

Old Flame, New Flame

Union City, Georgia.

A small city, where the most exciting place to be was the Super Wal-Mart. The theaters had closed years ago and the mall wasn't too far behind. The current town motto was: "You'll like what U. C.". This was printed boldly across the rather colorful banners that hung throughout the city along the roads.

Roads like the one Rita James happens to be walking along. She actually stands there for a few seconds to stare at the banner in disbelief, wondering how many hours it took the council to come up with that one. Despite her foul mood, she sniggers before moving on. "Dumb," she thinks.

Rita has been walking for quite some time, attempting to calm herself after a disastrous visit to her social worker. It wasn't working. It's been hours since she returned from downtown and the whole visit still irritated her. All she wanted to know was the answer to a simple question concerning her birth parents. At least she thought it was simple.

Were they nuts?

Mrs. Karen had been her social worker for as long as she could remember, which honestly wasn't that far back. Rita's memory was a bit foggy if she tried to recall anything further than five years. But Mrs. Karen was always robotic with her reaction to her answers, as if she had practiced the answers to any question Rita could possibly think up. She couldn't, or wouldn't, give her a straight answer.

Rita growls, her pace picking up a bit. If she didn't know, all Mrs. Karen had to say was that she didn't know. Instead, the woman gave Rita pamphlets. Pamphlets about how some kids found their birth parents and realized they were better off without them. How one kid's dad used to beat him and the state came and saved him. Or the one girl who found out that her mom was a rape victim and didn't believe in abortions but didn't want to have anything to do with her. And finally there was sunny Sally whose mom was pleased as punch to reunite with her.

Rita's parents were dead. She knew this already; there wasn't going to be a bad or good reunion with them. All she wanted to know was whether she was going to need a long-term prescription for Xanax or lithium in the future. She needed to know because she had started burning things and it would be nice to know if this was a family trait and if it could be treated. It had started small: she bought matchbooks and burned each stick whenever she got nervous or irritated. The need had gotten worse when she was with her ex-boyfriend, Gabriel. He liked watching her when she burned stuff. He said she got this blissed-out look on her face when she played with fire. He pretty much egged on her need to burn things. He had even bought her a bunch of cheap lighters; it was a rainbow of colors of which she wasn't even halfway through.

In the short amount of time they were together, she had gotten quite good at controlling what burned and what didn't. It wasn't long into their relationship that things got ... disturbing.

Gabe liked being intimidating. He truly enjoyed proving that he was a bad-ass and that those who hung with him were bad-asses too. That included his girl, and at first she was all for it.

One day he tried to take advantage of a pick-a-part dealer and it didn't pan out. Upset, Gabe was determined to teach the guy not to cross him. So he planned to use Rita's modest fire-bug skills to burn the dealer's yard. Not all, but enough so he would feel it pocket –wise.

Gabe was scary when he really wanted you to do something. Rita's initial refusal set him off. That was the first and only time he ever hit her, but she had agreed to the arson.

The plan was for him to drop her off at the junk-yard after closing and she would enter through the back and set the place on fire. It sounded simple enough.

That had been the longest drive of her life from Union City to the other side of Fairburn. When they got there, Gabe dropped her off and pulled away, promising to come back as soon as he saw the smoke.

For about ten minutes Rita just stood at the front of the junk-yard. She shook her head. What the hell was she doing? Why was she doing this? She took a deep breath and hurried to the back of the yard. At first there was nothing she could use to get in. The perimeter of the yard was surrounded by a fence made of solid metal panels. It had to be over six feet tall because she couldn't just reach up and pull herself over. Not to mention it was topped with barbed-wire.

She slowly made her way around, searching for anything to help her enter. She came upon the stump at the very rear of the yard. A couple of feet from where the tree had been, the fence was crushed. A storm or something must have caused the tree to fall on the fence, giving her the opening she needed to get in.

Rita realized her mistake as soon as she was over the fence: she had no way to get back over from this side. She started to panic. Gabe wasn't going to come back until he saw smoke and he was true to his word. She had to burn something for him to come back and help her out. She poked around and found some partially empty cans of paint and other flammable chemicals. They would give off more than enough smoke. She took out her lighter and picked up some scrap canvas that was on the ground. She had just lit it when she heard the growling behind her.

Rita didn't like dogs and this one was huge. It was some kind of monster hybrid of mastiff and chow. It had a large head and big teeth, and the rolling growl it was giving did more than terrify her. Rita did everything she could to prevent a scream from ripping free.

It happened immediately. Pressure built up in her chest and was released as she screamed when the dog moved toward her. Without warning, the fire she had started blossomed to an inferno. The flames swirled around her, causing her to become more panicked: now on top of being mauled by a monster dog, she was going to be burned.

But she didn't feel anything. She opened her eyes to see the flames dancing around her like leaves in the wind. The dog, on the other hand, was whimpering painfully as the flames had singed it. Rita raised her hand toward the fire in stunned fascination and watched the whirling flames move further out from her, sending the dog scampering away in fear.

At that moment, her fear of Gabe vanished. She was calm now that the dog was gone and she came to the realization that she wasn't freaked out about this 'ability'. She

looked at her hands, watching the feathers of flames circle around her fingers then split off to rejoin the whirling flames about her. It was as if somewhere in the back of her mind she knew she could do this. She simply never attempted to.

Rita looked around the yard and shook her head. She had no ill-will toward the junkyard owner so she wasn't going to destroy it as Gabe wanted. Instead she headed back toward the fence, the flames winding about her. She looked at a spot on the fencing and watched the flames slowly burn through the metal. The fire went from rich red to blinding white as it turned the metal into liquid, creating a widening hole to give her escape. It was easy. She focused on the stump and watched the fire devour it hungrily. The smoke she needed to signal Gabe filled the air.

She broke up with Gabe days later, but didn't wait long before moving on. She had a new boyfriend before the end of the week. He really didn't like that.

That was four weeks ago.

Rita enters the woods not far from her home. Union City was growing but it was still mostly trees, great for hiding the things you didn't want others to see.

She crunches through the remains of last fall, making her way through the woods. The piles of dead leaves and sticks were high here, nearly concealing an old barn that nobody would miss. She had come across it on one of her many walks. She thought it had been white once, based on what remained of the flaking paint. Two stories tall, its ladder laid on the rotted floor where it had fallen with her the first time she had tried to explore the hay loft. Time, the elements, and termites riddled the old barn with damage from roof to base. The weathered clapboard siding was coming off in dozens of places, either hanging haphazardly or rotting in piles on the ground. It was a miracle the building was still standing at all. Rita walks once around the derelict's perimeter before she stops at the opening where the doors would have been. Inside, she can see ancient hay and stacks of forgotten wood, all dark with age and overgrowth.

She reaches into the front pocket of her jeans and removes a worn book of matches. She had gotten rid of the lighters, not wanting to be constantly reminded of who gave them to her. The matchbooks were more comfortable anyway.

Flipping the cover open, she removes one stick from the dwindling few. She looks at the match and then back at the barn. She knows this is dangerous, knows that it's illegal, but it's the only thing that makes her feel better. It's the rush, the heat, the crackling of materials when they are devoured, she feels it. It's as if *she* is consuming it. The only other way she can describe the feeling is 'delicious'. It fills up the ache that takes her sometimes, an overpowering emptiness that feels as if someone has taken a jagged shovel and scooped out her insides. The fires, the beautiful flames, as long as she is near them, alleviate it.

Well, it used to. Now it seems to only make her ... hungrier. Rita looks back at the match and swallows. This is going to be so much bigger than her last couple of stunts. The needs were getting stronger which in turn created an excess...an excess of energy, she guesses. She doesn't really know what to call it; she just knows she can't get rid of it. The excess is growing more and more uncontrollable with side effects that were becoming harder to manage. Rita licks her lips. It's too late to try and stop.

Her fingers are shaking now. Soon the ache will follow and then the pain, if she doesn't release it.

The match suddenly ignites in her hand and she quickly moves inside the barn.

Elsewhere in Union City.

Two young men sit on a pile of cement rubble, all of what was left of an abandoned car dealership. It was one of the places where the high school kids hung out, a place they were going to have to stop coming to since they were no longer in high school. They're just enjoying the quiet of the woods surrounding them, neither saying a word. It's been a long day of absolutely nothing, the heat making being lazy arduous. The taller guy, a blonde named William Pevy, just grins up at a cloudless blue sky. The shorter, sandy-haired one is Kori Willers, his best friend. Kori takes a swig from a beer he'd pinched before he rolls his eyes at Wil's goofy grin.

"Why her?"

Wil looks at his friend in surprise at the sudden question. "What?"

Kori rolls his eyes again. They had just finished high school. They were two weeks into a future neither were sure about. But Wil was three weeks into a relationship with a girl who was known for all the wrong reasons, yet he acted as if there was nothing strange about it.

"Rita James," Kori says.

Wil can't help the grin that stretches across his face as he thinks about her. "What about her?"

"Why in the hell her?" Kori's eyes nearly bug out of his head. "Sure, she's pretty...after you get past the poisonous looks and the fear that she may drain you of every last drop of blood."

It's Wil's turn to roll his eyes then. "Man, there's nothin' I could say to make you realize what I feel when I'm around her." He sighs. "She's got me all twisted like grandma's yarn; I can't even explain it myself."

"But she's all wrong in comparison to you." Kori sits up straight. He doesn't know her personally but everyone's heard about her temper. "You're all, you know, normal, smiley. Yeah, you got a temper, but you ain't evil. Rita's...She's evil, mean and snarky, and has psychotic anger issues."

Wil smirks, knowing that most of what he said was true. "Not to mention that I'm white and she's black--"

Kori shakes his head quickly. "I don't care about that, dude. She's a girl and you're a guy. It's the rest of it. Y'all are like on the opposite ends of the freakin' spectrum."

"Yeah." Wil turns his eyes back up to the sky. "But she's so damn sexy, ya know?" He watches amused as Kori nearly falls off the bit of concrete slab he's sitting on.

"No! I don't!" Kori brushes his bangs back; his hair really needs a trim. "It's like you can't see what the rest of us see." He watches Wil shrug. "The girl's scary, man!"

"Maybe I can't. I got blinders on, I guess," Wil says, sounding a little dejected. "But if you could feel what I feel when she kisses me or see the way her eyes flash when she's pissed ... I know it's weird, but she's got me. She's got me locked up good."

They become quiet again.

"What about Gabe?"

There's a long pause before Wil gives him a rather cool gaze. "What about Gabe?"

Kori swallows nervously, “Yuh-you know? He dated her first and kinda still thinks she’s—”

Wil gives a partial shrug. “Red handled that a long time ago and he’s delusional.”

“Red?”

“Yeah, she dyed part of her hair red after we got outta school. Thomas hates it, I think it’s---”

Kori sighs. “Sexy, yeah, I know.” After about five minutes, Kori stretches.

“Whatever, dude. As long as you’re happy and y’all don’t end up on the news for some domestic crap.”

Wil smiles and says nothing. The sound of the wind blowing through the trees brings on a comfortable drowsiness that threatens to put both of them to sleep. Then Kori’s watch goes off.

“What is that?” Wil stretches, popping his shoulders and neck.

“Time to get going, we’ll be late for class.”

“Oh.” Wil sits up and huffs, “Yeah.” He sees Kori’s skeptical smirk. “What?”

Kori shakes off the summer lazies and does a couple of jabs towards the blond. “You know you’ve been looking forward to this all week, dude.” He is starting to get excited.

“Yeah, yeah, chill.” Wil can’t resist the grin. Today will be their first boxing session. Both of them had saved up all year for this.

The quiet is suddenly broken by the sound of sirens filling the air. Both boys look up in concern when the sirens scream past the dealership. Then Wil looks up behind Kori.

“Wow. That’s close.” Wil points behind his friend at the woods. Both of them watch the large dark plume of smoke coming from somewhere inside the woods.

Home

Evening slowly creeps up on Union City. The sound of the cicadas and frogs from the woods behind the Tan house was loud as the day reaches its close. Thomas Tan, an almost-middle-aged Asian man, paces the floor in his modest kitchen. He can't help but wonder why he's in this position when two nights ago he already had this talk with his foster daughter. He looks over at his younger sister, who quickly gives him a hesitant smile.

"Where did you say she was again?" Thomas looks at the girl who had made it home on time. Ingrid Tan fidgets; she didn't know where Rita was and had unconsciously lied for her. She swallows as her brother gives her that stomach-churning look of his.

"I think she said Wal-Mart, I-I'm not entirely sure?" Her dinner was eaten a long time ago. She even had seconds. Ingrid is regretting that now as her brother's pacing is making her more concerned than she thinks she should be. "You know we graduated high school. We are pretty old for a nine o'clock curfew."

"Ingrid." Thomas looks at her with growing annoyance. He presses his hands against the sides of his face, adding more wrinkles around his dark eyes. He knows this, but it didn't matter to him. "When you get your own place, you can stay out all night. You're girls, I worry, and you shouldn't be out there at this time anyway."

Thomas used to be more relaxed before he became Rita's foster parent. Like all her friends he used to call her by her nicknames; 'In' or 'Inny'. Not anymore. His dark brown hair is streaked with more white since last year. Now he actually looks older than thirty-four, a full fifteen years older than Ingrid.

Ingrid had always wanted to know what her parents could have been thinking when they had her so many years after him. But her parents were dead and Thomas was all she had. No cousins, no aunts or uncles. She had just her secretive and over-protective brother who was going to end up driving Rita back to the antisocial way she was before she came here.

"Next time don't volunteer," Thomas advises harshly. "Just say you don't know."

"I'm sorry." She flutters her long eyelashes at him, in an attempt to soften him up. It wasn't working.

"Go to bed." He didn't give her a chance to reply before turning out of the kitchen and into the living room. "I can wait up for Rita on my own."

Ingrid finds herself becoming more than concerned now. Had Rita done something? Was she really in trouble or was Thomas being paranoid again? In the last four years, Ingrid had gotten to know her adopted "sister" and she knew for a fact that Rita was a sweetheart. Usually quiet and reclusive, Rita only put up the hard exterior to keep the idiots away. It hadn't taken long for the two of them to become friends despite their differences.

Ingrid really wants to know what's bothering Thomas but there's nothing she can do or say that would change his attitude. Thomas is pretty decisive and stubborn when he gets moody. She gets up without a word, washes her plate and heads on to bed.

Thomas watches her; he didn't mean to take out his uneasiness on her, but it couldn't be helped. Rita is out there and Thomas could tell that her demeanor is changing as the summer goes on.

He turns to the TV on the counter. The local news is reporting a string of arsons that had sprung up around the area. They were small at first, but seem to be gradually getting bigger.

“Everything’s fine, she’s just lollygagging somewhere she doesn’t need to be,” Thomas says out loud. He paces around the living room and ends up back in the kitchen. The little black and white TV draws him in with news of yet another fire.

Another hour goes by without Thomas’ notice. His head rests on his crossed arms while he dozes in front of the flickering television. Muted, the news drones on about an earlier fire.

Rita watches Thomas sleep for a few minutes from the back window before she circles around to the front. She doesn’t want to hear what he has to say. She hadn’t planned on being late, but she had blacked out.

The door is silent when it swings out, but when she tries to close it, it squeaks. Loudly.

“Rita?”

“Shit,” she mutters. She lets go of the door, debating between closing it or just leaving the darn thing open. She decides on the latter and takes off for the stairs.

The little television goes off, pitching the kitchen into darkness. The only light is coming from the hallway upstairs.

“Rita? Where have you been?” Thomas calls.

Rita doesn’t answer as she reaches the banister and pulls herself upward toward the landing, skipping the first six steps. She hears him getting up from his seat at the table. He has been expecting her to come in with her head down ready to be reprimanded. Talk, talk, talk that’s all he ever does! Not tonight. Rita runs up the rest of the stairs and heads straight for the bathroom.

“Rita, come here!” Thomas demands angrily. He stands outside the kitchen and starts to follow her when he notices the front door still open. He pauses to lock it before continuing his chase.

Rita closes the door to the bathroom and breathes in relief that she did leave the front door open. But she will have to face him eventually.

Thomas moves up the stairs to find Rita and frowns when he hears the shower come on. “Where have you been, Rita? It’s way past your --”

“C’mon, Thomas. I got carried away at...the mall ---” She cringes after saying that.

Thomas groans. “There’s nothing at the mall.”

“Went to Southlake.”

“And you couldn’t call to let me know?” He leans against the door. “I was worried.” The sound of clothes hitting the floor makes him back up unconsciously.

“Thomas, you’re always worried,” she says through the door. “I don’t know why you think I’m made of glass, but I’m a lot tougher than you think,” she snaps from inside the shower. The rushing water is no match for her.

“I---” he starts, but Rita is irritated now.

“Oh, just punish me already!” she shouts. “I ain’t got nothin’ else to say about it!”

“Fine!” He snaps. “You’re Ingrid’s chauffeur for the week. Otherwise you are to remain home!” He stomps down the stairs. “No calls and no visits!”

Rita just let the water run over her, watching it turn black as it washes the soot away, “Whatever.”

The next morning, Ingrid is getting ready for work when she realizes that there's no sound coming from either Thomas' or Rita's rooms. No screaming, no shouting, nothing being thrown or broken. They're usually up before she is. Did they kill each other while she slept? She peeks out into the hallway and sees that Rita's door is closed, the tell-tale sign that the girl made it home last night.

A poster of a grinning vampire graces Rita's door; it creeps Ingrid out when she has to pass that thing on the way to her own room. She swears the eyes follow her. Ingrid finishes up and heads downstairs to find her brother staring into the light of the TV, seemingly watching the news. She says good morning cheerfully and gets nothing in response. She comments on his hair and still gets nothing.

"I got my nipples pierced and I think one of them is infected, would you mind taking a look?" she asks nonchalantly. The one thing that always made him uncomfortable was discussing female parts.

"Huh?" Thomas jumps when he finally realizes that Ingrid is standing next to him. "I'm sorry, what did you just say?"

Ingrid grins and pats her brother on his shoulder. "It's okay; you deserve a medal sometimes for being such a young guy raising two girls." She watches, pleased as her brother finally smiles and nods.

"How much?" He looks at her with a smirk. She just laughs and sits down across from him.

"Just enough to get something to eat for lunch." She picks a piece of fruit out of his forgotten bowl of breakfast. "Was Rita okay?"

Thomas stretches, giving a small gasp as something pops and snaps. He looks at Ingrid, who has both sculpted brows high on her forehead in surprise.

"Man, you're getting old," she says, laughing at the look on his face.

Grumbling, he snatches his bowl of sliced fruit out of her reach. "You just got through calling me young and now I'm old?"

She laughs harder. "You sure you didn't break anything?"

"You really don't want this money, do you?" He places the bowl in the fridge, planning to come back to it later. "And yes, Rita's ok. She's on punishment so she'll be taking you to and from work for the rest of the week."

Ingrid leans on the table. "Wow, harsh." Her brother eyes her.

"She's not allowed to go anywhere, or receive any calls or visitors...you wanna join her?"

Ingrid puts her hands up. "No, no. One person suffering so much is more than enough. So where are you going?" She watches him grab the keys for the car.

"I'll take you to the station, but I have some errands to run today." Mrs. Karen, Rita's social worker, had called that morning. She was concerned about Rita and wanted to see him personally.

"Wiiiiill-yam."

Wil groans and rolls over.

"Wil!" Nikki Vaega shouts. He smirks as his housemate nearly jumps from his bed. "Get up, man!" With a derisive snort, Nikki heads back down stairs.

Wil and Nik were practically brothers. The connection they had when they first met four years ago was incredible. So last year when Wil failed to graduate and was threatened with a transfer to another foster home Nik immediately suggested Wil move in with him. Wil was old enough to fend for himself and Nik was in this big old farmhouse alone. Ever since his own Foster parents died two years ago.

Wil sits up in bed, still groggy, but awake. He absently scratches his curly bed head and looks about his room. For a second he doesn't realize what's going on and then it hits him. Nik actually set foot in his room. That meant he wanted something.

Flinching a bit as his feet hit the cold wood floor, Wil gets up and heads to the bathroom, trying not to trip over the cluttered mess of model race cars and boxing gear. "We really need some rugs," he grumbles for the umpteenth time.

After taking a quick shower Wil is fully awake. Checking himself out in the mirror, he runs his fingers through the curly blond hair that frames vivid emerald eyes. He has just enough cheek to be considered cute and enough edge to be considered handsome, and he thinks he could be considered sexy. He has a quarterback's build, about 5'10" at 209 pounds. Wil grins at himself in the mirror but it quickly fades when he realizes that Nikki is still bigger. And he's not doing anything special for it. In fact Nik eats whatever he wants, and exercise not part of his every day routine. Nikki is Polynesian. Tall and well-toned, he has sun-bronzed skin and sharp eyes that are a deep violet color. "Genes." That's all Nikki says.

Wil huffs and turns out of the bathroom, making his way to the hallway. He heads downstairs toward the kitchen where he can hear the sizzling of meat and possibly eggs. When Wil enters the kitchen he finds Nik cooking up a feast: loads of eggs, a slab of bacon, what looks to be a loaf of toast. There's a pot of grits still bubbling on the stove and currently Nik is in the process of flipping one of many pancakes. The amount of starch is daunting. Something's up and Wil knows he's going to be on the receiving end. He backs up from the table. The smell is heavenly, but he's afraid of what it means. Maybe his girlfriend was coming over, although he couldn't really see Inny eating all of this.

"What is this?"

Nikki turns around and raises an eyebrow at him. "Breakfast," he says. He gives him an odd look before turning back to the stove. "You really need to use the alarm clock, cuz the rooster don't work for you."

Wil smirks and then moves toward the table again. Maybe he's being paranoid. "You ever thought about getting married? Settling down? Finding a good man? You'd make someone a good wife."

Nik throws the spatula at him. "Shut up."

Wil dodges quickly; Nik has good aim for not looking at him. "It was just a thought." He gets comfortable in his chair and watches in silence as Nik finishes up. Tossing the pan in the sink, Nik proceeds to plate up the food for the both of them. He places Wil's in front of him and then sits down with his own plate. He looks at Wil, who smirks again. "You're not getting a tip," Wil says.

Nik smiles, "Well, I figured you could use a good breakfast seeing as this is your first day on the job."

Wil's mouth drops and so does the food he had just put in it. He knew it was a trap. "You have *got* to be kiddin' me! Nik, c'mon man! Summer just started!"

Nikki shakes his head, "Sorry, Wil. You promised –"

“--- to get a job after graduation. Yeah, I remember,” Wil finishes and then plops his head onto his arm. He stabs his fork into the mound of scrambled eggs. “But I just wanted to enjoy a little freedom for a few more days,” he whines. Nikki rolls his eyes.

“Got bills, Wil. I need some help and you know how you are.”

Wil sits up again. “Yeah, I know. I said I’d get a job right after school let out. But I didn’t literally mean right after school let out. And you didn’t have to find one for me, I would’ve got one--”

That weird condescending snort Nik is so good at cuts him off. “No. Not likely. Not you. Not with your track record.”

“Oh, that’s not fair.”

Nikki rubs his temples. “Yeah, but --”

Wil stands up suddenly and points at him to hush up. “I didn’t know that she was the manager’s kid, besides, I’m taken now so there is no way it could happen again. As if.”

“This is true,” Nikki agrees. “She’d kill you and we’d never find the body,” he mumbles.

“Hey!”

“Anyway, you have a shift starting this morning so you need to head on back up. And here,” Nik says, throwing a packet at him, “that’s paperwork you need to read and sign and take with you.”

Wil grumps and pouts but gives in. He wolfs down the breakfast, finishing with a glare, and heads back upstairs to get dressed appropriately.

At Jillian’s Couture Apparel in the Lenox mall, Ingrid is skillfully making another great sale. Working her fashion magic and giving the usual lines, Ingrid talks a woman into one of their hard-to-move items.

“No, that’s a great color for you!” Ingrid ushers the woman into a changing room. “Really, it is slimming!”

The woman is obviously unsure after she exits the dressing room wearing the dress. Ingrid can see the woman second-guessing her earlier decision to put it back. She quickly whirls the woman about in front of the mirror.

“No, it’s supposed to fit like that.” Ingrid slides her hands down the sides of the dress, jerks the hem down and then snatches up on the shoulders. “Oh, he’ll love it!” The bright smile on Inny’s face is so bright it looks genuine.

The lady looks herself over in the mirror again, this time liking what she sees. She grins and faces Ingrid with a broad smile. “I’ll take it.”

Ingrid can’t stop smiling as the lady walks out with her purchase. Mrs. Jillian needs to give her a raise for getting that dress off the rack. She rubs her hands together and looks about for her next victi—client.

Lenox is busy today and Ingrid has been on a roll for the past hour. Everywhere you look there are people loitering, shopping, or simply yelling their heads off.

Ingrid pauses and actually listens to the yelling. She knows that angry voice echoing up the causeway. She peeks out the store entrance to see a small group of people standing in a clump. Some of them move away and she can see a black girl dressed in black standing in front of some red-faced guy.

Rita is loud.

Ingrid already knows the guy probably deserved the reprimand, but security is surely on the way. Ingrid looks Rita over and shakes her head. Rita is gorgeous despite her gothic style. If only she would let Ingrid give her a makeover.

“The shirt says, ‘I bite’, you prick, not ‘I blo—” Rita glances to her left and see Ingrid watching her. Rita quickly straightens herself out before she heads over toward Ingrid. The guy snaps at her, calling her a rather rude term for lesbian, but Rita just keeps walking.

Ingrid watches Rita make her way through the crowded foyer of the mall. Rita’s wearing a short, snug black tee that boldly says “I bite” with a set of glittered fangs across her ample chest. She has a long, full Persian chain that hangs across her hips and jingles as she sashays her way toward Ingrid. Rita scratches nervously at her head, showing off the vibrant streak of fire engine red that colors her bangs and part of the left side of her head.

“You’re not gonna say anything to Thomas, are you?” Rita quietly asks Ingrid when she makes it to the store. They stand before each other, their height an almost exact match. Rita is maybe two inches taller than Ingrid’s 5’2”.

Ingrid shrugs indifferently then cocks a brow at her. “Why would I? You didn’t start it, right?” She smiles as Rita nods.

“So how much longer till you get outta here?” Rita shoves her hands into her back pockets, ignoring the sudden burst of whooping outside the store.

Ingrid begins straightening up. “Thirty minutes, give or take.” She picks up some shirts from the floor and starts to fold them. Inny watches her friend closely. She is so visibly uncomfortable Ingrid decides to distract her while she waits.

“Helen came by earlier,” Inny says, watching Rita look at her, confused at first. “Helen, fifth period?” Rita rolls her eyes while Ingrid continues, “She’s getting some work done in the male hypnotizer department. She asked about you.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“What’s unfortunate? The fake boobs at eighteen or asking about you?”

“She spoke. *That’s* unfortunate,” Rita answers.

Ingrid grins. “Yeah, I got the sense she doesn’t like you either. Said you called her a w-i-t-c-h.”

Rita stops cleaning her midnight-colored nails and looks at her, confused. “She said I called her a witch?” Inny nods and watches as Rita sighs exasperatedly. “Shame. Apparently the poor thing can’t spell.”

Ingrid bursts out laughing and eventually Rita joins in. “That girl is such an airhead, I could never stand her!”

Ingrid shrugs. “I know, but I couldn’t get away.”

“Did she buy anything?”

“No, I told her she had better save her money,” She combs her fingers through her feathered, jet-colored hair. “I think she got mad at me then.” Inny pauses and waits for Rita to stop giggling. “Thomas is worried about you.” She smiles as Rita looks up at the ceiling with an irritated sigh.

“When is he not?”

“He asked me if you and Wil had...done it. If ...maybe you were pregnant.” She stops talking when Rita freezes. Her cinnamon-brown skin reddens and Ingrid couldn’t help but stare. This is the first time she has ever seen Rita embarrassed.

Rita stutters, “He – he – he what?” She shakes her head. “No!”

Ingrid laughs and waves the girl quiet. “I knew that. I told him about your black-widow mentality.”

Rita doesn’t know if she should be reassured or insulted. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Girl, you know Wil is brave for being with you and surviving this long,” Ingrid explains.

Rita huffs and absently picks up one of the shirts for sale. When she realizes that it’s pink, she quickly puts it back down, disgusted.

“Wil’s honest,” she says suddenly. “He doesn’t try to pacify me with pretty words or useless trinkets and he sees me for me. He knows he can talk to me about anything. That I’m too young to be his mother and too old to be his kid.”

Ingrid just looks at her and then asks, “So how long have you been scoping him out?” She watches her friend’s face redden again. Twice in one day!

“Since before the fiasco with Gabe,” Rita mumbles.

Ingrid notices the frown that always appears whenever Gabe’s mentioned and then smiles wryly. “Really? Then why did you and Wil act like you hated each other?”

Ingrid recalls the many arguments Rita and Wil had last year. Their verbal fighting was entertainment for many, especially Gabe. At first, Ingrid figured that Gabe realized that no one else went out of their way to argue with Rita.

Rita notices a customer watching the two of them. For a long time Rita stares at the woman until she realizes that she had been noticed. The woman quickly goes on her way. With a shrug, Rita faces Ingrid. “I dunno.”

Ingrid smirks at her, “Just plain mean, I guess.”

Rita playfully swipes at her. “Quiet.”

They’re silent for a bit before Ingrid gives her a worrisome glance. “Are you really okay?”

Rita sighs heavily. “I will be.”

“Ok.” Ingrid gives her a crooked grin. “Then let me finish this and we can leave.”

“I’m not holdin’ you up,” Rita says, eyeing her, “but yeah, you need to pick up the pace. I don’t quite fit the décor and I’m starting to attract stares.”

Ingrid laughs, noticing the few customers who lingered weren’t shopping but instead were eyeballing Rita.

The ride home is pretty normal: Rita growls and curses at other drivers while she tries to get out of the Lenox parking lot. Then there is more cursing and an actual flip-off getting to the light before the turnoff. And then the fighting over the radio begins. Ingrid wants a mix of alternative and R&B while Rita wants something harder. As usual, Ingrid puts up an argument that Rita can’t dispute, giving Ingrid control of the radio.

As they drive home, Rita hopes that Thomas is still moody when they arrive. When he’s moody, he’s reluctant to talk, at least for a few hours. She’s not sure she’s ready to talk to him just yet. Mrs. Karen had to have called him by now; she always let him know when she and Rita talked, as if she was afraid of hurting his feelings or something. Rita had always thought their relationship was odd. She thought the foster parent was supposed to answer to the social worker, not the other way around.

That night Rita sits in her room, her door open as she listens to Ingrid going through her nightly routine. Thomas didn't even look at her when they came home. He was pissed, she could see that plainly in the way he paced back and forth, trying his hardest not to acknowledge her.

Rita falls back on her bed, scattering the pamphlets Mrs. Karen had given her to 'help'. She is quite sure Mrs. Karen told Thomas about her inquiry of her parents, but he wasn't going to say anything to her right now. It's not like he could help her anyway; she's dealing with supernatural crap here. There's no way he could understand. She could barely understand it. Rita sighs and then wonders if this ability is why she's an orphan. Is it the main reason she can't get a straight answer about her mom or dad or any other background information on either? Had they been nuts like she had been feeling or did they gradually go nuts because they had such strange abilities? Who else knew? Were they killed by others or by the abilities? Was she a secret? Would someone come after her?

The questions keep piling up and she knows it will only get worse when Thomas finally corners her. She looks over the pamphlets Mrs. Karen gave her, trying to keep in mind that the woman had only been trying to help in her own way. It was a mix of happy and rather depressing endings for the featured kids in the pamphlets. Everything Mrs. Karen had said was true and Rita tries to understand that her parents may have just gotten rid of her because they didn't want her. How would you raise a kid who could manipulate fire?

Rita sighs. Her biggest fear is that with her inability to control her power, maybe she killed them herself.