

Excerpt from Urban Fantasy Young Adult Novel:

After the ocean, the Weatherwax was the best part of Ocean Shores. It was where I went to be totally alone, well, alone with my dog. A couple years before my dad disappeared, he and a bunch of other volunteers helped clean up the property and clear out walking trails. He brought me over here and pointed out every plant and bird species he could spot. I'd already learned a lot of the names on other hikes through other forests, but we added a few to my memory files. Most fourteen-year-olds probably would have hated it. I hadn't minded. I liked being outside. Maybe I was an animal in a previous life. Agni liked the Weatherwax too, better than the beach. Probably better smells or something.

I stopped in front of a single strand of spider silk; iridescent in a moist patch of sunlight, it hung in the middle of the path. One perfect huckleberry leaf dangled from the strand as if on display. Its chlorophyll-painted fulgid surface changed from viridian to sable as it swayed and twisted in the breeze that wafted through the trees like some forest sprite playing hide and seek. The spider silk hung onto the fat end of the attenuated green teardrop. The point of the leaf aimed at the ground. Maybe some arachnid left the leaf there as a road sign for fellow spiders, like those signs on paper plates you saw in campgrounds: Wolf Spider Reunion, This Way. I wondered what kind of spider silk it was; Dad had told me spiders had multiple glands that produced different kinds of silk for distinct purposes, like sticky silk for trapping prey, fine silk for wrapping it, stronger silk for a safety line.

Fifty feet or so from the trailhead, where I'd parked my mom's red Dodge Caravan, a ground squirrel chattered at me from a safe position on a branch well above my head. Agni watched the squirrel carefully, his head cocking this way and that. Once in awhile all throughout our walk that day, Agni had stopped and sniffed the air, inclining his head in what looked like

wary puzzlement. If I hadn't felt confident that I could handle anyone who might have tried to mess with me in the woods, his actions would have made me nervous. Of course, there was a chance of encountering a black bear or a cougar. But animals didn't scare me; well, at least they hadn't scared me before my sixteenth birthday. Now, they didn't exactly scare me so much as freak me out. It was the images. Every time I saw an animal, I saw No. I wasn't going there. I had come to the woods to clear my head. I wasn't going to pick at brain scabs.

I heard a swish and a splat. I turned.

I stepped back so fast I tripped over a rotting log and fell against a hemlock tree. I scrambled to right myself and find balance. If my legs had been tires, they'd have been completely flat. My arms flailed about like they'd been turned into limp fronds. What the heck happened to all that martial arts training?

“Good morning?” The source of my body's complete lack of function spoke. The voice was soft and rumbly, hesitant, the accent strange, kind of mushy Hispanic.

He was my fantasy. Seriously.

I was admitting something very personal when I revealed that I often lulled myself to sleep at night by having imaginary encounters with a guy who looked so much like the one standing ten feet from me at that moment that I would have thought I was having a waking dream except for the fact that Agni stood next to me enthralled by the spot where my fantasy guy stood. Agni whined softly. I looked at his fur. It lay flat on his back. He was watchful, but he wasn't alarmed.

How could my fantasy have come to life so perfectly?

I didn't even know where my fantasy came from to begin with. The guy in my nightly imaginings just kind of appeared, fully formed. I hadn't lain there and thought about what my

dream guy would look like. I hadn't weighed the pros and cons of hair color, eye color, facial structure, and body type. I hadn't used any pop star or movie star as a template. This face and body had just appeared in my head.

He seemed to be waiting for me to respond, which was reasonable.

"Uh, hi." I was Kali, goddess of wit and grace.

"You have a beautiful dog."

Not what every girl wanted to hear from her dream guy, but it was a start.

"Uh, thank you."

What was with the "uh"s?

"I saw the way you look at what's around you," dream guy said. "You like the forest, yes?"

"Uh, yes."

Could I have sounded any less intelligent?

He saw me looking around? How long had he been watching me? I tried to put that question in words, but my tongue wouldn't work.

It was his eyes. They went beyond my fantasy guy. My fantasy guy had green eyes. So did this guy, but these eyes weren't just green. They were partially a light olive color, kind of similar to the carpet in my house, but the color looked a lot better in his eyes than on the carpet. The olive color ran around the outer edge of his irises, and it evanesced into an amber inner ring around unusually large black pupils. His eyes were shaped like the huckleberry leaf I'd just seen hanging from spider silk; the fuller ends of the leaf were toward his nose, and the pointed tips were at an upward slant beneath glossy black brows.

He took a step back. "I'm sorry. I'm making you nervous, yes?"

Yes, but not because I was afraid of him, which was what he was assuming.

“No.” Hey, two points for me. I left off the uh. “I thought I was alone. You startled me.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated.

His mouth, wide and upturned, looked really good forming words. It looked really good not forming words. It looked really good. So did the rest of his face. He had skin the color of spruce bark. But his skin didn’t look rough like bark. It was smooth, yet I was sure it would feel thick and masculine when, um, *if* I touched it.

He had black hair. They’d recently redone the roads in Ocean Shores, so I’d seen a lot of steaming, freshly poured asphalt; the color and sheen of his hair was a perfect match to it. It was short, combed straight back off a broad forehead. Molded to his well-shaped head like Agni’s fur lay on him, the guy’s hair barely touched small ears that fit flat against the sides of his head.

I realized I was staring. “Uh, I haven’t seen you around.” Oops. Subtract the two points. “Are you visiting?”

“Visiting?” He pushed his brows together. Then he smiled. “Yes, I’m visiting.”

Whoa. The smile. He had unusual teeth, prominent canines, and unusually small incisors, but they were all remarkably straight and white. The smile was penetrating. It worked on me kind of like the sticky and fine varieties of spider silk. I was trapped *and* wrapped; if he’d wanted to kill me, I was easy prey.

But he wasn’t a spider. He was a gorgeous guy. Seriously gorgeous. He had extraordinarily broad cheekbones narrowing to a sharp jaw line that formed itself into a square chin. His nose was wide with flared nostrils that fit the width of his face perfectly.

I ran my gaze down the length of him then quickly refocused on his face. I wasn't ready to think about his body, his amazing, muscled body that wore the jeans and black t-shirt he had on so well it looked like they were a part of him. Oh, right, I wasn't going to think about that.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"South America." His accent was mesmerizing, even if it did sound weirdly slurred, as if he'd had too many injections of Novocain and his tongue wasn't working right. It wasn't an inebriated slur, and although I had to concentrate to understand some of his words, it wasn't a bad slur. Nothing about this guy was bad. "Colombia," he added. "I'm from the rain forest."

"Wow. Really?" I was going to have to take the time to learn how to sound like a person with a brain when I talked to a cute guy. That had never been a problem before. I'd always had disdain for girls who morphed into big fisherman's floats—full of air and as fragile as glass—when they flirted with guys. So that was what happened when you judged—it came back and bit you on the butt.

He smiled. "Really. I've been traveling for several months."

"Are you going to be staying in Ocean Shores for long?" Please, please, please.

"I have job to do, for some time. Yes. I like ... here."

I grinned. He smiled again. We looked at each other. Agni studied both of us. The ground squirrel whistled at us. The birds twittered. My fleece gloves warmed my hands so well they felt like I was resting them on top of that hot asphalt I'd thought of. No, it wasn't the gloves. It was him.

"What kind of work do you do?" I asked.

He could have been eighteen. Or younger. Or older. It was hard to tell.

"I do," he looked up for a second, "security."

“Really?” There I went sounding like a genius again. Security? Maybe he was older than he looked. “What kind of security? For a hotel?”

“No.”

He didn’t continue and I didn’t have enough brain-mouth coordination going on to ask more questions. Agni nudged me with his head and started toward the car. I looked down the trail at it, then back at the guy. “Uh, can I give you a ride anyplace?” What was *wrong* with me? I knew better than to offer a stranger a ride. I knew better than to put “uh” in front of every sentence too. What I knew wasn’t relevant to this situation.

“No, thank you,” he said.

“Okay.”

He tilted his head and turned. Behind me, Agni made a sound I’d never heard him make before, something like a growl but not as threatening. I swiveled toward him. He gazed past me, at the guy. I looked back at the guy too. I lost my footing again.

The guy was gone.