

Noah Riley worked the rowing machine as if his life depended on it, as if he was being chased down by the grim reaper himself here in the prime of his life. He had been honing the muscles on his lean, 6'2" frame since high school. Now in his third year at Harvard, he was a fine-tuned specimen with exceptional good looks and an outstanding talent both on the lacrosse field and the theater stage. When he took stock of these things, it was with clinical assessment, a bit of pride and absolutely no arrogance... well, very little arrogance anyway.

As lead in a majority of the prestigious school's plays, as well as a bit of a Broadway and Hollywood player on the side, he was used to all eyes on him. If he was honest with himself, he liked the attention more than most because he needed the validation like lungs needed air, but it really had absolutely nothing to do with vanity and arrogance. If only it was that simple.

As another hot girl in tight workout clothes sidled up to him and started a conversation, he smiled up at her, his amber eyes flashing with charm and flirtation, making her knees go weak and her cheeks flush. He was grateful for both the attention and the distraction from the troublesome territory of self-analysis he'd been tip-toeing dangerously near, but he kept rowing as they conversed, otherwise he'd never be in shape considering how many times these interruptions happened.

Unable to help himself, as if they had a mind all their own and were pulled by an invisible, nefarious force, his eyes kept sliding around the chatting, flirting girl right in front of him and across the room to someone else. Despite his best intentions, his gaze was once again drawn to the one and only female in the gym, hell, the whole school, that hadn't shown him any interest at all, hadn't even glanced his way once. Ever. He watched her adjust the weight on the chest press, her long brown hair falling around her face like a curtain as he all but willed her from across the room to turn her eyes his way. She didn't. She never did, but for some reason he knew her eyes were large, almond-shaped and piercing blue anyway.

To say he was fascinated by her was an understatement. Perhaps it was because she continued to completely ignore him here at the gym, day after day, as well as when they happened to cross paths on campus, perhaps it was because that peculiar behavior was quite singular to her, but it goaded him at the exact same time that it intrigued the hell out of him.

Inexplicably, he couldn't seem to take his eyes off of her. That, too, was singular to her. He never got hung up on any one girl. Why would he when he could pretty much have 'em all? Case in point, Miss Chatty-Cathy-in-Tight-Latex carrying on a one-sided conversation in front of his face at that very moment.

If he was more obnoxious, or confident a small voice chided in the back of his brain, he would have walked right up to the mysterious girl and forced her gaze and an introduction. But he didn't, maybe couldn't, for some odd reason.

*What is her story?* It wasn't the first time he'd asked that question to himself in his head, and he knew it was far from the last. He really couldn't figure it out, couldn't figure *her* out. She was a complete enigma and oddity in his otherwise flawless collegiate existence.

She was freaking fascinating, in great shape and, yes, strangely beautiful. Despite the long, haggard scar along one side of her face. Hell, maybe more so because of it.

His interest and curiosity in the girl was unnatural and he thought of that face, that scar, more often than he'd like to admit. As the chattering girl beside him finally got the hint and walked on, Noah continued to stare... stare and row... row and stare.

The juxtaposition of their outward appearances made for a startling, stark contrast. Night and day, really. The outside world no doubt looked on at the two of them and saw polar opposites.

Unbidden, Noah recalled a line from a Greek play he'd starred in a few years back. *"The first appearance deceives many... the intelligence of a few perceives what has been carefully hidden."*

Noah continued to row and stare, reluctantly acknowledging that he was probably primarily pulled to his mystery girl because she was scarred and damaged.

Just like he was.