

Mathilde Cognot

PROTECTIVE ABANDONMENT

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To anyone who's ever isolated themselves
for the sake of others.
To anyone who's ever feared they might be a curse.
This story is yours.

Oh and... You're not.
You never were.

PROLOGUE

I was running. I had no idea where—this place was completely unfamiliar. The corridor stretched endlessly ahead, almost entirely dark, and my vision blurred further from the relentless tears streaming down my face.

What a fool I'd been! Thinking I could fix things had only made everything worse.

Behind me, the two guys chasing me thundered down the hallway, their hooves pounding the floor as they shouted threats.

The corridor was too narrow. I couldn't use my wings.

I didn't know what to do—but I knew what I wanted. I wanted to save his life.

I shook my head, trying to push his face from my mind. I had to stay focused. His life depended on it.

Then one of them grabbed my tail. I thought they were farther behind!

I slammed my elbow into his stomach—he let go and coughed up blood. But I hadn't taken two steps when the second one swung his sword. The first blow slashed across

my forehead.

I was out of options. I launched into the air, kicking hard as I went, but barely two wingbeats later, a claw grabbed my leg. I twisted midair—just in time to see the sword coming down a second time.

CHAPTER ONE

According to her, things couldn't possibly get any worse.

Quick footsteps echoed down the corridor. *No running in the halls, no running in the halls...* Yes, technically, it was forbidden—but Cassie was late.

Cursing the alarm clock that had betrayed her, the girl rushed through unfamiliar hallways, searching for her classroom.

Typical. First day at a new school, and she was already ten minutes behind.

Flustered and breathless, she finally knocked on what she prayed was the right door. A voice invited her in. She stepped inside.

For a moment, she froze—fifty pairs of eyes fixed on her like she was some exotic creature. As first impressions went, it could've been worse... but not by much.

She meant to apologize. She wanted to promise it wouldn't happen again. But her lips only parted—no words

came out.

The teacher stepped in, mercifully. “Everyone, this is Cassie Johnson. She’ll be joining us for the rest of the year.”

Cassie lowered her gaze and made her way to the back of the room, alone. Intimidated, she avoided eye contact, hoping to shrink out of existence.

But on the far side of the classroom, someone couldn’t stop watching her.

She felt it—his stare, heavy, insistent. Any second now, he’d look away. He had to. She busied herself with her school supplies, gnawing at her nails.

Minutes passed. Finally, she turned her head.

Her green eyes met his. Bastian’s blue gaze locked with hers—and suddenly, she couldn’t look away.

Something was happening. Something she didn’t understand.

That look... Of all the stares she’d encountered, his was the most unusual. The most arresting.

The teacher pulled her out of her daydream. “Cassie, can you tell us the name of the prince of Wallachia?”

For a few seconds, Cassie was speechless. As usual, not a single word would come. Her lips quivered.

After what felt like an eternity, she swallowed hard and finally spoke. “They... they called him Vlad the Impaler, but he’s also known as... Dracula.”

The teacher stared at her for a moment, then simply moved on, offering no comment on the strange tone of her reply.

Cassie exhaled quietly.

When the bell finally rang, she rushed to gather her

things and hurried out of the classroom. Only once she passed through the door did she allow herself to breathe.

She pulled a small crumpled piece of paper from her pocket. She hadn't memorized her schedule yet.

A faint smile touched her lips when she saw her next class: art. Her father had enrolled her. Drawing had always been her escape—a breath of fresh air in an otherwise stifling world.

She didn't have much trouble finding the room. It was in the same building as the gym—the biggest one on campus. She was impressed.

At the entrance, students split—some going right, others left, depending on their schedule. Cassie checked hers again. She had no idea which direction to take.

“Hi.”

A voice out of nowhere made her jump.

“Sorry,” the boy added quickly. “Didn't mean to scare you.”

Cassie didn't answer. Her heart was racing from the surprise.

The boy gave her a curious look. His eyes sparkled hazel beneath tousled brown hair, and the glimpse of muscle beneath his T-shirt suggested he was headed to gym class.

Though mortified by the exchange, Cassie was far too polite to show it. Not that she needed to—her blush gave her away. Her cheeks only flushed a faint pink, but against her pale, porcelain skin, it was more than enough to betray her discomfort.

The boy pointed at her with a smile. “Art class?”

“Y... yes,” Cassie stammered.

“To the right,” he replied warmly, before heading left.

“Th... thank you,” she mumbled, watching him go.

Hello, I’m going to art class, could you tell me where the room is, please? Ugh. It wasn’t that hard! Moments like this always left Cassie mentally scolding herself, even though she knew full well she’d never follow her own advice.

With hesitant steps, she entered the hallway on the right.

The room she found was huge, overflowing with all sorts of objects and materials. Amid the creative chaos stood tall tables and high stools, scattered like islands across the room.

Cassie tried to walk confidently toward the teacher’s desk. “I’m... the new student. My name is Cassie Johns—”

“Ah, yes. Go sit in the back with Bastian.”

Cassie sighed inwardly. *Of course.* Just when she’d managed to get a proper sentence out, the teacher had to cut her off.

She didn’t respond. She didn’t know who Bastian was, but there was only one empty table at the back of the room. Slowly, cautiously, she made her way toward it.

As if her shyness weren’t enough of a hurdle, the floor was practically a minefield of art supplies. Still, she managed to reach the table without incident.

She sat down and finally looked up from her feet, letting out a quiet sigh of relief.

That’s when she realized who her seatmate was: the boy who had all but forced her into eye contact during history class.

She snuck a glance in his direction. He was already sketching, even though class hadn’t started yet.

Cassie let out a quiet breath. She had been afraid of ending up next to someone overly talkative, but Bastian seemed quiet—focused.

The teacher came over, handed her a large sheet of paper and some supplies, then gently pulled Bastian out of his concentration to explain the assignment. “Today, you’ll be working in pairs. Each of you will have your own sheet, but the true masterpiece won’t lie in your individual work—it’ll be in how your pieces come together. You’ll hand it in at the end of the week.” He gave them a brief smile before walking off to another table.

“Uh... Aren’t we all doing the same thing?” Cassie asked her neighbor softly.

“Nope. The teacher’s a sadist,” Bastian replied without looking up. “He’s into psychology. He observes people and gives them an assignment based on their personality. You’re probably shy, so he’s trying to break you out of it. He finds it fun.”

Great. Just what she needed.

She hadn’t planned on getting to know anyone. Her plan was to stay invisible, off the radar. This assignment threw that plan right out the window. Still, if she couldn’t avoid interacting, the least she could do was not come off as rude.

She turned a little toward Bastian, trying to appear engaged. But the moment their eyes met, she froze.

Once again, she couldn’t look away.

She didn’t even notice it happening.

“So?” Bastian’s voice brought her back. “Do you have an idea?”

“N... no, I... I really like fantasy,” she admitted,

hesitant.

“Me too,” he said with a faint smile. “Hold on.” He began sketching something on a scrap of paper, and Cassie took the opportunity to study him more closely.

His skin was nearly as pale as hers, contrasting with his chestnut hair. Faint gray shadows clung beneath his clear blue eyes, but she tried not to stare.

“What do you think?” he asked, sliding the paper over to her.

His sketch showed two angels—one white, one black—standing back to back, separated by a mirror.

“I really like the angel idea, but...”

She paused. “Actually, no—it’s a great idea. Really.”

In truth, Cassie knew she often slipped hidden messages into her drawings, sometimes on purpose, sometimes not. And she wasn’t about to share anything too personal with a complete stranger.

But Bastian wasn’t letting it slide. “No,” he said firmly. “Tell me what you actually think.”

She stayed silent, eyes fixed on his drawing. Then she bit her lip and finally looked up at him.

There it was again—that intense gaze. She hated how much it rattled her.

She sighed. “I picture something a bit different. Maybe... a dark angel on one side, and a child on the other. Just a normal child.”

“I like it,” Bastian said, already smiling. “But we’d need to rethink the whole scene, then.”

Cassie picked up a pencil and began sketching. Bastian leaned closer to watch, a quiet grin forming on his face.

They worked together in silence, absorbed by the task, barely noticing time pass.

When the bell rang, Cassie blinked in surprise. What had felt like ten minutes had actually been two full hours.

She packed her things quickly and was about to slip out when Bastian called after her.

“By the way—I’m Bastian. Bastian Olson.” He held out his hand.

“Cassie Johnson,” she replied, a little shy, but polite enough to shake it.

“Your hand is freezing.”

“Yeah. Family trait,” she said with a small, awkward smile.

He hesitated for a second, then added, “Maybe we could meet after school? For the project.”

“Uh... I...”

Cassie hesitated. Her parents wouldn’t be thrilled at the idea of her going to a stranger’s house—especially a boy’s.

Her excuse was already forming.

But the truth was... she wanted to say yes. Making friends here didn’t seem like such a terrible idea, after all.

Bastian’s eyes once again quieted her inner debate.

“I’d love to,” Cassie said at last.

The boy’s face lit up. “It’s the last house on the street—the one with the pond beside it.” With a warm smile, he gave her a quick wave before disappearing down the hallway.

Cassie exhaled. She already knew someone who wouldn’t be happy about this.

During her next class—English—she ended up seated

next to a girl named Vanessa. A bit too talkative for Cassie's taste, but cheerful and kind. The two were opposites in every way: Cassie pale, dark-haired, and soft-spoken; Vanessa golden-skinned, blonde, and bursting with energy.

"Wanna have lunch together?" Vanessa asked as they packed up at the end of class.

"No, I'm heading home. I don't have anything this afternoon."

"Alright. See you tomorrow then!"

"Yes, see you tomorrow."

Cassie was still smiling as she stepped outside. An hour with Vanessa had chipped away at her usual reserve. She didn't know yet if that was a good thing—but it felt... nice.

Her smile vanished the moment she reached the parking lot.

A man stood waiting beside a black car, his expression stony. Salt-and-pepper hair, long dark coat, arms crossed. He didn't move—just followed her with his eyes as she approached.

Cassie had kept her gaze low until then. But once she was close, she lifted her head and looked him straight in the eye. "What are you doing here, Dad? We don't live that far—I can walk."

"I wanted to make sure you didn't take a detour. We need to talk."

"Dad! What did I do this time?"

He didn't answer. He turned, opened the driver's door, and got in.

With a sigh, Cassie followed and slid into the passenger seat. "I really don't see what I did wrong."

“I saw,” her father replied simply.

The ride was silent. Less than five minutes later, they pulled up in front of their house.

Cassie hated this house.

They had only been living there for two days, but it already felt wrong. It was plain, ordinary—nothing outright awful, yet something about it made her uneasy. Maybe it was the lack of light. Maybe it was just too small.

Whatever the reason, it was the house her parents had chosen, and she hadn’t been given a choice.

She lingered at the doorstep until her father took her firmly by the arm and pulled her inside. He slammed the door behind them—louder than necessary. His way of announcing his return to the household.

“Sweetheart!” Mrs. Johnson called out, hurrying down the stairs.

“Mom, I—” Cassie didn’t get a chance to finish. Her mother wrapped her in a hug so tight it nearly knocked the breath out of her.

“Your father told me everything! I’m so proud of you,” she beamed.

“I’m not,” her father snapped.

His wife blinked, confused.

Mr. Johnson didn’t wait to explain. “You didn’t do your homework on that boy. He’s not an orphan.”

Cassie’s expression tensed. “But Dad, I never—”

“Cassie,” her mother cut in gently, “you’re seventeen now. You need to start taking these things more seriously.”

“But Mom, I wasn’t trying to—”

“That’s enough,” her father interrupted. “The truth is,

his family is completely inappropriate. Stay away from him. I'm not joking, Cassie. Choose someone else. This conversation is over."

"But—"

"I said the conversation is over," he repeated, his voice harder this time.

Cassie lowered her head. Any trace of joy had drained from her face. Without another word, she turned and started up the stairs toward her room.

She stopped halfway up. Still facing the wall, she spoke without looking back. "I'm going to see him this afternoon. We have a project to work on."

"I won't allow—"

"Dad," she cut him off sharply. "You can forbid me all you want—but just so you know, I'll go anyway. It's your call." And with that, she climbed the rest of the stairs, one quiet step at a time.

Once inside her room, Cassie slammed the door and hurled her bag across the floor. A rock CD went into the player, loud enough to shake the walls, and she collapsed onto the bed.

Flat on her back, she stared at the ceiling, lost in thought.

There was a knock at the door. She didn't hear it—the music drowned everything out.

The door creaked open. Mrs. Johnson poked her head in. Cassie didn't move, didn't even acknowledge her. Her mother stepped inside anyway, turned off the music, set a glass of juice on the nightstand, and sat down beside her.

"Sweetheart," she began gently, "you can't see that boy again. It's too dangerous." Her voice was soft, but her

words were firm. “It doesn’t make your father happy either, you know. He’s worried about you.”

“But Mom, that’s not fair—he...” Cassie sat up abruptly, frustration bubbling in her chest.

“It’s not your fault,” her mother said quickly. “You just should’ve done more research.”

“That’s not the point,” Cassie murmured, her voice tinged with sadness. “I wasn’t trying to study him. I wasn’t trying to manipulate anyone, or use them, or anything like that... You know how sensitive I am to people’s eyes. But his... out of everyone I’ve ever seen, his were different. There’s something about him. I didn’t approach him on purpose. It just happened.” Her throat tightened. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Mrs. Johnson silently picked up the glass of juice and offered it to her daughter with a tender, fragile smile.

“Tell me, Mom,” Cassie whispered, cradling the glass, “why does it have to be this unfair? I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Life is unfair, my love. Forget that boy. Find someone else. You don’t have much time left,” her mother said softly.

Cassie exploded. “For God’s sake, Mom! We’re talking about killing someone!”

“That’s enough. We’ve been through this. A curse comes with choices.” Her mother’s voice remained eerily calm. “Your father and I made ours. We chose to protect this family.”

“Well, maybe you never should’ve started one to begin with!”

The words stung.

Mrs. Johnson stood without a word. Her face was pale, her expression unreadable. She walked to the door and quietly left.

Alone, Cassie downed the juice in a single gulp and collapsed backward onto the bed. A few silent tears slipped down her cheeks.

Moments later, she drifted off to sleep.

The story begins here. Ready to dive deeper?

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... And what will your tears be made of.

 Mathilde Cognot