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Excerpts from AWAKEN THE
DAWN

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First edition

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From Prologue

The wind scraped at my cheeks and whipped my ponytail around. I laced up my cleats, shivering, and zipped myself into my Lady Knights hoodie. The soccer field stretched around me. Silence rested on the empty stadium.

I turned my back on the goal and jogged up the sideline. My thighs protested. Cold air hit my lungs and caught fire in my chest. I pushed harder, commanding myself into focus.

A blip of movement drew my attention to the bleachers. I turned, half-expecting to see Brandy—but why would Brandy be in the bleachers? We were supposed to be practicing.

I paused my warmup, scanning. The announcer's box fortified the top, and I could see straight in through the large windows. There was nobody in there.

There was nobody anywhere. I was alone.

The pocket of my sweatpants vibrated. I pulled out my phone and checked the message.

HELLO DEAR.

I blinked. The text was from Dad, but—he never called me dear. He also never wrote messages shorter than fifty words.

I swiped a reply. *DID YOU SEE MY TEXT? NEED TO KNOW WHEN*

YOUR FLIGHT GETS IN. I pressed *send* and dropped into a lunge.

The phone vibrated in my hand. The screen brightened.

U CAN FIND IT DEAR.

I straightened. Dad never abbreviated anything. Ever.

The sound of a scuff, like when a shoe catches on something, broke the silence. A chill whispered against my neck.

My attention returned to the stands and then moved to the cyclone fence. Somebody was here. Whoever it was didn't want to be seen.

"What are you doing?" The muffled voice came from behind me. . . .

* * *

Prophetic Dream Sequence

I stood on a ridge and looked out over the mountains. The landscape dropped down into a long, deep valley. The sun hovered at midmorning, a pendant nested in silky blue skies.

I closed my eyes and tipped my face up, letting the sun soak into my cheeks.

"Isn't it wonderful?"

I opened my eyes. Dad stood beside me, his olive skin bronzy in the sunlight. A breeze rustled his short, black curls, shaking them into a happy greeting.

He peered past me. I traced his line of sight to something in the distance.

"Ox-drawn carriage." Dad's mouth hitched up. "A common means of transportation here in Transylvania, and so much more stylish than horses, don't you think?"

I grinned. Dad had been opening up about his homeland lately. I'd been enjoying the stories. They made me feel closer to him, closer than I'd felt in a long time.

The wind changed direction, blowing in sharp gusts. Dark clouds rolled in, and the emerald landscape morphed into rocky, barren terrain. Lightning popped. Thunder clapped.

A funnel cloud slipped out of the storm and glided toward the earth—a black ribbon let down from heaven. The ribbon twisted, moving back and forth, to the left and to the right.

Finally, it touched down in a spray of dirt. Three more funnel clouds descended, spinning and grinding across the landscape.

“How many are there?” Dad slanted a look at me. “Do you count them?”

“Four.” I knew the answer was important. I didn't know why.

Dust peppered my face. I rubbed my eyes. “We need to take cov—” My eyes cleared, and the suggestion broke off.

Dad was gone.

Pain bloomed between my ribs. Tears, the kind that are big and fat and full of regret, shed my cheeks. *I'm sorry. Dad, I'm so sorry.* The words bubbled up within me. My soul longed to say them, but I couldn't speak past the lump in my throat.

The ache swelled, tumbling deep within me, until a black hole opened up in my chest. I collapsed. Dirt and rocks dug into my knees. Dust swirled. I held up a hand to shield my face. . . .

* * *

Kat Is Imagining Things

My feet exploded in a run. “Dad!” My backpack flopped

around. I cinched the straps and pumped my arms. My thighs burned, legs carrying me up the sidewalk. Dad was a speck in the distance. I pushed myself harder, tracing the peach color to the left.

A cross street. He was crossing over the canal.

The sights and sounds of the city grew louder. Pedestrians hustled up and down the sidewalk. Stone buildings towered over the area. Traffic scooted through an intersection.

I turned and barreled up the sidewalk. Apartments rose up at the next block. Was that where Dad had gone? Maybe he lived around here.

Men and women in business suits streamed through a cross-walk. Looked like they were going to a restaurant. I trailed behind them, intending to continue to the apartments.

Peach tugged at my vision.

I peered inside a window overlooking the restaurant's main dining room. My next breath caught. Dad was in there. He was *right there*, sitting at a table. Two men sat across from him. A blonde woman cozied up at his side.

Dad rested a hand on the woman's thigh, and I felt the blood drain from my face. Had he gotten married? He must have started a whole new life here.

That didn't matter. He was still my dad, and even if he'd forgotten about his life in America, seeing me again would jar his memory. It had to.

I shouldered through the suits and ties and entered the restaurant. The maître d stepped in front of me. "I don't need a table," I said, brushing past him.

He raced ahead of me and blocked my path. A waiter rounded the corner and stood beside him. A woman in a delicate blouse and long pencil skirt joined them.

"I need to speak to one of your customers. He's in the dining room." I pointed in case they didn't speak English.

A hand came down on my shoulder. Another hooked my arm.

I looked up. A man in a chef's hat stood on one side of me. A businessman stood on the other.

They turned me around and escorted me to the door. I tried to turn back, but the other suits joined them. I was surrounded, being pulled from the front and pushed from behind.

"What are you doing? Let me go!"

We were outside, a cluster of chaos on the sidewalk, when broad shoulders and a tall frame appeared. Aviator-style sunglasses masked the person's eyes, but his other features—square jawline, strong nose, supple curve of his mouth—rang a distant bell.

He shoved his way into the mix, wedging himself between them and me.

"I don't understand." A tear slipped out. "I need to talk to someone in the restaurant, and they won't let me."

His mouth popped open. He faced the men and ushered them away.

Peach flashed in my periphery. Dad was on his feet, chair pushed back. I raced to the window and rapped on the glass. Everyone in the dining room jumped.

The man in the peach shirt wheeled around, eyes wide—but they weren't Dad's droopy hazel eyes. My heart flipped, then shattered. It wasn't him.

Tremors moved up my legs and deposited into the rest of me. I braced a hand against the window as the mystery guy removed his sunglasses.

Maksim.

"Kat? Are you all right?"

I inhaled a shaky breath and burst into tears. Didn't matter who saw me, Maksim or anyone else. I wanted Dad to be alive more than anything, more than absolutely anything. A minute ago, I had him. . . .

* * *

Another Case of Mistaken Identity? (Club Scene)

Maksim held me with a burning stare. Burning and deeply perplexed.

I clutched the neckline of my shirt. Some part of me expected him to apologize, to say his friend was a drunk, an idiot, and that my reaction had been justified.

Instead, he pushed up from the couch and walked away. He didn't hesitate, and he didn't look back. My confidence wilted.

He followed the same path Émilien had taken—past the stage, past the couches—until he reached the metal staircase. He ascended, then his white shirt and navy pants disappeared.

"It's fine. Everything's—fine." I unscrewed the lid to my water. There was no need to panic. Actually, what happened was kind of perfect. I needed to talk to Andrei alone, and now I could. As long as Maksim didn't intrude again.

I lifted the bottle, hand trembling, and took a drink. Lukewarm water filled my mouth. I swallowed, attention drifting.

The dancer in the red catsuit crossed my line of sight. Pain dug a grave between my ribs and buried itself there. She looked just like the girl in that picture. Just like her.

I held back tears and forced myself to take another drink. Why was I thinking about Ty and his stupid—?

Bright lights washed over the dancer, revealing honey brown hair, streaked with highlights and lowlights. I coughed and spewed water all over myself. Was that *actually* Ty's fling?

No. It was a coincidence. A similar hairstyle.

I shoved a hand into my pocket, fumbling for my phone. I'd seen that pic a thousand times, a million. I had to see it again. I had to know for sure.

Someone flopped onto the couch. I glanced over, expecting to see Maksim. "Do you know that danc—?" I froze, the phone halfway out.

Silver eyes and a sharp nose glared at me. My heart crashed.

Émilien hooked my arm. I tried to pull away. His meaty fingers crushed my bicep. I whimpered. "Your 'Maksim' did not like my idea to share you tonight. But this is not a problem now, you see, because he is...gone."

"M-Maksim went to get Andrei." In reality, I had no idea where Maksim had gone. I feigned confidence and hoped my stutter didn't give me away. "He'll be back any second."

Émilien clucked his tongue. "Ohh, but he won't, *ma petite belle*." The Frenchman raked his gaze over me.

He reached out, fingers wrapping around my throat. My blood froze.

"So much the better, mm?" He leaned closer. "Now I have you all to myself."

My adrenaline spiked.

I jumped up. He caught my waist, yanked me onto the couch, and climbed on top. I sank into the cushions, pinned beneath him.

I pulled an arm free and brought my fist down on his head and back, his shoulder. It was like hitting a slab of cement. He even laughed. Legit, laughed in my face.

A waitress angled in our direction. I waved frantically.
The woman stopped

* * *

University Break-In Scene

We checked the file cabinets one by one. Well, Andrei did most of the checking. I mostly held his phone.

“Knew I should’ve brought my phone.” I angled the light for him. “I could be searching, too.”

“Maybe you should write a strongly worded letter to the fashion industry. Tell them to start making women’s clothing with pockets.”

“Yeah, sure.” My mouth twisted. “You can help me do that right after we find these records.”

Andrei snorted a laugh.

He continued to the next row of file cabinets. As he turned, the LED light reflected off something metallic clipped onto his back pocket. It looked like—

“Is that a knife?” I aimed the light at his pocket.

Andrei peeked over his shoulder. “Ah, yeah, that’s my switch-blade. Wanna see it?” Before I could answer, he whipped out the knife. Something about the way he did it seemed familiar, like I’d seen him do it before.

He pressed something on the handle. *Snap!* A blade swung out.

“Did you, by chance, use that thing last night? To punch Émilien?”

“You saw that, huh?” Andrei chuckled. “Useful trick if you’re

ever up against someone bigger than you. Just grip something sturdy before you swing.” He folded the knife, gripped the handle, and threw a right hook into his palm. *Smack!* “Adds weight to your hand and reinforces your knuckles. Maksim taught me that before he—you know.”

“No. I don’t know. You never explained anything else about it.”

“Wow.” Andrei gave a low whistle and stationed himself at the next file cabinet. “You sure are curious about him.”

My jaw slipped. “I am not.”

“You were asking about him earlier, too. You said you wanted him to SMS you.”

“I did not!”

Andrei cast a sly grin. “Suuure you didn’t.”

“You’re the one who’s been talking about him. I’ve just—been listening.”

“Uh-huh.” Andrei tugged on a drawer and peered inside. “Hang on. What do we have here?” He reached for a file when a creak reached my ears.

I wheeled around. “Did you hear that?”

Andrei froze. “Hear what?”

I tiptoed to the door, eased it open, and peered out.

“What is it?” Panic rose in his voice.

I shushed him and pointed his phone into the darkness. White light washed over desks and chairs, bookshelves, a coatrack. Apart from that, the office was empty.

“Kat?”

“It’s nothing.” I faced him. “Sorry. I must have heard the building creak.”

He stepped into the aisle, using a file to fan himself. “I’m nervous as hell. Can’t remember if I locked the door.”

“Which door? This one?” I thumbed at the door behind me.
“Or the door between the office and the foyer?”

“Office and foyer.”

My eyes bulged. “Andrei, how could you not lock it?”

“Maybe I did. Could you check?” He paused the fanning and held up the file. “You’ll wanna hurry, ‘cause I think we hit the jackpot.”

I perked up. “Is that—?”

“Yep. Faculty records.” His voice twinkled.

I couldn’t believe it. Finally, some luck.

I left the phone with him so he could look through the file, then I entered the office. Furniture carved shapes into the darkness. I stalked forward, giving myself a wide berth around each desk.

Halfway across the room, the floor beneath me creaked. I cringed. The noise was loud, but—loud enough to hear outside this office?

Probably not. Right?

I continued forward. The chances of a security guard passing by at that exact moment was one in a hundred. No, a thousand. Ten thousand. It was actually—

An epiphany brought my logic to a screeching halt. The creak from earlier had sounded similar. Did that mean someone had been in here a few minutes ago? Did it mean someone was in here...now?

Creak.

The sound permeated from behind me, and my insides shriveled. I spun around and slammed into a sturdy body. “Andrei, hel—!”

A large hand covered my mouth. . . .

* * *

Scene from Braşov

He laced our fingers together. His gaze wandered the planes of my face, starting with my eyes and drifting down to my nose and cheeks, over my mouth.

His expression turned thoughtful. He was thinking about kissing me.

I pushed up onto my toes and brushed my lips over his with a feathery touch. Tingles electrified my middle. Heat spread through my body.

He drew back, seemingly surprised. I was kind of surprised, too. Had I really just kissed Maksim?

I broke the connection, lowering my heels. His lips swept down, angling for mine. His breathing came fast, heavy, and left the strip of air between us, between our mouths, sweet and minty, like he'd popped a breath mint.

My heartbeat quickened into a drumroll. I closed my eyes, head tilted. . . .

* * *

Walking into the Trap

The cabbie picked up speed. His gaze met mine in the rearview mirror. "Uhh, you are—?" He didn't seem to know the word he needed.

"Tourist," I said.

"Ah." He reached for his phone, which was mounted on the dash. "Address?"

I gave him the address of the hostel. I might have been off by a digit, but the sequence was close enough to get us into the neighborhood.

My phone buzzed from my purse. I pulled it out, thinking it must be Brandy—while simultaneously, and pathetically, hoping it was Maksim.

I woke up my screen, and disappointment slinked through me. There was no message at all. I must have heard the cabbie's phone.

The thought of Maksim, however brief, spun into a whirlwind and tore at my insides. I leaned back and dipped into the front pocket of my shorts. Same shorts I'd been wearing yesterday. My fingers detected the Romanian flag lapel pin.

I pulled it out. Sunlight washed over the tri-colored bands. *"It's my gift to you. To remember your trip."* Maksim's words delivered a stab of pain, hot and fresh, into my chest. My chin quivered.

I unzipped my purse, planning to tuck the pin away.

The cabbie took a hard right, banging me against the door. The lapel pin popped out of my fingers. My purse tumbled across the backseat, contents spilling.

The cabbie straightened us out, and I finally looked up long enough to take in our surroundings. Broken-down cars, stripped down to their frames, littered the side of the road. Crumbly cement apartment buildings rose up on both sides of us.

"Excuse me, sir? Where are we?"

The cabbie's attention returned to the rearview mirror. "Who?"

"Where?" I corrected. "*Unde?*"

The man smiled and nodded, eyes wide. Did he not understand

me?

I leaned forward. "Sir? This is not Old Town."

"Yes, yes. We take shortcut. Avoid traffic."

I sat back. Trash blanketed the streets and sidewalks around us, and my stomach bottomed out. Was this the neighborhood Maksim had brought me to? What was it called again? Ferentari?

Graffiti wallpapered the buildings, all over the ground floor. An array of antennas and satellite dishes sprang up from the rooftops.

We passed a mound of garbage piled up on the sidewalk. A sour odor crawled into the cab. My stomach lurched.

The cabbie turned down a side street and crushed the brakes. I grabbed my phone. "I'm going to give you the exact address, okay? Just one second."

He didn't reply.

I was about to repeat myself when a lanky form emerged from an alley. The man had long, dark hair and a five o'clock shadow. Was that...Drago?

A stocky frame appeared in the rearview mirror. My eyes bulged. Émilien.

I banged on the driver's seat, screaming for him to go. He killed the engine.

Swearing, I fumbled for my phone and whatever else I could grab. My purse ended up across me, somehow, and I launched out of the cab.

Two sets of shoes pounded the pavement behind me

