

1 Wanda's Diner

Friday, October 24

"I'm not afraid of the dark," Ember gazed down the row of sugar, salt and pepper dispensers lining the bar, and focused on the curtains stirring around the window that overlooked her dark neighborhood. She jumped when a low pop and sudden burst of light resulted in the streetlamp nearest to Wanda's Diner shorting out to black.

"How about now?" Wanda asked, placing Ember's barely touched sandwich in a take-out box.

"Still not afraid." It wasn't the dark that scared her.

"I am. What's with all these electrical problems?" Wanda didn't sound scared, but did seem to know that Ember was not disclosing everything.

"Old neighborhood, old wiring." That had to be it. All of the blown fuses, thrown breakers and exploding light bulbs couldn't have anything to do with Ember, even if they did only seem to blow, throw and explode when she was around.

"Bobby's walking you home."

"No, I got this. My porch light is working again and it looks like my alleged next-door-neighbor's is too." Ember moved across the small diner and pushed open the door, peering out to see her house beyond the mammoth tree limbs that creaked and groaned as they swayed in the near-blackness.

"Alleged? That must mean that you still haven't seen them."

Ember sighed, "No. No new neighbor sightings." But she had looked. Newcomers to her small-town neighborhood were newsworthy.

"You would have met them by now if you weren't always working."

"I'm taking some time off." Ember blurted it out. Oops.

"Good." Only Wanda could say the word, good, and make it a question.

She was definitely not going there. Time to change the subject back to... walking home.

"Oooh, that sidewalk sure looks scary. Am I in danger?"

"Maybe." Wanda answered, wiping the already clean counter. "Another streetlight could explode. Or maybe the Boogeyman will get you. He always gets the dumb girl that walks home alone in the dark."

From the kitchen, Wanda's seventeen-year-old son bellowed over the sound of clinking glass cups, "Yeah, the streetlight explodes, starts a fire and then the Boogeyman gets you when you're running out of your burning house."

Ember raised her voice, "Not funny, Bobby. Don't even joke about something happening to my house. Besides, the Boogeyman would find nothing-happening-Riverdale extremely boring." Despite her bravado, she had noticed changes in her ancient-oak-and-magnolia-lined-street that ran deeper than electrical issues. It felt different, even if it was looking good—her house, the house next door, someone had even been patching the sidewalk. So why was she such a mess?

Leaving the door wide open, Ember returned to the bar and gulped down the rest of her coffee.

Wanda buffed the stainless steel coffee maker to mirror-quality and then turned her sharp gaze on Ember. "You've had so much coffee you'll never sleep."

That's what friends are for: to say what you don't want to hear and take you where you don't want to go. "I'll be fine." But she was right, it was going to be another long night.

"You're still having nightmares." Wanda's evaluation sounded more like an accusation.

"Only when I sleep." Ember immediately regretted the words. She had hoped to avoid the subject, but Wanda always managed to suck the truth right out of her. At nearly twenty-five, she hated that her lanky frame, pouty lips, and wild brown hair resulted in the fact that she was often treated like a teenager. Like now.

Wanda lowered her voice, probably so Bobby would not overhear this part of their conversation. "You're a nurse, don't you know any good doctors?"

"I saw one last week. He analyzed my dreams and prescribed drugs."

"Did it help?"

"The pills make me sleep and then the nightmares get totally out of control." She was ready to end the discussion but Wanda's truth-sucking gaze never wavered. "It's like, some monster gets inside my head and tries to control me. I can keep him out when I'm awake, but if I fall asleep, he'll find me and... I don't know how long I can keep this up. The doc thinks I'm crazy." Ember wrapped slim arms around her midsection and looked anxiously at the dark expanse on the other side of the doorway. "I might really be, you know, crazy." There it was, her greatest fear summed up and out there for Wanda to see.

"No."

That's also what friends are for: they tell you you're not crazy.

"Your parents died this year. Your job's too stressful. You're working long hours. You need to eat better. You're. Not. Crazy." Wanda said it like it was a fact.

"You sure?" She hoped Wanda was right. Wanda was usually right.

"Take a break, have some fun, and eat lots of veggies."

"Yeah..."

"And find a man," Wanda added innocently.

They were definitely going where she didn't want to go. How did Wanda do that? "I hate to break it to you, but men are not exactly lining up to ask me out."

"That's because you're unavailable."

"I'll be available after I finish remodeling my house. I mean, really, have you seen that huge corner house next door? I'm suffering from renovation envy. I'm going to have to go over there and find out who they hired."

"Yeah, I walked over and looked... and... don't bother. There's no way you could afford their contractor."

"You got that right. I'm gonna go home, pull out the power tools, and see if I can cut those bathroom tiles."

"Fine. You're crazy. Stay away from the power tools." Wanda's voice softened, "Go to bed. Me and Bobby will help you finish the bathroom this weekend." She pushed the take-out box into Ember's hands.

"Sure, if I survive the dangerous journey home." Antagonizing Wanda was so much better than contemplating her waning sanity.

Wanda threw her wet dishrag at Ember, but it missed and stuck to the doorframe at nose level, "Go home brat." She reached for another dishrag, "And leave the power tools alone."

"Fine. They'd probably just short out like everything else." Ember watched the dishrag slide down the doorframe and fall at her feet. She hastened outside, closing the door to block any additional flying dishrags.

2 The Boogeyman

Dried leaves swirled around her ankles and she caught her skirt, holding it against a balmy October wind. Walking home along ancient trees with no moon in sight and many of the street lights not working, it was hard to see the thick tree-roots that had long ago burst through the sidewalk. “Ouch.” Her too-cute sandals were uncomfortable when she put them on this morning, now she felt the sting of a broken blister. “One block, Ember. You can walk one stinking block.” Picking up the pace, she stumbled over a newly repaired patch of sidewalk. “Shit.”

Behind her, the wind ruffled the big oak tree, the magnolia, and then pushed at her back. Her long dark hair stood on end then blew into her face, popping with static electricity as another streetlight crackled above her head. Pushing the wild hair back with her free hand, she turned to look for a familiar face watching from the diner window, but huge wind-manipulated tree limbs obstructed her view. “Stupid cute shoes.” Holding her take-out box with one hand, she bent over and pulled off her sandals with the other. “No Boogeyman. Hmm, guess I shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up.”

“What exactly were you hoping for?” The deep voice that rumbled in front of her held a hint of amusement.

She dropped the sandals and pulled in her next breath with a loud wheeze, gaping at the man that had somehow materialized in her path. Crap, he was big. What did he say? Was he talking to her? And she had said... *Something brilliant about the Boogeyman. Yeah, he heard that. Shit.*

“Are you all right?”

The low vibration of his voice sent a tremor that shook her entire body and left her speechless. Beneath the streetlight she could see that he was a tall, dark, romantic cliché. Except no cliché ever had shoulders like that. She briefly wondered whether she had the power to conjure him up because if she did, she got it right. If not, where did he come from? Her struggles with wind, hair, streetlights, and inferior footwear had distracted her, but she wasn’t blind. He had to have been on that sidewalk right in front of her, or maybe hidden among the big old trees.

“I’m...fine.” She wanted to get a better look at him but her hair was everywhere, and her skirt, *crap*. She stifled the urge to utter a long string of expletives, at least for now. Maybe she could just drop the take-out box next to her stupid sandals. No, it was bad enough that she was freaking out, tossing food in front of him would be over the top. Her free hand moved to her fluttering skirt, opting for modesty control over vision. Her eyes involuntarily squeezed closed against a battery of hair driven by the wind. It only took a little self-groping to get the skirt under control. Now she had to get her hair out of her eyes again and see if that big wall-of-a-man was still there. *I’m such a freaking dork. He’s probably running to get away from me.*

The wind stopped and sounds ceased, but the tremor that his voice had initiated, continued, focused in her mid-section, moving downward, and leaving her knees weak. She jumped when the streetlamp above her gave another pop but remained lit. Her shaking hand pulled back a tangled mass of long dark hair and she opened her eyes.

Holy Mary... He’s still there. She snapped her sagging jaw shut, wincing as she bit her lower lip. “Owwww.” *Oh shit, that sound did not just come out of my mouth. What must he think of the*

crazy woman that's blocking his path? Her hand covered her lips to conceal any bleeding and stifle further embarrassing sounds. But there were no sounds. What happened to the wind?

He stood there looking at her with an intensity that made her squirm. That look—she could feel it—and it was pure seduction. Not loving or sweet, but something feral—fully sexual. She imagined how it might feel if he wrapped those very well-developed arms around her and... okay, better stop imagining things like that. He wasn't speaking—he didn't need to. Besides, his previous attempts at conversation had not been productive. He seemed expectant, like he was waiting for something. *What do you want?*

Take my hand and I will show you.

Oh, yes... Everything below her naval clenched as she peeked through thick lashes, needing to accept his offer. *Except there was no offer, right? That was my psychotic brain in overdrive hearing what I wanted to hear.* And she wanted to hear more than that.

Then she noticed... *Oh my... His eyes.*

Those eyes were like a void in the universe. She saw no reflection of light or color, only an endless darkness. He had eyes that would suck her in to their fathomless depths if she wasn't careful. But then, she might not want to be careful. Maybe. He was the man she would conjure if she had such powers.

But she didn't.

That left the other possibility. The crazy-as-hell-having-visual-and-auditory-hallucinations possibility. *It figures.*

One hand held thick hair from her face as the other clutched a smashed grilled-cheese sandwich to her chest. She squinted at him, debating. Is it possible to suddenly be face-to-face, in her small neighborhood, with the most frighteningly gorgeous man she could imagine?

No way. But she watched, waiting for him to do something, like, disappear. Or maybe devour her, because he looked like he might. And for the first time in her life, she might want him to.

He watched back. Only when he watched, something dangerous and profound seemed to be taking place within those deep eyes. Options weighed, lives in balance. Or just her life. Maybe just her sanity.

Holding a crushed take-out box between herself and this very unsettling man, it was hard to breathe. She had to focus on something other than those eyes. Anything. The front of his dark shirt, stretched across a broad expanse of chest, further expanded by the thick arms she was fantasizing about. *Not helping. Shit.* She didn't dare look lower so she fixed on that chest. The nurse within counted his respirations and found that they were slightly rapid and labored. Did she have that effect on him or had he been jogging? Probably training for a decathlon. She, on the other hand, had walked half a block and couldn't remember how to breathe because he definitely had that effect on her.

He waited in stillness so complete that even the wind didn't move. Her persistent hallucination, watching her and waiting, for what? He had asked her something and she had answered, hadn't she?

Her eyes strayed to his lips, which hinted at a wicked smile. She felt the heat of his gaze and again wondered if the man only existed in her mind. The thought made her want to weep.

Please be real.

He could be real. He could be made of hard, warm flesh. That would be amazing, like a dream instead of a nightmare. Too bad she only had nightmares. Her inability to believe that he existed here in her small part of the real world made it the most impossible scenario of all.

His hand moved, and she thought he might be reaching for her.

What would happen if he touched her? If she could feel his hard warmth? Her fingers twitched and she hardly noticed herself dropping the take-out box on the sidewalk. Her hand began to move towards him seemingly of its own volition. Staring at the strange appendage at the end of her arm as though it were alien, she jerked it back.

Her retrieval only postponed the inevitable. He would soon touch her, then... then she might confirm that he didn't exist at all. She couldn't let that happen. She gasped, taking in much-needed air. Her bare feet scrambled into action, shuffling backward and then blundering around him as she felt his heavy fingers brush her cheek.

The momentary contact produced a jolt of electricity that flashed in the dark, halting her progress. She felt like the overloaded streetlamps, bristling with energy that she could not contain.

She turned to him and fell back into those bottomless eyes. Only now they reflected light. But what light? It had to be static. The reflection transformed into a glow, as though his desolate eyes had absorbed her light. She could feel the hot intensity that radiated from his body and thought she should run, but her enthralled body would not respond to the commands that her panicked mind fired at it.

The hunger reverberating from him made her hope that he might do half of what his touch implied. Did he know what he was doing to her? He seemed to. His hand stirred, searching, until his fingers reconnected beneath her chin. The pad of his thumb stroked her swollen lower lip and his gaze shifted to her mouth. She wondered about his interest in her mouth, was she bleeding or was he going to kiss her? An audible current buzzed through them both, holding her in place while she waited, not breathing.

At odds with his overall predatory appearance, his fingers gently returned to her cheek and nestled there.

She burned. Everywhere. Her lips and cheek beneath his fingers, but low in her stomach most of all. And lower. A disturbing erotic burn. Her breasts ached, nipples hardened, and liquid heat flowed from her very core. She leaned in to him hoping he would kiss her, but terrified by the firestorm that ignited every cell in her body.

The buzzing increased in her head, making her dizzy and surging upward to overload the streetlight above them, causing it to pop and burp sparks until it went dark. Spent.

No, it simply shorted out because there's no way she could have had anything to do with that.

She thought to remove his hand, to protect herself from her own impending meltdown, but her hands hung useless at her sides. It was his touch that caused this inferno inside her. She wanted him to continue and at the same time wondered if she would survive it.

Breathe, she thought he said but no sound came from his lips. His giant hand cupped her face with deference and she saw regret flash in his dark eyes before he eased away, releasing her.

She pulled air into her lungs as he had commanded and the buzzing stopped. *Regret. Why?* Her eyes remained locked on his. It didn't make sense. How would she know if he felt regret? Was this another dream? Was she about to awaken, battling for control of her own will?

In another moment she regained the ability to move and wanted to touch him again. Was he the man from her nightmares that warped her sleeping mind? No, he wasn't, but something profound had just happened. *What did you do?*

Not me, it is you.

It was as though he heard her thought and then spoke directly into her head without making a sound. Like the nightmares. She pulled out of his compelling gaze and swiveled her head to find the security of her house.

Please stay.

His request pulled the air back out of her lungs, communicating a desire beyond his words, one that made her want to yield. But his voice in her head was too much like her dreams. Driven by a basic instinct for survival, she ignored his request, initiating a quick pace and finally moving around him.

She made a deliberate effort to regulate her breathing and keep her eyes fixed on the porch light that seemed very far away, when a second man with a short, thick beard stepped from between the old trees and into her path. She continued past him, keeping him to her right when a brush of air along her forearm caused sparks to crackle from their near-contact. Did he have a taser? No, she wasn't on the ground incapacitated. Static? She stopped and turned because she had to look.

He had also stopped and turned.

Big and frightening, almost like the man that still had her stomach doing somersaults, he looked like he was waiting for something. What could they possibly want with her? *It is dark*, she thought. *Much darker than usual*, she added. The first man had not moved and both were watching her expectantly. *Wishful thinking. Am I really so wacked-out that I would create an imaginary... what? Lover?* The probability that she was operating within the realm of reality was becoming quite slim. She looked away from the second man. Her heart raced as she resisted the urge to fall back into the spell of the first, instead, she turned back to the light of her front porch and walked toward it. Relieved to have regained some control, she didn't dare look back.

Oh, no. Silhouetted by her porch light and watching her from the sidewalk, there was a third man directly in front of her house. *Holy shit, why do I think he's waiting for me?* She grappled for an explanation, something that might explain her three apparitions and conclude with both a safe return home and a sane mind.

Right.

They're just big guys with muscles busting out of their tight tee shirts. Probably trained assassins. Walking down my street. In the dark. Doing something perfectly normal, like, a mafia hit. Maybe they want to steal my leftover grilled cheese sandwich. No, definitely assassins looking for someone to kill. It's a public sidewalk and I'm not who they're looking for. Just keep walking Ember. You're not important enough to be murdered by assassins. Crap, I'm not up for this. I just want to go home and write something nice and boring in my journal. No, I know what I really want...

The third man that was steadily approaching her was wearing dark sunglasses. Even with the sunglasses, or maybe because of them, he seemed familiar. It was so dark, how could he see? *Assassins wear sunglasses to disguise themselves.*

When he paused to speak, she sucked in a shaky breath and quickly stepped around him. Her pulse raced and her respirations increased to meet her panicked body's demand for oxygen in preparation for fight or flight. She swiveled her head and looked back at apparition number three.

He had stopped only a few feet away and looked a little stunned—stunned—but no less dangerous than the second man. And frankly, there was nothing on the planet that was more hazardous to her health than the first.

She whirled around and attempted to appear somewhat casual as she pushed them out of her head and sprinted to her front door. At some level she was aware that the men could have easily accosted her as she fumbled with her key and then the lock. *Please open.* When it did, she scurried into her house, securing the dead bolt behind her.