

Peau

Hello there, glad you could come, considering the weather and all. Shall I take your coat? Please, make yourself at home; sit here with me in the living room. I must apologize for the candles being the only source of light in this room, but it makes the atmosphere seem cozier and less of shadows created by the storm outside. I know your sight is not too well in here, but the lights will be turned on soon enough.

Are you comfortable? Would you like a drink, something to sooth your parched throat perhaps? Nothing? Then do I mind if I ask you a question? What is a book?

You seem surprised. Why? Such a simple question and yet you look at me with eyes that are quite wide. However, I must ask you once more: what is a book?

What, no answer? Surely someone as intelligent as you would be able to answer my little question, yes? Someone of your . . . reputation should be able to answer such a simple question, yes? And yet, you sit here, eyes as wide as pools, staring at me as if I have suddenly lost all faculties of my mind. Perhaps you do need a drink. I wanted you to come tonight because I missed you, my friend. The years have been too long and I have terribly missed you since our time at university. I wanted to enjoy my night with you as two learned individuals talking and sharing the night away, and yet all I have received thus far is silence.

Very well, I shall answer my own question then to begin our talk.

Tales from a Goth Librarian

A book, according to Webster's Dictionary, is a set of written sheets of skin, paper, or tablets of wood or ivory; a set of written printed, or blank sheets bound together into a volume; a long written or printed literary composition; a major division of a treatise or literary work, and so on and so on. Quite a lengthy description, I think, but tell me; is that what you think as well? Do you agree with what the great Webster's has to say about a book? Will you answer me please?

I see. Well, I guess I must speak once more in answering my question. Your eyes betray you; I thought you to be better than that.

I see matters quite differently. To me, a book is a journey yet to be taken, but once taken can be repeated over and over at the discretion of the reader. A book is a breath of life, a cool drink of water to a parched throat, a red apple eaten to nourish the soul, a kiss tenderly received from a shy lover. A book is all of that and still much more. When I read a book, I like to sniff the pages carefully, allowing my senses to enjoy the musk and dust of the knowledge contained within. I treat my books like absinthe; languishing in my hazy yet sensual mental fog gives me pleasure beyond all measure and yet I still ache for more. In order for you to understand better, let me grab one from the shelf here.

Ah, so you can speak! No, no, I can see quite well with the light from the candles.

Where is it . . . Yes, right here. Please take it and let me get back to my chair.

No, you did not see anything.

Now, shall we continue with this?

See the title you have in your hands? **Indigo** by Graham Joyce; do you remember why I have that title? Remember what happened when we were both sophomores? By that playful look in your eye, I would venture to say yes. I have not forgotten as well, although I still have the clothing I wore on that night; the stains will never come out. Oh well; we were

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both students in all aspects. I still remember Xavier's face when we told him what we did.

So, take the book in your hand and hold it. Yes, just hold it. How does it feel to you? Rough, perhaps? Smooth like a blushing virgin's cheek? Neither? No, keep your eyes open please. I want you to focus on the book itself and every aspect of it.

OK, give me the book back. Now, I want you to hold it as if it was your lover. Do not be shy; we are the only people in the room. Caress the cover tenderly. Stroke it, softly now, softly. Very good. It seems as though you have done this sort of thing before. I'll give you a few more minutes to let yourself go with it, but remember what I said. Treat it as a lover.

Open your eyes. Now, how did it feel to you? Different? Something . . . alive? Do not lie to me because I can see your true thoughts in your eyes. Do not hide from me what you are thinking. You know I am right.

So, why the experiment? It is because of this experiment that I asked you to come here tonight, leaving your warm and safe surroundings to brave such a horrible storm. I wanted you here tonight because it has been a long time since we last spoke. I still have your letters and I am sure you want to know why I never responded to them. I want to tell you what happened to me after we graduated. Are you sure you do not want something to drink? Tea, perhaps? No? Well, before I begin I must ask you to not ask me any questions until I am completely finished with my tale. No, I will not increase the light. I need the light just the way it is, you see. So, do you swear to remain quiet while I tell my tale? Good.

I had always known our group to be beyond that of anyone else who studied at the university, you know. Our small, but powerful group held the reins for the rest of the lot, paving the way for a higher sense of education. All five of us – Viktor, Emma, Xavier, you and I, we were all giants in our own way. To me, we were the family I wished I had rather than the one I was born to. Our many nights of staying up discussing many

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subjects still burn in my mind and sometimes, I long for those simpler days. I remember the books we used to read and the subjects that thrilled us so, while we drank cup after cup of that awful black coffee and smoked cigarettes.

Well, when we graduated and went our separate ways, I felt lost and disconnected for a time. I felt as though I could not trust anyone with my life and secrets and so I kept to myself for a period of time. I moved back home, but after six months of ennui decided to travel and see the world, as clichéd as that sounds. I first went to France and studied art history under a Monsieur Yves De Michel. For three months, I was his only pupil, helping him with his own paintings and sculptures while learning my own technique in the world of art. We used to stay up late into the night working in silence with breaks every now and then to smoke his special cigarettes that made my head feel like it was stuffed with cotton. I was glad to be studying with him for he opened my eyes to a world I never knew existed.

He also helped me with my own . . . awakening. Do not scorn me with your eyes. I knew what I was getting myself into and I welcomed it gladly. To me, Yves was a godsend, assisting me in my own path. His styles of lovemaking still haunt me to this day and quite honestly, I wondered how I even survived some of it. He did not beat me or abuse me; his actions were slow and careful, teasing in some ways when I wanted more. When he made his first move on me, I felt my soul for the first time. Do you realize that, for many years, I did not think I had one? I had thought that I was a hollow being that only felt truly alive when I read books and absorbed the knowledge contained in them. No, Yves was beyond all human understanding and I welcomed it.

It all fell to pieces when I walked in on him and a young man engaging in a quite difficult position while their bodies were covered in paint. When I asked him why he wanted this young man aside from me, he simply stated that my training was complete. I felt crushed, my friend, and so I left France and moved onward through the rest of Europe. Back home, my

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family was under the delusion that everything was OK for I did not want them to know what I was going through, but I was going through bloody hell.

I stopped keeping myself clean, hoping that my slovenly appearance would somehow turn me into a martyr who wanted to show the world the pain I had experienced. I wore the same clothing day in day out and I even refused to feed myself for days at a time. Of course, I had Mummy and Daddy's money, but I did not want to fall back on such a cushion. I wanted to feel the pain. I was so foolish in my thought process, but at the time, I saw it to be my only choice. I made mistakes, my friend, mistakes that young women in my position should not make. I tried it all and did it all; no matter what anyone tells you, chasing the dragon is not what poets make it out to be.

After another two months, my family wanted me to come home and settle down. They felt that I should begin searching for a husband so I could settle down and produce offspring for them, continuing some damn family line. The letters were all the same: please come home Violet, have you begun thinking of more serious matters, Violet? At first, I used to burn the letters after reading them, but then soon stopped. I had grown tired of the life I was living at the time and thought that perhaps coming back home was a good choice to make.

No, no, I am all right. I am not used to speaking so much. Please, let me continue. Do not interrupt me again.

When I arrived home five months later, my family did not recognize me. I had lost weight and my once long black hair was now barely touching the tips of my ears. I still remember when I stepped off the train, boldly facing my stunned family as I gathered my meager belongings and let them lead the way to the car. The drive home was quiet for no one knew just what to ask me. They had the questions, all right, but they refused to speak to me for fear that it would soon turn into a feeding frenzy with me as the sacrifice. When we arrived home, they beckoned a servant to gather my belongings and burn them in one of the kitchen ovens while another took me to my old

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room, stripping me down to my bare skin and forcing me to bathe. I protested during the entire ordeal, but deep down inside, I was happy. Happy to be home, happy to still be alive, happy to be home. Yes, I did miss them. I closed my eyes and let the servant girl scrub away the dirty past from my body.

For the next several weeks, tension was high at our manor. My family, although they loved me, tread carefully around me when I was out. They were glad to have me home, but at the same time were a little frightened of me. I would wander from room to room while holding a book in my hand while my eyes would focus on nothing in front of me. I was trying to come back to the world of the living, but found it to be difficult. My long nightdress made a whispering noise on the carpet when I walked, giving me the title of family ghost who would be spoken to, but who would not sometimes speak back.

My mother, however, wanted me to drop the “act” and come to my senses so she began throwing parties, inviting young men for me to meet with the hope of possibly marrying one of them. The men were all poufs, toying with their clothing in trying to impress me, but I saw through their false acts. I would dress in my best dresses and allow the servants to “pretty me up” for the guests below. When I walked down the stairs, you could hear the sighs and hints of surprises at watching me glide down the spirals stairs in my aristocratic form. I held the room in awe and my family was pleased.

The men would then run up to me like dogs after a piece of beef, their tongues wagging out of their mouths as they each eyed me as their potential bride and wife and yet I laughed at them all underneath my calm and composed demeanor. I did not refuse them outright, but I did play with them, toying with their minds with my games full of wit and innuendos. They were no match for me and I cherished the defeated looks in their eyes as they slunk off to some corner to nurse their wounds once I finished with them. My family saw the way I treated every potential suitor, giving them reason to be concerned with not only the situation, but with me as well. I

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was like a stranger to them who only looked like their beloved daughter.

I spent most of my time reading in either my room or the library while the rest of the family went their own way as well. We spoke when necessary and even laughed on some occasions, but most of our time was spent quite gingerly; they were still unsure as to who I really was. That was fine by me; less questions and more time to read. I even began ordering more and more books, filling up every little space that I had in my room in a desperate attempt to shut out everything else that no longer mattered to me. My mother continued on her “Let’s get Violet married” quest and every time, I shot down the potential suitor with a gleam in my eye and a smirk that reeked of evil.

One night, as I was preparing myself to go to bed, my mother entered my room without a knock or even asking for my permission. She gripped her candleholder tightly and I could see it shaking slightly and, judging by the look in her eye, I knew that the upcoming conversation was not going to be a good one. I sat on the side of the bed while she stood by the door, our eyes locked and neither one refusing to look away. After several seconds of silence, I figured I would begin this little charade.

“Mother.”

“Violet, what has happened to you?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I mean, child-“

“I am no longer a child!” For a moment, I did not recognize the voice that came out of me. My mother was stunned as well because it stunned her to silence. Her eyes grew wide at my insolence then narrowed again when she regained her composure. She set the candleholder on one of my dressers then continued to speak in a tone that she only used for a servant who had been caught stealing.

“Violet Winterstone! You will not speak to me in that tone, not now nor ever. You may have graduated from university, but you will always be a child, our daughter, in this manor.” I

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could feel the coldness seeping up my spine, but continued to stare at her straight in the face. I would not break down, no matter the cost. “We, your *family*, have given you everything that a woman of your caliber should accept in life. You wanted university and so we made it possible. We knew that your studies would lead you to a better understanding of the world around you.” She walked closer to me, but still kept her distance. “However, when you arrived home from your holiday, we no longer recognized you, Violet. You are now a stranger to us all. Why do you not choose to marry? Do you have someone else in mind? Is that it? Who is he and we’ll make sure we invite him to the manor, darling.” Her face softened a little; surely that had to be the reason why their golden child of a daughter was acting so strangely lately. Surely. “What is his name? Where does he live? Is he from a good family? Is he-“

“There is no one. I just refuse to marry.” You would think I had told her that I wanted to become a man by the look she gave me. She clutched her heart (so melodramatic!) and took a step away from me while I simply sat on the edge of my bed, waiting for her to leave so I could read before retiring for the night. Her eyes were wide like a deer momentarily blinded by a hunter’s light; she bumped against the door, but her eyes were still fixed on me.

“Refuse to marry?” she whispered. I nodded yes. “B-but why? You can’t possibly expect to become an old maid, do you? Why would you want to live your life like that?”

“But mother, there are many women who decide not to get married. They still lead happy and very fulfilling lives and I plan to do so as well.”

“But an old maid? Violet, you’re too beautiful to accept such a life for yourself.”

“I see. Beauty; is that all you think I have going for me?”

“Violet, please. I am trying to understand, that’s all.” She sat down on the bed next to me and began to play with my hair. “Help me understand.”

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We talked long into the night about my plans in life and why I was the way I was. I did not reveal any skeletons in the closet, so to speak, but just enough. When she left my room at 3 in the morning, she actually smiled at me. That night was probably the best sleep I ever had in a long time.

The next couple of months were good for the family, even I. We got along rather well and the whispering behind my back was no more. Violet was her old self, as some of the servants said. I still spent my days reading in the library, pouring over old manuscripts and documents handed down through the generations, and no one bothered me or thought it to be weird. It seemed like, for a time, they accepted my self-proclaimed lot in life. I was in heaven; I no longer had to worry about suitors coming to our home trying to win me over as the future Mrs. Whatever.

However, as I found out later, all was not well. My family, although trying to accept me and the life I had chosen for myself, still whispered about me behind my back. My mother, the one who shared such an intimate conversation with me that one night, still held questions in her mind about me, reservations about my true motives for refusing men. Slowly, but surely, they turned into actors in a play, smiling and talking to me in a good-natured sense in a rehearsed tone. They were nothing more than bloody actors.

Over a period of months, I increased my personal library, ordering books dealing with a wide variety of subjects and some I had just begun to study. I wanted to know more the world and why it was the way it was. There were some subjects that a university would never touch and I wanted to be an apt pupil for this new avenue I had discovered. My tastes ran to matters of forgotten corners of history, people and places that were now occupying museums and dusty shelves. I wanted to give these subjects life once more with a hope of sharing that life with others who were searching as much as I, thereby keeping the knowledge alive.

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You look tired, my friend. Would you like me to stop for a moment? No, I will not turn on any lights. I will do so when the time is right. Everything occurring tonight is planned right from the moment you answered my invitation to come here. My only concern is that you hear me out completely and not judge me during that time.

Yes, I have changed; such a far cry from the woman you knew so long ago. And yet; perhaps I have been like this during that time as well; only you refused to truly see me. No matter.

There have been studies that claim that we humans only use 10% of our brains. Imagine, for a moment, what would occur if we had the ability to use 100% of it. Think of the things we could accomplish! Would diseases be forever removed from our lives? Would we no longer use currency as a means of buying and selling goods? Would wars be only a smudge in the pages of history? Am I confusing you? You do look rather perplexed right now; perhaps you are thinking that I have gone mad. My family thought so and look what happened to them; oh yes, I have not reached that part of the story yet. Forgive me for trying to jump in time with my tale.

I began to stop eating; only taking in tea and other liquids. My only nourishment was knowledge and I had to have it, no matter the cost. Books had become my only source for anything; knowledge could not desert you, nor reprimand you for something that was insignificant. I used my inheritance to buy books and soon, my life was completely surrounded and inundated with them. For the first time in a long time I was happy. Then came the fire.

I remembered going to sleep after a rousing reading of Darwin's **Origin of the Species**, keeping myself locked in my room. I fell asleep in bed, clutching the book like a child holds onto its blanket when it thinks that the boogeyman is in their closet. Suddenly, I heard or thought I heard someone yelling downstairs, so I grabbed my robe with my book still in my hand and slipped out of my room to the balcony while trying to shake off my sleepiness. I leaned over the balcony, noticing

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that the lights were on downstairs in the front foyer, but no movement. I turned to go back to bed, thinking that I had a dream, when I heard the noise again. It was my father, Jacob Winterstone, and by the tone in his voice, was not in a good mood. I walked back to the balcony and cocked my ear out as far as possible, trying to hear as much as possible. It sounded as though he was speaking to a servant, but I later realized that he was speaking to my mother.

“This can not go on any longer!,” he said in the voice he used when he was trying cases in court. “I can not, no, will not allow her to slowly destroy herself! Not in my home!”

“But dear...”

“Not another word! She will be forced to make a decision; either Violet lives in this house like a true member of the Winterstone family to later be married, or she will leave!”

“She will not make such a choice, you know.”

“Then I will make it for her,” he said in an eerily calm tone, but I could feel the steel underneath the words. “I will break her, one way or the other.” I clutched my book to my breast in shock; my father wanted me gone from my home? I had done nothing wrong as far as I was concerned. All I did was read books; what was wrong with that? I wanted to run downstairs and demand the meaning of his anger towards me, then realized that it would do me no good. Once his mind was set on something, he made diamonds look as though they were made of butter. I wanted to cry, but no tears came. I wanted to scream, but only a soft wheezing noise came from my throat. And yet - and yet deep down inside of me, I wanted him to suffer. I wanted him to truly understand that I had no intention of doing what he demanded simply because I was his daughter. I wanted my mother to suffer as well, for she refused to change his mind and instead let him have his way. It was always his way; he made the rules and we, even my mother, were expected to follow them without question. Oh, how I hated him.

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I slipped back into my room and locked the door. My mind was not functioning properly so I sat down at my desk and stared at the book I still held in my hand. Such a simple object and yet it caused my family to hate me with a poison I never knew could exist. I could feel a slow coldness running down my spine; numbness had now taken over me and I was no longer possessed of emotion.

“Violet! Violet!” yelled my father at my door. “Come out this instant!” I turned my eyes to the locked door, listening to my father yell for me on the other side, but I paid it no attention. For a moment, I did not even know who he was. All I could think of was my library; my personal library, my only form of sanity. My father began to knock loudly on the door while trying to turn the knob; I knew that the lock could not keep him out forever. My throat began to close up and I found myself gasping for air, but I refused to run to the door or let go of my book. I wanted to breathe and the air would not come. I could now feel the tears I had expected earlier falling down my face, but still I could not breathe. I realize now that it was all psychological, but at the time, I thought I felt my own father’s hands around my throat, choking the life out of me. I dropped my book to place my own hands around my throat and soon, I felt the air coming back to me. I swallowed great gulps of it, savoring the sweet taste, forgetting that my father still banged on my door.

Funny, that; once I acknowledged his fury at my door, I could no longer hear it. I slowly walked to the door and placed an ear to it, searching for any signs and sounds of the Enemy. Yes, at this point, my father had turned into the Enemy with no relation to me whatsoever.

Suddenly, the door shook violently with a loud thud, knocking me off my feet and landing on my back. I groaned with pain then it came again. Scrambling to my feet, I raced back to my bed in fear, knowing that whatever was making that sound could not be good at all. I lay down in my soft warm

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bed and pulled the covers over my head, trying to drown out the ever-growing noises at my door.

Of course, you do realize that my father was trying to break down the door by using the muscles of several of the servants. After few moments of grunts and hard labor, they finally broke down the door, knocking it off its hinges, to reveal me hiding in my bed like a child. My father pushed the servants away from the door and stormed into my room while I cowered even deeper in my bed. When he reached the bed, he yanked the sheets from me and pulled me up by my arm. There was obviously no love in his action, nor was there any in the eyes that stared at me. His eyes were full of hatred and anger and it was I alone who received such harsh emotions. He shook me by my arm then slapped me across the face with his free hand.

“You little spoiled brat!” he yelled at me and I could smell his dinner on his breath; mutton with onions. “You think that because you live here, you can do whatever you want! Not anymore. Either you learn to live by my rules or you will leave this place and never come back!” He shook my arm once more for emphasis then threw me back down on the bed. I glanced at my arm and saw the very red marks his hand left. I looked behind him and saw my mother silently weeping as she crossed her arms over her heaving chest. Her eyes silently begged me to change my ways, but I knew better. To live in my father’s house meant complete submission and I would have been a fool to do such a thing. My eyes then focused on my father’s red face and I slowly got up from the bed and walked to my writing desk. I could feel my father’s glare on my back as I calmly took one of my lit lamps on the desk in my hand then turned to face him once more. With a smile I dropped the lamp on the floor, instantly causing a small fire on the floor. One of the servants rushed up to stamp it out, but my father held him back, all the while his eyes were locked on mine.

“You have become mad,” he whispered while I said nothing in return. I could feel the fire warming my legs, but I did nothing to prevent it from coming closer to me. My father

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backed away from me, as did everyone else, leaving me standing alone, knowing that the fire would consume the room, the house, and me. I no longer cared; all I wanted to do was sleep. In five minutes, the fire had consumed a little more than half of my room with long tendrils of it sneaking its way out and down the hall. I remained rooted to the spot, watching the flames deliver smoky kisses to everything that it touched. No longer did I notice that the flames had now begun to kiss my nightgown and my legs. The pain felt a little more than a bee sting as I closed my eyes and welcomed its embrace.

Yes, my friend, I was quite mad. I could tell by the look in your eyes so there is no need for you to make a futile attempt in asking me. My mind, at the time, felt like it was torn in two and yet I thought I was the one in control. I felt as though my family had wronged me and that now it was my turn to seek revenge on their privileged and wasteful lives. I wanted them to know that hurt that they brought upon me. I thought that the fire was my only option. Looking back on it, I realize now that I was wrong.

It should have been done in another way.

The fire consumed the house and me with it while my family escaped to safety. Although I am not certain, I could probably guess that once they were outside in the cool autumn breeze, they stared in shock as they watched their home burn to the ground. I am sure that their faces, dirty and streaked with sweat and soot, still held the looks of shock and disgrace while they watched. I am sure that my father did not shed a tear for his daughter; he probably spat upon the ground in disgust. I am sure that my mother watched it all in horrified silence, but refusing to say or do anything about it; she never did have a spine. She was always my father's puppet. I am sure that the servants whispered among themselves, wondering what on earth could have caused Miss Violet to do such an act, while tears fell down their faces. When I lived at that home, I never spoke rudely to any of them, nor did I use them as scapegoats for any of my problems. I treated them fairly and spent time

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with them when they retired for the night in their area of the manor. It was during those times that I truly learned what it meant to be human. I learned how to laugh and smile through those people. Now, I do not think I shall ever see them again.

The clock has struck 11pm, my friend. Are you tired? The dim lights have made me more relaxed, but I still have more of my tale to tell you. Do not worry; it will all be over soon.

The house burned to the ground in a matter of hours. My family did not try to stop it from burning, from what I was told. According to neighbours who ran into them later in the week, they claimed that my family watched it burn exactly the way I told you they would then turned and left without another glance. My father dismissed the servants and sent them on their way while he and my mother left for good and traveled to Canada. They told their neighbours that the fire had started due to a fire in the kitchen. My family had no reason to lie, so of course everyone believed them. How strange it would have been to explain that your house burned down thanks to your insane and only daughter?

Firemen rushed to the scene to try to salvage the manor, but it was too late. They too let it burn down to the ground; it made it easier to clean up and start afresh. So they too watched it burn and then left when it was all over. Had they begun working on the rubble, they would have discovered a very shocking and strange surprise.

Yes, how very astute of you. Of course I did not die or else I would not be here talking to you right now.

I did not die. Thanks to the grace of God (or something far more sinister), I was alive, but barely. When the fire reached my body, I remembered screaming until I could no longer breathe. The fire peeled away my layers inch by painful inch, but somehow, I was able to survive the entire ordeal. I lay on my stomach, praying for it to soon be over. I knew that what I had done was wrong, but I had momentarily lost all functioning of sense. I was *non compos mentis* and looking back, realized that I had brought it all on myself.

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Days passed as I lay under the rubble. I could not move my body, but my mind was alive. I wanted to scream again, hoping that someone walking by would hear such pitiful screams and come to my aid. But, how could I explain myself to them? What could I say? Everyone knew my family and me, so how could I ask for anyone's assistance? I wanted to die and yet I could not. For some reason, I was still alive.

I felt something wet land on my burned cheek. With that one sensation, I opened my eyes. My vision was fuzzy, but I was still able to see. It was afternoon and it had begun to rain. The fact that I knew that it was afternoon and it had begun to rain meant that my mind was not as messed up as I had thought. I could still think and move. I wanted to shout with joy, but knew that I still had a long road to walk down. So, I blinked and felt the rain trickle down my cheek and into my eyes, cooling them like a balm from the gods. I could feel the rain landing on my charred skin and that too was relief. Inside, my mind was screaming for joy, but on the outside, I barely moved. After several minutes of me laughing inwardly, I calmed by heartbeat to a leveled rhythm so I could think of a plan. I had to remove myself from the ruins, but how? I closed my eyes as the rain now began to pour from the sky, washing away every trace of my past.

When I opened my eyes again, I was no longer wet. In fact, I was no longer lying among the ruins of my former home. Instead, I was lying in the softest bed I had ever felt, with robin's egg blue sheets and a down comforter of a bright and cheerful blue. My skin felt rough against the sheets, but I paid it no mind; I was grateful to be in a bed. I turned my head slightly and could feel the thick down pillows supporting me. Had I died? I could feel tears running down my face; surely an angel rescued me. I then turned my head ever so slightly so as to view my surroundings: I was in a small bedroom that had one window next to my head that was cracked slightly open, allowing a cool and scented breeze to enter and permeate the

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room. The walls were painted basic beige and there were paintings of every colour and size hanging on the walls. The colours in each painting were so bright that vivid that I wanted to touch them with my scarred hands. The only door was on the other side of the room. After trying to stare at my surroundings, I focused all of my attention on the door, wondering who had saved me and if this was their house.

Suddenly, the door opened without a sound to reveal a man carrying a tray with a bowl of soup and some fruit. When he saw that I was awake he smiled and walked over to my left side. He sat down next to me and instantly I could smell his lime cologne. His eyes were a deep blue almost black that had flecks of what looked to be gold. His skin was pale and yet healthy while his face gave him an aristocratic look. He was dressed in black pants and a long sleeve white shirt with ebony coloured hair that fell down to his shoulders and was pulled back in a messy ponytail. When he smiled, I could see the crows' feet around his eyes and at once I knew he was much older than he looked.

The tray of food sat in his lap, but his eyes were on me. I wanted to thank him for what he had done, but the only noise I could make was a strangled squeak, causing him to laugh.

"Now, now, my dear," he said in a deep voice that reminded me of velvet, "don't tax yourself. It's too early." He then lifted a spoonful of the warm soup (it was chicken and mushroom), blew on it several times to make sure it was at a temperature I could handle, then fed me. When the soup touched my mouth, I groaned with delight which made him chuckle. "I'm glad you like my concoction," he said with a pleasing tone. "I made it just for you." I nodded slightly, giving him the signal that I wanted more. With every spoonful, I could feel my body becoming warmer and warmer with an equal gaining of strength. I nodded more vigorously with every spoonful and he obeyed. Within minutes, the bowl was empty and I was able to sit up thanks to my newfound strength. I smiled, or at least I thought I did, and lifted a hand towards him. He took my

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hand in his own and it was then that I looked down at my skin. My entire hand and arm were blacker than coal and when his skin touched mine, flakes of my own fell off. In horror, I pulled my hand away from his and stared at him with wide eyes. He stared at me for a moment then took my hand again in his own.

“I do not know what happened to you,” he said calmly, “but I am here to help you. I am a doctor.” With those simple words, I fell back against my pillow and slept.

When I awoke, it was nighttime, but the drapes were pulled back, allowing the moon to shine her light into my room. I closed my eyes and prayed to Selene, the goddess of the moon, thanking her for her light. Within minutes, I was asleep again.

I opened my eyes again to the sun. My eyes darted around the room, wondering if anything had changed, but it was still the same. While looking around, I noticed that my head did not hurt nearly as much and that the sheets did not drag as harshly across my skin. I wondered . . . I removed my hand from the sheet and screamed. The black coarse skin I last saw was now a grey and smoother. In haste, not noticing that the movements were not causing me pain, I raised my other arm up and noticed it too looked the same.

Just then, my saviour came running into the room, wearing a white lab coat and strange copper and black goggles perched on his head.

“Are you all right? I heard you scream.”

“What in the bloody hell do you think?” I screamed back. “Why is my skin now grey? What did you do to me? What happened . . .?” I stopped speaking with shock; my voice had come back! The doctor leaned against the wall, crossed his arms, and smiled.

“It seems that you’re doing better,” he said.

His name is Lucien William Davenport, MD. That is the name of my angel, my rescuer when I thought I had none. It was he who found me lying in what used to be my room and pulled me from the wreckage. I owe him my life.

Kimberly Richardson

Yes, I do still speak to him. I should after all; he is my husband now. In fact, this is our home. But, don't worry; you shall meet him soon.

So, once I got over my shock of having a voice and my skin was on its way to being healed, Lucien sat down in the chair next to my bed and touched my forehead. I wanted to shrink away from those hands at first, for I was still not sure as to how he was able to save me, but his cool hands won me over.

"Hmm, slight fever, but other than that OK," he murmured to himself. I closed my eyes because I did not want to focus on his; somewhere deep inside of me, I was fearful of him. He looked human, sounded human, but yet . . . there was something more to this man that I cared to admit.

"Why is my skin grey?"

"Part of your treatment. It is only Step One towards your full recovery." He moved his hand down to my cheeks and felt both of them for any fever. "You are in capable hands, my dear." Before I could ask him any other questions, he got up and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him. I lay in bed while staring at the door. I wanted to know just what he had done to me and yet I was afraid of the answer. True, I did feel stronger than before, but it seemed too short of a period of time for me to feel this good. I looked at my arms and hands again. The grey colour looked as though I was born from smog and smoke and when I touched my right arm with my left hand, the grey colour seemed to swirl a bit like smoke. I lay back in the bed and closed my eyes, too exhausted to think anymore about my condition. All I wanted now was sleep.

When I awoke much later, Dr. Davenport was in my room, checking my temperature and feeling my face for any signs of fever. When I opened my eyes, his dark blue ones locked onto mine and I could barely speak. The strength behind those eyes was powerful enough to silence me. He checked my temperature as well as my skin then left without saying a word, leaving me puzzled. He seemed different than the last time he checked me, I thought. Was there something wrong?

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Looking back on it all, I know why he acted so strangely, why his mood was different than before; his creation. Yes, you are confused; I can see that. But, don't worry; all will be explained. Just be patient with me, please. Don't speak.

I never knew that one could fall in love with someone so quickly. From the first moment I laid eyes on him, I was in love. He could not return the emotion, I thought at first, and so I buried my love for him deeply inside of me, never giving it light. However, I was only fooling myself; the more I saw him, the more I loved him. He was an angel to me, a saviour that could never be repaid. I wanted him to love me just as much as I loved him.

One brisk afternoon I sat up a little higher than before in my bed and gazed out of the window. The verdant meadows rolled as far as my eyes could see and yet the scene brought me nothing, but sadness. I wanted to be out there among the hills, laughing and running, as a normal human should. My eyes gazed back to my now light dusty grey arms and before I knew it, a sigh had escaped my lips.

"Why so sad?" I looked up in surprise and saw Lucien standing by the doorway with a tray of that delicious soup for me. His face bore the look of sadness that made him even more beautiful than before. I looked away, focusing my eyes on anything, but him. "Come now, is that any way for a patient to act when seeing me?" He walked up to my bed and sat down, preparing the soup for me.

"It's just . . . the hills. I've never seen hills so beautiful before." His gaze wandered to the window and he smiled. "Yes, my lands are quite beautiful, but there are other things even more so." I turned to face him, but his eyes were now focused on the soup while he tried to cool it for me; did he mean me just then?

While he fed me and I ate, my mind had begun to wander. Was there any way that someone like him could ever find something like me desirable? Would my hair ever grow back to

Kimberly Richardson

its original length? Would I ever be pretty again? It shocked me to think such shallow things, but I wanted it for him. I wanted him to look at me the way I looked at him. He fed me my dinner and I took it with gratitude, never realizing that my strength was coming back faster and faster. My hair had begun to grow and I barely noticed it. My skin, however, stayed the same dusty grey. I was coming back to my old self and yet I never knew it. My thoughts were focused on Lucien.

Days turned into weeks and soon, I was out of bed, walking around with his assistance. He would come by my room every other day and lead me around the room, testing out the strength of my body. We never spoke during those times, but words were never needed. If I had known then what I know now, I would have smiled. You see, he loved me too.

For the longest time, I never saw the rest of his home, for my exercises were confined to my room. Strangely enough, I never worried about such things; he came to see me every other day right on the dot. So it struck me as a surprise when he told me, one day after he arrived at his usual time, that he was going to take me out. At first, I was nervous for I had no idea what he meant. He noted the look on my face and laughed like a deity.

“My dear,” he said in his usual deep and smooth voice, “I am merely going to show you the rest of my home. Please,” he said as he held out a hand for me, “come to me. Do not be afraid.” I was unsure for a moment; of course I had strength when he led me, but for me to get up on my own was unthinkable. . . and a challenge. I removed the sheets from my body and sat up rather quickly, surprising myself with my speed. I then swung my legs over the side and with some slight shaking, roused myself out of bed and slowly walked to his inviting hand. When he took my own in his, I wanted to cry.

My room was at the end of a long hallway that seemed to go on forever, at least to me. The walls were covered in dark wine coloured velvet that only added to the overall feeling of his home: sophistication and upper class. Soon, we arrived at the staircase, which wound all the way down to the main room that

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looked to have been used for parties and other formal and informal gatherings. However, when we reached the lower level, I was in for a shock.

His home was unlike any place I had ever seen, for most of the walls were covered in bookshelves that were set to bursting with books on every subject. I touched some of the tomes as we walked. He pointed out some of his favourite titles to me, watching my reaction to them. Of course, most of the ones he pointed out to me I had already read, which surprised him.

"I've never known anyone, let alone a woman, who had read the same works as I."

"Perhaps you should travel in better circles."

We spent most of the day walking around while he pointed out things to me. I took it all in with my eyes, for I did not know when I would leave my room again. I gripped his arm tighter and noticed that he winced slightly.

"Lucien," I said in a quiet tone as we walked.

"Yes?"

"One question: you never asked me my name."

"Why should that be a concern? For right now, you are my patient. What I need to know about you does not include a name. All I need to know about you I already know." For the first time ever, I was stunned into silence.

We continued our walk through his home and although I enjoyed it tremendously, I was also beginning to feel slightly tired. Lucien took note of my sudden change of condition then, without a word, led me to my room. Once my head made contact with the pillow, I fell asleep and knew no more.

I can not remember the first time I ever heard the noises, but I do remember hearing them the night after my first outing into the rest of the home. After some time of a peaceful slumber, I awoke to the sound of grinding metal. My eyes flew open and I peered into the darkness of my own room, wondering about the source of the noise. For several minutes I heard only the sounds of outside and my own breathing.

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Thinking it to be a dream, I smiled then lay back down within my thick sheets and fell asleep.

“Wake up, please.”

I slowly opened my eyes to Lucien’s face. He wore his usual black and white outfit with those strange goggles perched on his head. His hair was loose and fell down his shoulders like a velvet river. Not knowing what to do, I smiled. He smiled back as he helped me from the bed.

“What’s going on?”

“My dear,” he said as we walked out of the room and down the hall, “I think it is time for me to show you my project, one that I think will help you finish your recovery.” Not knowing what he meant, but excited anyway, I allowed him to lead me down the winding staircase and through the front hall. We walked through the many rooms as I winced from the sunlight coming through the windows. “In my time here alone,” he said in a slow tone, “I have noticed that power comes from many forms. Some achieve it through prayer while others achieve it through knowledge.” My ears perked at that word: knowledge.

“During my time at university and beyond, I too have been on a quest to seek knowledge in its many forms.” I noticed a look of surprise on his face that changed into a grin.

“Ah, so you do understand, then. That is good to hear.” We reached a door that I had never noticed before and he pulled out a large brass key to open it. Once opened, he led me inside a dark room then closed the door behind us.

“Lucien, where are we?”

“Where you should be.” Immediately, he turned on several gas lamps that he knew of and soon the room gave way to the light, exposing me to his plans. The room was filled with books and a massive oak table in the middle of the room. To the side, however, was what caught my attention; there was a massive black metal box with tubes and spigots coming out on its sides. Lucien left my side and walked over to the machine, caressing it as if it was a lover. “This is my creation, a chance for humans to evolve beyond their own limited thinking.” Still not

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knowing what he meant, I leaned against one of the chairs by the table and waited for him to continue. He walked over to one of the shelves and pulled a book from it then took it over to the machine. He touched a lever on the right side and the box began to groan loudly.

I was frightened; what was I about to witness? The machine continued to groan and as it did, it slowly began to open, revealing a space the size of a human inside.

“For years, we have read books and accepted their knowledge in our minds,” he said in a louder tone over the sound of the machine, “but what would happen if we could go further with that book? What would happen if we not only ingested our minds with such a thing, but our bodies as well?” Suddenly, he began to remove his clothing while I watched in horrid fascination. As he removed each layer of clothing, I saw strange markings on his body like tattoos. Within minutes he was completely naked and I could not help, but stare at every inch of his perfectly sculpted body. He then walked up to me and it was then I knew what he had meant. He waved his hand in the air and the machine turned itself off. How did he-

He took my hands in his and with a sigh said, “For years, I have wanted to transcend humanity, giving a new reason to those who surely deserve it. I have chosen you, Violet, to take that journey as I have done.”

“How did you know my name?” I was shocked; how much of me did he truly know?

“I know all about you, Violet. From the moment I rescued you from the wreckage, I knew all about you. I know of your passion for the written word and how it consumed you so. I know of your desire to lead a life beyond that of any normal human. I know that you love me as I have loved you all of this time.” He held a marked finger up to my lips before the thought of speaking out even occurred to me. “You see, I know it all. Through my own machine, my Genesis, I am beyond that of any mortal. Will you take that same road that I took, my dear Violet? Will you come with me?”

Kimberly Richardson

I said yes.

With a grin, he led me back to the black box then turned it back on. The box groaned as if hungry for me. I removed my clothing to reveal my completely naked grey body to him as an affirmation of my choice. The door opened once more and I stepped inside of it. He then closed the door and I was locked in. Strangely enough, I was not afraid, for in some way, I knew what was going to happen. Lucien opened a side slot and threw the book into it then closed it back. I could feel the cold metal against my body, but I was not afraid.

Then, it began.

Inch by inch, my skin was pulled from my body. To be quite honest, friend, I had never known such pain until that moment. Imagine if someone took a razor to your body and with deliberate and sadistic care, peeled your skin off. I had thought surviving the fire was horrible, but this . . . this was monstrous. I screamed for my life and yet the machine groaned. I clawed at the metal, trying to escape and yet the machine groaned, oblivious to my pain and my screams. I wanted to actually die, but the machine would not allow it. To ask for death was to be weak. I closed my eyes as blood, my blood, slid down my arms and into my eyes. I wanted to sleep.

It seemed to be faint at first, but soon the noise grew louder. I could barely open my eyes, but I knew deep in my mind that the box was being opened. I could see light and a figure opening the door with little ease that, suddenly, I helped open it myself with a strength I never knew I had. Soon, I was facing a still naked Lucien who smiled an impossibly wide smile. He took my hands in his and led me out of the box.

“My darling . . .” was all he could say as a tear fell down his face. In haste I ran to a full-length mirror that hung on the wall by the door and almost fainted. There I stood, naked, but my skin . . . I looked at my hands, my legs, and feet, even touched my hair. It was all real and yet . . . I turned to face him again and soon, I was in his arms. When we made love, could actually feel the ground beneath us shaking due to our

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combined power. I could see time moving backwards; I could see myself back at home with my family who did not understand me. I could read my father's mind as he wondered which mental institution would be best for me. I could feel my mother's anguish as she desperately wanted to be like me, but never had the courage to do so. I saw the stars, planets, and other worlds that we had yet to discover. I saw myself with Lucien, our bodies welded together as one. I wanted to cry; it was too much, but my body only drank it in like wine, leaving me with a hunger I had never known before. I felt like a god.

When we were done, he then led me to his room and soon, I was his wife, student, partner, and friend. I have him to thank for my life. This, of course, will never be the same again.

Now, you can speak.

Too stunned? Here, let me turn on the light.

You see what happened to me? Do you truly see? Lucien gave the ultimate gift to me and I willingly took it. Yes, those are words you see on my skin. Yes, it is the book **The Red and the Black** by Stendhal. My old skin was ripped from my body, only to be replaced by the pages from the book. Lucien had done the process on his own body, using a book of poems by Emily Dickinson. My hair has grown back to its normal length and yet if you look carefully enough, you can see that my hairs are actually more words tangled together. Touch it; does it not feel like hair? So now you know what has happened to me; now you see what has become of my formerly wasted life. I wish I could locate my family and show them what has become of their daughter, but that moment and my family are in my past.

My strength, due to the book, is ten times greater than men. I can read people's minds as well. You can not leave here, not yet. You see, I asked you to come here for a reason. Lucien and I need others, intellectuals such as you. Come, there is no need to be frightened.

I will ask you again; what is a book?