Chapter One

Reaching out, I try to grab onto something, but it’s no use, I’m falling. A few heartbeats later, I plunge into the water below and start sinking. Doing my best to stay calm, I force my eyes open to figure out which way is up. Following the tail of bubbles, I locate up, but just as I am about to swim to the surface something shiny catches my eye. Despite the plea from my lungs and common sense, I dive further and search quickly for whatever it is I think I saw. Almost ready to give up, I scan one last time and finally find it half buried in the sand. As my fingers wrap around it and pull it out, a pulse radiates through the water, but I don’t have much time to process that as I feel an arm wrap around my waist and start pulling me away to the water’s surface.

I gasp for air as soon as we make it all the way up, swallowing a bit of water in the process, choking me up. My rescuer drags me to the side of the boat and pushes me up the ladder. I struggle to climb, but still I make it and my rescuer quickly follows, but quickly walks away. It gives me time to stash my treasure before they come back. They come back a moment later with a couple dry towels and an angry look on their face. As I wrap a towel around me, I sigh and give in and ask, “What?”

“We could have both drowned, that’s what.”

“I’m sorry, but what? Neither of us would have even been in that position if you hadn’t pushed me overboard so don’t you try and blame me.”

“I did not push you; you just backed up too far. You know how clumsy you can be sometimes. Be glad I was there to save you.”

“You’re right, Darren, thank you. I’m sorry I was standing too close to the edge. I just lost sense of where I was while you were standing so close to me.”

His face softens a little and says, “It’s alright, I forgive you,” as he places a hand around my throat gently, “you know how much I love you, right? How devastated I would be if anything happened to you?” he continues as his grip slightly increases.

Feeling the panic rise up again, I respond with, “of course I know and you know how much I love you, I would never want to hurt you.”

“Let’s head back to shore and get you some dry clothes and then maybe go out for dinner to celebrate that we’re both still alive,” Darren says casually as he takes his hand from my neck and instead embraces me as if relieved that it’s all behind us, but I know better than to think that’ll be the end of it. I won’t be safe until tomorrow.

I simply nod and move away from him towards the cabin where I don’t run the risk of falling overboard again. Darren does not follow and I breathe with relief. It’s only when I feel the boat start to move that I feel safe enough to pull out the treasure I found, because I know he’ll be too busy sailing to give me another thought. What I found turns out to be a heart-shaped pearl on a very delicate chain. How it managed to get enough light to reflect at all is a complete mystery. The pearl itself is also unusually cut, as if it were a gem or diamond instead.

The boat rocks unexpectedly and I start to tip, but I manage to catch myself by grabbing a nearby table. Once the rocking smooths out, I pull my hand away only to find I’ve got a splinter. I wince at the sudden twinge of pain. I head for the so-called medicine cabinet to search for some tweezers or a needle, but find nothing useful. Sitting down on a makeshift seat made from fishing netting, I inspect my hand and set to picking my skin apart to get the splinter out that way. After a few minutes, I finally manage to get the last of it out, but now there are bits of blood on my fingers so I make my way to the cooler to get a water bottle when Darren finally decides to check on me. I quickly grab the necklace and shove it in a pocket before he can see it.

“Thought I’d come check to see if everything was still in order. There was a large wave that came out of nowhere,” he reports as he glances around to see if anything fell over or moved.

“All’s good here, only a splinter, but nothing too terrible,” I reply matter-of-factly.

He nods and heads back out to continue our journey. After he is safely out of my line of sight, I pull on the necklace to wipe off any blood I have gotten on it only to find that it’s no longer a pearl or at least no longer the solid white pearl it was. It’s now a deep crimson shade so that it looks more like a garnet instead. To think that somehow the pearl absorbed my blood and changed into a garnet is absurd and I have to put a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing too loudly, because that would be insane.

Darren shouts that we’ll be docking in a few minutes so I put the necklace back in my pocket and headed out to help tie-up the boat. We head ashore and I put the necklace completely out of my mind. That was a mistake.

Chapter Two

Dinner went by flawlessly or so it seemed to the outside world. Darren was the perfect gentleman with opening doors and pulling out chairs and pleasant words; me of course with the perfect thank-yous and smiles and nods. Then there was the hidden side of clenched teeth, the touching, and the anger behind cloudy grey eyes.

The part that worries the most is the fact that I do not understand why he is angry. I have done my very best not to upset him. Actually I have done my best to interact with him as little as possible without seeming like I was avoiding him, which I definitely have been. It’s generally the best way to stay safe these days. It wasn’t always like this. When we first started seeing each other he was sweet and kind, but something changed, but I suppose these situations generally always start that way.

I can feel the air shift as we pull back into the driveway. There’s a storm brewing and it’ll hit when we get inside and there is no one left to witness. The only hint I’ll have to how bad it might be is if he locks the door once we are inside and if he makes sure all the shades are drawn and curtains shut. If he checks all of that, I understand there’s a chance I might never make it back out that door so I’m trying to come up with any reason why we should not go in yet so I try suggesting getting dessert or to go see a movie, but he’s not having it. He gets out of the car and then comes around to open mine so that I don’t have a chance to move over to the driver’s seat and take off. I tried that once. Let’s just say that ended up with me in the hospital with a couple of broken appendages and a story of falling out of a tree. Well, we might as well get on with it.

I reluctantly get out and slowly follow him into the house. I head to the bedroom and put my ears on alert. I hear the locks click into place and the whoosh of the shades and curtains being drawn. Nervously, I start to change into pajamas, something somewhat suggestive to perhaps provide a distraction. His footsteps draw closer and I struggle to keep myself together as I finish dressing and turn to face him. I’m met with a back-handed slap across my face.

“I give you everything and this is how you repay me, with betrayal?” he yells holding up the necklace and grabbing me by the throat. “Who have you been seeing? Who else have you been sleeping with?” His grip grows tighter with every word.

“No one, I swear,” I choke out, “I found that today, in the water. Please believe me, I would never betray you.”

He lets go of my throat and I gulp in fresh air and rub my throat to soothe the soreness. “And why should I believe you? After all you tried to blame me for you falling into the water. How do I know the whole thing isn’t a setup? No, I’m going to find out who it is and believe me there might not be as much restraint as I have shown you right now. You are under no circumstance allowed to leave this house until I say so, do you understand?” I nod, but it isn’t enough and he grabs me by my hair and yells in my face, “I asked you a question,” to which all I can say is “yes” and he releases me then storms out of the room and out of the house, locking me in as his prisoner.

I don’t move for a half hour willing him to not return any time soon. I shouldn’t have to worry as he’s usually gone for at least several hours after something like this occurs, but I am not one to take chances. Changing into something far more comfortable, I go to the kitchen for a bag of ice for my face and then return to the bedroom to lay down because I don’t quite feel up to anything else. As I walk into the room I have to step back quickly in pain from stepping on something, it’s the necklace. I wonder if he has even realized he’s dropped it. It could be a test, but I think likely not in this case; he wouldn’t want to hold onto anything that repulsed him for too long, except maybe me. I don’t know why he won’t let me go. I don’t know why I don’t leave other than the sheer terror of what might happen if I suggested it.

Against my better judgment, I put the necklace on and am surprised by the weight of it. It didn’t seem so heavy in my hand. I lie down and let my mind wander to thoughts of how I thought my life would be and how it is not this and I am not sure how to escape this to get there. Drifting off in a whirlwind of ideas, I fall into a deep sleep of dreams of a brighter future where I am not held back by chains that I’ve bound myself in.

Chapter Three

I wake to a dull throbbing pain in my face and an ache in my neck and the memory of the day before comes flooding back. I sit straight up and feel my neck for the necklace, finding it exactly where it should be, but I quickly remove it and get up to hide it somewhere Darren will never find it. Hearing footsteps in the hallway, I stash it quickly and then return to the bed. He walks into the room carrying a tray with breakfast items.

“I made your favorite, crepes. I know I can’t make them as well as you, but I tried. I’m sorry about yesterday. I may have overreacted, but you know how much I love you. I just couldn’t stand the thought of you leaving me for someone else,” he rambles and I mostly tune him out. It’s always the same. Now more than ever I know I have to find a way out before he kills me. “Adalia, are you okay? Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes, Darren, I hear you. It’s just hard to believe you given the pain in my face and my neck this morning.”

“You’re right, I didn’t mean to hurt you so much, but under the circumstances I just lost my senses and it was justified, but I’m willing to forgive you, if you’ll promise to never go back to whoever it is and we can move past your indiscretion.”\*

“Are you serious?” I ask incredulously. “Do you truly think I would do that to you?”

“Sometimes, Adalia, it’s like I don’t know you anymore. Anyway, eat and get dressed, we’re going out in a half hour,” he states simply and leaves the room. I sit there for only a short moment of disbelief before quickly getting ready. I don’t want to risk making him wait.

The street is empty as we make our way to the car so there are no witnesses that I can see from here, only drawn curtains and carless driveways. Opening the door myself this time, I get in and pray that wherever we’re going is somewhere normal and crowded. Crowds are safe, there’re witnesses. Maybe there’ll be a way to sneak away and lose myself in a crowd. If I can manage to separate myself from him, maybe I have half a chance. We travel for a few hours and my hope starts dwindling with every mile. Stopping once for a meal and bathroom break, we continue on for another hour before he announces that we’ve arrived. Slowly getting out of the car, I look around trying to determine where we are. All I see are trees, leaves, sticks, and dirt. To say that I was internally panicking is an understatement.

“As I was saying earlier, I don’t feel like I know you anymore so I thought we’d take a small vacation and remedy that. There’s a cabin a few minutes’ walk from here, but no road to drive on as you can see.”

“We didn’t bring any supplies with us. What will we eat?”

“I called the owners last night and they brought a few starter things. If we need more, we’ll drive into town and get them, but for now it’s just you, me, and this forest. Before you can ask, we’ll be here as long as it takes and town is 20 some miles away.”

Obviously there’s no good way to respond to that seeing as how my brief hope of escaping has just been left to die here where no one knows that I even exist, so instead I just start walking letting him lead the way. It takes us at least five minutes to walk to the cabin so trying to leave at night is definitely out. Maybe a trip into town will be more hopeful, but I have no idea how long before one of those trips. I am dreading the thought of what we’ll do in the meantime. My mind has been too terrified to touch that yet, but I have a feeling I’ll find out soon enough.

“Well, here we are, home sweet home for now at least,” he announces as he finds a hidden key in a nearby plant. I’ve no doubt it won’t be there again. He unlocks the door and lets me go in first. I hear him lock it back up behind us.

Searching for a bathroom I ignore him the best I can as I’m sure he’s taking inventory of everything. I’ll have to be careful not to touch too much. It doesn’t take long to locate the bathroom and announce that I’m taking a shower, because let’s be honest that long drive had me building up a sweat and I stink. I’ve only been in the shower for a couple minutes when I hear the bathroom door open and Darren comes in.

“I thought I would join you,” he says and does indeed slowly, painfully join me, drawing out every movement to torture me and gauge my reaction. Like a deer caught in the headlights, I desperately want to bolt, but too afraid of what might happen if I move an inch. “Don’t worry, Adalia darling, I don’t want to hurt you.” He gently touches me everywhere, gradually moving closer to me. I involuntarily shudder and his demeanor instantly changes. He roughly grabs my hair and whispers in my ear, “I guess you want to do this the hard way then,” and shoves me up against the side of the shower and forces himself on me. There’s no way to fight him off, not if I want to live and honestly right now, I’m not sure I want to.

Once he’s finally had his fill, he leaves abruptly and I fall to my knees trying to hide my sobs in the water raining down on me. I have no clue as to how much time has passed. It doesn’t really matter. When I finally shut off the water, I find myself shaking, but it doesn’t take long to realize it’s not from the cold air. Somehow I convince myself to move and put clothes on, but I do it with my eyes shut. I cannot stand to look at myself.

Leaving the bathroom, I listen for any noise that would tell me where he is, but I don’t hear a sound. Creeping to the hallway, I scan for any sign, but he’s left, again. Moving more quickly, I throw on some shoes and head to the door only to find it’s locked. It’s a double sided lock and I don’t have a key. Searching for another way out, I check every inch of the cabin. There’s a backdoor that has the same kind of lock and all the windows are too small for me to fit through. I find a door that leads to a basement, but I come up short there too. I’m trapped.

After two hours the disgust and bleakness of the situation turns into hunger and I force myself off the floor and to the tiny kitchen and take inventory of what’s available to eat. There’s not much. The easiest option is a bowl of cereal and that’s about all I can convince myself to choke down. He still hasn’t returned by the time I have finished eating and the sunlight is nearly gone. In my search earlier I found some paper and some pencils and I set myself to drawing. At first I am not sure what to draw, but as someone trapped wanting to be free I instantly think of caged birds and decided to set them free.

I lose myself in my work. It’s only when I notice I’m nodding off that I decide to go to bed, but I leave the bedroom door open. I don’t want to miss hearing him come in. As I’m changing into some clothes I’d found in the dresser, the necklace falls out of a pocket and I’d completely forgotten I’d decided to grab it last minute as we were leaving. I make a quick silent wish for a way out as I decide to once again wear it. Maybe it’ll bring more luck on even though it is part of the reason why I am even here, stuck in these woods who knows where. I climb into the bed and fall asleep almost instantly from exhaustion. What I forgot to do was check out the windows before I changed, before I made that wish, before I crawled under the blankets. If I had, I might have seen the eyes of the monster looming in the darkness.

Chapter Four

The sound of a chainsaw jars me out of bed. I throw on a sweater and go to the living room area to find the door wide open. Glancing out the door I find Darren cutting down a small tree though I cannot imagine why; there’s already plenty of firewood and it’s not cold enough to warrant actually using it. He spots me watching and stops working to wave me over. Carefully making my way over, I stop a good ways away to give him plenty of work space, but he gestures me closer. Moving closer, I keep an eye on the chainsaw and when I’ve almost reached him, he swings it out, towards me, and then to his side where he then sets it down. Naturally, I jumped back and he just laughs menacingly.

“Have no fear, darlin’, I wouldn’t want to get blood on my new best friend here. Did you sleep well? Have those dreams of your necklace prince?” he taunts. My face must give away my terror, because he continues, “Oh yes, I saw you last night clutching that thing like your life depended on it. He won’t find you here though, sweetheart, I can assure you of that, but even if he did, well,” he cuts off and instead revs up the chainsaw. I run back into the cabin and slam the door though I know he could just as easily lock me in again. After checking the back door for a miracle and ending up disappointed, I make my way to the kitchen to try to find a knife, for protection of course.

Darren stays out there playing with the weapon for another hour or so and I stay curled up in a corner with a blanket waiting for the next threat. When he finally decides to come in, he goes straight for the kitchen and I worry he might notice that there’s something missing, but a few minutes pass and I don’t hear any chaotic drawer checking so I might be safe, for now. He comes into the bedroom, finds me huddled in blanketed safety and tells me to go fix lunch while he showers. I wait until he’s locked himself in before I chance moving from my spot and make a dash to the front door only to find it locked. In despair, I go to the kitchen and began prepping for a light lunch.

As I’m finishing up, he comes out and places himself at the small table waiting to be served. I oblige. If I can just be the perfect girlfriend, if I can somehow convince him I’ve repented my ways, then maybe he’ll see I’ve earned a trip into town. It’s the only chance I think I have. There’s no other way out from here, not without a key and I don’t see that happening, at least not now. We eat in silence. Once we are done, I clean up the dishes as he plops himself down on the solitary couch to read the book he bought with him. He pats the spot next to him as I’m walking by on the way back to the bedroom and I grit my teeth and obey.

The next few days pass by in a similar manner, but oh so painful to my very existence. I am not sure how much longer I can put on this façade. The years I have wasted on this relationship, the family and friends I haven’t seen or talked to, and all the dreams that have died are weighing heavier and heavier with each passing moment. Every day that passes, I begin to doubt we’ll leave even if we run out of food, I don’t think he has any qualms about us starving or me at the very least. In fact, we’ve been through most everything now. I wonder if I should risk asking. Slowly I approach him as he sits on the couch reading another book that I didn’t know we had.

“Darren, darling, I’ve noticed we’re running a bit low on some things. Are we planning to restock soon? It’ll be difficult to make sufficient meals for you before too long.” I stand in the doorway waiting as patiently as I can for him to answer. He certainly takes his sweet time to respond. I was starting to think he hadn’t heard me, but I think was just another test; I pray I’ve passed.

“If it’s not raining tomorrow, I might go into town. Make a list.”

My heart drops. A list means I won’t be going. I don’t ask to go. I’ll do my best to fix a nice meal tonight and maybe some work elsewhere tonight to see if I can earn last minute points to earn a chance to go. If I ask, he’ll say no. Of that, I am absolutely sure. Turning to go, I wish that somehow he decides to let me go and head to the kitchen to start working on something special for dinner and to work on that list.

As I cook I ponder about what to put on the list, I try to think of something that would give me chance to be alone without it being obvious, but I am not sure that there is anything that he’d be willing to let me shop by myself for, not even underwear or other feminine necessities. Maybe I could convince him to buy lunch and fake getting sick? No, he’d just bring us back here. Nearly done with prep work, I give up making plans. It’ll happen on its own if it’s going too. It has to or someone will end up dead and I don’t know which of us it’ll be.

Chapter Five

Early the next morning, Darren gets ready to leave and as he’s walking out the door he turns back to me hovering in the living room.

“Oh alright, Adalia. I can tell you want to go, but one foot out of line and we leave, got it?”

I nod quickly and try not to run to reach the door. We trek back to the car and he drives us to town, which is a bit more like a small city. Judging by his face, I don’t think he expected it to be this large either and I can tell he’s regretting my tagging along by his sideways glances at me. Keeping my face as neutral as possible I try to make myself look slightly uninterested, but I don’t know that it’s working.

“Are you sure this is the right place, Darren? I haven’t seen anywhere to buy groceries,” I say trying to make it seem like I only care about getting what we need and leaving.

“This has to be it. The sign outside of town matches what I was told. The store should be coming up soon, don’t worry. We’ll be in and out of here in no time,” he answers though he says it slightly doubtful and the spark of hope rises in me again, but I push it down. Now is not the time to let my emotions get the best of me.

The store is only a couple of blocks further down the road and he finds a parking spot near the back of the lot as far away from potential cameras as possible. It would also give him more time to catch up to me if I make a run for the car, but that’s okay. I know him slightly better than I did in the start. Obviously I still don’t know everything or I’d have found a safe way out, but I don’t think we’ll both end up okay at the end of this.

We head for the entrance and I can feel his stare on my neck as I walk ahead. Grabbing a cart I make a beeline for the produce section first and he chooses to watch from the sidelines to better track my movements. As I weave my way through the aisles, he simply walks down the main aisle trying to act like the uninterested man letting me do all the work, but there’s no losing him. When I finally reach the last aisle, I come around the corner too fast and ram my cart into someone else’s. I quickly apologize before I look up, but then I do and my breath catches. It’s another man and I’m lost in his honey golden eyes before I remember myself and start to panic, looking around for Darren. It doesn’t take long before I see him charging towards us.

“Oh I am so sorry sir. Adalia here can be a bit clumsy sometimes. She just gets a little too excited shopping sometimes and loses her senses,” he interjects and grabs my arm a bit too hard and I let a small grimace of pain slip out and I see the stranger quickly question the situation as he subtly scans my face for answers. I shake my head in a silent plea and I can see the internal struggle within him trying to decide how to proceed. Then he makes his choice.

“It’s truly no big deal I can assure you. I can understand the joy of shopping. I hardly get to do it myself anymore these days. In fact, I don’t get out on my own much, but I could use some company for lunch. Any chance you’d both like to join me?”

Darren surprises me by responding with a yes. He tells me to finish shopping while he sorts out the details with our new friend. Is this my chance? Moving away from the two of them, I continue shopping and then start making my way to the front of the store. The doors are in my sights and I can feel my heart beating faster. My pace quickens just a fraction, but the moment I’m about ready to bolt the unmistakable sound of Darren’s shoes is getting louder and I slow down, the chance vanishing.

“Darling, I think you’re going the wrong way,” he says.

“No, I just remembered something I’d forgotten in produce, but then got lost in thought. Thanks for stopping me or I might have just walked right out of the door with a bunch of stolen items,” I say in return with a laugh, “How silly of me,” and I turn to face him. His face speaks volumes of how he doesn’t fully believe me so I continue, “besides, I couldn’t leave when that nice man has offered us lunch. That would be downright rude, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” is all he responds with as he turns us towards the checkout.

We’re still at the checkout when I notice the stranger shows up to also check out, but he at least knows to go to another cashier. I mouth a thank-you and he gives me a small nod and then acts like he’s completely distracted though I can feel him sneaking a peek our direction occasionally and I try to ignore it, but I can’t. There’s something about him that I can’t put my finger on, but I trust him entirely.

Placing the groceries in the car I ask Darren where we’ll be going to eat, but all he has to say is that I’ll know in an hour and then we sit there, in the car, in the parking lot, awkwardly for 45 minutes before he finally drives off to who-knows-where. It doesn’t take long to get there though and I search for our new friend as soon as we turn in, but I don’t see him. This isn’t another trick is it? It would be just like Darren to go somewhere else just to spite me and not to wherever we were supposed to go. However before I can lend myself to another round of heartbreak, I see him get out of a car that I didn’t see and am instantly relieved. No one says anything until after we’ve been seated and even then no one is even sure what to say.

“So Adalia, it was Adalia correct?” the stranger asks and I nod, “what brings you two here?”

“Just a spontaneous anniversary vacation,” Darren interjects before I can respond. Wait, anniversary? That cannot be right and I think back; no, that’s not for a couple more months.

“I see. How long have you two been married?”

“Oh, we’re not…” I start, only to be interrupted, again.

“We haven’t quite reached that level, but I was hoping that maybe we could change that on this trip. What do you think, Adalia?” The question catches me so off-guard that I truly have no response. Thankfully our company fills in the silence,

“I didn’t mean to spoil a surprise, but now that the cat’s out of the bag how about a dinner party? Where did you say you were staying, perhaps we could have a small get together tomorrow. I can bring cake, I love cake.”

“That’s not necessary,” Darren answers at the same time that I say, “A friend’s cabin,” and I instantly feel Darren’s energy shift and I know that I may have made a costly mistake, but I don’t care anymore. Darren continues, “It is kind of you to care so much about strangers you’ve just met, James, but I assure you we don’t need a party, especially seeing as how she, for some reason, hasn’t agreed about getting married. I think we better just stick with finishing our vacation alone.”

“You’re right. I am so terribly sorry. Let’s talk about something else, perhaps favorite books and such,” he says trying to diffuse the situation and while the two of them do the talking, I sit mostly silently only nodding in agreement occasionally.

Our meal doesn’t take long to eat and Darren is clearly anxious to get going so I fake an excuse about a headache and we head out. He grabs my hand and is basically dragging me to the car. I only get a chance to look back once to see James frowning with helplessness. I turn back to the direction we’re walking, finding it difficult to hold back my tears, but I know that will just anger Darren further so I try harder. Reaching the car, he opens my door and practically throws me in. He gets in and speeds off ignoring stop signs and traffic lights. It’s a miracle we make it back out of town in one piece and a disappointment that no cops pull us over. I just close my eyes, because at least that way I cannot see him.

We arrive back far sooner than I’d hoped, but it’s just as well before the food spoils. I get out to start unpacking the trunk while he just sits there and stews and plots. As soon as I reach the front door I remember that I don’t have a key and have to go back to the car to ask. Assuming he’ll finally get out and unlock the door I begin to walk away when I hear a jingle and a plop as the keys hit the ground. He’s dropped them out the window. Tentatively I bend over to pick them up when he opens his door, hitting my head and knocking me over. He looms over me with death in his eyes and I lose consciousness. Chapter Six

When I wake up, I find myself in darkness. Attempting to move, I find my legs chained to something. I reach down and try to loosen the binds, but it’s no use. Giving up, I sit back finding a wall to lean on. My head begins to throb as well as most of the rest of my body. How long has it been? My eyes slightly adjust to the darkness, but nothing seems familiar. Where am I? Man my head hurts; how hard did he hit me? I gently put my hand to my head, but even that amount of pressure is too much and before I can stop it, I pass out again.

This time I wake to the sound of a door opening and a bright light fills the room which does not help. Darren strolls in with a chair and sits out of reach, in case I try to come at him, which I might if I thought I had any strength to accomplish anything. He stares at me for a few minutes waiting for me to make a move, but I’m too tired. A frown appears on his face.

“What, now you don’t want to try to fight me? I’m disappointed.”

“No, Darren, I won’t fight you. I know that I could never win.”

“You’re right, so let’s play a game. I want you to stay as still as possible as I move closer,” he pauses a moment to reach into his boot to pull something out, “and every time you move you earn a mark,” he continues as he waves around the knife I had stolen and finishes his proposition with, “and if you stay completely still, I will unchain you. Sound fair?” Do I have a choice? I make the smallest of nods, praying that that doesn’t count.

He grins like he knows that’s exactly what I’m thinking and ever so slowly he gets up. Like a predator cornering its prey, he only moves every so often and at irregular intervals to keep me unsteady, but so far I’ve held strong, but he’s so very far away. The first ten minutes go by painfully slowly and then suddenly he moves far quicker than I expected and I involuntarily jump and I didn’t think his grin could be any nastier.

“That’s one.”

It takes all my reserves to pull myself back together, but another 5 minutes or so and it happens again, and now I’m at two counts. He successfully and unfortunately pulls this off seven more times before he finally gets close enough that he can touch me. He drags the knife up one arm and then down the other. Then he drops the knife and grabs both arms and begins to secure them behind my back. While he struggles to get the rope wrapped, I am able to get one swing at him, but he catches me mid-swing. After he finishes knotting, he picks the knife back and puts it under my throat and whispers in my ear,

“That was foolish and that’s going to add to your final count, but to be honest I don’t remember where we were in counting so I’m just going to make up a number now and I’m not going to tell you what it is. You didn’t play nice, Adalia.”

He pushes the knife a little further into my throat and I can feel the blade breaking the skin and it’s all I can do not to move any more in a way that might provoke him to slice my throat open completely. The knife suddenly moves across my neck cutting me shallowly and then I find it against my stomach. A slice there and then it moves again, and then over and over again and I lose track of how many, never anything too deep. It’s more fun if I live. I’m on my knees and he’s back at my throat again, when I hear something upstairs. Someone’s pounding on the door.

Darren releases me, threatens me not make a single sound and rushes from the room, the door closing behind him leaving me in the darkness once again. I finish falling to the floor, no strength left to hold myself up. I hear footsteps overhead so I figure I must be in the basement, though it must be a room I didn’t know was here. All I can do is lay there and listen and struggle to breathe. It sounds like too many people. They must be shouting, but I cannot make anything out. Drifting in and out I almost think I hear someone coming down the stairs. I see light coming in through the door and honey golden eyes looking at me in horror just as I finally lose consciousness yet again.

Chapter Seven

Bright lights and annoying beeping greet me as I open my eyes. Panicking for a moment about the new location and not knowing where Darren is now, I try to pull out the tubes and needles and alarms start going off. Nurses rush in trying to get me to calm down, but it’s not until I see James looking worried in the window that I stop trying to escape. If he’s here, I’m safe. I get back into the bed and let the nurses attend to me and I hear one of them call for the doctor, but I speak to no one.

After a couple of hours some cops show up asking me all sorts of questions I’m not ready to answer, some I am not sure I can answer. Honestly, I don’t even know what day it is. I keep waiting for James to come in, but he hasn’t. Someone said he had to go for a while, but that he’d be back later this evening. I don’t let my hopes get to high. He’s done what he’s felt was right, but his job is done now. I doubt I’ll ever see him again.

One of the nurses brings me some of my personal things that they had to remove before the surgery. The necklace is among the items and I immediately put it on. Maybe somehow it has made my wish come true. In any case, it helps soothe me. Another nurse brings me dinner and I eat every bite even though I didn’t even think I would ever want to eat again. Just as I finish eating, James comes in the room with a book and sets it on a table nearby and then sits in a chair waiting for me to initiate conversation, if I want any. I don’t, so instead I ask him if he’ll read to me. He comes back over to get the book and begins.

At some point I fall into a restless sleep filled with nightmares of dark rooms and shiny knives dripping with blood. A nurse comes in and wakes me to do a quick check, one of at least a dozen more they’ll do over the course of the night. Scanning the room, I find James has left again, which is only fair. I think they let him in past visiting hours as it was, but now I feel alone again. Pondering my sadness, I begin wondering about what has happened with Darren now. The police were not too forthcoming about those details. I would certainly hope that he’s behind bars, but I’m not sure how this whole thing works. Will he have gotten out on bail? My heart races at the thought and it sets off an alarm and the nurse has to ask more questions that I don’t want to answer. They reset the monitors and take their leave.

I don’t sleep at all after that even though I try desperately. Noticing the book has been placed nearby and I pick it up. Opening to the page where there’s a bookmark, I get ready to read, but then stop. It would be rude to read ahead, right? As I place the bookmark back, I notice there’s something written on it. James has left me a note. It simply states that he’s already read the book so it’s okay to go ahead and read. Now how would he know I wouldn’t read without him? Or perhaps this is his way of saying he won’t be back to finish anyway. I sigh and decide to just go ahead and read. It’s been so long since I have read anything new. Darren was very particular about the books I was allowed to read. Actually, he didn’t like me reading at all.

I’m still reading as the sun rises and light begins to drift in through the shades. There are a couple of different doctors that visit me this morning: the one worried about my physical well-being and the one worried about my mental health. They each come at separate times to discuss my progress and to lay out a future plan for my recovery. The latter of course is more the psych doctor. It sounds like I will be able to check out fairly soon, should the psych side think I’m well enough that is. My biggest problem is that I don’t know where to go once I leave. I haven’t talked to anyone in my family since shortly after I moved in with Darren and that was 2 years ago.

I don’t have too much time to dwell on it though. There are more and more tests to make sure everything is healing properly and to double check on internal injuries. It’s a constant whirlwind of movement and honestly it is making me dizzy. By mid-afternoon I am exhausted and finally get a small nap in. This time when I come to, there are unexpected visitors. Despite not talking to her in years, there’s my mother sitting in the chair trying to hide her tears. She’s as successful at that as much as I am. Part of me is so glad she’s here, but another part that’s ashamed that she has to see me like this. She notices me awake, comes over to sit on the edge on the bed, and just holds my hand. She must sense that I’m not ready to talk about it yet. I’m not sure I’ll ever be. I just want to forget it ever happened.

Chapter Eight

My mom sat there for an hour, mostly her talking, trying to catch me up to date on how everyone is and what they’re up to these days. I attempt to apologize for not being there, but she says she understands a little better now and would rather focus on the future. We make tentative plans for moving me back home for a while as I get back on my feet. Going home slightly terrifies me. It means facing people and having to answer questions and probably fake being okay. I don’t want to drown again. I suppose I should bring this up to my psych person, huh? I just sigh internally.

Mom leaves after that hour because she has a long drive back home to start rearranging some things, but she says she’ll be back to get me when it’s time to go. I wave at her as she leaves and then I’m alone again and I’m more relieved than I thought I’d be. Soon it’s time for my evening meal and I eat in relative silence. The television is on, but I am not paying any attention to it, until I see James on the screen. I nearly choke on my food. It’s not a news program either. It’s a replay of some movie I have never seen. Quickly I press the help button and a nurse comes in the room a couple minutes later, I ask her if I’m seeing things. She looks hesitant, but eventually confirms for me that my James and the one on the screen are the same. She asks if I need anything else and I shake my head. I just stare at the screen in disbelief.

It seems impossible that I wouldn’t recognize him, but again living with Darren I suppose anything and probably everything is possible. Perhaps it was as much a surprise to him that we didn’t know who he was either. There’s no sense wondering about it. It won’t make a single difference, but still you cannot help but think about how absurd this whole situation is. I have so many questions for him should he return. Perhaps I ought to write some of them down. The next time a nurse comes in, I ask for some paper and a pencil to write with. My hands are sore so it makes it difficult to write and it’s a little sloppy, but I do my best.

Two more days pass before he returns though I never truly thought he’d be back. Most of my wounds have healed up enough that the doctors think I should be able to leave in a few more days. I’ll still have to see someone for the other problem, but they’re making calls with doctors near my mom’s house to try and set something up. He seems happy that I am doing well. After filling him in on my status, I broach the subject of what I have discovered about him, asking him why he didn’t say so before.

“It didn’t seem like an important detail. I didn’t want it to influence how you spoke to me. I was afraid you’d be afraid to be yourself. And there wasn’t really a good time to tell you. Everything was happening so fast.” I ponder on this a moment.

“This is all true. I suppose I don’t know how things would have gone otherwise.” I wait a few moments before I hand him my list of questions because I can’t ask them out loud. He looks them over and starts from the beginning to fill me in.

Apparently he watched us leave the restaurant to get general direction to start searching. Darren had driven off too quickly for him to follow so he went to the police station to attempt to gather a search party. He admits that his acting position helped rouse the cops into action. It took them far too long to search maps of the area to locate the cabin, reach the owners to get more information and to find some confirmation that it was definitely the right cabin. Of course with the lane ending it took longer to find in the dark, but they made it.

Darren of course tried to make it sound like I had gone for a walk or something, but the blood all over his clothes was enough to arrest him and do a thorough search of the house. He had tried to deflect from the basement, but that was the obvious clue to send us there where they found me near death. The rest of the hospital details I knew by then, the needed blood transfusions, some of which was his; that I didn’t know. He’s been working on set, which is why he couldn’t be here as much.

I fill him in on my plans for going back home and admit that I am a bit scared to go; that I’m worried no one will treat me normally. His face says he’s sad, though I cannot imagine why, but instead says that he’s sure everything will go fine and that in time all will be well. He doesn’t say much after that. He asks about the book, which I have finished and offer back to him. He tells me to keep it. Shortly after, he gets up in a hurry and takes his leave. It makes me wonder what happened. Did I say something wrong?

There’s no time to think about it as yet another doctor comes in with another update on my status. All my tests have come back clear enough that I can leave tomorrow if I feel ready. Seeing no reason to stay now, I inform the doctor that I am eager to go. I ask them to call my mother though. I don’t feel quite up to talking anymore today. My hand finds the necklace and I move the pearl or gem or whatever it is back and forth on the chain absentmindedly. Silently I make another wish, this time for the strength to move forward.

Chapter Nine

Mom shows up around noon the next day with some fresh clothes and a plan for a fun road trip, to take my mind off things. While I appreciate the thought, part of me is dreading being in a car for more than an hour. I don’t let her in on that though. I don’t think that will get me bonus points with the psych doctor, but I’ll deal with that later. Shortly after changing into real clothes, the doctor comes in with release papers and instructions for changing bandages and who I need to see once I get back home. We leave after that stopping for a quick sandwich before setting off on our trip.

We only stay in motels on the outskirts of cities so I don’t feel like I’m stuck out alone in the woods, so that there’s always some sort of noise. Too bad home won’t have too much of that. Small towns can be a curse on occasion. My future plans don’t have me sticking at home very long. If I’m there for more than I year, I might never leave and then I’ll be no better off than I was before. That’s no fault of Mom’s though, let me be clear. It’s just the town and the suffocating air that inhibits it. I’m dreading reaching home so much I try to convince mom that we should spend a little more time on the road, but she has to get back to work. I’ve already caused enough trouble so I don’t argue.

Thankfully, there’s no welcome home party when we arrive. They all decided it was best that I get settled in before making a big deal out of it, which is oddly considerate, especially for my family. They like to make big deals out of everything, which I was one of the few that didn’t. I much preferred to fly under the radar, so-to-speak. Maybe it’s just because I never quite felt like I belonged. It might be part of why I moved in with Darren in the first place. He was the first one to treat me like I meant something, that there might be something special about me or at the very least interesting.

She helps me bring in my few things with a promise to get more stuff later. I let her know that the cops said once they’d finished investigating the house we were living in that they’d ship me my things or that I could go there, but I chose the first option so we wouldn’t need to get too much stuff. I’m back in my old room, though it’s mostly still set as the sewing room, an inflatable bed has just been added and a few things moved over to make some room for me. It kind of gives me hope that they aren’t expecting me to stay or it’s just because it was so sudden. There is that factor. I make a promise to myself, again, that I won’t be here long.

We’d gotten back late in the day so it was easy enough to feign exhaustion and just head to bed instead of trying to make small talk over a late dinner. Unfortunately there’s no lock on my door so even though I know no one will come in without permission, it still makes me slightly apprehensive. Then again, I’ve been locked in enough perhaps this is better after all. I change into the pajamas that we purchased the first night after leaving the hospital and crawl into bed. In spite of my anxious mind, I fall asleep relatively quickly only to wake and force myself back to sleep several times. I am not sure if I can get used to an airbed.

In the morning, I wake to the smell of fresh coffee and bacon. It’s such an unusual occurrence that I temporarily forget where I am, but then I remember. Putting on some clothes that are somewhat clean, I leave my room to find the source of food. In the kitchen is my younger brother, Adam, cooking, which is a complete surprise. I didn’t even know he knew how to properly cook anything. I startle him as he turns around to find me hovering in the doorway,

“Goodness, Adalia, don’t you make any noise?”

“Sorry. I didn’t expect you to be the one cooking. I hope some of that is for me?”

“I’m not sure there’s enough here to share,” he starts but then laughs, “I’m only kidding. Mom asked me to make some for you since she had to work early today.”

“Oh. I didn’t know she worked today. Thanks for cooking. Do you want me to help?”

“Nah, I’m almost done anyway. Oh here, this plate is yours,” he says as he points to a plate on the counter, “and there’s coffee in the pot. Mom also asked me to take you to get a new phone since you don’t have one, but I have a few other stops to make along the way. Is that okay?”

“Of course; I don’t want to be a bother. I can wait for a phone if you’d rather focus on your errands.”

“Eh, I’ll go right by the place at one point anyway. Leave in a hour?”

“Sounds good. Thanks again for breakfast,” I say as I take my plate and warm coffee back to my room, no sense in overcrowding him or badgering him with questions.

Once in my room, I devour my food like I haven’t eaten in ages, which while I ate on the road, it wasn’t home cooked and I tried not to order too much. I knew the trip home as already costing too much. After eating, I take a quick shower to wash my hair. I try not overuse whoever’s stuff I’m using, but that’s one thing I’ll still need to get and probably fairly soon. I try to leave Adam plenty of hot water in case he needs a shower also. Then I sit on the couch in the living room while I wait for Adam to be ready to go. We leave a few minutes before our hour is up.

We don’t say too much as we travel. He does make 2 stops to get things for work before we make it the cell phone store. I let Adam choose the phone since I haven’t used one for nearly the whole time I was with Darren and I don’t know what the best choice is. Everything has changed so much. I still don’t know a quarter of the functions by the time Adam has finished his errands and we make it back home. He promises to answer any questions I have later, but now he has to get to work. I wave as he leaves and go inside to the quiet empty house.

I wander around to reacquaint myself and it doesn’t take long to remember where everything is or well was when I was living here. Obviously some things have moved to open up rooms and make it easier to move around. When I make it back around to my room, memories of Darren seeing the house for the first time come flooding back. Instantly he started criticizing everything wrong with it, as if other homes didn’t have problems. Anyway, he started making promises of a better home and life than staying here. It didn’t take long for me to fall prey to a house to decorate and make my own. I get nauseous just thinking about it and I lay down to relax and calm my nerves.

A half hour or so later, I hear the door open and Mom calls out asking where I am. I answer and she comes in to check on me. All I tell her is that I was tired from the errand run today. Then I show her the phone and we program each other’s number into our phones and she installs a few games that I might like to try. She tells me that the cops had called her to let us know that they’d finished enough of the investigation to send me my belongings. While I’ll be glad to have more to wear, part of me dreads keeping anything from that period of my life. Perhaps I’ll be able to donate most of it once I get a job so I can buy my own things.

She also tells me that Darren is currently out on bail so if I feel unsafe I can call the number the cops gave her. My heart drops into the pit of my stomach and there’s no hiding my fear. I knew it’d be a risk coming home if he was out at all. Plus where’d he even get bail money? I know it was set really high. Honestly, being a flight risk I’m surprised they set a bail at all. I’m terrified. What if he shows up? My hands are too shaky to put the emergency number in my phone so Mom has to do it for me. While she does that, I go for a quick walk outside to try to shake it off, but it’s no good. There’s nothing but fear and it’s going to take a lot more than just being outside to make that go away. I need to talk to James. That’s what, but I can’t. It’s impossible. He wouldn’t want to talk to me anyway. I’m no one.

When I come back in, Mom has moved to the kitchen to start dinner and I offer my help to her. Thankfully, she accepts and I at least feel like I’m doing something useful. It’s just a simple salad, but it’s the most I have had since breakfast and that was far too long ago. Adam and I didn’t stop anywhere for lunch. He had far too much to do, but that’s okay. This is good. I’m home and I’m safe.

Chapter Ten

The next week goes by in a blur of repetition and nothingness. I make an appointment with a therapist on one of Mom’s off days next week and then scour the internet for open jobs. It’s been so long since I have had one that I am not sure what I am even good for. I decide to put it off until after my therapy session. My clothing and personal items arrived yesterday. I’m not sure how they determined what was mine, other than the obvious, but nothing seems to be missing. A cop did stop by shortly after my stuff arrived to let me know that they were able to convince the judge to force Darren to give me an allowance of sorts, part of the bail deal or something.

Honestly I’m not sure how that all works. I know that there will eventually be a trial, but it could be a very long time before that, unless he pleads guilty. I don’t know how he’s out on bail. I truly don’t. It makes no sense to me. I just am on edge waiting for him to show up one day. I find comfort in watching movies that James has been in. I know it’s not fair of me to do so, but for now it’s all I have. I’ve considered writing or calling the hospital I was at if they could somehow deliver a message, but I know that’s crazy too. I doubt they’d be able to. Maybe I could write a letter and send it as fan mail? Writing might do me good anyway. I know I talked about that with the psych doctor before I left.

Just as I am about to start writing, Mom knocks on my door to ask if I want to go do any shopping. I am about to say no, but I have been cooped up inside for too long so I say yes instead. We don’t go anyway expensive. Mostly we’re just buying some groceries and stuff for the house, which granted dos add up in quite a hurry. I try not to think about how much more she spending to feed me also now. I have got to find a job and pay my own way. --I did offer her some of the money Darren has to give me, but she’s told me to keep it for now.

Once we get back home, I help unload the groceries and put them away. As I do, I start thinking about what I want out of life, what I was dreaming of right before everything went haywire with Darren. There was something cathartic about drawing those birds. It might never amount to anything, but perhaps with some time and dedication I could make a partial living from my art. I’ll still need at last a part time job to pay bills and buy supplies, but maybe if I can put all my effort into practicing I can still make something of myself.

After I get all the groceries away, I ask mom if I can borrow her laptop, to research prices on some starter art supplies. The worst that happens is that I create art that I enjoyed making and let myself express my emotions and feelings. Oh my therapist would love this. Maybe I can get out of going if I can convince her that I’m good with this. I doubt it. I found a good website to buy some stuff and order some pencils and nicer paper to draw on. I need to practice my sketching skills before I get too involved in paint, I think, we’ll see. I try not to go overboard, but I am excited. I haven’t been this excited in a while.

After I have finished ordering my supplies, I head to my room to sort through the clothes and make some piles of laundry as well as sort through what I want to keep and what can definitely go. Anything that was a gift from Darren, mainly lingerie, is put in the discard pile, which I might burn. It feels good to separate myself as much as I can from the past couple years. It’s time to rediscover who I am without him. I realize it’s going to be way more work than it sounds or seems. I start up my first load of laundry and then join mom in watching a cooking channel. Thy make so many good things that I know I’ll never figure out how to actually make. Some of these shows have chefs a little too good at cooking. Who’s ever going to really make this stuff?

Before bed, I manage to get two laundry loads complete, with another to do at some point tomorrow, but at least now I have more options than the three outfits I was rotating through. Heading to bed, my mind feels more settled than it’s been in ages. Honestly, I cannot even remember the last time I felt allowed to have my own thoughts in my head. It feels a little weird. Unfortunately, despite the settled-ness, I find it difficult to fall asleep as I think about all the things I want to try drawing and eventually paint. Eventually though, I do fall asleep dreaming of colors.\*

Chapter Eleven

The next day, I am all on my own. I make myself a cup of tea and set to doing some chores. I might as well make myself useful. I wash the dishes and then wash my load of laundry. Then while that’s in the dryer I take a quick shower and then shove the towels in the washer. Then I vacuum. By the time I’m done doing that, it’s time to put my laundry away and put the towels in the dryer. As I eat some leftovers I found in the fridge for lunch, I watch a random movie that’s on the television. After that ends, I fold and put away the towels. Then I sit down to write.

“James,

I want to thank you for everything you did for me.”

And that’s as far as I get. There’s so much to say and yet there’s nothing. I put the paper aside and go upstairs to find a book to read. Scanning the shelf for anything interesting, I get frustrated again and decide to go walk around outside in the yard again. I’d walk around town, but I am too afraid of running into people that might recognize me. I definitely don’t feel like talking to people about where I’ve been or how I am or what not. I always felt unqualified to live in this town. Everyone is all related to everyone else, except basically us. We never truly fit in.

In case you are wondering about my father, he left a few years before I did. He should have left way sooner than that, but I suppose that doesn’t matter now. He was the first to corrupt and brainwash our minds into hating ourselves. Like I said, I have a long way to go before I’m going to be in a better place. So far I think I’m attempting to fake it until I make it. I mean it cannot completely hurt to do that, right? If I can pretend I am happy enough and put a smile on my face, it’ll eventually be real, right? Oh, wait, that didn’t work living with Darren. I might be in trouble then. Good thing my therapy session will be soon. I don’t know that I’ll say anything, but maybe she can get me started in the right direction somehow anyway.

When I make it back inside, I make another cup of tea and just sit on the couch under a blanket. I stay there until Mom comes home from work and then we play a game of cards until it’s time to make dinner. She’d taken chicken out before she left this morning, so we fry that up and eat in peaceful crunchiness. We go back to playing cards after that until she decides to go to bed. I sit and watch the television for a little while and Adam comes home about an hour later and then it’s bedtime for us. At least, I go to my room so he can feel free to do whatever it is he needs to do.

Again I find myself unable to fall asleep easily, this time wondering what James must be up to these days. I have no idea what he was filming at the time. I haven’t bothered to research. I open a social media app on my phone and type in his name. There are plenty of photos and lots of fan art. Some of it very good and some of it I wish I’d never laid my eyes on it. I turn off the phone. It won’t help to keep staring at his picture. I suppose I could attempt to message him on there, but I’m sure my message would get buried under a million other messages and he’d never see it anyway. I’ll think about it again tomorrow. Until then I’ll just lay here staring at nothing until I my body shuts off.

In the morning, I’m woken by a text from Mom saying that she forgot to get something out for dinner so it would be up to me. I’d forgotten she worked again today. I’ve got to find something more to occupy my time. You think I’d be used to this nothingness, but I feel even more trapped now than I did then. At least with Darren I served some weird purpose, but here I am just an extra person. I borrow Mom’s laptop again and start in again on the job search. I don’t even know where to start. I’d like to find something somewhere further away, but that makes things complicated with so many extra expenses.

I’m not sure I can make it alone. I wouldn’t be making very much and it’s so hard to find fulltime jobs these days. And the idea of a regular scares me. I don’t know how to interact with other people. I don’t know how to hold conversations. If I can find something that doesn’t require me to have to work too much with other people, that’s what I’ll have to try to go for, but there aren’t many options and I’m not qualified for much. I don’t know what to do. It seems hopeless. Times like this are when I wish Darren would have just killed me. The world went on without me then, it would do so again.

Placing that thought away, I check the social media page again. James hasn’t uploaded anything new in months anyway so I just sit and scroll trying to find out whatever I can about him. After an hour I select the message button and type out a simple hello and then erase it. Then I type out the sentence I’d written yesterday and then erased that. I close out of the app irritated with myself. Why is this so difficult?

I get up and go find some printer paper and a pencil. No reason why I cannot get started while I wait for my package to arrive. I fall back on drawing birds, because they’re what I know best. I’ll eventually have to branch out, but now is not that time. I’m still drawing when Mom comes home from work. Apparently everything else hadn’t mattered enough to think about, including dinner. We just make up some pasta and make tuna and pasta. It’s easy enough and I promise her that I’ll remember to pick something tomorrow. She doesn’t seem angry about it or anything. We watch a movie and then it’s time for bed, again. Just before I go, I get back on the app and send the thank you sentence and then turn off my phone. I’ll just obsess over it if I leave it on, not that I won’t toss and turn all night thinking about it anyway, but at least I took the first step. He’ll probably never even see it, Adalia. Get it together.

Chapter Twelve

Today’s the day of my first therapy session and I am absolutely terrified. I can pretend and act all cool about it, but actually going has me anxious. What if we don’t get along, what if she cannot help me, what if there’s actually nothing wrong with me, what if I’ve made this all up? Thankfully, Mom is driving or I might not have come or I’d have wrecked the car and that’s not any better. We arrive early so that I can go through paperwork with plenty of time, so that I don’t feel rushed. The hospital has already sent them their information, but there’s always the first-timers paperwork to fill out. It’s a little different than a regular doctor’s visit paperwork, but in the end it’s all relatively the same. I fill out what I can and then return it to the desk. Then we wait for another half hour or so before it’s time for my session. Mom cannot come in with me and I enter the room alone and sit in the arm chair in front of the window hoping it’s not my therapist’s favorite chair and wait for her to come in.

--Once she comes in I ask if she wants my seat, to which she says she’d rather I were comfortable than herself, which tells me I did in fact take her seat. I’ll try to remember that if I come back. The first order of business is mostly formal introductions and double-checking information received from the doctor at the hospital. After that she asks me if there’s anything immediate that I want to talk about or address, or if I am comfortable at home. I allow myself time to think before I answer, because I feel safe at home, but perhaps too safe, which in the end I tell her because maybe that will distract her for a little while at least from the whole Darren thing. We discuss some ways to help me relax when I am trying to sleep or when I feel anxious. Overall, we do not dive into anything too serious and before I know it, my session is up. I say goodbye and stop at the desk to make my next appointment for next week.

We decide to stop for lunch on the way home to celebrate my first complete session. It’s nothing fancy or expensive, but it does feel good to do something for the occasion. It makes me feel like I am at least doing one thing correctly. She doesn’t ask me what we talked about either though I think she wants to. I give her the short version about just updating reports from the other doctor and that, no we haven’t talked about Darren, yet. Sessions are too short to make too much progress in a single day.

Once we get back home, she has some sewing work to do so I have to let her in my room and I go take a shower. Then still feeling pretty good, I decide to bake some bread. I haven’t made one in a while so I have to find the book, but it’s a simple recipe so it doesn’t take long to put together and then it’s a matter of waiting for the machine and rising and then finally baking. It’s a 3 hour process, plus getting the ingredients, but always worth the smell and warm buttery bread straight out of the oven. After setting the machine to make the dough, I check my phone to see if by any chance James has responded to my message, but I am met with disappointment. Deep down it’s what I expected, but still I had hoped a little. I put the phone away and get out some paper and a pencil to do a little sketching. I might as well work while Mom does also.

Working away, I almost miss the timer on the bread machine. Thankfully the ding is loud enough to rouse me from my artist’s zone. I get it out the machine and into the pan to begin the hour long rising process and then head back to work after setting a timer on my phone. That hour passes by in what only feels like 10 minutes and then it is into the oven for just over 20 minutes. I decide to just scroll through social media instead of working just in case it is done baking sooner. Soon, I take it from the oven to cool. I decide that this will make perfect French toast for dinner, so despite wanting to go ahead and eat the whole thing, I don’t. I’ll eat whatever is left tomorrow and maybe make another. I’m sure Mom would appreciate having fresh bread around more often. It’s the least I can do while she works and keeps a roof over my head. I know it cannot be easy to get everything done around the house and work.

I announce my plans for dinner to Mom and she seems happy with the choice, although I think she would have been just as happy to split the bread and eat that instead. I tell her my plan to make another tomorrow so there will be plenty of chances to eat fresh bread. I will try to plan it to be done close to the time that she’d get home so that it will be as fresh as possible for the best effect.\* I get back to drawing for an hour or so and then start on fixing dinner. It’s another fairly easy meal, which is always my kind of meal. It’s nice not having to make a side or two all the time to go with it. Darren constantly had to have lots of food for his meals so it was most often a chore every night. I do need to get back into more of a habit of exercising though. I am definitely eating more now than I did. After eating, we each go back to our respective workloads until it is time for bed. For once, I am exhausted enough to fall asleep shortly after laying down. It’s been a long, eventful day.

The next couple of weeks pass relatively quickly without much fanfare. I fall into a basic routine at home of drawing and chores. I may have stopped looking for a job under the guise of wanting to focus on my art. My supplies did arrive a couple days after that first therapy session so I’ve had time to get a start on breaking them in. I clearly have a long way to go before it is any good, but I just have to keep practicing as much as I can, even if it’s frustrating or I’m tired of it. I just make a cup of tea, sit outside, if it’s nice out, and let myself breathe and then get back to work. It’s during one of these moments that I get a surprise.

Chapter Thirteen

As I am about ready to put water on, I see a car drive by the window towards the driveway. It isn’t a vehicle I recognize so I put the water kettle down, grab a knife and my phone, and slowly walk to my room where I can more easily peek out the window. The car door opens and someone gets out and then they turn. It’s James.

Attempting not to run to the door, I open it as he’s walking up the steps to the porch. He smiles when he first sees me and then it disappears. I know I have done something wrong, but still I am so glad he is here. I ask him to come in and offer him tea, to which he accepts both. I ask him to make himself comfortable while I go put the kettle on, finally. I come back and sit across from him not sure what to say or where to start or what to ask. He speaks first,

“How have you been?”

“Some days are better than others, but I am doing alright. How are you? Why are you here?”

“I’m good. We finished filming in that location and had a few days to rest before moving to the next place so I thought I’d come see you before I go since it’s out of the country. I did get your message. I’m sorry I didn’t respond, but I thought this might be better.”

“Wow. I did figure you were too busy and probably had too many other messages to worry about mine or didn’t see it. And I have to ask, why did you leave so abruptly that day? Did I do or say something to offend you?” He pauses before answering this time.

“I’ll be honest. I wasn’t sure coming back here would be the best thing for you, but it wasn’t my place to judge. That’s the other reason I’m here, to apologize for leaving like that. It was very rude of me.”

The water starts making noise and I go to the kitchen to make the tea and to ponder what he has said. After it has finished steeping, I bring it out and offer sugar or milk and he passes on both, which is brave of him. I need at least a little sugar, but not as much as I would if I were drinking coffee. Anyway, with tea now secured it is back to the conversation.

“I should return the favor, about being honest. I wasn’t sure coming back here would be best either. I have been worried about getting sucked back into nothingness here, hiding from the world, which I have unfortunately. It’s just that I don’t have many skills to offer the world and I don’t know how to communicate well with other people.”

“You seem to be able to talk to me.”

“Yes, but you’ve seen me at some of my worst. There’s not a lot left to hide. It’s different.”

“Perhaps, but still I think you have more potential than you give yourself credit for, but you’ll see that in time.” I nod, doubtingly.

We sit and chat about more lighthearted things such as where he’s filming next, South Africa somewhere, and about his family a little and mine. Unfortunately, about an hour later he says that he does need to go, but he puts his number and email address in my phone and I put mine in his. And then just as fast as he was here, he’s gone again. I make another cup of tea and go sit on the porch wondering if he was truly here or if I imagined the whole thing. I look at my contacts page at some point to reinforce that it’s true that he was here and smile and then cry that now he’s gone again. I cannot seem to make myself draw again after that. Instead I watch a movie, one not starring him. That would just make it harder, I think.

For some reason, I do not tell Mom that he was here. I don’t know why, but I want to keep that to myself for a while. Actually, I know why. I am not ready for her to start warning me about getting too attached to someone who won’t be around a lot or that will probably have too much to do to pay attention to other people. He was just being nice, that’s all. And I know that, which is why I do not plan on ever using his number or emailing him, first at any rate. For now, I will simply live in this small memory of time and be satisfied with that.\*