

A TRACE OF DARKNESS

In Darkness-short story

Alice Winters

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And here I introduce you to eleven-year old Felix. A less perverted version of Felix, but still just as short.

*I recommend reading this after book two.

I kick the can as I walk. There's something inside of it that rattles every time I kick it, but I'm not dumb enough to check out what it is. Probably a needle that will give me some disease. Although, maybe that'll get me out of the spelling test I have to take tomorrow. I give it another kick and it tumbles down the cracked sidewalk before getting caught on the lip of a concrete slab.

I hate Darian's new girlfriend. Maybe not the girl as much as the concept of the girl. I mean...she does give me candy, which is nice. But she says I look like a doll, which is not as nice. And I've seen her boob before, which was pretty interesting. The nipple ring blew my mind. You'd have to be a hard-core bitch to want to get a needle rammed through your nipple. It made my own nipples hurt just thinking about it. She told me I was the first male to grab their own nipples instead of staring slack-jawed at her boob. I told her it was because I'd seen better. She told me that I'm a liar.

And I respect her for that.

Doesn't mean I have to like her.

Because of her, Darian doesn't walk with me anymore since he has to drop her off first. It's not that I'm scared to walk home alone, it's that it's boring.

I kick the can again. This time, it sails through the air and hits the neighbor's fence. The dog hidden behind it begins barking and the evil old lady starts yelling at it. I can't see either because of the huge, wooden privacy fence. The dog doesn't stop barking, so I walk over to the wooden fence and climb onto the trashcan that's against it. Then I reach up, catch onto the top of it, and scramble up the side. I teeter on top so that I can lean over to pet the Pit Bull. He stops barking and wanders over to check out what I'm doing as I hang on the fence. Seeing that it's me, and not some druggie he needs to eat the face off of, he rears up. With his feet on the fence, I'm able to touch him. I give his head a pet as someone pinches my leg.

Startled, I lose my balance and fall into the yard face first. I know it was Darian and the cackling tells me I'm right. The Pit Bull starts licking my face as the evil neighbor sets her eyes on me. She was reading a newspaper on the porch with occasional birdlike cawing at the dog to shut up. Now, she's running at me with said newspaper balled up in her hand, ready to beat me into a pulp.

Darian always said that she makes meat pies out of people, and I honestly think she might. And I might be next. At the very least, she eats the happiness out of them because her husband always looks downright miserable.

In pure terror, I turn from her and struggle to climb the fence, but it's too tall without the aid of the trashcan. "Darian! Help me!" I cry as I leap up, trying desperately to reach the top.

The dog continues to wiggle in excitement as the chain smoking, slipper wearing, witch comes running for me.

"Help!" I scream as I run along the fence which prompts her into action. She takes off running after me, boosting my fear.

"Get out of my yard!" she screams. She's smoked so much that her voice is a gravelly grumble.

I don't understand why she hates me so much, but she looks ready to maim me if needed.

"If you steal another one of my vegetables, I'm going to skin you *alive*," she assures me.

Okay...maybe that's why she hates me.

"They were delicious!" I yell, hoping that would sate her as I reach the gate. I slip through it just in time. "Victory!" I shout as I raise my hands above my head, but the witch didn't get the memo that I'm safe outside her fence because she whaps me across the head with the newspaper.

"Scat!" she snaps.

"I think you'd be happier if you got some," I say because it's what Darian says to his friends.

Obviously, it was the wrong thing to say to Mrs. Hendricks because she looks more alive than I've ever seen her as she chases me down the road to Ben's house.

I guess my way of thinking about it is that I gave her a little more energy to keep on living. I'm not quite sure she appreciated it as she left me at our front yard. She's smart enough not to annoy Ben since there's a possibility he's inside. All of the neighbors avoid our house. I wish I could avoid it as well.

The door is locked even though Darian just got home. The door is always locked because we don't like when Ben's 'friends' come. They come in uninvited because Ben told them it's okay to do so. Since I don't have a key, I crawl in through the living room window.

Darian is grinning as he stares at me. His hair is grown out, and I keep telling him that he should grow it into an afro because then he'd look like a poodle, and I like poodles.

"You got me in trouble," I say with a glare.

He grins back at me. "I did no such thing," he says as he walks past Mom who's lying on the couch. She's asleep, so I knock into the coffee table, hoping it'd wake her. Hoping she's look up at me with a smile on her face, greet me. Tell me she missed me.

Darian reaches back and sets a hand on my head as he pulls me away from her and against his side. "Don't worry about it."

"But..."

"Come on, little dude, you don't need her," he says as he smiles down at me.

I lean into him for just a moment and nod. "I know." Of course I don't need her because I have Darian. It's not like she ever took care of me or did anything for me. Even when I was young, I don't remember anyone there but Darian. Hell, Mom might not have even been in this house for half my childhood, and I might not have even noticed. If I get a good grade, she doesn't even glance at it, yet Darian acts like it's the greatest thing. He's the only reason I bother trying at school. When I failed a test because I didn't even try, Darian threw a fit. He keeps telling me that the only way I'm getting out of here is if I use my head for something more than a doorstop.

"I thought you were walking Natalie home," I say.

"I was going to, but she had dance practice."

"You should join her. You'd be good," I say as I do one of the tiptoe things ballerinas do before twirling.

"She's not in ballet, you dork," he says as he continues on past.

"What's she in?"

"Hip hop."

I snort.

Darian grabs me in a headlock and drags me toward the room we share. He pulls the door open and chucks me through it like a rag doll. I flail my arms as I try to catch myself before I crash down onto the mattress that lays on the floor.

I bounce a little before rolling onto my back. "Darian, I have homework. Do it for me."

"Do I look like a nerd?" he asks as he shuts the door.

He slides the dresser in front of it and tosses his bookbag down. Then he flops down on the mattress beside me, before setting his feet on my head. They stink enough to knock a horse down.

"Oh God!" I cry. "My eyes are burning!"

"Good," he says. "And if you don't shut up, I'll stuff one in your mouth."

"You wouldn't!" I say with wide eyes.

"I would," he threatens.

I snort, and yank open my bag before tossing my math homework at him. "Do it."

He lazily reaches over and picks the paper up which he stares at for a moment. "And if I do? What do I get out of it?"

"What more could you want than to be my brother?" I ask.

He snorts. "A lot. Trust me."

"Nu uh. There's nothing better than me in this whole entire huge wide world."

“Popcorn.”

“Hmm...”

“Chocolate.”

“Oh...”

“*The Fast and the Furious.*”

“I thought you didn’t like that movie!”

“I still like it more than you.”

“You’re such a liar,” I say as he folds my homework into a paper plane and throws it at me. It floats across the small bedroom before hitting the wall and tumbling down.

“Go get me some chips, and I’ll help you,” he decides.

“I don’t think we have chips.”

“Food. I don’t care what kind,” he says.

I nod and get up. With minor struggling, I push the dresser out of the way and slip into the hallway that leads to the kitchen. The kitchen counter is a mess with delivery boxes everywhere. The pizza box, that’s been there since July, has ants crawling all over it. I think they might have made an ant haven inside, but I’m not dumb enough to check. Although, maybe one is radioactive like the spider in *Spiderman*.

Deciding that being Spiderman would be too much responsibility, I open the cupboard. The only thing inside is Ben’s stash, which we are not allowed to touch even if it was the end of the world and the only food left. He’d probably tell us eat each other before letting us have a nibble of one of his Oreos. The second cupboard has a box of cereal, but when I pull it down, I notice it’s completely empty. Someone just stuck the box back inside. So, I go to the fridge, but the smell is bad enough to knock me down. Ben had forgotten to pay the electric bill and must not have restocked it since the electric came back on three days ago.

I grab a can of corn, deeming it good enough, and head back to the bedroom. I shut the door, push the dresser back in place, and reveal the can of corn and knife, since I couldn’t find a can opener, like it’s the finest chocolate ever created.

“What the fuck is that?” Darian asks as he raises a bushy eyebrow.

“A delicacy.”

“I don’t want fucking corn.”

“I didn’t know corn could fuck. It’s true that you learn something new every day!”

He glares at me, not finding me funny. “If this is a joke, I’m going to pour the can on your head.”

“I wouldn’t do that, it’s the only thing in the house. You’ll be even hungrier.”

"I thought Mom was going to the store today," he says as he snatches up my homework and sets it on the stained carpet. He stares at it as I walk over, can still in my hand.

"Do you...want the corn?" I ask.

"No, we'll save it for supper," he says.

I nod and set it down, along with the knife, before sitting down next to him. He helps me with the homework for a bit before turning to his own. While he's scribbling away, I read a book I had grabbed from the school's library. Around five-thirty, he stands up and stuffs the homework back into his backpack.

"I'm hungry," he says.

"Want the corn now?"

He shakes his head. "No, I'm gonna see if Mom has money. We'll go buy something," he says.

"Okay," I say as I follow him out into the living room. Mom's still asleep, so Darian nudges her.

"Ma, wake up."

She slowly opens her eyes, like they weigh more than her head. The skin around them is dark and puffy. She has a bruise on the side of her face, but I can't tell if it was from Ben or her own carelessness.

"What?" she asks as she shifts her blue eyes onto Darian like he interrupted something important.

"You didn't go grocery shopping."

"We don't have the money," she says as she leans back and hugs a ratty pillow to her chest.

"We need food."

"Ask Ben," she says as she waves us away. "I think I can hear him."

Darian anxiously looks over at the door as it swings open. I know he wants to ask him, but Ben has been really mean to Darian lately. But he doesn't need to ask him. I can. I want to show Darian that I'm old enough he can depend on me. I feel like I'm the only one ever depending on anyone. Maybe if he realizes he can depend on me as well, he won't be so sick of this place. Ben's uniform is filthy, covered in grease and dirt, and he looks tired as he passes through the front door.

"Ben?" I ask.

"What the fuck do you want?" Ben asks as his eyes narrow. 'Fuck' seems to be Ben's favorite word.

"We need money for food," I say as confidently as I can. But now that I'm here, I feel like maybe I shouldn't have said anything at all.

"I can't even walk through the door and you're already all fucking over me? All you two do is want, want, want!" he yells as he reaches for me.

Darian pulls me back, dragging me behind him as I bite my lip. I shouldn't be cowering behind Darian, I should stand up, fight back, but instead, I stand in his shadow. It's like a brick wall suddenly forming between Ben and me.

"What the fuck do you want?" he asks as he heads into the kitchen. Darian follows him, but his hand never leaves my wrist. He keeps me behind him, away from Ben's hard stare. It was stupid of me to talk to Ben. So stupid. I'm lucky he didn't do anything but snap at me. Would he have if Darian hadn't stepped between us?

"Ben, can we have some money to buy groceries?" Darian asks.

Ben stops short of the fridge before setting his hard eyes on Darian.

"I gave your mother money for groceries this morning. Is that not good enough?" he asks.

"Mom said she didn't get anything," Darian says.

Ben's face turns harder as he pushes Darian out of the way and rushes into the living room where Mom is staring at the coffee table like it's astounding.

"Where'd the fucking money go for groceries?"

"You never gave me any," she says quietly, like there's no sense in pretending the lie is real.

His eyes turn sharp. "Where *the fuck* did it go?"

Her eyes stray to the table where her drugs lay. He picks them up as he stares at her. "Is this where they fucking went?" He throws them at her. Her reaction is delayed, and she doesn't cringe until they have already fallen into her lap.

"Well, guess you can eat that shit, because that's all you're getting," Ben snaps at Darian.

Darian opens his mouth, but I grab his hand and tug. Darian nods and heads for the bedroom, but instead of staying inside, he grabs his backpack. I follow him through the house to the front door.

"Let's go."

I jog after him, excited to be leaving the house. Fall is still fresh in the air, making it a little cool when we step onto the porch.

"What are we doing?"

"Going for a walk."

"To where?"

"Fucking Narnia," he says.

"I like Narnia," I say.

"Do you ever just shut up?" He always gets grumpy after dealing with Ben. I don't know why he won't just shrug it off and move on. Ben certainly does. He never cares about what we think of him.

“Rarely,” I admit as I follow along with him into town. About halfway there, we stop for a red light at a corner where there’s a man in a wheelchair holding a sign that says, ‘Veteran-needs money for food.’

He moves around the city, but always comes back to this corner. He says that there’s a rich young lady that always gives him money on her way home from work. When I was old enough to know what a Veteran was, I asked him what war he was in.

He said, ‘the war for pussy.’

I wasn’t real sure if he meant the opposing sides were pussies or if he just liked pussy that much, but I thought it was a pretty cool response.

“Hey, Lieutenant Dan,” I say with a smile.

He grins when he sees me. “How’s little Felix doing?”

“Good, I see you’ve got the wheelchair today,” I say since the man can walk just fine.

“Yeah, I made a show of falling out of it while she was walking by last time, she gave me a fifty,” he says as he gives me a toothless grin. He’s missing his two front teeth but when I asked him what happened to them, he told me I was too young to know.

Which means that he couldn’t think of a cool response that would make him sound badass. He probably knocked them out tripping over his own stupidity.

“Can I sit with you, and we split the money?”

“No, kiddo. Then I’d just look like a pedophile.”

“Maybe they’ll give *me* money then.”

He laughs. “No, kid, but thanks for the idea,” he says as he rubs at his scraggly beard. It kind of looks mangy which makes me wonder if humans get mange. It’s probably a good thing he doesn’t want me near him then. I quite like my hair.

“I have a lot of good ideas, just ask my brother.”

Darian does some kind of one shoulder shrug, then hurries me on by.

He leans down, so he’s a little closer to my height. “Why do you like talking to all the creepy people?” Darian whispers.

“He’s not creepy. He was a lieutenant,” I say matter-of-factly.

“You do realize he just stole that name out of *Forrest Gump*, right?”

I think about it. “What’s *Forrest Gump*?”

“We’re not related,” he decides.

“I dunno. I think we match,” I say as I hold my arm up to his like we’re comparing tans. My arm is nearly pure white compared to his darker skin. “You’ve just been out in the sun too long.”

He shakes his head in disbelief.

I smile proudly at him. “I wanna be black too. What’s up my n—”

Darian clamps his hand over my mouth. "Do not *ever* say that unless you want your ass kicked."

"I wasn't gonna say the bad one. I was gonna say negro. I mean even black crayons are labeled negro."

"Just shush," he says as he looks around nervously for who might be listening. "Please. Shush before we get beaten up."

"You're part black, and I'm black at heart."

"Where do you come up with these things?"

"I want to be like you."

"I'm not three feet tall and look like a pedophile's wet dream."

"I'm sure if you stopped glaring at people you could be a pedophile's wet dream too."

"I would prefer to not be."

"Yeah you're right...that doesn't sound fun."

"No, it isn't."

"Do you see why I want to look like you?" I ask.

He laughs but shakes his head. "Trust me, in these parts, you don't want to look like me. You're lucky to look like you."

I don't really believe him, so I just shrug. "So...what are we doing?" I ask.

"Grocery shopping."

"How are we getting the money? Want me to steal tips again?"

"No, we were almost caught last time."

"I'm better this time, I promise."

"How did you get better?"

I stole the library book, my teacher's pencil, and some stuff from the gym lockers. "I just did. I'm magical," I say as I wave my fingers through the air.

"You're confident, I'll give you that, but definitely not magical."

"Hey, my Hogwarts' letter could still be coming, I just turned eleven."

"Trust me, Felix, no one wants you," he says.

I grab onto him and look up, into his brown eyes. "You do."

"I have to, I'm your brother."

I snort. "If that was true, Mom would want me."

"She wants you."

"To shut up or go away."

He bites his lip before patting me on the head like I'm a dog he pities. "Eh, you don't need her anyway."

"I don't need no one."

But you.

"Exactly. You especially don't need correct grammar."

I grin. "Exactly," I agree. "So...Can we steal a car?"

"I don't have anywhere to take it tonight."

"Basically, we can't do anything because you're scared," I taunt. "Little chicken Darian. Bawk bawk." My rendition of a chicken is nearly spot on. Even I'm a little proud of it.

Darian must be jealous of my superior chicken skills because he gives me a push toward a Ford parked along the side of the street. "Go steal a car, Felix. What are you going to do with it then?"

I shrug.

"Thought so...we need to think of something good."

We walk in silence for a moment as Darian thinks about a good plan, and I think about how hungry I am. Or maybe he's thinking about how hungry he is as well because as we walk by a delicious smelling chicken restaurant, his stomach growls.

"Let's just rob this place for the chicken. Not even take money, just chicken," Darian says as he leers into the window. The people inside look so happy, and slightly concerned with us staring at their dinners.

"Ooh! Lieutenant Dan gave me an idea!" I shout. It must have been loud enough that the people just inside the window heard me because they shift away from us.

"Do not trust any of his ideas," Darian says as he leans his head against the glass.

"What if I pretend a pedophile is after me and then someone feels bad and gives me money."

"Did you think that through in the slightest? Why would someone give you money? To beat away the pedophile with those thick bills? Pay him off?"

Okay...dumb idea. "Well, in my defense, my brain power is being zapped away by the smell of food. Sweet...sweet...food."

He laughs. "You're such a dork, come on."

Darian pulls me away from the window and begins walking. "You know...you might have a good idea. Let's head to the rich part of town, alright?"

I grin at the realization that Darian thinks I have a good idea. I *had* been mostly joking, but if he can make it work, I'm all in.

We walk to the rich part of town before Darian pulls me into an alleyway. "Here's the plan. You're going to find someone that looks rich and skip in front of them. Then as you're walking by an alleyway, I'm going to grab you, hold my knife to your throat and tell them they need to pay, or I'll gut you."

My eyes get wide at the idea. "I love it."

"Of course you do, because there's something wrong with you. Be scared, alright? After I get the money, they'll probably try to take you somewhere, so you'll have to sneak off."

“Yeah, got it!” I say as I turn and see a lady wearing high heels while chatting on her rich person’s phone. “Her!” I shout and take off.

“Felix! Stop, dammit, Felix!”

It’s too late, I’m already a quarter of the block away from him. I stop and pretend to tie my shoe as she slowly catches up. She snaps her phone shut and keeps walking as I walk in front of her, heading back the way I’d run from. I skip a little and try to draw attention to myself as I continue down the sidewalk. As I’m walking past the alleyway, I slow down so Darian can snatch me.

He grabs me around the waist and yanks me back as the woman yelps, startled.

“Give me your fucking money or I’m gonna kill the kid,” he yells as he points his pocket knife at me. I scream and fight as the woman looks at us with wide eyes.

“Let him go! I’ll call the police!” she says, sounding panicked. Cleary, my acting is superb because she honestly seems concerned for my life. I flail and cry like I’m terrified.

“Give me your money or I’ll kill him,” Darian shouts. He sounds muffled, and when I look back, I notice he has his shirt covering his face.

“Here!” she says as she yanks her purse open, pulls out some money and throws it at Darian. Darian pushes me at the lady who scoops me up like I’m a toddler and starts running. I’m so shocked that the plan worked that I let her tote me a block before I realize what’s happening.

“I’m fine,” I say as she pulls out her phone. She sets me down as she fumbles with her phone which probably means she’s calling 911.

“It’s going to be okay, honey, you’ll be okay,” she promises as her attention turns to the phone.

That’s when I discreetly slip away. Just like a magician.

Heh, and Darian didn’t think I was ready?

I take the back road and run all the way back to Darian who now has his shirt on. He looks up at me and holds the money out in front of him with a grin.

“Fifty dollars!” he shouts.

“Can we have *chicken*?” I shout as I run to him.

“Yes! We’ll do five dollars. That’s it...we’ll share something.”

Then I get a brilliant idea. “Let’s do *another*.”

“Don’t you kind of feel bad about that one?” he asks in concern. “I mean...this is enough.”

“They’re rich,” I say. “We’re like Robin Hood.”

“I...don’t think so but...one more. Let’s move since I’m sure she called the cops.”

We relocate deeper into the suburbs until we find another good spot. Darian sends me out on my own, but this time, I have to wait a bit before a man pulls up in a very expensive looking car. He gets out and starts walking, so I walk ahead of him.

Darian snatches me right off the sidewalk and this time I am a real actor. I scream and fight against his grip. I have tears flowing and everything.

“Give me your money, or I’ll kill him,” Darian says.

The man glances over at us, quickens his pace, and tries to pretend neither of us exist.

I almost forget to keep acting when I realize that this man doesn’t care about my demise in the slightest.

“Give me your money or I’ll kill him! I’ll do it!” Darian shouts.

The man carries on, clearly not swayed by my acting skills.

Darian pulls me back into the alley. “What now?”

“Let me go,” I say, and he does.

I race out of the alley, screaming as I run for the man. I grab onto him, clawing and grabbing for him.

“Get off me!” he growls as he kicks at me like I’m a feral dog trying to eat his face.

“Why won’t you help me?” I sob as he presses a hand against my face.

He grabs a handful of my hair and peels me off of him. “Go find someone else,” he says, before quickly slipping through a restaurant door, leaving me out on the street.

I walk back to Darian while whistling. As I step into the alleyway, I flash him the man’s wallet. “I told you I’ve been practicing,” I say with a grin.

“Oh my God. Holy shit,” he says as he grabs it and flips it open.

“Just admit that I’m better than you.”

“You’re cockier than me.”

“Better. Say, ‘Felix, you are so much better than me...I strive to be as amazing as you are when I reach the same mental maturity that you’re currently at.’”

“Free kid, anyone want a free kid?” Darian asks as he looks around, but the street is empty.

I punch him in the gut which shuts him up.

“I can’t believe that guy didn’t give a shit about you,” Darian says.

“Let’s steal his car.”

“No, you already stole his wallet,” Darian says as he peeks out to see if the coast is clear. “Whoa, whoa, whoa...is that his car?” He points to the shiny, blue sports car.

“Yes.”

He has a dreamy look on his face as a grin plays at his lips. “Let’s steal his car.”

“Yeah, now we’re talking,” I say with a grin as I rub my hands together. We sneak over to the car where Darian opens his bag. He pulls out a wedge which he forces between the door jamb until there’s a gap between the door and the side of the car. Then he slips a coat hanger with yarn attached to the end, down inside.

“Are you keeping watch or are you staring at me like I’m a Baywatch babe?”

“A what?” I ask as I watch him hook the lock with the yarn. He pulls the yarn tight and the lock pulls up. He takes the coat hanger and the wedges out before pulling the door open and hopping inside. I rush around to the passenger side, so I can get in, and watch him start to hotwire the car. It takes him a bit before he gets it and grins at me.

“Let’s go get some mother fucking chicken.”

“Ohh yeah,” I say, excitedly.

He floors it and the car’s tires squeal as he takes off. We fly down the road, feeling free. I roll down the window and shout into the wind whipping inside. I feel so alive as we careen down the road. We head out of the city where Darian gets the car up to seventy. The trees are flying past us as wind whips in so fast, I feel like it’s drying my eyeballs out.

“Do you want to drive?” he asks.

“I can?” I ask with wide eyes and his grin broadens.

“Sure,” he says as he pulls off onto the side of the road.

When he gets out, I clamber into the driver’s seat, feeling like I’m on the top of the world.

“Can you even reach the pedal?” he asks as he buckles his seatbelt.

“Yes!” I say although I have to move my seat all the way up to reach it.

“Now, don’t go fast, alright? Check your mirrors.”

I check them and grin at him. “Check.”

“Good, now foot on the break, you’re not going to go over thirty, got it?”

“Got it!” I say as I put the car in drive and start to crawl along. I’m not even sure if I ever get over ten miles an hour, but it is the most amazing thing the world.

Darian turns the radio on and *Bohemian Rhapsody* comes on which we both scream along to. Darian starts headbanging at one point and we’re both laughing as I chug along at ten miles an hour down some desolate country road.

When the song ends, Darian slumps back in his seat like he’s exhausted. “Chicken?” he asks.

“Chicken,” I agree.

When the car stops, we swap seats even though I never want to stop. He parks the car a few blocks from the chicken place. We take the cash out of the wallet before sticking the wallet into the glove box. Darian caresses the steering wheel one more time before locking the doors and getting out.

I get out as well, but I don’t leave.

“What’s wrong? I thought you wanted chicken. Do you want something else?” he asks as he looks back at me.

“What if we got back in the car and drove and drove...and never came back?” I ask desperately.

Darian’s jaw tightens as his body stiffens. “We can’t. Now come on.”

“Darian, please. I hate him. I hate him so much, and I hate Mom. Please?”

Darian sighs as he walks up to me. Even at sixteen he towers over me, so he kneels down. “Someday, you will turn away from this place and never have to look back. Someday, you’ll get away from this life, but we can’t right now. I have no money.”

“We have money!”

“Felix, I can’t rent an apartment, where would we live?”

“I don’t care!” I say desperately, unable to see why he doesn’t understand. “Just anywhere!”

“We can’t. Right now, it may feel awful, but you have a roof over your head. You have school, and you have food. Right now is not the time, alright? Not right now.”

“Someday?”

“Someday, I promise, you’ll get away from the sickness. You’ll get away from all of it. This is such a short time of your life. Soon, you’ll be able to live the life you want, alright?”

I nod and let go of the car door. With a deep breath, I start after Darian.

We walk through the door, the smell making my stomach clench in hunger.

I rush over to the line and stare up at the menu, scanning prices, not items. “How much can I spend? Two dollars? Can I have three?”

He stares at the menu for a moment, and I watch him. He always seems so grown up. More grown up than most people in my life. Maybe it’s because he’s so tall, or maybe it’s because he does everything my mom should be doing.

Then he looks down at me and his thin lips twist into a smile. “You can order anything you want.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “I can get a pop?”

“Sure.”

“Next,” the cashier says, but I have no idea what I’m getting. There are too many options and not enough time as Darian orders a number three, and if it’s what Darian wants, it’s definitely what I want as well.

When we have our food, we get a seat near the window where we can eat. The food is so delicious, neither of us talk. He smiles which makes me grin and nod at him as I wipe my greasy fingers on my napkin. There isn’t a scrap left on the plates when we’re done.

“I kind of feel ill,” I admit.

“Me too,” Darian says with a grin. “But it was worth it.”

“Oh, definitely worth it,” I say. “Can we come back again?”

“Sometime, sure.”

“Good,” I say as I rush over to fill my cup back up with pop. By the time I return, he’s cleaned the table off and is waiting for me.

Together we head outside, sipping our drinks, money bulging out of Darian's pocket. The night is dark at this point, and as we walk, I notice flashing lights in the area we'd left the rich man's car.

"What's in your pockets?" Darian asks as he stares at my pants in concern.

I reach in and pull out a handful of salt packets. "Salt."

"You have two pockets of salt?" he asks.

"Yeah, I like salt."

"You're going to turn into a little thief."

"It's free," I say as I take one out and chuck it at Darian's head.

It bounces off, which makes me laugh.

"You brat," he says as he reaches for me.

I take off running as he chases after me.

When we reach home, we sneak in and Darian heads off to hide the money. Ben won't bother it, but if Mom found it, it'd be gone. As soon as Darian's done, he stands by the door.

"I'm going to go talk to Mom," he says as he rubs at a bruise on his wrist. I know it's from Ben, but isn't everything wrong in our life dealing with Ben?

No, not everything.

"Please don't," I say.

He bites his lip, unable to meet my eyes.

"Darian, please," I beg as I grab onto his shirt.

"I'm sorry," he says as he pulls away from me and slips through the door.

Fuck him. Maybe I'll just run away myself. I don't need him. I don't need anyone.

I crawl through the window and run to the neighbor's house. The witch isn't awake to notice me as I walk over to the dog house. The Pit Bull wags his tail as I crawl inside the dog house with him. It smells, but I don't care as I curl up. He lays down on top of me, and I hug him to me.

It's hours before I go home. Hours before I tell myself that Darian is right, there's nowhere for me to run to. I climb in through the window and find the lights on in the room. Darian is asleep on the mattress on the floor. He's still wearing his jeans, but his shirt is on the floor. His arm is outstretched, and I see the needle mark.

I love Darian. I love Darian more than anything, but some days, I want to tell him that he becomes more like Mom every day. She's a sickness and he's caught it.

When will I?

I sit down next to him. "Darian?"

He's asleep, so I pick up a marker I'd been using for my art assignment and start to draw on his chest. I make sure to draw a huge penis on his chest and write 'I'm a pussy' on his stomach. He never even twitches as I draw all over his stomach and

chest. When I'm almost finished, he wakes enough to wave at me and roll onto his back.

In the middle of his back where he probably won't ever notice, I write, 'Please don't leave me.'

"What are you doing?"

I look over at Lane sitting in the passenger seat of the car. I don't answer him for a moment as I try to think of a good lie.

"Felix? You are in here, right? You didn't sneak out like that one time and are currently outside of the car, laughing at me?"

I hold my finger right next to his cheek. "Lane!" I shout, and he turns his head which allows my finger to ram him right in the cheek. Copper, hearing the burst of excitement, tries climbing into the front seat.

"What are you doing?" he asks as he bats at the air. He accidentally smacks Copper who looks quite offended as he sits back down in the backseat.

"Jerking off. You?" I ask.

"I know that's not true, you can't keep your mouth shut long enough to do anything," he says.

"You like it when my mouth is open," I say as I pinch his gut.

"I feel like I'm always hyperaware, just waiting for you to pinch me and poke me."

"I'm just preparing you for the day when you're bending over in the shower and I poke you real good," I say with a grin.

He shakes his head. "I'm not worried because I'm not sure you can even reach. This one time I was at a fair and there was this little miniature stallion trying to breed this horse and everyone was just laughing and wasn't trying to stop him because they knew he couldn't reach. That would be you."

"I hate you," I say.

"Huh...I'm not worried. See the carefree look on my face? Not worried at all."

"You should be because one of these days, I'm going to get you back."

"You mean you can do something worse to me than you already have?"

"Oh, I can do something a *whole* lot worse to you...I just have to think of it," I say as I lean back in the seat. It's starting to get stuffy with the car off. "The windows are starting to fog; your parents are going to think we're doing the dirty when they arrive."

"Maybe we should be," he says with a grin.

"Alright, bend over and spread those buns of steel," I say.

There's a rapping on the window which makes Lane jump. Jenny presses her face against it, so it looks like she has a pig nose, which makes me laugh. Lane, not realizing it, pushes the door open, slamming it into Jenny.

"Oh my God, murder me why don't you!" she says as she holds her nose. She's blinking rapidly as her eyes tear up.

"Why were you so close?" Lane asks as he holds a hand out to her. She doesn't take it, probably because she can't see it through the tears of pain.

"I was just saying, 'hi!'" she lies.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"I suppose," she says dramatically.

"Well, your snottiness is still intact, so you must be fine," he says.

I get out of the car and come around to join them as he gives her a hug. While I'm pulling Copper out of the car, Janet and Tom walk up. Copper leans against my leg and looks up at me like I'm the greatest thing in the entire world.

"I'm ravenous," Janet says as I rush up to hug her before either of her children can. I even push Jenny out of the way to get there first. I feel like if Janet never has contact with her real children, she'll forget about them.

"How are you today, Felix?" she asks as she wraps me in a hug.

"Good, how are you?" I ask as I hug her back.

"Better now that I've seen you guys," she says. "Where's Robbie and Hailey?"

"He found a new woman," Jenny jokes.

"Smart man," Lane says.

"Yeah, but he took the kid, so he must not be too smart," I say, which makes Lane laugh and Jenny glare at me.

"My little pumpkin is perfect."

"Hey, Tom!" I say. "I've missed you. I feel like I don't get to see you enough if I'm not robbing banks or anything."

"Don't rob a bank," he says.

"Lane's always complaining that he doesn't get to see you," I say. "Ha, get it?"

Everyone stares at me like I'm the worst kind of human as Lane laughs. "I'm so glad I can't see you, Felix, because there has been a few times I wanted to strangle you, but I just couldn't find you."

I take Lane's hand and squeeze it. "Just call my name, baby, I'll always come."

"Sounds like a trap," Lane says.

"Definitely a trap," Jenny says.

We head up to the restaurant together, Lane and I trailing behind them. Before we reach the door, Lane pulls me back.

"I know what you're trying to do," he whispers.

I look over at him. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"She'll never love you as much as me. There's just not enough of you to love."

“That’s it, I’m moving to Asia where I will be height appropriate,” I say. “It’s not my fault your family is made of giants.”

“Normal people.”

I shake my head as Tom holds the door open for us. The aroma of chicken floats through the air, attacking my senses. This place is definitely nicer than the one Darian and I had gone to all of those years ago. But I don’t think chicken has ever tasted as good as it had that day.

We get in line to order as Lane squeezes my shoulder. “You never answered my question.”

“About spreading your butt cheeks?”

Tom looks back at me, which makes me grin.

“What were you thinking about in the car?” Lane asks

“Oh...Uh...the last time Darian and I went to get chicken when we were kids. It was one of the best days of my childhood getting to spend time with him. We’d stolen a bunch of money from some rich guy. It was a really neat trick, I would pretend he was abducting me and he’d hold a knife against my throat and make people pay him to let me go.”

“As one does with their sibling,” Lane says like he does it every weekend with Jenny.

I laugh. “Hey, we were starving.”

“Have you talked to him?”

“I’ve thought about it. I know people...think I’m crazy for going back to him. For caring about him, but they don’t understand how it was growing up like that. What you had to do to survive. How it screws you up.”

“I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“Let’s talk about something else. Like what you want to eat. There are some honey-mustard coated chicken,” I say.

“Don’t you dare.”

“I’ll get you that. Extra mustard.”

We order and sit at a table in the back of the restaurant. We talk as we eat, falling into the ‘normal’ family routine. Jenny talks about work and Tom stares. Janet makes Lane talk about the classes he’s taking, and I tell her that I’ve been playing with the idea of taking classes at the local college. I’m not sure if I say it because I’m actually interested, or because I like the way it makes her smile. And when she smiles, it makes me feel like I can do anything.

When we finish eating, we head out to the car where we hug and tell everyone we love them, and we’ll miss them like we aren’t planning to eat together in two days.

I slide into the driver’s seat.

“I like that place. We’ll have to eat there more often.”

“Yeah, it was pretty good chicken,” I say as I start the car.

“Not as good as anything you’d make, but pretty good.”

I smile at him. “Thanks, love. You melt my heart.”

“I hope it doesn’t melt too much or there won’t be much left,” he says.

I grin as I lean over and kiss his cheek. “I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

Suddenly, the driver’s door opens, and I feel someone grab me.

“Where’s the watch?” he growls.

I look up as I see someone outside of Lane’s door, reaching for the handle.

“We need a new hobby,” I tell Lane as the person drags me out of the car.

Author’s note:

Don’t feel like you need to read this, unless you feel like hearing what I have to say. Trust me, I’m not sure if I ever have anything interesting to say.

I decided to write this scene with Darian because, while reading some reviews (I know, I know, one shouldn’t read reviews), I noticed quite a few people talking about how much they hated Darian, or how foolish Felix was for going back to him time and time again. But I never felt hate for Darian, and I don’t think Felix should either. Felix knows that Darian has had a rough life. He wasn’t as strong as Felix and fell into a world of drugs. I know that Darian truly cares for Felix, but he just doesn’t always show it the right way. Felix hides his insecurities in what he says (and his jokes), Darian hides them in drugs and bad decisions. Hopefully, this made you like Darian just a little more because I don’t think I’m done with him yet. Family bonds can be very strong, even when spread paper thin. I know I would go to the end of the world to help my own sister and forgive her every step of the way, even if she was someone like Darian.

On another note, all descriptions of breaking into the car are from personal experience and taught to me by my grandfather. Not because I steal cars, but because I was going for the world record of locking my keys in my car at least once a week for about a month straight. Over the course of that year, I bet I locked my keys in my car at least seven or so times (probably more but it’s kind of embarrassing to admit). I have even locked them in the running vehicle because the lock button was way too easy to hit. My grandfather (who was a tow-truck driver for many years) taught me the art of breaking into my own car to retrieve the keys. Every time I would call him, the first thing he’d say would be, ‘Did you lock your keys in your car?’

It’s been years since I’ve done it, so let’s hope I’ve grown out of that trait! I check to make sure I have my keys at least three times every time I exit my vehicle! Oh, and Felix starting the car in the first book with a screwdriver? That was from my grandpa as well. While we never tried that one out, he told me that he never

understood why people would hotwire a car when you can just ram a screwdriver into the ignition. Not sure I believed him, I looked it up online and surprise, surprise, he was right! Just don't ever plan to put the key back in the car after that! Or...you know, just don't steal a car!

Well, I hope you enjoyed and thank you from the bottom of my heart for sticking with me this long. I honestly didn't think people would 'get' my sense of humor. Some people don't (they're just weird), but the amount that does has blown me away. The reviews, messages, and support have been astounding. I cannot thank all of you enough for sticking with me this long.

After you're finished reading, feel free to let me know what you thought or what you enjoyed! You can leave a comment on Facebook, Twitter, or send me an email at alicewintersauthor.com

Thank you and I hope you continue to enjoy their ridiculous adventure!