The Jump

The rain, it never stops. It fills my head, one drop right after the other until I’m drowning. I stand out in rain waiting for the water to wash away the raging thoughts racing around in my mind. The anger coursing through my veins feels like fire eating away at my soul. I look down towards the water crashing into the pier below and it draws me closer to the edge. I’ve always considered myself to be a water element, at least for the most part, so this fire is burning me from the inside out and it hurts. It hurts so much that I’m willing to do whatever it takes to put it out.

Alright, I need to rewind here and fill you in on how I found myself at the edge of pier waiting to jump into the depths below. It kills me even more to admit it’s likely the most cliché reason there can possibly be: a boy, well a man. It’s more than that though. It’s this deep well of worthlessness that’s swallowing me whole. My emotions fluctuate constantly and hit me so intensely that they overwhelm all my senses and then sometimes I don’t feel anything at all. It’s the numbness feeling I crave the most because it never happens often enough or long enough.

Honestly, to even think about this makes me feel absolutely ridiculous, but when the one person you love most hates you it’s hard to live with that. Although it might be worse to think he doesn’t actually care enough to even hate me, he just feels nothing. I am nothing to him. It bothers me so much that I drove nearly 1200 miles to throw myself into the ocean. It’s been years of buildup and there’s no going back to that life. I can’t. I won’t. Everything about that life is small and meaningless and I don’t want to be that person anymore. So don’t you see that this is my only option? I’ll either drown or finally kill that part of myself and let it wash away in the waves.

There are too many people I’ve lost or pushed away because of my selfishness already that this is the only way I could ever begin to redeem myself. I have never deserved the life I have. I didn’t earn any of it. And I always feel like a fraud; relentlessly having to pretend everything is fine, that nothing ever truly bothers me.

Even when I was younger, it felt as though I was invisible whether at school or at home. I never felt heard; I never felt safe enough to let myself feel my emotions. No matter how I tried, I always found myself on the bad side of my siblings and I realize many of those with siblings probably feel like that too, but it doesn’t make it any less valid. I tried so hard to be good, but that has always ended up being a bad thing when it comes to them. I only tried to keep them safe because I loved them.

There are several years between myself and the next oldest, so it always made sense that I’ve been closer to my younger brother than my three older siblings, but even now there’s more distance between the two of us and that’s again my fault. I left for college and everything changed. Actually right before that though, my senior year of high school was where it all really start to fall apart. You see that’s where I fell for this one person, this one person who could drive me to the edge to die. The truth of that is that it’s all been just my brain destroying everything and there’s no way to rewire it. It’s been too long.

Most of the time, it never seems that bad, but when it hits, either the high or the low, it hits hard. It’s like a hurricane; a bit of a buildup and then a massive storm with a small reprieve in the middle until it eventually fades into nothing leaving a large path of destruction in its wake that takes an abhorrent amount of time to clean up. Then just as the clean-up is nearly completion, another storm hits. It’s beyond exhausting and it’s gotten too hard to keep fighting. Is it so terrible to want to finally be at peace?

So here I am at the edge willing myself to just let go because there’s nothing left here for the person I am. Hard work with no return isn’t worth doing. It’s not an easy decision. There are enough people in my life that would care and I realize that, but some people keep saying to do what’s best for me and well, here I am. This is the only sure way to finally be free of myself. So now’s the moment, because once I jump there’s no going back to how things were.

I look again at the dark water below and ask for forgiveness. Then I take a breath, then a step, and then I fall.

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They say that the majority of jumpers that survive their jumps regret the choice the moment they leave the edge. I don’t have enough time to think anything before I hit the water and sink. The water is warm and comforting which I wasn’t expecting. Obviously, I don’t breathe because I’m under water, but it would be the place to take that calming breath if there were air to breathe. However, that urge to breathe is naturally fighting within me. The body’s job is to fight to live, right? Of course, this kind of doesn’t make sense with my brain pushing me here in the first place.

As I’m floating there debating internally, I feel this movement of water somewhere near me. It’s hard to tell exactly where it’s coming from, but it’s a larger disturbance of water than I’d felt in the rest of the time I’ve been down here, which probably isn’t all that long honestly. Before I can think about the possibility of say sharks, I feel myself being dragged to the surface so my mind switches to someone must have come in after me. I could have sworn I’d checked to make sure no one else was nearby. Or did I? It seems like forever ago.

Instinctively, I inhale as we reach the surface which leads to coughing a bit because I still had time to take in some water. I feel myself being dragged towards the shore, but I have no effort to help or to fight. Once we reach land the person who pulled me out of the water rolls over catching their own breath while I finish coughing up water. We stay laying on the ground for a few minutes before either of us truly acknowledges the other.

Then through my muffled hearing, I hear a voice asking me if I’m okay. It’s takes a moment to process the question, but it doesn’t take long for me to regain my anger, only this time it’s focused at someone rather than simply myself. I sit up too quickly and make myself dizzy. Then this person has the gall to put their hand on my back and tell me to take it easy. Finally I turn to look at them and say crossly, “How dare you drag me out of there. I was fine. You could have drowned yourself jumping in after me.” Their response? They laugh which just makes me angrier and all I can do is glare at them.

“I’m sorry, but you want to scold me about trying to drown myself after you jump into pitch black water in the middle of the night? That’s ludicrous,” they say to me through their unending laughter.

“Well, it is on me if you die trying to ‘rescue’ me, which was completely unnecessary by the way. I was fine right where I was.”

“And I’d feel guilty for the rest of my life if I didn’t at least try.”

They finally stop laughing, at least for the most part and all I can do is let out a sigh. I slowly stand up and start to walk away, slightly unbalanced, but I am walking on sand and I am still swaying with the waves. I don’t make it far before me ‘rescuer’ catches up to me and tries to get me to stop, but I keep going.

“Hang on. You can’t just walk away from that. I should probably get you to a hospital or somewhere safe. Can I call someone for you?”

“No,” I say simply and keep moving.

“Okay well, I’m just going to keep following you anyway. Are you sure we can’t stop and talk for a bit? I think that might be a good idea. We can talk about anything. Or I can just talk, would that be better?”

“No. Please stop talking, you’re giving me a headache and I’m about to walk right back into that water if you don’t shut up,” I snap. They hold their hands up in mock surrender, but they do keep following. “Look, I swear I’m fine, will you please just go back to whatever you were doing before? This is starting to get weird.”

“Sorry, can’t do that.”

“And why not?”

“I thought you were going to go back in the water if I kept talking?”

“I’ll admit I was just thinking about pushing you back in instead.”

“Oh, so she has a sense of humor. Ladies and gentlemen please welcome to the stage,” they begin, but I shove them away and they start laughing again clearly enjoying making me angry. Giving up trying to lose them, I turn back the way I came and start walking back towards where I parked my car. When I finally reach it, I stoop down to the wheel well to fish out the key that I’d poorly hidden. Honestly, I’m surprised no one has stolen my car even though it’s not exactly a high end model that just screams take me. I go to open the door when my follower has more to say. “Hey, now wait I can’t let you just drive off. Let me drive you to wherever. The water may have affected your cognitive abilities. You still aren’t walking well.”

“You want me to let you drive me somewhere? Are you insane? Do you think that I’m that insane?”

“I literally just saved your life. I’m pretty sure I’m safe. I should probably be more worried about you murdering me or something equally terrible.”

“I don’t know you. I don’t even know your name. For all I know, you get a kick out of ‘rescuing’ people just to torture them with your annoying self. I should drag you over to the police for stalking me right now.”

“You won’t do that, because then you’d have to tell them the whole story and somehow I don’t think you want to explain jumping off the pier to them, right?” I just sigh again in response. “That’s what I thought. The name’s Peter, by the way.”

“You know for someone who’s supposedly trying to help me, you’re kind of mean. And since I’m sure you’ll go snooping in the glovebox anyway, I’m Lia.”

“Wait, does that mean you’re going to let me drive you somewhere?”

“No, you’re going to ride while I drive you to your car, which is where exactly?”

“It’s back at my apartment. I took the bus down here. I’m too cheap to pay for parking.”

“Of course it is. Fine, get in and let’s get this over with, but no talking other than directions, got it?” He nods and quickly gets in before I change my mind. We drive for what seems like forever and I’m starting to think he’s giving me wrong turns intentionally, but I can’t figure out what purpose that serves yet. Finally he points me in the direction of a parking garage and I drive in and he tells me where his car is and I go to just let him out, but instead he tells me to park next to him. He reaches over, turns the car off, and confiscates my keys. I look at him in disbelief, “what are doing? Give me my keys.”

“Can’t do that. I saw your plates when we got to the car. You’re not from here, so I have no idea that you even have somewhere to go after you leave here so I can’t let you go.”

“This is not how life works. Seriously, give me my keys before I take them. I will hurt you if I have to.”

“Oh so you’re going to fight me for them? You are much feistier than you let on. I like a challenge.”

“What do you want from me? What will make you give me my keys and leave me alone?” I ask in exasperation, “You can’t hold me hostage forever. He sits and ponders for a moment before he answers me.

“Just come in and I can get you some clean, dry clothes. They might not exactly fit, but they’ll be better than that. And sleep the night off. You will be able to make a better plan for yourself in the morning. Please?”

I can see there’s no way to get rid of him and I was already planning to kill myself so honestly what’s the worst that could happen? “Okay fine, but I sleep with a knife and if you even think about touching me, I will stab you.”

“Deal,” you reply laughing yet again. “Now come on. The night is nearly over and you look beyond exhausted and I actually have some work I need to finish.”

I walk behind Peter still wondering how I ended up here and if this is a smart idea. I wonder if I can somehow slip away when he’s not paying attention. I glance around looking for a possible escape and because I’m not watching where I’m walking I follow him onto an elevator so now I’m extra trapped. Internally I groan in frustration at myself. We rise up several floors before the elevator finally comes to a stop at the top level. Too cheap for parking my \*\*\*; this is the penthouse. That probably wasn’t even his car in the garage. How could I possibly be this dumb? I feel the anger rushing in again and I can feel the color coming to my necks and face. I glare at Peter as we exit the elevator and into his apartment. I sense he’s avoiding facing me until he can be sure I’m not going to either bolt or possibly kill him. Just when I think he might actually have run out of words he says quietly, “I’m sensing you probably have a few questions and I can’t exactly blame you for being angry with me.”

“Well, I mean you could have given me some sort of clue. Not that I suppose it ultimately matters. I never asked,” I reply, feeling the anger cool off, because I’m too tired to argue anymore, “I don’t suppose you could just point me in the direction of a shower and those dry clothes you promised?”

He leads me down a hallway and open the door into a suite the size of a small apartment and tells me to help myself to whatever I can find. It takes a moment to reorient myself as this is not at all how I expected this night to go. I wander around the room trying and finally locating both a bathroom and the closet. This is clearly a room for a girl so I really hope it’s not a girlfriend because this couldn’t possibly get any crazier, but for now I won’t think about that. I search the closet for something comfortable, but not too expensive which is nearly impossible. I do find some suspicious lingerie, but I move past them and put the thoughts away with it. Eventually I find something halfway decent and then take a quick shower.

As I get out, I take the towel and wrap it around me and find it strangely warm which makes me suspicious again and then I notice there’s a heater opening under the rack which must have turned on with the lights. I scold myself for jumping to conclusions again. I wrap my hair in a towel and get dressed. I hang up my wet clothes over the heater to dry and start searching for a laundry basket. Not finding one, I take my towels and walk back towards where we originally came from to ask Peter where to put these. As I near the end of the hallway, I hear Peter talking to someone so I stop and lean out of sight. I shouldn’t listen in, but for some reason I can’t seem to help myself.

“I swear I’m fine. There’s nothing to worry about. I’m sorry I scared you. I’ll come over sometime tomorrow, okay? Maybe we can have dinner?” I stop listening and go back to the room and then walk back to make it seem like I wasn’t trying to listen. I move out into the open where Peter can see me and he puts a finger up to let me know he’s almost done. I wander away a little to let him finish and I try not to hear him as he finishes his conversation, “look I have to go. I’ll call tomorrow okay. Goodnight.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt your phone call. I was just trying to figure out where to put these,” I say and lift up the towels a bit.

“Oh, you could have just left them on the floor. They’d get picked up tomorrow. I should’ve mentioned that. And no worries about the call. I thought you might be in the shower longer.” I start to head back to put them where I should, but I stopped yet again. “No, don’t go back there just for that. Just put them over by the couch or something. I’ll put some water on for something to drink unless you want something else?” I shake my head and dump the towels even though it hurts my soul a bit to do so. Then I ask the question I don’t really want the answer to,

“So is that your girlfriend’s room or…?”

“Oh, you noticed that huh? It’s kind of a complicated story, but I guess the short answer is yes, it was her room.”

We let the answer hang there as Peter goes to the kitchen for the drinks and I find a comfy spot on the sofa near the window. It’s hard not to stare outside. Clearly I wasn’t paying much attention to location as I was driving, because this looks out towards the water and it’s difficult not to open the door and go out onto the balcony, but after the whole jumping thing I don’t want to freak Peter out more. Who is he exactly anyway? I’m not left alone too long before he comes back carry two full mugs.

“I hope you’re good with hot cocoa. I know it always makes me feel better. Although it is pretty hot so be careful.”

“Thanks, this is perfect.” I take a mug carefully and take a tentative sip. “This is really good. What brand is it? Or is some high end thing I’d never be able to afford anyway?” I joke and I get a small laugh out of him, which between you and me is actually slightly addicting when it’s warranted.

“No brand. This is my mom’s secret recipe and definitely one of my most favorite thing’s she’s taught me.” He sits and reflects on that a moment before talking again, “so enough about me, what about you? Do you want to talk about what happened tonight and why you were there or would you rather tell me more about who you are?”

“Now if I told you more about me, you could probably figure out how I ended up there,” I answer honestly. “It was bound to happen sooner or later. This apartment is the absolute last place I thought I’d find myself though. It definitely was not in my plans.” We sit and sip on our drinks while we each mull over our own thoughts. A half hour passes without another word when I finally decide it’s time to call it a night. “I’m going to head to bed. I assume it’s alright to sleep in that room. Or would you rather I sleep here on the sofa?”

“Oh, of course you can sleep in that bed. Don’t be ridiculous and you can leave your cup here. I’ll take it when I’m done.”

I thank him, pick up my towels, and go back to the room. After closing the door I head to the bathroom and deposit the towels and check on my clothes which are unfortunately still slightly wet. I wonder if there’s a chance I can sneak out after he goes to bed. As I brush out my hair and sit on my own bed the tiredness settles in and decide I need the sleep more. I turn out the light and slip under the covers. I’m out before I can count to 10.

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I wake early from a dreamless sleep and for a moment I forget where I am. Then I remember and I quickly sit up. I go to check my phone only to realize that I must have left in the car. I let out a groan of frustration and head to the bathroom. My clothes are finally dry so I put those back on even though they’re a bit stiff from not being properly washed. I fold up my borrowed clothes and put them with the towels for lack of place to properly put them and then I leave the room in search of the kitchen because I’m hungry and that’s terrible isn’t it? I need to just leave. Except I have no idea where my keys are. He never gave them back, did he?

By the time I reach the hallway, I can already smell food being cooked so perhaps I can sneak out with some after all. It does smell like bacon and there’s no way I’ll say no to that if offered. I follow the smell to the kitchen where I find someone who is not Peter fixing up the food. They turn around as I enter the room and are a little startled that I’m not Peter either, but they quickly hide it.

“I’m sorry Miss. Mr. Row did not inform me that he had a guest. Is there anything I can get for you?”

“I’ll have whatever that is that you’re already making, if it’s not a problem that is. I’m Lia. And you are?”

“Vinnie, Miss. And I shall grab another plate. Are you sure there’s nothing else I can get for you?”

“Please call me Lia. And the fact that I’m hungry means that I would eat just about anything so no special requests. As long as I’m not eating Mr. Row’s breakfast, I’ll be good with whatever.”

While I sit at the counter bar and wait for my plate, I ponder about the little bit of information I’ve gathered about Peter, Mr. Row apparently. There’s only one prominent family of Rows that I can think of and if that’s Peter’s family then I am in further over my head than I originally thought. I definitely do not belong here. He has a personal chef for goodness sake. I seriously need to find my keys and get out of here before I make a bigger fool of myself. I don’t have to wait long before there’s a warm plate of food in front of me and I lose myself to the taste of bacon and poached eggs. It’s a bit like heaven really. I’m so lost in the food that I don’t notice Peter join me.

“Are you eating my food?” he teases.

“Oh geez man, do you delight in scaring people to death?” I ask in turn after nearly jumping out of my seat and after slightly choking on the bite in my mouth. I push him playfully and then I remember who he is and pull my arm back over quickly and apologize, “sorry, I’m not sure why I did that.”

“Wait, why did you just apologize for that? And why are you acting differently all of a sudden?” he wonders and then spots Vinnie trying to hide. “Let me guess, Vinnie let you in on who I am, didn’t he? Well, it was nice while it lasted.”

“Why didn’t you tell me who you were last night?”

“Would you have stayed if I had told you that I was Peter Row, son of business mogul Nickolas Row, owner of one of the world’s largest tech companies?” he spits with sarcasm. I’m taken aback at the spite in his voice.

“Probably not if I’d have known this version last night.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just sick of everyone treating me like there’s nothing more to me than that. It was nice to be anonymous for a bit. It doesn’t happen often. I should have been upfront with you, I’m sorry. You’re not going to run off are you?”

“Well even if I wanted to, I can’t.” He looks at me in confusion. “You still have my keys.”

“Oh, right. Sorry about that. I meant to give them back last night, but forgot before you went to bed. I’ll get them for you after breakfast, unless you want to leave. I can’t blame you after what I’m sure you’ve read about me, especially lately.” I look at him quizzically.

“Well, I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about. It may come as a surprise, but I don’t keep up with that sort of thing. I might have recognized you if I did. I only know some of the basics, but I certainly don’t know you. It must be hard actually getting to know anyone because it’s hard to tell if they’re faking everything about themselves and trust me I know how to pretend up there with the best of them.”

“So how do I know you’re not doing that now?”

“You watched me jump off a pier. It makes it difficult to put that façade back up after you’ve seen part of the worst of it. There’s no point trying to hide the fact that my brain is a little messed up or I am or both really.”

“Perhaps you’re right, I’m sorry. I’ve just been on edge lately and I took it out on you which is unfair.” We sit there looking at each other in silence when Vinnie lets out a huff from the other side of the room. “Oh Vinnie I’d forgotten you were here.”

“Clearly. Is there anything else I can get you Mr. Row?”

“No, I think I’m good for now and I’ll be out for dinner tonight so you can go early if you want.”

“Thank you, Mr. Row. I’ll get to cleaning up here and then make a shopping run. We’re running low on some things. Is there anything new I should be stocking on up for our guest here?”

“That’s a very good question, Vinnie. Well Lia, are you going to be sticking around for a bit or are you going to be running of into the sunlight never to be seen again?” he poses the question even though he should perfectly well know that I cannot possibly stay. That would be absurd.

“I’m not sure that it’s logical for me to stay. I appreciate everything you have done for me, but I’m sure I’ve far out stayed my welcome.”\*

I stand and take my plate to the sink when I hear the front door open. I don’t think too much about it after learning about Vinnie so I assume it must just be yet another person on the payroll. Wait, that sounds terrible. It’s probably just a touch of jealousy. I mean if you have the money you should spend it on whatever makes you comfortable. I’m lost in my thoughts, that I don’t notice when the new arrival enters the room.

“What the hell is going on here, Peter?” an angry voice asks and all eyes turn towards the source.

“Hannah, what are doing here?” Peter angrily asks in return. The tension in the air is so growing so thick that it’s starting to choke us or at least I do and I ask if I should go. They both answer at the same time, Peter with ‘a please don’t’ and Hannah with a ‘yes, I think you should.’ And then they both glare at each other. Then Hannah turns on all her sweetness and charm and I gag on that instead.

“Peter, darling, I came over to talk about what we talked about yesterday. I thought maybe we could just forget it ever happened and we could go out for lunch and maybe spend the day together?” she says while reaching over to touch Peter’s hand as if trying to make her possession of him obvious. He pulls his hand away and responds with, “there’s nothing more to say. We’re done. Go get your things if you want, but don’t come back here again after you’ve left. Leave your key on the counter when you go.” Her mouth hangs open for only a moment before she composes herself.

“I guess if that’s how you want to play it fine, but you’ll regret it. I can promise you that.”

She flips her hair, texts something on her phone, and heads off to her room. Did I make the bed? I don’t remember, but I sure hope so. I finish rinsing my plate to stall facing Peter and to give him some space. I hear him get up and leave and I feel my shoulders drop from trying to hold myself together. Then there’s a knock at door. No one answers it for a moment and they knock again. I turn and see no one is answering it so even though I probably shouldn’t I go open the door myself. I’m not a complete idiot not to know it’s his mom standing in the doorway with a look of surprise that she’s trying to hide. This is the strangest morning ever.

“Mrs. Row, please come in. This must be weird for you and I swear I’m leaving as soon as I can find my keys and it’s not what you might be thinking and I can totally explain if you want me to,” I ramble on. She puts up a hand to stop me from talking.

“My son’s old enough to make his own choices, no judgement. Do you know where he is though?”

“He’s around here somewhere,” I tell her and she starts to walk further into the apartment when I add, “just so you know, Hannah is here also.” She pauses only momentarily before she continues on. I stand there awkwardly before going back to the kitchen. It seems safer there. Maybe I can see if there was anything left from breakfast that I can eat. I need to find something to keep my mouth occupied so I don’t say anything else stupid.

When I get back to the kitchen however, I find it empty. Vinnie must have left to do the shopping already. I decide to snoop around the cabinets and find some kind of tea in one. There’s no label so I have no idea what it is, but it smells good so I put the kettle on and start looking around a mug and some sugar. 5 more cabinets later I finally find both. As I pour the warm water over the tea bag I hear movement towards the living room, but being the smart person I just stay where I am. I do not want to get caught up in any more of the drama if I can help it. As I sip my tea, I hear voices talking and the volume is increasing at an alarming rate. Boy I wish I could just leave. I should not be here.

Forget the keys; I’ll just have a new set made or something. I hate to waste perfectly good tea, but I need to go. I quickly pour the rest down the drain, rinse the cup, and sneak towards the door. I glance out in the hall and not seeing anyone quickly open the door and softly close the door behind me. I head for the elevator and press the down button. I stand there and try to remember which level we actually got on last night. It wasn’t the ground floor and I certainly don’t want to risk going out that way anyway. I need to go out the way we came. The elevator door opens and I get in and press a number. I’ll figure it out later, but I have to get off this floor. As the door shuts, I see Peter’s door open and he’s trying to reach the elevator, but the door closes, cutting him off.

As I travel down, I think back to everything that’s happened the past few days, the past few hours. I fight back tears. I don’t even know where they came from. When the elevator stops, I get out and look around. There’s nothing here but a small room with a window facing outside, a flight of stairs that goes all the way up and down, and a locked door. This is clearly not the correct floor. I look up and down the stairs to see if I can find which level will lead me back to the parking garage when I hear footsteps above me. Wait, is he seriously coming down the stairs?

I hurry down the stairs and hope I don’t trap myself. 6 flights down, I find the hallway leading out. My hand is on the door when I hear Peter call out asking me to stop. My better judgement urges me to open the door and leave this crazy fantasy world behind, but desperate loneliness stalls me. I don’t turn around even when I know he’s right behind me. I still don’t know what to do. Peter’s out of breath when he speaks to me.

“Lia, please come back upstairs. I swear I didn’t expect her to show up this morning or well either of them, but certainly not Hannah. Please give me a chance to explain. Could you at least look at me, please? I’m begging here. Please don’t leave me.” His voice breaks at the end and it breaks my heart to know how much he must be hurting to be begging a stranger not to let him deal with this alone. Despite everything telling me to go, I turn to face him, water sitting in my eyes.

“Why, Peter? I don’t belong here. This isn’t my world, not even a little. I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to be here while she is at the very least. This is between you guys. I don’t want to part of some game.” He reaches to hold my hand and wipe away the stray tears,

“I’m sorry you feel that way. I’m just worried about you, Lia. I have some things I need to tell you about last night and I can’t do that if you leave. Please stay for lunch at the very least. There’s a lot going on right now and I need someone to talk to. Please, Lia?”

“I just don’t know, Peter. This is so much, I…”

“I know. Please? I’ll give you some money to get you wherever or get you whatever, just please?”

“You think I care about money? I don’t want your money, I...”

“That’s not what I meant, Lia. I...”

“Peter. Stop, just please. Give me a minute.”

“I’m sorry.”

We stand there panicking in our minds, neither of us knowing what’ll happen even 5 minutes from now. All I know is that I cannot truly let him be alone right now. He looks like how I felt a few days ago before I drove down here. What if this is a huge mistake? I suppose there’s only one way to find out. What’s the worst that can happen? I end up at the pier again? Here goes nothing.

“Okay.”

“You’ll stay?”

“On two conditions; number one, don’t use me as weapon against Hannah. And number two, I really need my phone out of my car and you still have my keys.”

“Done and done. I’ll get your phone, stay here,” he says as he’s walking out the door pulling the keys out of his pocket as he goes. Seriously, in his pocket the whole time? Unbelievable. He must not trust me not to try to escape because he returns with my phone in record time. He hugs me quickly and then grabs my hand and basically drags me to the elevator. I pay attention to the floor level this time, just in case. Even though there’s no chance anyone will be stopping this elevator, Peter never lets go of my hand and honestly, I think he’s about to squeeze it off my arm. When we reach the top, the doors open and guess who’s standing there? If you’ve guessed Hannah, go ahead and pat yourself on the back. My luck, I swear.

“Wow, Peter. I didn’t think you’d sink this low, running after the help. No amount of people you could buy to satisfy you will ever match up to what I can give you.” She walks over to Peter and puts her hand on his chest and leans in. He backs up and takes her hand off his chest while never letting go of mine. Her smile fades and her face turns cold. “I see. Well, you have my number when you get bored playing prince to the poor and clearly deranged.”

“Don’t talk about her like that. You’re the deranged one if anyone is.” He starts walking towards his apartment still pulling me along for the ride leaving Hannah standing there fuming. Before we enter though, he turns to me, “I’m sorry about Hannah. I never meant for you to be put in the middle like that.”

I shrug unsure what to say or how to respond to what’s happening here. I’m still not sure why I’m still here. Once we get inside, his mom rushes over to hug him and I get a chance to break away as he hugs her back. I stand a bit to the side trying not to intrude and after a few moments I try to sneak off to give them some privacy, but Peter must sense me moving, because he stops hugging his mom to introduce me.

“Mom, this is Lia. Lia, this is my mom.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Row.”

“Please, call me Karen. So how did you two meet? Do we know your family?”

“Ugh, Mom, please.”

“No, it’s alright, Peter. We met last night actually and before you start thinking badly of your son, he saved my life last night. And no, I’m afraid our families run in far different social circles.”

“Saved your life? Oh my goodness, what happened?” She comes over to hold my hands and to check me over for bruises or cuts. “Are you okay? Did you go see a doctor? Peter did you take her to see someone?” Peter interjects before I can say anything more,

“Mom, please. It was nothing as serious as all that. She tripped over something while standing too close to the edge of a pier. I happened to see her fall into the water and went in after her. I brought her back her to dry off and get some sleep.”

“Oh you poor dear and Peter are you alright? You could have drowned too. And why didn’t you tell me this when I talked to you last night?”

“I didn’t want to worry you. And we’re fine, I’m fine anyway. I shouldn’t talk for Lia, but we’re alive and here. Can we leave it there for now at least?” She looks back and forth at us somewhere thinking about whether to push it and wondering if we’re actually okay.

“Alright, but just for now. We will talk about this later, though we might just keep it between us. You know how your father can get. And Lia, please feel free to come to dinner if you feel up to it. We’d love to have you join us, but for now I must go. I just wanted to check in after the, the incident yesterday morning.”

“Thanks, Mom. It’s all good. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“It was nice to meet you,” I add in as she leaves. She waves goodbye as she closes the door behind her. I turn towards Peter, “you, you didn’t have to lie about why I went into the water. Now I’m going to feel guilty about you lying to your mom.”

“We told her enough of the truth. She doesn’t need to know everything right now. Now how about that dinner proposition? Are you coming? She’ll probably be pretty disappointed if you don’t?”

“I’m not sure. Our deal was only through lunch and she was probably just asking to be polite. Besides I have nothing but what I’m wearing to go in and I don’t think that’s going to fly.”

“Hmm, no, you’re probably right. What you’re wearing definitely won’t do and Hannah’s run off with all her clothes except for maybe those pajamas you wore. I doubt she’d have taken something you touched.” I smack his arm. “Ow, what was that for?”

“There’s no way I would ever consider showing up to dinner with your father in that. Are you insane?” He just laughs.

“It has been said before. I guess it leaves only one option then.”

“And that is me not going. That is me leaving like I should.”

“Leaving yes, but only to go shopping. We can just grab lunch while we’re out. I know a great place we can go. What do you say?”

“I’m not going to let you go buy me things for no reason. You don’t even know me. What part of this do you not understand? Maybe you should be the one to go see a doctor. I think there might be something wrong with your head too.” He gives me kind of a funny look, but then it passes and I start to believe I imagined it, but just in case, “Hey, are you okay, Peter? I’m sorry I’m snapping at you. I just don’t get why I’m even still here.” He runs his hand through his hair before answering me,

“It’s just a long story and I want to tell you everything, because I owe you at least that much. I know I’m doing this all wrong, but I would appreciate it greatly if you would stay. And I could use an ally at dinner, but I won’t push you to go if you really don’t want to, but at least give it some thought?” Not sure how to answer I need to find a small distraction.

“I’m going to grab a cup of tea, can I get you something?”

“So now you’re offering to get me something in my own apartment?” he teases, but I don’t follow suit.

“Well, I’ll put some extra water on if you want something.” I walk to the kitchen, thoughts swirling in my head and I’m not sure how to straighten them out. I walk to the cabinet and get out the tea and a mug. Then I stop and realize I know where these things are. Should I know that already? I shake it off and put the water on. It doesn’t take long before I hear Peter come into the room.

“You better make it two before you run me out of tea.”

I finish making the tea, pass him a mug, and then go to Hannah’s room and close the door. I sip my tea as I stand in front of the mirror in the bathroom. I stand there and stare at my reflection. I find myself touching my hair, the circles under my eyes, my lips… I finish drinking the dregs and as I look at the bottom of my empty cup the anger I’ve been bottling up since the pier rises up until it catches in my throat. Before I can control myself I’ve thrown the mug at the mirror and let out a scream. Both the mirror and the mug shatter into thousands of pieces. I slam my hands on the counter, shards cutting into my skin, and I fall to the floor shaking and in tears. The worst part is as I sit there, I don’t even understand why it happened. I’m not there alone long before Peter comes rushing to the doorway.

“Oh, Lia. Okay, just don’t move okay.” He’s clearly panicking but trying not to show it. He slowly moves towards me, trying not to step on the glass, which is basically impossible, but at least he’s wearing shoes. He helps me stand, but then thinks better of it and picks me up and carries me out of the bathroom. He gently sets me on the bed and then runs off to get a towel, some tweezers, and some rubbing alcohol which I’m dreading the most right now.

He sits next to me and carefully places one hand on top of a towel while he turns his attention to the other hand. He looks at me before he digs in, “this is probably going to hurt, I’m sorry.” I’m too in shock to respond. As he works, I feel myself numbing over and I just close my eyes as he goes along. I don’t feel anything until he’s done pulling out glass and wiping my hands down with the rubbing alcohol. My face contorts into a grimace, but then it’s over as I feel him wrapping my hands in towels. It’s only then that I can bear to finally look at him and I can feel the water filling my eyes again.

“I’m sorry, Peter. I don’t know what happened. I’ll, I’ll find a way to pay you back for the mirror and the mug. I hope it wasn’t a gift or something, because I don’t know that I can replace that. And all this after you’ve been so good to me and all I can do is break things. I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, shh no. I’ve put you into this situation. I shouldn’t have done that. And to be honest, I’ve wanted to break a few things myself the past couple days, okay? It’s alright.”

“Hannah?”

“Her and some other things. Look, I’ll order in for lunch and I’ll fill you in. Why don’t you lay down until then okay? I have a few phone calls to make anyway so it’s not rude if you just want to sleep some more. And don’t say that’s not what you were thinking because I can see it on your face.” I just wrinkle my face at him.

“Fine, but nothing too extravagant for lunch okay? I don’t think I’ll be up for that. Unless that’s all you can eat, then do whatever you need to do. You won’t have to put up with me for too much longer I promise.” He just rolls his eyes, but then his face falls and he just looks tired.

“Stop, please. I have enough to deal with.”

“Okay, I’m done. I won’t leave this bed until lunch I swear. Now please go do what you need to do.”

“You better not move. I’ll clean up the glass enough in case you need the bathroom though. I don’t want to have to do operation again. Now get some rest okay.”

“Yes, mom.”

He goes to teasingly shove me, but then changes his mind. I lay back and he pulls the covers up because it’s a little hard with my wrapped hands. I watch him walk to the bathroom to clean up yet another one of my messes and I lay there and wonder why he’s being so nice. Why is he putting up with me? I quickly close my eyes so he doesn’t see me watching him finish up and leave. I open my eyes up just enough to see him watching me from the doorway for just a moment longer than he should before he closes the door.

I hold my hands close to my chest and intend to stay awake, but when I close my eyes and let myself relax I fall asleep. I blame it on the soft sheets. When I eventually wake up, I push the covers back and realize my hands have come free of the towels. I hold them in my lap and stare at the mess I’ve made of them. Dreading what I need to do next, I make my way to the bathroom and run them under the water. It’s not easy to keep myself from making too much noise at the pain of washing the soap off. Just breathe, Lia. Gingerly, I pat them dry on a clean towel. Now I have to go face Peter. He must be regretting pulling me out of the water by now. I can’t blame him.

When I open the door, I listen for sounds in case I hear him on the phone. I don’t want to interrupt him again, but I don’t hear anything so I continue making my way to the living room. I call out, but there’s no answer. I keep going down the hallways across from mine, which I assume will lead to his room to see if I can hear shower water or something, but again only silence greets me. Should I open the door to see if perhaps he’s fallen asleep also? No, let him sleep if he is Lia, don’t be a creep. I’m heading towards the kitchen when I hear the front door open and in walks Peter, noting the direction I’m coming from.

“Oh, you’re up. Did you see my note on the fridge saying I’d be right back?”

“Oh. I hadn’t gotten that far yet. That was my next destination.” I walk over to grab some of the bags he’s carrying which are heavier than they look. “What on earth did you buy, the earth itself?”

“You really shouldn’t be carrying those with your hands like that. I can get them.” I shrug and keep going anyway. “Alright, well just dump them on the counter or the couch or wherever then I guess. Lunch should be here in 10 minutes or so. I hope pizza is alright.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine as long as there’s nothing weird on it.”

“Nah, I stuck with just cheese because I figured that was the safest option. Unless you have something against cheese? And if you do that might have to be the final straw.”

“Just cheese is my favorite. Peter, I...” he holds up a hand and I hang my head in shame. He comes over and lifts up my chin so I have to look at him.

“Don’t ever be sorry for feeling, Lia. Just try not to let it completely control you. I’m here for as long as you are and after that if you want me to be.”

“Thank you, Peter. I still don’t understand why, but thank you.”

“Alright, enough of that. Come see what I’ve brought for you.” I look at him incredulously and he lets out a quick laugh, “You didn’t think all of this stuff was for me did you? I did have to guess a bit on sizes so there’s stuff that might not fit, but we can always take stuff back. You can’t keep wearing that same outfit, because no offense but it’s starting to stink.” I take a random item out of bag at throw it at him and he just laughs. I smile even though I tell myself that I shouldn’t. He stops laughing and my smile disappears. "Please keep smiling. I’m sorry. I just didn’t think I was ever going to see a real smile from you. It’s a good look.”

He looks away and starts taking things out of bags and sorting them into piles of shirts, pants, socks, and such. When he finds the bag of underwear he starts blushing. Someone knocks at the door and you can see the relief flood his face as he drops the bag nearer to me and goes to answer the door and it’s my turn to laugh, but I do it quietly so he doesn’t hear me. I stop when he makes it back over announcing lunch break.

Despite his promises of filling me in on what’s going on with him, we eat our pizza mostly in silence. He watches as I go through the absolute fortune’s worth of clothing he bought. He must be insane if he thinks I’m even going to consider keeping most of this. I pick out a few pieces that might pass on the cheaper side and a couple more expensive looking options for the possibility of dinner this evening. If I go, there’s no way I can go looking as poor as I am. I won’t go overboard, but it needs to be presentable. Picking the two best options, I present them to him to choose between, because he’ll know what’ll be best to wear for his parents. Unfortunately for me, he chose the burgundy colored dress instead of the pants and blouse option. I roll my eyes and take the dress back to the room I’ve been using to lay it out to prevent wrinkling. When I get back to the living room, I find him texting on his phone looking angry.

“Peter? I don’t mean to interrupt exactly, but is everything okay?”

“No, Lia. Everything is very not alright. My mom just called to tell me that my father invited not only some business friends to dinner, but Hannah also.” I inhale sharply. “I know. I’m sorry, Lia. If you’d rather not go now I’ll understand. Honestly, I’d rather not go either. Want to go run away somewhere with me? I could tell my mom I need to stay and take care of you.” I ponder on this for a moment, settling on a decision.

“I’ll still go with you if you go. It’s the least I can do after everything you’ve done for me. If you need me to be an excuse, I’ll do that too. Just tell me what you need me to do.” He comes over and hugs me tightly.

“Thank you, Lia.”

He lets go and starts pacing trying to decide what to do. I set to picking up all the scattered clothing and leaving him to his thoughts, but not staying out of the room for too long at a time in case he needs something. After I’ve finished cleaning up, I go to the kitchen and do the only thing I know to do: make tea. When it’s ready, I bring him a cup.

“If you want, I think there’s still a chunk of mirror not broken in the bathroom,” I suggest pointing at his cup. That earns me a short laugh and then it’s over. He takes a sip and his shoulders relax a little. I take his hand and pull him towards the sofa. He sits and I bring a blanket over to him and he pulls me down next to him. I curl my legs up under me and lean close to him. He leans his head towards mine and I hold his free hand in my lap. We sit there in a quiet silence, each of us lost in our separate thoughts. I have no idea exactly how long we sit together. I wasn’t looking at the time when we first sat down, but as I look out the window I can see the light starting to fade. I nudge him and nod my head towards the window and he nods in return. He stands and heads to his room to dress for a dinner party he never wanted.

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I take a quick shower and then slip on the dress. There’s a mirror in the closet that’s still intact. I scrounge around to see if Hannah left anything behind. Several drawers later I find some old make-up and mismatched earrings. It’s not a lot to go on, but it’s better than nothing. I’m not an expert so I stick with the basics and try not to look like a clown. Then I move to finding a pair of shoes. He surprisingly didn’t buy any heels, which I wouldn’t have wanted to wear anyway. I assume he looked at the size on the shoes I was wearing because everything is within a half-size. I find a simple pair of black flats that won’t detract attention from the dress so they’ll do. As for my hair, I brush it out straight and then finger fluff it up to gain just a smidgeon of volume.

I take one last look in the mirror, decide there’s not much more I can do, and then head for the living room to wait for Peter unless he’s already ready. I find he’s not there and sit down on the sofa to wait. I don’t have to wait long before I hear his bedroom door open and fancy shoe footsteps head this way. He stops at the end of the hallway struggling to do his cuffs with his shaky hands. I go over and help him.

“Peter, are you sure you’re okay to go? You kind of look like you’re going to be sick. I’m sure your mom could cover you if you want to stay here.”

“I have to go. Putting it off will just delay the inevitable. Just don’t let me alone with either my father or Hannah?”

“Of course and you squeeze my hand three times if you need me to come up with a reason why we have to go, okay?”

“Deal. You look beautiful, by the way.”

“Thanks. I’m not sure if it’ll be enough to pass any tests though. You look good, too. Do we need to get going though?”

He nods. He takes my hand and together we make the journey down to the lobby where we get a few looks from other people as we pass by. Then we head outside and into Peter’s actual car and not whatever it was I parked next to. From there, the driver expertly makes his way downtown to an even taller apartment building where we enter through a private entrance and take an elevator all the way to the top. As the door opens, I can feel Peter’s character change into business mode. If it weren’t for the fact that he’s holding my hand in a death grip, I would never know how nervous and terrified he is. It’s impressive. I try to follow his lead, but I’m so far out of my element I doubt I’m succeeding much, if at all.

A doorman opens the door as we approach and we step through. It’s like a whole other world here compared to Peter’s place. From the crystal chandeliers and glasses to the marble floors, it’s like a small palace has been placed on top of the building. I wonder if all the apartments in the building are similarly built or if this is strictly just for the Rows. Peter told me on the way over that the apartment is actually the top 4 floors of the building which is nuts. Another employee asks to take my jacket and gloves which I decide to keep on, because for one it’s freezing in here and the gloves help hide my hands, which is why Peter bought them for me. It was his last gift to me as we left his apartment.

We linger in the entrance while Peter searches for his mom, his one safe person here I assume. Eventually he spots her with his father on the other side of the room talking to some other men in suits that I do not recognize. As we weave our way to them, I wonder how this went from a small dinner party to a massive event in such a short time. I cannot believe how many people are here. I can feel eyes turning to watch us as we go by, but it feels more menacing here than it did when we left to come over. After what feels like an eternity, we finally reach his parents.

“Hi Mom, Dad. I hope I haven’t missed too much. Before I forget though, Dad, this is Lia.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Row,” I say and hold out my hand to shake his which he ignores and gives a slight huff of disproval. I quickly lower my hand and address his mom, “and it’s nice to see you again Mrs. Row. It was wonderful of you to invite me.”

“Lia dear, I told you to call me Karen.” She gives us each a polite hug not wanting to be too personal in such a business atmosphere even though I think it might be hurting her not to hug Peter longer. Clearly there’s something I’m missing. I wish Peter would have given me some small clue earlier. Peter’s dad drags him off to the side a little and I start to follow due to my promise, but his dad gives me a look and Peter shakes his head at me. My shoulders slump a little in defeat. His mom starts a conversation with me while they have it out. I only catch bits and pieces. His dad does not want me here and Peter is getting dangerously close to losing it so I beg him mom with my eyes for permission to intercede which she relents to because this will get ugly soon. I mouth thank you and hurry to Peter.

“Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Row, but Peter promised me a tour and I’m dying to see some more of your lovely apartment.” I pull him away before his dad has time to object without making a scene. When we get far enough away I apologize, “Peter, I’m so sorry. I promised not to leave you alone and it didn’t last more than 5 minutes.”

“It’s fine. You didn’t really have a choice.”

“It’s not fine. You’re not fine. You’re fuming. Hey,” I put my hands on either side of his face and make him look at me though he tries to turn his head I hold firm, “hey, look at me. Just look at me. Take a deep breath Peter, please, and another and another. It’s just us; no one else is in the room, just look at me.” And he does and after a few moments I feel the pent up anger leave his face and his body as he relaxes. “Do you want to go?” He takes my hands and lowers them, shaking his head.

“I’m alright now. Thank you. Come on, I’ll show you my secret spot while we wait for dinner to be served.” He walks me back to a marked off section and to a private elevator. We head to the top floor and then through a couple rooms only he can open. Finally, we reach the secret spot.

“You have a private pool on the top floor of a 70-story building? Seriously, Peter, what are you doing hanging around with someone who can’t even afford a pool on the ground?” He ignores my question and heads towards the glass railing separating us from the long fall to the ground. I follow him over somewhere torn between making sure he’s not going over and wondering if I will. Thankfully, he simply sits and leans against the railing which is still a bit terrifying, but I try not to let it show. Tentatively, I sit myself down beside him, our arms barely brushing each other. I want him to know I’m there while also giving him his space.

“Did you know I had a sister, Julie?” I nod. That’s about all I know. I know something happened, but I don’t know the details. I let him decide what he wants to tell me. “She died 3 years ago. She was 19. She…” he starts crying.

“Hey, it’s alright. You don’t have to tell me anymore if you don’t want, if it’s too hard.” He shakes his head.

“I need to get this out,” he takes a deep breath and then continues, “She apparently overdosed. And I didn’t know until a couple of days ago. And then there’s Hannah. We’ve been falling apart for a while, but my Dad is adamant about us marrying, something about being good for business, but I just can’t marry her. Especially after I tried to tell her about Julie and she blew it off. That was the final straw. Yesterday morning, my Dad showed up to try to convince me to work it out with Hannah then I ran off, ended up at the end of a pier. Lia, you saved *my* life last night. If you hadn’t jumped in first, it would have been me. I would have been the one jumping in trying to be done with this life.”

I have no idea how to respond. There’s a lot to process in what he’s told me. So all I know to do is pull him in closer and hold him and let him let it out. We stay like that for 10 or 15 minutes.

Peter’s phone makes a noise and that’s what disrupts the situation. I can tell he doesn’t want to look at it, but he does anyway. It’s a text from his mom saying they’re waiting for him to start serving dinner. I dip my hands in the pool water and gently wash the dried tears from his face. He looks at me with a funny look on his face.

“What’s that look? Do I have something on my face?” He looks like he wants to say something else, but instead says,

“Just some mascara runs.” Then he returns the favor of washing my face. He’s touching my skin so softly, so tentatively that I almost think he’s going to kiss me, which is the last thing we need right now so I decide to make a dumb remark instead,

“We are an absolute mess, aren’t we?”

I let out a quick laugh and flick some water off my fingers at him. He tries to return the favor, but I’m already up and close to the door before he can get more water on his fingers. We make our way back to the elevator. Once inside, I straighten my skirt and he tries to smooth out his suit jacket. We don’t hold hands as we exit the elevator. That would make it look more like we were up to something when we definitely were not. His mom meets us as we come out and looks us over trying to decide what happened. Her nose kind of pinches a little suspicious, but then it’s gone and she leads us to the very long dinner table. I have no idea how a table could possibly comfortably seat as many people as it does. As we get closer to the table, his mom says a quick apology to Peter as he heads to his normal seat while she takes me to the other side to sit next to her. Across from me is Hannah with a giant smirk on her face and Peter looks about ready to throw something as he sits next to her across from his mom.

His dad sits at the head of the table looking thoroughly pleased with himself and oblivious to the fuming hatred spilling from Peter’s eyes every time they look at each other. I find myself getting lost in the business conversation and I feel his mom pat my knee a couple times in solace. Hannah keeps touching Peter’s back and I can see it hurting him that he can’t just outright tell her to stop. I on the other hand stab my food a little harder than necessary every time she does and I don’t completely understand why. I’ve known Peter for less than 24 hours and I’m what, jealous, of a girl who is now an ex? This makes no sense and yet…

Several courses later, we finally arrive at dessert and I’m relieved that we’ve made it this far without too much fanfare, but it turns out I’ve thought too soon. I’m about to take a bite when Mr. Row takes time of his business talk to finally address me,

“So, *Lia*, when will you be returning to ‘wherever’ you came from so Peter can get back to what’s important?”

You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed his question, all eyes turned towards me. I sit there a moment in shock and am about to give him some response, I’m not sure what it was going to be before I said anything, but before I can Peter interjects while holding a knife pointed at his dad,

“How dare you. How dare you address her like she’s no one, like she’s nothing. You know I didn’t even want to come to this stupid dinner after you decided to turn it into a spectacle. I’m not marrying Hannah, ever, so stop acting like this is an engagement party. The only reason I stayed this long is because, *Lia*, came with me to face you and your business craziness. The only thing you think is important is how much money is in your bank account. I’m done with this tonight. I’ll talk to you later, Mom. Lia, let’s go.”

He drops the knife and it clangs loudly on the plate and gets up. He comes around the other side of the table to pull me chair back to let me out. He kisses his mom on the cheek while I put my silverware down and stand up. He takes my hand and we leave. We never say a word the entire way back to his place. When we enter the apartment, he gives me an apology hug, says good night, and goes to his room closing the door with a bang. I’m left standing there unsure of what to do.

I’m so wound up and so exhausted that I don’t know which feeling to feed. I wander to the kitchen and open the fridge and stare inside. Vinnie must have restocked during my nap this morning because this fridge is overflowing with selections. I find some grapes and eat a couple, then close the door. I’m not truly hungry. I decide to go change into something that’s far more comfortable and warm. Then I sit on the bed and notice my gloves are wet and dirty from never taking them off, but that’s what I do now. My hands are pretty scratched up. I was lucky not to need stitches.

I look out the bedroom door down to where his door is closed and make a decision. I’ll probably regret this later, but there’s no going back once I do it. I get up and walk to his door. I consider knocking, but decide just to try the handle, it’s unlocked. I finish turning it and open the door. I use the living room light to locate the bed and then quietly close the door again behind me. I cross the room and crawl under the sheets and sit near him. I don’t touch him. It’s not long before I feel him reach out to pull me closer. I oblige. I scooch over and let him lay his head in my lap. I comfort him by lightly petting his head. He falls asleep long before I do. What have I gotten myself into?

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I wake up a few hours later after we’ve drifted apart. It’s hard to leave him when he looks so peaceful, but I think it’ll be for the best in the long run. Carefully, I get out of bed and head back to my room. I get dressed and then head to the kitchen to make myself a sandwich or two for the road. Now I just need my keys which he still has. Alright, where would he put them? I wonder if they’re back in his pocket. I don’t want to go back into his room. It’s so risky, but it might be the only option. I check around on the counter first, but to no avail. I lean against the counter in frustration and start scanning the room. My eyes find their way to the fridge again only it’s the side I haven’t paid attention to before now. There’s a whole row of keys just hanging there in plain view and the last set, mine. I say a quick thank you towards the ceiling, take the keys and my things, write a short note, and quietly leave.

All the way down in the elevator I question my decision. It’s not that I don’t want to leave, because I don’t, but his dad is partially right. I don’t belong here. Plus, I think Peter has a lot to work through and my being there will just make it confusing and harder. And I have my own issues to deal with. I can feel the little scabs scraping against the steering wheel as I turn it. I drive by the pier, tempted to stop, but then I move on knowing that if I stop, I might not go at all. I’d texted my mom yesterday to let her know I was alright and she graciously transferred enough money to my account to make it back home, so that’s where I’m going.

I don’t stop except for gas, bathroom breaks, and snacks. I don’t even stop to sleep somewhere; I drive straight through. When I make it home, there’s no one there to greet me. Everyone must be working and I take advantage of the quiet. I take a hot shower, take some ibuprofen (a couple more than I should), and then fall asleep on my own bed. I sleep for hours, time enough that some are home now from work, but they don’t disturb me. At some point I wake up and I can still hear them awake so I force myself back to sleep until after they’ve gone to bed. Only then do I get up and get myself something to eat. Then I go back to my room and fall back asleep.

The next morning I wake to the sounds of someone moving around trying to be quiet so I assume at least one person is off today or if it’s mom she probably called in. I guess it’s time to face reality. I get dressed and then open my door. I head to the living room to see that it is mom still here.

“Good to know you’re actually still alive. You could have at least called, Lia. I don’t know why you disappeared without saying anything. You know you can talk to me about anything.”

“Well, not this. You wouldn’t understand. You never do.”

“I wouldn’t understand what?”

“Just never mind. It’s not important. I’m back and that’s what matters, right?”

“Well where have you been anyway? You didn’t exactly tell me when you texted asking for money.”

“I’ll pay you back soon okay, I promise.”\*

After our brief conversation I set about doing what I normally would, doing laundry, washing dishes, get something out for dinner… When I finally have a few minutes of downtime I get out a fresh canvas and start prepping for a new paining. I do a light sketch and then apply a thin underpainting to give the paints that’ll go on top more depth. It’ll take a little while for that to dry so I get back to chores. I head out to the garden to weed and to check on my roses. I’m not sure why I thought the roses would be a good idea. They require so much care and attention and I’m not sure this house even deserves their beauty. It takes most of the afternoon to finish the weeding, but it needed to be done. Now it’s time to fold up the laundry and then probably start dinner.

The rest of the evening goes on as if I’d never left as if nothing is wrong. I’m relieved when it’s finally time for bed. After the parents go upstairs, I sit in front of my computer trying to convince myself not to search the internet. My resolve lasts about 5 minutes before I type in his name and hit enter. Peter Darren Row. Date of birth: August 19, 1989, age 30. Son of Nickolas and Karen Row. Siblings: Julie Marie Row. I stop reading the facts and start looking at pictures and yeah that’s him alright, but the pictures don’t reflect who he is or who he was with me at least. Then again, I wasn’t with him that long. I don’t really know who is he is either.

I close out the browser window and head to bed. Tonight I can’t sleep. I toss and turn never finding a comfortable spot. Eventually, I give up and start painting. After another hour or so I’m finally feeling tired enough to at least get a few hours of sleep.

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I spend the next few days in a daze just going along the normal routine fitting in as much as I can to distract myself. Every day that goes by I start to think those couple of days with Peter are just a part of my imagination. Every spare minute I spend painting trying to erase him from my mind. It is nice for once to have someone else fully occupying my mind. At the same time it almost feels like a betrayal even though there was never anything there either. A week goes by, but it feels like a year. I’m lost in my world of paint that I don’t notice someone standing in my doorway watching me. It’s not until I stop to take a break to attend to the laundry that I notice him.

“Peter, I, what are you doing here? How did you find me?”

“I’ll admit you weren’t the easiest person to track down.”

“Perks of being invisible, I guess.”

“Why’d you leave, Lia? And in the middle of the night?”

“Peter, you and I, we live in vastly different worlds,” he starts to interrupt, but I keep going before he can, “and you have so much to work through and with me there you don’t have to face it head on and it was terrible of me to leave like that, but I’m a very unremarkable person and I didn’t truly think you’d miss me.”

“Lia, I was so worried. I was worried, terrified that you… Lia, you have no idea how relieved I am that you’re here, alive.”

“Peter, I’m sorry, I’m here. I’m not going anywhere,” and I run out of words so I just hug him. After a minute he breaks the silence,

“So you’re an artist then?” and he gestures to the painting I’ve been working on.

“Oh. Well, I don’t know if I’d go that far. I’m still learning the basics. Would you like me to show you a few of my finished pieces? This one is nowhere near done.”

“I’d love to see more if you want to share them with me.”

I get him settled in the living room and then I gather up everything I’ve finished that I’ve worked on since I got back. I sit near him as I show him each piece and explain as best I can to the questions he has. Mostly he just looks in silence and it kind of makes me nervous. When he’s seen all of them, he sits back and still doesn’t say anything.

“You hate them, don’t you?” He turns and looks at me like I’m crazy.

“Are you kidding, Lia, these are amazing. Are they technically perfect maybe not, but there’s so much story to them. Lia, did you paint these all from memory?”

“As best I could. Some of the details are missing, but I kind of like it that way though. It kind of ties them all together. At least for me it does.”

“Can I buy them?”

“Why do you want to do that? They’re not that great, barely past conception.”

“But you captured our brief time together perfectly and I don’t ever want to forget it.”

“Except that it was an absolute nightmare the entire time I was there. Why would you want to remember it at all?”

“Because Lia, in this one here with the pier? That’s where I met you. And the broken mirror? I got to hold your hands for the first time. And this one with the lights in the pool water, that’s where I told you I was planning to jump off the pier, but that you saved my life. Lia, I’d never want to forget those moments with you.”

There’s part of me that obviously wants to keep them because even though I’ve finished them they don’t appear finished and another part wondering if he’s just trying to find a way to give me money for some unknown reason, maybe just because he can. And then there’s the part that wouldn’t mind the money for more supplies. Plus I can’t really tell those sad eyes no.

“Alright I’ll sell them, but I’m setting the prices and then you can either pay that or not buy them, got it?” I take a moment to decide what to charge because it’s not like I’ve ever sold anything before and I don’t want to overcharge or undercharge. When I’ve made up my mind, I give him individual prices and a bundled price. He wrinkles his nose at me and shakes his head.

“I can’t pay that, you must be joking.”

“Oh, is it too much? I didn’t think I’d overpriced, but I suppose you probably do buy art more frequently. I’m new at this, sorry.”

“No Lia, it’s underpriced. These are worth so much more.”

“No, you’re only saying that because you have a personal connection to them. If you didn’t and were buying them for simply aesthetic reasons, you wouldn’t pay a penny over what price I’ve given you and you know it.”

“Okay, maybe that’s only a tiny bit true.” And I give him a look that says that’s crap. “Okay, okay I concede. But, you have to be the one to put them in the apartment.”

“Wait, wait. I don’t know about that one. I am not sure I should leave again. I have a lot to do here.”

“Hey, I’m not asking you to move, just come back for a short time, completely under legitimate reasons. At least think about it.”

I avoid an actual answer and give him the incredibly short tour of our house. It isn’t long until my parents get home from work and I introduce them to Peter and give them the short version of how we met. I should mention it’s my mom and step-dad. That bit of information kind of surprised Peter for some reason, but he didn’t comment on it. I’m sure it’ll come up later. Peter helps me fix dinner; well he keeps me company while I cook. As we eat he brings up his idea on my going back down to hang the paintings. My step-dad thinks it’s a great idea, but my mom is more skeptical.

“It’s not that I’m not happy for you finally selling some of your art, but I just don’t understand why it’s necessary for you to have to go wherever to hang them up for someone who you hardly know. Couldn’t you just have a professional take care of it, Peter?”

‘Well, I suppose I could. I guess I was just hoping to convince Lia that there’s more to life than just painting in her room, especially as good as she is.” It doesn’t fully convince her, but she drops commenting on it further.

After dinner, Peter takes his leave after making me put my phone number in his contacts and his in mine. He tells me that he’s heading back home tomorrow morning. I give him a hug and tell him I’ll let him know soon about whether or not I’ll be driving the paintings down or if I’ll just be shipping them. And then he’s gone and I’m left here feeling very alone. I head to bed right after he leaves, avoiding any more questions saying that we can talk about it more the next day.

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The next morning, I send Peter a message wishing him a safe tip back home and then I go for a walk. There’s a lot to think about and consider. I really want to go back and not just for the art or Peter, but I’ve always wanted to live in that area anyway. The only person I need to convince is mom. I need a plan to present to her. If I can put Peter’s name as a buyer, I think that might help sell more in the future. I doubt he’d mind but I will certainly ask first. There’s no way I could afford a place that fancy, but maybe I could make enough for a 2 bedroom somewhere. Just enough room to sleep and paint. I send Peter a message about adding his name as a buyer if I made a webstore and then start building the site and researching potential apartments.

Feeling inspired, I start trying to decide how many boxes I’d need to move my things. For once, it feels like it could be real. I’m almost too afraid to think about the possibilities. I just don’t want to take advantage of Peter. I don’t want his parents, mostly his dad, to think I’m only hanging on to him for his money and his influence. Maybe we can just start with delivering the paintings and see how things go. That’s probably the safest option.

I start wrapping up the paintings for travelling. Then I start packing up a bag of clothes to take. I can’t depend on Peter for everything. I check my hiding spot to see if I have anything left in my savings. It’s not much. I’m not sure it’s enough to get me there and I certainly cannot ask mom for more. I’m just going to have to ship the paintings. It’s not ideal, but it’ll be better than nothing and then I can put every penny into creating more work. Maybe in a year I can move out. It’ll be hard to leave mom, but it’s time otherwise I might never leave.

That night I make a special dinner and run my thoughts by mom. She doesn’t say much about them other than she’ll give it some thought which is better than saying it’s an awful plan, because it’s at least half a plan which is more than I can usually give her. After cleaning up dinner they watch television and I go back to painting when I get a text from Peter saying it is okay to use his name and to check my bank account to make sure that the transfer went through. I login to my account to find a very large number pending. Far more than we’d agreed on. I think I might kill him next time I see him. For now, I just say thanks and that the paintings will be delivered soon. Well, I can afford to go now I guess. I go to sleep that night feeling both grateful and furious.

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At some point during the night I wake up to flip over the pillow and I find something inside the pillowcase. I’m too tired to figure out what it is so for now I just put it on the table next to the bed and if I think about it for too long I’ll be awake and I need sleep more right now. I put it out of my mind, roll over, and go back to sleep. It is the first thing I check in the morning though. The note on the envelope reads “You might need this.” I open it to find a key card that I assume lets me into the private entrance to the elevator to his apartment. When did he even have time to leave this?

Shaking my head I move forward with the day. I spend the day organizing my room and packing a few more things. Not many because I don’t actually have a place to stay, but I want to take a few painting supplies with me because I don’t want to get out of the habit. I pack everything but the paintings and the sensitive paint supplies into my car. I won’t go until tomorrow, but I am going. After that’s finished I get on with my normal routine. I break the news that I’m leaving the next day after dinner.

Mom’s not happy about it, but she says it my life if I want to screw it up. I thought she’d be happy that things were starting to fall into place, but I’m sadly mistaken. I know she’s worried about the whole Peter thing, but as some point she has to trust me to know what’s best for me. I do feel bad for leaving her here when she needs the help, but it’s time for my siblings to step in and help for once. I don’t know why it has to be all on my shoulders anyway. I don’t want to leave on bad terms though. So I ask her what I can do to ease her worry.

“Lia, just be careful okay. Don’t let him push you into anything you’re not comfortable with. You have a tendency to trust too easily and let people walk over you and I don’t want to see you get hurt, again.”

“We’re just friends Mom and barely that. This is just business.” Clearly, this is unconvincing. “I promise to be careful and take things slow. And I’ll just come home again if things start turning ugly. I just don’t want to miss the one chance I have to maybe start my art career. You can understand that much, right?”

“I’m still not sure, Lia, but I won’t be the one to stop you from following a dream. Just remember that no matter what, I’m here for you.”

“I know, thanks mom. I love you.”

I give her a hug and then surprise her with the blueberry pie bribe I made just in case. We sit and enjoy the pie instead of spending any more time arguing. Then I have her help me make sure I haven’t forgotten to pack anything important. She’ll have left for work by the time I leave in the morning so I want to make sure everything’s as ready as it can be now. By the time we go to bed, Mom feels a little more relaxed about the decision but tells me to text her every time I stop on the trip and then as often as I can to keep her up to date on what I plan to do after I’ve finished taking care of Peter’s paintings. Of course I agree. I’m not that terrible of person, especially after my recent ‘runaway’ attempt. We say goodnight and I give her one more hug. Then I go to bed, but I don’t sleep much because I’m excited and terrified. I still have no idea what I’m getting myself into.

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After a restless night, I wake up to remember that today’s the day I leave for the start of something new and I smile. And then it dawns on me that I have no idea what I’m doing and the smile fades just a little. Then I brush it off and finish getting everything packed. I decide to eat on the road because if I wait any longer I might not go. I take my time driving, stopping every so often when I see something interesting to photograph. I don’t let Peter know I’m on the way so that I don’t feel rushed. I stop the first night just on the far side of Nashville so that I don’t have to deal with the morning rush, not that the evening rush was any better.

I order a pizza which takes ages to arrive. As I’m eating it though, it takes me back to that lunch with Peter and I’m not sure how it makes me feel. It doesn’t stop me from eating though. I turn on the television for company and text mom to update her on where I am. I flip through the channels and find some old movie I don’t really care about and try to make myself comfortable on the bed. At some point, I end up falling asleep wondering why Peter never asked me why I was on that pier.

I wake up the next morning not allowing myself to think on it any longer. I get back in the car and head down the road. I take backroads rather than interstates enjoying the journey. Evening approaches as I reach the bottom of Georgia. I stop for the night before I cross the border into my destination state. I take a shower and heat up some of the leftover pizza. I’ll text Peter in the morning letting him know I’ll be there sometime in the afternoon, unless he has other plans and then I will need to find a place to stay, but I’ll deal with that when I know more. I head to bed early. Tomorrow will be the actual start of the future, at least I hope so. I’d be lying if I didn’t say the thought wasn’t making me nervous and excited, but until then I’ll sleep in this fairly uncomfortable motel bed.

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I wake up slightly later than I intended and spend the morning rushing to get out before I’m charged for another night. Peter did text me back saying that he’d be back to his apartment around 3 so I don’t have to necessarily be in too big a hurry, but it’s still a little ways drive down the coastline and there’s no way I could pass up stopping by the welcome center for my cup of orange juice.

I sip my juice and pick up every map and attraction brochure for the area. I’m about ready to leave when I spot a gossip magazine from the day after that disaster of a dinner party. It’s about Peter leaving the party early. And it’s not even about the fight between Peter and his dad. It’s about Hannah or rather about Peter leaving with someone that is not her and how heartbroken she must be after that. I shouldn’t, but I take the magazine with me. It’ll serve as a good reminder that these games they play, I don’t want to play them.

I put the magazine in the passenger seat and I keep glancing over at it. I wonder if Peter has seen it. He probably has. Hannah probably hand delivered it to him complaining about how this makes her look, trying to get him back. By the time I pull into the parking garage, it’s driving me crazy and as much as I want to ask him about it, I don’t want to start something that’s none of my business. I am here to deliver paintings and that is it. I send him a quick message to let him know I’m here and then I gather up his paintings and head for the entrance. For some reason it still surprises me that the key card works, but then I move on and get on the elevator.

When I reach the top, Peter is waiting for me when the doors open. He offers to help me carry the paintings and I’m grateful for the help. We enter the apartment and he starts to walk to his room.

“Where are you going? Don’t you want to put these up in the living room?”

“Ummm. No, these are going in my room.”

“Oh, so you don’t really want them then?”

“That is not what I said at all.”

“Well, it seems a bit like you might be trying to hide them.”

“I’m not hiding them. I just want to keep them for me. They’re too personal to share, at least for now.”

“I see. Well, just show me where you want me to put them up. I’ll need to go buy a few things in order to actually put them up, but I need to know what I need. Do you want these framed?”

“I didn’t envision them framed, but maybe we should go to a framing place and have a look at some different frames and we can get whatever else we need to hang them.”

“Oh, well I guess that could work too. For now, let’s focus on where exactly you want these.”

We spend the next couple hours taking turns holding up the paintings trying to find the perfect locations for each of them. Then we head out to downtown to find a framing shop. We find a couple different ones, but nothing sparks Peter’s interest so we go with getting the supplies to hang them unframed. We take the supplies back to the apartment for tomorrow. I’m about to leave when Peter asks me to stay.

“At least stay for the night. Everything in the area is probably already booked by now if you didn’t make a reservation anyway. We could go back out for dinner or I can call for takeout or I can have Vinnie come back to make something.”

“Peter, I really don’t think I should. And if everything is booked I can probably just sleep in the car. It’s no big deal, believe me.”

“Lia, I know I did everything all wrong before. Neither of us was in a good place and it got out of hand. I’d like a chance to start over. Please?”

“Peter, I don’t want to get in your way with your dad and your work. I don’t want to cause any more problems.”

“I’m not exactly sure what you’re talking about. My dad and I go through spouts like that all the time. It unfortunately was a larger fight than normal. It didn’t really have anything to do with you. That was just the final straw and I needed a reason to leave and you were the best chance I had and I am so sorry I used you like that.”

“It’s not just your dad, but Hannah… I saw one of those magazines and I don’t want to play games. I need to know what you want from me. I’m starting to wish you’d left me at the bottom of the ocean.”

“You don’t mean that. And you cannot read those things, you should know that. And I just want a chance to get to know you and see you flourish with your art. I was actually hoping I could commission a couple pieces, which is why you may have noticed I paid a little extra.”

“A little? It was a fortune.”

“Well, as you were thinking before, I need some art for the living room and there’s a lot of space to cover and I want some large canvases and I know those don’t come cheap.”

“Well, that is true. As long as you swear that’s the only reason you paid me that amount.”

“Okay, I was hoping you’d stick around a while so I thought that would get you towards a studio to work in. Actually, I had someone do some looking around and we came up with a few possible ideas if you want some help locating a place.”

“Wow, you move fast. I’m not sure if I can keep up. How did you even have time for all of that? You’ve only known about my being an artist for a couple of days.”

“Sorry, I guess it is part of my nature and upbringing. I just want to see good things happen for you because I need to keep you off the bottom of the ocean.”

“And how do I keep you off the bottom of the ocean? It seems vaguely familiar that you might have been there for the same purpose or similar anyway. How are you anyway?”

“I’ve been better and I’m certainly better now that you’re back. When you ran off, I started wondering about my sanity and whether you were ever here. It wasn’t until I found where you lived that I knew for sure you were real. I told you a lot about what was going on in my life and I felt so unimportant when you left, that I didn’t matter.”

“It wasn’t that at all, Peter. I’m so sorry I made you feel that way. Why did you look for me though if that’s how you felt?”

“I needed to know if you were just pretending to care. Once I saw the paintings, I knew you for sure didn’t leave just to hurt me.”

“I never meant to hurt you. I just didn’t want to be a cover up. I was scared. I didn’t want to fall into something just to get hurt again myself.”

“Oh Lia, I’m sorry I didn’t even think about that. It didn’t occur to me for some reason. I don’t even know why not, especially after the mirror thing. We never even talked about you, did we? I’m so sorry. Do you want to talk about it now?”

“No, Peter, I don’t. Honestly, I’m getting tired. I think I’ll take you up on sleeping here, just for the night. I’ll look for another place tomorrow. Is that okay?”

“Of course it’s fine if you stay. Can I get you anything? We haven’t eaten yet. Can I fix you something or anything?”

“I’m not hungry. I just want to go lay down. I’ll scrounge around in the fridge later if I need something later. Good night, Peter.”

“Good night, Lia.”

As soon as I close the door, I remember my clothes are still packed in the car. I check the closet. The only thing there are the pajamas I wore when I was last here. I change into those and am grateful he returned everything else at least. I get into bed and then I start crying. I do my best to be quiet and I let the rain falling from my eyes put me to sleep.

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Going to bed so early wasn’t necessarily the best of ideas. I check my phone and see that it’s not quite 3 am. I’m still not hungry, but I do take advantage of the extra time for a long hot shower. It is nice not having to worry about using up all the hot water. I could be in here for an hour. I kind of wish there was a tub I could soak in. That would be amazing. I’ll have to add it to the list of things I want to look for in an apartment.

I leave the room to head to the kitchen to find a snack to occupy my time. I find some microwaveable popcorn and I debate with myself on whether I want to risk using the microwave or not. I decide to skip the popcorn and just go back to my predictable cup of tea. I take my cup and make myself comfortable on the sofa. I sit and think about all the things I need to get accomplished in the next few days. I nap on and off to get to the sunrise. This time I go out onto the balcony and watch the change the colors in the sky and the water. It’s a spectacular view and I envy Peter with a passion. I’m still gazing out at the water when Peter comes out to join me.

“I don’t think I could ever get tired of looking at this. How do you stand doing anything else?”

“It is pretty nice to look at, but I can think of lovelier things to look at.” I turn my head to see looking at me with a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Please tell me you didn’t just try to pull off a weird pick-up line, because that’s just sad,” I laugh and then he laughs too.

“Sorry, it was right there. I couldn’t pass up the opportunity.”

“I guess I did sort of just walk into, huh?”

“How long have you been up? Your hair is still wet. Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine, there’s just a lot on my mind. There’s so much I need to do, probably starting with trying to find a place to rent.”

“You can just stay here, with me.”

“That’s a nice offer and I may barge in until I can find my own place, but I’m not sure moving in with you is the best idea.”

“I can always charge rent and I swear I wouldn’t go anywhere near your side of the apartment without permission.”

“Peter, I…”

“At least think about it, okay. No pressure, but the offer’s there. It gets kind of lonely around here when it’s just me. I wouldn’t mind the company, trust me.”

“I’ll think about it, but I’m not making promises. I want to see what else this city might have to offer. I don’t want you to hand everything to me. I haven’t done anything to deserve that or what you’ve already given me.”

“You have earned it. You just don’t realize it. Now come on in, I’m sure Vinnie will be here shortly to start breakfast and I want to go over some ideas for the commissions I’m hoping to talk you into.”

“Work; that I can work with. Let’s begin.”

We stand in the living room discussing color palettes, canvas sizes, and what type of art he wants all through breakfast and nearly into lunch. Then Peter convinces me to go see some of the studio options with him and eat out on the beach. We make no final decisions on art or studios today, but there’s a better foundation to work from now. I still can’t believe how fast this is all moving and at all. I ought to still be painting away in my room chasing away the thoughts that have constantly been drowning me, the ones that drove me to the pier, the ones sitting at the back of my brain occasionally poking me to remind me of their existence. I have everything right now and yet…

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The next day, Peter has to go somewhere for a meeting so I’m left to my own devices so I get to work putting up the paintings. I do my best to ignore the fact that I’m in his bedroom. This is work. This is normal. People have decorators arrange bedrooms all the time, this is no different. Okay, I’m lying to myself, this still feels weird. At least Vinnie sticks around to help me to make sure I line everything up properly.

“Thanks for helping me do this, Vinnie. It’s good to have another set of eyes.”

“Of course, I have to admit I was super looking forward to seeing them after hearing Peter talk nonstop about them once he got back. There’s a haunted vibe I’m picking up. It’s a slightly foreboding feeling, but I like it. I wish I could afford your art. Peter might have let slip how much he paid for it.”

“Vinnie, Peter far overpaid. I’m sure we could work something out especially for all the help you’ve given me.”

“Really? I mean that would be amazing. I don’t want to take up all of your time though. I know Peter has lots of plans for you.”

‘Well, I have my own plans and I would be honored to paint something for you. Did you have something particular in mind?”

“I mean I have a couple thoughts, but…”

“But?”

“Well, do you have time to come back to my place? I’d want to show you where I’d want to hang it and we’d have to be sneaky because I want it to be a surprise for my wife.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet Vinnie. Yes, we can totally do that. When do you go?”

“Well, Mr. Row won’t be back until at least dinner. So do you have time after we put these up?”

“Good point, let’s get to it so we can get going. We’re almost done. It’s just this last one.”

We move quickly, each of us excited for our own reasons, but excited just the same. I grab a notebook and Vinnie writes down a quick list of groceries he’ll need to get on our way back. Then we’re off to his place and honestly I’m just as excited to see where he lives as the painting possibility. With Peter around, I haven’t had much chance to look around past the city itself and thanks to Vinnie living on the outskirts I’ll get a little more chance to do so today. I know he has work to do so I won’t keep him long, but it’s nice to get out of the apartment and back to something real.

When we get to his house, I wait in the car while Vinnie goes to check that no one is home and he waves me inside when he finds the coast is clear. I join him inside and am comforted by how normal it feels as opposed to Peter’s. The rooms are smaller and filled with more stuff. It feels cozier than Peter’s wide open spaces. I don’t make that comparison out loud though. Apparently the bedroom placement is popular option, because that’s where Vinnie leads me. There’s no proper head board so the wall behind the bed is simply just a solid color and I can see why he’d want to do something with it.

We talk about a couple ideas, but Vinnie isn’t exactly sure what would be best so I have him take me on a tour of the house so I can get a feel for the style his wife has been going for or at least attempting. It’s a bit of a hodgepodge. I take a few photos as we go for future reference. Then we head to the grocery store and pick up whatever Vinnie needs plus I may have tossed in a few things for myself and then we go back to Peter’s.

“Where have you been?” is the greeting we get when we return.

“Clearly grocery shopping,” I say holding up a couple of the bags I’m helping Vinnie bring in. “I didn’t know I needed to ask you permission to leave.”

“You don’t, I’m sorry. I guess I thought a note might be nice. I thought maybe you ran away again.”

“So dramatic. Plus I certainly wouldn’t runaway with your money sill in my account; that would be terrible for business. You’re back early though. Vinnie didn’t think you’d be back until closer to dinner. Is everything going alright?”

“Yeah, my last meeting just got cancelled. Someone had a sick kid and couldn’t make it.”

“Aww, poor kid. I hope he feels better soon. Being sick is no fun, unless they get unlimited t.v. time and then it might be worth it.”

“Wait, that’s a thing?”

“Oh um, something that I saw in a movie once.”

“Haha, I’m joking. So what did you and Vinnie pick up for dinner?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. He just sent me off for things, never told me what they were for. Actually, I should check on him and see if he needs help with the rest of the groceries.”

“I’m sure he’s fine. Any more thoughts on any of the studios we looked at yesterday?”

“Not really. There was one maybe, but nothing I instantly fell in love with. I do need to find some space to work in soon though. I’m itching to paint.”

“Well, I mean there’s the office in your room you can use for now if you want.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. What office?”

“You haven’t fully explored your section of the apartment yet. How can you not have? It’s an amazing space. I think it’ll be a great spot for painting. Come on, I’ll show you.”

“Okay, it’s not *my* section,” I say as I follow him anyway. He walks into the room without hesitation and for some reason it slightly bothers me, but then I remember that it is his apartment and he’s probably been in here so many times with Hannah that it’s normal. “So where’s this spectacular office hiding?”

“Seriously, you don’t see it? It’s right in front of you.” And he stands in front of a large wall. “No?” He turns around and he pushes the curtains hanging from ceiling to the floor apart a little to reveal little circle handles like you might find on sliding doors. How did I not notice these doors off-set from the rest of the wall? He slides open the doors.

“I’m speechless. This is, I mean, wow.”

“Well, it’s all yours if you decide you want to move in. Well, I mean you can use it for as long as you’re here anyway.”

“That’s generous of you, truly. I’m still not a hundred percent sold on the moving in thing, but I might take you up a short-term lease option, maybe month-to-month until I settle into the area and find the right place?”

“I think we can arrange something along those terms.”

“Excellent, so do I get a key to the apartment or will I need to knock every time?”

“Ah, good call. I think I have a spare one laying around here somewhere if I recall correctly. I’ll hang it up on the fridge where I’d put your car keys.”

“Thanks, I do have a few things I need to bring in from the car. And, Peter?

“Hmm?”

“Thank you, for everything. I owe you.”

I spend the rest of the afternoon and evening moving in the few things that I brought with me and trying to make it feel a little more like me in here. I only stop to eat dinner with Peter. Vinnie fixed us a delicious chicken meal and left for home right after. I think I’m more excited for his project than Peter’s but it’s another one of those things I’ll keep to myself. I’m not even sure Vinnie wants Peter to know I’m planning to paint him something. I should check with him to be sure. I’ll need to go buy more supplies, because these are very large projects and I definitely didn’t bring big enough canvases. Okay, I couldn’t even afford to buy them in the first place, but I can now. I’m so ready for this, but also not.

It’s a lot of pressure having to paint something following what someone wants. The thought of commissions has always freaked me out. A mix between not knowing if the client will like what I’ve done and feeling a little boxed in on creative freedom, but as long as it’s currently paying the bills, how can I refuse?

This office is huge and the window faces the ocean. I don’t really need the balcony anymore, although I did also find a hidden door to the balcony from in here. How did I not see that either? I guess I was too focused on the view to notice anything else. The lighting will be awesome for painting. Even the normal lights seem to be good for this kind of work. It does occur to me though that this is the penthouse so it should cover most of the top floor and I feel like this is still only part of it. Maybe there are more hidden rooms? Wait; there is one other door when you get off the elevator. I’ll ask Peter when I see him next or Vinnie. I’m sure he would know too.

Well, I think I’ve organized as much as I can so I think I’ll head to bed. There’s so much to do tomorrow. I should make a list, in the office. I could get used to this. Oh. I better be careful about that. I need to make sure that I’m constantly looking. I don’t want to get too comfortable. I cannot depend on Peter for everything, besides having my own place will be good for me, although this view, I’m not sure if I can give it up.

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For the first time in a long time, I wake up energized and ready to go. I grab my shopping list and head out to the kitchen to see if Vinnie’s made breakfast or if I’m on my own. Although, I probably should fix my own food. It seems rude to assume Vinnie will make food for me all the time when I’m not paying him, but I also don’t want to get in the way, so much to consider. I’ll just have to ask. Reaching the kitchen, I do find Vinnie, but no Peter. I ask Vinnie about the food thing and he says he doesn’t mind cooking for me at the same time unless I want to do something myself I which case to let him know ahead of time if possible.

I also check in with him to see if he has any more thoughts on the painting he wants me to do, but he’s leaving that up to me also. Then he hands me a plate of food and the key to the apartment. He said that Peter didn’t want me to accidently grab the wrong one. I almost skip asking about the other door I saw, but there’s no point not asking while I have his attention.

“Oh that. That’s just the laundry room and where we keep extra supplies, nothing exciting.”

“A laundry room, that completely makes sense. Do I need a key to get in?”

“Why do you need in?”

“To do my laundry?”

“But Peter has a housekeeper that comes in once a week so you don’t need to do your own laundry.”

“I’d rather do it myself.”

“Well, I’d take it up with Peter.”

I’m not sure why wanting to do my laundry would be a bad thing. In any case, I head out to find some art stores. It takes a while to find some decent ones, but eventually I find everything I need. The canvases are too big for my car so I’m having them delivered tomorrow. I drive around trying to get acquainted with the area and find a small deli to pick up lunch. Then I drive to the pier. It’s so different in the daylight. I pull out a sketchbook and eat my sandwich while I draw a few ideas. I check in with mom to see how things are going and then head back to the apartment in the late afternoon.

Peter’s still out when I get back so I put the supplies that I could fit in the car into the office and then take a shower and change into something more comfortable for painting in and I set to work. I’m planning to do mock-ups on smaller canvases so I can get feedback to make sure I’m going the direction Peter and Vinnie want me to. I start up some music on my phone and start prepping the canvases. I’m so caught up in work that I miss hear Peter getting back. He knocks on my door startling me out of the zone I was in. I go to the door to find Peter there looking a bit disheveled.

“Everything okay, Peter? You kind of look like you were in a fight.”

“Just work stuff. Dinner’s almost ready. Sorry to interrupt you.”

“It’s alright. It’s probably good that you did interrupt or I might have just worked straight through until it as finished.”

“Oh, you’ve gotten started already.”

“Well, just some possible compositions, nothing definite. Just let me clean up and I’ll be right out.” He leaves and I go wash my bushes and change back into my clothes from earlier. Then I join him in the small dining area, “I hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long.”

“Not at all, I needed to change out my business attire too so I’ve only been here a couple minutes myself. So do I get to see what you’re working on?”

“Not yet, it’s not ready for presentation, maybe tomorrow. Oh I almost forgot; I have some large canvases being delivered here tomorrow. I hope that’s alright?”

“Sure. You don’t need my permission unless you’re planning to build bombs or something. We might need permits for that.”

“Oh ha ha. But one more thing; is there a way I can get a key to the laundry room? I don’t want your housekeeper to have to pick up after me. I am capable of doing it myself.”

“Are you sure you want to do it yourself? The housekeeper won’t mind. They’ve always cleaned up the whole apartment.”

“I kind of like doing my own laundry, but if you really don’t want me going in there or messing up the way things are done I won’t.”

“I would prefer to just let the housekeeper take care of it. I pay them to do the whole place; I wouldn’t want to have to change that.”

“I see.”

“Now don’t be like that. It’s just how it is.”

“Well, at least let me pay for my half of that and for Vinnie. Just add it to whatever it is you’re planning to charge for rent.” He just nods and we eat in silence after that. It’s back to work once I finish eating, but for some reason I cannot get myself back into my zone so I go to bed instead. Hopefully, I’ll find my mojo again once the canvases get here and I can a little more. Hopefully, I don’t screw this up.

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In the morning, I am up early enough to see Peter before he’s off to work, whatever it is that he does. I’m about to ask, but he’s up and out the door before I can sit down to join him.

“Did I do something?”

“Not sure. He was in a pensive mood this morning, but it could easily be something at work. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Mmmm. Oh hey, I worked on a possible thought for that painting you wanted. Do you want to see what I have so far?”

“Absolutely, just let me put the leftovers away.” I go to my office and set up the painting I had started yesterday while I wait. He joins me after a few minutes. “So is this it?”

“Yeah, it’s obviously not a finished piece, but I wanted to see what you thought before I did anymore.”

We look at the painting and talk about what he likes and what he doesn’t. We’re so involved that neither of us heard Peter come back in for something or saw him lurking in the doorway listening to our conversation. He’s gone by the time we’ve finished discussing what changes I need to make. As far as we knew, he was never there. Vinnie goes back to his routine and I get back to painting only stopping to let the delivery guys in and then it’s straight back to it. In the afternoon, I switch to Peter’s paintings, but all I can do is stand there and stare at the blank canvas.

To change pace, I go back out to the living room to stare at the wall. I sit on the floor with sketchbook in hand, but the longer I sit there the more irritated I get. Vinnie had to runout somewhere for something so I take the time to rummage around the kitchen to see what’s available to use. I search the internet on my phone for recipes and find one for a triple chocolate cake thing and decide that it should be the perfect distraction. Without thinking about it, I grab ingredients and lose myself in delicious messes. Vinnie gets back while I’m putting the cake into the oven.

“Do you need some help?”

“Oh, Vinnie, you’re back. No, I’ve got it. I think. And I promise to clean up. Actually I was going to start that now while I wait for that to bake. I hope this was okay, I just got so blocked by art and needed something to do and there’s no t.v., which is kind of weird. Sorry, I’m rambling now. Can I help you carry in anything?”

“No, this is all there is. I kind of wish you’d let me know though so I could’ve restocked while I was out.”

“Oh Vinnie, I’m sorry. I’ll go out tomorrow and rebuy everything I used.”

“It’s alright, just next time please.”

“Absolutely. And once it’s done, you should definitely take some home. There’s no way we need this much cake laying around.”

He nods noncommittally and I begin cleaning up the mess while also making more for the glaze to go on top once I get it out of the oven. It feels good to make something, but I just hope it tastes good. Once it’s ready and I pull it out of the oven I’m tired of waiting so I put the glaze on too soon, but hey it’s whatever and I grab a slice. Then I confront my art block by standing in front of the canvas again while savoring every bite. I’m still standing there when I hear Peter come in the front door. I can hear him arguing with Vinnie about something. I move closer to the bedroom door only to hear a crash and then Peter’s bedroom door slam shut. Using my now empty plate as excuse I make my way to the kitchen.

Vinnie is cleaning up something on the floor so I move closer only to see it’s the rest of the cake I made plus the dish it was on. I hurry over to help with the clean-up, but Vinnie just glares at me and I back away unsure of what I’ve done. Feeling scolded I go back to my room and watch the sky change over the ocean and it helps to soothe the emotions seeping into my skin. I call mom to check in and talk to someone I know better than anyone here.

After a while I fall asleep leaning against the window. I awake to the sound of Peter calling that dinner’s ready if I want to eat. Slowly I make way out to join him for dinner and for a moment I’d forgotten about the earlier issues, but as I sit down it comes flooding back. It’s hard to decide whether to bring it up or pretend it never happened. In the end, Peter starts up the conversation.

“I thought I’d let you know that I’ve given Vinnie some time off. He had some things going on at home that he needs to take care of.”

“He does? He didn’t mention anything to me.”

“Well, no offense Lia, but you’re still new here and don’t know him all that well. I doubt he would have told you.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t something I did?”

“No.”

“That’s not exactly convincing. If this is about the cake I made then you should be upset with me. Vinnie didn’t know and I should have asked him or you…”

“Lia, it’s not about the cake. Can we just eat please?”

“Okay. I’m sorry, Peter. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s just been stressful with work and dad and Hannah.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really, Lia.”

“Alright, I’ll stop asking questions, I just want you to know I’m here for you.”

“I know. I’m sorry for getting angry.” The food gets cold as we both sit there mostly just pushing things around on the plates. Not hungry anymore, I grab the dishes to take to the kitchen when Peter reaches out to touch my arm, “Lia, I’m sorry about the cake. It was just a casualty and truthfully had nothing to do with why I was upset. How about we go out and get a shake or something to make up for it? There is an idea I want to run by you.”

Nodding, I finish cleaning up and then change into something more appropriate for going out in public. We end up at some fancy restaurant and Peter being who he is ends up getting a private seating location where we won’t be disturbed. I’m not sure I could ever get used to getting treated like this. Peter orders us some fancy dessert I cannot pronounce and some wine that supposedly pairs well with the dessert. I sip tentatively at the wine and take small bites that seem more ladylike than how I would normally eat. We may be eating in private, but it still feels inappropriate to eat like a pig. We’re almost finished when Peter brings up his brilliant thought,

“So I’ve been thinking about going on a trip to get some fresh perspective on things and was thinking that maybe you’d like to go with me.”

“I mean I wouldn’t mind travelling, but I don’t know about going with you. Wouldn’t you prefer to get some time alone? I’m not sure my going with you will allow you to get that fresh perspective.”

“Well, I didn’t want to abandon you when you just got here.”

“I’d be alright. It would give me a chance to get some progress done on your paintings anyway, unless you don’t trust me in your apartment by myself for that long?”

“No, nothing like that,” he laughs, “I just wanted to give you the chance to see some new things too and I could use some company. I’m not too fond of going on trips alone. I get lonely.”

“Where are you planning to go?”

“Actually, I have no idea. I thought about just jumping on the first plane we saw and going wherever it takes us.”

“Even if it’s Antarctica?”

“Even there, although that might be bit too cold for my tastes, but I like leaving things up to destiny, that’s how I found you.”

“Can I think about it, even just overnight?”

“Of course, of course, but I would really love to have you go with me. I think it would be a great way to get to know each other.”

“Because moving in with each other after knowing each other for like two days isn’t good for that,” and it’s my turn to laugh, but Peter doesn’t; he gets serious.

“I need to get out of that apartment. It’s suffocating me. That’s why I wanted you to make more art for me. To change how it feels. I need you, Lia.” I hesitate before replying,

“Okay Peter, I’ll go.”

We head back to the apartment after that and go to our separate rooms to pack. After I’ve finished packing, I go into the office and hide Vinnie’s painting. I’m not sure why I do; it just feels like I need to. Then I turn to the blank canvas and I paint. It’s a crude and vicious session, but when I’ve finished I feel better. I step back to see what I’ve painted, but it’s a mess of colors. No true rhyme or reason, but it feels right. Maybe not right for Peter, but for me. I leave it sitting on the easel to dry.

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The next morning we head to the airport fairly early. He wasn’t kidding about just hopping on a random plane apparently. We spend a few moments looking at the flight board when he asks me if I have a passport. Of course I don’t. He seems mildly disappointed, but only says that we need to get me one. Then he chooses a flight leaving in an hour to New York. I let him take care of tickets and baggage since this was completely his idea and then we make our way through security. We make it through just barely in time to the gate and I’m trying not to be overly stressed about it.

Thankfully it’s not the biggest plane so there’s no actual first class, but we still end up in some of the most expensive seats with me in a window seat which I need. I’ve only flown once before and I wasn’t the most pleasant of experiences so having the window to put my head against during take-off is a must. It also gives me the chance to get some more photos of clouds and the ground. They’re good for art inspiration and just cool to look a. It always amazes me how many different kinds clouds there are, from the top or bottom.

We land at JFK and slowly make our way out of the airport and to Peter’s place somewhere in Manhattan. It’s so large and crowded that I could easily get lost walking half a block so despite better judgement I hold Peter’s hand the whole time so we don’t accidently get separated. While his place isn’t the penthouse of the building, it’s still pretty near the top and takes up nearly the entire floor. It would be rude not to say that the view is spectacular, at least on the two sides that aren’t somewhat blocked by other buildings. Once our bags are delivered we change from flight wear to something slightly more fitting to the New York atmosphere. Off course that’s easier for Peter with his expensive wardrobe versus my Midwestern one. He looks at my outfit choice with slight disapproval, but never actually says anything. Then we hit the town.

We visit a couple more touristy sites like the Empire State building and Central park and then Peter pulls me onto the shopping district. Assuming he has some suits he needs I follow along only to realize that we’re not here for him. A salesperson drags me to a room full of mirrors and another person starts taking my measurements. I’m somewhere in-between stunned and embarrassed.

“Peter, what is going on?”

“I thought maybe you could use a couple extra outfits for dinners out or with my parents.”

“Wait, are you embarrassed by me?”

“No, nothing like that; I just want to protect you from my father’s crude remarks.”

“I’m not sure clothes are exactly going to solve those problems.”

“Maybe not, but worth a shot.”

“Well, arguing with you isn’t going to get me anywhere. How much is this costing me?”

“It’s all on me, my treat.”

It makes me slightly uncomfortable, but I can only hope that’ll make things easier for him with his dad; although I’m not sure why it matters. So I stand there and let strangers judge me and I move my thoughts to other places, other people. Once the fitting is over we grab some take-out and head back to the apartment to eat. We talk about some of the things we saw today and what sights I’d like to see while we’re here. Then we go our separate directions for bed.

A package arrives early the next morning addressed to me. I open it to find half a dozen outfits that have been perfectly tailored to fit me. I try them on and while they’re comfortable I’m not exactly sure they’re me. They feel foreign. However, despite how weird I feel I put the least uncomfortable outfit of and join Peter for another outing. We visit more places including a couple art galleries. For the next two weeks, it’s how we spend our days: sightseeing, some shopping, and plenty of food. We never talk about anything serious and I’m not sure why. I know he wanted to clear his mind, but I didn’t realize that meant avoiding it completely.

Once we board the plane back to Florida it feels like something shifted along the way. I cannot quite place my finger on it. It seems like Peter and I might be closer together, but it still seems like we’re also miles apart. I have no idea how he feels. Are we friends, more than friends? It’s hard to tell with him. I have no idea what to expect once we’re home.

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As we ride up the elevator to the apartment, Peter seems to be nervous. Perhaps he’s afraid of his parents showing up or something after disappearing for such a long period of time. We get off the elevator and enter the apartment. At first, everything appears to be normal. It isn’t until I enter my room that I notice what’s changed. There’s a new bed and the walls have been painted. Then I walk to the closet to find everything I’d left behind when we went on the trip gone. Instead I find a closet full of expensive clothes, most of which I probably would never have picked for myself. It resembles Hannah’s closet when I had spent that first night here. Then I check the office, but it seems the same. It isn’t until I’m headed back out the room that I notice the panel by the door.

“Peter, what on earth is all this?”

“I did say I thought I needed to freshen things up and create a new atmosphere.”

“Except that my closet is now full of all the fancy crap Hannah would wear. Are you just trying to make me into Hannah? And what about the panels on either side of the door, what are they?”

“Remember at my parents’ place we went up to my rooms there and I had to use my fingerprint to open the door? Well, I thought you might like some privacy so I installed these, but these are voice activated.”

“Well, I guess that might be nice. It’s a lot to get used to I suppose. You better show me how to set it up I guess.”

As he shows me how to set up the voice activation part I start to wonder about if this is a bit too much, but then think that I’m probably just overthinking. He is part of the tech royal family, this is probably pretty standard. After everything is all set up I realize we haven’t eaten.

“Hey, is Vinnie coming in today or shall we go out for something? I’m famished. ”

“I thought we might meet my mom at one of her favorite places, if that’s alright?”

“It’ll be nice to see her again. At least there’s one person in your life that doesn’t hate me.”

“Dad doesn’t hate you. He just doesn’t know you, but I’d like to change that, but let’s finish winning Mom over completely first.”

“Okay, well I better start trying to get ready, because it’s going to take a while to sift through all the new clothes. I’ll try not to take too long though.”

Trying to sort through the closet, I get lost in the sheen and sequins that I almost can’t tell anything apart after a couple minutes. I sort through until I find something that’s not glossy in the slightest and I quickly change. I don’t want to hold up Peter or his mom. Peter’s waiting for me and we leave shortly after I walk out of my room. We’re just about to get on the elevator when Peter says he’s forgotten something. He goes back into the apartment and is back out in 5 minutes and then we’re off to meet his mom.

We meet up with her at a beachside café. She seems happy to see me, but maybe it’s just that she’s happy to see Peter. We get a table outside to enjoy the summer breeze. The smell of the salt in the ocean calms me. After a round of drink s I feel even more relaxed and can enjoy the mindless conversation. With it just being his mom there’s no business expectations or high-class rules. It’s easier to be myself.\* Unfortunately, because we’re eating at an outdoor table, the seagulls keep circling trying to snatch bites of our food. For the most part they’re unsuccessful. It definitely made for an amusing meal.

After an hour or so, we went our separate ways. We decided to do a bit of shopping on the way back, I picked up a few art things wile Peter needed a new laptop.