

Excerpt from *Untamed*

(Passage taken from *The Boy in the Web*, Thomas and Alison's short story)

Our landlord, Wally Marcus, kept the back door to the building locked for “safety reasons.” Or so he claimed. He just wanted to gawk at all the single moms and young girls who lived in his low-rent building. His door was the first one down the hall from the entrance, meaning he had the ideal situation from any perv's perspective.

Shards of rain, laced with ice, pelted me. The denim of my jacket and jeans absorbed every droplet, and I felt ten pounds heavier and twenty degrees colder by the time I pushed inside the building. My hands were too wet to hold on to the knob, and the door slammed shut. I cringed at the sound.

I'd barely skirted by Wally's room when his door flung open. I backed slowly down the hall toward the stairway, keeping him in my sights.

His sweaty face appeared first, then the rest of him, rolls of flab barely contained within a tight blue T-shirt and grease-stained khaki pants. I could smell his distinctive odor even with my eyes—the scent of rotting cabbage and meat. Pools of perspiration formed uneven circles beneath his armpits, darkening the blue to navy.

He'd always reminded me of a walrus—bald head, deep folds of skin over his brow, double chin, and a handlebar mustache that looked like a half-chewed kielbasa dangling over his sausage-fat lips. The wheezes and clicking sounds he emitted with each breath only added to the illusion of a beached sea mammal.

“Hey there, Alison. Get a little wet, did ya?” His gaze glittered—watery and dark like liquid charcoal—as he took a bite of an overripe apricot. The juices drizzled down his chin and he offered a sleazy smirk. His incisors—two sizes too big for his mouth—hung low like underdeveloped ivory tusks.

My stomach twisted with disgust as he stepped full into the hallway and made an obvious appraisal of my chest where my shirt clung to me. He looked famished, as if he wanted to gobble me up. I snapped my jacket closed and shoved ringlets of dripping blond hair off my face.

“I've got some hot chocolate on the stove. Wanna cup?” he asked.

I'd caught him staring plenty of times, but he'd never had the guts to ask me in. I swallowed and held tighter to my bag's straps. "Nah. Mrs. Bunsby's waiting."

"Nope, she's not. Had to make a run to the grocery store." He flashed a note at me.

I only had time to see a tiny triangle torn from the top, right above the words *I'll be back in an hour*, before he shoved it into his pocket.

"In fact," Wally wheezed, "she told me to keep you company. Says you're too young to be on your own and stay out of trouble. I can come to your room instead, if ya like." He jangled the keys that hung on one of his belt loops and smirked bigger.

*Idiot.*

I hated him, and hated myself more for being scared. I'd faced monsters like him before. Two foster families ago, I had a fourteen-year-old foster brother who trapped me in the basement and stuck his tongue down my throat while his hands found their way up my shirt. Yet I was the one who got sent back to the children's home for biting off the tip of his tongue and breaking his thumb. *I was the one with issues.*

Unfortunately for me, Wally Harcus wouldn't be as easy to fend off as a skinny teenage boy.

The bottom step hit the back of my heels, stalling me. It was fight or flight. One thing I knew: Mrs. Bunsby wouldn't have asked the walrus to keep me company. He probably saw her leave and decided it was the perfect chance to make a move. So there he stood between me and the only way out. And even if I locked myself inside our apartment, he had the keys to get in.

I could prop something against the door and buy myself time to clamber down the broken fire escape. I'd probably fall to my death, but that had to be better than the alternative.

I spun around and hightailed it up the four flights of stairs. The sound of his footsteps followed, slow and plodding. He was in no hurry. Everyone minded their own business here. No one would stop him, which made the chase about as challenging as a fly already stuck in a spider's web.

Tears blurred my vision as I made it to our door. A piece of Scotch tape dangled the missing puzzle piece from Mrs. Bunsby's note where she'd stuck it next to the peephole. Wally had taken the letter she left for me.

Gulping back bile, I struggled to fit my key in the lock. Adrenaline used my heart like a punching bag, slamming it until it quivered uncontrollably in my chest. I'd just managed to get inside, shut the door, and lock it when Wally cleared the final step onto our floor.

Straining every muscle, I wedged Mrs. Bunsby's favorite wing-backed chair into place under the knob and raced for my bedroom, dropping my bag just inside the threshold after I shut myself in.

The overcast afternoon hazed the light to a gray fog, and with my heavy curtains covering the window, shadows cloaked the room and painted eerie shapes along the bare walls.

Keys jangled outside our apartment, loud enough I could hear them through my closed door. Sobbing, I stumbled over to the window, shoved the curtains apart, and opened the pane. A rain-drenched gust caught my hair and slapped it around my face. Tears burned trails down my cheeks as I flung one leg over the sill, about to throw myself out.

"Tsk, tsk. Now, that would be a tragic waste." A deep cockney accent froze me in place there, straddling life and death. "Surely your existence is worth more than that oily rat's."

I snapped my head toward the voice. In the left corner of my room, the shadows moved and took on the indistinct silhouette of a man.

A gasp broke through my lips. "Wh-who's there?"

"Introductions aren't necessary amongst friends." My intruder leaned into the dim light, revealing a face both beautiful and terrifying. He wasn't human. No, he was far too perfect and mystical for that. Markings, resembling tattoos, flashed with jeweled colors beneath his dark, fathomless eyes. His blue hair swayed, out of sync with the wind gushing through my window. "I believe I've merited the title of friend, don't you? Considering the last time you almost cracked your skull clambering around on that fire escape." Giant wings splayed out from behind his shoulders, glistening like black satin in the grayish light.

Adrift somewhere between terror, disbelief, and hope, I eased my leg back into my room and leaned against the juncture of the window frame and the wall. "*You . . . you were the one. You saved me.*"

He smoothed the wrinkles from some red gloves on his hands. "Not quite, Alison. You saved yourself by daring to defy the natural laws in the first place. The fact that you even tried to make that climb merited a second chance at life, yes? Courage paired with folly becomes abandon, which is an honorable trait where I'm from, and should always be rewarded."

I squinted at him. “You were rewarding me for my folly?”

He held a top hat in front of him and stroked it as if it were a cat. “Your *abandon*.” A deep chuckle rumbled in his chest. “You’re an odd duck, aren’t you? You haven’t balked at me yet, nor have you questioned if I’m real. Or even how I know your name. It doesn’t matter to you one way or the other, does it?”

I clenched my hands into fists at my sides. “It doesn’t matter if I’m crazy, as long the madness helps me survive.”

He raised an eyebrow, obviously pleased and surprised by my answer. “Ah, spoken like a true netherling. Madness, like any other facet of irrationality, can be used as a tool and a weapon, in the right hands.”

I didn’t have the chance to ask what a netherling was because in the other room, the wing-backed chair’s wooden feet scraped across the tile floor and clawed through my nerves like talons. Wally was in the apartment.

My throat dried. I glanced outside at the slippery rails, then back toward the man with wings, now standing in full view next to my door. He was tall and graceful, around the age of nineteen or twenty, and dressed in lace and velvet, like a gentleman from another time and place.

“Are you . . . are you my guardian angel?” I’d heard of such creatures but had never believed they might be real. Yet in that moment, I was willing to believe anything if it would save me from my landlord or a broken neck.

My visitor flashed his teeth in a stunning smile that transformed his face to the devil’s playground—malice concealed within a veneer of lovely persuasion. “I’m the furthest thing from an angel, little ducky. But I am here to watch you dole out some righteous retribution upon a sinner most foul.” He placed the top hat on his head. A string of dead moths trembled at the brim in morbid tribute to the gusts fluttering my curtains. “Now, let’s have us a bit of fun with old Wally, aye?”