



AN INCONVENIENT

ATTACHMENT

PRINCESS D. MCRAE

Content Warning



This book contains the following material that may be harmful or traumatizing for some readers.

**Emotional Abuse/Eating Disorders/ Panic Attacks/ Nightmares about Traumatic Events
& Tons of Flashbacks/ Physical Abuse/Inappropriate languages**

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Every novel has a beginning, middle, and, end; however ours end with:

Until then...

Chapter One

“Clarissa! Get over here!” Jessie chirps. “I’m glad you made it!”

I couldn't help but chuckle as I heard Jessie call out my name. “Me too; nice party you’re throwing!” I gave him an awkward thumbs-up.

Did I give Jessie a thumbs-up? I can be anti-social when I want to be. If I'm being completely honest, I'm a little nervous. After all, this is my first time being invited to a party, especially since Dekvia and I are on summer vacation. Speaking of her, where is she?

“Have you seen Dekvia?!” I yelled over the loud music.

“What?! Let’s go outside so that I can hear!” Jessie nodded before taking my hand into his, pulling me through the crowd of people and swaying their hips to the loud music.

On the way out, I accidentally bumped into a girl that was twerking like crazy. How does she move it like that? “I’m so sorry!” I panicked by putting my hand over my chest.

“Continue twerking, girl; you’re killing it!” I smiled at her before being pulled out the front door.

“I was about to ask you hav--“ A brown Honda suddenly slammed into his mailbox before I could finish speaking.

When it comes to driving, I don't know anyone besides Devika Collins who is completely incapable of driving. My best friend, her dad, and I all know each other. Her beauty was always an eye-catcher. She has dark brown tresses and sparkling eyes. She gets asked out on a date once a week, but no one ever realizes she is a total klutz.

“Oh, shit.” As soon as Dekvia saw us, she leaped out of the vehicle and said, “I’m sorry.” with an anxious grin on her face.

Jessie took off his cap and combed his fingers through his black curly hair. “I’m not even forty and my hair is already falling out.” Jessie swore.

As I snored in his direction, he scowled at me. “It’s only been three days, and already I feel like I’m losing my sanity and my faith because of the both of you. I’m sure I’ve already passed the religion stage.”

“I’m so sorry, Jessie!” As Devika exclaimed. “You can count on me to move it.”

Jessie said, “No, I’ll move it.” before sprinting out to her vehicle. “I don’t want you to run over anything else!”

Before he could start yelling again, Devika sprang to me, gripped my arm, and said, “Come on.” Soon enough, I felt myself being dragged inside, and that was when I heard the ruckus behind us.

“DEVIKA! There’s no gas in this car!” Jessie let out a roar behind us.

As we both giggled. “He’s so calling your dad.” I said elbowing her in the shoulder.

As we enter the party, Dekvia ties herself to my arm. “My cousin, Jessie, didn’t give you any trouble, did he?” “She flashed me a radiant grin as she winked her way past a few male admirers in the crowd.

Seeing my best friend smiling always put me at ease; she always knew how to calm me down. “No, before you ran into the mailbox-” I poke her shoulder. “It wasn’t too long ago before I ran into him.” I smiled at her.

“Next time, Dekvia, fill up your car with gas!” With a thudding approach, Jessie handed her keys into her hand. “Fortunately, I had a few people to help me push it out of the way!”

“Good for you.” Dekvia smiled and gave him a pat on the shoulder.

“Let's take a few shots, especially to loosen up grumpy over here.” Dekvia says to us. It was impossible not to roll my eyes at Dekvia as she smiled at Jessie and me with her toothy grin. “As long as you do not tell my dad!” She aimed her finger at Jessie in a huff of rage.

“When was the last time I did that?” Jessie reached behind him and scratched the back of his neck. “I need a drink myself after that little workout you made me do.” He says as we both follow him into the kitchen pantry, where he keeps his stash of expensive alcohol and liquors. Jessie reaches into his pocket and pulls out a set of keys; he then opens the cupboard containing the booze. After reaching into the cabinet, he takes out a brand new bottle of Billionaire Vodka.

“Why does that bottle look like it would cost a fortune?!” I asked before seeing Dekvia take two cups out of the cupboard.

“This is one of my go-to beverages.” Jessie poured the beverage and loudly announced. “It costs a lot; I've been saving this until Dekvia came back. And we are drinking the whole bottle!” he adds, picking up a glass and casting a questioning look at me. “Dek?!” Jessie scowled at her “What are you doing, where are your manners? You forgot to give her a cup.” He was about to turn around but I stopped him.

“I don't drink at all besides nobody can afford to let this one get out of hand.” I aimed my finger at Dekvia who was already halfway through her cup.

“Really? That's insane. But have no fear; Dekvia and I have your back. We're not alcoholics, at least not to that extreme.” Jessie pats my back and says. “Since you're not drinking..” Jessie dashes into the refrigerator and returns with a bottle of water. “I didn't want you to feel left out. Here's to partying like it's 1999!” he grinned at Dekvia and me.

“We didn't even exist in 1999, you moron!” Dekvia states while raising her glass in the air.

When it comes to alcohol, my only experience with Dekvia has been a disaster. Since these two are together, I'm already starting to regret this.

I clinked my bottle of water in time with the other two glasses as Dekvia, Jessie, and I were all cracking jokes and dancing like there was no tomorrow. Now I understand why that girl I ran into earlier was moving like that, she was drunk.

Thankfully I don't drink, but with the way this music sounds, I was bobbing my head and shimmying my hips to the melody.

The words “last ro-ro-rounddd.” mumbled by Jessie's excessive drinking, came out of his mouth in a slurry.

I remarked. “You're hella drunk.” I laughed when I peek over to Dekvia having a hard time dancing with some random guy after returning to Jessie and me.

“Dancing with him is like dancing with a broken foot.” Dekvia said.

I swallowed my last swig of water in one gulp. “Next time, dance with a professional, Not with someone with crutches.” I told her as I rolled my eyes. Without realizing it, I glance over at the bottle.

I grabbed the bottle and asked in disbelief. “Did you guys finish this whole bottle?” I let out a startled hiss as a sudden, intense ache shot through my brain, but I was relieved to find that it passed swiftly.

On the other hand, Jessie wasn't doing too well. “ I DON'T CARE HOW LONG IT TAKES, AS LONG I'M WITH AM WITH YOU, I GOT A SMILE ON MY FACE!” Even though he was alone, he sang with his arms spread widened as he could and his drink in his right hand.

My jaw dropped as I watched him in disbelief as he suddenly broke into singing. *Wow, what girl turned him down?* “Don't you think Jessie may have had too much to drink? He's becoming too emotional?” When I circled to ask Dekvia, she had already returned to the floor.

I knew this was a bad idea.

“I believe you've had enough now, Jessie.” I tried to take the cup from him, but he just snatched it back up and chugged it again. Come on, Cl-Clarissa.” he stutters. “Don't be a buzzkill.” A yawn escapes his lips.

If I ever drink alcohol at some point in my life, I won't ever drink with Jessie. “Is it just me, or does sleeping sound very nice right now?” I heaved a breath of relief as another wave of pain swept through my brain.

“It does!” Then, with his palms once more in the air, he says while bopping along to the beat. “Maybe, I should take a quick nap.”

“Hey, Clarissa, Are you all right?” This time, Dekvia brought a cup with her.

“Yeah, I just have a major headache. Are you alright? I don't want to chase after the both of you, so I think you should go to sleep or something.” I blinked and saw that Dekvia had two heads.

Tylenol would be great right now since my head hurts so much.

“I'm doing amazing! For some reason, I felt less of a sensation from this particular type of booze compared to other ones.” Dekvia gives Jessie a flick on the forehead. “ Besides, I wanna be sure, Jessie, doesn't do anything crazy like last time.”

“Since he is feeling sentimental at the moment, that is true.” I remarked as I watched Jessie dance by himself once more.

“You don't look too good, perhaps you should go back to the crib where it's very quiet.” Dekvia looked at me intently as she rested her hand on my forehead. “Let me get you a cab or an Uber.” She gave me a tight squeeze until I felt like I'm going to black out.

Sober my butt, I'm not sure if she's lying or not. No matter her sobriety, Dekvia always manages to convey her emotions genuinely. With the way my throbbing head is hurting, I most definitely take this opportunity to go back to the crib we are staying in this month.

“You know, D-Dekvia. As much as I love your hugs, could you let me go? I c-can't breathe.” I managed to say.

With a soft smile, Dekvia let me go, asking. “Seriously, do you want me to?”

As I looked over her shoulder, I noticed the teenage boy she had been dancing with earlier was still looking at her. “No, it's fine. I can make it back to the place.” I give a reassuring grin and add, “Plus, I believe your dancing buddy misses you.” I pointed in the direction behind her.

Dekvia says “Okay! Call or text me when you get there!”

I let go of her hands and she continued on her way through the crowded area. I shouted, “USE PROTECTION; DON'T GET PREGNANT!” so that she could hear me. I'm pretty sure she heard me because all I earned was a middle finger.

* * *

Who knew that a painful headache could make you feel this way? It was so painful, I couldn't even think straight. Normally it doesn't last this long.

I'm not sure if it was a wise decision or not, but I find my thoughts scattered as I ride the taxi home. Unwilling to risk a possible injury by jumping out of a moving vehicle, I realize with a headache like this and if I was drunk, would this be Dekvia's way of ensuring Jessie doesn't do anything impulsive?

I handed over my fare “Th—Thanks for the ride. Here's a tip.” and gingerly stepped out with a deep sigh as the taxi driver drove away in a hurry.

Someone must be in a hurry/

As I walked towards the darkest part of the house that Dekvia and I are staying in, I felt like someone was watching me from a distance. Perhaps it was just me being paranoid about how dark it was on this street. I should keep in mind that I'll leave some lights on if I plan on going somewhere. However, it feels great to be back in a familiar place. My eyelids were drooping as I made my way up the steep path and the three short steps to the front door. As soon as I entered the house, I collapsed on the floor.

“Argh, fudge-nugget, my head...” When I turned around to see what I had fallen over, my temple started to hurt again. It was that annoying green rug again. This was my fourth time tripping over it since I arrived. I hopped onto my feet and limped toward the kitchen for some water and Tylenol for my throbbing head. The moment I entered the kitchen, I saw a corpse. I laughed and tilted my head, utterly baffled.

The Collins family is getting good at decorating for Halloween. Hold on a second, Clarissa; let that sink in. I placed my icy fingers on my temples and gently massaged them. We haven't even reached Halloween.

“What the heck..” My pulse felt like it was going to explode. “I don't remember seeing this here.”

“That's because you are in the wrong house.” A deep, mysterious voice says.

I quickly spun around and only caught a glimpse of his black visage trench coat. On the end of his sleeve, it says “Elliot” in calligraphy. Men who are just like him make him more interesting than the average man. He is quite a mystery. I eyed him from head to toe to see he was carrying cleaning supplies.

“Why are you in my house?” As I looked over the cleaning materials, I stammered at him.

“This kind of crap never happens to me.” He mutters softly under his breath. “How did you even get inside?” he asks, grabbing my shoulder.

Does he not want me to be in my own house? Wow, this headache is kicking my rear end; I knew I should've gone to my doctor's appointment the day I left before going on this trip. Now I see why I shouldn't have tried to do things on my own. The way things are looking now, There's no way there's a dead body in the kitchen.

But meanwhile, this man's eyes were...I couldn't even tell you about it. It's a lovely shade of pale lime green, his eyes were stunning. I didn't get a good glimpse at his face because he hastily whirled around and started scrubbing.

I glanced around the kitchen, totally uninterested, before glancing down at Elliot cleaning the Halloween decorations.

It seems like he has never cleaned a day in his life. He was cleaning with the wrong products. Does he not know how to clean up the fake blood? You gotta use the right products. It might be alright if I call him by the name on his coat. Heck, it's worth a shot.

“Elliot? You need to try something else.” I grabbed the bleach and, for some reason, the hydrogen peroxide that was resting on the counter, and gave it to him, telling him. “The peroxide dissolves blood, and I'm sure you know what chlorine does.”

Elliot gave me the strangest expression like I'd suddenly sprouted a second head onto my body. “How do you know my name?” he questioned.

I gave him a friendly grin. “The writing on the coat.” I pointed at the end of his sleeve that bore the name Elliot. “I think I'll go get some fresh air because it's pretty stuffy in here. You should keep working on your Halloween creation.”

“It's not..” He sighed deeply, giving up.

I'm crossing my fingers that he picked up on the fact that I was using this conversation for a ruse. Because as far as I know, I refused to believe there was an actual dead body in the kitchen. I thought to myself.

There's no way I could have gone to the wrong house. This is the most ridiculous hallucination I ever had before in my life. Without no warning, Did I doze off or something? All of this, I believe, is just a dream about how this party is going to go because as of right now, I have no idea what's going on. This dashing guy, for starters, insists that I have the wrong address. And secondly, why is he using fake blood for a Halloween decoration when it's nowhere near time for that? With the way society is today, who knows, I guess to make it seem more realistic.

As I stepped away from the kitchen, a strong hand clasped my shoulder and exhorted me. “You won't remember any of this by tomorrow morning.” There was a bitter feeling at the nape of my neck. Following a brief sensation of dizziness, I swiveled to confront him. “What caused you to bite me like that?” My neck pulsed with pain.

Elliot glowered. “What the... Are you holding it against me that I bit your neck? This isn't some Twilight movie; Matter of fact, I would never consider talking to you in the first place. You're unbelievable.” His arms folded across his chest in obvious agitation.

I wasn't so certain if it was more important to focus on my sore neck or what he had said about me. It occurred to me how undesirable it was in Elliot's opinion. In consideration of myself, I reckon my character is quite admirable.

I stuttered, trying to form a coherent sentence that would explain my confusion.

“W-What exactly is happening here?” I asked, wincing in pain as I spoke. “This can’t be real.” I spoke my thoughts aloud, thinking it was just a dream.

Elliot's gaze became sharp and intense as he stared into my brown eyes; his eyes turned from mint green to an amber flame. “This is all real.” he said calmly before taking a step back. His voice brought me comfort despite his mysterious words.

“Why are you telling me this?” I inquired with amusement, tingling my tone.

If it wasn't real, nobody wouldn't dare tell you the truth.

His eyes light up again to an amber flame, staring deeply into my eyes saying “Because whatever happens tonight will be forgotten by tomorrow—so it's best you remember where you truly belong.” With one final shove toward the door, Elliot closed it behind me with a harsh thud.

What a moron!

As I trudged up the hill, I began to question: *Are my eyes playing tricks on me? Was it possible that his eyes had changed colors?*

Suddenly, a chill ran down my spine and I knew one thing was certain: right now, getting off this street was the best idea. Taking out my phone, I dialed Devika's number-- she would be able to tell me where the crib was at.

“ Hello?!“ Devika says over the loud music.

“Can you tell me the address to the crib?” I said loudly enough for her to hear me. While speaking with her over loud music in the background, something across the road caught my eye - a little girl clutching her doll close to her body with dirt smeared all over her face and shoes. She seemed as lost as me. Could it be possible that we are in the same position?

“It is 416 Westside Park Hills.” Dekvia shuffled in the background. “Did you go to the wrong address!”

Oh my gosh, Elliott was right. I gave the wrong address to the taxi driver. I told him 413 Hills Road. So that's why the driver was in such a hurry to get out of here. I'm on the wrong side of town and there's only one person to blame. I have to say that my throbbing cranium is to be blamed for it.

I heard the little girl say, “Leave me alone, I need help, I'm lost right now.” and her cries echo through the street. “I just want my big brother.”

I took a good look at the group of young blokes, most of them seem to be between 14 and 16 years old.

While the other four hold her pigtails and start taunting her with “leave me alone” and snickers, The tallest one out of the group pushes her to the ground. This is unacceptable, and I refuse to do anything about it. She didn't deserve any of this. One of the younger kids shouted, “Freddy!” and I turned to look. Freddy was the tallest of the bunch, Freddy snatched the toy from her hands and flung it into the road.

A young boy was overheard saying to his companions. "If she can't save you, nobody will." pointing to the doll in the middle of the road. Tears in her eyes, the young girl ran blindly into the street.

As I turned to look, I was startled by the constant honking of a truck.

HONK, HONK, HONK, HONK!

I let out a gasp as I realized that no one was going to help, everyone just stared at what was happening. What kind of sick people just stand there and do nothing? There was a palpable dread in me as I shook my head. I could hear Dekvia screaming into the phone, but I couldn't bare to see the little child in pain. I lunged for her and said, "Watch out!" Before I knew it, Everything went black.

Chapter Two

Struggling to open my heavy eyelids and take in the bright light, all I heard first was an incessant, shrill beep all around me. beep...beep...beep. It seemed like it had been going on forever and yet wasn't getting old anytime soon. My eyes finally adjusted, and as they darted across my surroundings, I realized with a start that I was at a hospital!

The sound of rushing steps reached my ears before the little girl exclaimed excitedly. "She's awake." repeatedly. Turning toward the door, I saw many faces trying to peer within. Suddenly finding clarity in the situation and heavily aware of everyone around me, I quickly asked "What happened?"

"It's okay, Ms. Fallon." said the doctor, offering me a kind smile as he pointed at the child in the corner of the room. I noticed his eyes brightening with hope as he added. "Unfortunately, You saved this little one's life before taking quite a fall." He adjusted his glasses and continued with optimism in his voice. "I'm sorry, that was very inappropriate of me, I'm Dr. Phil, however, there's still a chance of us getting you home early and I'm here to help make that happen."

So, I wasn't dreaming? It was 100% real as I shifted my focus from Dr. Phil's in this situation.

How is all this unfortunate? It's amazing how brave I was.! It's quite lucky I was able to turn things around –not many would be able to do so.

The doctor quickly checked his clipboard and energetically replied. "I'll be back in no time Ms. Fallon, I'll go see what else I can do for you!" His energy was infectious as he stepped out of the room after my response and quickly turned around the sharp corner.

With an apprehensive gaze, I looked at the little girl slowly making her way over to me and I smiled widely at her saying “Hey.”

'Hi.' She graciously smiled in return as I happily asked “What's your name?”

“Isabella.” She said in a shyly whisper.

.

With a gentle touch to the bridge of her nose, I introduced myself as Clarissa with admiration. “How’s your other little friend doing?” I said softly, moving my hand gently over the toy in her arms.

Isabella easily fell into an embrace with me and smiled, expressing “We are fine, thank you for saving our lives.”

I wrapped my arms around her, reaffirming “You’re welcome, but you should never risk going outside again on your own without letting someone know. I'm sure your parents or another relatives was worried about you.”

Looking into her eyes, I could see the shame Isabella was already feeling when she held her head down saying “I know, Elliot was worried about me.”

That name seemed so familiar - have I heard it before? “Elliot?” I couldn't stop thinking about that name. Something was pulling me towards it, but I just couldn't figure out why.

She snuggled closer to me with a hint of a smile creeping across her face. “My brother looks out for me most of the time.”

“Have you thought about calling him?” If there's anything I know for certain, it's that family will always be there no matter what, and Isabella and her brother seemed to be the perfect example of that. But still... Does he even know? She wouldn't be here right now if she hadn't figured things out on her own.

I smiled reassuringly at her as I extended my pinky finger up. “Let's make a promise, You won't go wandering off without letting your brother know.”

“I promise.” she said cheerily while her feet bounced from side to side eagerly. “I won't go wandering off on my own anymore.” Isabella grins toothily and links her little finger to mine. “You should come to our tea party when you're feeling better. It's not much, but I hope it makes up for what I did.”

I was about to respond when a voice interrupted me.

“Isabella.” Those words come from a familiar, rough, voice. “She can't.”

When I looked up, I saw that his coat was concealing his face. His name, in calligraphy, is written on the cuff of his arm. I feel, for some inexplicable reason, like I already know him.

Isabella pleaded. “But Elliot, please.”

“No. Let's go “. Elliot reached out and clasped her tiny hand in his.

Isabella jerked away from his grasp. “Elliot, but she was the one who ended up saving my life. The least we can do is give her a get-well card, right?” Softly, Isabella said.

“I will think about it, buttercup. Let's get you home.” Isabella reached out and grabbed at his open palm.

When Isabella told him I was the one who had saved her life, I saw the slightest twitch coming from him.

And with that “Goodbye Clarissa, I’m hoping you recover quickly!” Waving her little hand, she left the room, leaving Elliot there watching my every move.

Silently, I watched Elliot place his palm on the doorknob and say: “I was wrong about... Until then.” His pale, emerald eyes never took their gaze off of me.

As I sat there, befuddled, wondering what that was supposed to mean. To be honest, He ought to thank me. I murmured to myself and folded my arms. All I got back was: “I was wrong; until then.”

I can't believe this jerk.

“Clarissa!” Dekvia squished me as soon as she walked sprinted into the room.

When I finally managed to break free of her grip, I said: “Dek, You’re squeezing me too tight.”

“I should have followed my instincts. This wouldn’t have happened if I called a taxi for you and—” She began shifting back and forth. Before she could continue, I cut her off.

“Let me explain why I did it, but first please sit down.”

“Okay, tell me.” Dekvia said, taking a seat in a large recliner chair.

When I tell you, I was so glad she sat down, I wanted to do a little dance. When people pace back and forth, it makes me nervous. “Promise me you won’t go crazy when I tell you this.” I looked her square in the eye.

“You must have hit your head because I never freak out about anything.” Dekvia pats my leg while I just blankly glance at her.

“Remember the last time I told you I lost the tires on your car and you flipped out.” I rolled my eyes.

“I would freak out about something like that. That is my baby.” She snorted.

“I didn't know that you could push a brand-new metal car out.” I arched an eyebrow at her.

Devika rolled her eyes and asked. “Where does that mouth come from?”

I beamed. “I learned from the best; she’s sitting right next to me.”

“I'll let you slide off this one. So, tell me more about this incident and I promise I won't go crazy.” She chuckled at me.

“Okay.” A deep breath of anxiety entered my system as I began. “I was on 413 Hills Road when I saw this little child-.”

“Why don't you let me call you a cab instead of wandering around the wrong side of town?” The way Dekvia spoke was serious.

“I mean I di—” I started to say something, but she cut me off. “Clarissa, what the hell were you thinking?” Dekvia said to me.

I let out a frustrated sigh. “Could you kindly give me a moment to finish?” This Is why I told her. “Don't freak out.” I was expecting her to panic at this point. No matter how many promises they make, nothing will be able to calm down your parents and friends.

With a sigh, Dekvia nods her head for me to continue.

“As I said, I don’t remember what happened before, there was this little girl who was being picked on by a group of preteens. One of them took her doll and threw it into the road. Even though there was a truck that couldn't be stopped, she wasn't paying attention to where she was heading. And I felt like she didn't deserve that because everyone was just standing there, not helping. So I did what I thought was best and pushed her out of the road.” As I gazed at my best friend, I gulped.

“I am so proud of you.” With a warm grin on her face, she hugged me tenderly.

“I'm glad you're not angry, Dek.” I said as I felt like a gentle peck on the forehead. I felt really good after telling her that. Even if I hadn't told her, I would have felt bad about lying to her.

“Do you remember anything that happened afterward?” Dekivia mentioned before the doctor came back glancing at the clipboard once again.

Now that I think about it, I don't remember a single thing. It must have been a crazy night, whatever happened. I saved someone's life.

“Ms.Fallon?” Dr.Phill said.

“Yes?” I felt a sharp pain in my neck. *I might need to look that up when I get home from the doctor. As of right now, I have no interest in doing any tests.*

“It was fate that you weren't hurt, so you are too free to go... You're going to feel some pain, particularly in your left thigh, but Ibuprofen should help.”

“Thank you, doc.” I gave him a friendly smile.

“Well, It's safe to say that we won't be sharing this news with our dads.” Dekivia says this as she reads her text messages. “Are you sure you are feeling okay? There's always the option of going back home?”

“No, I'm fine. I'd rather not cause my father any excessive worry right now.” I smiled at Dekivia. “And besides, you can't go on a vacation without getting injured at some point, can you?” Slowly creeping my way off the bed, I sat up.

With all earnestness, Doctor Phil budes himself into our conversation. “If I may have a moment with you, Ms. Fallon...”

“I'm going to get the paperwork and stuff to sign you out.” Devika says as I return my eyes to her. She lightly touched my shoulder before heading out the door.

What on earth could he want now? He just told me I was fine.

“As you know, I told you you'd be fine.” When Dr.Phil made a point, I nodded in approval.

“Ms.Fallon, I was wondering if you get migraines often and if you've had any injuries in the last two years.” He glanced up from his notepad for an instant and studied me.

The room filled with an eerie silence after Dr. Phil asked his question. From across the room, the pulse monitor was pounding furiously.“At least four or five times a week.” I deliberated over my response.

His gaze lingered on me as if he was saddened by my sudden reactions. He quickly glanced away and flipped through his notepad, only for a moment before returning his attention to me. "I'm so sorry if I triggered something," he said before gathering up the courage to ask me more questions. "Do you have any relatives who have suffered from regular headaches?"

After giving him a brief sideway glance, I looked up at him and said softly. "Yes, sir, my mother did." Trying my best to gather myself together, I gave him an affirmative response and waited for his next question nervously.

Soon, he moved on by responding with a nod, and asked me "Where is your mother right now?"

Taking a deep breath I whispered sadly "She passed away three years ago... from cancer of the brain." I said when Dr. Phil automatically knew the word that would come out of my mouth next – it was almost as if he could feel my pain in every syllable of that phrase. He nodded gently and continued writing on his notepad in an effort not to make this situation any harder than it already was. All I could do was sit there in complete stillness while fighting back tears – willing myself to stay strong despite all odds.

I was completely taken aback when Dr. Phil brought up my mom. Talking about her always fills me with a crushing sense of sadness, because I never got the chance to ask all the questions that have been haunting me for so long. "I hate to ask but, Dr. Phil, why are you bringing this up?"

As my vision began to blur, I could barely listen as Dr. Phil spoke. He showed me a photo of my brain while explaining “ It seems like your migraines were likely handed down in your mom's DNA.” And then he pointed to the left side of his neck while telling me “Apparently, there’s good and bad news in this situation. There is some type of injection that has been inserted into your neck, which might causing you to have blackout episodes, and we had no clue where it came from or what it was doing there. However, this unknown creation is killing the brain tumor you have which is good. And on top of all this nonsense, the bad news is, your rate is very low and you will not be able to make it because of this injection. On certain days your memory will be slipping away at an alarming rate with this condition, but some of memory will come back unexpectedly.” He finally ended up saying to me.

My mom used to tell me that whenever I encountered tough situations like this, I should remember to keep faith in myself and stay positive no matter what. It's really hard to take her advice sometimes, but I know deep down she would want me to try to stay optimistic in moments like these.

My heart sank as soon as I heard the news: someone injected me with an unknown substance and now being filled with this kind of news is scary, if my chances of dying are that low I wouldn't be very scared. Dr. Phil apologized sincerely when he told me “There may be side effects and that your vitals were fine, but the estimate could be a month or less. We can still run tests on you to see what’s going on.”

All I could think about was my time running out-- if it was spreading that fast, then am I doomed? There was no room for hope anymore. Taking biopsy tests didn't seem important anymore; all I could focus on was the frightening reality in front of me. My voice caught in my throat as I said.“No, it's fine. Let's just take care of what matters to me now. which is spending time with the people I love.”

His jaw dropped and he sputtered for a moment before saying, “This is serious, please don't hesitate to contact me if you need anything. I'm hoping that the drug will vanish quickly and we can get started on your treatment.” He handed me his business card before leaving.

I closed my eyes and exhaled heavily; all I could think was 'A couple of weeks...' It pains me to even consider who would do this to me, and why they would want to erase any recollection of what happened.

Subconsciously, I'm glad Dekvia didn't hear any of this, I couldn't bear seeing the disappointment on her face if she knew what happened. But if there's one thing that I can take away, it's certainly not going to ruin Dekvia's fun this summer. Even though it isn't the outcome that I had hoped for, there's nothing else left for me to do but enjoy our wonderful vacation while it lasts.

Chapter Three

The past couple of days had clouded my memory. As far as I can remember, I was in the hospital speaking with Isabella, Dekvia, and Doctor Phil before eventually leaving – even after a restless night before, everything was foggy.

Dekvia noticed my absent-mindedness and asked, “You don't remember a single thing from that night, do you?”.

A wave of embarrassment passed over me as I shook my head no and Dekvia grew oddly quiet. Sitting up a bit straighter, I questioned “Do you know something? You can tell me, it might jog my memory.”

After inhaling deeply and fiddling her fingertips around, Dekvia confided in me “I've been holding onto a secret and didn't think it would stay hidden this long“. She proceeded to lower her voice until it became barely audible. “I've been talking to someone on the same street you had the accident on.“

Dekvia usually becomes anxious when she plays with her fingernails since maintaining secrets and lying were not part of her personality." I asked her casually to calm her down. Who is he?“

Before Dekvia even said his name, it showed on her face; turning red from embarrassment and surprise at my surprisingly astute deduction. Dekvia mumbled “Braden.“ Trying to hide behind the hair covering part of her face, she continued voicing out. “The moment I heard you yell watch out! My first thought was to call Braden.“

“Watch out.” I whispered sternly, as a sudden flashback hit me.

My first flashback from Two days ago

I clenched my jaw as I turned to find a small girl in the center of the road. It was clear that no one was going to help.

“I swear, Clarissa.” came Dekvia's voice on the other line of the phone. Immediately I could feel my feet glued to the ground with terror for what was about to come. But that didn't hold me back from saving the little girl who was next in line for this disaster.

I lunged towards her and grasped her tightly as we both fell to the ground three times scraping against its unforgiving surface each time. To distract myself from the burning pain emanating from my skin I ran my fingers through her hair while trying my best to speak softly and reassuringly. “It's okay honey, you can open your eyes now. Are you hurt?”.

As the little girl clutched onto her doll tightly, she slowly nodded her head before screaming out for help appallingly loud. The hands of fate mercifully answered the screams soon after with voices calling out in unison: “ISABELLA!”

Grief and despair flooded Isabella's face as she clutched onto Elliot. “Please, Elliot.” she begged through her tears. “We have to save her. You know the trick—the one you always do at home! Help her!”

My heart sank as I witnessed Elliot carefully examining Isabella for injuries. Was he looking for any signs of harm? We both knew there was only one way he could help right now; however, his expression was ridden with guilt as he looked over at me.

“SAVE HER, I’M FINE!” Isabella shouted desperately from beside him before she continued to sniffle and wipe away her tears. It almost seemed like my knowledge and experience weren't enough—that the bond between them overshadowed it all.

Resting in a puddle of pain and humiliation, I watched Elliot numbly for a few moments before everything was trying to fade away into blackness.

Suddenly, yet another voice shouted out in alarm. “Call 911 NOW, babe!” A tall stranger raced towards me, carrying his phone, and started searching for any injuries then he looked around my neck area with an almost impulsive mannerism. “What happened to her neck?” His voice trembled with fear that I had used the same instrument again; guilt followed by wordlessness filled both of our faces when the stranger realized that this was solely due to the negligence had caused this hasty action--I knew it couldn't be reversed even if I wish it so badly right now.

Just then, the stranger shot a hard glare toward Elliot before resuming his attention back toward me. “Stay with me, Clarissa. If you don't live, Devika would most likely murder both of us.”

My eyes drooped with exhaustion as I watched Elliot walk away, leaving me on the chilly pavement.

End of Flashback

The pieces of the puzzle began to click into place and I released a sharp gasp. Dr. Phil was right, I realized – there were times when my brain pulsed with pain and my focus dispersed easily, but then suddenly it would be clear again, enabling me to recall memories.

The sound of Dekvia shaking me out of my trance caught me unexpectedly, and when she asked “Are you okay?”

A mixture of emotions swept through me. “That evening, I first met Elliott and that tall dude by my side is Braden?” My trembling voice uttered in response to her interrogative question. Her eyes opened wide in surprise just before she fell into a state of distressful tears – knowing exactly who those figures were.

During her breakdown, I silently slid off the embankment and embraced her only to discover the true reason behind her sorrowful state; it was not because of the past itself but because Dekvia felt like she almost lost me on that fateful day. Soaking in the emotion surrounding us, realization washed over me – *if this had such an effect on Dekvia, what would she do when I give her the devastating news?*

I could feel an immense weight being lifted off of my shoulders; though I am known to be an emotional person, seeing others in distress hurts me more than anything. Holding Dekvia close while stroking her shoulder comfortingly, I tried to assure her: “It’s okay, I’m here”.

“Oh Clarissa.” she replied miserably. “You’ve done it again.” My brows furrowed in contemplation as understanding eluded me.

I furrowed my brows in confusion. “Did what?” While I was still shaken and confused, my brows furrowed further in thought. “What did I do?”

“Do you recall having another attack last night? You haven’t had one of those in a while.” Dekvia spoke in a near-shattered tone.

“I did?” I gaped at her, baffled by the fact that I couldn't remember it.

Nodding with an agreement, Dekvia proceeded to excuse herself to clean up. “I need to freshen up because you made me cry, but I won't be long. Meet me at the car when you're ready; let me take care of the meal here.” And with that, she handed me her card before retreating to the restroom.

At that moment a young male server wearing a black shirt approached and said respectfully. “Ma'am, here is your bill.” As he handed over the payment terminal, his gaze bore directly into mine and heat crept into my cheeks as he continued with. “I understand this isn't appropriate for me to say but you are simply beautiful.”

My heart warmed when he showed me kindness. I was surprised but very grateful. Compliments don't happen often, so his gesture was particularly meaningful to me. When I felt a blush across my cheeks, I swiftly tried to change the conversation by saying “Thank you for the bill.”

“It's a part of my job. Are you new in town, I'll love to show you around.” He suggested as he tore the receipt off the machine and handed it to me.

I confirmed that “I'll only be in the area for a month. I would take that offer, though.” I glanced at the name tag that says, Adam. “I'm sure you wouldn't have a pen on you, do you?”

Adam smirked and patted his uniform before pulling out a blue pen. I don't have a pen.” Soon after he handed me a ballpoint and began chuckling, I took it. “My name is Adam.”

“Clarissa.” I wrote down my phone number and handed it to him. “That's a shame, Adam. I'm afraid I'll have to turn down your offer.” I slung my bag over my shoulder and got up to leave with a smile.

“I'll text you.” Before Adam saw me going out the door, he held up the paper.

My heart was pounding. It felt like my face was on fire when I walked out of the building. That's when I remembered Dekvia's warning that another attack might come. This wasn't surprising, it usually happened when somebody triggered one of my episodes.

Over the last couple of days, I'd been feeling strange - constant headaches and intermittent stabbing sensations that have become so normal for me that I didn't even bother to look up what could be causing them.

Who knew being in my thoughts would make the walk a little faster?

I saw Devika's car park on the side waiting for me. “What took you so long?” “As soon as I got inside, she said, cranking up her car.

“Pardon me for having to walk from the restaurant! You parked so far; it felt like a 2-mile walk.” I puffed.

“Anyway, I have an emergency.” she said as she began speeding across the parking lot and onto the main road.

Letting my thoughts distract me, I hurriedly reached for the seatbelt to get into the car and securely fasten myself in - but it wouldn't budge. After jerking hard on the buckle multiple times, it finally clicked into place. Clutching onto the "oh sh*t handle." I took a deep breath and asked "What exactly are we dealing with here?"

"I was talking to Braden through FaceTime a few minutes ago." she started to explain sheepishly. "and made a move because I wanted him to make one too! Instead, he freaked out." She went off on another tangent once again. Dekvia's voice shook as she recounted her story. "He was having a panic attack and all I could say was oh. Then, I quickly tried to suggest he should follow my breathing like in the movies, but then I ended up saying, erm, the cow jumped over the moon last night."

I couldn't help myself and let out a loud laugh.

Dekvia smacked me for laughing before continuing. "After realizing how ridiculous what I said sounded, he was able to get himself together so I hung up on him. Thankfully he's okay now."

"I'm glad he's ok." I said while wiping away tears from my eyes due to laughing so much.

"So you're saying the emergency was caused by embarrassment?" I said as I processed everything she just said.

"Yeah, pretty much." She shrugged her shoulders with relief.

I seriously don't know what to do about her. "We could've gotten into a major car accident if you hadn't slammed on the brakes", I said, repositioning myself in my seat.

“I’m an excellent driver; no need to be so dramatic.” Dekvia retorted and rolled her eyes.

“Yeah right.” I mumbled under my breath as I grabbed a drink from my bag.

“You sure did take a long time in the restaurant.” Devika pointed out shortly after, shifting lanes.

“I was giving, the waiter. Adam, my number.” I stated nonchalantly, right before she applied pressure to the brakes again—rattling us around long enough for my Sprite to spill everywhere. The cars behind us honked their discontentment too as I exclaimed “What the hell, Dekivia?!”

Her loud shriek was pretty unexpected. “He has your number?!” Digging around in her armrest department, she handed me some napkins to dry up with.

My tone was flat when I responded: “Yes he does.” With the thin napkins, I managed to wipe down most of me despite Dekivia’s efforts at destroying me in that car today.

She seemed ecstatic with this information: “That sounds exciting; tell me more.”

“He only wanted to give me a tour of town.” The napkins weren’t good at drying my clothes off; I was still wiping them with them as Devika spoke: “First date, eh?.” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively while stopping at a red light.

Knowing if I brought up Adam again, We might eventually get in an accident, I made sure to change the subject. “Enough about me; I want to meet Braden.” I smile at her. “I wanna meet the guy that saved me.”

Dekvia turned to face me and started laughing uncontrollably. “I don't want to see Braden after my embarrassment.

“How long have you known Braden?” I casually asked.

“That's a long story, but four months have passed. For us to continue talking, there was a lot of sneaking and snooping around.

“What?!” I remarked as I continued to comprehend what she had just said. “And you're finally telling me about it?”

“Yes, I didn't think I'd last this long.” she said. She murmured. “But I'm glad you saved that little girl's life the other day. I'm not sure if you can meet him, but there have been changes since your accident.

I gave her a puzzled look. “What do you mean?” *What kind of changes is she talking about?*

“After your accident, The owner, Elliot, shut down that whole side of town.” Dekvia spoke.

How can he do that? He's not the mayor of the town; he can't be. He seems like the type not to care about anything or anyone. That is my opinion; he sure as hell didn't care about me.

“It's a little confusing since Elliot is well-known in this town because of his father. When I was down here about four months ago, Jessie told me he came back claiming and running that part of town. Rumors say his father brought half of the town from the Mayor. It's the town where nobody is given enough thought or care. Half of the homeless and unemployed people go there. After Elliot claimed that town, it was renamed Kellville. Braden is from Kellville.”

I find it surprising that someone like Braden is friends with Elliot. Although I have no idea what he is doing, I wouldn't hold it against him if he were to keep something from him.

“Let's go; I have to get a couple of things. I'll tell you more about it in the store.” Dekvia says before getting out of the car.

* * *

Choking in a matter of embarrassment, I fumbled with the three large boxes piled onto me. My small frame was shuddering from the extensive weight of the cargo - much more than anticipated.

With measured steps, I struggled towards Dekvia's car, praying that whatever Braden had said to her during his call hadn't discouraged her from assisting me. My hopes were shattered as she abruptly abandoned me at the storefront door before heading out. All that was left for me now was to face this embarrassing situation alone.

I heard Dekvia and another voice I never heard before as I nervously opened the front door of the store, using my weight to keep the boxes in place.

There she is.

I puffed as I went over there, only to trip on my shoelaces. When I saw that Dekvia was hit by both boxes, two tall figures standing next to me were also hit. *Universe, you failed me big time.* “Are you alright?!” I nervously stammer before being startled by Devika's ear-piercing shriek for Braden. I feel the tips of my ears turn the color of hot chili pepper.

“BRADEN, Help me! Just don't stand there.” Devika shrieked.

That's what she gets for leaving me with all these boxes.

I glance over the boxes to see the legendary Braden, who saved my life. It becomes crystal clear why Devika was so smitten– he was tall and strong-looking with striking ginger hair and brown eyes that captured everyone's attention in an instant.

As I looked upon the figure standing next to me, I was overcome with a strong wave of déjà vu. He had a black long trench coat, one that seemed familiar yet impossible to put a name to. I felt my breath stop in my throat as his presence overpowered mine.

It wasn't until he shoved the box abruptly into my arms that it caused questions to my thoughts.

Wait? If that is Braden, then who is standing next to me? I slowly faced the tall guy carefully, only for him to forcefully shove the box into my arms.

Causing me to lurch back, I scoffed at him. Guys like him are always a red flag, but luckily I'm being nice today and rather not deal with this kind of behavior. Otherwise, I would have gone off on him in an instant.

As I struggled to reach out and shake Braden's hand with one hand, I glanced at Dekvia and noticed she was flushing. "Hi, Braden." I said as we exchanged handshakes.

"Hey, Clarissa, How are you feeling? It's our second time meeting. I'm not sure if you remember me." He asked courteously.

I nodded approvingly at his composed nature - after all, he did save my life recently. "I remember parts of you. I'm doing okay, but I wanted to thank you for what you did the other night." I replied gratefully.

He looked pleased that I remembered him and smiled back at me. "I'm glad you are okay, you had some of us worried." Braden says as he ran his hand across the back of his neck casually before turning towards the tall and mysterious figure standing next to me in recognition. "Elliot? What brings you here? You don't usually come out so much." he noted warmly, referring to my companion with a friendly familiarity only a second-time acquaintance would have with someone else they barely know like myself.

"Elliot?" I thought to myself.

My mind started piecing together memories of meeting Elliot at the hospital before they gradually blurred away into obscurity as if struggling against my growing confusion. I wasn't quite sure what's it bout him nor what I'd done for him, but there was one thing that was clear in my mind. The one question that kept replaying in my mind was: did he deserve my consideration at the time? Unfortunately, it looks like this foggy head is here to stay for now and possibly worse over time - hopefully not though!

Elliot remained expressionless and impassive as he eyed Dekvia and Braden before finally turning his attention to me. He uttered in a frigid tone. "I had to visit the mayor. I didn't expect you to be out here."

I shivered inwardly, even though Devika and I were standing some distance away from this tense exchange between Elliot and Braden.

Should I do something? I really hate awkward moments.

Desperate to lighten the mood, I juggled my package momentarily before offering him a nervous smile and introducing myself. "Hi! You're Isabella's brother, if I remember correctly? My name is Clarissa." As soon as I finished uttering these words, I extended my palm out for Elliot to shake my hand - only for him to overlook it without response and just stared at me curiously. Feeling increasingly uncomfortable and awkward, I looked around aimlessly and noticed Braden glanced at me and back at Elliot and said "El? Shake her hand or something, it's the least you can do after all what happens."

Elliot's reaction was dismissive as he remarked. "I don't like people."

I felt awkward as I lowered my hand back to my side. It was clear that Elliot was far from rude.

“This will be discussed later.” he said swiftly toward Braden, before pointing to Dekvia and myself. He then abruptly walked away, bumping into my shoulder and nearly making me drop the box once more.

“He's such a jerk.” I whispered.

“Keep your words to yourself.” Elliot gave me a stern look before walking away into the crowd.

There was no way he could have heard my quiet words; It must have been his sharp hearing. Nonetheless, I kept quiet while I watched him disappear.

“I'm sorry about him.” Braden sighed as he helped Dekvia and me load the boxes into the car.

“It's not a big deal.” I calmly responded. However, my heart was telling me otherwise. It's a big deal, no matter what, you always respect others especially when you're talking to women. Someone really should remind Elliott about his manners.

Braden, on the other hand, understood this concept and acted accordingly saying “May I borrow Dekvia for a moment?” he inquired.

With a slight smile, I made sure Braden was aware of the situation by saying “Be sure to treat her well; I'm keeping my eye on you.”

He glanced back at Dekvia, astonished that I knew about their relationship.

“Of course, she does.” Dekvia questioned. “Wait? Do you think you'll make it home? It's getting late.”

I looked down at my Apple Watch. "It's okay; I'll catch a taxi, so I'll be fine."

However, she didn't like the answer I gave her. Dekvia put forth a proposition that I join her and Braden for the evening, so as to be safe. Despite my inclination to look after myself, I took my bag from the car.

"It's getting late. I don't think you should take a taxi home." Braden offered me a ride home after Dekvia suggested I can head back with them. Gently declining his suggestion, I shut the car door and was met by questioning eyes. After a brief exchange between Braden and Dekvia, she assured me that I should come along with them and to settle any dispute, she'll even drive.

"That's even worse, Dekvia." I sighed with agreement in the end as I got into the backseat of the car.

"I know that's right." Braden glanced over at Dekvia before putting his seatbelt on.

"Let's get this show on the road." With a determined acceleration and a scream of joy from Dekvia's lips, we began our journey towards our destination.

"So." I asked cheerfully. "where are we headed?"

Dekvia shot me a cheerful glance in my direction and those words were "Kellville."

Chapter Four

My heart dropped down my stomach as I found out that Braden has been keeping secrets from his family. It seemed his story was quite sad, but I had faith that things were going to be better soon. Dekvia has been helping him get clothing so he can visit her town of Gregville more. Besides that, Braden mentioned he had a safe environment, an apartment, in Gregville where he could have all the snacks and lights he wanted.

As I got out of the car, I saw nothing but trees around us, which made me slightly anxious.

“Let's go.” Dekvia said as she pulled something out of the trunk.

“You guys meet out here?” I delicately shut the door, afraid wild creatures could come out if I slammed it too hard.

With that Braden chuckled and, added “Yeah, we have to get there someday.” As Dekvia and him continued searching, Braden said.

Someday?!

“Here.” Dekvia flung a leather jacket my way, but I couldn't catch it. “What am I supposed to do with this?” I grabbed it off the ground and dusted it off.

“Put it on so we can go.” They both said this while turning on the flashlight.

I rolled my eyes at how demanding both of them were. It makes sense why they get along so well. They are exactly alike.

“Okay, okay.” I surrender my hands. “Let's go.” I remarked as I put on my jacket. I switch on my flashlight and follow them.

“Stay right beside us.” Dekvia whispered as I nodded my head towards them.

As we began going into the woods, I felt a chilly breeze strike my face. My nose is filled with the smell of moist, soggy moss and filth. I once heard that if you smell anything in the woods, it means the beginning of new life. It doesn't feel like a new life right now. Everywhere I turned, there was the sound of owls and birds chirping. I had goosebumps on my arms as I heard something in the bushes behind me. I kept repeating. “*Don't turn around; that's how you get killed, just like in the movies.*” Why did I choose to be in the back? I could be in the middle.

“Guys, do you hear that?” I murmured.

They turned around and glared at me with their flashlights. They didn't move as they hear the sound coming from behind the bushes. Braden briefly moves past me and shines the light in that direction.

“HEY! STOP RIGHT THERE! As they shined the light in his face, a voice shouted.

“IT'S SECURITY.”

“Shit, we've got to get going.” Braden whispered.

I knew this was a bad idea. “You should tag along.” I mocked Dekvia as we leaped over a branch.

“This is not the time to criticize me right now!” Dekvia shouted at me.

I quickly ran through the woods, my five-foot-frame dwarfing me as I darted away from the security guards. I didn't dare to turn around; I knew that was a sure way of being caught. As I threaded through the muddy puddles and jumped over fallen tree limbs, my phone suddenly stopped working. “Oh no, Please don't do this to me right now.”

Despite how dark it was outside, navigating these woods with no light seemed nearly impossible—especially when all I wanted to do was get out of there! To my surprise, just as I heard several men start shouting in the distance “Where are they?!”

I quickly scanned the dark landscape, then crouched behind a large rock when I heard a branch snap nearby. Holding my breath, I waited in tense silence until their voices faded away. Feeling a sharp pain came through my head, I saw a dim street light appeared up ahead. Tired but elated, I ran towards it without fail, dodging branches and boulders in my path while looking for Dekvia and Braden on the way. Needless to say, this escape and looking for them wasn't easy—but at least now there's a glimmer of light at the end of the path.

As I walked down the empty street that was filled with dull flickering lights, I had an uneasy feeling. I heard rumors about this area and knew that it wasn't particularly safe, thanks to Braden and Dekvia. My arm bristled with goosebumps as a cold gust of air swept past me and I increased my pace.

I felt something that made me prick up - a presence behind me. But before I could turn to see what it was, I heard voices approaching from the opposite direction - people seated on a park bench nearby. Taking advantage of this distraction, I hastened over, trying not to draw attention to myself but ready to react if necessary. Just when I

thought safety was within reach, the grip of an unknown assailant encircled my waist and their hand smothered my mouth - fear gripped my body as time came to almost a standstill. As I quickly reached into my pocket, releasing my switchblade. In one swift motion, I turned to the perpetrator and brandished my knife in their side.

Upon realizing my predator was a man, I instinctively took action. Acting quickly, I delivered a powerful kick to his shin while he was still off guard. As he doubled over in pain, I leapt atop him and began pummeling his face with my fists. However, despite my efforts, it wasn't long before he had me clinched firmly under his control.

His voice exuded indignation when he exclaimed "It's you again! I thought I made it clear the first time yet here you are again". His minty green eyes bore into mine and his fingers gently prodded at the side of my face. Holding my gaze steadily with one hand, the other grabbed my chin lightly and tilted it up slightly. As he leaned closer to me, time seemed to slow down and the only sound I could hear was my pounding heart--*could it be because of how close we were?* The further away fear crept from me until what remained was an odd sense of comfort in warmth radiating off of him as our faces merely inches apart. *As I take a closer look and recognize the familiar hoodie.*

Elliot?

All I wanted was to be set free from his grip, but then his companion's sharp voice interrupted me when I was wiggling my hips underneath him. "As much as I love seeing you struggle, Are you done?" he asked.

"Done with what?" I asked nervously, feeling my face flush.

“With this..“ he replied, casting a stern glance down at me. “We both know how it's going to end, Ari. You're failing trying to set yourself free underneath me.“ He spoke softly into my ear.

When he called me 'Ari', I realized that he clearly did not know my name and that bothered me deeply. But still despite myself I felt my heart flutter when he said it. “My name is Clarissa.“ I muttered quietly.

“Whether you like it or not, Clarissa, I'll be calling you Ari.“ His sudden grimace revealed blood dripping from his side and onto me - had I caused this? Noticing my panicked expression, he spoke wearily through gritted teeth “So, what's your plan here,are you trying to kill me? You have a long way to go from there.“

I nervously asked while struggling to help him up. “Are you alright?” Before guiding him back over to the bench where I was heading in the first place, we avoided eye contact throughout our exchange until he broke the silence.

“You're certainly capable, for a female.“ he said, lifting his shirt up . “Let me just tell you that I'm only allowing you to help because of my wound that's been bothering me since earlier. Please don't ask questions, just get the first aid kit out of my bag.“

I quickly noticed the tattoos on his body, but not a single one across his face. His left eyebrow was slit and his soft pink lips bruised; once again, it was clear he had remarkable features. “I'm sorry for attacking you at such a late hour, I thought you were someone else. First thing first, let me take a good look at your nose before I take care of your wound.“ I smiled softly as I reached for the mini first-aid kit and started tending to his injury before moving onto the next.

“What are you going to do? Hit it again?” He sarcastically chuckled.

Rolling my eyes jokingly, I replied soothingly. “If that's what you want.” After finding the right ointment for his injury, I began applying it cautiously but paused when he suddenly shouted “Don't!”

I chose to ignore his unexpected outrage. He groaned as I applied a small amount of ointment to his wound. “What are you doing here?” He inquired, his stern tone obvious, while my eyes roved around the vast forest.

“I was with Braden and Dekvia when we ran through the woods.” I explained honestly; then hesitantly asked. “What are you doing out here?”

A scoff shook his chest before he spoke. He had assumed anger rather than apprehension at my presence. “You should worry about yourself—you shouldn't be here.”

I rolled my eyes at his response and replied sarcastically. “Look at you finally being a sweetheart.” With that said I finished packing up everything before asking another question “How's Isabella doing?”

A storm spread across his face until he spoke. Running words together like fire he said solemnly. “I thought I told you not to ask questions especially about her; we'll be alright for as long as her name is never mentioned out of your mouth again”.

I stifled an eye roll as I replied to him. “You said don't ask questions, not about her. Be more specific next time.”

For a while, neither of us spoke. Did he always have this attitude? I had only seen him being kind to Isabella one time. When it came to me, it seemed like he despised me completely. However, In the silence that followed his question with “Why did you save Isabella?” He turned and faced me; confusion evident in my expression.

“What do you mean?” I asked skeptically, crossing arms across my chest in anticipation of a reply.

He proceeded with a new demand, despite having just warned against such inquiries moments before. “Don’t worry about it.” His voice was tinged with admonishment as he grabbed his bag back from me and uttered “Forget it.”.

I took a deep breath, thinking about what had happened. “Isabella didn't deserve it. Part of me felt like I already knew her that day; she deserved the chance to continue living her life.” There was a slight pause before I continued on in a quiet tone. “Life can be short, but it wasn’t the time for hers’ to end. I’m not everyone else; I believe that everyone deserves a chance.” I finished with confidence, still looking into those refreshingly light green eyes .

I glanced at Elliot softly, noticing he was deep in thought. We remained silent for a while until I inquired. “Do you often act so quietly and mysteriously around people?”

He darted his eyes toward me. “Maybe.” he said nonchalantly. “But it's nothing to be concerned about. I'm usually like this at times. It doesn't bother me anymore, so I am totally fine with being in my own crazy little world.”

I found myself reflecting on the things that I had been through, and how I had handled them alone. It wasn't easy, but recognizing my own strength gave me a sense of peace.

However this situation I'm dealing with might be different. "It can be difficult to take charge of the problems life throws at us." I told Elliot. "Sometimes, the only person we have for support is ourselves — having a few people in our background can be the cure to problems, but we just have to see for ourselves and accept it." I shivered lightly as I felt a cool breeze hit my skin.

"You're right about that." He rose from the bench and motioned for me to join him.

"Come on; let's go."

I mustered up the courage to follow him, feeling my heart beating a little faster than usual.

Chapter Five

My father always cautioned against going out with strangers , but I was entranced by Elliot.

Midway throughout our journey I experienced pain from around my neck and lower abdomen. When Elliot noticed me rubbing at my nape, Elliot gave a quizzical look before saying,“What's wrong?”

Weakly, I told him “My neck has been aching lately since I left the hospital.”

Elliot studied it more closely as like he saw this before,he rolled his eyes at me“You don't hear me complaining about my nose; you'll be OK.” He says as he sees his truck parked on the side of the road.

I believe my situation is different compared to yours, dimwit.

“Come on now, it's getting colder outside.” He took huge steps and made his way to open his door from the inside and said “Give me a second, I have to open your side of the door, I’ve been meaning to get it fixed.”

I heard a sharp clang coming from the ground.It was my knife! When I bent down to pick it up, an unexpected force came from the passenger side.Just within seconds, A sudden memory of being thrown off balance after his door swung open leading me to hit the ground hard came flooding back to me. It was from two days ago, the night I saved Isabella. Although I didn't get a good view of what had happened, I could tell it wasn't good.

“Oof.” I groaned out loud as he lifted his head to see me lying there.

“Did I hit you with my door?” He asked.

“No, it hit me all by itself.” With one hand rubbing my head in pain, I replied sternly.

He snorted at my answer and told me “What are you waiting for, get in the truck.”

This guy is seriously going to be the death of me; literally! Rolling my eyes at his audacity, I grabbed my knife before jumping in and shutting the door behind me. He drove us off with the engine roaring and heat blasting out the vents.

After riding for some time in silence, trying to put a few pieces together from my memory, but struggling. I only managed to remember seeing Elliot in the house and standing close behind me.

Feeling my frustration rise, I started beating him lightly on his shoulder whilst venting out loud. “IT WAS YOU! Why are you acting like nothing's wrong?!” Exhaling slowly in an attempt to calm down once more, I stopped hitting him but kept mumbling under my breath for a few moments longer until he spoke words to me.

Elliot stared at me in surprise as I wasn't supposed to recall bits and pieces of what had happened, only to be filled with confusion again. “What are you talking about? I haven't done anything wrong.” he said, absentmindedly watching the people crossing the street out ahead of us. “Move your head over so I can see.” he snapped as he tried to move my massive noggin out of his sight.

He stared blankly at me before gradually managing to make it onto the road. “At least we'll both have bruises by tomorrow.” he commented as he began texting and driving. I

silently prayed to myself, hoping I didn't have a bruise before reflecting in his car's mirror and noticed a red mark on my forehead. Grimacing, I touched the spot gently with my fingertips. "It's not that bad.." Elliot mumbled, dropping his cell phone into the seat beside him.

"Yeah, for you." Turning to face him, I took in his condition; there was a bruise on his beautiful face—karma really suited him well. Raising an eyebrow at him in disbelief.

"Maybe, I was just overreacting and accusing you for all my problems right now. I'm still in such a blur moment, I don't know what's going on. I'm so sorry."

He responded with a firm nod and a stronger grip on the wheel handlebars. "It's alright. Sometimes it's better off not remembering things at all." he answered shortly afterwards.

The good thing is I was starting to gain some of my memory back.. I still couldn't believe that I had gone to the wrong house that day, and gradually more pieces of what happened were coming together as I thought about it. However, it is still a blur to me. Perhaps losing your mind isn't a part of the side effects because I would be more at a lost than I already am .Suddenly Elliot's phone began ringing, and he asked me to "Answer it since it's already on your side anyways."

I was a bit taken aback by his request, but hesitantly complied with "Hello."

On the other end of the line, a happy voice called out "Big Brother!"

"You're totally right." I chuckled at her curiosity.

"Who is this?" Isabella questioned.

I covered the phone with my hand. "Am I allowed to tell Isabella who this is?" I looked at Elliot. I didn't want it to be like earlier because clearly he didn't want me to mention her at all.

He sighed. "Go ahead; she has been dying to talk to you."

With a warm and cheerful tone in my voice "Hey, It's Clarissa!"

"Put her on speaker so I can hear." Elliot made a sharp turn on the road.

As I put Isabella on speakerphone and she continued her barrage of questions about am I ok, my whereabouts, and if the two of us were on a date.

"I miss you too." I said with a smile.

"Bella, what are you doing up?" Elliot asked, barging into our conversation.

Isabella remained quiet for a moment before asking quietly "I want some chicken muggens."

Elliot chuckled and remotely reprimanded her. "Didn't Nyla already feed you?" he asked.

"Nope." she replied succinctly. "She said she'll be back later."

I scratched the back of my neck as I took in their conversation without understanding all of it; who was this Nyla person? Nevertheless, Elliot told Isabella "I'll bring you some."

“OK, give me a few minutes.” Elliot told Isabella before she cut him off with a slightly different tone: “Take good care of Clarissa, smiley.” She then directed her attention towards me on the phone “When will I see you again, Clarissa?”

To which I answered honestly. “I don't know.”

A voice suddenly shouted from afar on the other end of the phone line: “Isabella, where are you at?!”

Isabella reacted quickly and ended her call by saying cheerfully “Love you bye!” Elliot just shook his head after she hung up on him and - though out of courtesy for Isabella - I managed to repress my own amusement. Glancing at him I jokingly remarked: “She's quite a handful isn't she?”

“More than a handful.” Elliot shook his head with familiarity. His phone began ringing again and he answered it using an informal “Yo!” as he placed one of his AirPods in his ear -- *I wish I could have heard that conversation too!* A few moments later, Elliot declared to the caller that “We'd be there within few minutes.”

We? I'm going somewhere with him?

I watched Elliot took his airpod out as I touched stylish upholstery and light brown leather material in his truck. “Where are we going?”

“My place.”

Chapter Six

Flashback

My heart sank as I pictured the scene in my head again. It had been just two years since I moved away from California, but it felt like a lifetime. There I was--sixteen, walking down the hallway with a black present in my hand, excited to give my first love Mason his birthday gift--when I saw them kissing. The tears welled up in my eyes as reality set in and shattered all of my hopes and dreams as I rushed into the bathroom.

He had been my first love but clearly it wasn't the same as it used to be anymore.. As someone walked in, I quickly wiped away the tears from my face and tried to bring up a smile.

A voice as gentle and elegant enquired "Are you alright? Did you and your boyfriend break up or something." She pointed out at the broken box layering on the ground. Her words were full of ignorance as she thought we'd just broken up yet her beauty was breathtaking nonetheless.

"W-we can say something like that, more like cheating." I choked out when I picked up the black box that was laying on the ground.

"I'm sorry, My name is Claire." When she realized what had happened, she assured me that if wanted, "You can have lunch with me and my boyfriend--Mason." That's when it suddenly hit me; the girl Mason was kissing was right in front of me and I didn't even pay attention to it.--she was his girlfriend? He had been seeing someone else for god knows how long.

All at once it felt like everything around me stopped moving. A small sob escaped from me as immense sadness began to overflow from within. “Boyfriend?”

My devastated expression must have given away my confusion as she applied lipstick in quick succession, providing a smug reply “I had been going out with Mason for two years now.”.

Could this be some sort of twisted joke? Does she not know I was. For a moment, I felt like I didn't exist to her. I have been going to this same school with them for a while. Despite all the love Mason and I had shared and the toxicity, and the lies that followed along with it, it still broke me because he found someone else.

“Wait? Now I know why you look so familiar. You're Mason's little cousin.” Clarie said as she turned to face me. “I've been dying to meet you.”

“No, I'm not.” I stammered at her.

“What do you mean?” She looked at me bewildered and asked. “What are you to him then?”

“Soon-to-be ex.” I said as Mason was standing in the hallway when I walked out. I took a deep breath and faced him. “You're a liar.” I looked at him with puffy, teary eyes. “This is my only chance to get away from this toxicity and lies, We are done, Mason..” I handed him the box as I walked out the school building.

End of Flashback.

“Hey. Snap out of it, we are here.” When Elliot nudged me on my shoulder, bringing me back into reality, a wave of emotion came over me as I realized how familiar this feeling was. Sadly but not surprisingly, I was reminded that time alone doesn't offer much healing; those painful memories can come flooding back any time. Whether I'm triggered by something small or seemingly insignificant. Healing isn't always a linear process; sometimes healing takes forever. My past is the reason of who I am today, I want to be a better person.

As we pull up the driveway, I can hardly believe my eyes. Towering ahead of us is a magnificent mansion, it was a sight that can never be forgotten. It was at least four to five floors tall and had two rooftop terraces. The entire house is lit up, especially the driveway entrance. Nature has certainly embraced this building; trees, flowers and shrubs seem to grow naturally in and around it. It's clear that the architect idolised nature as a mighty oak. When he rolled down his window and said “It's me, you can open up the gate.” he spoke with confidence and authority.

“I'm sorry, but I don't a it's me, so please state your name.” An unfamiliar voice says through the intercom.

“Once I get my hands on whoever is on this intercom, I'll hurt you. It's Elliot.” He says before being granted access inside—This place truly is something else!

“This is huge.” I took a glance at him.

After Elliot shut off the car and sighed, he said. “That's exactly what she said. It's OK, though; it's not a big deal.” We got out of the truck. I tried to keep pace with him but

swayed unsteadily on my feet until he noticed me. He asked “Are you coming or not?” and held the bag of food.

It took everything I had to just nod my head as a form of reply, and gingerly took a step forward.

At that moment, I realized how my world spun around me before collapsing onto the concrete pavement below. My knees were bruised from the fall, and my trembling hands shook uncontrollably as I glanced at Elliot and said “El-Elliot, I need your help, please..” – only for him to look away as if I didn't matter. This hurt more than it did when I remembered being stared at by him like this the first time we met.

My question “Do you ever show compassion for others?” - was met with a shake of the head. He was hardly the one I expected to turn to in this kind of situation, yet here he was. His reply wasn't reassuring - “I don't care about people that much; only the few that matter to me do.” But as he crouched down in front of me, his eyes said something different.

“Well, if there's anyone else around here in this area, tell someone that actually cares because I'm still just a stranger to you..” Though I began to protest, my exhaustion was overtaking me and blood started dripping from my nose. Too tired to resist any further,

I was carried by broad shoulders, rapidly ascending stairs with remarkable speed, faster than a typical person. Exhaustion enveloped me, making my head sway as I drifted between consciousness and sleep. Despite not knowing where I was going, I felt secure in his arms, too tired to inquire further.

After that, I could no longer see anything but kept my eyes closed. I don't know if I had a minute nap or fainted briefly. I was in—what is this? It's got to be a 20-foot shipping

container home on a rooftop!? I was curled up in a comfortable bed when I looked around the little room and noticed Elliot seated in a chair and glaring at me.

His unknown presence startled me, and I exclaimed. "*Shit, he really scared me.*" to myself. Does he usually give people these intense stares? It is pretty uncomfortable.

As he carefully placed a moist paper towel over my nose, I could feel his gaze burning on me. His stern expression turned warm momentarily as he finished tending to me and quickly disposed of the napkin. He stepped away, running his hands through his hair, pondering what to do next. "Elliot." I asked when he turned around and faced me. "would you mind telling me why you seem to show so much hatred toward me when I haven't done a thing toward you? You don't seem too pleased with the fact that I'm here."

He grumbled something inaudible before pointing at me and exclaiming. " You don't even know,It is exactly all because of you. Everything is so messed up right now. Matter of fact,You think coming here like this will get you attention? He pointed toward my nose.

I knew he didn't believe that I was intentionally trying to garner attention with my condition, but it felt like the accusation lingered in the air regardless. "I wasn't trying to get anyone's attention, it's complicated with my condition, Elliot." I muttered quietly under my breath, feeling slightly embarrassed by the situation.

Elliot sighed in frustration before pointing towards me and speaking firmly " You are right, it's complicated. I really don't want to deal with you right now. For all I care, find your own way back." With that he stood up and marched down the steps, leaving me

stunned as to why someone would waste their time worrying about total stranger in such a manner - even if I didn't deserved it this time around.

* * *

I managed to find my way back to the front entrance, and after using a cell phone to contact Dekvia, it kept going to voicemail. Sooner and later, I was welcomed inside. Conversation and laughter filled the room as I rounded the corner.

“Clarissa!” Before I could even register who it was that called out my name, Dekvia had already hugged me tightly. “I tried calling you, but your phone kept going to voicemail, and then I dropped my phone in the water, so I used Braden, but he said he got it under control. Are you all right?”

“I'm alright.” I said while simultaneously returning her embrace. “And so are you.” Pulling away, she smiled at everyone in the room.

“Let me introduce you to everyone...” Dekvia began before getting interrupted by a small voice. “It's Clarissa!” It turned out to be Isabella - excitedly hopping around me and giving me hugs of her own accord.

As laughter echoed through the living room walls, Dekiva replied: “nevermind...you're already familiar with each other.” Moments later Braden hurried into view; his angst being soothed only by running his fingers through his hair. “There you go, Bella.”

“It seems like you have a lot to handle on your plate.” An assumed chuckle escapes my lips as I gesture toward Isabella.

“Thank you for handling finding Clarissa.” Dekvia followed him over to thank him for something - which then ended in her awarding him with a light kiss on the cheek before returning Isabella's hug back snugly once more afterwards. It never ceases to amaze me how even though Dekvia and Braden act like a couple sometimes, their relationship has yet been known officially between them thus far.

“Auntie Dekvia.” Isabella welcomed her with a hug. “I didn't know you were here.”

“Hey, pumpkin.” came the cheerful response as Dekvia ruffled Isabella's hair while looking at her altered appearance – a black high-neck sweater and plaid skirt coupled with zipper-up boots – her hair in a messy bun with two strands falling down on her sparkly face. Isabella then grabbed my hand before Dekvia spoke up again. “Isabella, how do you know Clarissa?”

Dekvia was sent into shock when Isabella answered without hesitation. “She saved my life.” she smiled up at me. My heart fluttered as I fondly remembered saving her life.

“I thought I told you that part, Dek.” Braden mentions to Dekvia.

“Clearly, Clarissa and you failed to mention the child's name.” Dekvia mumbled softly. “I'm glad Clarissa saved your life too—she's a real lifesaver.” She then turned towards me and questioned “What happens to your forehead?” Elliot suddenly arrived carrying an object in his hands; I already knew it was Isabella's bag, Nevertheless curious about this question addressed to me, I touched my forehead only to realize what she meant—my noticeable bruised resembling the shape of someone slapped me with their head on forehead – so kindly I responded “It nothing, I fell earlier.”

“ELLIOT!” Isabella eagerly embraced him as he presented her with a bag of McDonald's food. “Thank you for going out of your way to make sure I'm not hungry.” She inhaled deeply, scenting the delicious food. “It smells amazing!”

With the way his body language was standing close to me, I knew I didn't belong here, it was time for me to go back to the crib.

“I'll be back shortly.” he said with a kiss on the forehead. “In the meantime, I'm going to talk to Nyla about feeding you more.”

Isabella gently tapped me on my nose and smiled. “Be a bit more careful in future, okay? Can you help me get ready for bed and read me a bedtime story?” she asked pleadingly.

Before I could respond, Braden and Dekiva both encouraged us to get started, so I agreed and said “Maybe you can take a break from this little wild cheetah.” I gestured toward Isabella before we made our long journey up multiple staircases and down various halls adorned with modern artworks against black wallpaper – each one seeming exactly alike – until finally we got to her bedroom door. Flowing wooden floors echoed our footsteps as we made our way there.

With delight, Isabella flung open the door and jumped onto her bed. “We're here!”, she declared with enthusiasm.

Upon reaching Isabella's room, I take a deep breath saying “Finally.” She had decorated it in a way that stunned me; I expected something quite different. The white walls were adorned with picture frames and her own drawings, while the twin bed held stuffed animals and was topped by a sunflower comforter. In the center of the bedroom was a

kid's table and chair, with a window seat containing yet another sunflower blanket to my right and finally, her white dresser on the side.

“I love sunflowers.” she noted with a smile as she saw my gaze lingering on the blankets. “Can we play a game before getting me ready for a bath?” She ran to her dresser and pulled out a board game she'd been waiting for someone to share with her. We both sat on the floor and played Candyland while she was eating her chicken nuggets.

45 minutes after we started, Isabella and I had reached the end of our game of Candyland. We were playing on the floor when Isabella suddenly exclaimed: “Clarissa, YOU CHEATED!” She was bristling in indignation.

“What?! How am I cheating?” I laughed, seeing how close I was to securing my win in this game.

Isabella tightened her lips and arms in a gesture of frustration, whining with: “Because I said so.” It wasn't long before she followed it up with a disdainful “I don't like you anymore.” while scrunching her tiny nose.

“Is that so?” I chuckled and moved closer as if preparing for something.

“Yes.” she shivered but bravely kept her chin up. However, before either of us could say anything else, I started tickling her until she was laughing uncontrollably. Through fits of laughter, she screamed at me to cut it out - “STOP IT!” - only relenting once I had done so; collapsed against me from laughing too much and murmured: “OK OK ... I like you again.” between bouts of laughter. As soon as Isabella took part-leave for her bed - exclaiming about my behavior being befitting a monster - there was a buzz on my phone indicating a text from Dekiva.

[Dekvia: Is cereal soup?]

[Me: What?]

[Dekvia: I'm being forreal, like think about it. Once you put milk in the cereal it becomes soup.]

[Me: I love you, but did you just found this out by Braden?]

[Dekvia: Yesss I did, I wanted to ask you since you're the expert of food, but I love you.]

“Let's get you all prepped up for bedtime.” I said, looking to my right and seeing Isabella dozing off. After slipping my phone into my pocket, I held out my right hand and she guided me to the bathroom.

It was rather small with a sunflower motif – complete with draperies and rugs – giving it a cozy feel. “I'll go turn on the water while you get a cloth and towel.” I nodded as she went looking for the items from her list. When I saw the bottle of melatonin bubble bath on one of the shelves, a small snort escaped from me; evidently this is how Isabella manages her excessive energy! The footsteps got louder during the next few moments, so I quickly put back the container where I had found it.

Isabella arrived in a short matter of time with her own toys, cloth, and towel in tow. As she started throwing rubber duckies into the tub before climbing in herself,

“You know, you're much nicer than Nyla.” Isabella says playing with her rubber ducks as I grabbed the soap, lathered it on a rag, and started washing her back.

There goes that name again? Why does no one ever mention Nyla, and who is she?

“Who's Nyla?” I wash off the soap from her skin.

Isabella put down one of her ducks and glanced at me, seemingly disgruntled. “She's Elliot's girlfriend, my brother.” she said as she resumed playing with her toys. “She often leaves me here by myself while she takes care of some errands; however, in many ways she reminds me of a wicked stepmother.” Isabella continued talking even as tears started to swell in her eyes. She admitted “Besides Elliot, Uncle Braden and Auntie Dekiva were the only people she had grown close to.”--a feeling that was met with a wide smile when she mentioned Dekiva.

Taking in all that Isabella said, I couldn't help but feel tears circulating around my eyes. When I noticed this sudden shift in emotions, Isabella immediately asked if I was all right with some hints of concern embedded in her voice. Smiling reassuringly, I wiped away those tears and obtained a hold on myself once again. “And, of course you have me too, Buttercup!” patting her head fondly as I did so and leaning forward for a kiss on the forehead as I inquired. “It has been nothing short of blessings for us both”.

Her face lit up with pure happiness as is evident by the broad beam visibling on it upon hearing these words--no denying that mutual understanding lies between us not just through verbal expressions but through nonverbal ones too!

“Me too.” Isabella beamed at me, knowing our relationship will always be perfect for one other.

Chapter Seven

THUD, THUD, THUD!

If I'd known this headache would last this long, I would have done something about it, instead of listening to my body telling me I wasn't hungry or anything. It was past midnight, when I finally made it back to the crib, and I'm glad I did because, without Dekvia's being there, I might still be in another bad situation again. With the way my mind is right now and how tired I am, I wouldn't even know where to go. Now that I think about it, I fell asleep with Isabella until Dekvia woke me up to go home. Honestly, I'm looking forward to relaxing out on the sofa with some takeaway and sleeping in until tomorrow. Besides, if I don't get some shut-eye soon, I'm going to be a real grouch.

My phone made the familiar sound of the latest message from Dekvia came in.. Since we couldn't go to sleep, We had spent all night together chatting and baking cookies – it seemed strange that we were still wide awake despite our bodies' desire for sleep. Even more bizarre was how no matter what we did, we just couldn't seem to drift off into dreamland.

[Dekvia: Hey girly! Braden is taking me out on a date today, and I didn't want you to wait around for me, so I'm letting you know. Text or call me if you need me. I love you .]

Text or call me if you need me.

When I had thought long and hard about the situation that was being kept from Dekvia and everyone else, I had realized how much time I had left on this planet to be with

them. I just want everyone to be happy without any grief, just all the happy memories we shared.

DING DONG

When I heard my doorbell at the front entrance it could only mean one thing - Pizza Delivery Guy is here.

Thank God they sell pizza at any time of the day.

After grabbing the cash from the table, I dashed to the front door, where I was suddenly struck to my waist.

“Isabella?” I questioned.

She looked at me with teary eyes, mumbling “I miss you.”

Taking a deep breath, I shoved my hair out of my face, peeked out the door while seized her luggage, and led her inside before shutting the door. Crouching to her height, I asked. “Honey, how did you get here?”

Quietly, Isabella said. “Promise me you won't get mad?” as she whirled her luggage around.

How could I possibly not be outraged by this! I gently comb my fingers through her hair as I tell her. “I can never be mad at you. But it seems like you broke our promise, didn't you?” I asked her.

After a moment of silence, Isabella said. "I'm sorry, I really did want to come see you."

"How did you get here?" I asked as I pulled her hand toward the sofa.

Isabella held out her pinky finger to make a promise as she said. "Promise me you won't freak out."

I was already anxious, not knowing what lay ahead of us. Knowing that somebody else's safety was on the line made me uneasy. I interlinked my finger with hers in agreement and said. "I promise."

Isabella then adjusted herself on the sofa and began telling me the story. "When I was with Dekiva getting my hair done; I felt kinda sad that you'd left without saying goodbye that morning. Then out of nowhere, this perfect idea hit me. So I was thinking, what if I used Google Maps? So I asked Auntie Dekiva to show me where the both of you were staying and I scribbled it down before Uncle Braden called her away." Taking a breath, she finished by saying "That's when I knew this could be my moment to shine."

The thought of a six-year-old taking the initiative to come up with this plan, and it being successful, was staggering. It's undeniable that children today are exceptionally intelligent and capable compared to adults in a variety of areas.

"Now, now." I said reassuringly. "You have proved your intelligence. Use your skills wisely from now on and next time, tell people the truth of what you're doing. This world doesn't have friendly people like me, okay?" Placing my arm around her shoulder in

support, I asked the question that had been preying on my mind since our encounter “What are we going to do about your brother?”

I could only imagine Elliot's fury when he found out his little sister was here with me - an action which admittedly wasn't my own suggestion. The sheer thought sent a shiver down my spine; even though I tried not to act bothered by the subject, inside me something quivered with fear.

After hearing Isabella's tummy grumble, she pulled out her toy. “In the end, he'll find me just like he always does.” I heard her say. As another ring of the doorbell sounded off, Could it be Elliot already? With some hesitation, I got up to answer the door and was met by a pizza delivery man. “Ms.Fallon,Here’s your pizza.” He handed me the Meat Supreme pizza that I had ordered and I paid him “Thank you, keep the change.” before closing the door with haste.

The smell of the pepperoni, sausages and cheese made my stomach grumble.As soon as I opened the box and shot an amused grin towards Isabella saying “You want some pizza?”

“YES!” She squealed as she reached for a piece, but I pop her on the hand.

“I'll wait while you go wash your hands.” I nodded my head in the direction of the restroom and watched Isabella took off as fast as lightning.

With a laugh, I got up to wash my hands and take a paper napkin for us both.

As I heard Isabella cheerily voice coming out the bathroom saying “I’M READYYYYY” She perched on the floor waiting for me to give her pizza.

“All right, here you go.” As I gave her a thick slice of pizza, she thanked me. I helped myself to two pieces and sat down to enjoy my food with her.

Isabella started nibbling on the pizza and asked. “What kind is it?”

“It’s Meat Supreme.” I replied before taking a bite of my own slice.

“I don’t think I’ve heard of that before. Elliot usually orders cheese for me.” she said.

That was when my heart dropped - in all the chaos of having Isabella over, I forgot to ask if she had any allergies. Nervous yet optimistic, I responded with. “Wait - are you allergic to anything?”

To which Isabella responded with a mischievous grin. “Yes, I am ... pepperoni!”

“Oh great.” I thought. But then Isabella burst into laughter and said “Just kidding! No allergies here.” Talk about a close call! Relief washed over me as I let out a sigh and playfully shoved her shoulder while winking at her. “We are so not friends right now.”

After eating more pizza, messing around with makeup and toys, watching movies and crashing out afterwards - there was an unexpected knock at the door which alerted me.

Nobody is home, you can leave now.

I could clearly hear the persistent knocking on my door. Whoever was here must have been in a hurry. I had to quickly drape a blanket over Isabella and make my way to open it, only to find that Elliot was on the other side. Isabella had been right; he always seemed to find her wherever she was.

“Please let me explain.” I implored, as I watched him shut the door firmly behind him. His looming presence seemed to keep me pinned against the wall as my heart beat wildly in my chest. Then suddenly I noticed something strange; his emerald green eyes shifted from their usual vibrant shade to a singular fiery amber gesture which made every hair on my body stand up immediately. After taking a deep breath and blinking away any trace of sleep from my eyes, I saw that his gaze had gone back to its familiar hue - whatever just happened must have been an illusion.

My attention reluctantly moved downwards where Elliot's fingertips lightly brushed against my neck - sending goosebumps down my spine - only this time to land at a particular spot below where barely-visible traces of scarring still lingered from when I got it injected.

Elliot's voice was stern and assertive as he questioned me. “Clarissa, this is the last time I'm asking you, What game are you playing? Humiliation flooded my veins as he pressed his palm against my neck. I couldn't dare answer, feeling like breathing was a task too hard for me.

“I'm not playing any games.” I protested hoarsely, her voice strained from Elliot's hand that had been pressing on my neck. However, trying to explain myself again felt tedious since he had simply not believed my words before; but I knew for this exact moment Isabella seemed to mean much more to him than anyone else.

At that moment I felt an invisible bond between us and it made me think that no matter what, he would never harm me. After tens of seconds of gasping for air and grabbing at my throat, I took a deep breath and said "I do not know." Taking another sip from the glass of water near me, I kept going: "I tried telling you that Isabella had come here on her own but you attacked me anyway."

"That was just a fear tactic; I had no intention of actually attacking you. I thought I made it clear about Isabella. After all why is she acting like she has known you her entire life." Elliot says as he glances at me.

"I don't know, she's been begging to stay here forever." I shrugged my shoulders at him.

"That's not going to happen." Elliot pushed past me, gently waking Isabella from her sleep. As soon as she recognized him, the enthusiasm in her eyes died down. "Isabella, we are going home and talking about this."

She quickly moved away from the bed and pulled closer to me.

"Please." she pleaded with Elliot, not wanting to leave my side. "I want to stay."

He firmly rejected her request and her grip on me tightened in reply. "No." he said as he closed in on us both: "I can see that this is more serious than I initially thought."

Isabella said firmly: "I'll go home." and lowered her head in sadness.

"Right, let's go home." Elliot had seemed to begin reaching out for Isabella before pausing at his own words.

“If only Clarissa can come with us.” Isabella looked up at me with a mischievous grin then glanced over to her brother. It was clear that she intended to challenge him despite the situation.

Upon hearing this, Elliot massaged his forehead in disagreement. “Isabella, she can’t come with us, she doesn’t actually belong here.”

I stepped forward and gently knelt down next to Isabella, saying, “Sweetheart? Please remember that your brother only wants what's best for you.” A single tear streaked down her cheek and I quickly wiped it away before she could notice it herself.

“Being with you is the greatest thing that's ever happened to me. You are coming with us.” But much to his dismay Isabella scowled back wordlessly and positioned herself close in front of him, demanding “She’s coming too.”

I stood there silently waiting for an answer while they both locked eyes. Suddenly feeling suffocated by the tension between them I asked myself: Am I allowed any say in this matter?

Elliot stood firm in his resolve: “Whether you like it or not, Isabella! She’s not coming with us.”

“We shall see about that”. Isabella said with confidence in her eyes.

Chapter Eight

Isabella is extremely persuasive. Even though she brought me back to Kellville, I'm still worn out. Thank goodness, Isabella went back to sleep after I promised to stay the night and won't leave.

I strolled into the kitchen yawning, seeing Dekvia's hair, which is absolutely everywhere, and her anxious countenance.

“Thank God that Isabella brought you here.” She raises her hands to the sky and gives them a little smooch as her arm is linked with mine. “Can you please help me out here? I'm completely lost.” She pointed at the ingredients' in front of us. “It's not looking as good as yours does. “I went over it three times!” There was a scowl on Dekvia's face as she started tossing the throwaway dishes.

I noticed a bowl in the corner filled with fresh strawberries, grapes, blackberries, cereal, and chocolate chunks. I knew exactly what she was trying to make. As I wiped my hands clean in the basin and set the knife on the counter, a grin spread across my face. “Are you trying to make my delicious yogurt bars?” I raised an eyebrow at her.

“Of course, I think you put strawberries, blueberries, granola, and everything else on this counter, as well as flour.” Before handing it to me, Dekvia gathered up the fruit, cleaned it, and dried it.

“That's where you went wrong.” Once I had the strawberries in hand, I immediately began cutting them up. “You need to use Greek Vanilla Yogurt, not Flour! The word is in there.” I shook my head. “Yogurt. Why are you doing this?”

“Because Braden didn't believe me when I said I could make him something nutritious.” Dekvia grabbed the yogurt from the fridge and flung it on the counter. “You already

know I can't cook for sh*t. "That's your job." She hopped onto the stool and watched as I prepared the fruits for cutting.

"So, you're telling me."— I twirl the knife around. "Braden thinks you're making this."

She flashed a smile in my direction. "I'm glad you're catching on." She popped a blueberry into her mouth.

"Could you take my phone out of my pocket? My dad been blowing up my phone." I said, pointing to the left pocket of my sweatpants. At 1:13 p.m. daily, and sometimes later, my dad has been calling to see if I'm doing fine.

"Sure thing." She got out of her chair, reached into my pocket, and placed my phone on the counter. "This is a lot of work, and I am not even doing anything."

As soon as we heard conversations coming from somewhere from the house, Dekiva jumped up, grabbed a square cake plate, and poured the yogurt into it.

I gave her a quick glance behind me while rolling my eyes. "I hope you washed that pan out." Putting down the knife, I gave her another sidelong look.

She gave me a deathly look. "Shut up." and then smeared flour all over her blouse and face like she worked diligently to prepare this quick snack. She is lucky, I love her. If it weren't for me, Dekvia would be eating fast food every day.

Before joining us into the kitchen, Elliot ends his phone call by saying. "Thanks for letting me know."

Braden burst out in laughter as he walked into the kitchen and saw Dekvia. He was so touched that he chortled. “Babe!” and laughed once more.

Dekvia glared at him menacingly, rolled her eyes, and said. “I feel like I’m missing something with the yogurt.”

I said. “Yeah, the vanilla flavor and 3 tablespoons of Maple Syrup.” and started cutting up the remaining strawberries. I can understand why they’re a couple. Braden’s antics and Dekvia’s responses.

When I glanced up, Elliot’s eyes were riveted on me; he was following my every move. He was looking at me as if he was trying to figure me out. As an intense wave of feeling dizzy washed over me, I shrugged it off. Then the stillness grew deafening, as if someone had crammed cotton into my ears. Uh oh, am I losing my hearing?

“I knew that; I was just testing-“ After giving me a quick smile Dekvia reached out to touch my trembling hand. “Are you all right?” And she put her palm on my forehead and said. “Your hands are shaking.”

I took a long breath and reassured her. “I’m OK.” as I glanced down at my shaking palms on the knife. The notification flash on my phone notified me it was from my dad. I put my face in front of the camera and felt a tiny ache—Damn it! I sliced my finger.

“YOUR FINGER!” Braden screamed.

“Oh, my God!” Dekvia freaks.

Only Elliot remained calm; normally I would have freaked out too, but I restrained myself. I didn't want to make the situation worse. Honestly, everything around me has been looking odd. The whole time Elliott would not take his eyes off of me. Do I have anything on my face? Why does he keep looking at me like that?

Carefully wrapping a paper towel around my bloody finger, I said, "I'll be back; I'm going to go handle this cut." before dumping the knife into the sink and taking my phone into the bathroom.

That was a bad decision. The right thing to do would have been to stop cutting before trying to unlock my phone.

It was Elliot who gave me the creeps. As much as I tried, I just couldn't think clearly. After tending to my wound, I was heading back to the kitchen, but I heard muffled voices. I leaned back on the wall and listened to their conversation.

Elliott murmured to Braden, "I don't get it, man; all her signs are the complete opposite."

"What was in the injection." Braden enquires. "Dekvia says that Clarissa has been acting strangely lately."

Elliot was quiet for some time before responding, "I mixed it." He grumbled.

"You've got to be kidding me! With that?" There was a mix of concern and curiosity in Braden's intonation.

“Please understand that the purpose of this work is to provide me with a means of erasing the traumatic experiences I'd rather forget and an additional means of relaxing.” It is called Uratidroid.”

“Please don't tell me that you mixed the medicines your father made for you a while back. There are a number of potential dangers here, as it is impossible to know how an individual's body will react to the injections.” I could see Braden pacing back and forth around the corner. “Those are two very potent drugs also along with your DNA.” He said.

“Maybe she won't remember, right? If she does, it will be a miracle.” Elliott laughs, carefree about the outcome. “As I took each drug back then, it proved effective for me. What might happen if you mixed them together? Totally nothing, calm down, buddy.”

“But she's not you, Elliot.” Disappointed, Braden shook his head. “Why did you use it on her?” Braden asked one last question.

“She was already suffering from a severe headache, and I didn't want her to remember the dead body that was there.” Elliot threw his hands up in frustration.

“You might think that you just use your powers and two powerful drugs to solve everything! That is not the way it works.” Braden shouted at Elliot.

When Elliot responds. “I didn't choose this life Braden, I'm still trying to figure out the purpose of all of this.” I look up and see the lights flicker on and off. “You know what my father did to me, and I still refuse to be a part of it.”

“ I know, man, and I’m sorry. Elliot, you got to starting give a f*ck about other people once in a while. If anything happens to her, it's in your hands. You will always remember that.” Braden says before abandoning Elliot there.

With a deep breath, Elliot followed Braden into the kitchen.

When I felt my phone buzz, I opened it to find a text from the hospital. Do doctors ever sleep? It is well past midnight. So, What's it now? There is just too much going on right now for me to dwell on the fact that Elliot is to blame; I am sure I will forget about it soon enough.

Hello, Clarissa Fallon.

I'm writing to inform you about your issue. This is Dr. Phil from Kindred Soul Medical Center. As we analyzed your lab data, we concluded that you might have brain fog, fatigue, headaches, flashbacks, and nose bleeds. Stay calm if you ever experience an average nosebleed. Simply make your way to the hospital right away. Have anything changed? Nothing has changed there. The estimation and injection remain unchanged, but things are going swiftly. It'll greatly help you. Clarissa. Think about it.

Thank you.

Physician Phil

This is ridiculous. Elliot's injection makes me act this way, and although he doesn't know what might happen, he believes I'll be OK, Doctor Phil claims otherwise.

What should I do?

Taking another nap may help. The amount of information I just found out drained me completely. Besides, sleep solves all your troubles.

Chapter Nine

I had two problems earlier. If it isn't my head pounding, it's figuring out which room to stay in. Luckily, I bumped into Dekvia and Braden again on the way there to figure out which room I could shower in and doze off. I had no idea that falling asleep may bring up another memory.

Flashback

Two years ago, My life was perfect. My dad was always at my side; I had a decent job, wonderful friends, a beautiful car, and—most importantly—a lover named Mason. Everyone loves him. The teachers, students, my dog Flynn, dad, and even I. Everyone who knew him believed he was the most charming man they had ever met. I had the same thought. But I knew how he could be at times. It seems like yesterday when I think back on it, after six months of being in a solid relationship with Mason. He started to become abusive, venomous, and manipulative. Before things worsened, I tried to end the relationship several times, but I failed.

That night was my last chance to get out of that toxic relationship.

It was the night after I ended my relationship with him at school. I was dancing at home alone, hoping I wouldn't ever have to see Mason again. I strolled downstairs to get a water bottle while singing and swaying my hips to the music. When I finally reached the kitchen, I grabbed a water bottle from the refrigerator. Suddenly, a door slammed.

“Welcome home, Dad!” I shouted while standing in the kitchen, feeling my hips sway to the music.

The sound of a cough reached my ears. “What the hell are you doing here?” With dilated pupils, I spun around and asked. I swiftly snatched the sweater from the chair and put it on, sounding agape.

“Breaking up with me in front of everyone at school is totally not acceptable, you do realize that, right?” Mason spurted.

I steady took one step back. Though my anxiety was rising, I found myself unable to articulate what I was feeling. The further I backed away, the nearer he got. “Mason, Please.” Tears of desperation well up in my brown eyes as I beg him, knowing my recent scars have not yet completely healed. “Why can't you just leave me alone?” I lost it and started bawling into my palms.

He shoved me up against the wall, and my skull smacked into a sleek glass wall clock. I stared at my shaking, bleeding hand and wailed in pain as I grasped the back of my head. Mason took my left forearm forcefully, with a solid grip and twisted it back. 'LET ME GO!' I heard a bone crack and I shrieked in pain.

I gasped and collapsed to the floor, gripping my wrist in agony, as his rough palm struck me in the face. Watching him tower over me with weeping in my eyes, I began to prepare myself for the worst. I was humiliated that I had allowed my soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend, let alone any male, to cause me harm, and I cried bitterly.

He relentlessly kicks and punches me till blood appears. “You're not going anywhere, Clarissa! “He repeatedly strikes me in the stomach, which hurts like hell. The more I scream, the more he seems to take offense, so I attempt to keep my cool. “Now that

you're in the mood to cry, I'll give you a reason to do so, b*tch.“ His familiar fist punched me in the face. “You still haven't learned anything yet.“ Mason laughs as he drags me by my messy hair into the living room. The sensation of having hair pulled from my scalp was painful. When I reached for the dining room table for support, he booted me in the stomach.

“Ahhh!“ My blood began to flow behind me as soon as I let go of the table, and I let out a shriek. His hand slipped from my hair and he seized me by the throat. I tried to get his hands off of my neck but I failed. As Mason tells me. “You're mine and always will be.“ he slaps me in the face again. Grunting angrily. “How many times do I have to tell you?.“ he sliced my wrist and lower abdomen with his pocket knife. When we go back to school, you'll say, "I made a mistake; I realized how much you mean to me.“

I started bawling my eyes out, and he let go of me and booted me so hard I lost my air.

“What I need from you is to tell me I love you.“ Mason gently cups my puffy cheeks and brushes away my tears.

“You are sick in the head.“ I spat in his direction. “You need help.“ my voice trembles. I could never tell a guy I loved him if he struck me for no cause.

Mason's beatings on me became wildly erratic. He picks up my weak frame and throws me up against the wall. The sound of crashing glass reached me. I fought desperately to free myself from his grasp. “MASON.“ I beg him. “Please, stop.“ When I uttered these words, I thought I was going to pass out.

“Clarissa?“ Blood trails were heading toward the couch when my dad entered the house.

My gut was killing me. When I look down, I see shards of glass on the floor. After cautiously looking into it, I was utterly frightened by what I saw. Blood poured down my forehead from all the strikes and blows I took. Was this the end? “Dad?” I mumbled his name with drooping eyelashes.

The last thing I remember, my father was beating Mason up.

End Of Flashback

“NO, NO, STOP! LEAVE ME ALONE!” I screamed as I jolted up. Sweat and heavy tears were dripping down my face while I was hyperventilating.

I felt like my chest was closing in on me. Telling myself, “*It was all a nightmare, Clarissa; it was all a nightmare.*” was my constant mantra. I tried to catch my breath by remembering what my dad had taught me. The butterfly embraces therapy. The sobbing and trying to catch my breath were useless. The door swung open suddenly, and I glanced up, clutching my chest, to see Elliot standing there.

I certainly didn't want him to see me in that weak spot.

“Ari?” How did you—are you okay?” he asked as he rushed to my side. “I heard crying and screams coming from this room.”

Apparently he forgot that I was going to be spending the night. In tears, I gazed into his eyes and said, “It's okay. Go back to sleep.” As I rocked myself, and wiped the tears off my face. However, that was a lie.

His eyes broadened as he looked into my teary ones. “Did you have a nightmare?” He comes in and settles on my bed, and I look directly into his eyes.

“Can you just please leave?” I said softly, avoiding eye contact with him.

“But you were screaming and you need someone to be ther-.” Elliot spoke sympathy toward me

“Would you please stop...” After a few tries, I finally managed to utter. “Stop with this nonsense. I don't want your sympathy!” I erupted. “We both know, you don't care about people.”

“I'm not the monster you think I am. I'm jus-” he responded. His back rub was soothing and his whispers gave a sense of comfort and care. “Atleast, let me help you.” He says as I allowed myself to lean in closer before feeling a comforting embrace that felt like home. A deep breath filled my soul with tranquility as soon as I heard the sound of his steadily beating heart. “Everything's going to be just fine. I got you.” He began pressing me up against him. “Relax and take some deep breaths. Just like that.” he summed up.

“I'm not the monster you think I am.” he responded. His back rub was soothing and his whispers gave a sense of comfort and care. “Atleast, let me help you.” He says as I allowed myself to lean in closer before feeling a comforting embrace that felt like home. A deep breath filled my soul with tranquility as soon as I heard the sound of his steadily beating heart.

Although I was hesitant at first, guilt urged me to say “I-I'm sorry for waking you up.

“Don't worry about it..“ Elliot wiped away my tears, saying,“I should have never left you here alone tonight.“ Refraining from asking why he did, I questioned under my breath into his shirt “Why did you?”

He brushed his hands through my hair and said,“I don't have all the answers to life's questions.“ He looked over at me before continuing,“Are you alright?“ His presence made me feel safer, so I nodded in response.

“Let me stay here a few minutes longer and make sure.“ he said as he pulled away from the bed. “What's the weirdest thing you ever did?”

I paused for a moment before answering. “Well, I've tried combining ice cream and chicken tenders together - which surprisingly is amazing.“

He stared at me with an expression of amusement. “Chicken tenders and ice cream? That sounds... interesting.“ A smile tugged at his lips when I exclaimed that people also dip their French Fries into it too, even though one should probably try dipping chicken tenders into Coca-Cola.

He chuckled before giving my head a gentle pat. “You're certainly one of a kind, Ari“ he said fondly.

I grinned back up at him while replying “Having weird people around is always the best! What was your least favorite song as a child?”

He hummed while thinking about it before finally saying,“Old McDonalds...”

Surprisingly enough I had enough courage to sing it right then!

*“Old MacDonald had a farm, Ee I ee I o,
And on his farm he had some cows,
Ee I ee I oh,
With a moo-moo here,
And a moo-moo there,
Here a moo, there a mo- “I started singing before I was cut off.”*

I glanced at Elliot and saw he had his ears covered. “Ari, can you please stop singing that annoying song?” I couldn't help but let out a chuckle after that comment.

My thoughts were interrupted by me letting out a loud snore. Looks like I found one way to irritate him! “Old McDonald's is a classic childhood hit“, I added.

“It's agitating“, he replied, before gently placing his hand on top of mine and asking “Are you going to be okay though.“

. “Yes.“ I replied with a smile, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. “Thanks you Elliot.“

He took out his phone and exclaimed: “Let's see who already put chicken tenders in their ice cream!“

“Oh yeah.“ I countered with enthusiasm, laughing along with him. “You might as well count me in there too!“

Chapter Ten

My eyes widened in disbelief. There I was, sharing a bed with Elliot while his arm rested around my waist. This was completely new to me; I'd never felt as content as I did then, snuggled up against him and experiencing a good night's sleep for the first time in days. Yet it didn't come without a pang of curiosity; why had he been acting so strange lately? Nonetheless, all thoughts evaporated the moment I ran my fingers through his curls and took notice of the sturdy structure of his neck and jawline. When Elliot shifted onto my left side of my neck and started snoring lightly, an amused giggle escaped from my lips.

One glance at the clock revealed that it was 9:12am- today was a brand new day with endless possibilities. What in the world? Did Elliot and I sleep all night, and most importantly, where is Dekvia? She usually comes bursting in like a crazy woman, but I am totally not complaining right now.

“Ari?” His questioned tone was matched by an inquisitive gaze. His arms were around my waist when he suddenly leapt up, asking in a raspy voice. “Shit,. I'm sorry I dozed off. I lost track of where I was and it - “. His words trailed off as his eyes began to wander, suggesting that he had forgotten what he was saying and rambling.

I couldn't help but be captivated by the sound of his morning voice as it danced around me like a lullaby. I felt myself slowly slipping away from reality before being pulled back by his familiar timbre once again. Baffled, I mumbled softly. “What happened last night?”

He stared intently into my eyes for a few moments before responding with deep concern. “What do you mean? Don't you remember?”. With a shrug, I admitted

honestly.“No“. Rubbing my temples gently in an attempt to bring back any memories from the previous night, I inquired further.

Elliot took a deep breath before mumbling “I don’t know how I’m going to fix this.“

I was confused at what Elliot had said and my mind began to wonder. I asked.“What did you mean by 'fix this'?“

He quickly responded, stating that “I didn’t say anything.“ His sudden change in behavior and avoiding the question made me suspicious. Before I could ponder any longer, he pulled out his phone and said.“Damn it - what does he want?“

Shaking off the curiosity for a minute, I rolled out of bed and stretched when Elliot's eyes got fixed on a part of my body that was now exposed. Embarrassed, I looked away before finally He asked, saying.“So what are your plans for today?“.

“I’m probably going back to crib for good today.“ I chuckled as the thought of Isabella and Elliot debated.

His musculature strained against his shirt as we made direct eye contact with each other before responding “Cool“ Following up on our awkwardness, I informed him that “I’m going to take a shower.“ while pointing at the bathroom door To my surprise, all he did was give me an uninterested stare before typing away on his phone again.

My heart races when I noticed Elliot still standing there, watching me. I could barely speak and instead of doing anything, he just silently observed me before saying “You wanted me to join you?“ As my breathing began to accelerate and my cheeks heated up, it was then that he finally commented on the situation. Fortunately, before we could go

any further, I received a notification from Dekvia letting me know she wasn't coming after all. With a sigh of relief at avoiding an awkward encounter, Elliot said "I'm going to go check on Isabella." He spoke before walking away from my room.

When alone in the bathroom, gazing into the mirror - I almost couldn't believe what had just happened. What if Dekvia saw him near my bed? My heart dropped as I ran my fingers through my disheveled hair; it must've been electrified after everything that occurred moments last night. After revealing this internal panic out loud with an expletive, I quickly stopped wasting time hurried and brushed my teeth and tried to make my hair a little decent before heading into the hallway to meet Dekvia.

When Dekiva saw me, she directed me into one of the rooms. "I did it!" She exclaimed excitedly.

"You did?" I asked curiously before pointing to the room we were in and querying. "In this room?"

"No, silly." She replied with a smile before handing me a bag. "Here are some more clothes."

I looked into the bag before turning her attention to her friend. "What happened? I need all the details."

Just then, The both of us looked up as Braden walked into the room, smiling widely. "I was looking for you." he said, kissing Dekvia's forehead.

"Did anything happen to you last night because girl, look at your hair?" Dekvia asked me as she pointed at my hair.

Braden raised an eyebrow, then smirked knowingly. "Speaking of last night...I saw Elliot come out of your room this morning."

Thanks to Braden's snooping around this morning got me caught. I was hoping to keep this secret until later on, but he ruin my whole plan.

"Ari, Did I leave my keys in the room?" Elliot came bursting into the room when I was about to explain to them.

"Actually, let's go see." I said before putting him in the room along with me and purposely found his keys laying on the nightstand. He then asked me if I wanted to hang out later-- an unexpected offer for sure--

"Sure. I'll love that." I grinned at him.

"I'll see you in about 45-50 minutes. Make sure you do something to your hair" He says before walking out.

However, before I had the chance to close the door Dekvia walked in and falsely assumed the situation was more interesting than hers. She came inside with her laptop demanding what happened.

I suspected that she would be intrigued by the news. "It's not a big deal." I said, as I sat next to her on the bed.

"It is a big deal." she replied. "Everybody knows who Elliot is."

“Apparently, I don't know who everyone is.” I responded.

She took the laptop off the bed and started typing rapidly. “Elliot has quite a deep past.” she explained. “How deep can it be? Is that why he just walked away?” My mind was racing with questions.

Dekivia slid the laptop in my direction and there it was - Elliot Ward's profile information right before my eyes.

“I can't believe you looked him up.” I muttered in disbelief. From what Dekivia showed me - parties, gang activity, excessive beer drinking and other heavy drinking-related content - it was astonishing to me that he had a girlfriend at all!

“Can't remember her name but from what I recall they've been together for about eight months now.” She scrolled through her phone for proof before saying. “Yeah, Nyla.” We both shared an eye roll then shrugged - how someone like Elliot managed to snag such a level-headed girl was beyond us both!

Finally, curiosity got the better of me and I asked Dekivia “How did you get access to his Snapchat account anyway?”

“What, how do you know?!” she asked, eyes wide with surprise. “I mean, everyone always talks about it in town.”

I replied. “Isabella told me.” As the words left my lips, Dekivia shook her head at me and I exclaimed. “But you have a boyfriend!”

Before Devika and I could exchange any more words, we heard someone call out “Devika Maria Collins!”. We both glanced at each other fearfully; I muttered under my breath. “I think Braden is going to be mad at you...”

Braden had already burst through the door; his face was bright red as he shouted furiously at her--something about she's going to fix his little problem after all she was the one that started it. Then suddenly pointed at his little area below. "Well."

The room fell silent for a few moments; Dekvia's smile had faded away by this moment. "Hi,' she stuttered nervously as she waved towards him awkwardly. After exchanging a few glances between them in shock - then amusement - I quipped jokingly."Good luck!" Devika just nodded before turning to leave my room. With that- the incident concluded and I went back to scrolling through Elliot's pictures on the laptop before getting ready-wondering who would know such an obnoxious person would have such a beautiful girlfriend.

Chapter Eleven

For the past 35 minutes, Elliot and I have been having a heated argument about absolutely nothing. It was all because I was running three minutes late.

After saying “I don't like waiting on people.” he continued driving. “Two, don't ever slam my door!” He yelled right next to my ear.

I should have guessed Elliot was being passive hostile. Even though I was sure I didn't slam his door too hard . I mean I knew I had struck him with my cereal bar, but slamming someone else's door wasn't on my to-do list. However If I knew any better, I know for a fact he didn't just yell into my eardrum.

“You were almost close to breaking my eardrums, you jerk!” Placing my tiny hands over my face.

As he said my name, “Ari.” I caught him looking at me out of the corner of my eye. I felt a touch on my shoulder from him. “Are you okay?”

Choosing to ignore him, I wiped my eyes and continued to cry into my palms.

“Clarissa, I didn't mean to do that. I'm not good at this kind of thing, and I didn't mean to yell at you.” He went on, deeply ashamed of what he had done. “ I am sorry.”

Even after that, I paid him no mind. I felt he pulled the truck alongside the road.

“Clarissa? I'm sorry, I don't usually apologize. but are you okay?” he asked as he moved closer to check on me. With a gentle hand on my shoulder, he spoke.

“NO! Don't ever scream at me like that again, I shouted into his ear as I watched him shrink back in terror.

His question was. “Were you fucking faking that shit?” holding his palm over his chest.

“Yes, we had two problems. First, I don't appreciate being yelled at, and second-. As I raised up two of my fingers. “ Don’t ever yell in my eardrums.” “I held out a cereal bar and offered. “Anyways, since we have that settled, do you want a piece?” After saying “No, okay.” I munched down a large chunk of it.

“You didn't even give me an opportunity to respond. Good thing I picked one up on the way out!” He said while showing me the cereal bar.

“You didn't even ask.” I said without hesitation =.

A chuckle escaped his lips. “Since this is already my home, there was no reason for me to ask.” When he opened his bar and proclaimed. “These are good.” He looked at the cereal bar once more and then got back behind the wheel. “Never do that again, for the love of god”

I beamed at my success.

“Take that stupid grin off your face and let go.” he exclaims as he climbs out of his truck.

“I am not happy with the answer I chose.” Exiting the vehicle carefully so as not to slam his door, I exhaled. Men and closing doors.

As we began our hiking expedition, Elliot noted the irony in my selection of options. "You chose it, so we're doing it." he commented as he breezed past me.

Attempting to catch up to his easy strides, I couldn't help but nudge him with a retort - "The least you could do is wait for me."

Elliot merely snorted at my remark. "So, this your first time going on a hike?" He asked, pausing at the tree limb for me to make my way over more easily. It was clear he was being courteous despite his curt words and that made me smile slightly.

I answered, "Yes, it's kind of exciting.." before pointing down at my shoes.

"Clearly because you were wearing the wrong shoes today." His eyes flickered to my red and black Vans as appreciation covered his face in an amused grin. "Whose fault is that?" He added sardonically.

As I moved to reply with witty confidence, a large red sign caught my eye; warning those around of 'the sinking'. However, Elliot didn't pay any attention to the sign, but luckily I am being nice today. "You do know, you're about to walk in a sinking mud." I said with a smile on my face.

He glanced over at the sign and took a deep breath "I was just testing you, that's all. Let's go."

"I think I did a good deed." I said, with my hand over my heart.

"Yeah, we could say that." came the mumbled response from Elliot.

When I asked him “Repeat what you said.”, all he replied was “nothing.” This wasn't going to ruin my mood though; the area around us was stunning. As autumn drew nearer and temperatures decreased, so too did the leaves on the trees fall to reveal a clear picture of our path forward. The waterfall looked especially majestic at this time of year and I decided to pull out my phone and take some photos of it.

“You should definitely get one in front of the waterfall.” suggested Elliott.

“Ah, I'm not really dressed for it.” I said looking down at my outfit - black leggings, grey senior-themed hoodie, flannel shirt and red Vans shoes.

Before I could protest further, Elliott had already grabbed hold of my phone and encouraged me to go for it: “Come on, you look nice.” Rolling my eyes at his comment but still smiling nonetheless, I quickly tidied up my hair before trying to get a perfect shot with the waterfall.

“Smile.” Elliot commanded, flashing me an arrogant smirk before directing his attention back toward my phone. “With those pearly whites.”

I didn't want to waste too much time in the heat, so I quickly rolled my eyes but couldn't help chuckling as I reluctantly posed for the picture.

“These came out perfect, Ari.” he said as I strode over to him once again. “Have you ever wondered why I call you Ari?” He gave me a playful wink.

I shrugged my shoulders; it was true that no one else had ever called me that before. “Why?” I asked, looking up at him with intrigue.

A mischievous smile spread across his face as he replied “It's because it's in the middle of your name when you spell Clarissa. Pretty unique, huh?”

I had to admit he was right — it was both clever and endearing. Thinking fast on my feet, I then created my own nickname for him. “Lio”.

He furrowed his brows in surprise before asking delightedly: “Lio?”.

With a laugh, I explained “It seemed only natural after the clever nickname you had given me based on my name; apparently nobody else had ever thought of using this diminutive form of Ellio' before now!

His eyes lit up before remarking, mockingly: “So does this mean we're suddenly best friends?”.

“Maybe”, I quipped playfully before taking his phone from him so I could examine the photos more closely — they truly were impeccable!

“Let's take a picture together.” I suggested, realizing that he was the only one who looked presentable compared to me.

“I'd rather not.” he replied, tucking his hands into his pockets. “I'm the only one that looks decent here.”

I rolled my eyes in amusement and insisted on taking a photo anyway. We ended up with a great image, which encouraged him to try something different – angling the camera against a tree and kneeling down in front of it while Elliot asked me to “Jump on my back quickly.”

Right before we took the shot, I realized he had set the timer while I was talking to him – quite impressive! And so, after counting down from ten, we managed to capture another beautiful photo.

I saw that my phone had been taking pictures of us smiling. As I glanced up at Elliot, he softly grabbed onto my arm, lifting me close to his strong shoulder. His eyes, the color of minty green, sparkled in the soft summer light as he studied my face intently.

“Are you okay?” He asked as he held onto my waist and examined me more carefully. I could feel a little dizziness coming over me and a sharp pain in my lower stomach. Trying not to show any sign of distress, I told him that it would soon pass away.

“I can take you back to Dekvia.” He offered again, concerned for me.

“No, it's fine; it's going to wear off soon.” I replied confidently as I tugged on my phone and put into my pocket

“I uh- I apparently set it to take 20 photos at once which would explain why one was still snapping away.” He broke into a clumsy, idiotic smile.

Did he just smile at me?

“Of course you did, Let's finish the trail so we can head back and eat because I'm starving.” I said playfully as we began our trek home again.

“Who are you telling? I can eat anything.” He licks his lips while rubbing his stomach. As we climbed the slope, I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at Elliot's exclamation that he could eat anything.

Clarissa, get your head out of the gutter, I thought as I subtly coughed.

We talked for two miles, discussing our lives and activities. When we made it to the summit of the mountain I was completely out of breath while Elliot seemed unfazed saying “It wasn't that bad.”

“ For you. I have short legs, for goodness sake.” I said, sounding like a dying Hyena.

After twenty-five minutes savoring nature, chatting a bit and enjoying the peace and quiet, we began conversing again. “This is beautiful.”

He fixed his gaze on me. “It most certainly is.”

Taking in the beauty of our surroundings and enjoying a moment of tranquility, I eventually mustered up the courage to ask Elliot a question “Can I ask you something?” I glance over at him, seeing him nodding his head. “What was your childhood like?”

His expression became uncertain as he looked upwards towards the clouds, so I changed my inquiry, noticing the cloud went dark. “Is it going to rain today?”

He shook his head and joked “Someone must have really offended the universe.”

Suddenly we heard a mysterious sound from above—looking up we spotted an object flying our way. “What is that?” I asked in awe, my curiosity piqued. Elliot stared at it also as I carefully examined it from afar.

Regardless of what it was, I knew one thing for sure: it was sure to be an unforgettable experience!

“It could be a helicopter.” I glanced at it one last time before making eye contact with him.

He took another glance at the unknown object coming toward us. “That’s not a helicopter, that is a- Watch out!” I felt an inexplicable tug when Elliot's gaze met mine, causing me to stumble backwards.

Where did that incredible force come from causing me to lose my balance?

In one instant, I found myself tumbling off a cliff, with no end in sight except fear and doubt. How could this monstrous accident have possibly happened? My time seemed to run out faster than expected and the gravity was toying with me; all that I could feel in my heart was pain and regret for leaving the world unrealized.

When Elliot peeked over the edge and saw how scared I was, everything felt like it moved in slow motion.

This is it. I can't believe this is the ending to the story of my life.

As I closed my eyes in preparation to accept the end of my journey, it was quickly replaced with comfort as he gave me a warm, reassuring touch wrapped around my waist. We were in mid-air, among the brightest stars.

"Holy crap, I was just falling to my death until you scooped me up like it wasn't nothing." I said it nervously. "What was that?! That thing was approaching us."

Elliot's brilliant, flaming eyes met me as he spoke. "That was a killer-shield. It was designed to murder individuals like me." He spoke in hushed tones.

"Elliot... What exactly are you?" I inquired quietly. "What exactly do you mean, people like you?"

What he said next pushed me past confusion "I'm a Kitsune. One of the world's few surviving nine-tailed foxes. I may not be able to give you all the answers but I'm one of a kind."

"There's no way you're real." I queried, peering into his captivating amber eyes. "Is this really happening?"

Elliot offered a gentle laugh and shook his head. "There's no other way for me to explain what's happening" he replied in seriousness, reminding me of our mid-air position moments ago. His words were astute - never had I been taken so off guard before!

"Why are you telling me this?" I said softly.

“Sometimes letting others know their deepest secrets means moving forward. You told me your deepest secrets from others, I might as well tell you mine. I’m slowly trusting you, Ari.” He says without a doubt.

“But how did you end up here?” I asked as we landed firmly on the ground below, still mystified by what’s going on.

“That's a long stor-."The thunderous roar of nature replied before Elliot could explain, and we exchanged knowing looks; it was time to go. With both our hearts racing wildly and we were off.

As we looked at each other, we flashed each other the “let's go“ look. I cried loudly.“HERE WE GO AGAIN.“ as we descended down the hill.

The rain poured down hard as the thunder roared around us. I certainly knew this wasn't going to be a pleasant journey, but I was determined not to give up. As I started to voice my concerns “Isn't it possible for you to use your teleportation or telekinesis to help us out?”

“I usually keep my powers for emergencies only.“ he said loudly.“but we really need to find shelter soon so that we can get out of this!”

The thunderous downpour was making communication difficult as his words became inaudible. I could barely make out what he said. I could feel the silence behind him, but I wanted to be sure, he didn’t say anything.“What?!” I asked again.

He shouted louder this time: “SHELTER!”

I cried out loud “I CAN’T HEAR YOU!”

He shook his head and replied. “Never mind.”

Wiping my face so that I could see clearly without being distracted by the rain. “It’s only getting worse.” So, with a sense of urgency and determination in my voice, I loudly declared: “ We need to find some kind of shelter!”

“ARI, I SAID THAT! And I have to ask, what the hell is wrong with you people?! It's as if the planet Earth has no ears. What's wrong with your ears!?” Elliot stopped sprinting for a second to look at me with a scowl, but kept continuing to run on.

When I saw the “Sinking Muddy” warning again, I decided to ignore what he was saying.

With a loud “ELLIOT, STOP! “ came from my lips. He had already gone right through it before he even realized it was there. When I saw that he was in danger of sinking, I stopped dead in my tracks.

“Sh*t, I'm sinking!” Elliot became infuriated and screamed. “DONT JUST STAND THERE, HELP ME FOR FUCK SAKE.” He raises his arm for me to grab.

I can't decide whether to record this priceless moment on video or to just keep laughing until I cry. It's the way he begs for help for me. “Can't you get your own self out? You're the one with the power.”

“Didn't you hear a word I just said? I said it a little while ago. I'd only ever used them for emergencies.

Even though I knew I should be concerned about Elliot's secret identity as a Kit-something, I found myself not worrying about it.. I couldn't help but feel special toward him. He trusts me with his biggest secret. A secret that nobody shouldn't know about and he chose me.

“This is an emergency, Elliot!“ In a tight grip, I pulled on his arm. The rain was getting heavier and more frequent by the second.

He scoffed at me and said.“I HEARD YOU, I have an incredible sense of hearing. You're almost there, PULL, that's it!“

Oh, no, he did overheard me calling him a jerk the first time ; no wonder he warned me to watch my mouth.

Again, I yanked on his arm and he stumbled and collapsed on top of me. We came very close to bumping heads. It was as if the entire world had tilted on its axis while my heart was pumping way too fast.

A heartfelt “Thank you“ in a low murmur, he shifted his weight away from me and held out his hand to me.

I reached out and grabbed his palm when Elliot said.“There goes my truck; it's not far.“ I reached out and grabbed his palm.

“Are you up for another exciting adventure?” He smiled and offered his palm once more. I faced him after gazing at his hand.

I couldn't help but laugh. I reached out and took his hand, noting that our fingers were intertwined. “Readier than ever.” I said.

“LET'S DO IT!” Despite the weather, we made a breakthrough toward his black truck.

This is what it's like to run with someone in the rain. It wasn't like you were just going for a normal run and then sprinting inside the house ; it felt energized.

As we got into his chevy truck, I wiped my face. The only thing we did was sit and watch the rain fall outside. We exchanged glances and chuckled together.

I joked. “You might as well have been a broom.” Tears well up in my eyes from chuckling so hard.

“You can't talk because you resemble a vole.” His laughter began to spread throughout the entire truck.

The unexpectedness of his remark surprised me. “Every vole needs a friend.” I chuckled.

Chapter Twelve

Here I am, standing in the ladies room at Waffle House, staring at the bag Elliot gave me not too long ago. I really, really, really, hope it's clean. When I opened the bag, I found a white t-shirt, some boxer shorts, some socks, and a pair of jogging pants. My exhalation became a mumble as I started to take off my clothes and put on his, as I pleaded with the universe to make his clothes clean. I placed my damp garments in the bag since he told me I can have it. permission to do so. I took a look at the joggers as I exited from the restroom carrying my knapsack. Every time I walk, these joggers lag behind me. At some point, I'll eventually trip over my own two feet and embarrass myself in front of all these people.

Walking out of the restroom, I saw Elliot tapping away on his phone.

How come he is looking so dashing while just sitting there? I just stood there, staring, trying to take it all in. He was sitting there, looking ripped in a black tee that emphasized his figure. I knew he was fit, but I had no idea he'd look this good in a shirt. Everything about his appearance had changed for the better. I strolled over to the table and plopped down, saying, "Hey." with a smug of confidence.

"Hey." He raises his head from his phone. "I was about to go into the ladies' room because it took you so long."

"Roo, were you worried about me?" As I put down my bag, I asked.

"What kind of a question is that?" Elliot's eyes don't miss a thing as it scans my shapely frame. "I suppose." he responds with a twinkle in his eyes. "You look fantastic, you should wear my clothes more often." he winks as he speaks.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” and I flush, but then try to play it off by letting my brunette hair fall forward. I clear my throat and say, “Has the waitress arrived yet?” while looking around the delicious diner.

“Yeah, I already ordered for you.”

“You did?” Truthfully, I was taken aback by that. How did he know what I was going to order?

The waitress brought our drinks and said, “There you go! One Sprite for the handsome young man, and one... The waitress’s cheerful voice fell quiet as she said “lemonade for you.” and she shot me a repulsed stare.

What was that, exactly? If I had done anything to deserve her scornful gaze, why did she give it to me? Not that I would have done anything to harm her.

When she lifted her blouse a bit to expose her bosom, I rolled my eyes noticing exactly what she was doing right now. “I almost forgot to ask what you wanted to put on your burger.”

Elliot says “Um, she doesn’t want any onions, tomatoes, or ketchup on it.” I could sense his agitation from the fact that she was talking in such a flirtatious way.

“I’ll be right back with your order, handsome.” She tilted her head and winked.

Handsome? Not only did she say it once but twice!

She is obviously attracted to you, but you don't realize it.“ I chattered over my glass of lemonade.

“So what?” His posture softened as he turned towards me. “It was just a compliment about my looks; that doesn't mean I manipulated her in any way.“ he responded with a confident smile.

Why am I getting so worked up over this?

I shot him a stern look before dropping the conversation . “Is there anything else you can do besides being in mid air?”

“Of course, I have tons of them. “ Elliot stares at me boldly. “Why did you ask?”

“There's no reason.“ I gave a quiet grin. “I was just curious.”

“You know, I have an incredible memory; I can remember every detail from so long ago, and I can tell what a person wants just by looking at them.“ he said.

I guess that explains why he predicted after all he's Kitune, The Senses of a Fox. “ You know, I believe you were to explain to me about Kitune? I winked, curious about his life more.

“ I don't think you are ready for telekinesis and teleporting.” .”Elliot gave me a smirk, folding his arms.

“Telekinesis & teleporting?” I said with shock. “You mean like moving objects and jumping from one place to another? All of this is very hard to believe.”

“I figured you'd say that. Do you want to see the kingdom of Kitune?” he asked with a certain gleam in his eye.

“I would love to, but are you being serious? I said in puzzlement. “Like right now?”

“If I were you, I would get ready.” He laughed softly, and then things got really weird—his fingertips touched my palm and it felt like electricity! I tried to pull away from him, but I couldn't—it was like my body was glued in place. I said “Elliot, what the heck?”

He looked at me intensely and responded calmly. “Just breathe, Ari.”

“Breathe.” I whispered as soon as he spoke those words, a deep calm washed over me—and the next thing I knew, we were no longer in the diner. It was replaced with a woody oak smell, and cheerful chatter of the people nearby.

“Are we really here?!” I asked him, amazed by what I was seeing. He smiled and nodded, his fingertips still lightly grazing my palm. Then he pointed off into the distance and said “Take a look”. When I followed his gaze, I saw stunning fields of wildflowers and forests filled with lush foliage.

It felt like we were truly living in a different era. I attempted to take everything in at once--all these beautiful sights that had suddenly opened up to us. Everything was so much better than anything I could have ever imagined! With a deep breath and eyes wide open, all I could say was “wow”.

“So we just time-traveled?!” I shrieked in excitement.

He couldn't help but chuckle at my reaction as we were standing in a place quite unlike anything I had ever seen before. Everywhere around me, people were filled with joy and contentment as they carried bamboo frames lit up with flames, talking to one another about various stories of adventure and discovery. There was a magical and mystical feel in the air that made me want to stay and explore.

The night sky above us was magnificently illuminated by millions of stars, shining brilliantly over us like an unspoken promise. As I marveled at the scene before me, I asked Elliot. "Where are we?"

He smiled at me reassuringly and replied. "You are standing in Tironde--it's a place where mythical creatures such as vampires and witches really exist."

I couldn't help but grin excitedly at his words--the thought of mermaids being real filled my heart with disbelief and pleasure all at once. "Are you serious? Mermaids are real?!"

He gave my arm a friendly pat after noticing the look on my face and said jovially. "It seems you have a special affinity for these mysterious sea-dwellers".

"I do." In that moment, I felt like I could be part of this marvelous world forever; as if all existence faded away except what lay before me. However, it was suddenly pushed away when a thought hit me like an icy breeze--*If we're here, then it's almost like I'm non-existent in the other world.*

"Don't worry," he said warmly. "We are only here for a few minutes. This place is like an oasis." He wiggled his eyebrows at me playfully.

We were surprised by the sudden chill in the air as we traveled further through Tironde—a place that was broadening our horizons with each step. Staring intently at a bouncing marshmallow, Elliot and I traded glances between disputing its existence in this other-worldly oasis. “How did you become who you are today, Elliot?” I asked with genuine curiosity,

Elliot then proceeded to share his story of transformation with me, about “It was hard becoming the way. My story isn’t like everyone else here. His words radiated warmth and resiliency.

My focus shifted when I noticed something extraordinary in the night sky - two moons! My jaw dropped as my eyes grew huge in awe of the magnificent sight before me. Pointing wildly towards them, I shouted “OH MY GOD! LOOK!”.

Elliot asked “Have you ever read a werewolf novel where the main character finds their true love at age 16?”

Heaving a deep sigh while still taking in the stunning view before us, I replied affirmatively. “I have.” My voice was filled with awe and admiration as I continued to admire both moons - from their first- quarter expression through to their fading crescent phase - from this perspective. “Is it similar to it?”.

As I heard the beautiful sound of percussion and horns, my gaze naturally followed the music. When I looked out towards the palace, it was dazzling; white walls that caught each glimmer of light around it. In the distance, two women stood on the terrace. One

facing away from the audience while her companion stared down at us. That's when Elliot's words returned to me“ Kintine is unlike any other universe –it has its own special culture. Every year, when you look up in the sky in Tironde at an exact day and time, you'll be able to spot your partner from amongst 365 foxes—determined by their birthday! While Elliot and I were closer to the palace, I caught sight of a figure of a lighted bamboo frame in the air.

“Unlike any other globe or universe, Kintine has its own unique culture. A fox's partner is symbolized by the two moons. You do have to go through the typical human life phases, but it generally follows a person's birth date every year. Everyone in Tironde doesn't have the same birthdate, so there can only be 365 foxes in the world. If you want to know who your partner is, all you have to do is look at the sky on the same day and time every year, because the world already knows who should be with whom.“ When Elliot looks up while he's strolling, he sees the individual releasing their bamboo frame into the sky.

I glanced at Elliot in confusion. “Are we supposed to do that too?” I asked.

He smiled, then produced a bamboo frame from his palm and handed it to me. “All you have to do is let it free.“ he said, nodding at me encouragingly.

Following Elliot's instructions, I visualized the bamboo whirling in a closed circle—and the lights of the lanterns became even more breathtakingly beautiful than before.

Pointing up at the balcony above us, Elliot murmured “That lovely woman who is gazing down at us is the Guardian of Love—her name is Rosanna. She decides when it's time for another soulmate release.“ A mischievous twinkle appeared in his eye as he added “She can be a real pain in the butt sometimes... but she also helps bring couples

together by telling them both about their strengths and weaknesses in relationships—no matter if they found their soulmate or not.“

“And the person who is facing away from everyone else?” I questioned as the beautiful woman that was facing away from everyone else slowly turned around, the whole crowd lit up with the two words “OUR QUEEN!”

She was stunning, her golden skin complimenting her the way her hair, her jew on head and dress fitted on her quite amazing.

“Izel. Our beloved Queen.“ Elliot paused and gave me a meaningful glance .

I asked “Why does she look so distant?” I could feel an invisible bond connecting us as my gaze met her eyes, they were heavy with sadness.

“Izel has always been a rather enigmatic figure; if there was ever a problem, I always go to her than anyone else here. She's quite a keeper.”

The shooting stars tracked through the night sky above us as Rosanna words echoed rose from the sky “It's wonderful that the world has recognized West and Hazel as soulmates this year!“ Rosanna's words seemed like a heavenly blessing of love to all our hearts as West and Hazel embraced each other in the center of their group of friends.

“Wow.“ After a moment I saw my shadow fading away as we both returned back to the diner as nothing happened. “That was a lot to take in.“ I said, thinking of Elliot's expansive life. “But that's how you're to meet your one true love, Nyla,right?“

With a subtle shake of his head, Elliot looked up at me with piercing eyes and spoke: “No, she isn't the one for me. Even though I had deep feelings for her, it seems like my destiny is something else entirely. See.” he continued, advocating for himself gently. “I am the sole robotic fox in existence; I was not born as a fox like others before me, I was created from experimentation. As such it means.” He paused before continuing softly. “I was born on leap year..”

“Meaning each time a quarter century passes by.” I managed to say softly

The gravity of the statement revealed itself fully with the finality within his voice. “So there really is no hope of finding the one.” he said solemnly. “I’ll be stuck like this forever.” Despite feeling downcast by his current predicament, Elliot looked deeply into my eyes and told me that everything he had said was honest and true.

Though my heart listens and empathizes closely to what Elliott was saying – knowing full well that this wouldn't be an easy journey - I still held on to the thought that there might be someone out there meant just for him someday.

“Alright, here's one Bacon Cheeseburger without any tomatoes, ketchup, or onions and here is your food, handsome.” After placing the food on the table, she gave her full attention to Elliot.

I glanced at the waitress's name badge as she tugged at her top, trying to show off what little charisma she possessed. Her name was Brittany. As I glanced at my own breast and then at hers, I scoffed and had a tiny gay moment. Is this the right way to catch a guy's eye? I've never really flirted with anyone before, and the way Brittany does it, she'll ultimately tug her entire top down and there might be a chance she'll break her back. You don't need to go to all of this trouble just to catch a guy's eye. As far as I can tell, she

got more than I do, but I'm not going to whine about it. I have no problem with my small breast. Brittany, on the other hand, should be focused on her job and not on casual flings.

Is he even noticing what she's doing? Knowing him, I stole a glance at his face and saw that he was so caught up on his phone, he didn't even notice Brittany was there.

“If you need something, just call me.” Brittany said seductively. As she strolled away, I smiled at her in contempt.

At last, I won't have to worry about losing my appetite while eating my burger.

I dug into my sandwich and a couple of fries, but I noticed he didn't eat it right away. Elliot stared at his plate, clearly not happy with what he had gotten.

“Hey?” I asked. “What the matter?”

He flashed me a crooked grin, gestured toward his plate, and anxiously scratched the back of his neck. “Oh, she handed me the wrong order.” he said.

Silently, I laughed, hoping he wouldn't hear me. *Way to go, Brittany; you messed up his order because you were too busy flirting with him.* “Seriously?” I rolled my eyes.

His ears started to flush. “Yeah, but it's not a big deal.” He glanced down at his grits and toast in the breakfast dish. “I usually don't go out this much; I try to keep a low profile out of the human world sometimes.” He pointed to his hoodie

“What are you supposed to have?” I looked up from his plate and back at him.

“The Texan Bacon Lover's Sandwich.” he mumbled.

When it comes to food, one thing I've noticed about men is that if they don't get exactly what they want, they quickly accept it. But women on the other hand are serious about their food.

After shrugging his shoulders, Elliot forked over his plate.

The words “Put it down” came out of my mouth.

Confusion and fear filled his gaze as he followed my orders. “It's not a big deal, really.” Once more, he reaches for the utensil.

Before Elliot had the chance to dig into his dish, I quickly took it away from him.

“Clarissa!” he exclaimed, an embarrassed look settling onto his face. “Please come back and I can ea-“

I heard Brittany's laughter coming from across the room. As I made my way closer to her, I saw her adding coffee grounds into a cup with a flirty smile directed at some guy laying on the countertop.

I cleared my throat, coming up to them and calling out “Brittany!” loudly enough for her to hear me over their conversation. She looked up and made eye contact with me.

“It looks like you gave-“ I paused pointing my finger in Eliot's direction and then moved it back to meet Brittany's gaze again, saying- “the wrong order.”

“Impossible.” she retorted confidently before slamming the coffee maker against the counter, emphasizing her point. “Every single one of my orders is correct.”

I smiled to myself as I set the dish down in front of her. “He's supposed to have the Texas Bacon Lover Sandwich right behind you.” I said confidently, before peeking over her shoulder to make sure it was Elliot's order.

The kitchen door opened and a guy with a plate came out. When he saw me still at the counter, he asked. “Bri, how come you haven't taken care of this order yet?”

“That's my order, sir.” I declared positively.

He replied with a smile as he placed the dish in my hands and said. “Here you go.” I thanked him gratefully and added to Brittany “It's clear that by now you know what accurate service looks like.”

With a cheerful smile, I turned back to the booths Elliot and I were using. After noticing that he was still looking at me, totally embarrassed, I couldn't help but chuckle at his embarrassment. Once I had set the plate in front of him, I took my seat next to him and said. “What's bothering you now?”

“Nothing.” He gave me an innocent-looking grin. “You're incredible, you know that.” He struck up a conversation as he gobbled down some of his lunch.

I chuckled softly. “Looked like we already knew that from the start.” giving him a playfully teasing look as I winked at him.

Chapter Twelve

There was only one location in Elliot's entire house where I could find peace and quiet. The library is the best spot. I've always been an introverted person. I won't talk to you unless I feel completely at ease around you. Besides, this is the only opportunity I can think of what I need to do with my life.

My stomach growling interrupted me as I read my novel's next page. I hoped no one heard that.

"Dear, are you all right?" Putting a book on the rack, an unidentified woman said while grinning at me.

My cheeks puffed up in shame. "Everything is great." Like why now, that was humiliating. Who even keeps a librarian in their home?

"All right, just making sure." She said, giving me one last grin before walking away.

Another uttered a loud commotion ran through my stomach. I fixed my gaze on my belly. What's going on with you?" I hissed, pointing to my stomach.

I simultaneously sneezed and felt like I had been punched in the stomach. This wasn't like your average sneeze. It was like hearing "CHOO" as you descended a waterfall.

I groaned in annoyance.

This isn't a good day for you to appear like this. I hurriedly grabbed my belongings and ran to the closest room. Instead of running, I might as well have meant to be fleeing like

a crazy woman to find one of the restrooms. I see someone changing when I open one of the doors. "SORRY!" I sputtered, shutting the door behind me before opening a few more doors further down the hall.

Definitely not this one. What can a girl do to find a bathroom instead of walking in on someone?

I swung open another door, revealing... bedroom door?

This is the best I can do. Nobody is in here.

This house has so freaking many rooms. I spun around and looked in the mirror at the condition of my pants.

"Just perfect, perfect, perfect." I thought to myself as I pondered the TikTok that had just entered my thoughts.

I cried out and swore at mother nature as I went into the bathroom; mother nature had given me another abdominal stab.

I reached for my phone and texted Dekiva.

I heard the door open a few minutes later. "WHERE ARE YOU?" The sound of Dekiva voice screams in the room.

I scowled at Dekiva's outburst. "I'm in here!" I could have sworn I spent twenty to thirty minutes in this bathroom. I could have handled it myself if I wasn't concerned about looking foolish.

Once she heard my voice, she quickly gave the bag to me, went to the bathroom, and started lying on the bed.

“What was it that took you so long?” I questioned her as I tended to myself by turning on the water and jumping in.

“Well, no one told me which restroom you were in!” Dekivia lashed out at me. “It’s not like this entire home has only one room. There are far too many. I even phone and text you.”

“You know there is hardly any service here.” I muttered.

“Sure, if you say so. Everything you need is in the backpack. I’m happy you texted me anyway; I wanted to tell you about my ex.” Devika said. “I told my ex, I don’t want him anymore, but he continued calling and annoying me.” Devika began babbling.

Frustratedly, I blew my facial hair as I exited the restroom carrying my bags. “What a day.”

“Girl, who are you telling?” She says as we leave the room and approach the hallway.

I was startled by sudden noises inside the house, including loud screaming, argumentative shouting, and breaking glasses.

You heard that, right? Both Dekvia and I said,

No sh^t, obviously, I heard it.

“Let’s go check it out.” Dekvia tilted her head in the direction we heard the commotion.

Did Dekvia say. “Let’s go check it out?”; “That’s how you die in movies? This isn’t a movie where you can come back alive.”

I took hold of her wrist to halt her. “Dek, that’s how you die.”

“We are all in this together. If I die, you die with me.” Dekvia says without no hesitation.

“All right, let’s go.” We both move cautiously as we stroll together, hand in hand, while we come across the corner to see the guys fighting over football.

This is what we heard. I let go of her hand and walked to the table where Elliot, Braden, and Dekvia were waiting for me. I couldn’t believe it; maybe someone had broken into the house. It’s just these stupid guys.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Braden touched my forehead and asked. “Are you feeling alright lately?”

Due to you both, I nearly had a heart attack.

I gave a head motion. As they were conversing with their eyes, I noticed Braden looking at Elliot.

“Oh.that.” Elliot began to snigger at Braden.

Yeah, that, I laughed at him. What on earth could they be saying with their gaze. Isn’t that primarily a signal for females?

“Are you laughing at me?” As he drew nearer to me, he arched an eyebrow at me.

“What if I were?” As I neared him, I challenged him. I enjoy how this guy makes me feel like my lungs are on fire.

“You wouldn’t want that, Clarissa.”

“So now, you’re back calling me by my first name.” I turned to face him.

He was grinning, obviously finding this conversation amusing, as I looked down at his soft pink lips. We could brush lips if I drew closer because our noses are so close.

“Ari. My eyes are up here.” He whispered while pointing at his visage. We continued to gaze at one another.

I swallowed hard because it felt like my heart was pounding incredibly quickly. He was staring into my brilliant brown eyes with those gorgeous minty eyes. We felt like we were the only two people in the room.

“Please keep in mind that Dekvia and I are also present. Do you two have a discreet relationship or something?” When Braden said it awkwardly, we hastily retreated.

“What?” Looking at Braden, Elliot and I both remarked.

“All right, you didn’t have to glance at me as you both were ready to jump me instantaneously. “I was wondering whether you are together secretly.” he declares as he withdraws, raising his hands in the air.

I asked, gesturing at Elliot. "Him? Heaven No." I told an untruth when I said it. "So you two aren't together." Braden inquired.

"He is not my boyfriend." I muttered while resting my arms on the table.

Elliot remarked. "You know this man, she is not my girlfriend, and I already have a girlfriend. He focused exclusively on Braden.

"I'm just saying it's the vibe you two give off and how you stared at each other." Braden shrugged and turned to face us as Elliot, and I exchanged glances. "I believe the universe agrees." Braden grinned toothily at Elliot.

Intending to hurt Braden, Elliott folded his arms and gave him a quick glance. "That kind of energy is obviously given by best friends. We are best friends."

Best friends? Since when did we come to an agreement on that? Was it the other day when he mentioned it in the mountains? I was joking; I didn't anticipate him accepting it so quickly.

He began pricking my forehead with his finger.

"Get your pale ass finger off my forehead." I said. His palm was releasing the odor of cigarettes when I smacked it. "Honestly, don't even approach me", I said once more.

"Much attitude?" Eliot stated.

Whatever, I'm going to take a nap. I placed my head on the table and reached for my jacket to cover my head. I heard Braden, Dekvia, and Elliot talking, and I closed my eyes and started to nod off.

In 45 minutes

The last thing I expected when I woke up was a warm palm on top of mine. I peered under my windbreaker as Elliot dozed off, his long eyelashes gazing at me. His fingers interlocked with mine as his hand was deliberately put on mine. As butterflies started to emerge, I looked at our intertwined fingers.

I exhaled softly. This could be better. I remained silent. I noticed Dekvia wasn't there when I glanced to my right.

His affection typically enjoys closeness—both emotionally and physically.

When he was close to me, he began to express his love for me more frequently. His thumb is gently stroked with mine.

Elliot, check this out.“ Braden said in jest as he lightly tapped Elliot on the shoulder. He showed Elliot a video on his phone.

Elliot looks at me while widening his pupils. I was fortunate to be hidden under my overcoat, so he couldn't tell if I was really looking at him.

I'm sure his senses can't tell if I'm awake?

His cheeks are flushed, so he must have been caught off guard by what he seems to have dreamt about unexpectedly.

He leaned his head against his forehead and thought about his dream, then spun to furiously observe Braden as he glared at his phone and yelled, “Did you really just wake me up to watch this idiotic ass video?” His voice grew angrier and more agitated.

Please remind me not to wake Elliot up whenever he falls asleep close to me.

“I didn’t know you were sleeping.” Braden brought up. “Get your underwear out of the gutter, buddy.”

Under my windbreaker, I don’t move.

“Uhhhhh, Elliot?” Braden asks.

“What is it now, Braden?” Elliot turned to face him again and asked. “If there isn’t anything between you two, why are you grasping her hand while sleeping?” Braden cocked his head to look at our hands.

“Stop being ridiculous. Why wo-“ Elliot froze as he stared at our hands. I squint my eyes slightly as I watch him look at it to completely comprehend his reaction. He appears to be in a state of shock. He presented the impression of not knowing how or what to feel.

When he got a notification on his phone, he shrugged it off. He shifted his warm hand away from the mines, furrowed his brows, and turned to his phone to read what he had seen.

He furiously stormed out of the room, mumbling. “I’ll be back.”

I wonder what the text made him so mad; whatever it was, it had to aggravate him.

My mind began to race with thoughts. Why is Elliot so appealing? Was it the movement that grabbed my attention? It was terrible when we started, but we've improved. I feel more vibrant and energized the more time I spend with him. He always makes me flush when he is around. I find myself gazing at him because of the ways he pushes me on certain occasions. I probably sound creepy right now. Considering that all I do is read on Wattpad, perhaps I am just an unrepentant lover. Maybe all of this is in my head.

Next to me, a chair was being dragged out. When I looked under my windbreaker, Elliot was already back, Even more, enraged than before. I've never seen him quite like this.

He muttered, "You've got to be fucking kidding me." as he pounded the table repeatedly, grabbing everyone's attention.

I quickly raised my head, My heart seemed on the verge of bursting out of my chest, and I glanced at him in shock.

"Elliott, what the hell?" My voice quivered when I witnessed him continuing to strike the table.

If he punches me, may the universe be with me because I'll return the favor to him.

I forced Elliot to gaze into my tear-filled eyes by grabbing his hand, which he used to continue striking.

As they look down into my mines, his fiery amber eyes alternate between his initial minty green eyes and softening amber.

“Deep breaths.” I can still hear the fear in my voice. His hand landed on top of mine.
“Everything will be fine.”

He nodded and then closed his eyes, trying to calm himself by rubbing his knuckle against mine.

The only way to calm him down physically was to touch him.

I also looked up to see Braden and the others staring at us. They started to shrug it off, returning to whatever they were doing. He must do this regularly for them to ignore it.

“It’s okay.” I gently grinned as I took my hand off of his

“Nyla irritated me.” Like a five-year-old, he curled his arm.

So it was her? I forgot about her until he mentioned he had a girlfriend. He doesn’t even seem to be genuinely in love with her now.

“Thank god, I was afraid you were mad at me because I woke you up.” sighed Braden in relief. “Hell, I should get an apology.” he said, placing his palm on his chest. “You gave me the creeps.”

“I ought to be indignant about that, but it’s irrelevant.” Elliot went back, focused his attention back on me, and just stared at me. Even in this awkward setting, I ventured to blush.

“How did you do it?” He asked.

“Do what?” Curious, I questioned him.

“How did you manage to calm me down?” Elliot blurted out.

“To be honest, I just went with the flow.” I shrugged because who wouldn’t just follow their first impulse without thinking?

“You could have gotten hurt.” He says with hesitation “Who knows what could happen.”

“I just know you wouldn’t.” I noticed that his irises had returned to fiery amber as I faced him.

He didn’t say anything else after that. He pulled a set of keys from his pocket, which I examined carefully. If I remember correctly, Elliot doesn’t have a Honda.

“New car?” I questioned.

“No, It’s Nyla’s keys; she always manages to misplace them.” He said, grasping the long lanyards of the key.“ I can’t stand her sometimes, like when she texted me earlier.” He announced.

She’s here? I can finally get a glimpse of her appearance. I didn’t speak up, just remained silent. That, in my opinion, was the best answer I could give.

“No matter how hard I try, she can’t fucking see that.” In a rage, he shouted. “It was her decision to make us the way we are in the first place.” I could see him exhaling and inhaling rapidly.

To make her happy, what choice did he make? Is this the right time to say something?

I said to him with as much ease as I could summon. "Well, maybe if you both just calm down and sort things out, I believe everything will be alright." Why am I advising the guy I like, especially since he's dating someone? I ought to be offering lousy advice rather than good ones. "Everything is going to be okay."

"Okay?" He questioned me as he leaned closer to me.

Did I say that correctly? I'm sure I didn't say it backwards or anything. "Yes, everything will be okay." I said.

"It's not going to be okay." Elliot says loudly. "I was never okay from the beginning."

"I'm just trying to help." I jerked back at the tone of his voice.

"I'm fine without your help, Clarissa." He gave me a scowl.

"Next time, I'll keep it in mind.." I sink back into my chair. Talk about manic; he must endure it. I'm sure it was a mistake to believe I had a crush on him.

"That's your problem right now." He looked at me.

"Excuse me?" I frowned angrily.

"You heard me." He nodded and said. "You always have to throw your two sentences in and save the world."

I'm unsure if he's trying to piss me off, but it's working. "Elliott, you need to calm down before you lament something."

"I need to calm down!" he said, pointing to himself. "I NEED TO CALM DOWN!"

Why reiterate something I already said? He made me doubt my understanding by forming sentences.

"Yeah, it's jus-." Before I could finish, I was interrupted.

It all happens so fast. I don't think I even blink when it happens. I looked down at the table and tried to understand what had happened. I blinked three times before a memory from two years ago drew me in.

Flashback Trigger

"LET GO OF ME!--." I tried to get away, but he firmly gripped my wrist.

"Why should I, Clarissa? I don't fucking get it."

"Please, just let go." I begged, tears streaming down my cheeks.

End of Flashback Trigger

Stop being the same frail child you were before, Clarissa; get your act together.

I felt hot tears dripping down my cheeks as I compelled myself out of my thoughts. Elliot swiftly grabbed my wrist as I rapidly reached for my bag. “Shit, Clarissa, I’m sorry.” He looked at me with eyes full of remorse. “I didn’t mean-“

In exchange, I pulled his grip off of my wrist. I struck him in the eye he had just given me. Call it revenge, but if someone strikes you—whether intentionally or not—be sure to get one lick in. I learned that the hard way. I snarled. “Now we’re even.” and stormed out of the room, leaving Braden speechless and Dekvia standing by the door.

I’m not sure how I really feel about this. You will never forget this moment, especially since both of you will soon have a black eye because of a set of keys.

Chapter Thirteen

“Don't worry, Dad. It's great that you, Collins and the other mens are hanging out together.” I told him on the phone.

“I don't know what it is, but you seem different right now. I know my own kid and don't tell me otherwise..” My dad said while shuffling in the background.

My dad had spotted something unusual about my eye earlier when we were talking on facetime. Worry and sadness overwhelm him. I had completely forgotten about how I looked if that was the case I would never answer his call. He continued talking about it until Dekivia came along. I knew if I told him what had occurred, he would be extremely angry.

“No, Dad, nothing happened. Just a little bit clumsy, that's all.” I'd already answered my father's question 10 times. There really is no other way to say it.

“Are you sure a basketball just knocked you out?”

“Dad, I already answered your question. Don't you think you should join the others tonight instead of being on the phone with me?” A murmur escaped my lips.

“I want to make sure my baby girl is okay, even though I think you're lying to me.” I couldn't help but smile when he said that.

“Don't worry, Dad; I'll be okay. I love you.” I told him.

“All right, be careful. Give Dek my love. I love both of you very much. Bye.” As he hung up the phone .

A groan escaped my lips as I recollected what had happened earlier. I can't believe how quickly and randomly everything happened. At first, everything was fine, but after I napped, Elliot took on an entirely different personality. Although I knew he was a fox, does his fury normally take over like that when he gets angry? Whatever it was that Nyla said to him had to get under his skin. I don't know, what could it be? Perhaps she's heard stories about us being together recently. God, Should I feel bad for hitting Elliot in the face? I'm sure it was a mistake because the timing was just off. It all occurred in a flash. I don't know what to do because my mind is a complete mess right now.

“Are you all right?” Dekiva kept rubbing my shoulder. “You don't look too good, Clarissa. I'm like your dad on this one; you haven't been acting like yourself lately.” Dekivia declares.

I should tell Dekvia about what the doctor said a while back.

The pain in my brain made me scowl. I glanced up rapidly at the stars and mumbled. “I'm fine.” thinking they were approaching me.

“I understand why you're so upset.” she said. “First of all, I'm sorry I came here, and second—” ‘This situation,’ Dekivia sighed, grabbing my jawline and pointed at my face. “Are you even paying attention to what I'm saying?”

My eyes widened as they scanned the clouds above. “I feel like the stars are getting bigger and brighter.” “It's like I can touch them.” I exclaimed with a chuckle as I stared up at the stars.

Dekvia said with concern as she tried to figure out what I was looking at. "I'm going to take you to the doctor to make sure you're okay. There are no stars out right now."

The wrinkles appeared on my forehead as I studied Dekvia, and when I glanced up, the sky was empty.

I really need to see a Dr.Phil. Depending on the day, I may feel great or dreadful.

I blurted out weakly. "I feel sick." and grabbed my stomach.

" DO NOT VOMIT ON M-" Before she could even finish, I threw up on her sneakers. Dekvia gagged as she saw that her once-red sneakers were now stained with vomit. "Be lucky, I love you. Let's get you inside so you can relax." With my other arm around her waist she helped me to my feet by putting her arm across my shoulder.

"I'm really sorry." I gave her a sheepish smile and mumbled. "I'll get you some more."

My period was probably the only thing making me feel this way. She has a lot of ways to get me down. Sometimes I have intense cramps, vertigo, migraines, emotional changes, fatigue, and even mental confusion. The pain in my neck has never been this bad, and I rarely get dizzy or have migraines that last more than a few days.

The doctor did warn me about side effects, but surely they won't be this severe.

"Don't stress over it. Dekivia tells me with a smile. "I only care about your health; a pair of shoes doesn't mean anything to me." As she helped me inside, she kicked off her shoes at the entrance and ran into Braden at the front door.

“Clarissa.” Without a doubt, he asked “Are you okay?” He walked over to me. “Have you been eating?” before lending his shoulder to me. “You seem very weak and tired?”

Not at all; I never felt shamed for choosing a healthy diet. Lately, I still hear Mason's words in my head occasionally. “Hey, guys, I'm fine.” I stumbled and landed squarely on Braden's shoulder again.

While Braden kept a wary eye on Dekvia. “Dek, She really needs to see a doctor.”

“I'll call and make an appointment for tomorrow morning.” Dekvia says as the both of them help me get up to the second floor.

“Wait? I have something to say.” I talked softly. This is it; how will they react to it? Will they be upset with me because I kept it from them?

How they could possibly think there's something wrong with me. I'm alright; my monthly cycle just gave me a lot of trouble. Give me a week, I think its my monthly for the most.”

In the middle of taking one stride up the stairs, Braden stopped dead in this tracks.

“That's what's wrong with you?”

When I noticed a slight flush to his cheeks, I said. “I believe so.” Nodding in their direction and saying. “I'll handle it from here; you go have fun.” I prompted them to depart by suggesting they go have fun.

I walked past seven more doors and made my way into the room. I turned the knob on the final door at the end of the hallway. *“Hopefully, I can get some sleep.”* As soon as I opened the door, I shrieked. This is terrifying.

There were shards of glass everywhere, a couch on its side, cavities in the wall, and is that blood? As I made my way through the terrifying room, I kept a sharp eye out for any shards of glass to avoid. Why in the hell am I still here when I could be going?

Curse my inquisitive mind!

“WHY, ME?!” Someone was yelling in the bathroom . Another shard of glass shattered, and I stopped dead in my tracks.

Okay, Clarissa. You have two options.

1. Get the heck out of here and never look back.

2. See what is actually going on.

The first choice doesn't sound too bad. I ran back to the door when I heard someone in pain screaming. My teeth gnash together and I snarl. “You're an idiot, Clarissa.” I mumbled under my breath as I plowed through the door from which the cries emanated.

“I would like for you to leave.” His remarks were nothing but a massacre. “Elliott?” I could only see the back of his black jacket.

Angrily, "I TOLD YOU TO LEAVE!" He hurled the empty bottle of alcohol in my direction.

A soft "Ahh" escaped my lips as I shrieked from the pain in my palm from trying to protect my face. While Elliot drank from a second bottle, I shrugged off the discomfort. I went to grab the bottle from him, but he resisted. "Get your own bottle; this one's mine." He snatched it up and sipped from it.

Why does this man keep hitting me with things? First it was his truck door, then the keys, and now this bottle. I snatched the bottle away from him again and emptied the remaining liquor down the drain, inwardly scoffing at the way he reacted the whole time. "Now, there's nothing left." My eyes met his, and I felt that familiar connection again. As I turned to leave, he grasped my arm and pulled me back, causing me to fall awkwardly into his chest. As he slid back to the tiled floor of the bathroom, I landed on top of him. With a moan, I craned my neck and saw that the hoodie of Elliot finally slipped off.

"Clarissa, Are you okay?" The words came out of Elliot's mouth with a tremble. He had a contusion over one of his eyes and both of them were swollen and rosy. It was impossible for my strike to have caused such severe damage to his eye. How long he'd been imbibing and shedding tears? After brushing the grit off my black tights and offering a hand to him. He looked at me intently as he reached for it to pull himself up. When he grabbed my hand firmly, I left out a soft hiss. Elliot looked down at his hand, where a warmed liquid had been placed onto his palm. I looked at him and then my hand. My palm slid away from his and I hid it behind my back. "It's not that bad." I said, speaking softly.

“Clarissa... I am so sorry! I didn't mean to hit you with it. I just blink out for a bit.” It was then that I noticed his palms were shaking. “I thought you were so-“As Elliot kept telling me what was happening, all I could do was stand there and try not to cry.

“What on earth happened to you?” I whispered, Not wanting to draw attention to the scar on his face.

He gently said.“You shouldn't be in here—at least let me take care of this first.” and gently placed his hands on my waist as set me down on the counter while he fetched the first aid box from the cabinet.

For the past few nights, this room has been my home, and now it is completely destroyed. Since I only told Isabella that I would be staying for only one night, I don't see any reason to continue staying here. Even though this will be the final journey of my life, I had no intention of spending the rest of my time here. “ I was thinking that I should go back to the crib tonight..“ I raised an eyebrow at Elliot, who was playing with the bottom of his shirt.

I chuckled. I've never seen him appear cuter.

“Clarissa, Do you have a moment to talk?“ He came up to me and stood there in between my legs, his expression awash in regret. Nothing I could have said or felt would have seemed appropriate in this situation. Being in his presence always leaves me feeling like I need to catch my breath. Inquiringly: “Ari“ He gently touches my left face as he gazes into my eyes. As I tried to pull away, he reached out and gently grabbed my jawline. “Don't ever pull away from me. That's very disrespectful.“ Elliot said raspily as I restored my eyes to him.

Suddenly, he remembers manners, where was his manners when he first met me?

Once again, I pull away. "I don't need your help. Elliot." I lowered my arms. "I'd rather bleed to death than have you tend to my wound." It's almost as if he has a secret double living inside of him. Well, I suppose he does, being a fox and all. One moment, he'll be all warm and fuzzy, and the next, he'll be all bossy and callous.

"I'm really sorry, I messed up big time." "I would never hit a woman on purpose or by accident, especially with a key bottle and keys." he whispered. "At that point, I lost all composure and just snapped." The last bit was murmured as he took my palm and started bandaging my wound.

With my spare hand, I fiddled with the tail of his shirt and listened to what he had to say. "I'm sorry for hitting your stupid little face, too." I said, gazing at his swollen eye.

"I deserve it," he quipped. He continues disinfecting the cut on my hand. "I must admit, you've hit me twice with your good aim."

"Thanks." I let out a small chuckle and a wheeze. "What happened?" I ask once again. "What happened to your face and this room because I know I didn't hit you that hard."

"It's nothing." he said, looking directly at me. "Nothing happened." Elliot says as he wiped my palm with the hydrogen peroxide.

So, he expected me to think there was a battle between cats and dogs here? I mean, really, what kind of response is that?! I said "You do realize, I can see it, right?" I watched as he turned to look at me again.

His only word was “shit.” and muttered. “Really?” As he tightened the band around my wrist, he sarcastically remarked.

A guy like this is even worse than a woman on her menstruation. I knew I was capable of sarcasm and mood changes, but I never imagined he could be as extreme as I was.

“I was just seeing things, sorry.” I laughed and watched him as he encircled my hand. When I looked closely at him, I could see a single tear falling from one of his lengthy eyelashes. “Is everything alright, because you don't seem like yourself at all?” As I tilted my head, I noticed the grief in his eyes.

He's not as talkative as he was earlier.. Is it an indelible trait of Kitunie to feel bad that his mishap caused me pain? I'm totally ok with it, I forgive him

Elliot moves in for a close, saying. “I need to tell you something.”

I took a deep breath, leaned back, and said. “Okay.” with an uncomfortable grin on my face, I stammered

“I- I d- , never mind.” he stuttered “I'll be alright.” he said softly. Putting up the kit, he finishes wrapping my hand. “I've got a spare bed next door if you need it.” Leaving me alone in the bathroom, he said. “Goodnight.”

I leaped from the counter and chased after him. “Thanks, but El?” I felt like I had to go after him because something is bothering Elliot.. He needs someone to stand by his side.

The words “I don't want to talk right now, Clarissa” came out of his mouth.

“Elliot.” He turned his back on me. I said, “Talk to me.” as I stepped closer to him. To me, it's clear that he's hurting but is at a loss for words.

“What exactly do you want me to say!?” In distress, he swung around to face me.

“Something. I can see right through you; I know you're suffering on the inside.” A flood of tears welled up in my eyes.

Oh my god, I am such a coward.

I look up at him, taking in the utter malice and devastation in his face. “You don't have to say anything. I will never judge you.” As a trickle rolled down my cheek, I opened my arms wide. “Whatever it is, it'll be private between the two of us.”

He said nothing and just stared at my open arms. Even though I'm bawling my eyes out, he just looks at me like I'm an imbecile.

“GIRL!” A voice yells in my head. “Put down your arms and stop crying like a wimp!” I heaved a sigh and lowered my arms. Soon enough, an embrace from a friendly presence warmed me up.

“Arit.” Elliot says as his head rested on my shoulder.

“Hmm?” I give his back a soft stroke with my palm.

“Let me have this moment right now.” Wrapping his arms around my waist tightly, he whispered.

When I focus on the rhythm of his pulse, I can't help but feel some empathy. "Take as long as you need to."

A teardrop landed on my shoulder. "You don't need to say anything at all." I said quietly. "With all my heart, I'll always be by your side until the end of time." And there we were, standing there embracing each other.

Chapter Fourteen

Comforting Elliot was very beautiful. It's a wonderful thing when someone gets to know you well enough to share secrets or do things they've never done before. What made me happy was not knowing he was hurting, but rather, knowing that he put his faith in me regardless of that. In every way, I was moved by what he said and did. Simply, I'm flattered that he picked me to share his emotions with. Everyone can be compassionate in lots of ways. Elliot has this tendency of putting his feelings and the world around him in a bottle. For those he loves, he'll sacrifice as much as he can. When it comes to intimacy, he really goes for it.

“I think this room is cleaner than the other one, so you can stay here.” Elliot scratches the back of his neck and then opens the door with a sly grin. “After you.”

A gentle wind tickled the back of my neck as I entered the room and beamed gently at him. “Why is it freezing here?” I shivered, seeing pitch blackness around me.

“A cold bedroom always does the trick for me.” He turned on the light as he made his way to bed. “Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you.” He tapped the mattress gently.

As I walked over to him, I heard a click and immediately I spun around and glance at Elliot to see he was closing the door with the nimble of his fingertips. “Sorry, It really bothers me with the door open.” There I was, sprawled out on the bed, gazing at the ceiling. I swiveled around to face him from my side. Aside from a few injuries on his face, his wild, wavy hair and overall appearance made him as handsome as ever. Even his eyelashes were so ridiculously long that I felt jealous. With all those cuts and scrapes, how does that person manage to appear so beautiful? As for me, I looked like a befuddled sphynx cat.

As I looked at him, Elliot broke into a broad grin and laughed. “You are doing it again.”

As in. “What am I doing?” A crease formed between my brows.

“You’re staring at me with those stunning brown eyes.” He is still staring into my eyes.

I shook my head and cleared my throat, trying to come up with an excuse. “No, I was not. Stop being so conceited.” I flashed him a grin without making full eye contact.

He flashes me a grin in mockery. Nobody expected you to be such a liar, Clarissa. “As he pondered a sneaky plan, he lifted an eyebrow. Soon enough he got to his feet, walked over to his drawer, opened it, and began pulling out garments.

Hey, hold on a sec... is this... is this... his... room?

“I feel like I should go-“ He said. “take a shower because of this.” pointing to his face and his dirty shirt. He takes off his shirt one button at a time, maintaining eye contact with me the whole time, and then pulls it over his head.

What a moron, is he trying to get me to confess that I was looking at him?

As soon as I sat up, my eyes went straight to his six pack. For a moment there, I thought I was drooling as I quickly covered my eyes. “I believe changing in the bathroom seems like a good idea, don't you think?” I shook my head and mumbled into my palms.

Oh my God! In my entire existence of eighteen years I have never witnessed a guy without a shirt. I just wanted to keep staring at how handsome he was, but I can't be doing that right now.

“Say it again, I didn't catch what you said.” The way he spoke made it seem as though he were standing right in front of me.

“Don't you think-“ When I took my palms away from my eyes, Elliot was standing directly in front of me. His gorgeous six-pack abs were on full display as they were exposed by the lack of a shirt between us. As my eyes traveled up his v-line and onto his face, our eyes locked.

Oh god, I looked at him too long.

“You should change in the bathroom.” When I spoke, I lowered my voice to a whisper to avoid further embarrassment.

“You're absolutely right.” His finger slid under my chin and he inched closer to my face. “Did I make you feel uncomfortable?” he asked sensually.

Holy crap, that was too smooth. For a minute, I couldn't tell if my pulse was slowing down or if it was just trying to comprehend what just happen. I totally get what you're saying, heart. Now that I know you're okay, you no longer threatens to explode from my breast. How captivated am I, really, by his presence at this very moment?

As I felt the warmth of his lips as they moved slightly closer to mine,

Although my heart felt like it was about to burst out of my chest, I knew I had to take a moment and collect my thoughts before making any sort of move or decision.

Unexpectedly, he uttered a quiet “Is this okay?” His eyes met mine intently, awaiting an answer in return. With an equally soft whisper, I replied with a simple “It's okay.” before our lips collided together.

The feeling of his fingertips running through my hair made me want more; however, there was a contradicting force within me that prompted me to take back what seemed like an inevitable romantic surrender. Without warning, I pulled away sharply and opened my mouth trying to find words that could express the situation without revealing too much - but nothing came to mind. Then in what appeared like an afterthought his gaze left mine with a satisfied grin just before turning around for good.

“That was, uh...” Without thinking, I put my right hand on his torso.

He snorted “I’m going to take a shower while you get your thoughts together. With one swift wink, Elliot left to take a shower.

In stunned silence, I fell backwards onto the bed. I hadn't locked lips with anyone for ages and Elliot was only the second guy whom I'd ever kissed. Different from what culture had ingrained in me, his kiss was tender and calming rather than overwhelming or monotonous. To say that I was surprised would be an understatement—my heart began racing when his lips touched mine. This experience would likely stick with me for all eternity; my very first kiss wasn't nearly as enjoyable as this one; it had just been a big smooch on the cheek. Every feeling imaginable cascaded through my body when he brushed his fingers along my hair, almost causing me to swoon. Had all kisses felt like this? A thousand emotions suddenly amassed in me—excitement, puzzlement, and total exhaustion combined into one fantastic emotion-filled moment.

I was brought back to reality when he called out “Clarissa!” Had I been thinking for this long? Instantly I got up from the bed “Yes, uh, Elliot.”

“Could you pass me my clothes off the dresser, please?” Elliot peered through the crack in the door as he asked for his garments.

I quickly ran over to him and handed him his clothes. Our fingers made contact briefly. Immediately, I knew that familiar feeling started up again.

“Thanks.” He flashed me a bright smile which lingered in my mind before I stepped back and took a seat on the bed's edge.

The uncomfortable feelings returned; when Elliot is around I don't notice them, but as soon as he's out of sight it can feel like the end of the world. The sharp pain has increased since last month and I'm feeling dizzy with worry.

After toweling off his head of wet hair, Elliot emerged from the bathroom and asked if I was okay. Grasping at my head in an attempt to ease away some of the pain, I replied “Ow.”

Eventually, Elliot came out from the bathroom with wet hair and asked if something was wrong. With my stomach in knots, all I could do was groan and rub my temples.

“Stop whining, Clarissa.” He said, without meeting my gaze as he finished toweling off his hair. “I'll put on a shirt if it makes you happy.”

I chose to ignore him, despite the fact that I really enjoy seeing you without a shirt. The sharp pain has increased in intensity since last month.

As in. "Ah, My GOD!" There was a searing ache in my stomach. I was curled up in a ball on my bed and mumbled.

"Jesus Christ, Clarissa, what is your pro-" He suddenly stopped talking and sprinted over to me. "Can you tell me what's wrong?" Concerned, his eyes probe.

I couldn't even utter a single word because the agony was so intense. What's the deal with how excruciating these cramps are this month? If anything, this is worse than last month.

"Clarissa." He reaches over and shakes my shoulder.

"What?" I gritted my teeth and held tight to my knotted stomach. I was in so much pain, the last thing I want to do is to answer your questions or hear your voice.

"Are you feeling okay?" He asked me, peeking through the hole my face was covered.

"Just peachy, nothing tops the famous time of the month." I moaned in agony again with a hint of sarcasm.

As he rose to his feet, I got a peek of him out of the angle of my eye as he rocked back and forth on his feet and looked down. "Seriously, what are you doi-?" And then he cut me off.

"Don't move; I'll be back in a second." Elliot bolted out of the room in a flash.

I wasn't planning on it.

Men would have an easier time understanding the mood changes, discomfort, and other emotions we experience if they knew how Mother Nature worked. Men often deny the existence of premenstrual syndrome. Unfortunately, it's all in our head. They can't know unless they experience it for themselves. Being ill and having to cope with Mother Nature is a nightmare.

“Okay, I'm back.” Elliot came in holding a drink in his hand while asking, “Are you allergic to anything?” as he placed the cup on my nightstand table.

As I grip my stomach in pain and pointed in his direction. Out of the corner of his eye, he looked at what I was pointing at, seemingly perplexed. “What is it?”

“You.” The laughter that came from my lips was weak. Even though I knew it wasn't the time, I had to play around with him.

“I'm going to keep my mouth shut.” He gave me the middle finger as he went into the restroom. There was the sound of cabinet doors banging in the bathroom.

Seriously, what is he doing in there? I really need that bathroom to stay in one piece.

Within a brief time, he came back with some Tylenol and a warm cushion. “Take this.” He encouraged me as he sat down beside me.

“It won't work.” I practically said, shrugging my shoulders.

“Stop being stubborn and just take it already.” In a determined move, he thrusts the bottle directly into my hand.

“I'm not.” Tossing the bottle back in the same direction.

“I swear, if you don't take this medicine.” Before my very eyes, he was vigorously stirring the contents of the bottle in my face..

I took the medicine bottle away from him and told him. “Fine, but any medications don't work for me.”

“Sadly, drugs do.” He muttered to himself.

“What?” I tried twisting the Tylenol bottle from left to right, but it wouldn't budge.

Rolling his eyes, Elliot grabbed the bottle and opened it with a single motion. “Just that simple, Rissa. It literally says so on the cap.” As he gestured to the cap, he said. “Push down then turn.” When he handed it to me, I rolled my eyes and mumbled a thank you and glanced down at the bottle in front of me.

Show off.

Before I could take the pill, Elliot said “Come here.” As he crawled into bed on the opposite side of me

I tilted my head to look at him. *What is he up too?*

“Trust me.” He whispered.

What makes him think I would trust him when I don't even trust the choices I've made for myself? But what the heck not.. As I got closer to him, I exhaled.

He gave me the cup, saying, "Be careful, it's hot." after he had removed it from the nightstand.

"What is this?" I asked, trying to hold the hot mug.

"I brewed up some peppermint tea to help with the cramps." Inarticulately, he spoke. The tips of his ears started to turn red.

As I looked at his ears, I couldn't help but giggle. "Are you trying to poison me?" I drew my full attention to the tea, as I observed it carefully.

"If I were being totally honest, I would have done it a long time ago." Mockingly, he said.

A small voice inside my head said. "He already did, now you are a part of him, but I just brushed it off."

With each sip of tea, I rolled my eyes. The steam from the smoke reached my nose as I took the pill and drank my tea. I handed him the cup of tea as he perched next to my dresser.

"Don't make it weirder than it is; lay on my lap." He patted himself on his right leg.

"I'm sorry? You want me to lie down there?" My eyes dart from his lap to his face as I ask while my cheekbones burn with embarrassment.

“I warned you not to make this awkward as it is.” Elliot gently gripped my shoulder and laid me on my back, lowering me until my head rested on his lap. He lifted up my shirt, revealing my belly button.

I say, “Woah dude, what are you doing?” and quickly lower my top.

“Calm down.” he said, raising the warm cloth again to place on my tummy. He said “Trust me, I wouldn't even try to make a move on you in this way.” and the words kept echoing in my head.

Another one of his rants. That's the second time he's mentioned it. What does that mean exactly? Is it my lousy looks or the way I act?

“There's no need to be rude, I know I look horrible right now.” I caught a glimpse of him chuckling.

His frigid fingers lightly touch my warmed belly. When our gazes met, I let out a gasp quietly. When he went to place the warm cushion on my stomach, I quickly broke eye contact with him.

Asking, “Why are you doing this?” With my gaze fixed on his eyes again.

As he spoke to me, he looked me in the eye. “It's nice to have someone on your side, and I wanted to return the favor, especially the very first time we met.” Elliot said. We exchanged silent glances before he spoke and stroked his fingertips through my hair.

Who knew Elliot would be generous to a woman who just got her period? The endearing and playful versions of him were my favorites, but the colder versions of him were hard to take in sometimes.

“You must have never done this with a guy before.” He kept his fingertips in my hair, gently massaging my scalp.

“No.” But honestly, It's perfect in every way; just the way I imagined it.

“ No wonder, you have goosebumps on your arms. Asking.“Do I make you nervous?.” he traced the goosebumps onto my skin.

I had forgotten that I was experiencing pain. The intimacy of his contact and our proximity gave me the chills. It was as if we were the only ones in the world.

“Don't be too cocky.” I said as the gentle stroking of his fingers through my hair caused my eyelids to grow heavy.

Soon as his gentle touch put me to sleep,the last thing I remember him saying was.

“Forgive me for what I did to you; I had no clue it would end up like this, now it's apart of me forever. I never got the chance to thank you for coming into Isabella and my lives. Without your help, I would have been lost.”

Chapter Fifteen

Flashback

So there I was, beaming and giggling on Mason's lap with some of his friends at his house. The words that came out his mouth was "Hey babe?" Mason leant in and murmured into my ear as a few of his pals stared at us.

The shock of his sudden movement caused me to wince. "Yeah?" Shakily, I replied in a whisper.

Mason ran his hand up and down along my arm and said "I'm hungry?"

If I'm being completely honest, I just didn't feel like making dinner. My pains were unbearable, and I knew it was time for my period to start. "How about I make you a grilled cheese sandwich?" As I fought, my shoulders ached.

When he smiled at me, I thought he might finally agree with me for once, but instead he said "No, my all-time favorite meal." His head moved up and down, showing that he knew I would make it happen or face the consequences later on.

"The one that takes an hour or so?" I questioned him.

"Don't push me today, especially around my friends. Do as I said." Under pressure, Mason spoke very slowly into my ear.

I jumped to my feet and leaned forward to peck his cheek. "If it means making you happy, I'll do it." I gave him a friendly grin.

“I wish I had a girlfriend like that.” one of his pals said.

You don't even know half of the story, I go through with him.

Mason took my hand in his and kissed it, saying. “She's one of a kind. I'm very grateful for her.”

Lies. Grateful of what? Beating or yelling at me everyday?

I forced myself to grin. “Without a doubt, I would give up the world for him.” My words trailed off as I shuffled off to the kitchen to start making his dinner. I'm not sure how much longer I can keep going like this. Even my dad didn't know because I hid it from him. After learning so much about Mason's true colors in the span of a month, my scars still feel raw from the day before.

The top six ways to stay on his good side is :

- 1. Don't ever question what he says, just do it.**
- 2. You should avoid arguing with him at all costs.**
- 3. Don't embarrass him in front of his friends or people.**
- 4. Put on act as if we are a happy couple.**
- 5. Whatever he does to me, don't ever tell anyone.**
- 6. Be sure everything is perfect.**

...and I went ahead and did it. My last argument with him led to him beating me.

Time went on, and I eventually served him his favorite meal: pot roast with boiled potatoes, carrots, and broccoli topped with melted cheese. Once it was ready, I set his dish on the spotless surface of the kitchen counter. Looking over the table, I made sure everything was just right. A pair of utensils on the right side of the table, with his handkerchief on top. A Dr. Pepper in an elegant tumbler with three ice cubes is his go-to drink. Mason tends to be theatrical and fussy when it comes to eating. The stainless steel sphere over his dish divides his meal into thirds. Just don't get me started on how polished his flatware needs to be before he'll use it. I scoffed as the idea came to me that I could simply poison him and I could get out of this predicament.

I know, the things Mason does are quite over dramatic.

After wiping my hands on the apron, I called him into the kitchen. "Mason, your food's ready." As I poke my head out the kitchen door, I see Mason sitting on the couch, watching the game by himself. I wish everyone didn't leave so early. It would give me a chance to go home.

He whirled around and gave me a blank look. "Finally. I'm starving." Soon after, he rose and joined me in the kitchen. I just stood there, head hung low, expecting a different response this time. The last time I cooked for him, everything turned out perfect.

As I raised my head slightly, I caught Mason staring at himself onto the silverware.

A snicker escaped my lips. Now that I think about it, He's even more unattractive than his appearance.

A split second later, he whirled around and asked. "What's funny?"

Suddenly, the grin that had been on my face transformed into a solemn one.. "Nothing?" I sneezed clumsily as I spoke. He nodded his head at me as he glanced back at the silverware. Truth be told, I would have lied a lot sooner if I had known it would help me.

He gave me a quizzical look and started. "Well-" With his arms crossed, he asked. "Aren't you going to open it?"

"Pardon?" I asked.

"I'm not going to repeat myself." as he glanced at me again.

This hasn't happened before. In most cases, he'll personally open it. Quickly, I moved over and slowly unlatched the lid, nodding my head as I did so. My beating heart felt like it was going to burst; why does he need me to open his dome now?

"Hmm?" Mason took in the array of food before him. "It looks good." As he starts to eat, he comments.

After pinning the lid down, I felt a sense of relaxation. Even though I tried not to, a grin popped onto my face. Just a few minutes passed, Mason and I ate dinner together. He bolted to his feet, appearing more angry and repulsed than ever.

Saying. "What the heck is this!? Are you trying to poison me?!" Mason scolds me loudly while pointing at the food on the table with his finger.

Trust me, I would have done it a long time ago.

I glanced in the direction of his finger and said. "It's a potato?"

"Why is it so mushy?" He picked up the potato with distaste.

I chewed into my spud right away and something took over me. "It tasted good, also well-seasoned, and was cooked all the way through. It's meant to be soft."

How inefficiently sluggish can he be?

He hurled the dish at me, angry. I duck as I hear the dish break into pieces.

Incredulous "Are you talking back now?" He looked directly at me.

I stutter-spoke "no" and put my utensil down on the dish.

He finally responded. "PLEASE TAKE CARE OF THIS MESS; I can't be bothered with you at the moment!" His head trembled.

"I am so sorry..I did my best to make you happy." As tears streamed down my face, I said softly. He left me there alone, not hearing a word I said. I went to clean up the damage that was made. Mild sobs escaped my lips as I noticed the blood trickling down my finger.

End of a flashback.

"I'm so sorry, I just wanted to let you know—I'm sorry I let you down." I said.

“Clarissa, it was a dream, it's ok, I'm here.” he said as I laid there serenely weeping softly into his shoulders. I felt him wrap his arms around me and comfort me.

I slowly opened my eyes and hugged him tightly. 'El-Elliot,' I cried out in a low voice.

“Shhh.It okay, don't worry about it.” He ran his fingers through my hair and said.“I had no idea it would be this bad for you.”

As I relaxed under his touch I let out a deep sigh.

“Jesus, Clarissa, what were you going through at the time? If I had the power to end your suffering?, I would. I totally get the desire to put the past in the past. “Elliot said again as he ran his fingers through my dark hair.

“Can you promise me something?” I whispered as I looked deeply into his fresh-green eyes.

“What is it?”

“Please don't let me forget the intimacy we shared... I don't want to remember any painful memories I've had anymore, I just want to remember ours.”

The tears welled up in his eyes as he brushed away his tears and nodded his head and questioned.“Why did you say that though?”

“Because I only have a few days to live.” I said.

As the news sunk in, he stopped running his fingers through my hair. How long have you known? You can't be serious, can you?" A choked sob escaped him as he continued to gaze at me expectantly.

"It was the day we saw each other at the hospital, but please don't tell Dekvia yet. I'm still managing how to tell her." I sniffed.

"I will keep my word." Softly, he rubbed his fingers against mine.

"I can't figure out why I keep having these terrible dreams and sharp pain all over again." Once again, I cried into his embrace. It was beyond me why I had to go through this again. It was too much for me to handle.

Elliot asked me "Are you going to be okay?" while humming a sweet tune and kissing the top of my forehead. The look in his irises conveyed nothing but concern, remorse, and more.

"I'll be fine." I sat straight up and wiped the tears from my eyes. It was 10:47 pm when I checked the clock.

"Come on, let's go outside and get you some fresh air."

Chapter Sixteen

A grin spread across his face as he gave my palm a tight grip. “Come on, let's go outside and get some air.” Once my hand was in his, I glanced down at it. When his soft, warm palm was on mine, I felt like a little girl all over again. He walked me over to the door of what seemed to be a closet?

With a grin on my face, I pointed at the door and said. “This is a closet. As I threw the door open, I let out an exclamation. Clearly, this space was too small for more than one person. There were a number of black business shirts and coats stuffed in there.

“You really think this is a closet?!“ he said as he let go of my hand and chuckled.

I raised an eyebrow in puzzlement and pointed at the clothes. “Elliot, there's nothing in here but clothing.” Even though I know I'm not going insane, this wardrobe seems to be made entirely of clothes to me.

“Get in.” He waved his palm toward the closet.

It took all my willpower to keep from just staring at him. Is he going to try to kill me because of my little outbreak? I'm too young for him to kill me; I haven't even won the lottery yet.

“Excuse me?“ At this juncture, I had no clue what I wanted to say.

He rolled his eyes as he shoved me into the closet. I could hear the door rattle close as the room went pitch black. “Relax.” Elliot was speaking softly in my ear.

I squeezed my eyes tight. How can I relax? I've never liked being confined in a small space. The overwhelming majority of the time, it makes you feel like you're in an impenetrable prison. The air in here is so stale and confined, oh my god. In a flurry, I opened my eyes in the total absence of light and saw a brilliant beam of light entering the room.

I looked around and saw that Elliot was shining his phone's light and asked. "Are you okay?"

Do I look okay? Clearly not. That was torture.

Elliot nods and moves a stride or two closer to me. When his strong torso rubs against mine, I inhale deeply.

"Sorry." Both of his arms were pressing against me, and he said. "Could you move a little to the left?" He whispers in my ear. Seeing how cautious he is to keep my anxieties from increasing comforts my heart.

Is he going to kiss me again? I can't handle this, particularly in this tiny room. I feel as though he is deliberately trying to make me sick with his actions and the stuffiness of this room. I shift slightly as I watch him lean over me, his lips coming dangerously close to mine.

As he does so, he pushes the tiny button on his right side. There was a tremendous creak sound that I could hear coming. When the door opened, Elliot shouted. "It's an elevator!"

I took a few deep breaths. *I swear to God. And here I was expecting another passionate kiss from him. I felt my cheeks heating up and ducked my head in shame. Great, I have to play it off now.*

“Who would have guessed that the one and only Elliot would have a closet-sized elevator installed?” I gave his shoulder a light nudge.

“Let’s go.” He grasped my palm once more as we entered the lift. There were several options, but he settled on the highest floor. As the elevator began going up, an eerie stillness fell over the space. It felt like the lift was moving beneath my feet. An eerily familiar tune began playing as we went up each level. “Classic, you even have music playing in the elevator.” When the music in the background started to play, I rolled my eyes and smiled. It didn't take long for me to begin humming along to the tune.

“What would be the purpose if there wasn't a traditional elevator tune? That would not be any fun.” He said with a gleam in his eyes.

“Somewhere only we know.” As I glanced at him, the familiarity of the tune finally clicked into place. “When I was a child, I would listen to it every day.”

“Me too.” As the elevator doors open, he says softly. “We had just walked out of the elevator when he flung open the final door and I saw that we were outside on the same rooftop a while back.

“Wow, that's a really smart way to get out of trouble.” I snuggled into my sweater even more. The temperature has dropped to dangerously low levels tonight. The two of us started walking next to each other. I was hoping he would say something first.

“It's best to keep my family safe.” He beckoned towards the house.

Despite this, the sweater was doing nothing to help me keep toasty. It's possible that I'll get ill the day after tomorrow or the day after that. The blame, however, will rest squarely on my shoulders because I dared to wear nothing more than a tank top, tights, and a sheer sweater.

Shivering, I said, “Yeah, it's best to keep everyone safe. I gritted my teeth to stop trembling.

Suddenly, I felt a soft cloth brush my shoulder from behind. I turned my head and saw Elliot drape the back of his large piece of jacket over me.

“W-w-what are you doing?” I asked him softly as I was handing back his jacket. “I don't want the weather to make you sick.” I tried to lend him his jacket, but he shoved it back in my way.

“It will keep you toasty, and besides I'm a fox we rarely get sick. I have a healthy immune system.” He retorted by reapplying his jacket on my shoulder. “Keep it on you.”

When did he even grab a jacket? I need to start paying more attention to him.

I had no other choice but to listen to him. I didn't want to get sick, either. “Ok, Mr. I have a good immune system.” I made fun of him by imitating the sound of his voice before missing the seat of the swing bench

Laughing heartily, he sat on a swing bench.“ And I heard you should never pick on anyone because it will turn back on you. Who was that supposed to be?“ While laughing, he helped me up.

I hopped onto the bench with him and said “ Who else, you.“ I chuckled.

“That was so terrible.“ He dabbed away the tears that were developing in his eyes.

Mild smile spread across my face. “I felt I did a fantastic job.“ I murmur at him, sticking my tongue out.

“Sure, we can go ahead and say that.“ He started laughing again.

Seeing Elliot smile warms my heart as I gaze in his direction. Everything altered the moment I met Elliot. At first, I was quite cruel toward him, but I soon realized that he was a kind spirit who just needed to be loved.

“Ari?“ Elliot said quietly enough for me to hear him

“Yeah.“ As soon as I glanced up, I realized he was staring at me. I saw him part his lips, but nothing came out. I felt his hand creep down my arm, pausing when he reached my palm, and then carefully winding his fingers through mine. As he shifted our entwined hands to his chest, where his heart was quietly pounding. “Have you ever considered dating?“ He tinkled on my fingernails.

I didn't say a word, which was surprising for me. To prepare to answer his question, I took a deep breath. “Not recently, but I have before.“

“Let me guess: you ended things with him.” A laugh escaped his lips.

I've never understood the logic behind the widespread belief among men that women always break up with their male partners first. Women don't always have cold hearts, you know. But what if the male actually did something?

“No.” I watched in silence as he traced his fingers over my skin, causing goosebumps. He cheated on me, I proclaimed.

When he finally looked at me instead of caressing my skin, he exclaimed. “Shit. I am truly sorry.”

“It's fine, nothing to worry about.” I said with a smile as the tip of my forefinger touched the tip of his.

“Of course it was your first love.”

“How did you know he was my first love?” I'm confused as to how he figured out that Mason was my first boyfriend. Nobody but Dekiva knew who it was.

“I could tell by the sound of your voice that he had completely shattered you.” Elliot commented.

I whispered. “He did.”

“He was probably a little shit, anyway.” After bringing my palm to his lips, Elliot asked. “Would you ever date me if things were different?”

Honestly, would I? When I heard those words emerge from his lips, my facial expression sank. What if things were different? Would I date him? He had faults, but in my heart he was the greatest spirit he had ever known.

“There's something about you that makes me wish I'd met you before I started seeing Nyla.” His voice was soft.

“Elliot?” Unexpected, but soft voices appeared.

“Nyla.” Elliot whispered, still glaring at her.

And there she was. Nyla, his girlfriend. Just like a blossom, she was stunning in her beauty. She stands out from a distance. When she called out his name, her voice was heavenly. Her golden, shoulder-length hair was perfectly straight. The woman was curvier than I was. Everything about her just screams that girl.

When we finally glanced up, Nyla was shuddering as she came toward us. He quickly pulled his palm away from me and walked over to Nyla.

“What are you doing out here when it's freezing?” Instinctively, Nyla shivered.

“Clarissa needs to get some fresh air.” He bobs his head in my direction.

I made a clumsy wave and a smile as I said. “Hey Nyla.” *Why did you feel the need to speak to her when you know in your heart that she doesn't like you? Call it a female institution. There is a lot of hatred, and I can sense it from over here. The million dollar question: why am*

I even going through this Universe? Especially with someone who is already taken. It seems like the world sometimes listens to the exact opposite of what I say.

When she saw me waving at her, she turned to greet Elliot with a smile. I watched as she took a deep breath of the crisp outdoor air. “Where's your jacket?!” Nyla freaks out when she sees that he isn't wearing a jacket.

Nyla said, “Let's get you inside before you become sick.” as I was about to hand him his jacket. She greeted him with a grin as she grabbed both of his hands and stuffed them into her bulky coat.

As I looked on, he kissed the back of her head and gave her an embrace from behind. It's clear to me how he feels about her, but I question if he's ever felt the same way about me. The little things he's done and said to me so far may have already captured my heart. The times we spent together only a few days ago seem like another lifetime at this point. You never know if you have feelings for someone until you witness them with someone else.

Chapter Seventeen

Whenever I think about it, there's one thing I get sick of doing. It's having high hopes for other people. I keep thinking, for no good reason, that the people in my life will eventually commit to being “the one“ for the rest of time. Even though I knew he was in a relationship, his behavior led me into a different story. Since I've never experienced healthy attachment, I tend to get hurt quickly. Even the smallest amount of affection is enough to make me feel cherished, so seeing him with the stereotypically beautiful woman shattered my heart.

“I'm really sorry.“ When I plowed into the solid ground, it was a blow to the sternum. “I wasn't paying attention.“ I happened to glance upward to see it was Adam.

“I would have never guessed seeing you here. “As he continues saying while holding his hand out for me “What's up with the long face, buttercup?“

I took grasp of his hand and saw his adorable dimples beaming at me as Adam reached out and grasped my cheekbones, hoping to coax a grin out of me. Slightly shrugging my shoulders with a sigh. "I'm surprised to see you here myself? How did you managed to get here?" Truthfully, If I had to give him an honest answer I would say “*I was having a great time hanging out with Elliot until Nyla came along and ruined it for me.*“

“On occasions, I uh, I call this place home too because I also work here. I'm a s-security guard, I'm off duty now. “He stuttered as glance over at me and noticed I was still was upset. “How about we try to cheer you up,yeah? If you have time, can I give you the tour I've been meaning to do for you?“ He gives me another bright grin, slides his hands into his pockets, and sway gently on his toes as he waits for me to say yes.

The truth is that I do need to get out of this house because I have never once enjoyed my time here. All I had were problems after problems. Things that can cause me distress include my headaches, my love life, mother nature, random neck problems, dizziness, brain fog, and so on.

For crying out loud. “Sure, Why the heck not!” A grin spread across my face as I glanced at my watch and told him. “It's only 7:41.”

“Perfect timing, do you want to tell somebody that you're leaving?” Adam stated toward me with curiosity.

Adam is such a gentleman; he wants to make sure someone knows I'll be leaving the house for a couple of hours. I never experience before “I'm sure Dekvia inside, let me go tell her.” I motioned the door behind me. I said hastily, As I entered the house, fully intending to make a sprint for the upper stairs, but after taking a few steps back, I noticed that everyone was already seated in the living room, watching television.

“Clarissa!” Dekvia exclaimed with joy. “For a while there, I was worried that you were sleeping off the sickness you experienced earlier. Are you all right?”

I noticed Nyla, whose long golden hair was lying on Elliot's shoulder, and a couple of people I barely knew, and Dekvia and Braden, snuggling up against each other. I want to be the one to rest my head on his shoulder. But I guess the universe has other ideas for me.

“I'm fine, Um” I said awkwardly, pointing at the entrance behind me. The uncomfortableness of this situation is killing me. It's as if I'm being chased by a clock and need to get to class as soon as possible. It's already uncomfortable and humiliating

that everyone seems to be looking at you until you explain yourself, no one will stop. "I'm heading out." I remarked.

Quick as a flash, Dekvia bolted right up and stared at me like a frightened deer caught in the beam of a car's headlights. "Where are you going?"

As soon as I heard footsteps coming from behind me, I spun around and saw Adam standing there with his hands in his pockets. I smiled and turned to face Dekvia, saying, "I'm going out with him for an hour or two." I reached out and clasped his hand, yanking him over to stand next to me.

You know what the scary part is. Dekvia doesn't mess around when it comes to me. When it comes to nonsense, she has zero tolerance. I watched as she slowly approached us. Her gait was overbearing; it made me think of military people.

"I actually do remember you." She looked at him with steely intensity. "You're a waiter at a restaurant. Do you mind if I ask what your name is again? Actually, what is your full name?"

"Babe, don't scare Adam like that. I believe she's good hands, after all he does work here too." Braden said as he walked up to Dekvia. "It's all right, buddy. Just bring her back as she is now." he tells us after kissing Dekvia on the cheek and turning to face us.

With a frown on her face, Dekvia asked me, "Where are you all going?" after glaring angrily at Braden.

"That's a good question; she seemed agitated earlier, but I'm not sure. Buttercup, where do you want to go?" Adam lowered his glance down at my tiny frame.

“So, no one cares about what I think?!” Elliot’s voice echoes loudly through the family room. “Since when did he start working here and clearly nobody told me about it. I also think there’s no reason for her to go anywhere, in my opinion.” His eyes darted to Adam, then to me.

Adam cleared his throat, nervously, as I felt his hands become very sweaty “Uh, It’s been two weeks, sir. You were very busy with other things and you didn’t notice me.”

“Since when do you care when people leave?” Braden gave Elliot a mocking grin.

You’re toying with fire, Braden.

The home shook along with the lights flickered as picture frames crashed to the floor. Causing Elliot to say, “I don’t.” giving Braden an icy stare.

Braden, giddy over Adam and me, says, “So, let the girl have some fun.” As he was saying, “They set up a nice karaoke and bowling alley at the fair in Gregvi-” Dekvia cut him off.

“Let’s go to the fair, babe, so I can beat your a^s at ring toss.” With a grin on Dekvia face, she jabbed Braden on the shoulder.

“Isn’t it my responsibility to kick your a\$\$\$?” Braden eyes flickered at her rear-end before winking at Dekvia.

I chuckled, “I didn’t know you were into it, Dek.” as Dekvia cheekbones started to flush.

“I'm going to get ready. If you go to the fair, just let me know.” Dekiva said as she quickly hid her blush and ran upstairs.

When I spun around to face Elliot, I saw him gazing vacantly at Adam and my hands. Looking into his gaze, I could tell exactly what he desired from me. The thought of leaving him angry made me consider staying, but then I saw her. As his attention shifted away from me, Nyla planted a peck on his face. But since it's my trip, I wouldn't let him ruin it.

After giving Elliot another glance, I turned back to Adam and said, “Let's get going!” As I ushered him out, I flashed a broad grin at everyone.

It's not like I have anything to lose by giving Adam a shot; if Elliot can go out and play with people's feelings while flirting with someone, so can I.

“You've got a clammy palm.” I wiped my hands off of my pants.

“I'm sorry, but your friend really freaked me out.” He chuckled nervously as we strolled.

Softly, I elbowed him in the side and said, “That's Dekiva for you.”

* * *

When Adam turned around, I crushed my vanilla ice cream in his face after tapping on his shoulder. With a look of shock on his face, he wiped the ice cream from around his body and went to place the remainder of the ice cream on me.

I let out a shriek when he grasped my waist, he rubbed some of the ice cream on my forehead and we both burst out giggling.

“I can't thank you enough for bringing me here; I desperately needed it.” Smiling broadly as I wiped my face clean of any leftover ice cream.

“To deal with any problem, big or small, just picture a caterpillar. You can't remain trapped in the situation you are in forever; you're going to have to break free at some point.” Adam nudged me on the shoulder with a grin on his face.

“That was beautiful saying.” I committed as we made our way toward a fairground game. 'Oh my God! I haven't played this since I was a child, can we play?’“ I keep pleading with Adam over and over again.

He chuckled as he reached for a ticket, but the cashier interrupted. “It's free for the beautiful young lady.”

Quietly. “Really?” I questioned. The clerk nodded and gave me five darts. “If you can burst all five balloons, you get to choose two plush animals.”

My eyeballs nearly popped out of their sockets. Will today be my day of luck? No one has ever told me that I could have as many plush creatures as I wanted for no cost. I need to get my hands on this because it would mean so much to me if I give it to Dekvia to have it as a memory of me.

“All right, let's do this!” As for me, I was never one to back down from a challenge.

Just as I was about to twist my wrist, Adam said. "Let me get 5 darts too, I gotta show her who's actually boss." Adam fished \$5 from his pocket and gave it to him.

"If you say so, I'll let you go first since that's what you want." I smirked at him.

"Don't say a word when I win." Adam insisted as he threw a dart at the balloons and winked at me.

MISS

In a humorous gesture, I crossed my arms over the top of my chest and said. "3 more and maybe you'll win something."

He returned my gaze. "There was a bug in front of me and I couldn't do anything." Mumbling, he threw his dart again.

MISS

As he flubbed again, I had a hard time getting the words out of my mouth before I burst out giggling at him. Even though Adam believes he is the game's dominant player, he is actually losing terribly. His "DAMN IT!" reached my ears before I spotted Dekvia and Braden approaching us.

"You made it!" After giving me a big embrace, Dekvia asks. "I see Adam and you are playing darts, who is winning?" Dekvia sees Adam miss another balloon.

"In light of Adam's defeat, I've decided to take matters into my own hands and prove once and for all who really holds the reign of the power." The thought made me laugh.

“You mean to tell me you're the best dart player around?” Braden says while we're all still watching that Adam has finally hit a balloon.

“SEE! That's exactly what I'm talking about!” Adam was proud of himself for successfully popping only one of five balloons.

If guys can play video games all day or night, they should be good at everything, but I don't think that's the case.

I shoved Adam away and laughed. “Adam, you only hit one balloon, you didn't win anything.”

Give me another chance! Before sliding another five bucks out his pocket, Adam says.

“If I don't win, you get another shot. If I win, you owe me \$5.”

From what I overheard, Dekvia and Braden have begun wagering on “My money is on my girl.” Dekvia huddled her arms around herself defensively.

Bradley let out a grunt. “I'm putting my money on Adam.” He reached out and patted Adam on the shoulder, whispering to Adam saying “You better not screw up either.”

My brain trembled as I watched the cashier turn you around to look at the balloons. I exhaled deeply before letting go of the object.

POP

“That's my girl!” Excitedly, Dekvia let out a shriek. “You better get your money ready, honey.”

Again, I let one fly.

POP

Also, another one.

POP

The people around you began to cheer. Wow, that really boosted my confidence up .

“What the heck!” Adam and Braden exchanged groans.

As well as the final two.

POP

POP

Energized, I flipped around. “I WON!” And I began leaping around, until I got a pounding headache. “It seems like you have to pay up, Adam.” As I turned to face the counter employee with a smile.

“Well, a win is a win.” the cashier sneered at me. Choose any of the prizes.” When I saw all the bright plush animals, he stepped aside. “Compared to your boyfriend, you're pretty talented.” The clerk says once again.

With a laugh, I reached for the largest huge koola. He is not my boyfriend, Just a friend.“
To the clerk's delight, I gave a broad grin. *I have no idea why I told him that.* The last
reward, a fruit toy with a broad grin on its face, was mine to claim. “This too!”

As the saying goes.“That was just beginner luck.“ Adam rolled his eyes at me and gave
me five bucks.

Someone is sad that they lost. “You're too kind for letting me play.Thank you.“I
mentioned it to the cashier as Adam, Braden, and Dekvia and I were departing.

“Here, have this; it's for you. I want you to hold onto it for me forever.“ Without a word,
I gave Dekvia the stuffed animal, trying to put out of my mind the details of what I
would soon have to reveal to her.

“This is so sweet. Thank you, but there was no need to sound so sentimental, Rissa.
Since we're both in this together, we might as well make it count.“ Dekvia gives me a
bear embrace, smiling brightly as she releases me.

I sure hope that we make the most of it. In a comforting embrace, Braden wraps his arm
around Dekvia and tells me.“I didn't know you were that good, Rissa.“

“My father used to let Dekvia and I play until one day Dekvia hurled a dart at his foot,
after that he forbade us to do so.“ While Dekvia was slapping my arm, I couldn't help but
laugh to myself.

“It's not my fault I was losing; come on, let's use the photo booth!“ Dekvia grabbed
Braden's arm, saying.“C'mon guys!“ as she pointed toward the picture booth.

As I faced Adam, I shook my head “I'll catch up with you guys,I need to make a short phone call. Don't worry, I'll bring this to the car. A grin crosses his face as he takes my koola and walks away.

A long breath helped me relax before going into the photo studio with Dekvia and Braden. We took a few pictures, and I put two of them in my wallet before recommending they each get their own to keep eternally. When I stepped out of the booth, I gave them a friendly smile and waved.

I'm sure there's room for one more, but I've seen plenty of folks come and go from the stand. I stepped into the photo studio and commented.“Just this one picture shouldn't hurt.“ It's 2023 for crying out loud; this year has been quite an adventure for me. That's when I struck a stance and started making silly faces for the camera.

I shielded my eyes by closing them and holding out a hand to the light.

When I open my eyes, all I can see is the photo booth snapping random photos. Besides the intense feelings, the luminosity is making me dizzy and queasy. My eyes were closed as the agony became unbearable. There wasn't much time before tears were welling up in my eyes, but I wiped them away and focused on adjusting to the brightness. I wasn't going to let some illumination challenge me.

There was a 5-second timer before the final picture was taken.

There was an abrupt pulling back of the drape, and Elliot was there. He walked into the cubicle and watched as the machinery took the picture. “What a loser you are, taking a

picture of yourself all by yourself.“ He handed me the pictures that were taken.

“Shouldn't you be taking them with you,Adam?”

Our palms touched as I pried the pictures out of his grip. “What's wrong with taking pictures by yourself? Maybe I wanted to take a picture by myself,but shouldn't you be with Nyla.“ I felt envy well up in my chest as I rolled my eyes.

“How jealous are you? She's in the restroom right now but she's here. When I saw you go into the booth, I decided to join you. “Shall we?“ His gaze never left mine as he spoke, and then he sat down next to me.

“I thought you didn't take pictures.“ I said after recalling something he had said some time before.

In silence, I watched Elliot push the trigger. “Things are different now.“ He speaks right before the camera goes off. After taking a few shots inside the box, we exit to get the pictures. Hold on a second, they're identical?! Has he accidentally hit the “copy“ button? With confusion on my face, I gave him the other one. I carefully looked at the pictures.

In the first one, we were seen laughing and beaming; in the next two, we're both being silly; and in the last one, I can see his lips slamming against my face.

With a “I believe...“ His palms disappeared into the inside pockets of his jacket. “I like it.“ A warm grin spreads across his face as he looks at the photo for a second time and then makes eye contact with me “Clarissa?”

“Yeah?“ I look up at him.

“I don't think you should be spending time with Adam because part of me knows he's not trustworthy.” He's leaning against the picture booth's wall, staring at me.

I gave him a quiet grin, Asking: “Jealous much? I teased him by laughing.

Sneering and rolling his eyes, Elliot said: “Don't think I came here because of you.” Elliot ended the conversation effortlessly as we saw Dekvia and Braden getting out of the booth.

I quickly put the pictures in my bag before I met them. I didn't want them to see the photo Elliot and I snapped together. There's no telling what happened to Elliot with his picture. Ultimately, he is likely to discard it in the garbage or something. As I looked on, I saw Braden and Elliot give each other a friendly fist pump as if they hadn't seen each other in days.

The air in my lungs grew thicker as Nyla smiled and joined us: “I figured that I should go on a respectable date with my girl. I decided to contact an old acquaintance who has offered to keep an eye on Isabella.

While planting a peck on Elliot's face, Nyla asked: “Should we all go to the karaoke?” She pointed to the structure that was directly behind us.

The perfection of the way she speaks is almost enough to make me dislike her. I don't understand how she could go her whole day without talking to me. She always greets me with a stony stare whenever she sees me. Is she not a fan of me or something? There is only one way to find out.

“Nyla, you look amazing in that outfit.” While smiling adorably, I said. Nyla's outfit consisted of black motorcycle shorts and an orange t-shirt with the word “Miami” on it. I wouldn't lie about how much I liked it.

Nyla mutters a hasty “Thanks” to me. She turned to face everyone and asked in a very cheerful voice. “Shall we go?”

“Let's go.” I just stood there dumbfounded as I figured out she doesn't like me. Dekvia walked up to me, clasped arms with me, and wore a scowl. Would it be impolite if I tripped her on purpose? Respectfully.” Dekvia's irises sparkled as she gave me the most edgy grin.

“I wish. Come on, let's go.” As we walked toward the building, we saw Adam standing there. After a while, I simply forgot that Adam was here. To be honest, I lost track of him while I was engrossed in Nyla and Elliot's being together. He was gone for a long time.

“Hey.” I freed Dekvia's arm and grinned at him as I saw her walk into the building.

“I'm sorry, I didn't think it would take that long.” He led the way inside the building by taking my hand.

“Is everything all right?” When I looked up, he was nodding his head yes.

I imagine one of the workers asks. “Names?” as I approach the main entrance.

What are the names for? Is there going to be some sort of reward for us to expect? Prizes are all I can think about right now. Perhaps this is done to control the number of visitors, as it turns out to be quite crowded here.

“Adam and Clarissa.” After Adam gave the employee our names, he allowed us to enter the loud, booming building.. We finally caught up with the rest of our party, who were all having a great time talking and giggling to the lively music.

“Mr.Ward? Is there anything you'd like to drink right now?” One young lady employee trembled.

I had almost forgotten that Elliot's father is well-known in this area; after all, he heads up the largest scientific facility in the world and doesn't mess around.

“I'm Good. Do you guys want something to drink?” Elliot's question formed in his eyes as he glanced at me.

Dekvia says.“I'll take some water.” before scoffing at Braden and adding.“Actually two, please.”

Asking.“What was the purpose of that? When Dekvia didn't look directly into his eyes, Braden grasped her jawline.

"It's nothing," Dekvia spoke softly.

“Get a room, you two.” Always flirting with each other, no matter what time or day it is.. Turning my focus back to the worker, I said.“I'll take some water, too.” I said.

“Grab a pitcher of water for the whole group, please.” Elliot glanced up at the girl who had bowed and then left without saying goodbye.

Personally, I don't get why everyone is so scared of Elliott. In all of my interactions with him, he has never once seemed threatening. He was perpetually grumpy, but this trait eventually grew on you.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! A guy onstage shouted. “THERE IS A REASON WHY WE WROTE DOWN EVERYONE'S NAME!” His words echoed throughout the room.

The previous employee now comes back with our bottles of water and sets them down for us. Before she left, I merely expressed my gratitude. At last, we reached the juicy part.

“It's going to be a spin-the-wheel-and-let-chance-decide-which-song affair, with 10 people!”

Oh goodness. It's not as captivating as it is now. No one wants to be the one to take the platform and look like a fool. Definitely not me. It would have been better if I had come up with a fake identity, but instead I let Adam do all the talking. My name could have been Alice.

As the saying goes. “Let's get this party started!” He picked a few names out of the box and announced them to the audience.

After a moment, I swiveled around to look at Dekvia. Saying. “You have something right here.” I drew her attention to her visage as she sipped water.

“Please, Dekiva and Braden, take the stage!”

And with that, her water went flying right at my forehead. Holy crap, she just spewed a full glass of water in my direction. That's so disgusting. I swallowed my pride, grabbed some napkins, and cleaned my face.

"I'm so sorry, I wasn't expecting that. What should I do?" Dekvia asked. "You know damn well I can't sing." I caught her eye as she looked at Braden and me.

Truth be told, I've never even heard Dekvia sing. She always hummed along to the music wherever we went, but singing? I'm not sure.

"You really got this girl!" Nyla applauded loudly as Dekvia and Braden took the platform. Suddenly, I raised an eyebrow in her way, because, well, who is she? She doesn't have the right to cheer on my best friend. That is my job.

"Hello, everyone! I didn't expect my name to be drawn, and neither did my girlfriend." With a laugh, Braden continued. "Let's hurry up and get this over with." Giving Dekvia the second microphone, he muttered. "Don't laugh at us because we're not as good as Beyonce and Justin Bieber." Braden says As the wheel spins and stops on...

"You've got to be kidding me." Dekvia says into the microphone as she observes the wheel. When I heard what she said, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Which do you prefer, the tune or the guitar?" The man asked Braden.

"The guitar, please." saying as the guy gives him the instrument. "This is what we'll be singing." Braden showed the song title "Stitches" by Shawn Mendes and Hailee Steinfeld on the big screen.

I have to admit, when Braden picks up the instrument and begins performing, he does a fantastic job. Right away, I reached for my phone to capture this moment on film, but as soon as I pressed the record button, my jaw struck the floor. I had to force myself to get to my feet. That lying is a piece... A moment ago, I was under the impression that Dekvia claimed she couldn't sing, but look at her now! For as well as he performs the guitar, I was surprised to hear Braden's voice carry so sweetly. That duo?. I can't quite put my finger on it... Incredible, and their sounds complement each other perfectly.

Shut the front door, he hit that note so perfectly! I think I may be the most enthusiastic person here. While beaming and singing along, I stuck out my middle finger at Dekvia when she turned to face me.. The words "THAT MY BEST FRIEND!" came out of my mouth nonstop. I applauded enthusiastically as Braden gradually finished playing the guitar, and the other audience members followed in.

A heartfelt "Thank you" Dekvia declares as she crosses off the platform. With a shocked expression on my face, I hugged her and exclaimed. "What the hell was that!?" At that, I broke off and seated down next to her. "I thought you said you couldn't sing."

Dekvia gulped down some water before uttering the words "I can't."

"Lying a--." I gave her a shove when the employee then called someone else a name. When the young woman singing the last few notes of the tune reached the right crescendo, I applauded.

"Another round of applause for the beautiful young woman, and on to the next performer! Giving it to Nyla and El-" he paused in mid-sentence as he read the paper. "Elliot."

I gave Elliott a cursory look and saw that his visage was as empty as a rock.

“No.” He looked at Nyla briefly.

“Please.” Nyla stood up and put her hand in his, pleading. “Just for me.” With innocent baby eyes, she peers at him. I caught his exhalation as he followed her up there.

Asking. “Can Elliott sing? He seem like didn't want to go up there at all.” A proclamation from Adam said.

“Yeah, he can?” Then I nodded my head as I swiveled around to face Braden.

Before long, Braden sets the record straight. “So, singing reminds him of his mom.” It's comprehensible why Elliot hesitated to go up there as soon as the wheel started to revolve. For him, this triggers a flood of nostalgic thoughts.

“Hey, folks! Duncan Laurence and Fletcher's “Acarde” will be our selection.” As she spoke, the music started playing in the background.

Once again, Braden's words continued, causing me to be alone with my emotions. “I'll do anything for Elliot. The things he does may not be intentional, but I still want to see him happy. The thing that scares me most about him is that he is constantly at war with himself. What I also fear most is losing him forever. If you ever see him show any emotion, You should treasure it, because he always doesn't show it just anybody. Isabela is his entire universe, Nyla can be his heart at moments, and I am his biggest fan.”

As far as anyone knew, Elliot and I were just friends. For the most part, I tend to hold the dearest every memory of time spent with him. When I'm with him or thinking about him, I can't seem to forget or feel a thing. As a pair, we share a close bond. On all levels—the body, the heart, and the mind. I'd go to any lengths to help him. However, I knew that I would always hold a special place in his heart. Just a few days ago, he never would have cried in front of me. Everything he does is motivated by love, despite his cold and callous exterior. All he's looking for is genuine love from the perfect person.

He seems tormented and elated all at once, even as he sings along with her. I could tell by the look in his eyes that he was suffering, but it wasn't until I heard his words that I understood what he was trying to tell me. He has nothing left, but in his quest for recovery, he continues trying to rebuild. As a result of his pain, I will experience some of my own. We share comparable backgrounds, but neither of us has ever had the chance to experience what the other has: recovery or affection. Regardless of the circumstances, pursuing love is always a gamble.

I don't know what to do.

Still staring into his soul, he continued to croon, but I could tell that making eye contact with me brought him some much-needed solace. As if his whole existence had been dedicated to the quest, will he finally get the chance to find it. Happiness was his cure. However, the way my life is currently unfolding, things are not going to end well.

Chapter Eighteen

“I can honestly say it was the greatest singing bar I've ever been to.” I gave off the biggest smile possible.

I haven't had this much fun in a very long time. Despite everything that's happened over the past few days, I totally forgot about my situation. Having people around me made me joyful and gave me optimism that this drug implanted in my body might disappear very fast.

I looked over at Adam, who was smiling as he placed his arm around me nonchalantly. “Maybe it'll make you want to come here more often, particularly to see me.” He gave me a knowing wink.

Who knows, I might.” I replied with a laugh.

Thinking back on it now, I realize that this was the greatest decision I've ever made. It was a smart move on my behalf to spend time with Adam.

“What are we all going to do?” Dekvia burst in, most likely glaring me down and asking me the question rather than the crowd.

“So, babe, what do you want to do?” Nyla encircled Elliot in an embrace and glanced over at me.

“Do you have any last-minute requests before we leave?” As he glanced down at Nyla, Elliot's voice was hoarse but he remained composed.

“I dunno if you're still free to hang out with me, but if you are, I'd love to take you to this awesome spot that I frequent quite often; would you be interested in making the trip with me?” Adam's eyebrows twitched in anticipation.

“How far off are we from it, exactly?” Before calling it night, I wouldn't mind staying a little longer.

“Um, I'd say about fifteen to twenty minutes.” Adam says nonchalantly as he looks at Nyla for a second before returning his focus to me.

I say, “Why not? Sure!” I gave him a grin as I saw Dekvia look at Adam for a second before asking, “Can we come?”

Braden laughed and wrapped an arm around Dekvia, saying, “Babe, We should let them spend some time together?”

“They seem like they'd make a cute pair, so I think Braden's right.” A grin spread across Nyla's face as she spoke.

I looked at Adam, who was rubbing the back of his neck, and I couldn't help but flush.

“Uh, well.” Adam's words began to stumble as he fumbled for an explanation. “When Clarissa said okay to me earlier, I kind of already had this planned.” As he said it again, the very tips of his ears began to flush crimson. That's why I was on the phone for so long earlier. Inaudibly, he muttered.

“Really? You wanted to take me by surprise, yeah?” I said, drawing away from him in disbelief at my sudden joy.

Adam nodded at me, and I burst into his arms while saying, “That’s so sweet, Adam.”

I felt a surge of heat wash over me as I drew away from his hug, and a sticky sensation spread across my stomach.

I was doing great up until I started experiencing this detrimental affect. What gives you the right to just turn up like that?

“Are you all right?” Adam took my hand as I watched Elliot advance, then retreat when Nyla grabbed hold of his hand.

“Yeah?” As I glanced around at everyone else, I smoothed my hair behind my ear and said, “We can still go, I j-” I felt my larynx getting tight, and I said, “I need to use the restroom.” With a gentle grin on my face, I released Adam’s hand and hurried off to use the bathroom.

No matter where I walked, the restrooms were either occupied or not working. As I scurried to covered my lips, I noticed a single restroom in the far corner, so I went in and relieved the pressure that had been building in my esophagus.

Then, with a final wheeze, I heaved a deep breath of relief and leaned against the door.

To myself, I muttered, *I don't like this one bit*, as I felt another one rise up.

When I looked up, there was blood right in front of me. I exclaimed, "Oh, my God!" I let out a gasp as I sputtered for the very last time. A hand went through my tresses and I heard..

With the words, "You're getting worst, Clarissa, you need to go to the doctor." he gathered my hair into a low bun. Elliot's voice came up behind me as he was giving me a damp handkerchief.

"Thanks." as I drained the commode and wiped my lips after taking it. "Why are you even here?"

"It doesn't matter" Sighing, he said "Something doesn't sit right with me, Rissa. I don't think you should go."

As I began to cleanse my hands, "No, it isn't. You aren't supposed to be in this bathroom!?" A female bathroom matter of fact. "In the mirror, I saw that Elliot and I were the only ones in the restroom.

"This is a family restroom after all." He pointed at the sign as he snatched a fresh roll of paper towels and handed it to me

It irritates me when he is right at inappropriate moments.

Thrilled, I grabbed it and asked, "Seriously Elliot, what are you doing here?"

"It's just strange to me that you seemed to be doing great up until Adam suggested leaving for somewhere, and then you went and embraced him. Isn't your intuition telling you something?" he walked back and forth nervously.

“What are you trying to say? That your fox senses picking up on Adam, or do you just not want me to go because you're envious that I'm having so much fun? I think Adam is a really cool dude.” I threw away the paper towel I said.

I can't believe you.” he sneered. Me? Envious of him? I don't get envious, Clarissa, he said, pointing at himself. His torso was heaving as he strode up to me, his eyes fixed on mine.

“All right, stop treating me like a baby and let me go!” I mentioned looking directly into his eyes.

“GO, but don't say I warned you!” Saying this, he went enragedly out the door.

Holy cow, that was something serious.

I take a long inhale and look at myself in the reflection as I get ready to go return to the group I had left behind. With a broad grin on my face, I approached the group just as Elliot sneered at me while he grabbed Nyla's hand and strode away.

“What was wrong with him?” Braden says as he watches the couple walk away.

“I can't say.” Dekvia questioned me. “Are you okay?” as she examined me.

“No, I'm good.” Smiling, I asked. “Where are you guys going before Adam and I head out?”

“I think we're going to go back to my place for a while.” Braden said as he planted a passionate peck on Dekvia's face.

“We are!?” Dekvia mumbled, bewildered.

A resounding “Yes, we are?” Braden simply said. “You two have fun. We'll see you later.” Braden snatched Dekiva's hand and drew her away from us.

After Dekvia and Braden left, she spun around and said. “Call me if you need me!”

After facing Adam, I asked. “So, you ready to go?” I reached out and took his hand.

“Of course.” Swinging our linked hands back and forth, he said as we made our way to his red Audi.

I'm not entirely positive, but a piece of me thinks I should take Elliot seriously. I didn't want him to be upset with me after all.

“After you, my lady?” While opening the door for me, he saluted and gave me a hearty laugh.

I had to hold back a guffaw. “You are so silly.” I said as I glanced up at the Little Trees Air Freshener and inhaled the strong aroma of Black Ice. Of course, he keeps this in his vehicle.

The sound of Adam getting into the vehicle prompted me to do the same, and I clicked my seatbelt into place.

Ready or not, here we go! As he started the vehicle and drove off, he made this statement. Asking. "Is there anything you'd like to listen too."

"It doesn't matter right now." I said as I lowered the window a little and looked out, still experiencing some mild nausea.

"I enjoyed my time with you very much." Adam looked at me for a second before turning his attention back to the road.

"Me too, I enjoyed my time with you very much." Softly, I grinned at him.

"Is it true that you and Dekvia have known each other your entire lives?" Adam took a sharp turned at the stop sign.

"How I wish it were true, but surprisingly it's been only two years since I moved." I purposefully avoided coughing loudly.

"You two look extremely close; practically sisters." Laughing, he made his statement.

"I'll do anything for her; she pulled me out of the depths of my despair." I whispered as I cast a quick look in his direction.

"I assumed you had known Braden and Elliot for two years too." After a pause, he inquired once more.

He's asking a number of questions, one right after the other What is this twenty questions.. A woman simply cannot respond to all of these questions

“No, I only recently met them on vacation.” Holding my stomach, I felt a surge wash over me, but I tried to put it aside so that I could continue talking to him.

“I hate to asked...”

You've been asking me stuff ever since I went into this vehicle, so stop it. Will you ever be quiet?

“What exactly is going on with you and Elliot? As far as I know, I've seen him in my entire life, even before he went and came back. He tapped his fingertips together, seeking to figure of the correct way to say: “protective over a beautiful woman like you compared to his girlfriend, Nyla, I believe that her name is.”

“There's nothing happening between us, why you asked.” I cleared my throat. His face draws my attention.

Adam cast a curious look my way and said. “I was just wondering.”

I bowed my head and glanced out the window once, noting the happy faces of the people passing by. My heart leapt for delight at the thought.

A call came in, and Adam hurriedly inserted his airpods, apologizing and saying. “I'm sorry, but I need to take this.” He smiled gently at me. “Hello?” He posed the query.

I know it's rude to eavesdrop, but I can't help but want to know what others are talking about. It's just how I am, and it's impossible not to listen since I am sitting next to him

“I told you before, but tonight is a very important occasion for me.” Saying this with a gentle smile on his face, he turned his attention back to the road. “Could you spare me a minute or two? Bye.” He said it hastily, his voice scratchy, before grabbing his airpod and letting out a deep breath.

Saying, “No, it's fine. I'll see him in a few minutes, so What happened to your neck?” Adam pointed out.

I hid the welt on my neck, and when I stroked against it and felt the searing sensation, I scowled gently.

I've noticed some minor bruising on my neck lately, but I've never experienced such a searing pain.

“Uh, it's just a sickness.” she said. I whispered, “It's a woman thing” as nauseous began to perch on me.

Holding my side in pain, I nodded.

“You don't seem too well; would you like some water? I have an icebox in the back of my trunk.” Adam mentions

“Yes please, If it's okay with you.” I moaned quietly as the pain intensified.

I'd do anything if it could ease this discomfort. Strangely, I didn't begin to feel sicker until Adam began asking a lot of questions, and once he went on the phone, everything got worse quickly.

“Just a second.” Adam said as he pulled the vehicle over and got out.

Blink

The screen of my phone suddenly glowed, and I saw that I had a message from Dekvia.

[Dekvia:I was really concerned about you; how are you doing?]

[Me:Adam is looking after me, so I won't have any problems. Have no fear!]

[Dekvia:I can always come get you,I'll be there in no time. All you have to do is say the word.]

“All right, here we go!” Adam reached over and gave me a container of water, opening it with the same effortless with which his frigid palm touched mine.

“I appreciate it.” As I gulped down some water I uttered .

There's a distinct flavor change from the regular water to this. My tongue went paralyzed and I got a bitter flavor in my mouth as my lungs burned.

With a side glance, I noticed that Adam still hadn't moved the vehicle, so I pulled the bottle away and stared at it.

“You're a breeze to talk to, Clarissa.” He winked and said.“Finish it off.” He proclaimed gravely

I refused by shaking my head no. What the earth could be in that bottle? I attempted to take a deep inhalation, but found that doing so was difficult.Adam grabbed the bottle out

of my hands and emptied it down down my throat as I choked, soaking both of my face and shirt. “Just take it down!”

I continued shaking my head, and he gave me a stern expression. Adam poured the remainder of the water container down my throat, tossed the bottle to the ground, and held my face while saying “There’s no other option for you at this point, Clarissa, you know it.”

A frown formed on my face as I did so. There's something off about this Adam, compared to the one I thought I knew. It was like he'd changed into someone else. Is this what he meant when he said he'd meet whoever was calling in a few minutes? He intentionally poisoned me.

When my entire body went paralyzed, I clutched at my breast but was unable to move a muscle. I glanced over and saw Adam get out of the vehicle again, and my phone lighted up.

It was her, Devkia was calling.

I managed a quiet wheeze as I fumbled toward my phone, hoping it would signal the return of my voice. Somehow, I was able to say “H-h-Help me“ Weakly, I said it in a whisper.

As in “I can't hear you.“ Dekvia claims .

I said loudly.“PLEASE HELP ME!“ Adam hurriedly looked back at me, and I let out a shriek as he lunged at me.Adam screamed at me.“YOU'RE SO DONE.“ so there was no

sense in fighting back. I seen he pull a needle out his pocket and brief strike it on the side of my neck where the first injection was once given to me.

The world began to whirl, and I lost consciousness. Seems like Elliot was right after all.

Chapter Nineteen

A resounding of BANG, BANG, BANG

I heard the sound of clanking metal and I blinked rapidly to see a dim glow emanating from all corners of the room. Instinctively, I went to sit up, but I felt a tug on my arm and the bottom of my legs. I looked over and saw that both my wrists and feet were cuffed to the edge of the bed.

“What the heck?” I thought to myself as I fiddled with the handcuffs in hopes to free myself, but I wound up cutting myself and seeing blood trickle down my arm.

“Look at you, you're doing part of my job for me.” Adam enters the room carrying a metal tray piled high with syringes and surgical shears of varying sizes.

Wow, that's a lot of needles. With all of those needles, I'm starting to wonder whether we're really performing some kind of invasive surgery.

“Adam, why are you doing this?” I jiggled again and stared frightfully into his eyes.

He stroked his fingertip over my wound as he set the tray down and said. “Well, Clarissa, it's quite a long story.” He rolls his black, medical stool, pulls out a pack of cigarettes, and pulls the stool close to me. “Is it okay if I smoke around you?” Adam picked up a big cigar and said. “Of course, you don't.” as he blasted smoke in my face.

A severe cough spasm from my throat. “Adam? I whispered”

All I heard was “Clarissa, Clarissa, Clarissa.” He wiped my arm with a sanitary pad as he remarked. “I’ve had my eye on you ever since you stepped foot in town.”

As in! “Why me?!” I shouted.

MAAs he leaned in closer, his gaze lingered on my lips before returning to my eyes, and he muttered. “You’re the answer to all our problems..” in my ear.

I turned my frown upside down to meet his scorching cigarette breath. Adam flashed me a spooky grin before he flung the pad aside.

Our? Is this just one person or does it include many people? This has been the most bizarre vacation of my life, and things aren't looking good at the moment.

As in. “Who else is involved, and what, exactly, are the answers?” My head tipped to the side in bewilderment.

Adam puffed on his cigarette again and chuckled. “Since I need to draw blood from you anyhow, I may as well spill the beans to you.” After setting down his cigar on the nightstand, he reached for a pair of blue gloves and, as his hand went inside them, I heard a loud pop

I took a deep breath as I saw him insert the syringe needle into my arm.

“I am aware of your current illness and the injection in your neck. You were given a tranquilizer shot on your third day in town. Despite the fact that my doctors don't recognize it, yet I do it. It's an injection of a drug that will eventually kill you, along with

the drug I put in your water. I had no intention of doing anything, but my boss really pressured me to do it.“ Adam's eyes were locked on me.

“Who's your boss?” I look across at him as he gently removes the needle, and then at the empty tube.

“I may as well spill the beans on some of it.” “I'm not that bad guy, you think I am.” he said with a kind grin. “but once he told me and show me this, I was so interested in this.”

Asking. “Who is he?” As the ache spread up my arm, I growled in protest.

“Perhaps this would help shed light on the situation, What do you know about Elliot being a Kitsune?” He smirked as he set the tube on the table.

The phrase “I'm sorry?” My brow furrowed in disapproval.

“Clarissa, I know you know.” He took out a clear liquid tube, inserted the needle, and stuck it into my arm.

Once Adam had inserted the device into my arm, I felt a searing sensation and said. “Why does it burn?”

“I'll let Elliot handle that one; moreover, he's the key to solving all of your problems.” Adam gave me a knowing nod.

Can Elliot really be the solution to all my problems?

“Does Mr.Ward ring a bell?” Adam asked after taking another look at the tube containing my blood.

There are so many Wards’ in the globe that I can hardly keep track of them all, but just one Ward really sticks out in my mind.

He laughed a little and said.“Mr. Ward is the father of Elliot and also my boss. He's like a father-figure to me. Mr.Ward saw you leaving Elliot place that night. After he learned about your illness and when you met Elliot, he instantly knew it'd be a great combination.“

“Are you telling me that you drugged me because of Elliot's dad?” A sudden, intense pain shot through my skull.

“And my girlfriend, but that’ll be another time to explain that. However, Be careful now, you don't want to aggravate your condition any further than you already have since the drugs are working within your body.“ He bandaged up my arm in a bandage. “I didn’t want to hurt you. You're just too sweet, I really did have a good time with you today, but you are the answer if this creation actually works for me.“

As for him? What sort of creation is this? It certainly wasn't Kitune, did it? Elliot's claim that he wasn't born but rather created , yet there was no way that it originated inside me. I didn't want to believe this at all.

“It's possible that He'll show up any minute now; I bet you, he will.“ He took the tube of blood and, with a click of his tongue, stuffed it into a suitcase along with four additional tubes.

“Mr.Ward?” I looked at Adam weakly.

The response was.“No, silly, Elliot.” he shrugged. “Since he does know where you are;he’ll be able to track you very quickly since he knows. As his phone started to ring, Adam said.“Oh Look, Mr.Ward is calling.” I’ll put it on speaker so you can say hello to him. he said as he picked up the phone,

“Is it finished?” The voice on the other end of the phone seemed stern yet gruff.

“Yes, sir, and I think it's putting her to sleep again.” Adam nodded and said.“Say Hello, Clarissa.”

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths without saying a word.

“I'm sorry I didn't get to meet you, Clarissa, but I see that my son, Elliot, has a strong connection with you for some reason and I have to put and end to that beca-. “While Mr.Ward was talking on the phone, a lightning-fast figure burst through the door.

“I knew there was a good reason I didn't like you..” Elliot growls in a deadly tone as he holds Adam against the wall, his blazing eyes focused on him.

In other words.“Elliot, my boy.” Mr.Ward's voice flooded the room from the phone. He said.“Put him down and listen to your father.”

Elliot looked down at the phone and said.“Father?” He laughed.“You were never a father to me and never will be.” Elliot yelled as he repeatedly hit Adam in the face during the ensuing brawl.

“Clarissa doesn't have much time left, so I recommend stopping if you want to help her.”

Mr.Ward interrupts the lecturer again.

I looked across at Elliot and saw that he was already examining me suspiciously as I let out a violent cough. “El-Elliot. Take me away from here please.” A tear trickled down my cheek as I sobbed.

“ I'm only going to say this once. I have no need for you anymore, you're dead to me and I hope I never see you again.” Elliot told Mr. Ward loudly enough for him to hear over the phone, as he hit Adam again and quickly came to me and took the handcuffs off. Elliot lifted me into his arms and spoke softly to me. “I got you.”

I gave him a feeble grin. “You're right, I should listen to you.” Another coughing fit was left out. Saying.“I'm sorry.”

Adam laughed feebly. This isn't over. Good luck, especially to you, Clarissa.

I saw Elliot's lips twitch as Adam jabbed him with the needle, then Ada, grabbed the briefcase and phone and ran.

After looking at me for a while, Elliot pulled the needle out of his side and tossed it on the ground, saying.“I'm so sorry about everything.”

Without a word, I nodded as the cosmos beckoned me to rest my eyes shut.

“I can't take this any longer; there has to be something I can do to save her. “A familiar voice said something. “LOOK AT HER, my bogus father is also attempting to murder her.”

When I opened my eyes, I realized I was in a new surrounding.. Hidden from view behind a curtain, I overheard an unidentified conversation between two people.

When I glance up again, the figure had glance to looked from the curtain and was looking at me behind it, and I heard them remark. “You know there's nothing else that can be done especially with her condition, Elliot.” Elliot was addressed by a woman with a beautiful voice.

Again, I'm going to be sliding eastward.

“I have no idea what to do at this point, Izel.” Elliot walked in place.

Izel? That's the Queen, right? Have we returned to Tironde?

“How about you bring me my bottle of Runa so I can fortify her with it and you can cool down by walking outdoors for a while?” I heard Elliot groan and leave the room, and as soon as he did, the curtain was drawn back. It was Queen Izel, and the color of her skin was as radiant as if an angel had kissed it. She had her hair up in a bun and was dressed appropriately in a beige dress.

“Hello Clarissa! So much has been said about you that I had to find out for myself.” Izel replied cheerfully.

“Hello, Your Majesty?” I said by asking a question.

Izel said. “Welcome to my house. Please don't call me that, you can call me Izel.” She sat on the edge of the bed and touched my forehead, saying. “Excuse me for touching you, but we don't have the medical stuff here like in your world.”

“It's all right.” I tried to make an effort to sit up but she helped me. “Why am I here?”

“Well, darling, Elliot brought you here, especially after you passed out from the drug that terrible man put in you, and since Elliot was struck with a needle that is very poisonous and I had to get it out of him.” She grimaced. “When he found out the medication was inside of you, he didn't want me to remove the poison until he was sure you would be well. He was willing to do anything and still is.”

He went to all this trouble for me? The question. “Is he okay?!” fell out my mouth. Shamefully, I asked. I should have listened to him, but instead I got myself into this mess.

Izel said with a grin. “Elliot is a tough one and always has been since the day I found him when he was 13. He makes me feel like he is one of my own.”

Asking. “How did you find Elliot?” I probed, curious to learn more about his background.

Izel stared at me with a sigh. I'm not at liberty to comment, but I will state that I heard him. His cries and screams reached Tironde all the way from Earth, and after that, I made it my mission to be there for him whenever he needs me. Sometimes he still ignores me, but then he'll rush right back to me. All he needs is someone to understand him.” She smoothed my hair behind my ear and added. “You do know, I can sense

anything, and that's how I knew you were awake and that why I sent him off so I can ask you something?"

As in. "About what?" I made an inquiry.

Well, I don't want to interfere, but are you ready for end of your life?" Softly, Izel questioned.

Good question! When I originally learned of the issue, I accepted it immediately and didn't give much thought to what may happen next. "At this point, I have no idea." My voice broke, and I could feel a tear fall.

"You've gone through a lot in the previous two years, not to mention this wild month." With a kind grin, she wiped my tears and said. "But there's always a cure for everything."

"That's just fairy tales talk, Izel." I giggled at her/

"You are, after all, in a magical world." She shared in my laughter. "Things may seem different for you now, but believe me, if you find out the answer and see it in front of you, everything may change. "

"We shall see, but if it don't, can you do me a favor?" I twiddled my fingers and watched as Izel nodded. "Can you guarantee that the people I care about won't suffer too much while I'm gone." Gently, I said.

To which Izel said. "You remind me of myself back then, but I'll do my best to keep your word." She then took both of my hands in hers and brushed her thumb across my skin.

As she looked directly into my chocolate eyes, she said. "Love is such a powerful thing, sometimes it can be your cure." As Izel spoke again. "Trust me, it will all hit you at once for you to realize all your answers." She lifted a fingertip, and a pixelated shower of magic descended over me.

"Thank you for giving advice and keeping your word." I smiled and nodded at her.

Izel magically produced a glass of water and offered it to me before asking. "So, do you and Elliot have something going on between you two?"

After taking a few gulps of the icy water, I gasped. "What do you mean?"

"You know, I don't know what you would say in your generation, but I think it's called talking stage or soon to be together?" Izel fumbled with her hands as she tried to think of the perfect words to say.

I laughed gently and said. "There's nothing going on between us besides Elliot is dating someone."

"Dating?" She posed the query.

"It's like when two people..." Izel cut me off before I could complete my sentence.

"Yes, I'm familiar with dating, but I had no idea he was seeing anyone." Izel rose up swiftly as she talked rapidly.

"Unfortunate as it may be, Elliot is seeing a girl named Nyla." As I watched Izel pace the room angrily until she froze, I straightened up.

“Nyla? The one with the blonde hair?” Confused, Izel asked.

My head went up and I told her. “That's the one.”

She's bad news; don't hang around with her; I warned him about her, but he ignored my advice.” As she took a big breath, Izel's clothing swayed with her. ““I feel there's a strong connection between Elliot and you. He never again brought a stunning woman to this part of the world besides Isabella. Remember that you have a special place in his heart for whatever reason. To help you get through the next few days, I'm going to try some Runa, but before I do, I want to warn you that it will make you very self-aware.” Softly, Izel placed her hand in mine and whispered.

“Okay, thank you.” Softly, while staring into her eyes, I murmured.

“Perfect.” Izel replies as she turns to see Elliot entering with a crystal bottle in his hand. As soon as he saw I was awake, he passed the bottle to Izel and came to check on me.

“Hey.” “Are you all right?” He pressed his hand on mine.

“I'm good, Ms. Izel just filled me in on the Runa elixir.” I smiled and met his emerald gaze, then said. “Are you okay?” I saw the dried blood on his shirt when I looked at his side.

“I'll be fine if you're fine.” With a grin on his face, he extended his hand into mine.

As Izel cracked open the potion and gave me a cap, I saw that she was smiling at us.

“You must gulp down your potion simultaneously.”

A heartfelt “Thank you“ I grinned at Izel. “Anyone who gets you should count themselves lucky.“ Before swallowing the fiery sensation all at once, I remarked.

“I want to talk to you privately, Elliot.“ Izel murmured as she took the cap from me and shot an angry glance at Elliot.

“Sure, Uh, You can get some rest or something,Rissa.“ Elliot gave me a quick look.

“Keep in mind what I said, and I hope to see you again, Clarissa. Please take care of yourself.“ Izel smiled and nodded at me before going over to talk to Elliot, and I was once again left alone with my thoughts.

I sure hope I'll be able to see you and everyone else again. Whatever happens, at least I'll accept my fate.

Chapter Twenty

All I did on my entire trip was hurt myself. First, I was sedated, then I found out I only have a month or less to survive, afterwards I realized my feelings toward Elliot, and lastly I was abducted. So, what else is there to happen? The good news is, Thanks to Izel potion, I've been feeling much better, with no nausea, headaches, or dizziness.

My father taught me the value of perseverance and the importance of getting back up after falling down. Since I've already survived the first half of this tempest, I know I can make it all the way through until the end.

"I'd like to order one hot chocolate." I mentioned it to the cafe worker with a smile on my face.

On a brisk day, nothing beats curling up with a mug of hot cocoa and a few mini marshmallows. I heard the entrance bell ring. When I turned around, my most beloved was standing there before me.

"Clarissa?" As he tucked his hands into his pockets, he flashed a grin at me.

Why is he here if he already made it obvious that we shouldn't be talking with one another? He rarely visits up town anyways. Part of me knew that just hearing his voice or being in his presence would brighten my day. "Howdy, El, What are you doing here?" I asked, grinning at him as I grabbed a mug of hot cocoa from the counter clerk and ended up splashing it all down on my blue t-shirt..

If you want to get a guy's attention, try this. I wouldn't recommend it.

“It's about to storm, so I came to fetch you up, clumsy one.” The slightest sneeze followed his words.

He is so hard to understand, but that's a first. Actually being picked up by a guy is something new for me. That, along with having a man pick me up because it's going to storm, is now a thing of the past. How did he even know where I was. I didn't even tell anyone I was going anywhere.

While placing a comforting palm on his head and gently stroking his cheeks with my fingertip, I grimaced. “You have a fever.”

“I'm good as new.” As his nostril begins to run, he says.

“What happened to Mr.?” I scowled and put my palms on my hips, irritated “I have a strong immune system.” I finger quoted.

His eyelids roll and he sighs. “I didn't think it mattered.” He barked a few times before saying with a hoarse voice. “It's not that serious, and it'll be over shortly. It's been years since I became sick, and I don't understand how I let myself get to this point.”

“It does matter. Don't move, I need to go back and thank the guy at the counter for my free hot chocolate and give him a tip. I handed him my mug of piping hot cocoa. “Here, have this; I'll be right back.”

“You're so f*cking nice, I swear.” He took my mug of steaming cocoa and began mumbling into it. “You shouldn't feel obligated to thank him personally or give him a tip . In other words, f*ck his tip.” My eyes rolled and I retraced my steps to the register. The

words “Hey, I forgot to tell you thank you“ were left unsaid. With a broad grin on my face, I reached into my pocket and dropped the five dollar bill into the tip jar. “And that, my friend, is your tip.“

The tall blonde male worker blushed as he swiftly dug back into the jar and tried to give me back my money, saying: “No, You can keep it.“

The least I can say is: “It's fine, You gave me free hot chocolate.“ Tossing it back into his grip.

“Really, it's not that big of a deal.“ He said, Putting it back in my grasp once again.

Believe it or not, this man is just like every other male I've met in this town. They have been trying to win me over by showering me with freebies like food, drinks, and plush animals. It actually seems to be working.

“Hey! What's that lurking behind you?! I beckoned him to look at the wall behind him. When he looked at me like I was crazy and turned around, I tossed the cash in the receptacle and said: “THANKS AGAIN!“ Smiling broadly, I let out a shout and turned to return to Elliot.

In a chair with his hoodie on, I spotted Elliot. There's no doubt he has a deep and abiding affection for that hoodie.

As in: “Come on, let's take care of you.“ I tugged at his end of sleeves as he lifted his head. “Do you feel better since you gave him a tip?“ Elliot's nostril was scarlet at the tip, so he sniffed.

“Right now, you're worrying about the wrong problem.” I said, giving him some space to make his next move.

‘I’ve got a killer headache.’ he moaned. The moment he got up from his chair, he almost lost his balance. “Elliot?” I reached out and grasped his shoulder. I raised an anxious eyebrow and sat him back down in the seat, asking “Are you okay?”

In silence, he bobs his head toward me.

“I have to get you back home. So, where exactly did you park your truck?” I stoop down to his level and give him a soft stroke on his shoulder .

Specifically, “outside the coffee shop.” A furious hacking fit seized him and he couldn't stop it. Feeling eyes on me, I took a glance around and saw that everyone was looking at us with obvious distaste, so I dropped my head and began hearing the muttering around us.

What is it with folks these days? The way they're behaving makes it seem like we've done some sort of crime. Many diners I've seen have been visibly ill, but they've kept their mouths shut because they realize it's nothing unusual.

“Give me the keys.” I told him, putting out my hand . As I held out my small palms, he reached into his pocket and slipped the keys to me.

“Do you think you can lean on my shoulder?” I looked him in the eyes and asked softly.

As he gingerly rises to his feet, he encircles my frail frame in his arms. I put my arm around his middle waist as we made our way out the door. "Why are you so heavy!" I said a refreshing wind brushed my cheeks. Looking up at Elliot, I could tell he was in a lot of pain. As we struggled to walk up to his pickup, and I opened the door and helped him climb in.

"What're you doing?" After Elliot looked back and saw that I was heading behind the vehicle, I couldn't help but come back around and face him.

"I was putting you in the truck." I'm like a tiny lady trying to squeeze a new sofa through a door.

"This is the side for passengers." He took a hold on my hand, trying to win me over.

"I know." Panting, I lean against the vehicle. He weighs a lot more than I anticipated.

"I'll be driving."

"I think I'm more comfortable behind the wheel." As he let go of my hand and climbed out of the vehicle, he said weakly.

"Elliot, get back in the truck already!" I said strongly, pointing back to the truck. "It's not like I'm planning on killing you or anything."

"Yes, ma'am." he laughed quietly. As he got into the vehicle, I shut the door behind him.

While placing my palms on my waist, I blew my tresses out of my face. Guys are so dramatic. Just think about how they wouldn't be able to handle having periods and giving birth. As I made my way to the driver's side and climbed inside the vehicle.

“I can drive.” With his palm, he touched my lower thigh.

Danger alert. Danger Alert. This is most definitely a code red. Before I lose it, I beg you to take your hand off my beautiful little thigh. Keeping my emotions for him under control is challenging enough as it is.

I popped in the key and fastened my seatbelt. “Don't worry, you can be the passenger princess.” As I pressed down on the gas I said.

“Just drive me to Braden's house.” he said, slouching in the passenger seat and taking a long breath.

I asked. “You knew about Braden's place over here?”

“After all these years as his closest friend, I realized there was nothing he could keep from me.”

Obviously, You couldn't hide anything from him. He knows everything about everybody.

“Where does he live?” When I looked away from the traffic to check on him, I glanced back at the road to see him moving around in his seat.

I saw Elliot reach for the navigation screen, however he put his palm on top of the mine and smiled softly at me.

“No matter how much I'd like for you to drive, we both know that neither of our conditions are ideal. Pull over.” As he unclicks my seatbelt, his emerald irises send waves of warmth through me.

“I'm totally fine; it's not a big problem. Just put his address in.” When I went to re-attach my seatbelt, Elliot again stopped me.

Immediately finding a parking space, I shut off the vehicle and gave him my undivided focus.

“This will be quicker.” Elliot's irises turned an amber-orange color, and he grinned gently at me.

Uh oh, we're about to teleport at Braden house. Teleporting is the worst, it makes me nauseated every time.

“Wait?!“ Quickly dumping some of his belongings into the glove department section, I rummaged around the rear of his pickup in search of a paper bag. “Just in case, again.” I blurted out as soon as I saw a Walmart bag and snatched it up with a small grin on my face.

“What about your truck?“ I asked, placing the keys into my pocket.

“It'll be fine since you parked it here. I'll get it later.“ As he grabbed my palm, he laughed and asked. “Ready?“

Holding the sack anxiously, I mentally prepared myself for the worst possible result and exhaled. “Let's get this over with.

Chapter Twenty-One

If I had to guess, I'd say that Elliot is currently acting like a spoiled brat . When I walked into the guest room for the tenth time, Elliot was sitting upright on the bed and sulking.

“What is the matter?” Fears started to form in my mind, not knowing what was wrong.

“It's extremely cold.” The cold made Elliot shudder, and he sputtered into his shirt.

I noticed the cloth lying on the ground when I glanced down. With a groan, I picked up the blanket from the floor and wrapped it around him. “Here.” Checking if the comforter is flipped face down I was taken aback when Elliot suddenly seized my wrist and pulled me into bed with him.

“Elliot?” I let out a sigh of relief.

“I want to snuggle.” With a murmur, he wrapped his arms around me, and let his face submerged in my neck. A grouchy “You're so warm, can we stay like this?” he asked. He leaned in and kissed me on the top of my head.

“Since I'm already in bed with you, I don't see that I have a choice.” A chuckle escaped me.

“Hm?” As he tucks a stray hair behind my ear and asks. “What do you think?” he moves some hair out of my face. I felt myself flush at his flirty advances. “I do not want you to get sick, though.” I feel his warm hand cup my face, thumb gently stroking my cheek, and I catch a glimpse of a frown on his face.

“As long as you're all right, I'll be fine.” Softly, I smiled at him. “Why didn't you tell me?”
I remark, settling into a more relaxed posture.

“I didn't think it mattered.” A whisper escapes his lips as he sees me flip over onto my back.

“When it comes down to you, everything matters.” I uttered this as I fiddled with the hem of my blouse. “

Everything he does is so irresistible? If I'm around him, why do I feel protected?

“I have a question.” My words came out too quickly. I can't even put my finger on what led me to ask him this

He put his finger all over my tummy and questioned. “What is it?” as he slowly makes tiny circles.

Asking him .“Are you Nyla's first boyfriend?”

“No, a jerk named Mason Phillips from California.” With venom he voiced his opinion.

Mason used to be her boyfriend. If so, when did this start to occur? It couldn't be two years ago, but maybe it was. Why did they decide to end their relationship? Did he treat her badly, too? This is unexpected.

“No way.” I swallowed hard to mask my anxiety.

“Don't you think, I don't know about you and Mason. I'm aware that he was your ex.”

Although I was tempted to leap from the bed, I hesitated. My palms started to perspire and I wondered. "How did he know?" The thought crossed my mind. Dekvia as well as my dad are the only ones who are in the know. Even if Dekvia wanted to, she wouldn't tell anyone about my past.

"H-H-How?" The right words finally came to me.

As the saying goes. "I know everything. You broke up with him from the moment you brought a present to school for him. This is why you went to the trouble of buying an apology present for him."

No, that's not what happened. That's not even close to being true. Before spilling the beans, he needs to do a little digging.

"I can't stand him because of how horribly he treated Nyla. It's hard to find words to describe how incredible a person Nyla is." With a single pass of his finger, he soothes my arm and banishes the cold goosebumps.

"How so?" I asked. Could she be more amazing than I am? I'm not saying I'm flawless, but I do my best.

"Just between us, he cheated on her and argued with her in a million different ways."

"Oh." Remember everything that went down between Mason and me, Gently, I chuckled. "Though cheating may be unforgiving to those around you, it's nothing compared to what some people go through on a daily basis."

Someone who “can look their ex in the eyes and say they don't have feelings for them but a lie detector would show otherwise“ is lying. He broke eye contact with me, putting an end to his arm trace, and said.“I know you still have emotions for him. To be honest, if I didn't know better, I'd say Mason was harsher on her than he was with you .

He has no idea how I ended up here. He has no idea what I went through with Mason. It froze me in place as Soothingly, I said.“I'm going to get your soup.“ The fear I felt in my heart manifested itself in the shaking of my voice. In a hurry, I climbed out of bed and made my way to the kitchen, where I smelled broth simmering on the burner.

A flood of tears poured down my cheeks as I grasped the top of my shirt and began taking deep, controlled breaths as I slowly collapsed to the floor. It felt like a tight band was around my neck. A little unsteadily, I pulled out my phone, opened up my playlist, and tapped the first tune. The soothing sounds of rain.

“A stands for Apple.“ Until I could breathe normally again, I softly murmured the alphabet letters to myself. Anxiety and fear were engulfing me. It can happen all of a sudden, or in response to a specific trigger. It's clear that Elliot doesn't understand all of my struggles, particularly with Mason. With all the other things I've been through with him, his cheating and our occasional arguments haven't bothered me too much. I felt absolutely nothing.

I steadied myself with a deep inhale and got to my feet, shakily snatching the dish from the cabinets and filling it with soup. Why isn't Nyla caring for you if she's so great? Whenever you turn around, you'll find me standing next to him.The steam was smoking and smelled heavenly. I wiped my tears away when I got back to the room and saw Elliot sitting up in his bed. As if nothing had happened, I strolled in with a broad grin on my face.

“You took too long.” Elliot says as soon as I walk in the room. Asking. “Are you okay?”

Elliot raised his brow at me, trying to get inside my head.

“I went to get the soup I made for you.” I joked. I clambered up onto the bed and slid the dish across to him. “Eat it quickly before it gets cold.” And if it weren't for my caring personality, I would have left him here, sick and alone.

“You didn't have to make this for me, but-“ His mouth watered as he stared into the sizzling dish, and his nostrils furrowed at the aroma of the soup. “It smells really good..I could feed myself, but how 'bout you feed me today?” He parked his lips slightly as though eager for me to feed him.

He picked today, of all days, and the cruelest possible moment, to ask me to feed him.

I bit my lip as I carefully placed the spoonful of soup on his lips. “Careful, it's hot.” Then, I said as I tucked the utensil under my palm to contain any potential mess onto the bed. “You happened to get some, right here.” I said as I lowered the utensil back into the dish. I felt Elliot's fierce gaze on me as he gulped hard while I slowly used my thumb to wipe the corner of his lips before popping it in my mouth to clean it. “I'm sorry, but you had something right here.” I said in a low voice, still staring into his eyes.

“It's fine, really.” He kept his eyes darting back and forth at me before finally replying “This is good, thank you.” I beamed as he opened his lips to take in once more, and I quickly filled it in.

With concern, I asked “How are you feeling?”

“I'm fine, so you don't have to keep treating me like a kid.” Elliot says.

I rolled my eyes at the comment he made. Not long ago, he asked to feed and take care of him, but now he doesn't want it.

“Here, just open your mouth again and take it.” I said without hesitation.

“Clarissa, isn't that supposed to be my line.” As his laughter grew increasingly out of control, he said.

I felt the hot flush of embarrassment rise to my cheeks. As I shoved the soup into his hand, I made up my mind to ignore him for the time being.

“Clarissa, Don't be like this. Could you come back and feed me again?” Yet, that still didn't prevent him from cracking up.

“I couldn't care less if you get sick again.” I told him as I was taking the bowl from him and went back into the kitchen. Since he wanted to be like that, I could be the bad guy too.. When I set the plate down on the counter, I could hear a voice coming through the front entrance.

“Braden?” I said, peeking around the corner.

Braden had just walked in and was taking his winter coat off when I questioned to see if it was him. Quickly, he rushed me and gave me a hug while asking. “Are you all right?” He asks me as he pats me on the back.

By responding. "Yeah, I'm fine." I asked. "Why?"

"You seem to be having a panic attack earlier." Braden whispered as his finger was pointed at the camera behind me.

Braden and I looked at each other in shock as Nyla stormed in. Before I could even finish my sentence, Nyla was already on her way toward the room Elliot was in. The little goon has a rash wish on my behalf.

"Are there cameras installed in every room?" At the kitchen sink, I gave the camera a quick glance-over. Why does he use house monitoring equipment is a legitimate question. I completely understand why you would put one up by both the front and rear doors to keep unwanted visitors out. Thinking about how many people could potentially watch this video makes my jaw drop.

The cameras are set to record only in the areas surrounding the front and back doors, as well as the kitchen, but I am the only one who can view them. Braden got a bowl out of the cabinet and started loading it up and asked "Is this soup?"

Relief washed over me when Braden assured me that no one else had it. "I made this for Elliot because he's been feeling sick." I muttered to myself as I watched Braden fetch a large spoon for his soup and begin taking a sip from it.

"This is really good." With a scowl on his face, he mutters. "No wonder why Nyla sprinted into the house like a crazy person. How did she even know where I lived?" He shook his head and laughed. "You do know why he's sick, right?" as he gulped down more soup.

“And after all it could just be a regular cold.” I sat down next to Braden and asked.

“Why?” when he shook his head in disdain.

“Obviously, you're the reason for this. This is how Elliot used to feel whenever Isabella got sick and his mom left for no reason. He's been feeling everything you've been feeling because you and he are so close. He seems to sense a stronger connection to you than to me. It's like he poured his soul into you. While Braden continued to sip his soup, he glanced up at me.

“That's not possible; Elliot and I have a complicated relationship. Excuse me, but I really need to go to the restroom.” I spoke to Braden as he ate his soup at the kitchen bar.

My legs felt like they were moving on their own as I walked slowly to the guest room instead of the bathroom. A door was open with just a crack, and I could hear voices through the air.

The tears just kept coming for Nyla. “Why didn't you say anything? Clearly, you are sick. I would have rushed over to see if you needed anything if you told me.”

Hearing her response makes me want to gag. *Jesus, Nyla; he will survive. His sickness will go away soon. It's not a big deal.*

I could feel jealousy and resent flooded my mind, I became agitated. The way he loves her more than I could. My eyes were streaming with the sour tears of jealousy and resentment.

I saw Elliot's eyes dart toward the door and grin, head cocked, as he sensed my presence there.

Did he see me? I was trying my best not to get caught.

“In light of how much I care about you, I hope you never have to go through an illness.” Elliott tells her very ponderously. Elliot said. “Please stop crying; I don't like seeing you cry like this.” as he got to his feet to brush her tears away with a kiss on her forehead.

Seriously, what the hell? He didn't tell me any of that. Ever since the day we saw the Queen again, he's been like a complete jerk.

As she fumbles for words, Nyla asks. “D-D-Do you need me to bring you anything?”

Simply and naively, he smiled at her. “All I ask is that you love me every day.” As Nyla's arms encircled his waist, I saw him run his fingers through her golden hair. “That's how much I care about you.” Elliot draws her close and presses his forehead against hers, kissing her passionately afterwards.

My eyes shifted to the floor as I hobbled toward the kitchen. How incredibly naïve of me. Therefore, he has feelings for her more than me. Even though I knew from the start, I still chose to give this my all to him. His explanation was the exact opposite of what I expected when I questioned him why he hadn't told me about his condition sooner. Does he really not give a damn about me? So, in his eyes, who am I?

Just a typical 18-year old, not a Kitsune or any other kind of magical being. What fox wouldn't want an ordinary 18-year-old who has been it all? As much I don't want to say it, but when will it ever end.

“Clarissa?” Braden glared directly at me as he emphasized.

“Sorry, but I have to get going.” I muttered as I stealthily collected my belongings from the counter.

Thunder boomed in my ears as he said “Let me at least drop you off out of the kindness of my heart and also not having Dekiva slaughter me alive for letting you go alone.”

Braden leaned over to pick up his keys off the counter, he suddenly rose to his feet.

“It's not like it's a million miles away or anything. I'll tell Dekvia that it was my idea so you don't get in trouble.” I forced a flimsy smile at him to keep the tears away.

“Clarissa?” Before I could even get out the door, Braden followed me

The moment I placed my hand on the doorknob, I humbly asked, “Would you please do me a favor?”

“Absolutely anything!” He was stuffing his palms into his pants pockets, waiting for my response.

“Can you please tell Elliot that he should know better than anyone that bringing up someone else's traumatic past is never a good idea, even if you think you have all the details right.”

Bradley nodded his head saying “ Yes, of course, but are you sure you don't need a ride?” With thunder and lightning rumbling overhead, he held up his keys.

“It's alright, It hasn't started raining yet, I'll make it. Good night.” Before I left I said softly. A huge vibration continued as I walked out onto the street. The rain started pouring down hard out of nowhere.

My cheekbones were getting pelted by rainfall as I carried on walking.

I couldn't care less that I'm soaking wet. The only thing on my mind was sorting out my feelings and coming to terms with the reality that my feelings for him went beyond friendly. My heart has been shattered in a way that I never thought was possible. It's like I have to start from square one all over again. Discouraged once again..

Chapter Twenty-Two

Being sick is the worst, I can't even stand up without feeling woozy. Yet, I brought it on myself by venturing out into the storm. Is it worth it? Yes, it was.

At once, I had a stabbing ache in my lower stomach. “Oof.” I clenched my stomach. I was lying in bed for a few minutes, not feeling particularly well, before I quickly got up, ran to the bathroom, and spewed everything that was in me.

I sighed nervously as I flung my palm toward the toilet's knob, sensing another oncoming on its way. Seconds later, I felt someone pulling my tresses back.

The comforting words. “I'm here.” spoke into my heart.

As soon as I finished puking, I was handed a wet rag. A hasty “Thank you” came out of my lips as I wiped it. In a sluggish motion, I lowered myself to the floor and turned to see who it was.

“Dekivia?” A grin met my eyes as I brushed my hair out of my forehead. “Surprised to see you here.”

She slid down the floor right next to me saying “Your dad called me and asked me to check on you again since you told him this morning that you weren't feeling well.”

Innocently, I grinned at her. “You did not have to come.” I pulled my hair back and secured it in a messy bun.

“Somebody has to be there for you.” Dekvia patted my leg tenderly. “How long do you think you are going to be in this bathroom?” She pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I really don't have a clue.” I hung on to my stomach, feeling rumbled again.

“Just take your time; I'm here for you.” Dekvia smiled at me.

I'm very grateful for Dekvia. Whenever I needed her, she was right there by my side. After I told her about Mason the first time, she wanted to hurt him in so many possible ways.

“Um.” While twiddling her fingers, Dekvia locked eyes with me. Two days ago, Braden said that you were about to cry. “Would you like to talk about it?”

As soon as I raised my head, I noticed Dekvia was already looking at me. “Okay, why not?” My voice was low as I murmured. “I believe I have feelings for Elliot.”

“You reckon? You do. I have been telling you for some time now that someone would come along and help you come out from your cocoon.”

A look to the side was all I could manage for her. “It's just that, after these few weeks together, he said he wished he'd met me before Nyla, and just the other day I overheard him say “I love you.” to her.” After thinking about what had happened the day before, I couldn't help but chuckle. “He confirmed my suspicions.”

Saying. “Wow, he said that!” Dekvia's jaw fell.

She scooted closer and put her arm around me, so I could rest my head on her shoulder. Dekiva gently stroked my dark tresses as she attentively took in my every word. I don't blame her. For me, it was also something totally out of the blue and totally startling. What's the point in confessing your feelings if you're already taken?

“Can you really love two people at once?” I questioned to Dekvia.

Exhaling deeply, Dekvia declared. “I'm going to give you some sister, but friendship advice.”

I gave her the go-ahead to continue talking after I nodded my head.

“It is possible, but there's a catch. Life is always testing you in different ways. It's possible that you've seen this test somewhere before. She dithered as she gave the matter more thought. “It's possible to feel affection for many people at once, but if you profess your love for two people at once, one of them is going to feel a great deal of pain. So perhaps the first is love and the second is desire.” Dekvia, at ease, kept stroking my hair as she talked.

It was all true what she said. I love him more than anyone or anything else. I've found that the more you fall in love, the more you do so. There would be some trouble along the way. If you love the first person, you'll never fall in love with the second. I was the second person there. Challenges with attachment and commitment are perennial. Being a naive idealist like me only makes life more challenging.

When I finally break away from Dekvia, I question her, blankly. “Since when did you become a therapist?”

She smiled and rolled her eyes, implying that “Don't start, Clarissa. You are really full of crap.”

“Only toward you“ Inwardly, I had to laugh. “There's also a second issue.”

The whole time I was watching, Dekvia stood up, picked herself up, and asked.“What is it?”

“Just the other day, Elliott brought up Mason. On top of that, Mason is Nyla's ex-boyfriend.“ To put it simply, Mason is Nyla's ex-boyfriend. I waved with my hands as I spoke.I still can't believe it.

“Are you done puking“ She questioned

That's when I nodded my head. With what does my throwing up have to do with this situation I brought up?

“Good, because we could both use a drink to talk about this.“ Holding out her palm, she said.“Well, I drink for you while you sip ginger ale and take your medicine.”

I moaned.“But that's not fair.“ I reached out and grabbed her palm.

Saying.“Come on.“ she pulled me into the kitchen. I followed closely behind her, wiggling my messy hairdo like a lost dog in my Minnie Mouse jammies. “Have you heard from Elliot before we get started on talking about it.“ Dekvia asked.

After answering.“No, I haven't heard from him since I took care of him.“ I leapt onto the sofa.

“SERIOUSLY!” With the sound of the refrigerator opening and closing, Dekvia called out from the kitchen as she made her way through the living room. “He was sick“ Dekvia gave me the pills and a can of ginger ale.

“Yes.“ "I mumbled," Seriously, when I'm around Dekiva, I feel like the daughter and she's the mother. There are moments when I really think something terrible is going to happen to me.

I looked at ginger ale because I hate the way ginger ale and drugs taste when mixed together. I watched in amazement as Dekvia swigged down the Mailbu. “Give me a sec.“ She smiles at me affectionately.

Whenever Dekvia flashes me a grin, I know she's planning on doing something. Dekiva pulls out her phone and holds it close to her ear.

“Braden!“ Over the phone, Dekiva yells.“Where the f*ck is he?“ She puts the phone on speaker and talks.

“Who?“ Braden was able to coolly convey his perplexity.

I couldn't help but chuckle and ponder how he deals with her.

“You know who? Elliot!“ As Dekiva does so, she paces impatiently back and forth.

“Uh, he's right here? Babe, what's wrong?“ Braden asked quietly.

“Give him the phone.“ She gave an in-depth phone explanation.

Oh no. As I pondered what she was planning to do next. When she said that, I jumped off the sofa and went to attack her, but she managed to avoid me.

“Hello?” Following Elliot on the other line.

Hearing his voice for the first time caused my heart to feel like it had plummeted. No matter what I did, I just stood there immobilized.

“She's sick, and you haven't done anything to help her!” Dekvia exploded. How much care do you have for her? She's the one who takes care of you, but you're off doing whatever it is you've been with Nyla. If you haven't heard from or seen that person for a few days, it's fair to be worried.

I snatched the phone from her hands and said. “Dekvia!” “I mumbled,” I said.

“What?” She took another deep drag of Malibu. “It's the truth; if he doesn't care about you, he should just leave you alone. I hate seeing you upset.”

There was complete stillness on the other end of the call. Quickly ending the call, I hung up. I forcibly placed the phone in her hand. As soon as she put down the bottle, I snatched it and poured myself a glass.

“ I don't even drink but the only way I can take this is if I mix it.” I spiked my beverage with a tiny dose of the medicine. “After what you did, I most definitely need it.” We drank that, I indicated.

Dekvia chuckled, saying things like “Welcome to the party; I did it because I would do anything for you.” She grins at me

“I appreciate you being here with me. I love you. I take a swig of the booze and then give her a big embrace.

After I give her a hug, she gives me one right back. “I love you. Now, let's speak about Mason and Nyla.” she says as she shifts away from me. Should we? She quickly hopped onto the sofa and raised an eyebrow.

“We shall.” I said with a chuckle.

“Please don't kill me.” The young lady screamed at the top of her lungs as blood poured down her cheek.

“Jesus, Dekvia, why did you choose this movie?” It scared me so much that I couldn't stop leaping and shielding my eyes.

She snickered when she saw it I was jumping from the edge of my seat saying “I had no idea this movie would be so scary.”

Leaning closer to her, I said. “If you're scared, there's no shame in changing the movie.” I mumbled.

She turned to me and said. “You're the one that scared, Clarissa.” looking at me with her gray eyes. A wry smile crossed her face as she declared “You're even scaring me half the death now.”

“I didn't mean for that to happen.” Maintaining eye contact with her.

“It's whoever gets scared first, pays the pizza guy.” Dekvia sneered at me.

“Deal.” I glanced back at the movie once again.

Shortly after that, the television went out and came back on. I can already tell that this plan fails.

Ring, ring, ring,

“Sh*t.” At the same moment, Dekvia and I expressed our fear.

As I glanced down, I noticed that Elliot was trying to reach me on FaceTime. With wide-open eyes I asked. “What did I do?” I must have looked terrible. I wonder can I get away with a fast application of mascara and lip gloss? Why am I even panicking when I don't know what he wants?

“As a huge fan of both Elliot and you , I must ask: Why is he calling you at 2 in the morning?” Still terrified, Dekvia clutched her bosom.

I hemmed and hawed before picking up, so I disabled my camera. The video showed Elliot and Braden chatting and imbibing on the couch.

“Don't do that.” Dekvia told me. “In order to trick him into thinking no one is on the phone, I turned on the camera again and covered it with my black overcoat. “ Actually, she did make a valid point there. Before turning the camera back on, I grabbed her jacket to shield it for the camera. I heard Dekvia say. “What the fudge is going on.” in my ear. “Thankfully, the latest iOS release for iPhones no longer shows the option for muting your phone..Go ahead and put yourself on mute, I don't think he means to call you.” She pointed toward the lens.

He has no idea that we are on the phone with him. As I caught a glimpse of Dekvia recording the video out of the angle of my eye, I asked mentally, "What the fuck are you doing?" and immediately muted myself. My gaze landed on Dekvia.

"I'm just recording this in case something happens later on; you know guys are quick to play dumb " Dekvia shrugged her shoulder and began telling me to "Hush!"

When I saw her reaction, I grinned and turned back to the camera.

Braden's eyes and cheekbones were completely crimson in comparison with Elliot's beautiful green ones. The fiery fox eyes weren't the only thing reflected in Elliot's irises, it was emotions everywhere.

"I don't know bruh, Dekvia she - she's driving me so f*cking crazy and I love that about her." Braden grooved along with the background music, nodding his head occasionally.

"I love her so very much."

I rolled my eyes at Dekvia as she beamed like a schoolgirl.

Elliot sipped his drink again and said, "At least you're not in a situation like I am between Nyla and Clarissa." He drew a deep breath, thinking, "I love Nyla to death, but that day Nyla saw Clarissa, it just screwed everything up."

"Why are you doing this anyway? You screwed up big time with Clarissa the day you met her, and you know exactly what I'm talking about; and you know it's going to stay with you until the end. So I say, F*ck Nyla and save your time with Clarissa." A thirsty Braden drank from his glass. " Besides Clarissa is cool, and I love her too ."

"Hell yeah, she's cool." Dekvia said with a laugh. "That's my man! " After hearing Braden, she shouted out. "If I ever have to show him this video, he will definitely hear me say that."

Elliot says. "To make Nyla happy." and with that I chuckle with amusement. Elliot looked up at Braden "If only there was some way to put a stop to this nonsense."

"You telling me, everything you and Clarissa did wasn't true. This whole thing was a sham to make Nyla happy." Braden wrinkled his forehead thoughtfully.

"It is genuine; she does make me feel things; however, the situation is just too complicated." Says Elliot, gulping down the last of his drink.

My tears started to well up as Elliot and Braden spoke further.

"Bro, you're so wrong for that." Braden reached out and touched Elliot on the back.

An unknown voice said. "You weren't raised to break another human heart, Elliot."

"Who is it?" While staring into the lens, Dekvia asked the camera. "Mr. Ward?" Braden says, tossing him a doubtful glance at his surprise presence.

Greeting his father without flinching, Elliotts states. "Hello, Father" "Since when did you give a damn about breaking another human heart? You shattered my heart and gave me a fresh spirit all over again.

"FATHER!?" Together, Dekvia and I said together.

Its Mr.Ward?! The night I was abducted, I remember having a conversation with Mr.Ward over the phone and Adam talking about Mr.Ward in the cellar. Adam says it was Mr. Ward's plan the whole time, and he'd much rather have him as his son than Elliot. He couldn't handle Elliot's weakness. This is my second time hearing his voice again.

I felt Dekvia's "no way!" tapping on my shoulder repeatedly.

“The trouble this Clarissa, girl, causes is enough, we already discussed this, Elliot. A decision needs to be made before matters get worse.” Mr.Ward said.

“How?!“ said Elliot. “ You're the one to blame for this! I told you I didn't want to see you ever again, so why are you here? I'm at a loss because I deeply care and love both of them.“ Elliot gave up and flung his palms in the air.

“You know you can't love two people at once?“Mr. Ward scolds him angrily.

“Man, you might need a relationship to warm up that stone heart of yours.“ The laughter of Braden.

And of course Braden would laugh at an earnest moment, I chuckled.

“For me, affection is a waste of time.“ Mr. Ward took a moment to reflect before continuing. “Do this to put an end to things with--“ Suddenly, Elliot's screen turned dark, cutting off Mr.Ward's words.

I didn't even face Dekvia when his phone went dark. Subtly, I laughed.“The universe works in many ways, doesn't it?“ I gave her a friendly nod and grinned.

“Are you all right?“ Dekvia swung me into her arms.

The truth is, It was me who caused this. No matter what happens, it will be me who suffers the most.

“Yeah .“ I buried my face in her shoulder as another tear rolled down my face and wept softly.

“I'll be fine.“

Chapter Twenty-Three

No matter how late it was, I was still fully awake. At one in the morning, I was listening to the wind chimes on the veranda. It was quite peaceful and lovely out here. To me, it sounds like the ocean at night. It wasn't just any veranda, though; it was a quaint one, with plenty of room to spread out and relax. In a way, it took me by surprise to find myself out here. Back at the house, I often take the time to muse on the veranda about my future.

As the first chills of the wind hit my skin, I tremble. Instinctively, I draped the blanket around my small frame as my phone's screen began to flash. I took a quick look and saw that it said:

[My Lio: Hey, are you awake?]

[Me: Yeah?]

[My Lio: You shouldn't be out here on the veranda at this hour.]

As I read the final message, I glanced around to see if there was any way he could have known I was out here on the veranda. In the split second it took me to compose a reply to his text, I heard Elliot's footsteps approaching my front door.

“Did I frighten you?” As he sits down next to me on the swaying seat, he questions.

I moved the pillow to the other side of me saying “Duh.” I smacked him across the shoulder. “What kind of question is that?!” He scared the living daylights out of me.

I could see the laughter welling up in Elliot's eyes. His palm on my leg sends a shock through my body. Taking a moment to carry on I inhaled deeply. There was nothing but the smell of booze next to me.

Asking. "Are you drunk?" I sighed and turned around to face him.

"Am not." When he did, he nudged me lightly on the shoulder and hiccuped.

The adorableness of Elliot made me grin wistfully. Some of the time he's so dang cute, and then other times I just want to bash his head off.

"How many drinks did you have?" I asked.

With great difficulty, he attempted to count on his fingers. "Five." His speech is low and hoarse as he speaks. He held up five fingers "1,2,3,4,5." He showed me his fingers while slurring and tapping them one by one.

"It's late; you should probably be in bed". I watch as he brushes his fingertip against my leg.

"I mi-miss you." I miss the sou-sound of your voice." he hiccups.

His drunken antics are even cuter than his sensible side.

I got to my feet and held out my hand. "Come on, dummy. Let's get you to bed."

With wide, curious eyes he asked. "Bed?"

I nodded saying “Yes, it is time for you to go to sleep.”

After a few moments, Elliot got to his feet, and I entwined my arms around his as we walked toward the front door.

He froze in his tracks and cast a beaming grin my way.

With a groan “Elliot, come on, you're drunk. With a nod, I signaled for him to move his feet

“I'm not drunk.” he justified. “Can a drunk person do this?” He released his grip on my shoulders to show me one of his incredible skills.

I stood there for a few moments with my arms crossed over my chest. “You're just sitting there, doing nothing.” I said as I made an eyebrow-raising expression at him.

Sulking, he asked. “You didn't get it?”

Incredulous, I asked. “Get what?”

“It's the love I'm trying to express.” He held out his hand.

It's a horrible task, and you're doing a bad job of it. Putting my arm back around his shoulders, I led him inside.

Seeing how silly he was made me chuckle.

“All right, buddy, you gotta help me get you to the bedroom.” As we walked down the hall toward my bedroom, I told him.

“OK, now stand up straight while I remove your jacket.” I noticed that Elliot bobbed his head, just as I reached over to remove his jacket, he fell forward onto my bed. “Elliot! No!” By collapsing onto the bed, he lands on top of me.

“You’re so freaking heavy.” I exclaimed. With a groan, I shoved him off of me.

When he murmurs “Mmm.” His deep, gruff baritone sends jolts of electricity through my body. Until now, I had no clue he was capable of doing that to me.

“Hi.” I turned to face him when we made deep eye contact.

“Hi.” I can’t help but be smitten by his velvety voice as he runs his fingers through my hair, he continues. His eyes were closed as he said gently. “Go to sleep.”

“I am not tired.” My smile broadened as I flopped onto my back and reached for my phone.

Then he places my phone on the other bedside and turns it to off.

“Hey-!” I said before getting cut off.

“Clarissa, go to sleep.” He groaned huskily, and I felt his hand slide down my back, pulling me closer to him.

Wow, for an intoxicated person, I sure do get told what to do a lot. I pouted as I said “I told you I wasn't tired.”

Asking.“What can I do, baby, to make you tired?” Gently he whispered in my ear.

Without even thinking “...well, there are many possible answers to that question...” I say giggling, he chuckles after realizing what I meant.

Wait a minute. Oh my god, did he just call me baby? And I'm just now catching on to this?!

He had both of his strong arms around my waist. “Elliot, what are you doing?” My voice quavered as I spoke.

“I'm just taking in what's mine.” To make matters worse, he started caressing my neck. It was undeniable that being in his presence made me feel secure. There was just something about him that was irresistible.

By putting my palm on his torso, I repelled his advances. “As much as I like doing this, I would rather you be sober before anything”

“Hmm? What if I'm sober?” he harangued. “Suppose it's all a show, though..” And again we lock lips.

While his lips were brushing against mine, I felt a gentle palm on my face. While we were still kissing, I ascended on top of him and felt his... Holy crap. I was wrong about how fascinating this would be. So I grabbed his shirt and pulled his face close to mine. My lips are only millimeters away from his as we gaze intently into each other's eyes. There was something I wanted to say, but I couldn't think of what to say. Both of us

move in for another passionate embrace. This time around, the love and passion were higher. As his hands roamed my body, he began caressing my neck, and I returned the favor. With trepidation, I pulled away from the kiss and met his gaze.

There's a piece of me that wants to give in to this temptation, but I know doing so would only bring me more suffering. He should be with Nyla and not me, for goodness' sake.

With a heavy heart, I slid off of him and plopped down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

After placing a palm on my shoulder, Elliot asked me "I'm sorry, Are you okay?"

So I swiveled around to face him and said. "Yeah, I just don't think we should do this." I mumbled quietly and tapped my fingers nervously.

A pair of welcoming palms encircled my tiny waist. "The day Adam kidnapped you, I didn't know what to do, I just wanted to find you. I was confused about my own emotions. You make me see a part of myself that I didn't realize was there." Under the shirt, his fingers were gently stroking my skin. "I deeply regret the way we started out. This is completely unexpected of me. It's eating me alive every day, and I don't know what to do about it."

I gave him a long, hard look after You circled him. "Our bond is unique in so many ways." But to me, In a way that hurts like hell, they are different.

The hands of Elliot cup my face "I'm sorry if I haven't been clear about my feelings for you, Clarissa, but I love you."

My eyes met his and stayed there. The message in his gaze, which I missed this time, was, tell me what to do for you to believe me. There was no way he could have loved me. It was clear that he loved her more than me. In most cases, I was a quick-and-easy abili I gingerly pull his palm away from my face and beg him. "Don't say things you don't mean." I got onto my feet and walked toward the door saying, "Get some sleep. I'm going to hang out in the living area for a while." As I closed the door and went into the living room. I sat down onto the couch, deep in thought.

I felt the sofa sink as I heard Elliot's footsteps come closer. Through the corner of my eye, I saw him, hidden behind my beige thick blanket. Without saying a word, he simply stared at me. Taking a deep breath, "I'm sorry, Ari." he lamented softly. "I wouldn't blame you if you were angry with me."

Swallowing hard, tears streaming down both cheeks now, I forced a weak smile. "I'm not mad at you. It's just that everything is hitting me all at once." Tears filled my gaze as I gazed into his sympathetic eyes. He leaned closer, until I cuddled up onto his broad shoulders. "It's just so hard for me now; time is closing in on me quicker than ever before. I haven't even did half of the things I wanted too."

"Maybe it will change," he murmured in an attempt to soften the lump in my throat as he held me close. "You can never predict how something's going to turn out."

Sniffing back another wave of tears, some part of me wanted desperately for him to be right about this thing...whatever it was that had been so cruelly taken from us by fate. Yet deep inside a dark corner of my heart I still feared the worst - that life would take away whatever hope I had left.

"How can you tell?" My voice broke as a fresh pair of tears pierced through my walls. "No matter what happens though... it'll still end the same way. I have a brain tumor, El."

Elliot's hand stilled on my shoulder, and he looked deep into my eyes, fear evident in his gaze. "I thought it was just an injection." I knew he was hoping that this wasn't true.

“Why didn't you tell me? I could have done something...” His voice was barely above a whisper, his mood heavy with sadness.

“I... I wasn't ready to tell you yet.” I said softly, my head bent in sorrow. “What more can you do? Magic won't be able to fix anything. We're powerless in the face of this overwhelming situation; It wouldn't be fair at all if I was heal by it. If magic can fix everyone's problems, we will be a utopia.”

“I'm so sorry, Ari.” he said quietly. “That was totally off guard.”

My breath came heavy at the thought of all the possibilities ahead of me. “No matter what happens,” I said firmly, “I can't bring myself to say goodbye because you mean everything to me. When I'm around you it's like all my troubles just melt away. That kiss... it's something the both of us will always have as a reminder by.”

Elliot's lips were twisted in a warm smile as he pulled me closer, securing me safely by his arms. “Let's just focus on what is happening now, and not worry about the future.” He gave me an intent look as he spread the blanket out over us both. I smiled deeply; Elliot always knew exactly what to say when I was feeling down. “So,” I asked, lifting my chin at him a little, “What do you think we should do?”

A faint blush crept across his face as he stammered, “Uhh...there's this movie called Die..uhh...Virgin?” Elliot looked embarrassed.

I cocked my eyebrow in surprise. “You meant 'Divergent' right? That film has been out for quite some time now” I corrected gently while suppressing a laugh.

“How come I'm only learning about it now?” He wondered aloud with a puzzled expression on his face.

“Beats me,” I replied with a shrug before trying to stand up but felt Elliott tugging me back into his embrace again.

He smiled tenderly at me and lifted one index finger as the television turned on unexpectedly. His eyes widened in confusion and surprise as he stared at the screen –

especially when Netflix app popped up on screen -and crooked head slightly to one side declared, “So that’s how it looks? Tell me more about it.”He asked with a playful grin and I snuggled against his shoulder as I patiently described the app. As I continued my explanation, I could feel myself beginning to drift off after 25 minutes of talking, yet again in awe of how patient he was being with me.

“I won’t forget every moment we shared,” Elliot said quietly. His words were heavy with sadness but also determination; “I need to do this for both of our own good, even if it means you're getting better.”

Chapter: Twenty-Four

Day One

Chapter: Twenty-Five

Day Two

Chapter:Twenty- Six

Day Three

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Three days have passed since I last spoke with Elliot. Not even a pitched his name, nor phone calls, nor text, and no showing up. During that time, three days seemed like three years. I guess, We can finally call it quits. Us? What were we? He was a part of my daily routine. But was it just a one-time deal in his mind?

To myself, I mumbled. *“I don't know why I'm still carrying this silly thing“* as I fished the crumpled piece of paper out of my back pocket.

Clarissa

I have a lot to say, but. Nothing we said or didn't matter. Words and actions are like a return-policy. You were just there.. caught up in the moment..until it's time to return you back, you're no use anymore..and you don't know why.. Nyla is my heart; I love her. This time I mean it, you can forget about me because I already failed once, and this time I failed again.

~Elliot

Seeing the one you care about fall in love with someone else is painful, but getting a letter and then having them suddenly vanish is worse. That is one shitty way of leaving someone.

With great care, I refolded the letter and tucked it back into my pocket.

“Ma'am? In just a minute, we'll be closing up shop. Just thought I'd let you know.” I hear familiar voice say

I hurriedly packed my belongings and mumbled. “I'm very sorry; I didn't mean to keep you here.” without even looking up.. “I haven't been myself for the past few days, and this is my first time coming back out again.”.

Why did I even tell her that—

When I glanced up, I was met by the same dirty blonde's emerald gaze. Claire, the one and only, is Mason's girlfriend. I'm not sure if they are still together--

Wind bells ring in my hearing, alerting the employees that a customer has entered the cafe. Isn't she going to say they've closed? I completely understand why she wants to leave because I did the same thing in California back then. So why she hasn't told the person at the door?.

“Surprised to see you here.” Particularly, that one voice said to me.

When I glanced up, I saw the person I had vowed never to see again was standing there right in front of me.

“Mason?” After taking a deep, shaking breath, I jumped up from my chair.

I have been dying to answer this. Exactly what am I going to do if I see him again? Would I escape, sob, strike, or cuss him out? It wasn't any of those things. As if I were immune to his existence, I felt nothing and I had no idea why.

With a beaming grin, as if Mason were the world's best boyfriend ever, Claire quickly staked her territory, strutting triumphantly to stand by Mason's side. Without making a sound, I let out a guffaw.

Oh, please stop with the fake bull crap. Even though Claire is dating him, I know he isn't the most ideal partner.

“Mason-poo, you didn't have to come fetch me up.” Claire leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Mason-poo? Okay, What is going on right now? Girl, Just let me know if you're in trouble and I'll try to help. Perhaps, some sort of hand gestures or something. There's no way she's in love with him. And I thought getting a letter was bad, what is happening in front of me Wait? Have they-

“You live here?” I blurted it out. Even if they did, I wouldn't care because I don't currently call this place home.

My skin crawls as Mason's sly grin spreads across his face as his eyes travel from my head to my toes.

“I'm not supposed to reveal that information, but no I don't. Who are you?” Before turning to face me, Claire gives Mason a wary gaze before returning her attention to me.

The tone of her voice told me there was no reason to feel jealous. Mason and I are done, forever.

With a friendly smile, Mason looked at her. I'm sure you remember my girlfriend Claire, Clarissa. As he looked at me, he arched a bemused brow.

How could I have possibly forgotten about her? I was replaced by her, and then I got beat up after I broke up with him.

“I do remember you!” Clarie cried out loud. “You're his ex; we met in the bathroom a couple of years ago.” she continued with a grin.

“That's me, right there.” I clicked my tongue and fumbled around for my purse.

“I'll be right back, I need to talk to my boss. Clarissa, it was great to see you again.” She smiled softly at me and then turned to look at Mason. “Make sure the door is locked after she leaves, and I'll be right back with my lemonade and your—”

“Fruit punch” I spoke softly as I assumed no one was paying attention. I can't believe I remembered that.

With a “I'm sorry?” Clarie questioned me

“Nothing, I'm about to leave. Sorry to have kept you waiting. I nodded, and she swiftly walked away, leaving Mason and me in silence there. When I had a chance to leave, I took it, but Mason stopped me in my tracks.

“You haven't lost any of your beauty.” I whirled to face Mason, and he gave me a quick, slanted glimpse. “As far as I can tell, everything is back to normal.” His eyes wander down my the arms.

Even though it's been two years, I'm convinced he's the same Mason I once knew.

“Thank you.” There were tears welling up in my eyes, as I spoke quietly, feeling my anxiety coming out of nowhere.

As the saying goes. "I've changed." Mason scowled at his feet before looking at me. "I see you still remember one of my favorite beverages." He caresses my face as he looks deeply into my eyes. When I looked directly into the Devil's eyes, I saw that he was still the same man he had always been.

"Mason." There was a trembling in my voice as I spoke. "Don't touch my face." I pleaded. I squeezed my eyelids shut, trying not to relive every one of our shared moments. The words. "We were perfect." escape his lips. "We were happy."

Actually, we weren't. That's not how things turned out to be. We were completely devoid of merit. I went out of my way to make him happy, but I still got poor treatment.

Flashback

"Are you eating again? Mason laughs at the idea of me eating again. "Don't you ever get tired?"

I do. I am genuinely tired. I'm tired of always being the one who has to make you happy, of always having to be the model partner, and of always having to put up with your constant stream of criticism and taunts.

"But this is my first meal in three days!" Holding a fry in the air with my stable hands. I'm feeling a little unsteady from lack of sustenance, perhaps it could be from anxiety?

"And I'm expected to believe that?" he questioned, resting against the bar, arms folded.

"When you're home alone, who knows what you get up to." he says ironically.

The fry fell out of my grasp and shattered on the ground. My fry! As I look up, I see that he has devoured a sizable portion of my bacon hamburger and french fries. Instead of picking on me and stealing my lunch, he could just say he was hungry.

He mumbled. "You're gaining too much weight, I'm just trying to help." into the sandwich. I kept my mouth shut as I stared at the discarded french fry and listened to the growl of my stomach.

"SAY SOMETHING!" Mason screamed in my ear.

I offered a pathetic "I'm sorry, I'll do better" in answer. I could feel the sting of the echo in the kitchen because it was so loud.

"That's what you get for neglecting me. Your face is really getting chubby, you don't want to be an air balloon." he says, looking down at his palm before turning to me. After mumbling something under his breath, he leaves me alone in the kitchen.

Why? What was the point in putting me through this? Obviously, a 16-year-old has no idea how to end a relationship without causing any more damage. At the end of the day, I still want to figure out how to get out of this relationship.

End of Flashback

I spun around slowly, praying he wouldn't touch me as I carefully removed his palm from my face and a tear trickled down my cheek. My hand pushed firmly against the door.

As his obnoxious hands tightened around my tiny frame. Did you miss me?" he asked gently, his warm air caressing the back of my neck as I hesitantly glanced down at his hands.

Absolutely not. And I just here and let it happen all over again. This was something he did to me often. Pretending he was the good guy as if I was the criminal.

Rigidly ripping his hands from me, I made a dash for the door. As I ran, my pulse pounded furiously. I could feel his hands on me even now. I've never felt so unclean as I did two years ago. My vision blurred as I made a sharp turn. I tripped over my own two feet and scraped up my legs and forehead. The exclamation "Damn it!" Seeing the blood seep through my pants, I began to cry.

A little unsteadily, I reached for my phone and dialed Dekvia's number. I'm sure she'd come to help me. Repeatedly ringing bells.

"Heyyy.." Within seconds, the searing agony had set in.

"Dekvia, I nee--"

"GOT YOU! Please leave a note and I'll get back to you."

BEEEEEP

I hate that stupid voicemail of hers. No matter how many times I called and left a note, I never heard back from her. After taking a few long breaths, I attempted to rise up, but found that I couldn't even get to my feet. I sobbed uncontrollably until I was completely exhausted. My palms shook as I looked at the dark screen of my phone and saw my uncombed hair and blotchy visage again. My fear of anxiety was actually starting to take hold of me.

For the last time, I glanced down at my phone and called the first number that popped into my head.

The phone kept ringing and ringing. "Hello?"

“Elliot!” Feeling a sudden stab of agony, I hissed.

From the other end of the line, I heard a snicker.

No, Absolutely not; I'd heard that voice before.

“It is you.” With resentment in her voice, Nyla states. “I’m going to make this clear, I don’t like you.”

Asking. “Are you ready to talk?!” Elliot’s voice can be heard in the background.

“Yeah, give me a second, baby.” Nyla says before turning her attention back to me. ‘I could easily get rid of you before, I rather played naive. I will kill you if I ever see you with Elliot. It’ll always be Elliot and me. The only thing you did for me was provide an excuse for my absence. I appreciate the time you spent while I was away. I’m back now, you Bitch. Don’t ever call him or breathe the same air as him.’ She threatens me Also, I think it’s important that you hear what Elliot has to say about you. As I heard some rustling in the background, Nyla laughed.

“I’m sorry, sweetie? Let’s finish talking about it.”

What exactly is she up to?

The question was “Did you fall in love with her?” Nyla uttered loudly.

I pictured his body tensing as he pulled his head up to look at Nyla. “I’m doing this for both of us. Just what else do you need from me?”

How could you? Nyla’s voice trembled.

Without uttering a single word, Elliot said nothing.

“This isn't how things work, and I knew it. I just watched as your feelings for her grew and blossomed.” Nyla voiced remorse.

“As much as I care about her, I will never adore her as much as I love you.” As he spoke, Elliot fumbled his words.

Then. “break her heart.”

My eyes well up again as soon as Elliot asks. “What else do you want me to do?” and I brush them away roughly. “I broke her heart once, and now I feel guilty every day for giving Clarissa a creation that I thought could heal me. Honestly, what more can I do? Because of that darn cure, she's dealing with a lot of her past right now. You are the reason I first wanted to do this place. My past was too much for you to handle so I wanted to get rid of it. If it makes you happy, Clarissa and I don't exist anymore. Because of me, I doubt that she has very much time to live. The cure is slowly killing her so I hope you're happy now.” I overhear him sneer as he slams the door.

Subtly, I hung up the call. It felt like a million shards of glass shattered inside of me. Memories of our late-night conversations, shared secrets, laughing, cries of delight, declarations of love, and passionate kisses fill my mind. It's the one memory I can't let go.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Every day I feel terrible for being given her creation, which could cure me, after all I already broke her heart once.”

It was like a broken record that wouldn't stop playing in my mind. So this is what Izel meant when you'll start to realize everything around you. I stuffed everything back into my bag as I pushed myself off the ground. Each and every memory will be a memory I won't forget. From the time I first met him until now, I was so lost. I was definitely not in the mood to talk to anyone. When my phone started vibrating, I knew it was Dekvia calling again. There were a total of 20 unanswered calls, 24 unopened texts, and 5 voicemails. Airplane mode was the first thing I switched on when I placed my phone in my back pocket. Before I completely lose it, I really needed this time to collect all my thoughts.

During those three days, I tried desperately to go through life without thinking about him at all times, but it was impossible. In time, I began to think of his smell, his smile, his name, and his presence around me. There weren't many places I went that brought up memories of him. The only times he ever visited the complex was twice, the fair, in his truck, and at his home. If it was a regular basic, I'd try to stay away from those places so I wouldn't think about him, but I'm always beaten by the thought of him. I ache for the sound of his voice, the sound of his chuckle, the chill of his personality, the surprise of his declaration of love, and the unanticipated moments we shared together. I finally felt secure again after all these years. Elliot was like air to my lungs. To this day, I've always loved him more than I could ever devote to myself, and that feeling won't ever diminished. My ultimate goal was to spend the rest of my life with him. He was there for me whenever I had an nightmare, and he helped me get through days and nights when I didn't think I could make it. While I thought I would never adore a guy like Elliot, he is

the one I just can't seem to let go of. It only took one shot for him to get me to let my defenses down. My weakness was in my past. I thought I'd gotten past that. I knew that healing takes time, but it turns out that I wasn't fully healed. He stole what was left of my heart and broke it.

You can count on being thrown into the most bizarre circumstances. Timing and the people we meet will change your life in some way. I feel like a failure for not letting myself completely recover. Once my recollections began to flood back, things began to make sense. Perhaps the shot could help him overcome whatever ailment he had. I doubt it was his first time administering that shot; he certainly seemed confident that he had the ability to cure himself. Is that why he didn't want me to know about it before things grew worse? Couldn't something be done to help me, I thought.

I know I'm not upset because he injected me. Truthfully, I don't believe a kid my age deserves to go through what I did. Both physical and emotional anguish were inflicted upon me. I've been there; I've felt utterly shattered; I've experienced heartache; I've battled with feelings of worthlessness; I've debated whether or not to eat; and it's not worth it anymore. Yet, it takes a strong mind and wisdom to put together the reasons you were tested in such a way. I'm still here, doing the best I can every day to grow my existence. Since this is my last journey, the universe wished for me to recover fully before embarking on my next one. I am so thankful for the experiences I've had because they've taught me so much. What really bothers me is that our entire relationship was based on lies. I didn't even know how to explain it just yet.

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My head is spinning and my stomach is churning from all the contemplation and sobbing I did earlier. Who knew? All the confusion will disappear and become crystal clear.

A vehicle with black tinted windows pulled up next to me, the windows rolled down to reveal a distraught Dekvia wiping away tears.

She jumped out of the vehicle and yelled at me. "WHY YOU DIDN'T ANSWER THE PHONE?" The mere act of gazing at me triggered her to burst into tears, and Dekvia swiftly drew me back into an embrace. "What the heck happened to your face?"

I just hugged her and didn't utter a word.

"Someone wishes to have a conversation with you." As I wiped the tears from her eyes, she backed away. I stared at her in bafflement as she bobbed her head toward the rear of the car, revealing Elliot.

Braden gave a knowing nod and led Dekiva to the car to calm down. Elliot cautiously opened the door and walked over to me. With remorse and grief etched all over his features, he peers down at me. Asking "What happened to you?"

After briefly shutting my dark brown eyes, I remember the sensation of Mason's palm on my skin and then open them to say "It just so happens that I bumped into Mason."

"I'm sorry, but Mason is responsible for this!?. Dekvia bugged in on our conversation

“After what happened, I managed to get away.” I gave her a half-grin and glanced at Elliot. The question is .“Why are you here?” Softly, I asked as I spotted Dekvia had closed the window.

“For two reasons. Braden told me you weren't answering the phone after you left a tons of voicemails on Dekvia's phone and secondly.” He paused for a moment, considering, and then asked.“Why did you curse out Nyla? She didn't do anything wrong to you.”

Am I missing something here? Never in my life have I sworn at her. There have been many times when I've wished to knock her out, but I've never once cursed at her. But I'd really like to now

“What? I said gently, meeting his gaze.

“Nyla told me you called her and cussed her out because you hated her so much you wanted her dead.” He cleared his throat loudly.

“You really believe her over me?”“Unbelievable words of astonishment escaped my lips.

“Yes, I did. Why wouldn't I?” He questioned me without no hesitation.

“You're so naive, Elliot.” As I heard the confirmation of his words, a sinking feeling grew in my stomach. Trying to keep composure and master my emotions, I spoke slowly and carefully. “If we were together— I would want you to do something that made you happy.” I said firmly, shifting my body weight onto one hip as frustration began to flare. “It took a lot of strength and effort to put the pieces together, but I finally know about the injection you gave me.Elliot, you decided to keep me in the dark even after I told you what was about to happen to me! You even left without saying anything three days ago

after giving me that horrid letter.“ I said emphatically as I fished out the paper from my pocket before throwing it at his feet.

He cautiously picked up the letter before looking back at me. “So, you did hear it all and remember every single thing?” His response was almost too gentle; had he expected me to explode?

Yes, of course I did, and he probably knew all along that I was on the phone.

My vision grew hazy. “It was you the whole time.“ I said, feeling a strange sense of comfort in knowing who was behind the events that had unfolded. My voice trembled as I added.“The heartbreaking thing is that I wish you had told me --whether there's a cure or not-- did I not deserve to know?”

His words he had spoken to me days ago suddenly rang through my head again-- “Nyla was treated worse than you“.

My breath caught in my throat as the memory of my abusive relationship with Mason came flooding back to me. Through a clenched jaw, I muttered.“You may not know everything that Nyla endured but at least let me tell you this--ever since your invention entered my bloodstream, all the pain from my past traumas has come surging back to life. And yes--Mason beat me until it felt like death.“

Fear filled my veins, yet despite that fear, I declared firmly with conviction in every word.“Here’s the crazy part, If I had another lifetime I would do it again because you actually made everything felt like home.

Elliot looked straight into my eyes and whispered only three syllables--“Clarissa“. At that moment I drew a deep breath and opened my eyes fully once again.

My voice barely above a whisper, I uttered “It's not fair“. His hand moved towards me, yet I instantly swatted it away. I spoke once again “It's not fair...because I don't have any other options compared to you.. In life,somebody is bound to get hurt each time, but it will be far more than a broken heart. This isn't something that can just be swept away with the passing of months or years. You get to live while I d-.“ I shook my head as I said “ We both know each other too well and how we comforted and supported one another through dark hours, yet here we are in the dark when everything is crumbling down into pieces.So this was your plan all along, knowing that my life would end sooner or later and that you would be able to live happily ever after with Nyla? I was only an experiment to you?“ My questions meshed together before fading into silence.

Elliot answered quietly “ No,This wasn't the way it was supposed to be.“ Despite his apology, all felt betrayed; after our journey together, we'd now arrived at this fateful place of unfairness and injustice – a place where my only choice left me broken and bereft of any hope for the future.

The atmosphere between us was thick with tension, and I posed an unexpected question: “Be honest with me, who would it be?“

But I already knew the answer to that.

He hesitated for a few moments before finally saying my name - “Clarissa“ - in defeat. “This has gone far enough, this conversation is done.“ But as soon as I touched his arm, Elliot turned around and faced me again. I questioned him again to explain himself. “How can you tell me you love me then turn around and speak those same words to her?“

With the way of his silence turned out to be, It was clear that I wasn't the winner at all.

The moment I wiped my hand, I took a deep sniff. "I swear this will be my last question forever." Blinking back tears, I held my breath and ventured. "At Least once, Did I make you happy?"

"My feelings for you are not a secret." He answered with conviction. "No one ever truly knows the intensity of their feelings or their meanings behind them before they find out." Elliot gazed into my eyes with warmth and earnestness, gently tightening his hold on my hands. He continued softly. "Sometimes it takes us by surprise."

He seemed to be searching for the right words while reassuringly said "I'm only trying to protect you." There was something unfinished in his expression - was there more he wanted to say or do? Regardless, his presence gave me peace of mind and rage.

His hands grew warmer onto mine as he gripped them tightly. Elliot looked at me deeply with his eyes, searching for an answer. His words were so comforting yet so mysterious. "I'm only trying to protect you."

In that split second everything became so lucid—my reason for the tears, his actions, my past traumas, and my feelings. "Protect me from what?" I asked bravely as laughter mixing with fear escaped my throat. The answer made me tremble. "Y-YOU." Taking another deep breath, a sneeze unexpectedly caught me off guard. "As I looked back on the day of opening that fateful door - only now did I realize that my life had changed forever."

He spoke in a much softer tone than before addressing me by name. “Clarissa... you're the only one who ever truly knew me.” His words echoed slowly while every sentence felt like a punch to my gut making any chance of escape futile.

All I wanted was to move away from this feeling and forget what had just been said, yet it seemed impossible at best. My silence said it all in that moment; every word felt like another punch as acceptance slowly began to settle into my mindset with a logical understanding of how things were going to end.

“I-I-, Just forget it.” I found myself coughing and sneezing when Elliot pulled me by my shoulder and looked at me “Clarissa, you're coughing up blood, not only that your nose is bleeding more than usual.” he said softly before muttering under his breath.

Dekvia interjected, shocked by the blood in our hands, she shouted “What the hell is going on?! GET IN THE CAR, WE ARE GOING TO THE HOSPITAL NOW!“.

“My head.” I whimpered in response as my throat seemed to be strangling me.

“Can you move?” Elliot looked me into my eyes as I nodded my head.

I weakly tried to take a step forward when a sudden dizziness swept over my body abruptly, like a giant wave crashing into shore. When I eventually regained control of myself, my legs gave way beneath me and I crashed onto the cold hard ground. As I realized what had happened, a numbing sensation ran through my body followed by a distinct ache in the areas where I had hit the ground.

Elliot hand found a way onto my shoulder in an attempt to comfort me while I battled both exhaustion and distress simultaneously. “Clarissa, Are you okay?” He asks softly.

In between hiccups and sobs, all I could muster was whisper “my head“.

“We need to go and stop wasting time.“ Dekvia urged a sense of urgency in her voice as she quickly opened the back seat door. A rush of understanding seemed to course through Elliot as he lifted me up carefully and guided me towards the car patiently.

Was this really how it was going to end, forreal this time.

I felt the intense pressure in my head rapidly worsening and couldn't help but scream out in agony.

“Don't do this to me right now, Ari.“ Elliot's warm hands caressed me, as he shouted at Braden “Drive faster!“ A tear drop hit my skin, making me aware that what I was experiencing had deeply affected him as well. He held his hand out to me, trembling as he looked down at me. “Now I know what it means when people say ,you'll find out the way you feel at the right moment. This must be that moment.“ His voice cracked as he slowly intertwined our fingers. “All this time, I was such a jerk to you when you were only curing me.“ Elliot paused, overcome by emotion before concluding in a whisper ‘Please, don't leave me here.“

My heart shattered seeing him like this but all I could do was reach out and gently wipe the tears from his eyes. Then a thought crossed my mind which made me look closely at his palm and gasp in shock - “It m-must have been when I fell earlier, I didn't mean to put blood on you.“ I said softly.

Looking deep into Elliott's eyes, genuine care shined through, he leaned closer and said “You're worried that even a drop of your blood can carry away all your strength from

me? You don't have to worry because nothing will tear us apart anymore, not even through a tiny droplet of our combined life.". Keeping my gaze fixed on him , a faint smile grace across my lips while he gently kissed the top of my head making everything seem more surreal.

The pain in the side of my head grew stronger as I spoke weakly, beginning with the words."H-Hey, Dekvia." I could feel tears welling up in my eyes and slowly spilling onto the seat in front of me.

Then Dekvia removed her seatbelt and turned around to face me, asking worryingly."Yes, Rissa?" There was a hint of sadness in her voice as she tried to remain composed.

Looking into her gaze I said softly "You were right..." I could feel each word quivering, as I prepared for my next response "

Without understanding she asked."About what?" She interlaced her soft fingers with mine

"That once I fell in love, it would last until death do me apart."A downhearted chuckle escaped my nostrils. "I wanted to tell you since we left the hospital that Dr. Phil said I only have a month or less to live from Elliot's injection." I smiled softly at Elliot then at Devkia "Just like the rest of us, he was trying to make it through life, so please don't hold it against him."

The truth poured from me like water from a broken sieve. "So that's why you gave me the teddy, huh? Because you knew..." Dekvia's voice trailed off as a tear rolled down her cheek while replying with a gentle sorrow smile on her face softly "I'm sorry but you

should have never fallen in love.“ With those words we both chuckled softly; although our hearts were breaking inside.“It wasn't supposed to happen like this-- for you to meet someone and have it end like this, Rissa..What am I supposed to do without you?“

As I looked from Elliot to Dekvia, I could feel the sadness radiating off of them. “You have Braden to look out for you, and I know he'll take care of you.“ When I said that Braden grabbed Dekvia hand and gave me a reassuring wink through the rearview mirror that he would take care of her, no matter what happened.

Then, I moved my gaze to Elliot, who seemed so mournful. As I leaned over to kiss cheek lightly, he absorbed my touch with his closed lids. “And Elliot, I said softly in between moans of agony. “Although we both knew our time together was limited and it felt like just yesterday we were exchanging promises that our love will never be forgotten. I love you so much, Elliot. Isabella and you are forever sealed within my heart.“

Suddenly there's a loud yell from the front seat that jolted me into Elliot arm's more. as Braden suddenly slammed on the brakes with a loud yell. “WE ARE HERE! Well sort of..“ He commented frustratedly while honking the horn at all the people blocking the entrance to the building.“This is exactly what I meant about hospitals, they never do anything right!“

No matter how off my mind I am right now, please don't let Braden take you anywhere, I'm not sure if Dekvia or his driving skills are worse.

“Jeez, Braden. You can shut your mouth now, idiot. There's no need to yell.“Dekvia exclaims.“Please shut up; I'm about to have a nervous breakdown after finding out that my closest friend is dying.“

Braden spun around and stared at us, saying. "You gotta do it, bro! It's going to take us a solid three to ten minutes to get to the front door. Traffic is blocked here. I'll explain to Dekvia"

As in. "Do what!" Dekvia's peepers popped open as she tried to figure out what was about to happen.

I could feel my life slipping away as I saw the blood between my fingers with one final cough. Knowing our time was up, Elliot teleported us to safety as we made it to the hospital just in time and Elliot screamed "HELP US!" as he ran into the lobby. One of the medics quickly brought a stretcher and asked "What had happened to her?"

With his eyes on me, Elliot told them mournfully "She was injected with a creation that I didn't know would kill her." He squeezed my hand tightly as I felt my consciousness fading away. The doctor asked her final question: "What is her name?"

In a voice full of sorrow, he uttered my name: "Clarissa Fallon." Causing all the doctors and nurses whirled around in disbelief, leaving them frozen in place.

The doctor's assistant uttered "This is the one we were discussing this morning" as she felt my neck. She instructed the other employees " She needs to be taken straight to emergency room 206 before she slipped into a trance." The nurses rushed me down the hall, giving me air and injecting needles in my arm.

Gripping onto Elliot's hand, I felt warm tears streaming down my face as my heart slowly sank. After all this time, the pain still feels so fresh and overwhelming. Looking

up at him one last time before everything faded out of view, tears streamed down his cheeks too and I could finally see so much genuine love in his eyes.

“Clarissa.. Don't leave me!” His voice shakes as he continues “I promised that our love would never be forgotten, and I won't let it happen either.”

All I can do is nod back with a sorrowful smile, knowing that our bond will never be broken no matter how far apart we are...

The pain was almost unbearable as I looked in my beloved Elliot's eyes and said a final goodbye. I nervously smiled at him weakly, trying to offer some hope. “It's like going to sleep, everything will be alright and I'll be back. It's not your fault.” I assured him, knowing I wouldn't be back. Tears streamed down his face as the nurse reapplied the oxygen mask back onto me. As soon as the nurse did so, Elliot crumpled to the ground in despair saying “I love you, Clarissa.” and as they ripped the ties that had bound us together.. Taking one last look at him, my heart felt heavier than ever before as I slipped away.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Final Chapter

And just like that, we are back to the beginning. After everything that had happened, I found it strange seeing myself like this. All my past were coming back to me, and I was continuously having headaches and falling in love, making it difficult to trust anything.

As I wiggled myself from the machines that have been watching my every breath, a voice says “She's awake, thank you Jesus!”

When I connected my eyes with– “Dad.” I breathed out in relief.

With a gentle sob, he said “Thank you, Jesus.I thought I lost you.” He embraced me with a tight hug as our eyes met again, all of the worries melted away and were replaced with love as we smiled at each other.

When Dr.Phil entered, he looked at us both with happiness and said “It's good to see you're awake finally.” A puzzled blink crosses his eyes as he takes one last look at the clipboard.

“I'm sorry, what do you mean, finally?” I asked, confusingly, looking at Doctor Phil and my dad.

*Wasn't it just a couple of faints, nose bleeds at most, and unexpectedly coughing up blood?
It's nothing to worry about, I tend to get them when I'm under a lot of pressure but why isn't
nobody answering me?*

I asked Doctor Phil once again “What happened.” while glancing at my Dad's presence again. Did he had come all that way to Gregville, because of my faint!

My doctor spoke to me slowly, giving my dad and me a reassuring smile. “Can you tell us what's the last thing you remembered?”

With an optimistic expression, I sat up and tried to process the situation. Although my confusion was palpable, I still managed to recall what had just happened. “I think...” Taking a deep breath I continued. “I think I was walking back to Collin's place after uh-.”

The doctor arched her eyebrow while looking at me with concern before taking another look at the clipboard.

My father then interjected and said something that broke my heart “ Honey, you've been asleep for two weeks.”

What? That couldn't be right? It felt like yesterday I was trying to find my way back to crib, Dekvia and I stayed in.

But then the doctor gave us some reassurance “This might be as serious as we thought it could be.”

“But Dr. Phil, you told me I had a tumor of the brain and the injection..” Fighting back the tears welling up in my eyes, I focused on processing everything around me - little by little. It took some time but soon enough, Then suddenly everything clicked.

The Final Recalled of My Flashback

Gripping onto his hand, I felt warm tears streaming down my face as my heart slowly sank. After all this time, the pain still feels so fresh and overwhelming. Looking up at him one last time before everything faded out of view, tears streamed down his cheeks too and I could finally see so much genuine love in his eyes.

“Clarissa.. Don't leave me!” His voice shakes as he continues “I promised that our love would never be forgotten, and I won't let it happen either.”

All I can do is nod back with a sorrowful smile, knowing that our bond will never be broken no matter how far apart we are...

End of Flashback

The way my dad ran his thumb over my shoulder sent a chill through my body and said “Honey, you really don't remember walking back home from work.” My dad's voice cracked in silence.

No, there's no way?! Had I really been walking home from work?

“No, I remembered being carried in here, dad?!” My lips quivered as I tried to remember who it was that carried me away because this really didn't make any sense to me. There was only person that I knew will always be there and tell me the truth, no matter what.

My gaze shifted to Dekvia when she walked into the room and I saw her crying, and suddenly all of these emotions overwhelmed me. All I wanted was to have answers.

“Please tell me the doctor and everyone else here is wrong.” I begged her while tears streamed down my face; I wasn't crazy, yet these memories...How could they come back to me at random?

But as soon as Dekvia saw me breakdown in front of her, she slowly nodded saying “I'm sorry, but I just want the best for you.” Fiddling her fingertips.

What exactly does she mean? She would never do this to me, and she would never lie to me. Watching Dekvia play with her fingertips nervously, I knew it wasn't true. Dekvia would not go this far for my for own good.

“W-Why are you doing this, you know exactly what happened, D.” I asked, holding back tears, staring at her.

There was no denying it any more; what happened had actually taken place...and I wasn't losing it.

“I could still vividly picture when I was being held in the car.” A familiar name came to mind when his name was “Elliot”. escaped my lips. From the look in Dekvia's eyes, I could tell she knew exactly who I was talking about. A sense of sorrow filled her eyes as she looked at me with a word that broke my heart “Clarissa.” She said gently, “We never went on our trip.”

“You're lying.” I roughly wiped the tear away from my cheek .

I refused to let her play mind tricks with me “Remember that night in Gregville, the party Jessie hosted after I managed to be on the wrong side of town. I save Isabella and

met Braden who also save me and most of all Elliot was there.“ I reminded Dekvia before taking a deep breath.

With another clipboard held in hand, the nurse rushed over to the doctor. He quickly flipped through it and then said.“You experienced a serious fall.“ He continues flipping the pages “It looks like you stumbled upon a form of dreaming called manipulative dreaming while you were sleeping.“

“I’m sorry, but I’m not fully understanding?“ I mean who wouldn’t? Why couldn't Dr. Phil just come out and say in my language.

“It looks like you've been through a lot. We believe that due to your confusion and stress, your mind entered into a special state where you experienced what we call 'manipulative dreaming'. He quickly switched tack, reassuring me, saying.“We will help you through the traumas you've faced. That's why we'll be assigning you a therapist - to help get you back on track!“ His eyes twinkling as he clicks the top of his pen; reassured by this bright outlook.“Hey Mr. Fallon and Ms. Dekvia Collins, may we have a conversation in room 415?“ Dekiva, my father, and I were left there alone when he nodded his head.

Taking a deep breath, I drew the blanket around me. In this world, so much frightens us-- death, loss of someone close to us, taking a chance for love and keeping secrets. But if you just close your eyes, you can make a world with no pain or sorrow that lasts through eternity.

In the end, I was able to find my home. That's what I saw in Elliot. But part of me didn't want to believe what others think..If only I had faith enough to believe with all my heart that he will last forever...

A gentle knock on the door interrupted my thoughts, bringing in a nurse saying. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but Dr. Phil forgot to mention that you'd be staying over tonight.." The nurse cocked her head and strolled over to my bed, where she picked up a slip of paper. "I think you dropped this." She smiled warmly at me as she handed me a neatly folded piece of paper. "Just press the button if you need me, Ms. Fallon." With a playful wink, she left me there alone with the letter in my hand.

Was that letter there the whole time?

Gingerly I unfolded it and took in a whiff of a familiar scent before I began to read it – then one voice filled my head and mended my heart together again.

Clarissa

When we first met, it didn't turn out right, but now it is different. I did make a promise, and no matter what, I will always keep that promise. Remember that, Until then Ari.

~E.W

A tear streaked down my wrist and onto the letter as I whispered quietly. "I won't ever forget you." With newfound hope swirling inside me, I smiled softly at the precious letter as I carefully folded it back up and held it close to my heart, forever.

As I looked out the window, marveling at the beautiful display of lights before me as the meteor shower shot through the sky, *I couldn't help but feel a wave of hope.*

It's true that life can be unknowable; despite how lost we are in this universe. No matter how hard and confusing things may seem right now, but Elliot, I'm not ready to close this chapter of our story. So I'm clinging onto the promise that one day we'll be together again—wherever you are—this isn't goodbye..

It's until then, Elliot

To Be Continued