

# **Falling into Forever**

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For the one, the only, Gerald L. Surface, my father.  
"I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable."

- Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*



## Prologue

Swinging her long, auburn pigtails from side to side, the little girl hummed her favorite song as she refilled her red pail with more of the beach's gritty sand. Building a sand castle, deep in concentration, she ignored what was behind her: gentle waves filled with splashing children. At her side, a pink dolphin inner tube lay sadly deflated on the sand.

As she worked, she sang a little tune to herself: "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy." She dumped the sand from the pail and stood up, her hands planted squarely on her swaying hips. The sand castle rose past her knees and nearly to her waist.

From under the shade of a rainbow umbrella, her grandmother looked up from her crossword puzzle and yawned.

"Come here, Granny June!" the girl called, waving her grandmother closer.

Drowsy from the August heat, Granny June stood and stretched her legs. "You have been working hard, Alexandra. Let's take a break," she said, admiring the growing pile of sand at her granddaughter's bare feet. "How about we dip our toes in the water?" she asked, gently tugging her granddaughter's wrist to ease her closer toward the water.

"No," Alexandra insisted, squirming out of her grasp. "I can't swim." A frown spread across her freckled face.

"We won't go in past our ankles," she promised the girl.

"A monster will eat me, Granny June," Alexandra complained, until her grandmother sighed and let go of the girl's hand. Without even a glance to the vast ocean behind her, the girl plopped herself back down next to the castle and began to fill her little red pail with more sand.

"You're five years old now. Don't you think it's time you started learning how to swim?" Granny June asked.

"Nope," Alexandra said, shaking her head furiously back and forth.

"Then let's eat at least," said Granny June, rummaging through the picnic basket under the shade of her umbrella.

"I brought your favorites," she said, turning to her granddaughter, her hands full of paper plates wrapped in aluminum foil. "Peanut butter and jelly, fried chicken, orange slices, and marshmallows." Granny June spread the feast out on a towel on top of the sand.

"Yummy," mumbled Alexandra through a mouthful of peanut butter.

"That is a beautiful castle," said Granny June, admiring the sand pile. "And who do we have here? Guests for supper?" she asked, picking up a plastic dinosaur and a grinning, blond doll.

"She's the princess," Alexandra explained as she reached for the toys. "And that's the evil dragon that is going to eat her." In her hands, the dinosaur chewed on the doll's helpless legs.

"Oh my!" exclaimed Granny June in mock horror as she nibbled at her sandwich crust.

"I'm going to be a princess one day, too, Granny," said

the girl as she dropped the toys to the ground and picked up a marshmallow.

"Did your father ever tell you that once upon a very long time ago, a girl in our family was a princess?" Granny June asked as she picked up a lonesome yellow bucket and began to fill it with sand just like her granddaughter.

"My daddy never told me that. Please, please tell me about her!" squealed the girl.

"Her name was Princess Iselin," Granny June said, rubbing the matted bangs from her granddaughter's forehead. "She was beautiful and kind, just like you."

Alexandra smiled. "What happened to her?"

"Her prince was put under a spell by an evil wizard," Granny June continued. "On the day of their wedding, the wizard sent a dragon to attack the prince's castle. But the prince sent his bride away to keep her safe."

"Did he see her again?" Alexandra asked. "The princess always lives happily ever after."

"Not always," Granny June sighed. "The wizard turned the prince into a dragon."

"How did he fit into his clothes?" asked Alexandra, wide-eyed.

"Good question," said her grandmother, nodding her head in approval. "According to the legend, the wizard gave the prince eternal life as a man who could turn into a dragon and then back into a man whenever he wanted. Then the wizard gave the prince a choice. The prince could choose to be the wizard's servant, and the princess would not be harmed, or the prince could choose to fight the wizard. Though if the prince did choose to fight, then the wizard swore that the prince would never see his bride again."

"Which one did the brave prince choose?" asked

Alexandra, patting the sand down on the sides of the castle.

"The brave prince chose to fight the evil wizard. But before their battle, the wizard found out where the princess was hiding, and he sent a dragon to attack her."

Alexandra picked up the blond doll from the sand and turned to her grandmother. "What happened next, Granny? Please tell me."

"The prince defeated the wizard and became king of his people for many years," Granny June told her as she dumped her bucket of sand on top of the castle. "But he never saw his princess again."

"That makes me sad. He didn't have a queen," said Alexandra, turning her head to the ocean behind her and gazing to the horizon. "What was his name?"

"Kraven," said Granny June, drawing a letter K into the center of the sand castle with her finger. "The dragon king," she whispered.

"*Kindergarten* starts with a K," Alexandra announced brightly as she read the letter her grandmother had drawn in the sand.

"That's right," Granny June said, hugging her.

"Mommy and Daddy said I have to go there in a couple of weeks," Alexandra explained, hanging her head. "I'm five years old now."

"Don't you worry, Alex," Granny June said, lifting the girl's chin with her finger.

"Why do I have to go school, Granny?" Alexandra asked, an auburn curl falling in front of her wide, emerald-green eyes. "Do princesses have to go school?"

"Is that what you're going to be when you grow up?" Granny June brushed the curls from Alexandra's freckled cheeks and tucked them behind her ear.

“Yep!” Alexandra shouted as she scooped a handful of sand into her red pail.



# 1

## Frustration

The black-hooded man at the gas station wondered why he was still alive. The question bit into his skull and chewed at his mind. He kept his azure eyes on his boots as he stalked across the oil-stained pavement to the gas station's glass doors. He considered that perhaps his soul was so wicked even hell would not have him. This question, like tiger's teeth, sank deeper into his mind, gnawing through flesh and bone until his head ached.

As he swung open the doors, the smoky scent of burning wood trailed behind him. Behind the counter, he saw a clerk with dirty-blond dreadlocks; he looked barely old enough to buy the cigarettes lining the shelf behind him. The clerk glanced up from his tattoo magazine and squirmed.

His eyes followed the hooded figure as the man made his way to the refrigerated cases in the back of the store. Opening the door, a blast of frigid air smacked him in the face as his hands reached for a bottle on the top shelf. He sucked in the cool air and relished the cold tingle on his skin.

At the front of the store, the clerk pushed his magazine to the side as the hooded man approached the counter. The man's jacket was unzipped, revealing a shirtless, scarred chest.

The clerk nodded as the stranger placed a quart of milk on the counter and stared at the floor.

"It's a buck five, man," said the kid as he stared at the deep, black scar across the man's chest. "Did you have that inked at One Eye Wizard?"

"Humph," the hooded stranger grunted. He pulled a wad of dollar bills from his camouflage-pants pocket.

"I—I'm sorry," the clerk stuttered. "On your chest there," he said, pointing. "It looks like something my buddy, Kevin, would do over at the tattoo parlor down the street. That is a wicked piece of ink. It looks like a real bite mark, like from a tiger or something." The boy grinned as he handed the man his change.

"Dragon bite," the man mumbled from under his hood, as he swiped the milk from the counter.

"What?" asked the boy, shaking his head. He watched the figure disappear into the darkness beyond the gas station's glass doors.

The long shadows of night swallowed the hooded figure as he ducked around the corner of the building toward a dumpster hidden from public view in back of the store. A plain white utility van parked out of reach of any overhead streetlight waited quietly for his return. When he opened the side door of the van, a dark-gray ball of fluff uncurled herself from the rumpled blanket on the passenger's seat. She purred a soft meow and jumped down to welcome the hooded man home.

"Princess," he muttered as he stroked her back and revealed the quart of milk hidden beneath his hooded jacket. In the back corner of the van, he poured the bottle's contents into an empty bowl. She nudged her fuzzy, gray head against his hands. "Bon appetite, mademoiselle," he

whispered as she lapped at the cool milk. Then he said softly, "Forgive me." Shame weighed heavily on his heart.

He retrieved the creased paper from his back pants pocket and unfolded the drawing across his lap, smoothing the wrinkles against his thighs. A charcoal-penciled outline of a dragon unfolded beneath his focused gaze. The beast's wings spread wide from his back, while his talons clenched the edge of a sea cliff. His head stared back at the hooded man from the wrinkled page with a knowing look in his sharp, black eyes, as if they shared a secret.

He had taken the illustration only by chance on a recent sunny afternoon at the city park. He had been there, discreetly watching a teenaged girl sitting on a pink polka-dot towel in the freshly cut grass. Like a traveling minstrel in a royal court, each day he played his guitar in the park across the street from her apartment. He always watched her from a distance. He would not speak to her—not yet, and maybe not ever. Her auburn hair had sparkled in the sunlight as she concentrated on her sketch pad, paying no attention to the brown and white bulldog rolling beside her in the grass.

He had brought his guitar to the park with him again that day. His fingers strummed idly at the metal strings, as if he were not there simply to stare at her while she was drawing. When she finished, she ripped the page from her pad and held it up to the blazing sun. Her head nodded disapprovingly as she wadded the paper into a ball. "Let's go, Jack," she had called out to the dog. She threw the crumpled sketch into a garbage can and shook her pet's red leash. They headed off down the park's concrete pathway. He had not dared to retrieve the drawing from

the trash can until she was out of sight. When he finally had uncrumpled the sketch, a dragon's fierce, fiery stare met his ice-blue eyes. He had taken a deep breath, then folded the drawing and slid it into his back pocket.

A siren wailed in the distance outside the van, momentarily interrupting his reverie. The cat was finished with supper. "Princess," he whispered, gently picking up the kitten from the cold van floor. He pushed the hood back from his shoulder-length, raven hair. Folding the sketch neatly into a square, he tucked it safely again into his back pocket. Nuzzling the kitten against his face, he closed his eyes and swore firmly, "Only cowards break their promises. She will not be harmed, no matter the cost."

Years ago, he had spoken to her father. On that day in a train station, a pale man with trembling hands had shoved a trinket box at his chest, saying, "The address—it is my mother's home. She can hold the gift for Alexandra and keep it safe until my daughter is old enough to know the truth."

"Attention. Achtung," sounded the warning that the train was departing. Again it echoed through overhead speakers mounted above them on the train platform: "Attenzione."

"You must go. She will be safe," he had promised her father as he took the box. "And you will return soon to tell her the truth yourself," he added. Her father had stepped up into the departing train, which then noisily lurched away from the station.

As the raven-haired man sat in the van with the kitten, he muttered something to himself. "The truth," he said, as if weighing the costs of talking to her. "You are a fool even after all this time. She will think you are a madman."

The van swayed in the stiff breeze of a brewing summer night's thunderstorm. The kitten yawned wide in his lap and nuzzled her face against his warm hands. He cradled her fragile body. "Mademoiselle," he said softly, stroking her fragile back as he stared through his windshield into the night. Thick clouds hid the moon and stars.

"Alexandra," he said, and he wrestled her drawing from his pants pocket once more.

His fingers hunted for a pencil as he pressed the paper against the dashboard. His fingers gripped the pencil tightly as he bore down upon the back of the drawing.

*Dear Alexandra,* he wrote shakily. *Secrets surround you. They lurk under a thin veil of reality, and you must know the truth. Your father has already paid a price for discovering the lies of men who used him for their own gain. But I swear, on my life, that you shall learn the true powers of your blood and inherit the fire destined to flame in your heart and soul for . . .* He paused. He wanted to write the word *me*, but instead scribbled *eternity*.

His chest heaved and the pencil dropped from his fingers, bouncing against the van's steel floor. He clutched at the scar upon his bare chest and winced. Short of breath, he cracked open the window a bit for some air. Outside the van, the night seethed with the palpable anticipation of a heavy rain.

In contrast to his sparse space in the van, Alexandra Peyton lived with her mother in a high-rise apartment, overlooking the city. While the man was writing on the back of her drawing, the high school senior was slumbering in her bed. But on one point they were alike: she was not calm in her sleep. Alexandra's long legs kicked sharply under her soft down comforter as she ran through her

dreams, struggling wildly through a thick forest and up a steep cliff. Sweat beaded on her forehead as a desperate howl surrounded her.

In his van, the raven-haired man cried in anguish. His wail was swallowed up by the sky. "She is the one," he said in the darkness, folding the unfinished letter as the low-hanging storm clouds surrendered sheets of rain that slammed on the metal roof of the van until morning.