

THERE WAS A FESTIVE vibe in the air that reminded me of the Fourth of July. Except I didn't get *this* excited on the Fourth of July.

Today was the day I had waited a whole year for. I was finally going to get my hands on a copy of *The Mists of Otherworld*, a book so hotly anticipated there'd been a whole news segment about it on TV last night.

I stood in the line outside the Book Nook with my best friends, Luisa and Katie. We'd been there since 7:45 A.M.—brutal for a Saturday morning, but worth it—wanting to get a good spot in line before the store opened at nine. The atmosphere was electric. Besides dozens of teenage girls, there were women in their twenties, moms with strollers, a few grandmas, and a handful of teenage guys.

Luisa stepped away from the line and glanced ahead. "I wish they'd let us in already!" She stumbled a little and grabbed Katie's arm for support. Believing that her shortness was a curse, Luisa insisted on wearing the highest wedges Payless had to offer. The result was that she rolled an ankle at least once a month.

“I just hope they don’t sell out before we get to the front,” I said.

Luisa’s brown eyes widened. “Amy! They *can’t* sell out—you preordered for us, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but I heard on the news last night that some of the shipments were delayed,” I replied, feeling nervous as I spoke the words. The idea that I would have to wait another day to read about Alexander Banks—the gorgeous, fearless vampire hunter—was too awful to contemplate.

“I *am* getting a book today, even if I have to bodycheck someone to get it,” Katie announced.

We laughed, because Katie would never hurt a fly—literally. When I’d visited her at the camp where she worked over the summer, she’d ushered even the smallest bugs out the cabin door. However, she *was* five foot ten and the captain of the girls’ ice hockey team, so a body check or two wasn’t out of the question.

“All I know is, we *have* to read it by Monday morning,” I said.

Katie and Luisa nodded. If we didn’t finish it by then, we’d have to cover our ears in the spoiler-filled hallways of our school. There had only been one book so far—*Otherworld*—in Elizabeth Howard’s planned trilogy, but it was a sensation, and most people we knew had been sucked in.

I felt the cool breeze on my face, and looked around at the swaying trees, appreciating the crisp autumn weather. Some would say it was a waste of a beautiful day, because I planned to

spend it inside reading *The Mists of Otherworld*. But sometimes it was nice to read on a lovely day, especially when the world inside the book was so dark and gloomy.

One of the best things about the series was that it was set in my city, Chicago. But Otherworld Chicago was very different from the Chicago I knew. It was a place where mortals stayed in their homes after nightfall. A place where you didn't trust anyone who wasn't your kin.

And it was all because of vampires. As the series told it, for centuries, vampires had existed in isolation in northern Scandinavia, preying on the residents of remote villages. Then in the 1920s, the vampires had decided to leave seclusion and migrate all over the world, creating more vampires as they went along.

Otherworld Chicago had been hit especially hard because one of the world's most notorious vampires, Vigo Skaar, had moved there with his coven of several hundred vampires. Vigo, and his vicious second-in-command, Leander, had been terrorizing the city ever since. As a result, innovation had stopped completely, and Otherworld had not made any technological advancements since the 1920s.

The line surged forward, a sign that the store was opening its doors, and there was a chorus of squeals and some jostling.

Luisa frowned at Katie. "It's going to be a stampede. I told you we should have come earlier!"

Katie shook her head, her blond ponytail swinging. “I don’t wake up before six for *anyone*, not even James Banks.”

“How dare you, Katherine? And you think yourself worthy of James!” Luisa made a show of hoisting her chin and turning her back on Katie. A self-professed drama geek, she loved using Otherworld’s formal language.

While my Otherworld crush—well, more like obsession—was Alexander Banks, Katie and Luisa loved James, Alexander’s golden-haired cousin. Alexander was dark and brooding, and determined to hunt down Vigo, who had murdered his family when Alexander was only six. James was a philosopher who wanted to bring peace to Otherworld. He was in love with Hannah Skaar, Vigo’s sister, a vampire whose beauty and feistiness were only matched by her undying love for James.

James was nice to read about, but he was no Alexander. I preferred a guy with some grit.

“I wonder if Alexander is going to fall in love in this book,” Katie said as we inched closer to the door. “It’s about time, don’t you think?”

“Not necessarily,” I said, feeling a blush burn my cheeks. I wasn’t sure I wanted a love interest for Alexander. The thought of being jealous of a character in a book was silly, but I couldn’t help it. Alexander Banks was the closest to perfection that any guy could ever be. What girl could measure up? “He isn’t the romantic type. Alexander’s too focused on revenge to fall in love.”

“Good point,” Luisa agreed. A few eager fans were now leaving the store, books in hand, bumping into us because they’d started reading already. “But you never know. If he kills Vigo, he’s going to need a new story line.”

Just the mention of Vigo gave me chills. There was no doubt in my mind that Alexander would kill Vigo. It was a question of *when*, not *if*.

Finally, it was our turn. As we stepped over the threshold into the Book Nook, I couldn’t help but think of how lucky I was that my friends shared my passion for Otherworld. It was actually our love of books that had first brought us together, in the ninth grade. Katie had started a high school book club, and Luisa and I had been the only ones to show up. I’d just moved to the east side of Chicago after my parents’ divorce and didn’t know anyone. Within weeks, we’d become a “trio of awesomeness,” as Katie put it. Most people we met thought we’d been best friends *forever*, not just for a couple of years.

Thankfully, the three copies I had preordered were there waiting for us. I picked up my book, hugging it to my chest like a long-lost friend. It was extremely thick, longer even than the first, and that made my heart pound: the more Alexander to read about, the better. Katie and Luisa were busy exclaiming over the cover — it had been revealed online months ago, but it was still amazing to see it for real.

The three of us left the store, breathless with triumph. There was no talk of hanging out afterward. We caught the bus and

grabbed seats, reading the whole way. When it got to my stop, I reluctantly tucked the book under my arm (since I hadn't mastered reading and walking like Katie had), and waved good-bye to my friends.

My building was called Courtyard Place, a name that made it seem posh when it was anything but. I wouldn't have any complaints about where we lived if it weren't for the fact that my dad and his girlfriend—the one he'd left Mom for—had managed to buy a bungalow in the suburbs. If he could afford to live in a house, why couldn't we?

I pushed those thoughts away, determined not to stew in bitterness. Besides, nothing could shake my good mood today. I had a date with Alexander Banks, after all.

I had to remind myself of that when I got inside the apartment and saw my younger sister, Chrissy, and her best friend, Madison, in the living room.

"Hey," I said.

Chrissy grunted and Madison said, "Hello there." Madison had a way of talking down to people that made me clench my teeth.

I noticed Mom's coat was gone. "Where's Mom?"

"She got called in," Chrissy replied. "Some idiot swallowed a plastic fork on a dare, so they had to open up the clinic."

Mom was an endoscopy nurse—a pretty good gig after toughing it out for fifteen years in the ER. She didn't have to

work overnights anymore, but she still got called in for emergencies.

“Hope you got your vampire book,” Chrissy said, and I caught the *Isn't she pathetic?* glance she and Madison exchanged.

Madison and Chrissy were often mistaken for sisters because they used the same blond hair dye. They were in eighth grade, but probably looked older than me, and I was a junior. On any given day they dressed like they'd just walked out of a dance club, with their skintight camis, low-slung jeans, and heavy makeup.

If you looked closer, though, Chrissy and I did look like sisters. We were both fair skinned and green eyed, with slightly upturned “snob” noses, as Madison had once pointed out. She'd also pointed out, right in front of me, that Chrissy and I were like *Before* and *After* makeover pictures. I didn't have to ask which one I was. My long, straight hair was the same mousy brown as Chrissy's roots, and I didn't wear makeup most of the time—both capital crimes, in Madison's eyes.

Whatever.

I grabbed a Coke from the fridge and a crumpled bag of trail mix, then went to my room. Kicking off my shoes, I sat back against the pillows, ready to lose myself in *The Mists of Otherworld*.

Hands tingling with anticipation, I opened the book.

I slammed the book shut. “No, no, no!”

This was *not* the ending I’d been hoping for.

It was Sunday night just after eleven. I’d been reading all weekend with short breaks for food, hygiene, fresh air, and phone debriefs with my friends.

How could the author leave Alexander’s life in the lurch? Hadn’t he been through enough already?

Alexander had been more amazing than ever in *The Mists*. But right now, he could be cornered by Vigo and other hungry vampires. And I had to wait another whole year to find out what happened to him! It was so unfair.

A horrible thought occurred to me: She wouldn’t kill him off, would she?

No, she wouldn’t dare. Alexander was too important. Readers would never forgive her. *I* would never forgive her.

But Elizabeth Howard was notorious for doing things *her* way, no matter what her publisher or fans wanted. I flipped the book over, my fingers sliding over the glossy jacket. Alexander and James were on the cover, with Hannah standing between them and Vigo watching from the shadows. The images on the books’ covers were drawn by Howard herself because she felt only she could depict the characters accurately. She had also refused to sell the movie rights, claiming that no actors could be true to her characters. Despite the uproar from fans, I agreed with her on that one. I couldn’t imagine anyone doing justice to Alexander Banks.

Sliding off my bed, I crossed to the window, gazing down at

the dark streets below. Our third-floor apartment had a better view now that the project next door had been torn down. From my window I could see most of the neighborhood, the streets glistening with new rain, mist rising from the sewers.

I could almost hear the sound of Alexander's booted footsteps as he ran down the street, stake in hand, looking for a flash of Vigo's silver-blond hair in the moonlight. If I could spot Alexander in this maze of streets, I'd climb down the fire escape and help him.

Not that I'd be of much use against a vampire.

Anyway, now that I'd finished the book, it was time to go online and vent. I wished I could call Katie or Luisa, but it was too late, and I didn't know if they'd finished the book yet. Turning away from the window, I headed to the computer, which was located in the small den next to the living room.

Chrissy was on the computer.

"What are you up to?" I asked casually, leaning in the doorway. I could see that she was IMing with someone, but she always got defensive if I asked her who it was.

"Madison and I were figuring out which party to go to next Friday," she replied, turning around.

Which party. Of course.

"I guess you're going to the dance," she said in a mocking tone, like a school dance was too cheesy for her. I should just be grateful she wasn't planning to go; I knew she could score tickets if she wanted.

I shrugged. “We’ll probably go.”

“Madison and I are all about house parties. They’re way more fun.”

I saw the challenge in her eyes. Chrissy was daring me to say that she should stay away from those parties, that she was too young, and that Madison was a bad influence. At which point she would tell me that a) I wasn’t Mom, so stay out of it, and b) I was just jealous of her wonderful social life.

For some reason, Chrissy loved to taunt me these days. We’d been close growing up—with the usual sister squabbles—but since Mom and Dad’s separation, Chrissy had turned on me. I guess she had to release her anger somehow, and I was an easy target.

“Are you almost finished with the computer?” I asked.

She sighed, disappointed that I didn’t engage her. “Just a minute.” She logged off Facebook with one hand and dialed her cell phone with the other, then got up. Mom insisted that we have cell phones for safety reasons. We were all on her phone plan and got free evenings and weekends, which meant that Chrissy was almost always on the phone when she was at home.

I plunked down in the chair and went to my favorite Otherworld fan site, then logged into the readers’ forum as Mrs. AlexanderBanks8021. It was weird to think that there were eight thousand and twenty Mrs. AlexanderBanks before me. Obviously they all recognized that he was the most incredible character ever.

I didn't know why most girls preferred the thoughtful, sensitive James to Alexander. It was a no-brainer.

I began typing.

Mrs.AlexanderBanks8021: (*Spoilers*) I just finished *The Mists*. I can't believe she ended it with Alexander chasing Vigo! Does anyone here think she might kill off Alexander in the next book? I'm really worried.

I waited, and a reply came up almost instantly:

ILoveJames4ever222: I wouldn't be surprised if she killed him. It doesn't look like he's destined to find happiness. If he were going to have a happy ending, he would've met a girl by now.

At this point, others began chiming in.

JamesBanksmylove9648: She wouldn't dare kill him. She knows we'd all freak out! I heard she's having writer's block and hasn't started the third book yet. Maybe she doesn't know what to do with Alexander.

Writer's block? I thought with dread. I began typing again.

Mrs.AlexanderBanks8021: I hope she gets over the writer's block soon because one year is way too long for the next book. I can't picture waiting any longer than that.

ElizabethHowardfan4307: I think she'll probably have Vigo kill Alexander. James will go ballistic and get all violent for a change. If James the pacifist kills Vigo, it would be the perfect ending to the series!

A flurry of comments came up, most of them saying that it would be a terrible ending. As if killing off Alexander would work. As if James's personality would do a one-eighty.

I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. If Alexander died, it meant the end of the fantasy, and that would be too much to bear.

Vigo Skaar looked out the window of his hiding place, a basement in an abandoned house. Scanning the streets with his pale eyes, he assured himself that he had nothing to worry about. Alexander Banks could not possibly have tracked him here. The vampire stalker was good, but not that good.

He was hungry, so very hungry. But hunting wasn't easy when he, himself, was being hunted.

He stepped back from the window and went to sit down in a battered old armchair, one of the many reminders of the previous inhabitants. When people left town these days, it was usually in a hurry. So many lovely houses allowed to rot because of us, he thought proudly.

If Alexander thought he could outsmart him, he would be disappointed. As always, it came down to the calculation of probabilities—something he doubted Alexander understood. Probabilities of where to run, matched with measured risks.

That was one thing Vigo was excellent at: anticipating Alexander's next move.

Sometimes he rather enjoyed their game. Other times, like now, Alexander was a damned nuisance. He wished he'd just killed the lad when he'd had the chance. But then, if he'd known that young Alexander was present when he was killing the boy's family, he would have.

Vigo felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise, and he bolted out of the chair, assuming a fight-ready stance. His predator was approaching. Vigo felt the blood hunger rumble in his belly. A predator who would soon become his prey. . . .

I stared at the screen, chewing my bottom lip. The predator-prey thing was overdone these days. So was the cat and mouse thing, come to think of it. I deleted the last line and skimmed over the scene.

Reading *The Mists of Otherworld* tonight had filled me with creative juice. I just had to end the Vigo/Alexander story line once and for all—with Alexander prevailing, of course. I was excited

to post it on a fan fiction website and hoped other fans liked it, too.

It was 12:34 A.M., definitely time to stop for the night. I'd stayed up late writing too many times, then ended up headachy the next day. The problem was, I was a night person, and that's when I did my best work.

I'd been writing for as long as I could remember, but once I read *Otherworld*, I'd stopped writing original stories to focus on fan fiction. It was such a rich, exciting world that I couldn't think of writing anything else.

I knew that if I was going to be a writer, I'd have to write my own original stuff one day. It was just too bad that the character of Alexander Banks had already been created by Elizabeth Howard. I wished he was all mine.