

Chapter one

My name is Zoe. And throughout the life I've already lived, I learned one thing; you choose your destiny. Whatever happens to you, whatever falls to your knees only matters a little. The true point of life is how you deal with things, how you manipulate your way into growing old and happy, how you manage to break every wall gets thrown in front of you. It doesn't matter how many times you fall down, but what you did after. Did you try and get up? Did you fight the pain that drummed on your knees and weakened your whole body, or did you accept fate and cut your own legs off?

Life is what you make of it.

You start punching yourself after one hit? Life will keep them coming. That's how it works, fair or not.

Please, cry me a river if you'd like. But do me a favor and look around you before doing it. Is it truly so dark, or do you ignore the switch under your palm? Are there really voices coming from the corner of the room, or does it just echo?

Life gives you plenty of lessons. You only need to learn how to listen.

For what is worth, though, I wasn't such a great student either. Too young, too inexperienced. Fighting weaponless against monsters.

Depression is an evil sickness. It can appear at a young age, but only make you deeply realize its existence when it is already too late. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines depression as a serious medical condition in which a person feels very sad, *hopeless*, unimportant and often is unable to live in a normal way. Another dictionary describes it as a state of unhappiness.

I would describe it as a deadly condition of nothingness; a chronic illness so sneaky and calculating, it can actually bring the most atheist person in our planet to drop on their knees and pray to every God.

I never prayed though; I never had the need to. Because I wasn't aware that what I had was a legit illness and not just something that will *go away with time*. I cannot quite pinpoint the date depression crept up outside my door ready though uninvited, but one thing is sure; I haven't felt nothingness so vividly in my life since the moment it knocked its small, vicious hands on my little heart's door.

One guess of when I became ill would be March 5th, the year of my ninth birthday. All I remember is sitting in the middle of my couch in my old home a few hours before the clock hit midnight putting an end to my miserable birthday, that I so desperately needed. My small hands were holding my mother's scarf and a red rose my father gave me in the

beginning of the day, my tiny eyes filled with tears as my grandma was upstairs with my brother, trying to calm him down.

I don't remember the reason they died. I hardly believe they actually told me. They just never came home from driving to the mall to get my gift. Maybe they did tell me how they passed away, but I doubt my juvenile brain could withhold that information. I asked many times after that dreadful day, but no-one gave me an answer. My grandma, who had become my brother's and my legal guardian, just cried whenever either of us began to bring up the subject of our parents. My aunt Maria, my mother's sister, smiled through tears and told us to just have them in our hearts and that it didn't matter how they died.

But of course it mattered to me. How could I keep them in my mind and heart when I thought they didn't want to be in them? Little-old-me had no direct picture of what was going on; to me all of what happened was my fault. At the end of the day, it was my stupid gift they went to buy. It was my stupid birthday the stupid gift was for. No-one told me otherwise. They didn't know I took the blame of course, but they never cared to find out either.

I believe that is when I started my journey on feeling nothing. It started off slow. At first the depression cut my need to feed myself. Whatever my grandma cooked, I didn't like. Whatever she put in front of me, whether it was ice cream or cereal, vegetables or pizza, something I liked or something I hated, I pushed the plate away and said I was not hungry. Even when we got to the part where my sweet, old grandma had to force-feed me herself, I vomited the food after I got up from the table.

Then I stopped drinking water, which didn't last long but it happened. I stopped bathing and showering, I stopped brushing my hair

and putting my dirty clothes to the laundry. I never smiled and my whole body got so heavy with emotion, I couldn't hold it up for too long. Even my eyes got heavy; so I slept. For hours. Even days sometimes.

That's how depression works. It fills you with emotion, the bad kind, and then it empties you. It finds a small hole, a little passageway, a chance to punch you in the face and it empties you.

Though, it happens only if you give it a chance. If you're not strong enough to fight for yourself, you'll lose. If the voices get too loud, if the darkness seems so much bigger than you, that's not your fault. But get up, fight through the pain and find the need to help yourself. Because if you don't want you to find help, then no-one else will. Awful, yet real.

Life isn't a great film or a book with an ending that's expected. Life's scary and sudden and there isn't any rulebook for it. You just have to do it before it's given a chance to start getting messed up. And it will; but how it turns out is on you.

I gave it more than a good chance to destroy me.

Chapter two

As the years went by, I forgot the reason I found myself guilty of their death. I just had trust in my younger self's thought process and took her word for it; she said it was my fault so it is.

After my parent's death, my brother and I went to live with my grandma at the outskirts of town. She had a small home that normally could house only two people. So, for the next seven years my brother and I stayed at the same room, a tiny room that could fit only one bed and a desk. Fortunately, we were not in great need of the desk, therefore it got replaced by another pint-sized bed that I had the luxury of sleeping in. The room was cramped, to say the least but neither I nor my brother ever complained. We never dared to. Even if we wanted to, when we got face to face with our really old grandma, seeing her trying to raise

us, our mouth magically closed shut. It was sad watching her hold on to life for us.

Aunt Maria, my mother's sister and my grandma's youngest daughter, started visiting more and more during the last two years of our stay at that house. She cooked for us, she cleaned the house, and with her husband Rick behaved like they were our parents.

Rick was a wonderful man. He really loved my aunt and everyone could see it. Even during what I believe was one of the worst times in my aunt's life, Rick managed to keep her smiling at most times. And when she told him she wanted to move to England for those last two years, Rick joined her with no second thought, leaving his entire personal and work life back in New York in half a heartbeat. He took me and my brother in, in no time, reaching out in the most delicate but passionate way, trying to be there for us without making us feel uncomfortable.

Rick was the only person I talked to. After my ninth birthday, my voice disappeared. I didn't do it on purpose, I swear. I just didn't have the need or power to speak. I didn't utter a word for two years. At school I had no friends and the teachers would scream at me every day for not talking when I was told to. I could barely even raise my look to stare at them while they were calling me names for *not respecting them*.

I didn't care though. Not one bit.

And so, the days passed. For the following seven years, I spoke to nobody but Rick, I didn't smile, I didn't eat regularly. My brother didn't speak to me either. He was always angry. Angry at *Maria*, as he had grown to call our aunt only by her name. Angry at Rick for overstepping the line, angry at his teachers, his friends. Later on and his girlfriends and boyfriends.

But mostly, he would be angry at me.

He believed I was the reason our parents died, too. I already knew it from that day. The look on his face couldn't convince me otherwise. Though he told me as well. He couldn't keep it in.

On my sweet sixteen, while aunt Maria and Rick were singing happy birthday as I sat in between their bodies, silently crying, my brother had been absent. He only came when they were done. He arrived just in time to wish me 'Happy birthday'.

He didn't. Rick and aunt Maria looked at him. His face had turned red from anger, his fingers were slowly moving into fists.

'Dylan, wish your sister a happy birthday.' My aunt's sweet voice said. My brother didn't look at her, he only looked at me.

'No.' He answered. I felt my aunt's body stiffen next to me. She knew what would follow. She didn't warn me though, neither did she make a move to conceal me from what my brother would spit right to my face, to spare me from the pain that followed me years after that. Aunt Maria stayed still. Although, maybe I deserved it.

'Why not, Dylan?' Rick's tone was harsh, threatening. I felt bad for Dylan then. Now I wish Rick had been scarier.

'Because it's her fault my parents died.' *My* parents, he had said. I don't remember what happened next. I just know that Rick started yelling, aunt Maria started crying and I blew the candles that stood short on my pathetic birthday cake, making a wish; I wished to be dead by the time my next birthday came around.

The following week after that incident was even more hectic. One day in particular I remember vividly. I was coming back from school without my brother; I believe he was staying at one of his *friends'* and

didn't have the curtesy to come pick me up. When I got in the house, the temperature was cold, and the atmosphere was moisty. I could hear nothing more than the ancient clock my grandma had up on the wall ticking. I called her name; nobody answered.

My heart clenched when I stepped foot in her bedroom. She was on her bed, laying. Her eyes open, a little less blue than they normally were. Her lips parted but no breath was passing in and out through them. I stayed there until my brother came. I sat next to her; I didn't know what else to do. Aunt Maria and Rick were in New York for some emergency business meeting or something, I don't care enough to remember.

I stayed on that chair for days; three to be exact. Only three, 'cause that is how long it took for Aunt Maria and Rick to come to England, have grandma's funeral, gather our stuff and move altogether in New York. Dylan stayed behind. Being nineteen at the time, nobody could force him to do otherwise.

That was the second slap life gave me. I knew grandma was not young but she was the woman that attempted to raise me for seven years after her own daughter passed away. She stood like a rock and stayed alive more than her body could handle, only for us. Losing her was not easy, and it scarred another wound in my already damaged heart.

We were all settled in within a fortnight and for the first time in years, I had my own bedroom with an additional gift; a view of the big city. New York is a wonderful place to live, I later discovered. They say it is one of the most beautiful places you will ever visit, the city that never sleeps. It is too bad I never saw it, for real. I was rather busy dealing with my exceptionally mind-clouding issues to enjoy the city as much as I should have. It is a pity, of course, but I don't think I was

able to control it. All I felt while in New York was misery, and every day that passed I wished to leave. And I did, eventually.

Rick and aunt Maria treated me like I was a piece of glass for the six-month period that followed. But even with the delicate approach these two had on me, I didn't handle New York very well. It made me anxious, with the skyscrapers and everyone walking around so fast. The change of schools didn't matter to me due to the fact that I had no friends or any sort of connection with no-one back in England, so nothing had changed. The only problem I faced with school was their educational system that confused me quite a lot.

Fortunately, I had to deal with that for only a few months, until I finished Junior year of high school. Then I was homeschooled for half of senior year, so I didn't get to experience their proper school life at first. Not that it mattered to me.

Aunt Maria emptied her schedule so she would be able to give me proper education, as she called it. But I am no idiot. The only reason she did it was because I was not meant to do regular school; my illness wouldn't allow it.

At first, the learning-from-home version of school didn't bother me, it actually helped me wake up from the slumber of numbness and actually learn a large amount of stuff. For a little while, I felt that I was a human being again. I consumed knowledge like a normal teenager, I had homework, a standard schedule. Until I got used to it.

February creeped in and aunt's work suddenly overflowed her weeks. She had meetings after meetings, spending hours on hours in front of her computer and Rick behaved the same. Having them both overworking, I was preparing to go back to regular, old school in no time.

I couldn't believe it at the beginning. I had grown to like my situation at home so much that I couldn't even imagine going back to regular school. That's when I had my first anxiety attack. I remember it vividly. My stomach had gone heavy, my lungs were too small for the air that I needed and my chest was too tired to expand as much as I desired it to. Dizziness, low rumbling in my ear, the voices of my aunt and Rick drumming intensely even though they were barely whispering. I felt small in a world of monsters and my mind became more and more busy with scenarios that were unworldly, scenarios that only brought the worst in my life.

And that went on from the moment I opened my eyes in the morning, till the moment I stepped foot out of that hideous building.

Mornings became difficult once again, my eyes forcefully trying to stay close and the crippling anxiety lingering in my heart, reminding me of my illness. First school periods were missed, and seconds, and thirds. School work was not being done and by the end of the year I had failed all of my classes.

Sometimes bad things happen so we can experience good things. Everything happens for a reason, the optimists say. But go ahead and say that to someone who suffers from depression. I wanted to die every day for as long as I lived with my grandma, and that didn't stop when I moved to New York. I kept falling into a pit of darkness and I didn't know whether I would ever survive the fall or not; and neither did I want to.

Everything seemed so pointless, so unnecessary. Why should I keep going? What happens if I want to give up?

Days went by wondering whether putting up a fight is worth it. Minutes felt like hours and when I wasn't sleeping, I'd just look into the void and do nothing. I wouldn't speak.

I wouldn't think.

Sometimes, I'd hold my breath until my lungs ached, until my heart jumped against my breastbone, until my teeth scarred my lips and the world started spinning. And then I'd let go. And I'd be happy for the next few seconds.

And then I'd start again. For however long it took me to fall asleep hoping to never wake up again.

Chapter three

Somehow, I reached the first day of school for the second time in my life.

It was not entertaining; it was not exciting. I absolutely did not stay up late the previous night wondering if there would be any hot students or teachers, or worrying about what combination of clothing would fit better for such important day. Call me pessimistic but in my head, that would be another wasted year and some giddy, fake excitement the night before would change nothing.

Aunt Maria, on the other hand, was exhilarated that I got a second chance at life; that's what she thought that was. I tried seeing it from her perspective, tried convincing myself that going back to school to finish a class I've already done before was something to be grateful for; something to wake up every morning. An opportunity given to me in

order to get my life together. It turned out to be something a little bit more destructive (or disturbing one might say) than that. The first few days seemed hopeful, though and surprisingly the very first day was, in fact, one of the most memorable days of my life.

I had gone to school earlier than usual, aunt Maria having no control over her joyous emotions. The level of eagerness that she had for me to go to school was so much that she woke up an hour before she needed to, something very unusual for my aunt to do since she moved to New York. Back in the day, before she even met Rick, she and her friends used to stay up late after having a successful meeting, or a random sort of celebration like a dog's birthday or something.

No one could claim that aunt Maria was ever on time for anything, actually. But that day was special. She even decided to drive me herself to school instead of just ordering me a cab or making Howard, the sweet old man that my aunt had hired to take her wherever she needed, drive me to school. When we arrived, she looked at me and she sparkled. Her blue eyes eased me every time that I crossed them with mine. And I could see it; I could actually see that they carried so much love for me and had so many stories to tell. She gave me a kiss on the cheek and wished me good luck.

Since I was almost an hour early I was not expecting to see anyone there. I walked inside and greeted some teachers that quickly passed me by through the hallways, all with a fake smile on their faces like they were actually happy to see me. I felt welcomed and a bit relieved, even though half of the teachers I greeted did not even remember who I was. Walking through the empty halls and classrooms of the school, remembering my previous year there and reminiscing on the times I used to cry myself through the day, I decided to sit on the bleachers and

read my book just to savor the last moment of peace and quiet I'd have before having to attend the first class of my second year as a senior.

'Hey, do you maybe have a lighter?'

That was the first thing she ever said to me. I was too focused on the book I had on my lap—a habit I have grown to adore, burying my face in the pages of any literary book, trying to escape my reality—to give her, from the start, the attention that I so desperately wanted to give only a few days later. It took me a couple of seconds too much to divert my gaze from the words of the book to her blue eyes.

I hadn't heard what she said; only the sound of her voice managed to break through the wall of my focus. So, with my voice shaking and a dry mouth, I asked her;

'Excuse me?' She laughed and I was in heaven. My cheeks got instantly heated and a rose colored color quickly coated them. She stood tall in front of me, with a confidence that almost took my breath away. It was cloudy that day and it looked as if it was going to start pouring rain any second, but she was in shorts and a tank top. She was not carrying a bag or anything to put her books in, her hair was messy and I could not help but notice her blond roots that differed from the rest of her black hair. She smelled of weed mixed with cheap perfume and the skin under her eyes was shadowed, almost purple.

But the color of her them popped out the most. They were the most vibrant blue I have ever seen in my entire life making me feel all sort of things that I could not explain and certainly had not felt before.

'I asked you whether you have a lighter or not.' I didn't have a lighter with me. Why would I? I didn't smoke, I didn't have friends that smoked and candles made me feel dizzy. So there was not one reason that could make me carry a lighter with me, yet I cursed myself for not

thinking to put one in my bag. She waited for my response and I felt like an idiot under her stare. She had asked me a simple ‘yes or no’ question and still I took several seconds to answer. Not because I couldn’t, but because I didn’t want to.

Because if I answered, she would say a simple ‘alright’ and then leave. And I didn’t quite like that scenario.

‘Uh...no, sorry. I don’t carry one with me.’ I managed to voice. She let out an exasperated sigh and placed the unlit cigarette she held between her fingers, right in the middle of her slightly parted lips that softly wrapped around it. She sat next to me, after roughly shoving her hands on each of her pockets, and in her grip appeared a small black lighter.

The wind was becoming more and more forceful. Both of our hair was fighting against it, getting in the way of clearly looking each other. Yet through the mess that was caused by the cold air, I noticed her winking at me.

‘I guess I should have looked in my pockets.’ We laughed; the atmosphere filled with something different; something unique. ‘My name’s Nova.’

I smiled; a teeth-showing smile. That was when I discovered I had dimples. That day was the first time I smiled in nine years and it felt... terrifyingly beautiful. ‘Zoe.’

Chapter four

‘I like your name.’ She had said. ‘It has a beautiful meaning.’ I was startled when I heard her claim that. My name has always been an uninteresting part of myself, along with everything else of me. I didn’t care for it; not the way she did.

After lighting her cigarette and taking a hit here and there, Nova got up and left with a simple yet disappointing, *‘Later!’*. Oh, how right Elio was. That one, lonely word sounds so dismissive, so tasteless. It really brought me down. But one could say it was partially my fault; what if we had met only a few minutes before her arrival? Is it bad that I wanted her to add another word next to that *‘Later!’* she so easily spit? Maybe that word could have been ‘talk’; it would be much more appreciated to hear her call, ‘Talk later!’. Or maybe that word could’ve been *‘beautiful’*.

‘Later, *beautiful!*. Yes, much better.

I saw Nova in all my classes. Either it was advanced math, social studies, even my goddamn elective; she was there. Which made everything a hundred times harder for me. Whatever magic she had put on me when I looked at her, it wouldn’t allow me to pay attention to anything but her messy black hair, or her slender fingers tapping the wooden surface of her desk.

The teachers asked me questions and I didn’t have any answer on the tip of my tongue. They would dismissively wave their hand and move on to another student after saying something about being more careful. What *really* annoyed me, though, was how dismissive Nova was. She didn’t raise her eyes from her notebooks once, didn’t meet my longing stare. Not even when the teachers called my name did she dare to casually glide her eyes over the other students, land on mine and linger for a second. It was safe to say, I was disappointed.

During lunch periods, I sat outside in a park-like area near the classes. Under a big tree, I was able to clear my mind and forget all about her. At the end of the day, I knew nothing of who she was. One of my ears was occupied with the earbud that rested in it, silently providing me with my favorite song, keeping my body and mind busy and at last, calm.

‘Life.’ Her voice came after the sound of books and a bag dropping next to me. My head shot up, the sun next to her head blinding me. *Worth it*, I thought. But I didn’t get what she meant by what she said. It seemed as if she enjoyed talking as less as possible; confusing yet luring you in, like a riddle.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Your beautiful name.’ She sat in front of me, the tip of our knees barely touching. ‘It means ‘life’ in Greek.’ Nova smiled while taking out a pack of cigarettes and her black lighter.

‘You know Greek?’

‘My dad is Greek, so I know some words here and there.’ She said through partly shut lips, the only thing that separated them being the cigarette which she lit after she was done speaking. I was so confused; I didn’t know what to say next. Everything seemed a bit too much for me. Her presence after a whole day of not paying me the slightest attention, the smell of the cigarette burning and the gray smoke that heavily clouded the atmosphere, her piercing blue eyes that didn’t want to quit staring at me. All that with the overwhelming feeling of repeating twelfth grade for a second time just took my breath away in a much different way than that morning.

Her eyes fell concerned on my face; I figured the discomfort fogged my face quite vividly in order for her to notice. She took a big hit of her cigarette and after the smoke had littered her lungs and escaped her lips, she asked me;

‘Are you okay? You seem troubled.’

I wasn’t used to it. I was not used to having someone’s eyes so intensely on me *and liking it*. I wasn’t used to socializing, as much as you can call that socializing. I was not used to conversations, to cloudy days at school, to light gray smoke flying in front of me, to caring too much about what my next answer would be. I couldn’t do normal life like that. I was scared. I hadn’t talked to anyone besides, what was left of, my family in years, my walls had gone so far up it was hard for me to accept *anyone’s* simple ‘good morning’ let alone sit there and have a full conversation. An irrational fear took over me, and I panicked.

Her eyes were blurred with worry, yet she seemed to remain calm. My body was stiff, my palms sweaty, legs slightly trembling. I really felt like I was going to explode in any second.

But then, Nova's palm landed softly on my knee. Her skin was warm, so warm I stopped wondering why she didn't have more layers of clothes on.

'Are you okay?' And suddenly, I was.

Days moved quickly, and I could barely keep up with them. I had grown into the habit of attempting to study right after I returned to the three-bedroom apartment I was forced into calling home, since then was the only time it was dead silent. Aunt Maria and Rick usually returned from their work, whatever that was, at seven giving me at least a couple of hours of complete nothingness in the house.

It had been almost three weeks since the first day of school; students were used to their every-day schedule by then, the weather had gone a bit colder and life had seemed to find its rhythm in the city of New York.

Day by day, homework became less hard, less complicated. Teachers seemed to be satisfied with my work progress and instead of dismissive hand gestures, they gave me encouraging, warm smiles. And right after, my eyes would search the cause of all my successes, seeing her already staring at me with her round smile and thumbs up, silently congratulating me.

Nova was very... intense, one might say. Once she realized I was having a difficult time that first day of school, without asking any more questions she became determined to help me with whatever troubled me. Although, apart from being intense and willing to help, she was a

very discreet person. So that, with the fact that I wasn't up to opening up to a complete stranger yet, made it exceptionally hard for her to give me some sort of aid in any way.

But she gave it a shot. She started by helping me understand what the teachers was saying, how to be present when they were talking and take notes when necessary. She gave me small, yet *so* useful, tips on writing less but not deficient, use euphonic vocabulary without making my essay look like it got out of Webster. She encouraged me to raise my hand when I knew the answer to a question and over-all saved me from going downhill at school from the first weeks.

Nova also kept me company during lunch, before and after classes, on the way to school and while I went home from it. She taught me how to drive. Sometimes, after school, she would stay over at my house. She said she wanted to make sure I ate. A few days later, she would start staying after we ate. It wasn't her fault, neither was mine. We had just grown so much comfortable with each other that time passed so fluidly, we didn't even notice it.

One day, she suggested we watch movies. So we did.

The next, we did the same thing. Another movie; *The Notebook*. The day after we watched *Finding Nemo*. The day after that, *The Titanic*.

It took us a week to make it into a routine. The last school bell of the day would ring and I would pack up my things as quickly as I could, shoving papers, books, my pens and pencils all messily together in my bag just to make sure I would make it out of class before Nova got to the gate. I never did, though. She would always stand there smiling and waiting for me.

Then we'd walk to my aunt's apartment, talking about how boring the last period was without each other. When we arrived and got comfortable, Nova and I would take turns to cook if Gloria, the woman who cleaned the place, hadn't already made something for us. We'd take our time eating, mostly because the conversation we started slowed us down. And then, we fired up a movie, each day a different genre, and nuzzled up underneath two big, fluffy blankets.

I got used to having Nova in my life. She felt like home.

I should've known not to smile when she looked at me. I should've known not to get close. Not to seek out *accidental* touches, or to answer her calls in the middle of the night because I missed her voice. I should've known.

But love makes you want to forget things, like the past, for example. It was as if Nova's attention brushed away any bad scar that was engraved in my heart. She didn't make the pain go away; she made it seem like it never happened. I had all of her attention.

But then I didn't.

Chapter five

Life is unpredictable and that makes it so thrilling. You never know what will happen, who will come to your life unexpectedly, who will leave from your life without a warning. And you just have to learn how to go with it. Some people can handle it, others can't. Nova, couldn't. As strong as she showed to be, I knew there was a part inside of her that broke every time someone left her.

But she never showed it directly and she didn't unwind until it was too late for me to do something about it.

By the time October rolled in, Nova knew every scrawny detail of my life before New York. It was my mother's birthday; I was at my weakest point and Nova could see right through me. It only took her to ask me a question as simple as 'Are you okay?' to get me spilling all of the scarring moments that made my past. After opening up that way to

her, Nova and I were so intimate with each other I thought there wasn't any other level of closeness we could reach. We took care of one another as if we were made out of glass.

For her, it was a bit different. It happened on a chilly Saturday morning; the sky was covered in light grey clouds, the atmosphere was heavy. Nova took us to a strange place far away from the suffocating busyness of the city. She drove for a good hour, maybe even more, before we arrived at our destination. She parked the car and, without a word, got out of it.

She had been silent for however long it took us to get to that cliff. I tried sparking up a conversation but all I got were low hums. It was awkward and uncomfortable. I wasn't used to her being so...empty.

We sat near the end of the cliff, dangling our feet on the air like we were not afraid to jump, ending our story there. It felt sort of liberating and scary at the same time; to realize how much power you have over yourself and that, at any given moment, you can end things quicker than you can think about it. But we did not.

'My mother called me today.' Nova's voice ripped the silence in two. I am not going to hide the fact that her lack of communication had awoken an unfamiliar, sharp feeling that I couldn't shake off. Bitterness in all its glory became more and more intense for every second she kept her mouth closed.

But then I realized what she had said.

Her mother called her.

And I knew nothing about that woman. Or anything about her father. Or any potential siblings. Basically, I knew nothing. And as I became more aware about it, it stung even more.

'And?' I asked sweetly.

‘That’s it.’ Dry. Cold. Distant. I guessed that her mother was the reason behind Nova’s new behavior. ‘She just asked what I was doing. I said I’m doing fine and then we hung up.’

Zero emotion displayed on her face. It was like a blank canvas. Empty.

I stared at her for a few moments, waiting to see if she’s going to speak more about it, but she didn’t. She didn’t even look at me, only the view that laid in front of us. My heart ached and I couldn’t make that horrible feeling of seeing her like this go away. I wanted to suck off every ounce of sadness or misery that Nova stored in her heart, break every piece of despair that wrapped around her throat and clouded her mind, preventing her from talking to me.

I wanted her to talk to me.

And she did. Though I was not ready to listen.

Nova talked to me about her family. About her little sister Sarah, a sweet little girl that meant everything to her. Sarah had silky, blonde hair and perfect blue eyes matching her sister’s. Nova was eight years old at her little sister’s fourth birthday party for which her one wish was to go play in the park where she’d seen other children her age run around happily.

Though Sarah’s and Nova’s parents were very strict and had no interest of ever letting little Sarah go play at the park. Nova was devastated having to listen to her sister cry on her birthday. So she managed to convince her parents to walk all together to the park and let the girls play until it was time for lunch. With rough and edgy faces, Nova’s parents agreed on one condition; Nova had to make sure Sarah played safely.

And Nova did. She didn't take her eyes off of her sister. Not even when she fell down on her head while running away from Nova who was playfully chasing her. Sarah, young as she was, didn't have the mind to look forward. She was having too much fun trying to get away; her stare was glued on her lovely sister behind her.

Sarah stepped on her shoelaces and tripped, hitting her small head on a rock. Her parents, who watched the whole thing unravel before their eyes, ran to young Sarah screaming, but it was too late. When they returned home from the hospital, Nova's dad broke down crying. He yelled at her and her mother. Nova got kicked out of her own house at the age of eight.

I listened to the story with eyes full of tears, my breath caught in my throat and my mind empty of words to say.

'I went to my uncle's. He was a drunk, but he let me stay with him. Things didn't go well there either. He'd come home late at night, reeking of vodka and cigarettes and forced me to drink with him until sunrise saying that was my way of paying for rent. When I turned fourteen, he changed his mind. He wanted something else in return of his hospitality.' My stomach turned at the insinuation.

'I-' I choked on my words. Nova turned to look at me. 'I'm so sorry.' I whispered.

I didn't know what to do, how to take the pain away. Her eyes were stuck on mine and I felt my breath abandoning my lungs. I searched for a sign, a sliver of emotion on her face that told me what my next move should be.

But then she looked away and a single tear dropped to her red cheek. My finger flew to catch it and wipe it away. Her eyes shot to my

direction and after that, everything happened so quickly, my mind wasn't able to process it. I

I was kissing her.

Her hands grabbed my face and even though I was the one to make the first move, she took control as if *she'd* been the one who did. It was my first kiss and the memory of it still plays in my head after all those years. In a different way, of course.

Later that day Nova admitted to me that talking about her past brought up feelings she didn't have the energy to dwell on. She said that experiencing it all was enough for one time and that she would rather have me pretend that I never heard anything. I didn't know if that included the kiss but seeing as she wasn't in the mood to talk about it, I acted like it never happened.

Like I didn't think about it for the rest of the day. Like it wasn't the first moment in my life I ever felt something so intense. I acted like it was nothing out of the ordinary.

Weeks went by and Nova didn't seem to be becoming better. Every day, I'd see her less and less. She would come to school with the same clothes for days, her hair unwashed and a cigarette hanging loosely from her lips.

November first was the first day I got a drunk call from her.

It was four in the morning when my ringtone echoed in my room. I picked it up and the sound of loud music was heard from the speaker.

'ZOE!' She screamed. 'DUDE! You *have* to come to th-this party. I sw-swear it has the best people EVER.'

She was drunk. I knew she was but I didn't want to believe it.

'Nova are you drunk?'

‘D-do I sound drunk to you baby?’ I ignored the sweet nickname she used on me and just focused on her slurring and wobbly voice. Though my body reacted thoroughly at the sound of the word *baby*.

‘Where are you?’

‘I don’t know.’ She said laughing. She kept laughing hysterically before going around and asking people where she was. After a little while, the call ended and my body shot up from its laying position, worry exploding in my chest like an atomic bomb. Seconds later, the address of the house she was at appeared in a text on my screen. It didn’t take long for me to get up and get to her.

It became a thing; she would make up nonsensical excuses to go to party at some random guy’s house and then drink to the point where she could not stand on her feet. And I would always be there to pick her up and sneak her in my aunt’s apartment so she would not have to drive to her apartment and kill herself in the process.

I was always there for Nova and she was always there for me. But being there for Nova became a difficult and challenging mission. She would fuck up by drinking until she was sick, or do drugs to the point where she needed to go to the emergency room. And the following day, she would apologize to me and cry, saying pointless words that she would forget the very next night.

Unfortunately, Nova’s grave past did not allow her to make any sort of mistakes, big or small. She could not handle failure and so she would unintentionally seek ways to punish herself. And it progressively got worse. Nova’s landlord kicked her out of the apartment in the light of not paying rent for six months which resulted in Nova being left homeless.

I grew worried. She stayed at my place for a week when aunt Maria and Rick were in England for business. Then Nova moved to one of her other friend's house. His name was Mason and he was three years older than us. Mason was kind and caring. He and Nova knew each other for a long time, way before came into the picture. I didn't mind how close they were, but my heart couldn't help but writhe every time her head leaned into his shoulder. Suddenly mine felt cold.

November was filled with parties and *having a good time*. School had moved places in my list of priorities as I was trying to keep up with Nova, desperately striving but struggling to stay in her life.

I felt like I was slipping away. One by one my fingers let go of the tight grasp I had on Nova yet she didn't seem to notice. And that sped up the process.

'No, I swear. This one will be fun.'

'Nova, that's what you said for the last one and I can still hear your drunk whining.' I laughed even though it wasn't funny, and my mood was nowhere near humorous. Nova was trying to drag me to yet another one of her friend's parties but this time, I planned on putting my foot down and detaching myself from that lifestyle.

'Come on, really. Marvin is my friend and it's his birthday. I can't not go and I want you with me.' When I think about these words now, I know she meant she needed me there to look after her. But at that moment all they did was send an irrational warmth all throughout my body, shaping the idea of attending the party into a more appealing one.

'Fine!' She shrieked with excitement. 'But. One drink.'

'One drink.'

It was not one drink.

‘Zoe, this is Marvin. Marvin this is my friend Zoe.’

‘Nice to meet you.’ I smiled. ‘Oh, and happy birthday.’ Marvin took my offering hand and kissed it, an action that forced my head to look straight at Nova who was just smiling. Her eyes told me something different that day. It looked like some mask had fallen in front of her face, hiding the person I knew and showing me a new version of herself; one that winked and mouthed at me to make a move.

‘I will leave you two alone.’ Nova said it and did it, Mason following close behind her. Marvin was handsome. He was handsome and he knew it. Only that had made him look irresistible to every other desperate girls like the ones who interrupted our what supposed-to-be-talk. Girls that wanted their prince to come save them riding a white horse. But I didn’t care about him. Not because I didn’t think he was attractive; I wasn’t blind. Though only one person mattered in that room to me. And she’d already downed her first drink.

Marvin had a tall figure. His legs were way too skinny but he was a tall guy with a surprisingly buff upper body. His shoulders were wide and he was keen on showing it. Marvin wore a sleeveless shirt that had a deep neckline and wide open armholes that made it an easy task to see right through them. He had structured characteristics that attracted girls. But he had a sweet-looking face; he did not have that rough beauty. What stood out the most were his eyes. Not the color, though. Marvin had the most beautifully shaped eyes that went along with the darkest and longest eyelashes I had ever seen in a guy. And even though the color was not so exceptional, Marvin’s eyes were ones who could lure you in.

My attention didn't stay for long on him but was constantly shadowing Nova's figure that danced around with a bottle of some liquor in her hand. Marvin was talking, I wasn't listening. I felt my heart thud, my eyes fogging and my ears started buzzing. Every second that passed, I saw Nova destroy herself more and more. And then I noticed it.

A white powder littered her nostril.

It didn't stay for long as one of her friends I wasn't aware existed, nudged her shoulder and whispered something in her ear. Next moment, she was wiping it off.

It hurt to see her like that. My chest burned, my head was pounding making it hard for me to keep my eyes open. Then as if she sensed the dark cloud that consumed me, she turned her head to look at me.

It happened in slow motion. Her body was still moving to the rhythm of the music, her hands up in the air while people around her cheered. Her eyes were different. I couldn't recognize her. I didn't know that person. She noticed it. A tear trailed down my face, burning as it went. That was more than one drink. More than she should've done, more than she could handle. More than *I* could handle. I turned around and left.

I knew she followed. That's why once we were out of the house, I turned around to face her. She hadn't expected it so she lost her balance and almost fell down. We didn't speak for a while. My eyes were sure to be red, yet she didn't look bothered.

'I'm sorry.' She whispered.

'No.' I bark. 'Sorry doesn't do it anymore. I am tired of this. Tired of seeing you destroying yourself. Tired of seeing you lose yourself.' Heavy breathing consumed me. It was hard for me to continue

speaking. But I did. And I did not sound happy. 'You're not letting me help you. You're not listening to me. You're hurting me by hurting yourself and every day you get more and more confusing. One day you kiss me and then you ask me to forget about it. You say I'm beautiful, you spend time with me but you shove me into Marvin so easily.'

I went from one topic to the other without realizing it. With every word that I spat, the pressure in me rosed until it started spilling.

'I love you.' She said.

'That's not love!' I screamed. 'God, Nova! That's not love, it's hatred!'

'I don't hate you.'

'But you don't love me either.' Everything I said came out of anger. A feeling so dark, so evil invaded my mind and I turned into someone else. I wasn't the same either. For a moment, I lost myself. 'And if that's your love then I don't want it.'

I wasn't in charge of my mouth when I said that. But I still blame myself for it. Nova's eyes flashed with something new, a feeling I wished I would never see again. And I didn't. Ever.

After that night, life became as dark and as empty as that look she gave me. I got stuck watching it all crash and burn before me. And the worst part was that I could not do anything about it. Not. A. Thing.

'I love you.' She said and walked away.

I had the sudden urge to vomit and I hadn't had a sip of alcohol. My head and heart felt so heavy with the sudden confession that I couldn't think straight. Even the tears took their time to roll down my cheeks like a river.

At the very end of the yard I noticed movement. My eyes drifted to the dark corner and a tall figure walked out of it. It felt wrong to be

under the stare of what I soon realized to be a guy around Nico's age. He looked at me, and I him. I knew he had seen and heard the scene I caused with Nova, yet the desperation brewing inside of me only cared about how she left me, about how I've spoken to her.

Without knowing why, without even thinking about it, I opened my mouth to speak to him. And I regretted it shortly after, realizing that I sounded awfully dramatic.

'Never fall in love. Just don't.'

And I left.

God, how I loved drama. I lived for it, I waited for it, I *asked* for it. I've experienced how it felt to be overwhelmed with emotions after a long time of feeling nothing, of being empty inside, and I had gotten used to it. I had gotten addicted to it. And I felt hopeless without it.

December was when it all began. Nova had started sleeping in classes or not coming to school at all. At first I thought it had something to do with her trying to find a new apartment but it was obviously more than that. The first day of December marked one week of her not showing up at school. I had texted her a million times asking her where she is or if she is okay but what I got was just dry replies like 'im okay' or 'I will text you later'.

School without her seemed dull and my schedule empty as I laid on my bed, feeling her absence strike my heart. I didn't like—no, I *loathed* how we were not together, how I didn't know how she was or what she was doing. Nova had completely erased me from her life in a span of a week and I was *hopeless*.

So I did the only thing I could get my mind to think of; I called Mason.

‘Where’s Nova?’

‘Zoe?’

‘Yes. Where is Nova?’ I heard rustling and bed creaking noises coming from the other line and a shameless part of me grew curious as to what Mason was doing before he picked up. The sane part of me though remained sickly worried about Nova.

‘I don’t know.’ My breath got held in as I took in the information. Mason was supposed to be my door to clearing the situation. He was supposed to make me feel better. ‘She must be at my apartment still. Don’t think she’d want to do anything else, anywhere else.’ What he said made sense but a nasty feeling crept deep in my stomach. ‘Hey, don’t worry okay?’

‘Uh, yeah. Thanks.’ My voice wasn’t airy; it came out uncertain and vulnerable. And Mason noticed.

‘Do you want to go check up on her together?’ After a moment of silence on my side, he added. ‘I’ll send you the address so we can meet there and go up to see Nova, okay?’

‘Okay. Thank you.’

‘No problem.’ Mason sounded everything I wasn’t; sure, calm, unbothered. ‘She’s fine, Zoe.’

We met right outside his apartment building’s gate. I stood there waiting for him for about an hour, rubbing my hands together to ease my pulsating anxiety, repeating in my head ‘She’s alright, she’s alright, she’s alright.’

When Mason arrived, he didn’t look so sure anymore. His face was paler than how I remembered it to be, his eyes widened and red crept

up his neck. I didn't ask if anything happened. I think the possibility of something going wrong scared me so much I kept my mouth shut.

The door to their apartment was slightly open so it was no difficult task getting in. I walked in first with Mason following close behind me. The apartment was wrecked. There were open trash bags everywhere on the floor, the couch was moved and the TV was open and on high volume. Mason walked to one of the bedrooms and when he didn't find her, he walked straight to the bathroom. I looked around the living room area. I was shocked at how messy the apartment was. But then again, it was Nova's apartment.

My eyes were furiously scanning the place and observing the little things. Meanwhile, things I could say to Nova, in hopes that I could help her, ran through my mind hopelessly. I heard a ringtone coming from under the pile of trash so I kneeled down and searched through the mess to find where it came from. Once I had the phone in my hands I realized it was Nova's. On the screen contact flashing 'Travis'. Something very dark was screaming at me to answer the call. It was almost like a strange power drew me to the device. I pressed the phone close to my ear and a worried voice appeared on the end of the other line.

'Oh thank God, you're alive. Listen... ' and then the voice kept talking, so fast to the point where I could not understand what he was saying. I tried telling him that I am not Nova but Mason's screaming distracted me. I got to my feet and slowly walked towards the bathroom where I heard Mason's voice coming from.

The vibe had suddenly changed. Something had changed once Mason screamed. He kept screaming and crying and the worried voice

was still ringing in my ear. Slowly, the voices faded and I could only hear my heart thudding. I saw Mason on his knees in the bathroom.

I hesitated for just one second, and Nova's smiling face and sparkly eyes from the time I saw her at school, hijacked my vision. She looked absolutely beautiful that day. For that one second, my body came at ease, my heartbeat progressively slowing. Then I heard the voice from the other line say,

'Don't use them, okay?' Everything dropped silent once again. I did not bear to make any movements. My eyes were closed and my breathing halted.

'I gave you the wrong thing.'

Suddenly, I lost all of my strength. My hands started shaking causing the phone to drop on the floor. It cracked, it shattered but I did not hear a sound. My ears were buzzing and the tears in my eyes were burning my skin. I kept repeating words in my head that did not make sense and Mason sobbed and screamed. I did not want to believe it but it all hit me like a truck. I walked closer to Mason and finally saw it. He was holding Nova in his hands. Her eyes open, her pupils markedly constricted and I could see droplets of sweat in her pale, white skin.

And that was it. She was gone.

We rushed to the hospital but there was nothing they could do. What could they do, anyway? Nova had lost hope in herself a long time before what happened. She had given up and no boyfriends or best friends could make her see that there was a future ahead of her. And she could do anything with it. She chose to wipe it out.

I cried myself to sleep that night. And many other nights after that, thinking of the day she took me to the cliff and talked to me all about herself.

I was not born to die old, Zoe.' She said. I frowned. How could she possibly say that? 'A long life isn't for me. I do not want to get old, anyways. Old life doesn't suit me. Can you imagine, waking up in the morning and looking at yourself in the mirror and seeing a strange face? A tired of life face that has lived everything there is to live and is just miserably waiting to die peacefully while sleeping? That is not me, Zoe. I can't bear the thought of ending up like that. Old and miserable, blaming everyone and everything for what happens to me when in reality, it is entirely my fault.' Silence. I could not understand if she was joking or not. So I just looked at her staring at nothing.

Then she looked at me and smiled. And I thought that with this smile she was implying that it was all just one of her jokes. That she was not really feeling like this. Well, I guess I was blind enough to be unable to see exactly what she was saying. She wanted to die so she could live forever young.

Actually, she wanted to die because she did not want to live.

And as weird and fucked up that sounds, it is the truth. And I blame myself for that. I always will. Nova asked for my help, she was crying for help, but I was not listening. Every time she got drunk and came to my apartment crying and apologizing. Every time she ran to get drugs in hopes she would feel free. Every drunk 'I love you, please forgive me'. All that was a cry for help. I had failed her and she was dead. I was blaming myself for it and I still am.

Chapter six

After Nova's death I thought I had reached rock bottom. Every morning I woke up thinking of the moment I would go back to bed to sleep. And every night I closed my eyes, I wished to never open them again. It was not like I had any reason to keep living, and as hard it might be to comprehend, it is true. There are moments in life when you truly wonder, why am I here? Who am I here for? And let me tell you, it is scary. It is scary to know that there is no reason for you to be alive and it is scarier to have a reason to die. Mine was to be with Nova.

I do not know how I got to the conclusion that if I died, I would be with Nova. Maybe some desperate side of me thought there was a place where all souls go after they have exited a body. Call it Heaven or Hell, I do not care. All I wanted at the time was to be with Nova. I lived like a ghost, walking around unbothered by anyone's presence. I did not

eat, I did not sleep. By the end of the month I looked like a pale twig with ridiculously dark under-eye bags. I missed my friend and no one could help me. It was like nothing from that point on could have an effect on me. I have lived everything anyone could ever live and I was left alone at last.

After being absent from school for three weeks, aunt Maria forced me to get up from my bed, take a shower, put on some decent pieces of clothing, fake a smile and go to school or else she would have to kick my useless depressed ass out of her house. That was where my aunt had come to. Threatening to leave me homeless on the street. She never did it and I learned how to ignore her after the seventh time she'd caught me coming back at five in the morning smelling of booze and cigarettes. I had never put a single cigarette in my mouth. It is just a killing machine that was made by people to destroy people. But everywhere I went, people were overly fond of smoking so by the end of the night, I would stink of it.

And that was something that would get my aunt ticked off. I tried many times to explain to her that I was not the one smoking but she would not have it.

So, I learned how to ignore that as well.

My first day back to school was rough. I had to walk through the hallways with everyone's pitiful eyes stuck on me and listening to everyone whispering 'That poor girl' as I walked by. I didn't care for their pity, or for their sad looks. But they were there, lurking, haunting me. Reminding me of what happened. Every. Single. Day.

By the last day of school before Christmas break, they had forgotten all about it though. I could still hear their whispers as I walked around school, but I ignored it so much I thought it was a done deal.

Over the holidays, I had become a little better. Aunt Maria had convinced me to see a therapist every Tuesday afternoon. I am very thankful for that decision my aunt took, because if it were not for that, I would have never met Hazel. Hazel took Nova's place for a couple of weeks. I met her at the park during the time I was supposed to be at my therapy session.

She looked to be a good girl. She had a simple life and everything was planned ahead. Her future was determined by her parents and she seemed to have no problem with that. Or I was too far into my issues to see her misery. Hazel had a boyfriend, named Steve. Steve and Hazel met in eleventh grade. He came from a wealthy family, and he, too, had his future planned by his beloved parents. I used to see that and envy their luxury; going to the best Universities in the country, living in huge houses, having everything when I had nothing.

Around the same time, I met William.

An athlete from my school.

He did not interest me in the slightest; no one did after Nova's death. I lost faith in friendships; relationships in general. But I kept him around. Do not ask me why, I really do not know.

But the poor little guy had stuck around even after treating him so badly. He met Hazel and they went along fine, not much connection between them. At times I thought William was jealous of Hazel because I spent all of my time with her. And I do not regret it at the least. Hazel helped me get back on my feet. Regardless of the fact she would be the reason for me to fall back into a pit of depression, she helped me.

William tried to make whatever we had, work. He called me every day, offered to drive me home, and asked if I was okay. But to me it all came off the wrong way. I felt pressured by all of this attention that was

suddenly given to me. So, what I did was ignore him as much as I could. I did not answer the calls, I took hours to respond to his messages and then throw a ridiculous excuse such as ‘I was in the shower’, like I could actually take five hours to wash myself.

I spent Christmas with my aunt and Rick, and New Year’s eve with William, Hazel and Steve. And before we knew it, the new year had welcomed us and we were back to our normal, miserable everyday life at school. Nothing mattered, at that point and Nova’s death was still hurting like an open wound that wouldn’t dare to close.

The three of us, Hazel, William and I, started studying at full force in hopes I could get my grades and GPA to get back up, and we successfully did so in time to apply to some colleges. By the end of February I had started going out more and getting up in the morning without feeling like it will be my last day on earth. I felt, for once in these two months, like I actually had a future ahead of me and things would get better. Adding to that, hanging out with Hazel gained me a lot of popularity at school and suddenly I was in the middle of the school cafeteria, sitting on the top of a table with six or seven people around me laughing and chatting about the most stupid and insignificant things.

William and I were still distanced from each other, only when people were not watching. Because when people had their eyes on us, we were all over each other. We had become the school’s power couple when in reality, we barely even talked. During that time, there were countless rumors that Will was cheating on me with a different girl every week, but in my eyes there were no red flags in sight. Everything was fine for once in my life and I could not let anyone ruin that. Even at

home with aunt Maria, things were at ease and the threats of leaving me homeless dropped to zero.

And then, we reached the week before my 19th birthday. The day fell on a Saturday and, according to Hazel, Saturday was the best day to party. So she put herself in charge of my birthday party which I tried multiple times to avoid with excuses such as my aunt won't let me, no-one will be free on that day. Anything besides telling the truth which is that I hated parties. I never even celebrated my birthday; not even when I turned 18 which is supposedly a big moment in one's life. The date held so much darkness it was hard for me to see it as something other than a misfortune.

I've always despised going to parties in general, but after Nova's passing it was hard for me to enjoy anything.

But Hazel would not take another word.

'So I was thinking, we put big LED signs with your name above the fireplace, in white color with black lining and have white and silver colored balloons everywhere. What do you think?' I was barely listening to her. I had my eyes stuck on William talking to a cheerleader across the cafeteria room and laughing at something she said. 'Zoe?'

'Oh, yes.' I took my eyes off of them for a second to focus on Hazel who thought my birthday was a chance to get away from her problems and distract her from the harsh reality of her life.

'You know what? I am really thankful for everything you have done, really. But I do not do birthdays. I do not celebrate it anymore. And I think the LED sign with my name is a bit much.' I said and went back to staring at William and miss fake blonde hair. Hazel did not speak much further but I saw her texting someone she named 'LED sign dude' on her phone saying, 'Bring the sign'.

The dreadful day had finally arrived, March 5th. My birthday. Hazel took me shopping after waking me up with a hundred happy birthday texts filled with a ridiculous amount of emoji icons and two missed calls, while William had texted me a simple 'happy bday'. After spending three hours at the mall and buying items of clothing that I would not wear even once but bought just because Hazel wanted me to have a special birthday, she dropped me off at my aunt's apartment. We had a nice family lunch; my aunt was constantly at her phone talking with Rick and Gloria, who had moved in, in order to take care of me, complained about how she forgot to put salt on the food. At the end, I blew some candles and aunt Maria left running to go to 'work'. I looked at Gloria in hopes that she will give me a decent explanation on what is going on with my aunt but she just shrugged and went to her bedroom to read.

In complete desperation, I quickly packed some things and drove myself to Hazel's house. I did not text her beforehand, thinking that she had come to my apartment plenty of times without giving me any warning.

Her mom opened up the door and greeted me with a smile on her face and her arms wide open for a 'happy birthday' hug. She wished me the best and so did Hazel's dad. I remember I thanked them both with red cheeks, not being used to that sort of attention. I quickly walked up to Hazel's room happy to have gotten out of an uncomfortable, on my part, encounter. As I walked closer to Hazel's room I could hear strange noises coming from her room. I thought Hazel had brought her cousin Marie, a strange girl from Hazel's dad's side of the family who was exceptionally skilled at make-up art. Hazel had promised to try and bring her before the party would start to make us look beautiful so we can

find a good-looking guy to help us have fun. It took me almost two days to remind Hazel that I have a boyfriend. A boyfriend who I had not seen or spoken to in ages, but that is a whole different issue.

I did not knock before I got in, thinking that it would be a pleasant way to surprise Hazel. But, no sooner that I had burst in her room than I regretted not knocking. It was one of those moments when something big happens, something you were not expecting. And all you can do is sit there in shock, not able to move a finger. You want to, but your whole entire system is frozen. Well, yes. It was one of those moments. I was watching William hover over my best friend Hazel, kissing her neck and other parts of her body and her brushing her fingers through his hair. I was watching everything go down and even though I wanted to leave, scream, cry, or even hit them, I could not do any of that.

There are times in life when you've had enough, Katerina. You are tired of everything going wrong so your brain kind of takes over, and then bad things happen. And this time it is only you who is at fault. That is exactly what happened. I lost my mind; I was not thinking clear enough to realize the horror I would create. What I was about to do was awful and would absolutely ruin my—somewhat already ruined—friendship with Hazel.

And then, whatever was going on hit me. My best friend was having sex with my boyfriend.

I slowly took my phone out of my pocket and started filming the whole scene that was presented before me. I was taking a video, some pictures, everything. And when I was satisfied enough with the footage that I had, I slammed the door shut catching them both red-handed. Hazel screamed out of her surprise and William got off of her in almost

a second. They both started talking without taking breaths and spitting excuses and nonsensical things such as 'It is not what you think'.

'I can't believe you.' I finally spoke up. 'You really go behind my back to fuck my boyfriend after all I've been through. And on my birthday? What kind of person are you?' Hazel had a face of regret but that soon changed into something else. Something vicious.

'You know what? I'm tired of hearing this. Yes, your drug addict of a best friend was stupid enough to die. So what? Things happen, life goes on!'

I stood there in shock. I could not believe what she was saying and William did nothing to stop her, which only meant he thought the same thing as her. 'Why don't you wake up, Zoe? Wake up and see life as it really is, because your precious boyfriend who you have ignored all this time, has screwed over half the girls in our school this past month.'

I could not speak. William and I were not at the best of terms, sure, but it is never okay to hear that your partner has been sleeping with multiple other people while you are in a relationship.

My eyes were blurry and so were my thoughts. Anger was boiling inside of me destroying to pieces every sense that I could have had at that moment. I started walking backwards and before I ran down the stairs I mumbled something to Hazel.

'You're going to fucking regret that.'

That was it. I ran off to my aunt's car crying. I was driving for hours, going places I did not know existed. I had five missed calls from Hazel, six missed calls from William and 4 missed calls from my aunt. I never returned any of them. I was trying to calm down, but nothing helped me. Waves of crying hit me every few seconds and I could not stop balling my eyes out. I had gone to that cliff Nova had brought me to

the first morning after meeting her. The sun had gone down and clouds were slowly gathering above me.

‘I wish you were here.’ I said in between sobs. ‘You would’ve ruined her better than I can.’ At that moment I heard thundering and saw lightning coming from afar.

People see only what they want to see; what they desperately desire. Consequently, in pure shock and raw, unfiltered need to have Nova with me I took the lightning and thunder that came from a distance as a sign from my dead friend telling me exactly what I needed to hear. I saw what I wanted to see. In reality it was just lightning and thunder.

Chapter seven

I drove to Hazel's house where, to my surprise, my birthday party was still happening even though I was not there. I grabbed my phone and made my way inside. The party was wild. Surprisingly many people wanted to celebrate my birthday, yet I could not name one person that was in that room dancing and drinking.

I saw Hazel coming down the stairs with her boyfriend, hand-to-hand. I narrowed my eyes and took a big breath. Moments of her moaning under my boyfriend played on repeat in my head. I was soaking wet from the rain and people were looking at me confused, but Hazel and William had taken no notice of my presence. I wandered around, trying to get to the TV. Once I did, I looked through some boxes they had searching for something that would help me connect my phone to the television. I could not find anything, so I did the next best thing. I

took some wires and connected my phone with the speakers. My heartbeat beating furiously made me feel slightly dizzy. The room fell silent. The music had stopped, I pressed play. My heart beating faster than it has ever beaten. Moans and groans echoed through the room. I lifted my hand up in the air, still holding my phone, so everyone could have a great view of what I was showing them. Hazel's face had gone pale and I saw tears rolling down her cheeks. I am extremely ashamed now, of course, but back then I felt nothing but pure anger. Her boyfriend, Larry, stood disgusted next to her, his eyes glued to my phone. Hazel's parents running down the stairs and seeing their little girl being intimate with someone who is not her boyfriend. Everything was going downhill for Hazel and I am regretfully saying that I was enjoying every second of it.

The video stopped and I disconnected the phone from the speakers.

'Better lock your door the next time you decide to fuck your friend's boyfriend without *your* boyfriend knowing, Hazel.' Hazel was trembling next to her parents whose faces had gone red from their anger. I threw my phone at her and said,

'Here; take it. Just to remember the moment.' I grabbed a bottle of Vodka that stood on the table next to the door and ran to my car. I drove away fast. I could not believe what I had done. But I did not care. I just wanted to disappear.

I am not aware of how, but I managed to get myself to some club downtown without getting into a car crash. It was still raining; my clothes were already wet of course, my eyes were red and burning from all the crying, my throat had a blazing sensation due to the huge amount

of alcohol I consumed during my ride to the random club, I was in sweats and a cropped t-shirt, yet I had no shame walking in that bar and ordering something that would probably have me passed out by the end of the night.

I sat on a stool and drank my beverage thinking; this is it. There is nothing worse that could happen to me. I've lived everything. Yet I was not even close. The drinks kept coming, and I kept consuming them till the last drop. It felt nice; the burning of the liquid going down my throat. It made me think of her, made me feel closer to her. I wanted to know how she felt when drinking.

I had nothing else to do but that. I had just lost another one of my best friends and my boyfriend and possibly had ruined her life by showing something so intimate to everyone at the party. I had never felt so low in my entire life. I hated myself. I wanted to escape from me, be someone else. Change my name, leave the country and forget about my past.

That night was the worst night I ever lived so far. I felt like shit; like I should be thrown away. I felt alone, afraid. I was about to end it all. But something inside of me kept me sane. A whispering voice inside my head was telling me to calm down, to stop drinking and wake up. Stop being such a baby, and look around to see I am still alive and that I will make it.

'You know you're talking to yourself, right?' I raised my head and my eyes followed the sound of the voice. 'Ah, I can see by your face that you did not know that.' I was trying to focus my vision on the person talking to me. I blinked a few times and then I saw him. Tall, muscular, rough looks. 'Wow, you look awful.'

‘Why thank you, you are so kind.’ I tried speaking. My voice came out as a mumble or a loud whisper. I heard him laugh next to me and the urge to punch him indulged me. I didn't do it though, do not worry. I only looked at him while downing my drink and took in his looks. He was still tall, the same dark brown colored eyes looking right through me making me feel extremely intimidated. He was gorgeous, anyone could see it. But I did not, that day. The last thing I wanted was to develop any sort of relationship with any human being. So I gave my money to the bartender, got up and fell down.

‘Easy there, tiger.’ He told me while lifting me up. He held me close to him and for some odd reason I felt safe. It disgusted me. I was not used to it so I quickly pushed him away with my hands.

‘Okay, that is enough. Thank you. But now I have to drive home.’ I said and started walking to the exit but he grabbed me by my arm and stopped my movement. The same warmth that I felt when he picked me up took over my body. Scared as I was by the strange and overwhelming feeling he had caused me, I tried pulling my hand away as fast as I could but his grip was too strong and I was far too drunk. A sudden rush came over me and everything started moving around. I was, in a matter of seconds, on the floor and overly aware of how much alcohol I had consumed. The guy, once again, picked me up and held me close to him. It felt lovely having someone be this close to me. It was the closest thing to a hug I had been given these past few months.

But I could not stand it. With my eyes closed to ease my headache, I pushed him away one more time. I got another head rush but this time I managed to stay on my feet.

‘Look dude, thanks for the concern and all, but my curfew was three hours ago and I gotta drive home or else I'll be left without one.

So, see ya.' I tell him and walk away. I thought I managed to get rid of him but as soon as I stepped foot outside he was right in front of me, holding me so I won't fall down.

'You can't drive like that or else you will die.'

'Another good reason to get in the damn car then.' There was silence after that. He probably was not waiting to hear something this shocking from me. I do not know why though; he did not even know me. He took a deep breath and started looking through my pockets. Once he found what he was looking for, my car keys, he put my arm around his neck and his arm around my waist and walked me to the parking lot to find my car. When he managed to make me recognize my own car he unlocked it and laid me down on the back seats. And then I passed out.

The next day I was awakened by an urge to vomit. I did not have time to get up and walk to the nearest bathroom, so I just threw up over the bed where I conveniently found an orange empty bucket placed just for me, I guessed. Once I was done spilling my guts, I laid back down in an attempt to ease the killing headache I had, taking in my surroundings. I had no idea where I was but that did not worry me. What more could possibly happen?

And then it all came back to me.

I had thrown my phone at Hazel the previous night, that way cutting all communication with my aunt, had taken her car without permission and had been almost 24 hours missing from my house. With every power that was left in me, I got up from the bed and started I couldn't push down the pure horror I felt running through countless corridors. Outside the room was a long grey hall and multiple white doors on each side that followed to what seemed to be a big empty

space. I walked quickly to the big empty space and came across an enormous staircase that led to what I guessed would be the second floor. Next to me I noticed a white wooden door that I ran towards at full speed, bruising my hand at the process of opening it. Fortunately for me it led to an outside area where my car was parked. Once again I ran to the car, or at least tried to. I had not eaten in hours, my feet were killing me and my throat was sore from all the puking and the lack of water I had consumed.

Moments later I reached my car and found it unlocked and with the keys on the dashboard. It was a relief to have it at one piece, even though it smelled of alcohol and vomit. I drove away as fast as I could and almost killed myself two times on my way to the apartment, where I knew my aunt was waiting for me. I arrived there quicker than I thought, but it did not matter much. I was already a lost case. Going up the stairs was hard for me to do because of my state but even harder because I knew what would follow. I knocked on the door twice and Gloria opened it two seconds later with a face of worry. Once she saw me and how I looked her eyes were immediately filled with disappointment and terror.

'Is that her?' I heard my aunt yelling from the other room. Gloria let me in and I thought it was a positive sign until I saw a pile of clothes and some suitcases next to the couch. And then I saw her; my aunt, dressed to impress as always, with no sign of disruption on her face, but with a look that would absolutely kill me if I said the wrong words.

'Don't you dare speak right now, Zoe' I didn't.

'You leave the house with no warning with *my* car which you took without asking for permission, to go to a party I later find out you ruined by showing everyone a video of poor Hazel having sex with a boy?'

Poor Hazel? If I had any power left in me I would comment something about that but I had nothing left. I just stood there listening to my aunt scream at me.

‘And then you disappear for a whole night and half the next day without even having the courtesy to call? And you come in here smelling of Vodka and possibly your own vomit? You are a disgrace, Zoe. You should be ashamed of yourself!’ Oh believe me, I was. ‘Look at what you’ve become! A drunk! A careless teenager who does not appreciate the opportunities she has been given! That is what you have become!’

All that and more I have said to myself those past 24 hours, so she did not do much to hurt my feelings. But what she said next was endgame for me. ‘Your parents would be extremely disappointed in you, Zoe.’

And then there was silence. I could even sense Gloria holding her breath so she would not disturb my aunt with her breathing. She looked me dead in the eyes and did not even blink with what she said.

‘I want you out of the apartment. Don’t you dare be here by the time I come home!’ She yelled while walking out of the apartment.

I stood there numb, not knowing what to say or do. My eyes were crying, I had tears run down my cheeks but I did not dare to change my expression. Gloria walked closer to me and gave me my phone. ‘Your friend Hazel dropped it off earlier.’ And then she walked me to my room and laid me on the bed. I passed out asleep within two minutes. When I woke up I saw all of my clothes neatly hung in my closet and all of my stuff in their place. I walked to the living room where Gloria was sweeping the floor. She looked at me and smiled.

‘What is going on?’ I asked her. My voice came out rough, my throat was still dry. My eyes were half open and I could barely stand on my feet.

‘I talked to your aunt. You are not going anywhere.’ She did not look at me. She just continued sweeping the floors unbothered. ‘Now go take a shower, you stink. And then come eat something you look like a twig.’ I dryly laughed and mumbled a thank you under my breath.

I walked to the bathroom feeling nothing at all. I was numb. I had come so close to being left without a home and I thought; it did not happen now, it will happen at some point. And if that does not happen, something else will. And that is how the rest of the year went by; me feeling nothing at all, just drinking and studying my ass through finals and through NYU, where my aunt had to pull off some strings to get into saying that this would be my way of paying her back from staying rent-free at her apartment. It did not make sense and still does not to this day why she wanted me to attend college so bad. Maybe there was a tiny part of her real self, hidden somewhere above the traumatized woman, that still looked out and wanted the best for. Besides that, aunt Maria and I did not have a close relationship. We barely even talked. After what happened on my birthday, I did not dare speak to her, afraid she is going to twist my words and kick me out of her apartment, for good this time.

I did not go to my graduation; I was not feeling like it. I did not have anything to celebrate and no one to celebrate it with. During summer, when aunt Maria went to vacation with Rick and Gloria returned to her family, I stayed in the apartment alone, taking care of Gloria’s plants.

The days went by and I just kept feeling worse. Nothing could cheer me up. I remember one day specifically, the one day I felt actual joy. It was one of the last days of summer, when Gloria came back home. She was smiling, like always, and was so happy to see me. We hugged each other and she told me all about her summer vacation with her family. Then she made me food, because I had not eaten real, homemade food in almost three months, and we sat in the living room watching Christmas movies. It was way too early to start watching Christmas movies, but Gloria loved them so I had no other choice.

After a couple of days, my aunt arrived home alone. Rick wasn't by her side anymore and in the apartment fell absolute silence. Before she came back, Gloria and I had a blast. The apartment was filled with joy and sunshine. The night before she left for vacation, my aunt came home crying and screaming. Gloria walked her to her room and took care of her. They stayed up until four in the morning. When I saw her again after those three months, she looked colder than ever. Her face seemed tired, as if she had not slept in ages. She smelled ghastly and I think I saw a small bruise on her cheek. I did not ask what happened nor did I make any references about that one night. Aunt Maria came out of the room a week after she returned home.

Sooner than I had realized it, September came crawling towards us, introducing me to a new era of my life; college. Classes began September 6th and Gloria was ecstatic. She took me shopping for clothes—so I can make a ripping impression to the teachers and students— and school supplies so I can have a well-organized year. All that was so sweet and the effort showed me that Gloria genuinely cared about me. It should have warmed my heart, but it just made me feel more like a failure. It was stupid, but all I could think about was my last two high

school years and how I disappointed everyone in my life and I could not stand watching Gloria's excitement plastered all over her face while I knew that nothing would change during the next year.

Chapter eight

I believe that nothing in this world is more terrifying than the first day of college. And mine was nothing less than that. I woke up in the morning feeling anxious and giddy. I never really cared about college but the thought really intimidated me. Even though when I was little every teenage movie made the idea of college very appealing to my unadulterated mind. Now, it all seemed pointless and scary. Therefore, my excitement and anticipation were minimized to zero. I did not have big expectations, none to be exact, and I did not get tingles half an hour before I had to go to campus. College had no effect in me except for nail biting and intense nausea.

I had to drive myself to campus with my new car that aunt Maria bought me because as she said, 'I have no time to be a personal chauffeur to a lazy failure like you.'

And those were her exact words. And although they seem harsh and could possibly hurt my already hurt self, it felt nice having her talk to me.

The house had gone silent since she came back from her summer vacation and Gloria and I had less and less things to talk about. I had started helping her with chores when my aunt was around as a form of paying her back for the new car. I even had to go pick up her laundry or drive the car to a car repairer and then had to walk back home or take a cab and pay it with my pocket money. And, of course, since I had finished high school, my aunt was not obliged to provide me a safe, warm house so I had to find a way to pay her rent for my room. Once again, Gloria came to the rescue and found me a job as a babysitter for her sister's friend's four-year-old every Saturday night.

As the days went by and September 6th slowly walked closer to us, college did not look so bad in my mind. A few hours away from home did not seem bad after all. So the morning of sixth of September arrived and I timidly put on my NYU sweater and was set to leave 'home'. It felt strange to wear that sweater and deep down, even though I knew I did not earn it, I felt prideful and even a little... excited to be wearing it. I drove myself to campus but stopped at a random cafeteria to order a coffee. I walked inside and a warm breeze hugged my body. I decided, since I had some time to spare, that I would stay there and drink my hot coffee.

I sat at a small table near the big windows that had no other tables close to it. I hugged myself tightly and rubbed my palm together to create some sort of heat since I had brought the cold from outside with me.

‘Here’s your coffee.’ The nice waitress told me and handed me the coffee

‘Thank you.’ I said and thought that was it. I was surprised when she asked me if she could sit with me and since I was not really in the mood to have a company I asked, ‘Don’t you have your work to go to?’ She seemed a bit taken aback and I figured my tone was a little too harsh. I immediately felt so bad and I could sense my cheeks getting redder from the embarrassment.

‘Oh no! I do not work here.’ She said with a little chuckle in the end. ‘The woman behind the counter that made your coffee saw that I was about to walk to your direction and asked me if I could give you your coffee.’ She explained with a smile. She was constantly smiling, something that made me feel very uncomfortable and she twirled pieces of her hair a lot in her fingers. It was bright red, long and wavy. I could see why she was touching it all the time; it was truly beautiful. The weird girl in front of me seemed to be looking straight into my eyes like she was trying to put me under a spell making me feel tragically insecure.

My long pause made the atmosphere quite awkward so she just smiled again and gave me her hand to shake it.

‘Nice to meet you.’ I reluctantly gave her my hand and she shook it proudly.

‘I’m...’ I did not know what to say. I did not know who I was. For some inexplicable reason I was stuck. And a rush of anxiety hit me. I started sweating all of the sudden and taking shaky breaths.

‘Are... you okay?’ She asked me. I was startled. It was the first time I had heard someone ask me that in months. A strange, overwhelming feeling took over me and all I wanted to do was shout. Shout that I was not okay and scream that I hate my life. Everything came back to me,

and was played in my mind like a movie. I saw my parents who died from a car crash on my 9th birthday, I saw me moving across the world with my piece of shit aunt that wanted nothing to do with a child like myself. I saw my best friend, the only person that came up to me and wanted to be near me, to be my friend, laid on her bathroom floor overdosed of some drug, and it was my fault. I wanted nothing more than to cry out words that after months of being alone I finally found someone else to be around with after a dreadful friendship with a girl who was sleeping with William, my boyfriend. I saw myself filming them have sex and then showing it to a room full of people including her parents and boyfriend, instantly ruining her life. Then I saw me getting wasted at some club and returning home to my angry aunt threatening to leave me homeless. I was not okay. And I wanted to tell her. To tell the nice, smiley stranger in front of me who asked me if I was alright, that my life had been smashed into tiny, sharp pieces and that I was far from being 'okay'.

But I did not. All I said was, 'Uh, yes. I... I am okay.' And she nodded.

'I'm so sorry, but I did not catch your name.' The same feeling bubbled inside of me. I looked her in the eyes and she smiled again, somehow calming me just a little to the point where I could at least take a normal breath.

'Uh, yes. My, uh, name is Zoe.'

'Ah, what a beautiful name.' I gave her a weak smile. 'You know, that means *life* in Greek.' I went still. My fingers started lightly shaking as a specific memory played in my head. *Your name. It means life in Greek.*

I swallowed the sharp pain along with the hot coffee.

'Yes. I've heard.' She nodded. 'What's your name?'

‘Hannah.’

Hannah and I drank our coffees while getting to know each other. We are the same age and as it turned out, we went to the same college too. She was the younger sibling of two, having an older brother who according to her was a pain in the ass but could be very sweet at times. Her parents had gotten a divorce when her brother and she were little kids with her mom taking full custody. Later on her brother went to live at their father’s house.

Her favorite color was pink, her family’s dog’s name was Walter and her childhood/teenage best friend was Maria who slept with Hannah’s boyfriend in 11th grade. She told me about her first girlfriend who used her for her father’s money. She went through a lot. Her dad always treated her like a maid and abused her, mentally and physically, while growing up solely because she was a girl who liked girls as well. Her mom, equally abused by her dad, did not have the courage to stand up to him. That was until she saw her husband lying hands on their daughter. They got a divorce and took him to court. Hannah’s dad was a powerful man, though, with a lot of money. Hannah’s mother got a lot of money from her husband, but he ultimately got away with it. After that, he stopped any communication. Her brother, afraid of being left poor with his mom and sister, left them after turning 18 to go live with their father. She seemed heartbroken while talking about her brother. But as we continued talking, she claimed to be more than happy living alone at her tiny apartment near campus and working two jobs so she can finally stop living off her mother’s money. Thankfully, her mom was very supportive of her every decision and was not pressuring her in the slightest when it came to money, or other random things.

I did not know what to tell her about me. I felt uncomfortable talking about my life to a stranger despite the fact that I felt abnormally close to her. Yet the fact that she shared so much with me about her life and everything that she has been through made me feel like I owed her my back story. So, I told her some things. I told her about my parents, I told her that my best friend died letting out the gory details and that my boyfriend cheated on me. I did not mention my awful aunt or the fact that I ruined a person's life. My self-loathe and hate towards my past actions were enough to bring me down. I did not need another person's judgmental words.

Then we drove to campus in complete silence. It was nice, a comfortable silence, one that did not feel weird or tense. I enjoyed it quite a lot, to be honest. Once we were out of the car, Hannah expressed her gratitude for letting her drive with me to campus and for being with her at such a nerve-wracking situation. We walked together inside at a quick pace. The first thing we came across was a big marble staircase and a spacious hall that looked like a seating area. It had a few chairs in some sort of circle and two round wooden tables in the middle. Right beside the seating area was a huge room with glass windows and doors that seemed like a lounge room where you could see numerous red couch chairs with silver round tables next to them and some long tables with wooden chairs around them.

We took a turn to our left into a long hallway that led to another spacious area with small couches and armchairs. Another staircase was placed in the center of it leading to the upstairs floor which Hannah and I decided to walk up to and until we found an elevator and go to our assigned floor. Neither of us knew where we were going or what we

were looking for exactly, but we just went with it. Finally, we ran across a nice-looking teacher that told us where to go.

Unfortunately, Hannah and I did not have the same schedule for a couple of hours. I had English and Humanities and she had Math and Science. When we were done we hung out at the cafeteria and took a stroll through the city. We ended up going for lunch at this small salad place near campus. It was cold and cloudy so we took a seat inside. There, Hannah told me more about her life and her interests. She told me how incredible it is to paint and how much she loved it. She had been painting since she was a little girl and it was her passion. She had already picked a major in Biomedical engineering, which she explained to me what was, but I did not understand, nonetheless.

And there I was, sitting in front of this woman who was the same age as me and knew everything about herself; her passions in life, what major she wanted to choose to follow. And I knew nothing of that kind. I did not have a passion and I certainly did not know what I wanted to do for a living after graduating from college. I did not even want to go to college and she had everything figured out. My mind went into a strange path while she was talking; for reasons I could not explain, my brain kept comparing myself to Hannah and as much as I wanted to stop it, I couldn't. So I kept silent. She talked and talked, and I just listened. What else could I do?

I went back home around five. Gloria was waiting for me so I can fill her in about how my first day of college was. It was extraordinarily difficult seeing her full with so many expectations for me and my life as a University student while I knew that it made no apparent difference if I went or not. For all I cared, college was a waste of my time and my aunt's money.

She asked me many questions about the students, the teachers, the facilities and I told her everything she wanted to hear. I told her that the teachers loved me and that I made many new friends. A wide smile was plastered on her face the whole time I narrated one of my made-up stories about a teacher; a smile that my heart could not bear to wipe away. So I lied to her. And I kept lying to her throughout the whole time I attended college. Lying seemed so much easier than telling the truth. I knew it would break her to realize that I am nothing more than a failure, so making up innocent, little stories appealed to me to a greater extent. The reality of things was that the teachers did not love me, I doubt they even knew I existed with so many students in one classroom. I had only one, although more than enough, new friend and my every-day life lacked the excitement and interest I had expressed to Gloria.

Although, the following week was quite eventful, one might say. Hannah was still as warm and welcoming as she was the first day I met her, but I was still pretty distanced. I would forget to text her back for a few hours or I would decline going to her place to study or even go out. She seemed very understanding and did not make a big deal out of my behavior. As the days went by and we spent more and more time together I started warming up to her. Near the end of our first week of college I visited her small apartment to spend the night.

It did not have any rooms; it was just a large space with a bed, a big TV hung to the wall across from it at a short distance, a relatively small kitchen next to the television and a wooden door that opened to a tiny bathroom. Despite the size of Hannah's apartment compared to where I was spending my days at, it felt more like a home to me than any other place I had been after leaving England.

That night we did not sleep. We put on some odd face masks that Hannah had stuffed in some cabinets and pretended to watch TV shows while, in reality, we made fun of our teachers and some of our classmates. It was certainly enjoyable to be a little care-free for once. Only the little voice inside my head seemed to have made a life purpose to ruin my night. Little thoughts and whispers telling me to run away, not to make another failed friendship. And if that was not enough for me to destroy the ease of the night, the image of Nova's unconscious body flashed every five seconds in my head, making me cringe away from any movement of Hannah's. She took notice of my slight reluctance and odd behavior and suggested we go up on the roof. Her apartment already had an amazing view of the city, but she swore that I would love the one from up there. Wrapping some blankets tightly around our bodies, Hannah and I slowly made our way to her building's rooftop.

And she was absolutely right. The view was breath-taking. Skyscrapers unraveling in front of us like beautifully intimidating monsters while the lights from other buildings made me feel like I was swimming in an ocean of stars. I was in awe and Hannah besides me was giggling. We sat there for an hour admiring the privilege of living in New York City, discussing life. My mind travelled to the almost forgotten days when I was a young, sweet girl who lived in England and wished to be here where I am today. I felt warm inside for a second.

For only a second, my life seemed perfect.

When we went back to her apartment, Hannah made hot cocoa for us and we, once again, pretended to watch movies while I rattled on about my life in excruciating detail. By the end of my monologue I was

crying. I felt so disgusted with myself for exposing my true feelings to someone I only knew for a few days. It made me feel small and pitiful. But Hannah hugged me, for a long time. And she didn't let go until I had calmed down from sobbing my issues away. It felt freeing to get it all out of my chest and have someone who did not make me feel like garbage in the end. She told me that everyone makes mistakes and that it is unfair of me to punish myself for doing something while my feelings had taken over my consciousness. I was not attacked for once. I was understood.

We cuddled and fell asleep to the 'Polar Express' playing in the background.

Chapter nine

‘If you do not feel comfortable, we can totally skip it and just hang around at my place. Just like last night.’ A fellow classmate on one of Hannah’s classes invited her and I to this party he was doing, Hannah was familiar with my hatred towards activities as such, yet I knew how much she loved them.

‘But you love shit like that.’ We both laughed.

‘Are you kidding me? First of all, I don’t drink. Crowded places make me *super* uncomfortable and to be honest, Paul looks like a creep.’ She had said and even though I could indefinitely tell she was lying, I went with it. I felt the ease and airy freedom of not being forced into doing something I don’t want to, and it rose something in me. Something addictive.

That day we had two classes together and even though the actual course was kind of boring, Hannah made it fun. Once finished, we went to that little salad place near campus and then straight to her apartment. Aunt Maria was more than happy to have finally got me out of her way although Gloria said she missed me a lot; said the house looked empty without me.

At Hannah's we baked some cookies and watched random videos of cats on YouTube and eventually sat down to study. And at the moment, I felt like an actual person, living my best life in New York City. I had amazing company who did not show any red flags that could scare me off or make me want to run away. I had spent enough time away from my aunt so I could feel less of a failure and was at the top of my classes in college. For once, nothing was wrong in my life. And that gave me courage.

'Hannah?'

'Mmm.' She had her nose almost buried into that massive book for one of her courses, and I felt kind of guilty to interrupt her. Though the tingling sensation in my chest couldn't be ignored any longer. I felt powerful. Life was in my hands and I was the one controlling it.

'Do you have Paul's address perhaps?' I couldn't bare to look at her, fearing that she would laugh right in my face for trying to be brave. The laugh never came.

'Yes..' A giggle almost escaped my lips noticing how confused Hannah's voice echoes through her small apartment. Excitement shit through my entire body as I got ready to make a, what seemed to be, huge step forward.

'Good.' She waited for me to continue. I hesitated. With a little pressure he voice on the back of my head put me through, I managed

to finish off my thought. ‘Because I was thinking maybe we could go to that party?’

It did not come off as strongly as I wanted it to be, but I was proud of myself for taking such a decision. Parties were never my thing and after all what happened I did not even want to think about such events. But something inside of me was so glad to be finally having a normal life that I did not care what happened in the past. I only cared about the present and my need to be normal. And normal meant party.

‘Are you sure you want to? Because if you’re doing this for me just know that I really do not mind and I like it here-’

‘No really, I want to go. ‘ I said, this time more confidently, interrupting her little rant. She looked me straight in the eyes and searched for some sort of uncertainty, and when she found none, she smiled and got up from the bed. She bent down and dragged a huge black suitcase from under the bed and placed it on top of it over our notes. Opening it, I came across numerous fancy dresses and skirts appropriate for an occasion like tonight’s.

It took us fifteen minutes to figure out what we would wear and another extra hour to actually get ready. While we were squeezed in Hannah’s little bathroom, a sudden rush of anxiety hit me as I realized what we were about to do. My palms were getting sweaty, my heartbeat was quickly increasing and I felt once again like I was not in my body, living my life. I felt like I was watching it from a third perspective. And then I started feeling woozy.

‘Zoe? You good?’

Her voice was kind of muffled, like I was hearing her voice from a distance, yet she was standing right next to me. My heart was beating heavily and I could feel it on my stomach. ‘Zoe, we really do not have

to go to that party if you do not feel comfortable enough.’ At the mention of the party, the whole feeling intensified. I had a few tears at the corner of my eyes, threatening to come out as a full mental breakdown. But I fought against it. My initial feeling and need to be normal kind of took over and got me able to say,

‘I’m fine, really.’ I wasn’t, even at the slightest. The feeling never left, but I was too stubborn to let it rule me. So I continued to get ready for something that made my stomach flip and my tongue go dry. And it got even worse when we arrived at Paul’s house.

The house alone was enough reason to start sweating again. It had big, black, iron gates at the front that led to a small hill covered with numerous exceptionally tall trees. The guy at the front let us in and we followed the rock path that took us to Paul’s mansion. The party itself was not much different from the high school parties I have been to. Drunk people puking everywhere, others making out, others dancing and some smoking weed and doing other kinds of drugs at the near back of the house. Exactly the same, just with older people.

Paul did not come to the main entrance of the house to welcome us, not that it shocked me. I doubted that he even remembered the fact that he invited us here in the first place. So we were left standing awkwardly in the middle of a guy’s, I’ve only met once, mansion surrounded by plenty of other drunken people that we did not even know. The music was awful; it was not even music, it was just an oddly loud excessive noise playing through the speakers. I gave a look to Hannah and she returned it right back to me. It was a look that said, *‘Let’s get the hell out of here and go watch Christmas movies.’*

So we laughed, placed our full drinks on a table and started heading towards the door. But that is when we bumped into Stella, Hannah's cousin.

'Oh my god, Hannah! What are you doing here?' Stella said with an unnecessarily, enthusiastic, high-pitched voice that I knew drove Hannah insane. She was not very fond of her cousin and in fact, the last time I went over Hannah's apartment we talked ages about her cousin and how awful she is. So the scene seemed very amusing to me and made it difficult not to laugh.

'I'll leave you guys to catch up.' I said to the cousins and immediately received a death glare from Hannah. But Stella's energy was too much for me at the time so I needed to get as far away as I could from her.

So I started walking towards the exit again. And there, among the sea of drunk, sweaty people I saw a face that brought everything back to me. I stood still, shocked that he could even be here. I had not seen him in ages and just seeing his face brought back so many buried memories that surfaced so quick that I did not realize he had seen me too and had the same empty expression on his face. Slowly, the corner of his lips started lifting and his blank expression was beginning to change to one of warmth and something else that I could not recognize. While I was still in shock, he started walking towards me and in a matter of seconds he was standing in front of me and I had to look up to be able to look him in the eyes.

'Hi!' He said smiling. I looked down at the ground to gather all my powers because I was about to take a quick, short trip down memory lane and I needed a lot of strength to do that.

‘Mason! Hey, how are you?’ I said looking him straight in the eyes. It was then when I finally noticed his ice blue eyes. Nothing interesting about them, but when I looked at them, I saw her. He paused for a moment. The air suddenly became thick and suffocating. He looked down and then back in my eyes.

‘You wanna go somewhere quieter?’ He said, implying that we’re going to talk about her and I knew it was coming, but I was not prepared for it.

We walked all the way to the very back of the house, away from the puking people and the ones who smoked weed or were doing other types of drugs. We went and sat on a little wooden bench that was placed under a big tree and had small pink and purple flowers surrounding it. He sat down first and I took my place next to him but with an appropriate distance. There was silence at first. No one knew what to say. The one other time we were together we found my best friend who he was madly in love with, dead on her bathroom floor.

‘So...’ He said and I stayed silent. ‘Look we do not have to talk about it.’ I nodded. ‘How have you been, beautiful?’ Beautiful. When that pet name came out of his mouth it was like I heard Nova say it. He reminded me so much of her. I knew how much time they spent together and Mason was the only connection I had with my life then, my life with her. It felt so nice to be reminded of her through him; it felt warm and familiar.

He was looking deep in my eyes, waiting for my response. But I could not give that to him, I could not form words. That unbelievable feeling of Nova being so close to me, in a very weird and unsettling way, got me so excited that the only thing I was able to do was... kiss him. It was all so sudden and weird and wrong, totally wrong. I did not like

him, he did not like me. But we never stopped kissing. Only to catch our breath. But that was enough time to make me realize what I had done.

‘This...This is not right. We should not have done that.’

‘Why?’ He said as I was dramatically walking away. I stopped and turned around facing him.

‘What?’ He got up and walked closer to me. His face was serious and he was looking into my eyes like he was trying to cast a spell on me, which I thought was working. He was abnormally tall, and that made me feel intimidated. But just his stare brought me back to the time where Nova used to be alive. It felt so nice and as the seconds went by, I would slowly forget why it was wrong and wanted to just kiss him already.

‘Why is it wrong?’ He was only a breath away from me, his eyes not having left mine. I was heavily breathing, my face was burning and I could barely feel my legs and all that just because he was looking at me.

‘Because.’ I tried to gather my thoughts. Everything was so messed-up in my head I couldn’t find the words to express what I was feeling. ‘I don’t like you. And you don’t like me.’ It was true. ‘This only feels right ‘cause it feels familiar and that’s not enough.’

He seemed to understand.

But he didn’t.

‘Is it because she’s my ex?’ I think I heard the sound of glass breaking as that information sank in. I heard the sound of my heart breaking. I don’t know why, but I felt betrayed. I felt my breath escaping my lungs and never coming back. Whatever was left of my heart drummed in an uncontrollable rhythm I couldn’t hear anything but that.

‘You—you guys dated?’ Realization fell on his face. Why hasn’t she told me? Is that the reason she ran off to him when things got ugly,

when she got kicked out of her apartment? It hurt. It hurt me to think what they could've done when the lights were off.

Two people that used to date.

In an empty apartment.

My stomach turned.

'Yes.' He whispered. 'I figured she told you.' I saw how hurt he was *too*. It must've been painful to find out he wasn't important enough to her for her to mention him.

We sat in silence. His hands wrapped around my waist. *No*.

'No.' I said. 'The fact that you are her ex just—. It just makes it worse.' I tried to brush off his touch. I didn't have to try many times. Something I said ticked him away from me, sighing, turning his back on me and pulling his curly hair away from his face.'

'Can't you listen to yourself? Seriously? That is your excuse? Because she is my ex?' He started yelling. I did not know what to do so I just sat there listening to his outburst and taking it all in, just how I always did. 'She is dead, Elisabeth! Dead. She doesn't care anymore, she can't care anymore. And even if there was a way she could care, I do not! Because I am tired of caring about her when she did not care about me when she was alive!' He was pacing back and forth, pulling his hair and yelling at me. 'Wake up, Elisabeth! She cannot do anything about it! We were having fun and, and what? You stopped because I used to have sex with her? That does not make sense! It is not like she can come back to do something about it!'

The last one hurt. It hit me right where he wanted it to hit me. But I could not do anything about it; I was weak. I had no power left in me, nothing that could make me scream back at him and get everything out of my chest. Only thing that came out of me were tears. They were

running down my face like a waterfall and he had not even noticed. 'I know...?' Is all I said with a broken voice. He finally took notice of my situation and walked quickly to me. He gently grabbed my face and lifted it so I could look at him properly. 'I'm sorry. I should not have yelled at you like that.' He said and his voice soothed me.

I closed my eyes and imagined a world where Nova was not Mason's ex. And after that, everything else was easy.

He started kissing me and I responded with much bigger force. It was like I was in a different world, one with no care about the future or the past, or even the present. I was just living, existing. Doing things like they would not affect my tomorrow, simply because that world did not exist for me anymore. For the next few hours I lived in an illusion. I danced with Mason, got drunk with Mason, smoked weed with Mason and at the end of the night had sex with Mason. And just like that I had lost my virginity to my dead best friend's ex-boyfriend.

I woke up thinking I had done the worst thing possible. I walked out of that room looking like I had just killed somebody. Everywhere I looked I saw Nova's judging face staring at me. I had to go home, but home I could not find. Back at my aunt's was dangerous to go because I would have to explain why I looked like that and I did not have the courage to do so.

And like sent from above, my phone started ringing and on the other line I heard Hannah's worried voice.

'Oh lovely, you're alive. Listen, I am so sorry I left you alone at the party, but Stella wanted to show me her huge shoe collection at her house and then I came to tell you that but I saw you talking with your friend and laughing so I thought that you'd be okay but then I forgot about the fact you did not have a ride home and by the time I

remembered that it was too late. Then I went to Paul's house but the guard, he would not let me in so-

'Hannah, Hannah! I'm okay. It is fine, do not worry.' My voice was raspy and I could barely form my sentences. 'Just come pick me up please. I am at Paul's house.' There was a brisk moment of silence. Hannah was trying to detect whether I was okay or not. It was clear that I was not, even though the phone. But she did not say anything about it. And when she came to pick me up with her mom's car and saw me like the mess I was, she stayed silent. Her caring look always on me during the drive to my aunt's apartment where I decided I wanted to go. She kissed my cheek on my way to the door and told me she loved me. I hugged her tight and walked up the stairs to my doom.

When I got in the apartment no one was there. Not even Gloria. So I took that opportunity to unravel my true emotions. I started crying and screaming aimless apologies to my dead friend whose trust I thought I had ruined. It was like living her death all over again, and again and again but that time, instead of feeling Nova's love I just felt hatred. I thought she hated me and without any particular thought process I walked to the apartment's balcony. I opened the sliding glass doors and went out to the cold. I watched New York City fall beneath me and I knew this was the last time I would have a view like that so close to me.

I walked further into the balcony, stuck my body to the balcony railings and took a big breath. I lifted one leg above the railing and with tears in my eyes and the image of Nova's dead body looking at me, I lifted the other leg almost above the black railings. Before I could fall, I heard my name being shouted from a distance, but my ears were buzzing so it did not occur to me that someone was calling me. And

then I let my hands go. I closed my eyes and let my body fall into what I thought would be my freedom.

But I did not fall. I stayed on top of the railings. I did not know what was going on until I saw two hands wrapped around me. I let a loud sob fall off my lips and the two hands pulled me down until we both fell on the balcony floor. I curled up to the person's embrace and cried until I had no voice to scream. My eyes were burning and so was my neck, my head felt like it was five times heavier and shocks of a killing headache ran through it. I could not move my body; I felt my bones and muscles going numb every second that passed. I just felt an unbelievable, indescribable pain in my heart. I was sinking into a pit of darkness and doom with such force that I thought I would never come out. My body could not physically handle the pain so I started shaking so intensely that I thought I would break in millions of pieces, and I was fine with it. I was wishing I would break and shatter. That way I would stop feeling like this. I wanted to stop feeling like this.

I wanted everything to stop; my pain, my brain, my heart. I wanted to put an end to me and I couldn't. I had failed yet another time and that was by far the worst of all. I could not even make myself stop living. I felt useless, like a piece of trash that could not do anything right. I could not go a day without disappointing someone. My aunt was constantly reminding me how I do nothing in this world that could make me useful. I could not keep my parents alive, I could not keep my best friend alive, I could not even keep my boyfriend to stay with me. I repulsed him so much that he had to go and have sex with my other best friend. I had failed everyone and for every miserable, heart-breaking thing that has ever happened to me it was all because of... me.

It was me who pushed William into sleeping with other girls, it was me who came suddenly into my aunt's life and messed it all up and it was me who was so far up my own hypothetical problems that I could not see my best friend suffering so bad to the point where she needed to free herself from the pain. It was me. Me, me, me, me, me ,me ,me, me, ,me ,me ,me ,me ,me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me ,me ,me ,me ,me, me, me, me, me...

When I woke up I was neither at the balcony, nor in my room, nor in the apartment in general. I was lying on a hospital bed in a, what seemed like, private room. It had only one bed, the one I was lying on, and a bunch of other medical stuff that I did not know what were. Next to me was a chair with a half asleep Gloria sitting on it. I tried moving but my arms and legs were too heavy. I tried speaking but my throat was aching. Gloria's name came out of my mouth in the form of a cough but that was enough to make her jump out of her seat and come running next to me. She started calling for nurses. I did not hear her say the word 'nurse' when she was yelling, too occupied by the bone-crushing pain in my chest and the dizziness in my head, but someone came. I did not know what was happening around me nor did I care.

Even when the supposed doctor came and told me I would be staying there for a while, I did not understand. Then they took me to a ward where another girl was staying too. They took away my belt and shoelaces and locked them away. Then Gloria sat next to me and calmly explained where I was and what I would do there. To put it into words, I was at a mental health hospital and I would be staying there for about four weeks. After Gloria had found me trying to jump off my aunt's apartment's balcony, she brought me here. I found that extreme back

then. I thought that there were many steps one should take before locking me in a hospital. Besides, I was fine. At least that was what I would say to myself. I would trick my mind into thinking that I was totally healthy or that whatever was happening, I deserved it.

My answer, though, to Gloria's announcement was, 'I do not care, just leave me alone.'

That was not supposed to go directly at Gloria; I was definitely not trying to make her feel bad or unwelcomed. But I did not care at the time about what my words did to people.

For the next four weeks, I was visited by a psychiatrist, a clinical psychiatrist, a bunch of nurses, social workers and other therapists. I had to participate in therapy alone and in a group and had to take particular medicines that supposedly would make me feel better. Nothing helped me. I did not talk during any of my therapy sessions. I just phased out, looking at nothing and letting her talk or sit there and try to get me to talk. I never did. Although, during my second week of staying there, my therapist informed me that if I did not talk they would have to keep me there longer than four weeks. At the time it seemed appealing. But as days went by the walls became smaller and the room more suffocating. I neither could nor did not, want to talk with the girl next to me. I did not care. I just wanted out.

So at my first therapy session the fifth week of staying there, I started talking. I told her about my parents, about aunt Maria, Nova, William, Hazel and Hannah and in the end I told her about Tyler. I did not tell her how I felt about all those people, I just mentioned some facts. At the end of the session she told me I had taken a big step, but I still had to talk about myself more than I had to about other people. And then I told her I do not know myself to talk about her.

During the sixth week, I started talking about my feelings; she forced me to. And during the seventh week, she asked about that day. The day I wanted to jump off my building. I did not know what to tell her. She was not asking any questions, I did not know why. I thought that was her job. But she refused to ask me any questions.

She just kept repeating the phrase, 'Tell me about that day' over and over again.

It was driving me insane. I did not know what to say. I barely remembered what had happened.

So she changed her method. She started telling me about that day. Surprisingly, she knew quite the details about my attempt to jump off the balcony of my aunt's apartment. She described everything, with every little, disturbing detail. She even started assuming what my feelings and thoughts were during that time. The most bizarre and mind-numbing thing about the whole situation, was that she was exactly on point. And that made me feel exposed and vulnerable. I started shivering and fidgeting in my seat as she continued talking; it was like I was reliving it all over again. She never lost eye contact and she could clearly see me going through a crisis. Yet she did not stop and she definitely did not hesitate to bring even more detail into my story. I was sweating, biting my nails, trying to gather some saliva to hydrate my chapped lips and dry throat. My nails were forming scars on the skin of my palm and a few small droplets of blood trickled down and got smeared all over my fingertips.

After a little while, she put an end to our little supposed talk and with a smile she informed me of my progress. She also informed me that I would be leaving the hospital but be under psychiatric supervision while at home, which meant I would still have to go through therapy

sessions like those I had been attending so far. Later that day, Gloria came to settle some things and talk with my therapists and doctors. I did not see her much; only her worried face I noticed.

I returned back to my apartment on November 1st.

I was terrified once I settled down. Many thoughts brought darkness to my thoughts such as my aunt's or Hannah's opinion and reaction about all of this or the possibility of having to go back to the hospital and face everything all over again. A few questions seemed to circle my brain ever so often, though, that made me feel as if all the gleeful emotions were taken away from me; What would I do with college? Would I have to retake some classes? What about Hannah? Would she be mad at me? Would my aunt be? How was Tyler?

It was maddening, really. I could barely even get a few minutes of sleep at night. These thoughts were invading my dreams as well, forcing me to abruptly wake up and ending up choosing not to stay awake, afraid of what I would see if I didn't.

But, of course, aunt Maria did not give a damn in the world about anything else than her trips to Europe. Rick was out of our lives for good, it seemed, and my aunt changed drastically. A flash of worry that lasted less than a second I saw when I returned *home*.

One day when returning from my weekly appointment with my psychologist with Gloria, we found my aunt all dressed up with a man standing right behind her, both standing in the living room area looking at each other as if they had just been fighting about something important. I recognized my aunt's 'fighting face' immediately. It stuck to my brain after seeing it for the first time when she got into a heated argument with my father when I was six years old; oh how dreadful it was.

Though the man appeared strange to my eyes; he seemed cold and scary. His body was tense and every move he made was rushed and assertive. He did not say a word. He just stared at me with pity and disgust. My aunt, after several weeks of me being in a mental health hospital for trying to jump off her balcony she said, 'Go pick up my dry cleaning after you're settled down.'

Gloria pushed me inside and to my room, the man's eyes following me. Once we were in the bedroom Gloria locked the door and sighed while rolling her eyes. My curiosity got the best of me and I could not help but ask, 'Was that her new boyfriend?'

'Hush.' Said Gloria and I grinned. 'Do not worry about the dry cleaning; I'll go pick it up. You lay on your bed and relax.' She said and I did and I was told while she tucked me in the blankets and whispered something under her breath.

'He is kinda cute. Scary, for sure, he is, but cute.' I said and laughed and so did Gloria. She then proceeded to lightly hit me on my head and tell me to go to sleep. But I couldn't. Many thoughts were taking over my mind, and I started feeling uneasy again. Gloria would not give me my phone back yet thinking it was too soon for me to have any other contact with the outside world. '*Doctor's orders*' she would say. Although I knew that was far from the truth; Gloria was never a spectacular liar.

Chapter ten

I could not do anything else but try to relax. So I did that. I started looking at my room. My room. I never felt like it was my room. It was so cold and so much different from my actual room back home. This one had tall, light blue walls. Or maybe they were grey. It was a weird mix of both colors, not very unique. Cold, distant, boring. A king sized bed with white blankets and cover ups and countless pillows, colored in the same shade as the walls was stuck on the wall next to the window, making the entire area feel almost suffocating. There was a big TV hung on the wall across from the bed, which was never open, and a silver colored desk that seemed to me completely useless was placed under it.

But my room back home in England was indeed something else. First of all, it had color. The walls were painted warm beige because my parents did not want to paint it pink which is supposed to be the girls'

color. They wanted it to be neutral. My bed was not so big, but it was enough. It was made of iron and it had a rusty sort of texture that made it look super vintage and cozy. On my walls I had many paintings of mine; I loved to paint. I was not very brilliant at it, but it was my favorite thing to do. And then, there was my large wooden bookcase. Many, many books I had back home. New, old; some of them were my mom's from when she was at high school, some others were new, and my personal favorites; second-hand books that I had bought from a small, hidden bookstore I discovered one day walking from school, near my house. Like me, my mum used to read a lot of books all the time. So I had a big collection of books. All of them I had read and I had even more that my dad had put in the basement so they would not take up much space in my already crowded, little room. The ceiling was painted red. I remember getting this idea on my 14th birthday and telling my dad. He loved it, so we sneaked off the house without my mom noticing and went to the store to buy paint. Then we crawled up to my room from my window, we set everything up and while my mom was cleaning the house, my dad and I painted the ceiling.

Later that day, when it was my room that my mom had to clean, she noticed the painted red ceiling and started yelling to my dad for doing something so big to the house without asking her. Eventually, she got used to it. They bickered for days; well my mom did. My dad just listened to her while reading his paper and saying over and over again, "The kid wanted a red ceiling, what is so bad about that?"

And with the thought of my parents, I finally fell asleep.

The first week of November was dull. I stayed in my room for most of the time, except from eight to nine p.m., when I was forced to go see

my therapist. Hannah visited me a lot. Every morning, I woke up and after five minutes she would be outside my door with a big, warm smile painted on her face. We never talked about what happened; Gloria forbid Hannah to ask me any questions about that 'dreadful day'. I overheard her talking to Hannah and threatening her (as much as Gloria can threaten; she is too sweet) that if she asks or mentions anything about that day or about my time in the hospital, she will have to stop coming to see me.

So, Hannah and I talked about everything else; college, her mom that dyed her hair bright red and that her brother had gotten into a huge fight with their dad. Hannah told me she wishes her brother and their dad stopped talking so that he can stop sucking on his ass and realize how much of a shitty person he actually is. It was really entertaining listening to her problems; much because they distracted me from mine. And although I never even got a name for her brother, I knew he would not really appeal to me as a sympathetic person. Hannah's family drama was something that we never forgot to talk about whenever she visited. Angry, rich aunts and ungrateful fathers were our past time. Nonetheless, the drama reminded me that the only family I have is a heartless aunt with a toxic boyfriend and a brother who I had no idea of his whereabouts. It has been a very long time since I had talked with my brother, and since he was the older one I expected him to reach out to me. Something he never did.

The week was boring, yet calm. I did not have any mental breakdowns, only the regular; crying, yelling and such. But the feeling of my heart sinking into a pit of darkness and fear, and the crippling anxiety filling my body until I fell on the floor trembling had become just a dreadful memory. I ate regularly; at least that is what Gloria

thought. In reality I had been feeding Buddy, my aunt's dog, whatever Gloria gave me.

I had built a routine, whatever that routine was, and I was content with it.

Until the second week of November arrived. I woke up one morning thinking that I would be seeing Hannah soon. Yet Hannah never came. I waited all morning and all evening. She was nowhere to be found. She had not texted me, or called me. And when I asked Gloria about it she just shrugged and gave me my soup, which smelled ghastly. Finally, around nine p.m., Gloria came into my room with an unfamiliar grin on her face.

'Somebody has come to visit you.' She said and quickly walked outside. I guessed that Hannah had finally decided to pay me a visit so I leaned down to grab some magazines I had collected to show her so we could judge the models and drool over that delicious looking food, when I heard my visitor entering.

'Finally, Hannah. I thought you'd never—I had leaned back to my bed and had seen that my visitor was neither who I wanted to see nor who I thought I would see. '...come.' I took my time before speaking up. For some odd reason my tongue had gone dry and I found myself unwilling to take a breath.

'Mason? W-what are you doing here?'

'You never called me.' He walked closer but stopped immediately after seeing the pure fright in my eyes as soon as I realized he was getting closer. 'I-I do not know, I feel like we left things a little bit...weird. I went to your college campus and waited at random times in the day, in hopes I would see you. But you were not there so I looked for your friend and she avoided me. So I came here.' The unforgettable feeling

of nausea had suddenly hit me. I felt as if the room had become smaller than it was a few seconds ago and the temperature of my body had risen quite a lot. I took a shaky breath and discreetly wiped my sweaty hands on my sheets. I felt as if I had run miles.

‘I was... away. B-back in England to see some, uh, relatives.’ That was far from the truth, of course. I had no relatives left except from my long lost brother. But he was exactly that; long lost. If only he had kept any sort of contact with me, I would not be in New York. And for once in my life I wished I had never come in this stupid city.

‘Oh...’ he said. And then he looked at me. I felt helpless under his stare. All I could think about was her and what I did; how I betrayed her. At the thought of that my breathing got sharper and all of the sudden the air in the room was not enough for me. I broke the stare and looked outside my window. The steely gray sky brought me comfort and ease. The image of myself walking around a park while it drizzled, had surprisingly calmed my nerves, and in the matter of seconds my breathing returned back to normal.

‘I get it... okay? I know every time you look at me you see... her. And when I look at you I see her.’ It was as if saying her name was a crime. Like we had both agreed not to mention it, because it would make everything so much worse. ‘But I felt something. Something between us that has nothing to do with Nova.’ He paused. A long pause that seemed to last for a lifetime. Tears were threatening to come pouring out, and the sharp pain in my heart along with the sinking sense had made an appearance once again only this time, it was far worse. I could not even control my body as it slowly started shaking. I wanted it all to stop but a feeling inside of me was raging to come out and in a few split moments, I was helpless. ‘Don't you feel it too?’

I did not want to answer his question. I had not felt anything when I was with him. Only guilt. But I could not find the guts or words to say that to him; that every time we talked or every intimate moment we had shared had brought me nothing but pure hatred from myself. That every time he kissed me I saw my best friend's lifeless body lying on the bathroom tile floor. It was all too much for me and I could not bear the thought of breaking his heart like I had broken mine.

Fortunately, someone had knocked on the door. Gloria did not wait for an answer as she quickly entered my room and with a worried smile, lightly dragging Mason out of the room, saying it was time for me to eat. Finally, being left alone, the tears came flooding down my swollen, red cheeks while I tried to cry soundless sobs. Once the shock had come off my system in the sweet form of tears, I wiped my face and took a deep breath remembering what my counselor had told me. 'Try to bring up a nice memory to your brain whenever you feel like you're drowning.' Only problem was, I had to dig very deep in order to find a happy memory. But I managed to calm myself down.

Soon I realized Gloria had left the door open so I made myself stand up to shut it close. That is when I noticed my aunt's new boyfriend standing next to my aunt's bedroom door staring right at me. I did not move, I stayed still as if he would attack me if I made the slightest move. He was looking deep into my eyes making me feel extremely self-conscious and vulnerable. His stare was cold and lifeless but his grin was almost lustful making me sick in my stomach. He never broke eye contact, not even when my aunt came out of her bedroom looking like a million dollars and grabbing his arm, seeking his attention. Once she realized that her precious boyfriend's eyes were fixed on something else, she followed his gaze and her eyes widened at the scene. Feeling the

nausea getting the best of me, I quickly closed the door and started throwing up every bit of food I had previously consumed in hopes of getting his persistent stare out of my system. I felt so sick to my very core that I did not stop throwing up until I felt empty. Gloria had barged in my room running and yelling, asking me if I'm okay. And when I was done, she took me to the bathroom to clean myself up and then back to my room to immediately put me in bed insisting I needed sleep.

But I could not fall asleep. The thought of seeing that man again had haunted my dreams that it was impossible to close my eyes and relax. The room was cold yet I found it an impossible task to get up from the bed and walk to the window to close it. The short burgundy curtain hanging from a black painted wooden rod was slowly moving right and left as the street noise from busy New York played as a background noise for my noisy thoughts. For a moment there I felt at ease. But, of course, it did not last very long. Suddenly, my aunt's boyfriend's stare popped into my mind. His dark brown eyes looking straight into mine made me shiver in disgust. I tried closing my eyes and falling asleep, but the brisk air coming from outside was enough to keep me awake nearly all night.

Rick, I miss you.

At around four a.m. was when aunt Maria had come home from her date with the devil. I heard her heels clicking against the recently cleaned floor coming closer and closer to the room I was staying. The clicking sound stopped when I saw her shadow right outside my bedroom. She stayed there for a few seconds before bursting in and piercing her eyes on mine. Her stare was as cold and lifeless just like her boyfriend's but not nearly as scary.

'You!' she barked. 'How dare you look at my boyfriend that way?'

Nothing that she had ever said to me felt more like a slap in the face like what she said that night. He was a filthy man, but my aunt did not realize it for a long time. I felt unbearably humiliated and sick to the point of throwing up only by the thought of his stare.

‘You come in here and bring hell to all of our lives after we helped you and cared for you! You are an utmost disgrace, Zoe. How dare you look at my partner that way? Who on earth do you think you are?’ She spat gracefully. I could not dare utter a word. That would only spur her further. She had walked closer to me; so close that I could smell the alcohol in her stinky breath. She was a mess. Her hair was not falling into beautiful long curls, like it did every single hour of the previous days, but it looked damaged and frizzy. The long curls were replaced by a weird combination of straight and wavy strands of hair, looking confused as to what they’re supposed to be. Her mascara was smudged under and over her eyes while the remains of her bright red lipstick were a faded pink shade.

She looked tired.

Her whole body showed. The way she stood breathlessly in front of me, her wrinkly face that once looked fresh and happy. And her eyes; it was the first time I ever really looked into my aunt’s eyes since the day she dropped me off at school the second year I attempted to finish my education.

Her eyes looked different than what she presented to be. To me, she was a burden. Someone who only brought me unhappiness and a constant reminder of every failure in my life. But her eyes told me a different story that night. I saw despair. I saw desperation. I saw loneliness, hurt, fright. Her eyes were begging for something I could not understand at the moment. The room had fallen silent. She had stopped

screaming at me. She, too, was looking into my eyes for the first time. A glimpse of regret, and even pity, flashed in her eyes. But then she blinked, and when she opened her eyes, all those emotions were replaced with pure, raw hatred.

‘One more thing like that and you’re out of here!’ She said and exited the room leaving the door open to reveal to my view a scared looking Gloria, standing right outside.

It was shocking to hear aunt Maria talk in such a manner. She used to be one of the nicest people I knew but something in her had changed.

And if you have asked me then what was the thing that I thought had changed my sweet aunt, I would say my condition or even the city. But nothing like that changes a woman as much as a strong man’s hand does.

Chapter eleven

The next morning Gloria had forced me to get up from the bed and take my breakfast at the dining room area. She sat patiently with me while I tried to stuff the delicious—yet indifferent to me— food she had made me. It all tasted like carton, not like I knew what carton tasted like; but I assumed it tasted something like what I was eating; dry and difficult to swallow. My whole body felt entirely dehydrated from the lack of water consumption, but I dared not to tell that to Gloria unless I wanted her to start screaming at me. It took me long to finish the whole plate, but Gloria managed to stay silent and with a, slightly weird looking, smile plastered on her face. It was as if she was waiting for something other than me finishing my meal.

After I was done eating I stood up planning to place the plate in the sink but Gloria grabbed it before I could do anything and threw it

on the counter next to it and then motioned me to sit back on the chair. And with a gentle smile she started talking.

‘Look, darling. Unfortunately, your aunt and I had a fight yesterday about... some issues that had to do with the house.’ I stayed silent and waited for her to continue. ‘And, um, one thing led to another and...’ She was no longer looking at me. She had found great interest in her fingernails than looking me in the eyes. ‘I...will be leaving the house soon.’

Gloria might have been old, close-minded and sometimes pushy, but she was the only thing that kept me sane in this house. She was the one who saved my life and actually cared enough to make me realize I needed help. In every fight or awful encounter with my aunt, I knew Gloria would be waiting for me with a warm hug, a witty joke and food. But when she told me she would be going away, it nearly killed me. Pictures of aunt Maria staying alone, her boyfriend invading my personal space and nights when panic creeps through my thoughts and body without Gloria there to comfort me, flooded my mind.

I left the table without saying a word and almost ran to my room. I was angry. This weird version of desperation started bubbling inside of me and the only thing that managed to appear in my mind that would help me ease whatever I was feeling was breaking objects. And that I did. I grabbed anything that I could get a hold of and threw it on the floor with such force, that it could only break into pieces. Every time my hand grasped an item, I could only feel my anger reaching the very tips of my fingers, squeezing the object until my fingers were white and hurting and finally bursting out like flames forcing me to throw the object into the wall or on the floor.

Once I calmed down and realized the mess I had put myself into, I grabbed the nearest coat I saw lying around and quickly left the apartment building. My aunt would be furious when she would come across the mess her unworthy niece had caused. I could already see her face, without closing my eyes; lips scrunched, hands grabbing her waist so tight her knuckles seemed white, eyes wide open not even daring to blink. And Gloria would definitely be disappointed in me. She would, of course, not show it the slightest, but I knew her too well to know how she felt. But at the moment, I could not care less. I felt hurt, betrayed, abandoned. And to be honest, I do not know whether I had the right to feel all those things; Gloria was nothing less than like a mother to me, she had helped me more than anyone ever dared to. And maybe that is why I could not forgive her for leaving me alone, for knowing everything I've been through, yet abandoning me at a house she knows I only stayed because of her. Now that I think about it maybe that was the reason she left. Maybe she wanted me out of there. It seemed odd that a small, stupid fight could break my aunt and Gloria up. Because long before I came in the picture, Gloria was aunt Maria's little helper.

I do not know much, but I know enough. Gloria met aunt Maria when aunt Maria was only 19 years old and had gone to New York City to follow her dreams. A young, prude, with no life experience whatsoever, 19-year-old girl roaming through New York streets was my aunt when Gloria found her. She saw that young Elisabeth from quiet little Leeds was quite ambitious and fearless. So Gloria brought her to her house and took very much care of her; treated her like her own child. Of course, Gloria was not old at all, at the time. So, she too had a great

deal of energy coursing through her veins. Enough for young, careless Elisabeth, at least.

So, the two young ladies streamed down New York City happy and ready to live new adventures and create wonderful memories. They went to different parties or clubs every single night, some nights even more than one, stayed outside until the sunrise, sneaked into movie theaters and ran away from the security when they got caught. It was all like a happy fairy tale.

That was until, aunt Maria, at the age of 20, met handsome Rick and got into the world of business. Gloria would help aunt Maria pick the most beautiful dresses for her dates with Rick, stayed up until the sun had risen to keep her company while she studied for whatever she needed to gain the right knowledge to be Rick's right hand. As a thank you, Aunt Maria took Gloria to a big event the company hosted.

Very glamorous. Very expensive.

Gloria was astonished, aunt Maria, not so much. Aunt Maria felt as though she had already been there. She was born for being in the limelight and Gloria could obviously see it.

Aunt Maria proved to be a hard worker, thus climbing up the stair of successes quicker than anyone had considered possible. Her social circle expanded as she traveled all around the world with Rick by her side.

She met new people, people her age that could bear to have another drink after the clock hit midnight.

Consequently, that is how the both of them drifted apart. They saw less and less of each other and ended up just talking once a year via a birthday card. After a few years, when successful, independent Maria was of 26 years, Gloria came into the picture again, but this time, asking

for employment. Aunt Maria was delighted to see her and more than willing to give her a job as her maid.

And that is where I think the connection was lost; right when aunt Maria became some sort of boss to Gloria. She had power over her and was able to use it whenever she felt her ideas or choices were judged by Gloria. But Gloria did not like that. Maybe she thought that, going to ask for a job, they would become what they used to be, even if Gloria was too old and tired. She thought that maybe, even if Maria had changed, they would meet at a certain point. That, of course, never happened. Aunt Maria saw Gloria as nothing more than an employee from the moment she stepped foot in her apartment asking for help six years after their fall out as friends.

Without even realizing it, I had reached at the far end of the area where I lived, and had walked into the place where Nova had brought me the first time we met. And days after Gloria had officially moved out of the apartment, I found myself going there to calm down, ease my mind after breaking half of my belongings in hopes I could get rid of that bothering feeling that was planted in the middle of my chest. I even found myself in one of those British pubs they had down the street from Hannah's house. Right, Hannah...

I had not seen her in ages. I tried calling her multiple times, I left voicemails on her answering machine, I even went to her apartment frantically knocking on her door. But she was nowhere to be found. Thoughts and flashes of memories of the last time I had not heard from my best friend filled my mind, bringing back the resentful feeling of raw anxiety and fear crawling through my body. I tried pushing everything

back and it— somewhat— worked, until Mason appeared out of nowhere at the park I had been hanging around.

‘Be mine’, ‘I love you’, ‘Just one date, please’, ‘You are nothing like her’, ‘She never made me feel like you did’, ‘Please make me forget all about her’. Were some of the things Tyler told me every time he visited, each word making me feel sicker and sicker. He would follow me all the way to the park without me knowing, show up unexpectedly and then follow me back to the apartment while crying and screaming how much he needs me. Some days, I would leave the park early, go up to my aunt’s room and climb down the fire escape, wait for him to leave and then quickly walk back to the park.

The park had slowly become my safe place, even though it was far from safe. My aunt had become almost unbearable. After the realization that I dropped out of college months ago, the fact that I have no job and that I am staying at her house rent-free, had finally sunk in, she made her life purpose to make my life a living hell. Marcus, the name I heard being moaned one night from my aunt’s room, had stopped coming to the apartment, the only positive thing that happened that month, and Tyler’s visits had slowly decreased. And then December slowly arrived at my miserable, little life.

The cold was almost unbearable and the rain was falling furiously every other day making my visiting to the park quite an adventure.

Fortunately, on not, during my 5-hour outings at the park I met Anthony and Jayden. They, too, were spending a lot of their time at the park, right next to the spot where I had named ‘mine’. Anthony was the first one to catch my attention. He was very tall, abnormally tall actually, and even though he only wore black clothes and would sometimes get lost in the darkness of the night, he stood out to me. He was quite

skinny, his legs especially; they looked like chopsticks. Anthony had long, curly, brown hair that fell right below his ears. He would usually put half of it into a bun and under the sheer moon light, I could see his bright blue eyes and cute, deep dimples whenever he smiled.

Anthony being too good not to look at, was always accompanied by his equally beautiful friend, or I should rather say, girlfriend. I won't lie to you, even though I was in no state to have any sort of emotional, or any other type, of relationship with any human being, I was pretty bummed out when I saw Anthony kissing his girlfriend passionately one cold evening. Her name was Jayden, and she was beautiful. She had long, straight ashy blonde hair that reached to her perfectly shaped waist. She had one of the biggest, most captivating smiles.

One Monday night, Anthony and Jayden walked over to me to ask me if I had anything that would help them light up a cigarette. I stood there just watching Anthony with, what I think was, my mouth hanging open. I do not know how Jayden managed not to hit me in the face, and I knew she was thinking about it. But I could not help it; Anthony was gorgeous. He had captivating looks and it was hard not to stare at him. I felt trapped, worried; I had not felt like that in ages. The attraction I felt towards Anthony was something I could not control.

'Uh.. n-no. I am so-sorry; I do not carry a lighter with me.' Jayden smirked; she seemed pleased with the fact that I stuttered. I do not blame her; I was practically gawking at her boyfriend with her right next to him. Anthony did not seem to notice. I do not blame him either; he had Jayden next to him, gracing her hand up and down his arm looking at him with eyes that promised a lot for when they went somewhere more private. It felt strange, I grew angrier each time her hand reached his shoulder and then went down his palm.

The next time that I had any contact with one of them, was a few days later. Jayden reached out to grab my arm and pull me away from a racing bike coming right at me.

‘Thanks, I did not see that coming.’ I said in a laugh. She was laughing too, which felt odd and suddenly I felt as though being hit by the bike would be less dangerous compared to what was coming.

‘You seem tense.’ She told me and raised her brows. I did not speak. ‘Are you?’ I must have looked terrified, because I was. Normally, jealous girlfriends did not scare me but Jayden was something else. Her eyes shot daggers right through me, but her face seemed unbothered. Jayden was slightly shorter than me so she had to tilt her head to look me in the eyes but her height did not take much from how scary she looked.

‘Come join me, I might have something that would help you relax.’ Her tone was endearing. Her voice made me want to follow her and discover what she had for me, but my gut was telling me that one; what she had would probably not actually help and two; she might want to kill me for basically drooling over her boyfriend.

So I kindly declined and threw her a lame excuse to get myself out of there. I said something about my aunt, the apartment, a car... I did not really make sense. Although, stupid as I am, I decided that it was a splendid idea to hide out behind a tree for a while and then go sit at my spot again, hoping she would have left. Unfortunately, she had not and along with Anthony, was sitting at their normal spot under some trees. Once she spotted me, she grabbed Anthony’s face and pulled him in for a passionate kiss, while looking straight into my soul.

That day I felt sick enough from what I had seen, so I did not think I could handle going back to my dreadful aunt. So I decided to stay at

the park for as long as I could. At one point during the night, I was completely alone, listening to the sweet sound of the leaves hitting each other echoing through the nightly silence.

It came as a shock to see Anthony sitting on one of the swings listening to music through his headphones. Honestly it was even weirder to see him sitting there without Jayden. I might not have seen them elsewhere but the park, but these few hours were enough for me to understand the type of their relationship. They were always all over each other; hugging, kissing, showing other forms of affection in front of literal five-year-old kids.

Generally things that made my blood boil (and that I secretly wanted to do with Anthony). Though, I will not lie to you, it was always Jayden who showed so much publicly and at times when people were around. Anthony seemed uncomfortable with the whole situation and half the time he looked like he did not even want to kiss her. Of course, that could only mean one thing; that he did not quite like her in reality and was just playing a role in the relationship for someone else's benefit. And as a person who had felt the same thing and had played her own part in faking the feelings she had for her partner just for the eyes of her classmates, I could recognize anyone who felt the same pretty easily.

That or I was having too much fun fantasizing about Anthony that I needed proof that their relationship was going to end sometime soon. But to my disappointment, I started seeing clearly what was going on; and that was that Anthony was enjoying quite a lot of the little actions of affection that Jayden was showing him. He was smiling, a gorgeous smile that showed his teeth perfectly and that created little dimples on his cheeks making me feel an uncertain type of way every time I looked at it. He was too, looking more than willing to sneak with her behind

some bushes and scare some babies and toddlers with their loud voices. After living this experience, I decided that staying at my aunt's would be much preferable than having to see them together and happy as two free birds.

I knew that what I was feeling was wrong and unreasonable. I did not even know Anthony, yet I felt such a strong attraction towards him every time I saw him draw at his little sketchbook or skate aimlessly through the park. The maddening part of it all was that I was denying every bit of feeling I felt, even though it was quite clear what had been going on. My past relationship, the trauma that scarred me with sleeping with Mason and the fact that Anthony had a girlfriend, held me back from admitting to myself that it was not only an attraction I had to him, but a full-grown crush on the gorgeous stranger.

To top it all off, Hannah had been gone for almost a month. I continued to pay regular visits to her apartment, or go waiting outside of the college campus, hoping I would see her bright red, wavy hair moving up and down among the sea of students walking outside. But I never did. At first, I was remarkably sad, realizing that I had been left with no one to share my problems with, since I was continuously denying going to my therapist. Where's a best friend when you need to talk about boys? I needed her company and I began to feel worried about her whereabouts.

After a while, I grew angry at her. She had left without any warning at a time she knew was extremely difficult for me. Once I had gone to the mental health hospital, I had been informed that Gloria had told Hannah of my state, so I kept calm at the thought that she knew I had not abandoned her. But she did no such thing.

That day, when I saw Anthony alone at the park at night, was the day I deleted Hannah's contact off my phone. As I was very upset and the angry thoughts had clouded my mind, I was not able to think straight. I grew tired of just sitting under my tree, looking at Anthony put the cigarette between his lips and after a few seconds, blowing out the grey smoke that filled the air. Something in the way the cigarette hung loosely off his lips and the way he gently grabbed and toyed with it with his fingers made me feel odd, creating an unsettling feeling in my stomach. He saw me looking at him and smiled; a half smile that if I did not know he had a girlfriend waiting for him, I would have taken the wrong way.

It took him exactly ten minutes to come and talk to me, but it was like nothing I've ever lived with a guy before. Because that time I actually liked the guy and he was not just someone I randomly met at a party and agreed to follow him to the bathroom, nor someone that did not interest me in the slightest way but dated him because I wanted a boyfriend so I can be like every other girl my age. And most importantly, he did not have any connection with my life. Not with Nova, not with William or Hazel, my aunt or Tyler. He was new, exciting and knew nothing of what I've been through and the horrifying mistakes I've made.

'It seemed weird to be the only two here and pretending we do not see each other.' He said to me. His voice was much higher than I thought, but I liked it, nonetheless. He sat next to me and took off his beanie. I did not say anything, I couldn't. I stayed silent and kept looking at the stars. But the silence was not at all uncomfortable. At least on my part. I enjoyed his presence even though he was not doing anything worth enjoying. He took another cigarette out of the pack and put it

between his lips. He took his time before lighting it though. And that was enough time for my brain, at least, to overthink the situation and come to the conclusion that if I asked him for one he would find me much more interesting thus more attractive, perhaps.

‘You got one more to waste?’ I asked him and in my head, I knew I sounded way cooler and much more intriguing than I actually was. In reality, I was just a pathetic girl, acting like a silly teenager that went overboard and did foolish and ignorant things to get a boy’s attention. The fact that it worked on Anthony should have troubled me, but I was over the heels excited that I gained his attention. I felt more feminine, the most feminine I have ever felt, with his eyes lingering over my body and lips.

He took another cigarette out of his pack and instead of placing it on top of my open hand; he slowly brought it in front of my lips and waited for me to slightly part them so he could set it in between. I saw him look next to me. A strand of my hair had fallen and he took it with his finger and slowly put it behind me ear, while gracing my face when retrieving his hand. I blushed at his gentle touch and by that time, his girlfriend Jayden had completely escaped my mind. It was just him and I and I could not be more thankful. Although deep down, I knew what we were doing was partly wrong, my inner voice had convinced me that since our lips were not touching, we were doing nothing particularly wrong.

‘Your hair is a very beautiful color.’ I could not take my eyes off of his; small, but a beautiful grey shade. I never thought that my hair was pretty. It was normal, nothing special; light brown, kind of curly but not completely. ‘But you would look really hot with black hair. It’d make your eyes pop.’ He said in excitement. My face fell.

...And there she was, near the sink with her head low and her hand grabbing her own hair. I walked quickly over to her and took her rough, damaged from the hair-dye hair into my fist and kept it away from her face...

Nova had black hair. It was not natural, but it was black. It made her eyes pop. It made her look hot. Not me, it was her thing. I could not dye my hair black. But after all, she was gone, she would not mind and Anthony said I would look hot with black hair... I laughed and looked down so he would not see me blush when I heard him laugh. I took the cigarette from my mouth to my fingers to speak.

‘Thank you very much, but I do not think I could ever do that.’ He looked at me and frowned. I took in his expression. His brows trying to touch each other, his nose scrunched like a kid’s whose parents won’t buy him treats.

‘Why not?’ I couldn’t, not notice the concern in his voice. He was actually interested in what I had to tell him and for once, I had found someone I wanted to talk to; except from Nova who overdosed and died and Hannah who disappeared out of nowhere and had not contacted me in a month.

‘Because...I am not the person who would do random things out of the blue. That was my best friend’s job.’ I said with a sorrow laugh in the end.

I tried to avoid his gaze but he grabbed my chin with just his finger and moved my head to look at him. The vibe between us had drastically changed. We were no longer two strangers that hung out at the same park. We were developing some sort of connection that I hoped would eventually turn into something more powerful, and, without shame of thinking about it, I imagined a world without Jayden; a world with only Anthony and I.

‘I think it is more ‘you’ than you think, Zoe.’ He said my name. He said my name and it was like a million butterflies sprung free in my stomach.

I must’ve looked confused, because I was. I did not have the faintest idea how he knew my name but his finger that laid still on my chin was quite the distraction from what was going on. He laughed, a beautiful laugh that rang like music to my ears, and looked down while retracting his finger. The empty spot on my chin felt cold with the absence of his finger. As soon as I realized how pathetic I must have looked, and sounded inside my head, I straightened up and looked at his flushed face.

‘That woman that calls you every now and then when the clock hits 12, really knows how to scream.’ It took me a fair while to realize what he was talking about, but it dawned on me after all that he was referring to the loud calls I would receive once in a while when my aunt remembered that I existed.

She would yell at me for staying out very late, not being home at all during the day and night but that bizarre attitude only lasts until she has fallen asleep. After that, I’m free to do whatever I want without having her ‘worry’ about me.

‘Yes, she is quite the woman.’ We sat there and laughed for some moments. And then he abruptly stopped, but continued smiling at me. He took a look at his left and then with a smirk he got up and spread out his hand, waiting for me to take it, which I obviously did.

‘Now what do we do?’ I said, quite nervous. His eyes fell right on mine, making me once more very aware of the swarm of butterflies in my stomach doing circles.

‘Now... I’m going to teach you how to skate, Zoe.’ The way my name slipped through his lips was sure to make me do anything he wanted me to. But skating really terrified me at the moment. Sure, it looked easy when other people did it, but my feet could not possibly stay balanced on a piece of wood stuck on four small wheels. There was no way. So I started walking backwards laughing awkwardly, while his smirk grew bigger.

‘Ha... yes, I do not think that will work, *Anthony*.’ I told him and his smile turned evil. I was trying to get my hand away from his firm grip and walk away from the absolute terrifying scenario of Anthony trying to teach me how to skate but instead just watching me make a fool out of myself and fall on my ass. He just smiled more evilly and tried to pull me closer to him. I won’t lie, that little scene of us messing around seemed quite charming and was definitely something I would not stop replaying in my head once I got home, but I was starting to get worried about his intentions. He seemed to want to stay close to me; his hands were always near mine or somewhere on my face. But he had a girlfriend, a gorgeous one too. How could he ever see me like that? And even if he did, did that mean he would cheat on her? I would not like that.

But, oh how I wished to have his lips on mine.

It was wrong, though. Very wrong it would be. And I knew how it felt to be the girlfriend who was being cheated on. And I did not like it, not one bit. And I could not bear to live with myself if I did that to another girl, ever. Even if I did not like Anthony’s girlfriend, which I did not. I would make sure not to let my emotions control my actions.

Those were surely just words, though.

Because as soon as Anthony put all his strength to pull me to him, my breath got stuck in my throat, my hands got more and more sweaty and my heartbeat got so much more intense and faster that I could basically hear it drumming in my ears. He was close, too close for my liking. His hot breath hit my lips. His body was almost touching mine; I could feel the warm temperature radiating out of him. I did not dare look him in the eyes, or else I would not be able to control myself.

I heard his soft chuckle. I smiled. It was beautiful. His finger found my chin and suddenly I felt my hand rise and my eyes level with his. I got lost. I got lost in his eyes, the way he looked at me, like I was the only one there. I was, Angelina. I was the only one there, and I did not realize it. He looked at me like that because Jayden was not there. Anthony needed to get away from her and he saw the lonely girl, sitting under a tree in the middle of the night. The same girl that had been staring at him for over a month and was clearly into him. He saw a chance to get away, Katerina, and for that I do not blame him. We all reach a point sometime in life when we need an escape. It is how we choose to escape though, that makes the difference.

Anthony chose oblivion. Or, to be accurate, he chose make-belief.

That night, Anthony kissed me. And I kissed him back. It was beautiful; I will not hide that fact. We never got caught. Even a few days later when he kissed me again, Jayden did not find out. He eventually taught me how to skate and I did surprisingly well, compared to my previous expectations.

Chapter twelve

We had reached the beginning of the third week of December. The weather was cold, it was mostly raining and once it lightly snowed. But I never stopped going to that park, and neither did Anthony. December 17th was the day Anthony told me he was in love with me. That is when it all went wrong, Angelina. Anthony had not stopped his relationship with Jayden and he had made it clear he would never do such a thing. That should have been my first red flag. But when he told me he was in love with me, it all changed. I actually thought that something would turn it upside down and Anthony would stop seeing Jayden, ask me to be his girlfriend and then live together a happy life.

It all happened extremely quickly; so much I barely had the time to register it. I believe that is the reason I seemed happy.

It was the first time I thought of my future. Before Anthony, I had an expiration date. I never dreamed of a happy future, or a future at all for that matter. So when Anthony came into my life promising a bright, happy life ahead of me, I felt ecstatic. And I told him I loved him. It was a beautiful moment, I dare say. He had taken me to his house, a gorgeously decorated apartment. Antiques sprawled over the space giving a wonderful cozy, vintage vibe to it that warmed my heart. The walls were painted very light brown and were decorated with many colorful posters of bands, vinyls and CDs. It was a small place; the kitchen right next to the living room and to its left there was an averagely large space where he put his twin sized bed. We laid there, the view of the whole apartment before us, cuddling. My head was resting on his chest and I leaned to look at my right, his large windows displaying the perfect view of New York City.

It was calm, very calm. I was in his arms and I felt whole for the first time in my miserable life. I knew that time, that I had a reason to stay here, a reason to keep going. My mind was going circles. I imagined a world where I could abandon my aunt's apartment and go live with Anthony instead. A world where Jayden is out of Anthony's life and I am the only girl he wanted. And I was determined to make that dream a reality. Every time Jayden called Anthony, I would purposely walk out of the bathroom with only his shirt on, or with nothing at all. I would whisper promises in his ear while he talked to her while my hand was doing anything it could to make him stay. And it worked, most of the time. I kept him busy with me so he could forget all about his other girlfriend waiting for her. For a split moment I let myself believe that Jayden was the other girl and that I was his real girlfriend.

That day, when we were cuddling on his bed in the apartment, was the day he told me he loved me. It was warm, he had his arms around me and soft music was playing in the background. He leaned into my ear and whispered;

‘I think I am falling in love with you.’ He planted a soft kiss on my ear and then on the top of my head.

After hearing these words of love come out of his mouth, I was hooked. He had me wrapped around his little finger and he knew it. I thought I had him hooked too, but Anthony was only playing a role. But, again, I don’t blame him as he wasn’t aware of that himself. Anthony had lied as much to me as he had to himself. We were both so caught up on this fake reality we had created, that we could not admit that it was all just... a lie.

I did not love him; I loved the idea of him. I loved the feeling of being happy and having someone who hadn’t abandoned me. Yet, I told him I did. The first time I mouthed these three words to someone, they were utterly fake.

And Anthony; he did not love me. He loved the idea of being with someone who was not pressuring him and manipulating him as much as Jayden did. Even though I did as much pressuring and manipulating as his girlfriend, Anthony could not see it. Because people tend to go looking for the same destructive things until they realize what’s really wrong.

Christmas time was upon us and I could not have been more excited. Christmas was a big one for me. I had not celebrated it for years, so when Anthony suggested we spend it together, I almost started crying. I would if I had not cried so much these past few years that I

was left with no tears to cry. The plan was simple but brilliant. Anthony would come to my apartment on December 23rd to pick me up and take me to his apartment. Jayden had to visit her parents in California, so she would be gone for the holidays, leaving us with the cost crystal clear.

On the 24th, Anthony woke me up with excitement plastered all over his face. He kissed me for 'good morning' and then lifted me up to go brush my teeth and get ready. As I was brushing my hair and swerving it around trying to make it look nice and clean, Anthony tip-toed to the bathroom and snooped his head from the slightly open door. He coughed and I looked at him through the mirror.

'Is everything okay?' I asked sweetly. His eyes sparkled. It was like seeing a five-year-old kid ready to ask if we could go to the candy store. And that he did, only the adult version of it.

'I wanna go get a tattoo.' He stated. My hands stopped moving inside my hair. I looked completely startled. I did not know what to say. I feared that if I said the wrong thing and looked extremely excited or supportive, he would drag me with him and I will end up on a chair getting a massive tattoo that I did not want. 'And... I was thinking that it would be very Christmas-y if we got one together.' My eyes shot right up to his eyes. I was facing him completely; my hands had fallen out of my hair and were dangling to my sides. I was speechless. Getting a tattoo together was far more than what I expected he would say.

'T-together? Are you sure we are ready for this?' He walked fully in the bathroom and got close to me. He grabbed me by my waist and wrapped his hands around it. He looked down on me and smiled before kissing me sweetly. I was drunk on him; I could not say no even if I wanted to. And I did. Deep down, I knew we should not get matching

tattoos because our relationship was so mentally draining, that it was obvious that it had an expiration date.

But all that was buried deep inside of me. So deep that what came out of my mouth after he kissed me, was a breathy. ‘Yes.’

Anthony had many tattoos; it was not his first time doing it. So he was not even the slightest bit nervous. On the other hand, I had not gotten any tattoos, ever and I was very nervous. It may have come as a shock to you, considering my state of tattoos right now, but, everyone’s gotta start at some point. That was my point, with Anthony.

We were walking down some small streets that I had never been to, passing by stores I had never seen, heard or visited in my entire stay in New York. Anthony seemed to know where we were heading and I trusted him, even though I had no idea where on earth we were waking to. I felt as if I had traveled into an entirely different city. There were no skyscrapers, no busy roads swarmed with people who walked quickly from one place to another. It was a very quiet neighborhood, only a few kids playing football on the street.

Once we reached the tattoo shop Anthony swore was the best in the city, I felt as if my legs had abandoned me. The place was hideous. It was a small building with two overly large windows that had random dirty, ripped posters on top of other equally awful posters stuck on them, on each side of the half ruined, wooden door that led inside. On top of the windows and door, was placed a medium sized sign that wrote ‘TATTOO SHOP’ in red letters. The sign was also ruined, covered in mud and a few letters were missing. Anthony looked at the place with love whereas I looked at it with pure terror. Anthony opened the door for me and stood behind my shaking, from the cold and fright, body.

On the other side of the door were just some stairs leading to another floor. The place was dark and as I walked downstairs, I could barely recognize where the steps were. I almost fell once or twice.

At the end of the staircase I was greeted with an enticing smell of freshly made coffee. I closed my eyes and took in the wonderful smell. I felt Anthony leave my side and go talk to a man elsewhere. When I opened my eyes, I was startled. It was like I had gone into an entirely different store. The floor was covered in clean, white tiles, the walls were painted crimson red and pressed against them were slim, wooden tables with a fair few papers and some sort of books that had tattoo drawings inside.

Anthony came skipping to me with a huge smile plastered on his face, a smile that made me forget all about the tingling anxiety that the needles lying on the silver trailer made me feel. I was definitely scared of getting that tattoo for a few reasons. First of all, I hated needles; the state of knowing that something sharp and dangerous would penetrate the surface of my skin, made my heart pound. Second of all, from the moment Anthony suggested, or better manipulated me into agreeing to the idea of, getting matching tattoos, it was like something woke inside of me. I did not magically forget all about my supposed love for Anthony, but the possibility of lasting long enough to make getting tattoos together a reasonable offer, seemed slim to non-existing. All of the sudden I started doubting our 'love' and thinking that maybe we should not be so irrational about something so...permanent.

But of course, all of my worries disappeared when Anthony's lips touched mine and dominantly swept me off my feet. I hate thinking about how easy it was for him to change my moods, opinions and stop my rational thinking. It was honestly embarrassing what he could make

me do just by kissing me. I will not, of course, put all the blame at him. The toxicity and manipulation must be equally given. I used him as much as he used me. Every time I made any negative comment about something he did, or when our conversations seemed to be turning into heated arguments, Anthony would use my undeniable attraction towards him, against me. Meaning, if he knew he did something wrong, like dating two girls at the same time perhaps, he would seductively walk towards me, press me to a wall and start kissing my neck until I begged him to kiss me. I know, pathetic. But that was our relationship; pathetic.

And same thing with me; every time his mind cleared out just a little bit and he started seeing our relationship just the way it was, I would find his secret buttons and persuade him in my own way that what we have is completely real, natural and not at all mind-fucking, soul-renting and mentally disturbing. Or, if he wanted to go visit Jayden, because he had been ghosting her for weeks, I would put on something provocative and with just that, he would forget all about her. Then, it seemed like a reason to give me a pat on the back, something to be proud about. Now, I want to throw up just thinking about it.

‘So, have you thought of any designs you’d like us to get?’ He asked me ever so softly, while pressing his nose on the crook of my neck and inhaling my perfume. I felt his lips curl into a smile of satisfaction before he exhaled and inhaled once again. ‘You smell lovely.’ He whispered lowly, making the little hairs on the back of my neck rise. He must have noticed because he let a soft chuckle and wrapped his arms around my waist. He used his lips to leave small pecks all over my neck, clouding my mind with a hazy feeling.

‘So, any thoughts on the tattoos?’ He asked me, still latched on my body.

‘Uh... no, no thoughts.’ I breathed out and he chuckled once again.

‘That is okay,’ He said. ‘I have the greatest idea. I talked with Phil and he’s making the design right now.’ I felt uneasy with the fact that he had already decided on what I would get tattooed on my body forever. My stomach felt heavy and my head started spinning, but I could not open my mouth to protest. It was as if my voice had been stolen. In reality, I was just too scared to say no to him. I was afraid that if I were to deny anything he wanted to do, he would leave me. And I could not bear having another person walk out of my life again.

After whispering a few things in my ear, Anthony let me go and I followed him to one of the leather beds. He laid down first and I stood next to his head. The, severely intimidating, guy who would do the work walked slowly toward us, dragging a stool that he placed next to the bed, with him. The guy was short, shorter than me, and had numerous tattoos all over his arms, hands and fingers. He did not have any hair, he was bald, and in the center of his shaved head was tattooed a big black skull. The guy, who I figured was Phil, seemed quite intimidating until the moment he started speaking. Phil started asking me some questions to break the ice and then after listening respectfully to what I was saying while also making witty comments, he went on to tell us about one drunk client he had that did not want to leave the shop after Phil refused to tattoo his arm in that state.

Phil was so entertaining that he completely distracted me with his stories, that I forgot where I was and the reason I was there for. By the time I had calmed down from my hysterical laughing, Phil had finished scarring Anthony’s hand with ink and it was my turn to hop on the bed. I took Anthony’s hand and took great notice of the carefully wrapped tattoo that laid next to his thumb.

'A+E 'it wrote. I was in pure shock. I could not believe that Anthony had the first letter of my name tattooed next to his, in a place so visible with the naked eye. For a moment my heart fluttered. I felt joyous, I felt... loved. It is silly, I know, but that was something so unbelievably unfamiliar to me that I could not help but fall harder for him. It felt like, every morning I woke up hating myself for associating with Mason, every night I spent crying about my cheater-of-an ex-boyfriend, every passing second I compared my looks with the ones of Jayden's had been magically erased from my history record. It was just him and I in a cold, heartless world where anyone who stays alone would be stepped on to death. We had found each other and we were looking gracefully in a future that was just ours; a future that did not exist.

I might have felt happy for a split second, and for some more split seconds after that, but the walls of our violently perfect relationship would soon start to fall, and the chaos that had been fighting its way out, would finally find the opportunity to slap us right in the face.

After getting my tattoo, Anthony and I went to his apartment to celebrate our newfound love. Getting those tattoos woke up something inside of us and for an hour it felt like we were in heaven. We felt that nothing could ever separate us. Obviously, we were wrong.

See, we had yet to realize that heaven did not exist on earth.

December the 24th.

The day it all went to hell once again. That day, more than two hearts got shattered to pieces, but only one would stay that way.

We were lying in bed after having celebrated our new tattoos; it was quiet. No one was talking. Anthony was softly brushing his fingers through my hair and I heard his heartbeat through his chest. It was like music to my ears and I could sense myself falling into a peaceful sleep.

'I love you.' He lied. 'I love you and I will never let you go.' How his lies fell so easily out of his lips and were whispered in my ear was astonishing. It seems funny to me now, Katerina, how Anthony handled the situation. But then... then it hurt like a motherfucker.

'Anthony?' Cold. I felt cold. Every inch of my body felt frozen, as if someone had thrown freezing water all over me. His body did not feel warm anymore either. It felt strange and distant. I couldn't move and neither could he. I had woken up from a month of living in a lie. From a deep slumber of secrets, lies, cheating. And all the pure, happy moments we once lived were abruptly taken away from us and had been replaced with the next thirty miserable minutes, just like we deserved.

'Anthony?' The voice. That broken voice that will always echo in my head to remind me that I was the one who broke it, that I was the reason for its unhappiness, spoke again. 'Anthony, what is she doing here? What are you guys doing together?' Neither I nor Anthony dared to speak. 'Anthony what is going on?' Silence. We could not speak up. Hell, we could not even move. 'Speak up, for God's sake!' she yelled. I heard her voice crack and I could only imagine the tears that must have been forming in her eyes. But we still did nothing. I wanted to, I really did. But how could I? I felt embarrassed and if I stood up and tried to explain, I would look like a fool.

'You guys did it, didn't you?' She was crying, I could hear her small snuffles. 'You guys had sex.' And then it hit her. She took a big breath, cursed under her breath and walked away. Anthony immediately got up, dragging the white sheet with him to wrap his naked body. He ran after her, screaming her name.

I am going to be honest with you once again and reveal you that it hurt. It hurt to see him go after her even if I knew it was the right

thing to do, even if our relationship was only toxic and mentally draining. He ran to her after telling me he would never leave me. He let me go with the first chance he got and with no hesitation. I slowly stood from the bed and gathered my clothes that were scattered all over his apartment. An apartment that felt like home. Home. I wanted to go there, I wanted to go home. But such a place did not exist. I wore my pants and sweater and held my shoes in hand. I took a fair look at the apartment I had fallen in love with and in. Every bit of any moment I shared with Anthony flashed before my eyes and my heart broke just a little while their voices echoed through the hall. I opened the door and saw them. They were both crying, Anthony was on the stairs blocking Jayden's way out and she looked down on him with pure hurt and hatred.

‘... and she meant nothing to me! Really! She was just a sad little girl I felt sorry for! I swear I never loved her, Jayden! It was only you! It will always be you!’

I was the girl he was cheating on his girlfriend with. I was the other girl. But the moment these words came out of his lips I felt cheated on. I felt humiliated, betrayed, stepped on like a piece of trash that did not belong with the likes of him. Most of all, though, I felt angry. Angry that he could say uncountable ‘I love you’, that he could make me feel special, loved, someone who was worth spending his life with even for a little while, yet in mere seconds he threw me away into a pile of trash like I was not worth even a dime. Anger pulsed through my entire body, my heartbeat like I had run miles and my eyes were blurred with steamy, hot tears.

‘You felt sorry for me?’ I yelled. I was not ashamed anymore.

Yes, I had done a terrible thing as a woman but deep down I was a vulnerable, 20-year-old girl that thought she was in love. Even if I did not admit it, even if I thought I was better by myself, even if I considered myself a strong, independent woman, all I wanted was to be loved. Loved by someone who mattered, by someone who would not leave me alone, abandon me like everyone in my life had.

‘That is why you kissed me? That is why you brought me to your home? That is why you begged me to spend Christmas with you while your girlfriend was in California? That is why you dragged me to the tattoo shop to get matching tattoos? Because you felt sorry for me?’ I screamed at him. I wanted Jayden to hear everything his precious, little boyfriend did while she was away. And I wanted him to watch her face as I revealed every detail of the time we spent together. I wanted to hurt him as much as he hurt me. I wanted him to feel as much of a piece of shit as he made me feel. I wanted to make him suffer.

‘You got matching tattoos with her?’ She asked him, her voice pleading him to tell her that all that was a big lie, a scam, just to have fun the day before Christmas.

He did not speak. He only shook his head with tears rolling down his face. But I was not done. My anger had taken the better of me and with no shame I started laughing. An evil laugh that not even I could recognize. It was as if someone else was in control that day. And I am not talking about anything supernatural, of course. But see, when a person is hurt they change. And I had been hurt many times.

‘Of course he did! And it was all his idea.’ She stared at me with an open mouth and bloodshot eyes. She wanted to kill me but I did not even blink. I stared back right into her soul and in my head I tried to find the right words to finish out the both of them.

‘And you have no idea how well he thanked me after returning home.’ No shame. I had no shame in what I was saying. I saw her heart break from my words yet I did not stop there. ‘But yes, believe what he says to you. That he did not love me. Just like you believed him when he told you he is gonna stay alone when in reality he was screwing me mercilessly while you were in California pampering your parents.’

She fell down crying and Anthony stood there watching me. I walked closer to him, completely ignoring Jayden sobs next to him.

‘Fuck you, Anthony.’

And I left.

Chapter thirteen

I wish this was the end of my story. I wish I could just say that after that incident, I walked outside with tear stains on my cheeks, a red nose and puffy eyes and I fell on a mysterious looking fellow. I wish I could say that he took me to his warm, cozy house, he lit a fire and we sat on the carpet drinking hot cocoa, laughing and getting to know each other. I wish I could write that after running out of Anthony's apartment building, I ran into the love of my life. But I cannot do such a thing. Because that is not what happened.

Once I stepped outside the cold, wintery New York after getting my hair broken by Anthony, I felt the immediate urge to scream. Unable to do so, considering I was in a public space and the last thing I wanted at the moment was to be looked at like I was a mad woman, I stayed silent. My feet started moving and I was walking towards an unknown

destination. I needed nothing more in the world than to get away from the crowded city, to be somewhere alone, in peace, with no one to hurt me, use me or turn me into an even bigger monster that I already was. I did not like many people, and I hated a lot. But no person I hated more than myself on December 24th. What I did to Jayden, the way I disrespected her by going out with her boyfriend and then speaking to her like that while I knew I would hurt her, was horrible and I could not live with knowing she was still out there heartbroken and miserable.

So, a few days later I visited the park hoping to see her. To my surprise, I saw the both of them, Anthony and Jayden, sitting under a tree hugging and smiling. It hurt a lot. My anger was rising once more, almost consuming me. Only the sight of him made me want to run over there and bash his head on the ground. But, I did not. Instead, I waited behind one of some huge, green bushes until Anthony left Jayden so I could talk to her alone. Finally after almost two hours of waiting in the cold, Anthony went to the liquor store to buy supplies for some party, I overheard, that was happening later that night. I slowly got up and walked towards Jayden. She had her head bowed down, looking at the ground.

‘Hello.’ I spoke up, kind of timidly, afraid that if I was to make any sudden moves she would murder me. Crazy thoughts, really, but considering what I was about to do, I think they make sense.

‘Elisabeth?’ She asked, like we were some kind of old friends. She seemed tired. Her skin was paler, her eyes seemed damaged and her face generally made her look a lot older than she might have been. She looked right into my eyes, something she did almost every time we have talked and that scared me the most. ‘What are you doing here?’ She wondered and turned her head to the direction Anthony had left to.

‘I, uh, I came here to...’ I took a big breath, trying to control both my anger and the tears that were forming in the corner of my eyes, remembering the events of the last time I saw her. ‘I came here to apologize to you.’

She seemed taken aback. Her eyebrows were frowned and I could see the same events I was thinking of, plying on the back of her head.

‘It was not right what I did and how I spoke to you and, uh, yes I am so sorry.’ She looked at me with no emotion left in her face. I was simply terrified, but she stayed calm.

I saw her look behind me and her eyes widened just a little bit; enough for me to realize that Anthony must be coming back.

‘Leave.’ She told me. ‘Now.’ For some reason I wanted to stay. I wanted to see his face while he realized who Jayden was talking to and I wanted to see how he would react to me being there. ‘Can’t you hear me? Leave! I do not want you here!’ She screamed in an attempt to drive me away from there, but that only made Anthony walk faster and reach us sooner than what Jayden hoped. I turned around and faced him, my eyes full of tears.

He was shocked; he was not expecting me, obviously. Just by looking at his eyes all the memories flooded my mind. I saw pity in them, and sorry. He disgusted me. I wanted nothing but to stay away from him yet when I watched him walk to Jayden and hug her waist tightly, my heart clenched from the pain he was causing me.

‘I hate you’ I mouthed and just for a moment, his expression changed. Just for a moment I saw the Anthony I thought I fell in love with. The Anthony that told me he would never let me go, the Anthony who got a matching tattoo with me. Just for a moment and then he was gone.

‘I’m sorry again, Jayden.’ I said and walked away. I walked away from what I thought was the last person I let invade my mind, heart and body. The last person I thought would hurt me, the last person I thought I would have said ‘I love you’ to. I walked away and behind me I thought I left the Elisabeth who knew how to love and show affection. I left her running in the opposite direction. Running to the man that would teach me how it is to be alright. Of course, I did not know it then, but something great would come.

Not without the bad, though. The bad is always there, next to the good smiling proudly. Always.

A day went by with me crying my eyes out in my aunt’s empty apartment. When I returned from the park to her house, aunt Maria was standing gracefully in the entrance, wearing a, what seemed to be, very expensive suit holding an equally expensive handbag. Next to her, also standing, was Marcus looking like he owned the place, suitcases circling the both of them. I felt and looked like an ugly mess but my dear, sweet aunt did not even question my appearance or where I have been the past few days.

‘Marcus and I will be going to Paris for New Year’s eve.’ Paris. I always wanted to go to Paris. For a second I thought they would ask me to join them and I, surprisingly, got excited.

Then I remembered who I was dealing with; a verbally abusive aunt who I was sure, hated me and a creepy, mafia-related-looking man who I am now pretty positive was not treating my aunt how he should be.

‘You will be in charge of the house.’ She said strictly. ‘I shall not find anything ruined once I come back or you will be left with no home.’ She spat and walked away from me smiling.

Getting in the empty apartment was almost freeing. It was squeaky clean, the furniture was glowing and the floor was shining. The window door that led to the balcony was slightly opened and so I walked towards it to shut it close, the crispy air coming from it disturbing my warm state. New York seemed so calm and peaceful. I walked further into the wide balcony and took in the beautiful city. I crossed my arms in front of my chest and tightly hugged myself to create some sort of warmth for my cold body. It was silent. The street noise was playing softly as background music just like in movies. I took a deep breath. The sound of a siren echoed through the small streets. My mind was doing full circles. What was I supposed to do now? Stay alone forever? I did not want to stay in New York, I wanted to leave. But here I had a house. Where would I stay if I left New York? With what money was I going to live? I could work but it would take me ages until I could be able to be financially stable.

And then I finally screamed. I let it all out. No one could see me. A lot of people had possibly heard me and maybe even saw me, for sure. But in my head I was alone.

‘FUCK YOU, NEW YORK! FUCK YOU!’ It was pointless. I was screaming to a city. The city did not hurt me; it could not possibly do that. But I hated New York wholeheartedly and to be frank with you, I still hate it and it is quite likely that I will hate it until the day I close my eyes forever. But maybe that is my fault, once again. I had created quite the unreasonable expectations about how my life in New York would turn out to be and unfortunately they did not match the reality I was currently living.

‘When is it all going to get better?’ I asked desperately.

‘Soon, I hope.’

I thought I was dreaming, or that I fell so low that I had begun hearing voices inside my head. It felt warm hearing her voice. It reminded me of Nova, even though Nova had a faint accent. I turned around and saw Hannah. She was there, she was actually there. I was not dreaming or hallucinating. She stood there, timidly. I smiled and got in, closing the door behind me. Once I was inside, she ran to me and hugged me so tight I almost couldn't breathe. I hugged her back, feeling the need to have someone to comfort me.

'Where the hell have you been?' I whispered and tried to push her away from me, my anger kicking in. When she got the message Hannah walked backwards. 'Why did you leave me like that?' I was crying. God, how tired I was of crying! I did not know why I was shedding so many tears but I was not able to control my emotions and it was oh so tiring. My excitement that Hannah was back and I finally had someone to talk to and spend my time with along with my anger that she left so unexpectedly and without keeping any contact with me, were mixing and matching with my undying feeling of wanting to get out of New York as soon as possible. But she was there, and I couldn't leave her. But I had to leave the city.

'Liz, I am so, so unbelievably sorry I left you so suddenly.' I was crying still, but a little less loudly. My breathing got heavy as I was trying my best to control all my emotions at once. Having your heart broken and being angry at your best friend for abandoning you is not a good combination. 'But please hear me out.' My mind could not decide whether I wanted to hear her out or not and my heart was too worn out to make that sort of decision. I was completely drained.

'No.' I whisper with my eyes closed. 'No, no. I don't want to hear you.' She tried to change my mind. She grabbed my hand but I ripped

it away from her. 'I am tired of people leaving me! I cannot take it anymore, I am sorry!' She was crying, I was crying. 'I am sorry but you have to leave.'

Pain was an old friend and I welcomed him gracefully. 'You have to leave.' I whispered as I walked to my room. 'Just like they all do.'

Just close your eyes for a second, and imagine yourself falling. You are falling from a whole to a pit of darkness. Everything is black, you can see nothing. And you keep falling, and falling, and falling. You are falling with such force that it is almost painful and while your hair is wildly uncontrollable, getting in front of your face, suffocating you, your heart slowly starts to become heavy. It gets heavier and heavier as you fall deeper and deeper into the pit. Tears gather at the ends of your eyes, burning your skin as your whole mouth becomes dry. Your heartbeat quickens, it is so loud and intense that you can feel it drumming in your ear. The space shrinks. You start losing air. You take big breaths but the harder you try to find oxygen, the more you lose it. Now, your lungs feel heavy too. They get squished until they're empty and you begin to feel drowsy. You feel your senses leaving your body, slowly but surely.

And then you hit the ground.

You hit the ground on your back with a loud thud. You can feel every bone in your body ache and an insufferable pain strikes through you. You can no longer move. You do not make a sound. You do not cry, you do not scream in pain. You cannot do such things. You are too tired of falling that you no longer care what will happen. There is light where you are. You can see yourself lying almost unconsciously on the ground. You give up.

That is what I felt after Hannah left the apartment. I was in my room, trying to calm down. I could not. The room started spinning and my sobs had turned into intense coughs that scratched the back of my throat and left me in nothing less than a pathetic mess in pain. My head was aching, I tried to stay still but my body betrayed me and I fell on the floor. The feeling was familiar and I waited for someone to come save me. My palms were getting sweatier, my eyes were burning and I could barely keep them open. I waited, but no one came. Not Gloria, not Hannah. I tried to breathe but the air had been emptied off the bedroom. Heart beating hard against my chest and slowly the sweet, freeing darkness indulged me.

Chapter fourteen

As Christmas day slowly faded away and December 26th was forcefully dragged into my everyday life, I found myself without any motivation to get up and do anything. I stayed in my sweaty, wrinkly bed for most of the day and only got up to drag my, what felt like, almost lifeless body to the bathroom and then back to base. I did not eat, or drink anything and slept my way to December 27th. That day was quite interesting though.

It was the loneliest I had ever felt, December 26th, most definitely. And even though I felt deeply hurt by Hannah's decision to leave me in the dark all while she was gone, I could not stop thinking how fulfilling it would be to have someone to spend the last few days of holy joy with. Sitting on a chair out in the balcony gazing at the streets of New York City and the steely grey clouds that covered the sky I

thought of how magnificent it might be to have no worries and celebrate the New Year with laughter. To wear my nice clothes, make myself look pretty and roam the streets with Hannah, laughing and singing while people stared at us with smiles, because it's Christmas time. How lovely would it be to have someone to laugh with? I thought.

You have to know, Katerina, that back in the day I had the biggest ego one is able to have. I almost never admitted to be wrong and it did not interest me in the slightest what people thought of it; I was not going to change. Yet, on December 27th, I hung my head low and walked all the way to Hannah's apartment to ask for her forgiveness. It was, most certainly, extremely hard for me to do but in order to have my desired New Year's Eve, I had to do it.

Knocking on her door, I felt my heart beating quite fast and my palms were getting sweatier despite the freezing temperature in the building. She opened the door but did not look at me, talking to someone behind her.

'Yes, but mother said she wanted these in blue- Oh, Zoe. Hi!' She said, her voice indicating surprise. It was natural; I had not treated her in a way that promised a visit to her house any time soon. I stood there silent, waiting for her to make the first move.

'Yes, um, come in!' Hannah opened the door wider and made room for me to walk in the apartment. I saw a few people were already there, sitting around the wooden table behind the couch, with a couple of notebooks and a lot of papers in front of them. I got slightly jealous seeing that Hannah had friends over.

'Zoe, this is Mark, Katie, George and Jackie. They are helping me organize the New Year's Eve ball.' My smile got wider once I realized that these people were nothing more than Hannah's employees. 'Yes,

sounds fancy, I know.’ She took my hand, which I reluctantly gave her, and lightly dragged me to her bed. It was quite clear that she too wanted to talk to me and that she did not want others to hear.

I noticed Hannah was terribly nervous; biting her lip furiously, playing with the rings on her fingers and avoiding my stare. Not once in the time I had spent with her had she shown anything but pure happiness and joy. A sudden rush of regret washed over me thinking I had caused Hannah’s immense nervousness.

‘Look, I am sure you had your reasons not to tell me what happened and why you disappeared. And though it hurt me quite a lot, I should not have spoken to you like that and for that I am sorry.’ There was a pause in that moment. My brain was trying to figure out what I should say next and Hannah was looking at me with an open mouth and teary eyes. ‘And I would only hope to spend the rest of the holidays with you?’ I was reluctant. I did not know if she wanted to be with me and, to be honest, I was afraid that she would be angry at me.

All of my worries disappeared when Hannah leaped over to me and wrapped her arms around me for the tightest hug I had ever received. She started crying as soon as I hugged her back, and a few tears escaped my eyes. Once she pulled away I saw her smiling and I was more than sure she was mirroring my huge smile.

‘I am sorry I left you, I really did not mean to.’ She wiped her tears away and took a big breath. Then, she told me to wait there while she got rid of the organizers in order to have a nice, private talk. I waited anticipating that moment, a warm feeling charging my heart. She walked to the small kitchen and told me to go sit on the couch while she was making hot cocoa. I wiped the few tears that had filled my eyes and sat down comfortably.

‘So, what are the organizers for?’ I asked curiously. At the mention of them, Hannah smiled. She took out two Christmas mugs and while she made the hot cocoa, she explained.

‘Oh, my mom is insisting we have a huge New Year’s Eve *feast* this year. It will be sort of like a fancy ball and I, uh, am responsible for it.’ She grinned. ‘You are more than welcome to join us if you want. I know I would love it if you came.’ She told me and smiled once again, my happy Hannah slowly coming to show.

My insides were having their own feast of joy at the mention of the ball and at Hannah’s invite. It would be exactly what I had wished for and it was handed to me that easily. She approached the living room area with the mugs in hand, grey steam floating from them. I garbed the one she gave me and took a big gulp, my throat instantly burning. We looked at each other for a while before Hannah spoke up.

‘Okay so, uh, what happened, right...’ I could see her trying to find the suitable words to continue. ‘You know I have a brother, right?’ she made the first question to which I shook my head ‘yes’. ‘Right, well, the few previous years he lived with my father in California. We barely even talked with him, my mom and I. My mom though, had tried to come into communication with him several times but he would never respond to her calls or anything for the matter.’ In my mind, I was thinking of my brother Dylan who, like Hannah’s brother, had not found the courtesy to call his little sister, find out if she is alive or not.

‘The past few months, though,’ she interrupted my thoughts, ‘I would swear I saw him walking around New York City or casually drink his coffee in that little coffee place near my mother’s house.’ She took another gulp of her hot cocoa and so did I, listening to her intently. ‘So I decided to investigate. I would leave your house a little bit early and

then try to spy that strange man who looked so much like my brother. It took me quite some time but I finally caught him taking a seat to that coffee place near my mother's house. I was a few feet away from him though, so I could not tell exactly if he was indeed my brother or if I was just going crazy. After two painfully slow hours, he got up, paid for his coffee and left. Obviously, I followed him to where he was going only to discover that he was going towards my mother's place. I swear my palms got so sweaty and my heartbeat went crazy.'

She was explaining everything so fiercely that I felt as if I was there with her. I was gripping my mug tightly and drinking every few seconds, unable to resist the incredibly mouth-watering beverage. After a while of describing the road her supposed brother took and the emotions she felt all throughout her hunt, she told me they had finally reached Hannah's mother's house.

'He got in and my mother was outside waiting for him with open arms. Well, then I definitely knew it was him, my brother.' It was like I was watching a movie. Her descriptions were so vivid, I could watch everything unfold before my eyes. She told me all about how she sneaked inside her own mother's house and quietly tried to find where the both of them—mother and son— had decided to sit. From what she was describing, Mrs. Joanne's house, Hannah's mother, was quite big if not extraordinarily big. It took her almost ten minutes to paint the picture of her enormous, white-painted hallway that led to that other big space that her brother and mother were sitting. I was amazed by how many gold pots and mini decorations her mother had lying around in the entrance hall.

Though, the way she described the likes of the house woke something in my memory. It felt like I had been in that same house

before; like the pictures were already planted inside my head. And it could not have been Hannah's skills in describing only. But I brushed that thought away and focused on my friend's story.

'To make story short, I do not want to bore you with the details,' she said nonchalantly and I nodded agreeing, even though I was quite excited to hear the rest of the description of the house; determined in one hand to find something that would insure me I had indeed been there before and amazed on the other hand by Hannah's calming storytelling that made me want to hear as much as possible. 'I confronted them in the middle of their talk. And guess what? My brother had been in New York just like I thought but they wanted to surprise me; at least that is what they said.

'A couple of days went by and I had been giving my brother the silent treatment, acting like a child really. All the while, my brother had been spending an awful lot of time with dear mother, a thing remarkably strange considering he had been ghosting the both of us for the past years. The last time I visited you in your aunt's apartment, my brother had been waiting right outside your door. I was surprised; you can understand, I think, how odd it was to see him there. Not only that, but he looked significantly worried. I asked him what was wrong but Gloria forcefully escorted us out, putting his response on hold. Once we were outside the apartment he fell silent until we had reached my car. That was when he told me mom was sick.'

I was startled. I could not believe it. Out of all things I had been thinking Hannah would tell me that was the last one. A wave of shame surged through me once I realized how nastily I had treated her and how atrocious my thoughts of her were while her mother was sick,

battling to stay alive. I did not know how sick she was yet, but my guilt got the best of me.

‘She is alright now.’ It was a relief hearing her say that, though I felt bad for not asking her about her mother’s current situation earlier. ‘I thought you might want to know, your face seemed dreadfully anxious.’ She said and laughed lightly.

‘He also informed me that he had announced our mother’s situation to our beloved dad who by the way had moved to Paris, thus why my brother had to come to New York.’ What an awful person! I thought. ‘I did not want to hear anything about my father, Zoe, so the best I could do was to get in the car and lock him out. He was faster, unfortunately and he managed to get inside. ‘He wants to help mom’ he told me and I almost laughed hysterically. ‘If he wanted to help mom he would be here all those years and would not leave for Paris.’ I was furious at him; he was actually taking my father’s side after everything he did to me!’

She was getting more irritated by the second and I did not know what to do. So I did nothing and waited for her to continue.

‘Anyways, he told me dad had a friend in Paris who is supposedly the best in the whole country and that he, my brother, and mom would be leaving later that night for France. It was shocking, at the least, whatever was happening. In the span of a few days I had found out that my brother was in New York, that he was sneakily meeting mom and that mom was so sick that she had to travel to another country to be saved. It was all too much for me, Liz, so when my brother told me he had a spare ticket in case I wanted to ‘tag along’, like he said, I did not think to let you know I will be leaving the country.’ I drank the rest of the hot cocoa while shaking my head frantically.

‘Do not worry Hannah, really. I understand completely, and I am terribly sorry that I came off so strongly at you before listening to the whole story.’ I told her apologetically and she smiled warmly. We stayed in silence for a while before I spoke up.

‘Tag along’ though? What is that even supposed to mean? Like you would not want to accompany your own mother to another country because of her health? What an ass he was, really.’ I then realized that I had offended her brother, right in front of her. ‘Oh my god, I am terribly sorry! I did not know what I was saying.’

She just laughed it off and agreed with me.

‘No matter, Liz. I know he was being an ass.’ She drank a bit of her beverage. ‘You should have seen him in Paris; he was an absolute nightmare. Always clinging on my dad, like a helpless puppy he was. Pathetic.’ Under the pure irritation, I could sense hurt in Hannah’s voice. I am sure she too wanted to get as much attention from her dad as her brother was receiving. ‘All of the sudden he was the man of the house and my mom’s favorite, even though he had not spoken to her in years.’

‘And my dad, complete nightmare he was. He acted as if he actually cared about my mother and he did not do it just for his son’s sake. The worst part was that my mom bought every single lie that came out of his filthy mouth! It was infuriating, really.’ She calmly said while getting up and grabbing the two empty cups and taking them to the kitchen. Something was off, I must admit that. She cleaned the mugs in peaceful silence and despite having just talked about a very difficult subject for her, she seemed awfully calm and put together.

‘Say, Hannah?’ I spoke up and she turned her head towards my direction with the oh-so familiar smile on her face. ‘It must have been

very hard for you to be there with your dad.' She walked back to the couch and dragged the pink, fluffy blanket from the floor to cover her whole body as she leaned back to get more comfortable.

'Yes, very.' She confirmed with a smile.

'And being there with your brother...' she nodded and darted her eyes away from mine. A slight smirk formed in my lips. I was getting closer to where I wanted and it seemed as if it would be easier than I thought to get her to tell me what I thought was happening. 'And with your mom being sick and all...' Hannah was entirely avoiding meeting my eyes. She hummed a melody and played with the rings on her finger while looking outside the big window across from her. I stayed silent, waiting for her to break her little skit. I stared at her intently and I knew she was trying to look at what I was doing by the corner of her eyes.

'Alright, fine!' She exclaimed, raising her hands up in surrender. 'You caught me!' She said and I started laughing, a genuine laugh that was heard like a complete stranger's in my ear. I had not heard myself laugh so freely in ages. Hannah threw me a pillow that I easily dodged and used to hug and support my head. She took a deep breath and spoke up. 'It was really hard, truly and scary. I had a dreadful time there while my mother was in the hospital. But then she got better and then she was completely healthy. We were supposed to leave the next morning after my mother's medical examinations, or something like that, came out but my dear, ol' father suggested we stay another extra week to see the famous city of light.

'My mom did not hesitate to accept and so, we stayed. He also offered to book us a room in the same hotel, but my mom wanted to stay somewhere less...rich. It was a lovely little space where we ended up spending our nights. The space was rather small, but marvelous; the

walls were a sheer shade of pink, the floors were wooden and small vintage dolls and miniature Eiffel towers were decorated everywhere. It was like we booked a room in a classic, European rom-com movie. And I should definitely mention the cute, little balcony that was attached to our room with a breath-taking view of the real life Eiffel tower.

‘Anyways, it was lovely. At night though, my mom would get frantic; twirling over and over on her bed, snoring. I could not sleep at all. So, the smart girl I am, I decided to take a casual stroll around the block at three in the morning. Strangely, nothing happened, very quiet walk, I enjoyed it immensely. On my way inside the hotel though, I bumped into a rather disturbing worker. Or... might I say...disturbingly handsome worker. Both work, actually.’ I squealed loudly at Hannah’s words even though I expected her to say exactly that; that she met a handsome French guy and they fell madly in love with each other in the city of love.

‘Do not get ahead of yourself, Zoe. You will be quite disappointed.’ She said. ‘The guy was a prick. Yes, terribly good-looking, dark hair; almost black, deep green eyes, cravingly slim lips. Totally dreamy he was.’

‘But...?’ I asked persuading her to tell me his flaw. She took a deep breath, for what felt like the millionth time that night, and continued.

‘He was exceptionally rude. All the while I was staying in the hotel he would throw snide remarks about my sleazy way of dressing or comment about my brother sucking up to my dad like a little girl with daddy issues and laugh at my dysfunctional family.’ I was madly confused and overly intrigued by Hannah’s mystery boy.

‘Okay, you lost me here. How did he know all that about you and your family? And when did he find the time to do all of that?’ Hannah

looked as if I had asked her the most complex question one can ask. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat and started playing with her nails so intently that she even broke one.

‘Remember when I told you I bumped into him?’ She asked and I nodded. ‘Alright, well... he acted all ‘macho’ and asked that stupid, really stupid question all guys ask to make themselves feel superior to women; ‘What is a pretty, little girl like you doing out here all alone in the middle of the night?’ And I got really pissed because I do not like guys thinking they are above women and that they need to protect us just because they have something dangling between their legs,’ she said without interrupting herself to take any breaths. She wanted to get it all out in once, like she was ashamed of what she did, perhaps. Her cheeks were all flushed and her head hung low staring at her ruined nails,

‘And so I told him that I did not need anyone to come with me if I wanted to go for a walk and that I was entirely capable of going out on my own. Then he laughed, an annoying laugh really, and told me that every girl needs a guy to walk with at three in the morning or else stargazing gets boring. Then he continued sweeping and told me to find someone to do so, quick.’ She finally took a breath and looked at me, only for a split second. ‘And then he did this thing... he gave me his number—he had slipped it actually in my pocket, I do not know how he did that. I was determined to let it pass, not call him and definitely not go for a nightly walk again.’

I was listening intently to what she was saying, immensely interested to find out what would happen next, but already knowing deep down how it will end.

‘But, I do not know how, his face and really cute British accent got forcefully stuck in my head. I even enjoyed brunch with mom and dad

and my brother just because I was thinking of him. When I returned to the hotel from brunch, I figured I could talk to him... for putting his number in my pocket without asking me...but he was not there. There was this other French girl who did not know scrap about how to speak English, so I gave it up.

‘Later that night, when my mom started snoring again and I could not sleep, I took my chance to go for another walk since my last one was so...fulfilling. You see, Paris is beautiful so why not enjoy it as much as I can? Anyways, I ended up bumping into him again and he asked why I did not call. I explained to him that I was not interested in a walking buddy, but he insisted he join me since he could not leave a young lady alone wandering around Paris, like he said. We talked a lot while walking. Surprisingly, he was fun to have around. He told me he was in France to finish the novel he was writing, because the country really inspired him and that he worked at the hotel because it paid well and because they gave him, like, a small room to live in.’ I tried processing everything that she had told me, at once. I had many questions but the first that I really wanted answered was,

‘Sorry, you said he was British?’ I asked. She smiled to herself, probably remembering his cute accent, as she described it.

‘Yes, just like you. Something that should have reminded me to call you or text you...’ She said timidly. I completely ignored the last part and stayed to the ‘he-is-British’ part of her sentence.

‘Where is he from? I doubt I’ll know him, though.’ She frowned and squinted her eyes trying to remember that information I requested but after a little while, she quit.

‘I do not remember at all, sorry.’ I shook my head to show her that it did not really matter, although I really wanted to know. She leaned on

the cushions and closed her eyes. I still had some questions I needed to ask her, like when did he become rude to her and what happened in the meantime? But she seemed tired enough so I let it go and leaned on the cushions as well.

‘What have you been up to while I was gone?’ She asked, her eyes still remaining closed. It worked out for me well, that she had kept her eyes shut, since she did not see my shocked face. The evening had been more than good; it had been perfect and I was certainly not ready to ruin it by telling her everything that went down while she was in France.

Small flashes of Christmas day’s events flooded my mind. I felt my heart sinking again and my breathing getting heavier and heavier.

‘Zoe?’ Hannah asked me. She opened her eyes. ‘Are you alright?’ I could not speak. I felt every emotion ruling me, and showering me from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet. I was welling up, tears were blocking my eyesight. My heartbeat was speeding up moment by moment and I felt like something really heavy had been placed on my chest. Hannah’s expression had changed. Her eyes were filled with worry and her mouth was slightly parted.

‘Zoe what is going on?’ She rushed over to me and grabbed my hand. I started crying. She pushed me to her arms and hugged me tightly, whispering sweet things in my ear; that everything is going to be fine, that she was there with me and that we would get through this together. But I had found a shoulder to cry on, someone who did not make me feel like a burden. A friend who wanted me to be okay and move on and I was not bound to calm down. Everything I felt, I let it out. I let my emotions control me; I let sadness, fear, and uncertainty take over me and leave me completely empty. Empty of these dreadful feelings that ruined my life. Empty of my damaging memories and

events that I allowed to define my life. I needed to let it all go; my parents, Nova, Mason, Hazel and William, Anthony and Jaden. I had to put them all in a small box, lock it up and throw it away. I could not live off what had happened to me anymore. I was tired. Tired of not being happy, tired of not enjoying life.

Hannah, sweet and caring as she was, made me get up from the couch and moved me to the bed. She carefully laid me down and covered me in blankets. I had stopped crying, only soft sobs escaped my mouth every once in a while and just a few tears stained my face. Hannah opened the TV and put 'The Polar Express' to play. She crawled next to me under the pile of heavy, soft blankets and we cuddled until we fell asleep.

The next morning she had a full breakfast waiting for me. I thanked her almost a million times and assured her that once the incident did not make me want to throw up I would tell her what happened while she was gone. She just shrugged it off and insisted that I do not think about it and that she would be right there for whenever I was ready to talk. We ate our breakfast in peace. She talked about France and I listened carefully, not speaking much.

After breakfast, we cleaned the apartment a little and Hannah greeted the organizers for the New Year's Eve event while I sat on the bed watching cartoon movies and pulling more and more blankets over me, like a baby. During the short meeting with the planners, I overheard some words that made my heart lightly skip a beat, such as 'formal dress-code', 'variety of genre in music' and the best of all, 'plenty of food'. Soon, they were done and Hannah had come to join me in watching kid's movies.

During the evening, Hannah and I packed some food, many blankets and movies and went over to my aunt's apartment, since she had told me to keep an eye on it.

We laughed, we ate and we enjoyed ourselves. We slept in the living room, at around four in the morning and woke up the next day around noon. I had woken up first which gave me the opportunity to make Hannah breakfast. Only one thing I did not take into consideration; I did not have even the faintest idea of how to cook. So, instead of perfectly baked bread and cookies, excellently scrambled eggs and a fresh squished orange juice, Hannah woke up to burnt bread and cookies, no eggs because they had to be thrown out and expired juice from a paper box.

She laughed at my attempts to make breakfast but thanked me nonetheless. I was quite bummed out that I had not managed to cook anything that could be consumed (not even juice!) so I sat on one of the chairs in the dining room area, frowning and waiting for Hannah to finish with her cooking. After a little while she walked to the dining room and placed the plates in front of me on the table, laughing at my frowned expression.

We ate in silence, a comfortable silence. Throughout the meal, I caught Hannah glancing over my direction, by the corner of my eye. She would stop eating, she would look at me and then after a few seconds she would turn to her plate and continue eating. From my little, but enough, experience knowing Hannah, I knew that she wanted to tell me something but was afraid or just reluctant to tell me. Fidgeting with her fingers, moving uncomfortably in her seat and the deep breaths she took were all signs of my suspicions being true.

‘Hey, Zoe?’ she finally spoke up. I raised my head to look her in the eyes. Emotions like excitement but also fear and uncertainty filled her eyes. She was biting her bottom lip and bouncing her leg up and down.

‘You know, uh, New Year’s Eve is in, like, two days.’ She stopped and I nodded agreeing with the fact she presented to me. ‘And... my offer is still on about you coming to the party, if you want to and feel comfortable, obviously. You do not need to come just for me if you do not feel like it, I will absolutely understand, it is a really hard time for you but I would really like it if you were not alone and I think it will help you-’ She ranted.

‘Yes, I would love to come.’ I cut her off and she smiled. ‘I might have to kick your brother’s butt, though.’ I huffed and continued eating. She laughed and shook her head.

‘I do not have anything good to wear, unfortunately and no money to buy something new.’ Hannah tilted her head and squinted her eyes, thinking.

‘You could steal a dress from your aunt.’ She said mischievously, raising her brows. I raised mine as well and we both started giggling and eventually falling into a pit of laughter, like children.

Chapter fifteen

We quickly finished our breakfast and ran excitedly to my aunt's bedroom. It had not been the first time I entered the room, but it was certainly quite odd. My aunt hated it whenever she found me there, even if she, herself, had asked me to go fetch something from in there. The room was as cold and impersonal as she was. White walls, no special decorations. There was just a bed, a nightstand and a TV. Of course, aunt Maria's bedroom had the best view; breath-taking really. I felt like I was floating through New York's buildings every time I walked in the room.

Across from the large glass window were two white, wooden doors. One led to a significantly rich bathroom; white and gold handles on the small windows, marble floors and sink. And the other door next to it opened up to a, rather small but beautiful and extremely well-

organized, walk-in wardrobe. In the small sized, yet classy, room was hung high a golden poll that went around the sides of the room and carried hundreds of red-carpet-worthy dresses of all shapes and colors, t-shirts, blouses and many more pieces of clothing. On the top of said poll were built in several white shelves that carried all types of pants, jeans, trousers, athletic wear. And finally, across from her door stood marvelously a large open closet that carried my aunt's shoes graciously. The amount of pairs of shoes my aunt had in her possession was questionable and the cost of all of them together must have been bigger than my life's worth.

Hannah was astonished when she entered the walk-in wardrobe and noticed the collection of my aunt's shoes.

'I swear these shoes are worth more than my house!' she had excitedly said. We sat in there looking for the perfect dress-shoes match for the New Year's Eve party for almost two hours before Hannah screamed in shock and excitement, claiming she had found the one. I got up from the ground where I had been standing admiring my dear aunt's shoe collection, and met eyes with Hannah's bright, shining ones. She was already standing and holding the hanger with the dress on. Hannah had picked a very beautiful and very *elegant* dress.

'This is the one.' She said smiling. 'Oh, Liz you will look beautiful with this dress on!' I was admiring the dress, not quite imagining myself looking beautiful in it. Alone the piece of clothing was indeed quite exquisite. It started off with an eye-catching, black corset top that had a heart-shaped, low cleavage and that seemed extremely tight in the waist area. The corset had many small, yet lovely, embroidered roses all over it. It did not have any straps to hold the rest of the dress which only scared me as to how tight it would actually feel around me; if I wore it

that was. The clothing went on with an ankle-long, voluminous layered skirt that was attached to the corset. The first layer of fabric seemed to be just a simple, heavy it seemed like, black skirt. The next layer, though, had a gorgeous-looking pattern fabric of countless small, deep red colored roses. The third, and last, layer was a very thin, veil-resembling, black fabric that hugged the skirt gloriously making the whole dress look, to all intents and purposes, dreamy.

But on me, it would look ridiculous.

‘Hannah...this dress is gorgeous.’ I said wide-eyed. She furiously nodded, smiling. ‘I could never wear such a thing.’ Hannah’s face fell.

‘But, Liz, you will look divine in it.’ She argued, pouting. I was absolutely set in my mind that I would not arrive at the ball with a dress like that. I thought that it would look so out-of-place on me; like it did not belong with me. After all, I was nothing more than a lazy failure. How could I wear something so elegant?

But my fingers could not stay away from the fabrics of it, gracing it, feeling it and running my fingertips all over it. For just a mere second, I closed my eyes and saw myself walking down a wide staircase, wearing that dress. I was glowing, the dress was glowing. My heart fluttered when I opened my eyes.

‘Oh, come on, Liz.’ Hannah whispered. ‘You deserve to wear something pretty and have fun on New Year’s Eve.’ Did I, though? Did I deserve to be happy after everything I had done after hurting so many people? ‘It is just for one night.’

Having agreed to wear the dress to Hannah’s party, she and I went into a mission to find the perfect pair of shoes to go with my dreamy dress. After furiously searching for an hour, we ended up going for a

simple, elegant black high heel. We were very excited about finding the pair even though it did not matter that much since the dress would most likely cover most of my feet.

After that surprisingly exhausting experience, Hannah and I ordered take-out food and sat in the living room watching movies. The rest of the day went by calmly; Hannah told me all about the venue she had booked for the feast, she described the decorations she had bought to make it look pretty and then she went on to talk about the annoying planners she had hired, who continuously doubted her ideas and dodged her suggestions on everything.

One day before New Year's Eve, Hannah and I went to a huge mall close to my aunt's place, happily walking around malls, looking aimlessly through ridiculously expensive clothing stores, laughing and giggling over the retailers workers' faces who seemed to despise us. Unfortunately, Hannah had to return to her apartment to go over some details about the ball with the organizers. Being left alone at my apartment, though, gave me the time to reconsider my choice of wearing that magnificent dress to the party and to take in everything that had happened in the last few days. To be honest, I had not been expecting to have such a wonderful time only a day after breaking up with Anthony. And after seeing him with Jayden at the park, which really hurt.

But in all actuality, I was okay. Of course, the split with him was still heart-clenching to think about. It was still a rough, draining break-up after all. But every hour that passed, I hurt less and less. I slowly but surely was coming to the realization that my relationship with that man was nothing more than a toxic, soul-retching relationship that made both Anthony and I reveal our utmost worst side of ourselves. For a

different reason each, Anthony and I had the need to keep each other in our lives, and we used ghastly reasons to do so. It was all a game of manipulation and codependency at its worst form. It was never real love, and once I realized that, it was easier to let go.

The day of New Year's Eve found me in my aunt's apartment feeling like a nervous wreck. But an excited nervous wreck. Hannah had told me she would come by the apartment at five to join me in getting ready, which gave me the whole morning to stress about minor details and day-dream about our big, movie-worthy entrance. That, of course, resulted in being entirely unprepared when Hannah finally arrived outside my door. Quickly, so I could avoid her warning stare, I got into the shower and thus our preparation for the long-anticipated ball began.

We acted like teenage girls, high-pitched noises coming out of our mouths and giggling over the most insignificant things. The ball would start at nine, but Hannah and I would arrive at ten. Fortunately for us, Hannah's mother would greet the planners and the rest of the people who would work to make the ball a successful one. Hannah was far too drowned in her own anxiety, constantly worrying about whether the centerpieces were beautiful enough or if she should have picked something else or if she had chosen the right band for the music and people ended up not wanting to dance. Her mother was concerned for Hannah's well-being and wanted her to enjoy getting ready with her friend, me, instead of doing another task.

By the time Hannah was done putting on lipstick and doing some final touch-ups to her make-up, I had just finished releasing my hair into big, beautiful, silky curls. I was fascinated and slightly surprised that I was able to create such wonderful styling for my hair, considering I had not touched a single hairbrush or any other kind of tool to make my

hair in my life. Hannah was surprised as well but did not waste any time to comment on it. She leaped over to me and started putting weird, unfamiliar products on my face that would supposedly show off my natural beauty, as she claimed.

I only recognized the black, shiny eye-shadow that used to be my mom's —and that I stole from her when I was only fourteen— on Hannah's grip, which she smeared all over my eyelid and a little over it, close to my eyebrow, with a weird fluffy brush. I also recognized my aunt's favorite red lipstick. I was confused as to why aunt Maria did not take it with her to Paris. I remember ever since I was a little girl that my aunt's faux Chanel handbag always carried that small tube. Nonetheless, I let Hannah nicely apply the crimson red liquid all over my lips.

'Done you are.' She whispered and I turned my head to the mirror smiling, with my eyes still closed from when she was working in the eye-shadow.

I was not, and still am not, one to brag about my looks. But the moment my eyes fell on my mirrored figure across from me, I felt beautiful. I saw myself on the reflecting piece of glass and could not believe that it was me staring right back. The way my hair fell lightly next to my shoulders, the shimmering black on my eyes giving me an elegant yet rough look and the dark red color laying smoothly on my lips demonstrating boldness made me feel like an entirely different person. For once I felt strengthened by my looks and as if they had pushed away any unpleasant emotion and replaced it with a thunderous power that radiated off of me. At that moment, the main character of my life was none other than me. Not Nova, not Tyler, not Hannah. I was solely living off of me.

And that feeling got stronger when I put on the dress. The look was finally completed, my whole body and face beaming with an eye-catching aura of confidence. The daring make-up blended in so beautifully with the elegant dress and I felt like I owned it; like it was *made for me*.

We ran down the stairs, gripping each other's hands tightly so we would not fall, the sound of our heels clicking on the marble surface and our high-pitched laughter echoed through the cold staircase. I cannot describe that oh so unique emotion we felt walking outside the building into the freezing cold city, looking for Hannah's rented limousine. If you have not quite realized it yet, Hannah and her mother were filthy rich. I do not know if I have mentioned it before, but with the money Joanne, Hannah's mother, took from her husband from court, she invested in a clothing company, whose name I cannot recall at the moment. The company went very well thanks to Joanne's immaculate talent and business-related skills, and thus money was not a problem for the pair.

'It is a long white car, how hard can it be to locate it?' I asked as she was dialing the number of the driver. I looked around quickly, hoping to find the limousine fast. The cold air was hitting my uncovered skin, making me shiver and my lips to go dry. My eyes were furiously moving from car to car trying to identify our vehicle. It was crazy how empty of people the streets were. I almost found that disturbing, being used to the familiar crowd-filled city. Though, in the darkness of the shadow across from where I was standing with Hannah just a few steps behind me, I saw a figure moving. It was moving towards the light and I could slowly notice a few features; the black shoes, the grey

sweatpants, the red hoodie. And then the figure that appeared to be looking right at me, walked completely in the lighted area of the street.

‘Alright, thank you. We will be right there.’ I vaguely heard Hannah’s voice say behind me. She walked closer to me, grabbed my arm and spoke to me, ‘Come on, he said he parked a couple of blocks further up.’

I did not move, staring at him directly in his eyes. His eyes. As dreamy and fiery as I remembered they were.

‘Zoe, let’s go.’ I could not believe he had the nerve to stand across from me. Stiff as he seemed to be, I realized he might know how his appearance outside of my house looked. ‘What are you looking at?’ Hannah asked and his name left my lips in a choke.

‘Anthony.’ I didn’t know if I said his name to answer Hannah’s question or to get his attention. But at the mention of his name, Anthony walked closer and closer until he was standing right in front of me, overpowering me with his immense height. I knew that Hannah had no idea what was going on and who Anthony was, but she remained silent and took a few steps back, giving us the privacy she thought was needed. In my opinion, I should have left the moment I realized it was him standing in the dark. Of course, I did no such thing.

‘Why are you here?’ I asked him. My voice was pleading. As much as I wanted to be the strong woman who had gotten completely over him and did not care to hear the reason for his appearance, I could not do it. My head was clouded by our sweet memories; I felt trapped even if he had not spoken yet.

‘Please come back to me.’ He spoke up. My heart fluttered. I had just heard exactly what I thought I needed him to tell me. That he had missed me, that he had made a mistake; that I was the one for him. And

in my distraught, twisted mind I considered this a success. Jayden...she broke up with me today and...it made me realize how bad I needed you.'

My smile faded.

Anthony didn't mean what he was saying. He did not want me back; he just wanted someone to comfort him on New Year's Eve after his girlfriend broke his heart.

'You were always the one for me, Zoe.' I smiled again. But it was not for what he said to me. His words did nothing more to me than wake me up from a deep slumber. A sudden urge to laugh hit me. I started shaking my head slowly and he smiled. 'So, what do you say?'

I looked at Hannah's puzzled face and then back at Anthony.

'Get away from me.' I said laughing. He was startled, probably not expecting that answer from me. I took Hannah's hand and we started walking quickly towards the limousine. I heard Anthony's voice scream my name but I did not turn around to look at him.

My supposed love for him and the ache I felt every moment I thought of us together and what happened on Christmas did not stop haunting me even after that little incident. I still hurt, I still cried. Although it was not for what I had lost but for what I went through and for the damage I had caused. Obviously I could not instantly forget about him just because I told him to leave me alone. Life does not work like that.

Mysterious, little thing life is.

Because walking towards the limousine, thinking I was done dealing with insignificant things such as love and boys, something way bigger was waiting for me, drinking his champagne, making small talk with the guests and having no idea what was about to happen.

Chapter sixteen

On the road to the venue, my mind was going to wild places, imagining scenarios as if I were in a Hollywood movie. My newly found confidence and the ego boost that was given to me by Anthony's, not-so-genuine, confession, had made me believe that I was the center of the world. Picturing myself on the top of the stairs while everyone at the ball was staring at me open-mouthed and dazed by my beauty was one of the over-the-top, unrealistic scenarios that played on repeat in my head.

But, of course, in a realistic New Year's Eve party no one actually cares what you wear or how you look if they do not know you. So it was kind of a big disappointment when we arrived at the venue and, first of all, there was no wide, marvelous staircase that descended to the main dancing area where everyone would be and that I could stand on the top of, and second of all, no one was paying attention to me. Every

person on the ball was either dancing to the song that had been playing or calmly conversing with each other; all with a smile on their faces, lifting a sizable weight off Hannah's shoulders.

The place was wonderful, though. From the outside, it looked like a normal building, and to be honest, it was quite ugly; a grey, tall building with a wide glass door in the middle of it. There was a guy waiting at the entrance who wore an all-black suit and pants and held a small pack of papers on his hands with the names of the people invited to the ball. Hannah told him our names and he let us in immediately. We stepped inside quickly, and for the small period of time that took Hannah to open her phone and message her mom, I had the chance to observe the place properly.

The whole space was resembling a hallway; a not so long and unnecessarily wide hallway. The walls were as white as paper but with a gleam of shimmer in the color, and decorated with numerous large, gold-framed mirrors. The floor was covered with a thick, red, velvet carpet that was incredibly beautiful to look at but insanely difficult to walk on. At the end of the hallway I saw a big black door that had a small, circle shaped, tinted window that seemed to be pointless since we could not see through them and they projected no light to the other side.

Hannah suddenly grabbed my hand and, together, we walked to the main venue. Her mom was no longer standing near the second entrance to greet the guests and Hannah insisted that we go looking for her, so she can meet me. I agreed, not really paying attention to her but to the incredibly well decorated space I had just walked in. Right up front I saw the very large empty space to where people were already dancing at. Across from me, I noticed the big, oval shaped stage on

which the band was playing and next to it and all over the sides of the room were placed quite a few circular, seven-seat tables that were clothed with white, cotton covers and that carried a set of, what seemed like, rich plates and whatnot, for every person. Christmas decorations were hung all over the walls and hanging from the ceiling such as big, glowing snowflakes and Santa with his slay and reindeers.

It was very crowded; the place was almost crammed with people. Guests, waiters and waitresses, people who took videos and photographs. I got blinded by the cameras' flash over a hundred times over the span of a couple of hours. The music was over-the-top loud, yet people seemed to be having the time of their lives.

Hannah led me through the crowd of people dancing to a door next to the stage where the band was playing. She took a weird looking, rusty key out of her purse and opened the door, dragging me in the room. Once it was closed and locked again, the music and talking had been muffled into a quiet whisper. The room was obviously, very well soundproofed and the only noise that could be heard was the silent talking of Hannah's mother with another person. Hannah coughed to get her mother's attention and the talking came to a halt. Joanne's face shot to our direction and Hannah's body stiffened. Her head might have been high up, staring at the man next to her mother with spite, projecting confidence but her body felt sulky next to me.

'Hannah, dear, what are you doing back here?' Her mother spoke gently and Hannah's eyes darted to hers. She did not speak for a moment, the tension in the room becoming heavier and heavier by the second.

'You said you wanted to meet my friend the moment she steps foot in the ball.' She said confidently. 'Mom, this is Liz.' I walked a bit

further and gave her my hand, which she took and shook excitedly. She started telling me everything; from how many times Hannah had mentioned me to her to how much she anticipated our meet. I nodded my head and spoke sounds like ‘ahhh...’ or ‘mmhh’ too busy focusing my eyes on the man standing just a few steps behind her, looking strictly at Hannah. I did not fancy him, no, that was not the reason for my staring. Some part of my brain alarmed me of his presence and made me strongly believe that I had seen him before. I could not recall for the life of me, where or when I had but I swore his face looked oddly familiar. The memory was a bit hazy, even blurry. But it was there, nonetheless.

‘Shall we step out?’ Hannah’s mom had dropped my hand and proceeded to walk outside to the main venue. The unknown to me, young man follows Mrs. Joanne to where the party was still going strong still looking sharply at Hannah who gives him a similarly angry look. Hannah took a deep breath and smiled bitterly as I turned around to face her.

‘Let’s go drink.’

The night continued calmly; Hannah made short conversation with people who seemed to be very important by their looks, we were handed a few glasses of a brutally expensive champagne, as Hannah described it, and we danced to some up-beat songs until our feet started aching. During all that time, I could not avoid scanning the place with my eyes, searching aimlessly for the familiar stranger. Hannah seemed vastly affected by the short meeting with her mother, or at least that was what seemed to be happening, so I did not want to ask her the name of that name; afraid it will upset her again.

I tried getting my embarrassingly intense need to find out who that man is by dancing, eating some of the delicious plates I had displayed in front of me and drinking a little bit more. I had not seen Hannah for a long while, but I was guiltily enjoying the peace of staying alone. Once I saw her carefully running to where I was sitting with the brightest smiles on her face, though, I got excited, thinking she regained her energy and was willing to have a little more fun than the past two hours.

It was quarter to twelve when Hannah reached me, saying she wanted me to meet this guy named Ian, who supposedly was Hannah's best and oldest friend. I will not lie to you, I got a tad jealous when I heard that Hannah had another best friend who had the benefit of knowing her the longest thus, putting me in second place.

The music, now played from a DJ, was ringing loudly from the speakers whilst the band picked up their stuff to make room for the projector and white projection screen, for the countdown. Everyone stood from their seats and gathered at the center of the venue, where some used to dance, making it an extremely difficult task to walk to where Ian would be at. Laughing and excited chattering came from every person in there while waiting patiently for the New Year. I was growing more and more frustrated as I bumped into countless people trying to follow Hannah's lead.

Suddenly, the music stopped and the white screen on the stage became red. The number twenty appeared in huge, black letters and the countdown had begun. My ears were nearly buzzing from the loud voices that came from all the people around me, yelling the numbers that appeared in front of them.

‘Zoe!’ Hannah screamed. ‘This is I-AN!’ I looked at him and nodded, something catching my eye and diverting my attention. The young man whose identity I had longed to discover, was then standing next to the big projecting screen smiling proudly, and holding Hannah’s mom’s hand. His eyes were darting between the woman standing beside him and the people before him.

And then he looked at me.

And I looked at him.

His eyes bore into mine as memories from that night at Marvin’s party where Nova and I had ripped each other’s hearts apart appeared in my mind. His face was shaping a form in my mind as he started grinning, still looking at me. My cheeks felt as if they were on fire. Hannah next to me had stopped trying to get me to meet Ian and had begun counting down from ten.

Nine. I took my eyes off of him.

Eight.

Seven. Flashes of the previous year popped in my mind.

Six.

Five. Fear rammed through my whole body.

Four.

Three. Nova, Hazel, William, Anthony and Jayden all appeared in my mind mocking me.

Two.

One. Everyone erupted into screams, hugging, kissing. Every person in the room seemed so happy, so enthusiastic for what the New Year had to bring. Only I stayed still, unfazed by the year change and terrified of what was coming.

So here’s to the New Year.

Chapter seventeen

After the clock hit midnight and the New Year had just begun, all cheered, drank and danced like they had no worries in their minds. There were smiles on everyone's faces and no single frown could be found. Even I, after my small freak-out once the year changed numbers, managed to loosen up and have fun with my best friend. We stayed at the party until three and a half, dancing and singing and laughing.

It was all wonderfully enjoyable; the music, the drinks; all except Ian. I was not expecting to love Ian, or even like him to be honest. But what went down during these three hours I got to spend with him was enough to make me hate Ian. It happened gradually; at first I only had a strong negative feeling towards him with no reason to, just because he was named Hannah's 'best friend' when that place was already taken by me. Then, while I was near the bar ordering a drink, I saw Hannah and

Ian dancing very closely, something that gave me hope that maybe their relationship was more than friendly and that could potentially turn into a more romantic one, giving me the number one place for Hannah's best friend.

That hope was ultimately scrapped when I asked Hannah about it and she responded with a roaring laugh and an explanation I did not like.

'Ian and I being what? Please, he is like my big brother or in my case, since I absolutely despise my older sibling, my cool cousin from my mother's side of the family.'

I sulked in my seat. I was exceptionally good at detecting whenever Hannah was lying and that time was not one of these.

'Besides, he has a girlfriend.' The sulking feeling was quickly and effectively replaced by an undeniable amusement forcing me to come out with the loudest laugh I had ever heard myself produce. Hannah looked at me confused as I kept laughing.

'He has a girlfriend? Well, I feel sorry for her.' Hannah laughed lightly and shook her head before asking me to go dance.

That was when things got ugly for Ian. All three of us went to the dance floor and shook our bodies rhythmically to the beat of the music. The whole situation was very fun and I was even starting to warm up to the unlikable man that Ian was. When, suddenly, Hannah's and my favorite song of the night started playing for the fourth time and we were dancing to it like we've never heard it before. Ian sort of swooped in and slowly took Hannah away from me. He would get on our sides, trying to create a small circle for the three of us to dance in, but after a second of two, Ian would grab Hannah's hand, swirl her around herself and while doing so, move away from me, leaving me to dance alone.

Hannah always returned though, after realizing I was 'gone' and I could hear Ian telling her, 'Oh, I guess she just got bored' or 'We probably got carried away.'

The laughable part of it all was that once Hannah took her eyes off him and looked at me smiling, asking me where I was and continued dancing, Ian would throw me the deadliest look I have ever seen. It did not affect me in the slightest way but it did get tiring pretending I did not it happening only for Hannah's sake; she really wanted us to get along.

The night moved quickly and we followed with excitement, every feeling of jealousy or hatred had vanished. Being heavily under the influence of alcohol Ian and I had not the consciousness to dislike each other. I do not particularly remember where we went next or what we did once we arrived there; all my mind can recall is having Hannah lunged on my left shoulder laughing and Ian getting in between a few moments later. Was I a little bit more sober and I would have most definitely injured him the exact moment he separated me from my friend.

The morning after was as dreadful as the night before, at least for me. I woke up with a horrendous headache in, what seemed to be, a house's living room dressed in clothes I did not own and was not aware how I got in to. My dress was neatly placed on the floor in a see-through bag, thankfully unharmed. Now, I was laid on a very comfortable, despite its weird 'L' shape, couch covered from head to toe with a soft burgundy blanket, definitely not unharmed. My bones were in furious pain and I had several bruises all over my hands and legs. I groaned lifting my body up to sit normally on the couch with my back leaning on the cushion and my hands rubbing my eyes. I looked around the

house, focusing hard on every detail, hopelessly trying to find anything that would remind me how I got there the previous night.

‘I see you have woken up.’ Someone said and I groaned once again, but this time it was out of frustration. I had managed to detect whose voice had made the brilliant observation that I was in fact no longer sleeping, and it was not someone who I would choose to interact with for the first time after that long night.

‘Congratulations, you have eyes.’ I mumbled and he choked a laugh. My face might still have been buried in my sweaty palms yet I knew his lips were curled mockingly, slightly squeezing his cheeks up and making his rounded eyes lift up as well. I heard shuffling noises, cabinets opening and closing, mugs clicking with each other and then the magnificently enchanting noise of coffee pouring down and filling the mugs up. And in a matter of seconds, I had a cup placed on the small, wooden table in front of me. It took me a while to pick up the mug and drink the, much needed, coffee that was sure to make me feel tons better than how I was at the moment. I was trying really hard not to let my ego take the better of me and overpower it, needing the hot beverage more than anything in the world. It was quite difficult, to be honest; I felt as if he would have won the truly pointless and not at all justified, little war between us and I did not like it one bit.

Nonetheless, I grabbed the porcelain cup by its handle and walked over to the kitchen aisle where he was leaning on, drinking his coffee and trying to hold back his laughter.

‘I don’t know why you hate me so much.’ He exclaimed, leaving the mug on the isle’s marble surface and crossing his long arms in front of his overly dramatic toned chest. Only looking at it woke the anger

inside of me and made me passionately roll my eyes. I could only imagine how much of a fitness and body image obsessed person he was.

‘I do not hate you.’ I lied.

Hate is a deeply meaningful word, and very similar to love as well. They are both so much alike in the power they hold. Both words can affect a person in ways you cannot imagine. In my opinion, love and hate are the two strongest and most wonderful words in the English vocabulary. I could go on and on about them; I will not though. Maybe another time.

Ian I did not love or hate each other at that precise moment. The moment his elbows were touching on the marble, supporting his entire body, looking at me with amusement and mockery lingering in his eyes. Yes, his presence disturbed me a fair lot but that was only because I felt that he would take someone very important to me from me. I was scared and insecure that Ian was a much better friend to Hannah than I would ever be. And honestly, deep down I knew it was true. I knew that I had not been a great friend to Hannah; I knew she deserved him. And yet instead of trying to detect my errors and better myself, I attacked Ian and everything he did or said I took the wrong way. Surprisingly enough, I would go through times where I would both love and hate Ian.

‘Just admit that you despise me. You cannot even look me in the eyes.’ That was true, I could not look him in the eyes, afraid that if I did, I would let go all of my anger and tell him exactly how I feel about him, possibly resulting in a fight that would most definitely disturb Hannah.

Yet something in his tone of voice and the fact that even though he had just met me the previous night but could see right through my lies, awoke the stubborn side of myself and so, with my head still hanging low, I rose my eyes to his level and looked at him.

‘See? I can already recognize the pure hatred swimming in your eyes.’

‘You certainly think a lot of yourself to believe that a girl who you met yesterday could just develop such deep type of emotion towards you.’ I spat, fuming. My feet started lightly tapping on the hardwood floor, trying not to make much noise and my fingers were fighting each other on my lap and out of view attempting to ease me or control me from throwing a tantrum. ‘Unless you believe you’re *that* annoying that it’s very easy for one to hate you. In which case, I would have to take the fifth.’

He only laughed, clearly seeing what is in front of him. ‘You are ridiculous if you actually believe I cannot see right through you, Zoe.’ Hearing my name come out of his mouth in that low whisper while he looked me directly in my eyes, confident that he knows me so well, only succeeded in angering me further. I felt a wave of anger passing my entire body, from the bottom of my feet to the top of my head and pulsating in my head like a very deep voice telling me to hurt him.

‘You don’t know me.’ My voice could only come out in growls. Ian chuckled darkly, shaking his head dismissively. My nails were digging marks in my palms by the time he decided to speak up again.

‘Of course I do, Zoe.’ Arrogant, he was; so unbelievably arrogant for his and my own good. My legs were trembling and my palms were burning from the pressure.

‘What? You thought otherwise? Oh how amusing you are Zoe, thinking that you are something special. You are not, though.’ He was not blinking; he just kept talking and spitting insults at me with no shame. ‘You are only another one of these hopeless, no-life girls that got fucked over once and carry it around for their life acting as if they

had it tough in life.’ At that moment he was angry too. His voice was not mocking me anymore; he was not in a playful mood.

He was hurtful and with an intention. ‘And all you know is to cling on innocent, kind people like Hannah to try and suck off all of their happiness to keep for yourself, and all that just because mommy and daddy did not give you attention for thirty seconds when you were a kid and Chad from high school didn’t say ‘I love you’ back.’

Ian had walked around the kitchen aisle and was standing in front of me with his finger pointing towards my face. I could feel the tension of both of our bodies fighting each other, mine doing so to win. I could only think of one act that would make me feel in power again and would shut him up immediately. Yet I acted too soon and instead of insulting him back, my hand flew up and slapped him across his face.

‘You don’t get to talk to me like you know me when I have only met you yesterday.’ He was in shock. ‘Mommy and daddy *did* give me attention and Chad said more than ‘I love you’. Problem is, both of them got killed and all the Chads I’ve met either fucked my best friend or took their love back.’

Ian’s face was still crumpled with shock but no other sentiment I could make out in his features.

‘I saw my best friend dead on a bathroom floor, I live in a house where I am insulted every single minute with words your precious, little brain cannot even imagine. So stop pretending like you know all about me. You’re far from having an effect on me.’

I was on the verge of shooting my hands on his neck and strangling him right then and there and watching how the air slowly leaves him, but my sanity convinced me not to.

‘And if you want more of my life, don’t worry, I have more. But if I stay one more minute with your presence, I might commit a crime and I hate to waste my life on you.’ We were breathing heavily and looking at each other’s eyes, both feeling the tension and having the temptation to slit one another’s throats with a knife. ‘And yeah, I do hate you. I hate you like I have never hated anyone in my entire life.’

For a moment, only for a long second, Ian’s face was struck with another type of shock. He made it seem that the words I spoke last hurt him more than my hand did, and for that same long second, shame and regret ruled me. As soon as the second was over, though, the switch had flipped and we were back at the surprisingly familiar hatred.

Do you listen to Jazz music, Katerina? If you do not, you really should give it a chance. Especially whenever you feel stressed or whenever it seems like the world is suffocating you, I am sure it will somewhat ease your mind and relax your tense nerves. Now, much like calm, gleeful jazz songs, my life in January was as serene and untroubled. After my insignificant argument with Ian, during that part where we were looking angrily at each other’s eyes hoping one would drop unconscious or something, Dido, Ian’s girlfriend, showed up and put a sudden end to the joyous moment. She did not do or say anything; I doubt she even noticed the fumes coming out of our ears. But only her presence made Ian’s mood change drastically.

Dido was significantly beautiful; dark, silky, with no flaws whatsoever skin, wonderful, big blue eyes and a captivating smile. She was unbelievably kind and sweet as well; so much that I was seemingly surprised that she had chosen Ian to be her partner. I would dart my eyes between them two and, even though anyone could see how much

they fit as a couple, look-wise, I could not help but wonder what on earth Ian did to deserve a person like Dido.

When she first appeared to where we had been standing and screaming at each other, Dido walked directly to Ian. She didn't even bat an eyelash towards me yet kept her focus on the man across from her, as if they were the only people in the room. Once she reached Ian, her face beamed with pure happiness. She leaned in to kiss him while he wrapped his hands around her waist. I felt my heart warming up to the scene unraveling before me. It was nice to see a real love between two people; even if one of them had made me feel the opposite of it.

Then, still in Ian's arms, Dido turned to me with a shining, Julia Roberts smile and spoke,

'Hi! I am Dido, Ian's fiancée.' I was a bit shocked to hear she was his fiancée, having been told by Hannah that he only had a girlfriend, yet I gave the couple a fake smile and went with it, nonetheless. 'You must be Han's friend, nice to meet you.' She spread her hand to take mine and shake it to which action Ian tensed up and held her tighter than a few moments ago. I fought the urge to roll my eyes at him and just gave my hand to Dido to shake without saying a word. I smiled gracefully and kept my mouth shut for once.

Moments later, Hannah got out of a random room and rushed me out of their house mumbling to all of us that she had overslept and that her mother must be waiting for her at the venue to deal with some very important matters. My hopes that whatever she was saying were only lame excuses to get out of there mixed with my own desire to leave the place gave me the power to kindly thank both of our hosts, without attacking Ian, and follow Hannah to her car. To my disappointment, Hannah did in fact have to go to the venue to help her mother. She

offered to take me to my aunt's apartment, assuming that I must be tired, but I begged her to bring me with her and she excitedly accepted.

It turned out to be quite boring and after a good amount of hours it became tiring as well. I was stuck waiting in a small corner and watching Hannah do her job. During our time there not once did I mention my argument with Ian, even though Hannah was constantly talking about him and how happy she was that I had finally met him. It was irritating, but I did not regret my choice to accompany Hannah instead of going back to my aunt's house, knowing that she might have returned from her trip to Paris.

She had not, fortunately, giving me the time to place her dress and shoes to where they belonged, take a shower and change into my own clothes. By the time I was done, the sun had set and keys were heard jiggling on the other side of the door. My aunt walked in before several other people in black and white suits carrying her suitcases to her room. She did not speak to me and I did not speak to her. I only grabbed my bowl from the counter and walked quickly to my supposed bedroom.

The following night was spent huffing and sighing about thoughts swirling in my mind. What if what Ian had told me made some sense? He had insinuated things without even knowing me yet something about his words made me believe that he might have been right.

I did not look further into it, going to sleep with the vision of my hand flying up to his face and slapping him, playing in my head on repeat.

Suddenly, like all things happen in life, I found myself feeling happy and grateful while January slowly unwound before me. Hannah and I spent as much time as we could with each other. Some days I would

drive up to her apartment to watch comedy shows, others to talk about life or do anything there was to do. We even attempted to study one day. It didn't end very well.

Everything seemed to have fallen into place; Anthony was out of my mind for good, Ian was not mentioned again by Hannah and I had found peace in staying alone at times without my negative thoughts consuming me and leveling me down with the ground.

I was on cloud nine.

But of course, I took it too far; I liked having this undeniably thrilling sensation of pure happiness and ease, so much that I lost all control. Everything in life needs to be balanced whether that means we have to live in darkness at times, or not.

When you have lived your entire life without a shimmer of light, though, things change. You either begin to seek the dark, miserable and cold life that you're used to, or you shove every ounce of negativity under the mat so quickly you don't even know you're doing it.

That was the easy option; I was so scared of returning to that black hole that my life had been for so long, I desperately hung in a worry, stress, responsibilities-free life I created over the holidays.

I took Hannah everywhere. I took her shopping, for drinks at our favorite English pub, pointless walks at Central park, more shopping, more drinks. I learned how to sweep dark thoughts away like it was as easy as breathing.

There were days, though, that Hannah was too tired to come with. Days like these, I had no other choice but to stay in the apartment by myself, since spending time with my aunt seemed laughable.

And as the loneliness slowly started to settle in, the memory of Gloria's presence in the house cleaning, laughing with me and taking

care of the mess that I was crept in my mind and I welcomed it like an old friend. I had missed Gloria a lot, but my brainless, stubborn self, felt betrayed still that she had left me so unexpectedly.

It was foolish of me not to call her or go visit her at her house. She had been more than a mother to me and I should not have forgotten it so quickly. But, no worries, I would see her soon.

Though as suddenly as it began, January had come to an end, waving us goodbye with a heavy snowstorm. There was white everywhere; on the street and pavements, covering almost completely the top of cars and the windows. It was a very beautiful sight to see, but it put an end to Hannah's and my daily excursions through the city. The temperature was too cold to even stand outside your balcony for only a second and Hannah was clear she did not want to go outside in the least, despite my crazy, irrational reasons to do so. Thus, February found me alone, drinking warm milk from a broken porcelain mug.

My hand started cramping from all the writing I've been doing these past few days. I am determined to finish Katerina's letter by the end of the week. She must be waiting for it any day now and I hate to keep her waiting. But I need to write everything so carefully and with every detail I can remember.

'Are you almost finished with the letter, sweetheart?' I hear his voice echoing from the kitchen and then the sound of his feet stomping on the floor and coming to sit next to me on the couch. 'You are going to drive her mad!' He said with a laugh. A laugh that still makes me smile when I hear it. My favorite laugh in the

whole wide world, the one that made me fall deeply in love with him.

‘Well, if she is truly your daughter, she is already mad.’

Chapter nineteen

One year. A little over two months ago.

I don't remember what I was doing, or who I was with. Probably with Anthony, probably trying to fall in love. It doesn't really matter, honestly.

A little over two months ago had been one year since Nova's death. And I had forgotten it.

As I sat on a random, uncomfortably hard rock at that cliff Nova used to love, I thought about how I hated myself for forgetting. She's not supposed to be forgotten. She doesn't deserve this. She meant more than *everything* to me and I couldn't believe that we got to spend so little time together.

It would never be enough though. I would always want a little more.

Nova brought me back to life. She gave meaning to my mornings, showed me there's more that matters than sitting around and feeling sorry for myself. And how did I repay her? I pretended to be in love with a guy I'd met only a month before the famous three words escaped my lips.

I hated myself for spending that day as if it was nothing; as if a part of me didn't die when she laid unconscious on the tile floor. I hated myself for not loving her harder even after she left. But mostly, I hated myself because I didn't hate myself the slightest.

The pain sat prominent, still, every time Nova crossed my mind. Memories played like sweet lullabies every night before I fell asleep. Waking up to a world without her almost made me want to take myself out of it. That's why I was content with forgetting her.

I wanted to have her stored in the back of my mind without reliving every emotion I felt that day whenever a thought of us together popped in my head. Was that so wrong? Was I a bad person for not wanting to hurt anymore?

The view in front of me sat still, though it felt as if my world was spinning.

'You can't know that.' I told her, pushing my body closer to my knees and rubbing my arms with my hands while rocking my body back and forth slightly, trying to get used to the cold temperature or warm myself up.

'Why not?' She asked. I rolled my eyes. How could she ask that? It is pretty obvious why it is not possible. Yet she seemed to be genuinely curious as to why I had said what I said.

'Because,' she came to sit next to me.

She was not wearing anything more than a black tank top, sweatpants and some ugly looking shoes with holes on the sides. I never understood how that woman never got cold.

‘you haven’t been everywhere in the world to say that this is your favorite place.’ I said matter-of-factly but all she did was laugh.

‘Come one, Zoe!’ She lit a cigarette, the third one in the span of an hour, and looked at the view that unraveled before her. ‘Don’t take everything so seriously.’ Her voice had changed tones. She sounded distant and cold. Her voice coming out in something below a whisper.

‘Besides,’ she took a big breath but let it out slowly, silently. ‘look at where you are.’ Nothing more than some ugly trees I saw.

All the pain I felt, all the suffering I did when Nova died I was reliving once again, one year and two months later. And all I could think about was her face; her sweet looking face with her small blue eyes that shone every time she saw me, every time we sat down and talked about the real stuff. All I could hear was her voice calling my name and asking for help; something I never gave her. And her laugh; it kept echoing in my head. A beautiful laugh that was heard every morning after taking care of her or trying to make her breakfast. She would laugh; she would laugh at my stupid attempts of cooking and I would get extremely upset about it but still, she laughed; whatever was going on inside her head and soul did not prevent her from laughing. Laughing like it was the last day her voice would be heard, laughing like everything in her life was perfect, laughing like she was alright. Then why? Why did she leave? Why did she have to give up on herself so easily? Why didn’t she ask for help, my help? The thing is, Katerina, that Nova was constantly asking for help, I was just too blind to see it. Every party she went to, every

day she missed from school to go do things that harmed her, every broken 'I am fine' she told me; all that was a cry for help and I will never forgive myself for not helping her, for not giving her everything she deserved.

That day, the day she died, would always be engraved in my brain vividly. It is difficult to see the life of the party, the light of your miserable life dead on the floor. It is like nothing else in the world, looking at your loved one unconscious, still, lifeless. All the times they have laughed, talked or even cried flash before you and you cannot believe they are gone. A person so lively, so vivid, a person that was your world, a huge part of your life now lies under piles of mud and you cannot do anything about it. And you want to. You beg and you beg for one more talk, one more hug, one more pat on the shoulder and one more time that they could tell you that everything will be okay. One more time and then they can go. One more hug. And then another one after that. One more kiss on the cheek and then you will be alright, you will be able to let go.

But that is not true. There could never be one more time and then nothing. You will always want more and 'more' will not be given to you. Because it cannot be. It is impossible. Yet that will not stop you from asking. And I have asked; I have asked for another chance to see her and talk to her and tell her I love her and hold her hand to make her believe that everything will be alright, she will get through it. I asked for one more smile, one more word to come out of her mouth just so I can hear her voice. Yet every time I asked, I kept getting interrupted by another voice telling me she is dead, she is dead, she cannot come back ever again. But I waited.

And waited some more.

I waited too long for my own good.

She didn't come back, obviously. She wasn't even listening, no one was and I felt alone. More alone than I would ever be. And yet the thought of her sweet presence, silently sitting next to me calmed my senses. The sound of her deep voice telling me to keep going, to move on and live life. The knowledge that she would want to see me happy and experiencing what she didn't get to; that all gave me the strength to get up and leave with a tear-stained face.

'I'm coming' I whispered in the phone to a worried Hannah as I walked to the car.

With the pain still sitting heavy in my chest and the tears still staining my face I decided to call Hannah and ask her if she could forgive me and let me drive to her house and watch movies.

'I will be there in a few minutes. Okay, bye.' She told me to be careful and I hung up. From all the times I felt as if I had reached rock bottom, that time was the one I felt like I could get up and move on.

Checking my phone and walking to the car I saw a few calls from an unknown number. I stayed still for a moment, trying to remember if I had seen this combination of digits before, but nothing came to my mind. Curiosity getting the best of me as always, I tapped the contact on my screen and pressed my phone on my ear. Three beeps I managed to hear and a familiar, distant voice saying my name before everything went black.

I felt my eyes aching from an intense head rush the moment I tried to open them. A strong, white light was placed strictly above my face,

sharpening the pain in my head. I groaned and raised both of my hands to try and remove the light that was giving me a headache.

‘Oh, I am sorry.’ I heard a woman’s voice approaching and then the disturbing light was finally shut off. ‘I must have forgotten it open.’ She seemed to be nice but I still wanted to roll my eyes at her observation of the light. I opened my eyes slowly and took in my surroundings; I seemed to be in some sort of hospital, actual hospital that time. The woman that fixed the light, who looked to be a nurse of some kind, was patting the heavy blanket covering half of my body and smiling at me sweetly. A few moments later, when she stopped fixing my pillows, she asked me the million dollar question, ‘Would you like to see the people waiting for you?’

And then it all came down on me; what the hell happened? Why was I at the hospital? Who brought me here? Was I going to live? Alright, that last question was a bit overdramatic, but I was really shaken by the lack of information and memories I had. Then, standing by the door, I saw someone that made me forget all about what I was previously thinking.

‘Dylan?’

Chapter twenty

It was him; he had come to see me.

‘What are you doing here?’ I asked him, my voice trembling, my eyes filled with tears. He looked scared and vulnerable. His eyes did not dare to look at my own, afraid to face the possible judgment hiding in them. The truth is I did not know how to react to his arrival. I had not seen him since our dear parent’s funeral and since then, his presence was not so significant —if not non-existent— and I was not aware of my feelings towards the situation; towards him.

‘I came to see you’ He breathed out. My stare fell intensely on him, burning holes through him and wondering whenever he was going to speak up again. It itched me to ask him the question; why? Why did he come to see me? Why now? But I didn’t. I could not bear open my mouth and speak because I knew that the only thing coming from there would be a line of pathetic sobs. ‘I am sure you must be wondering why I came—’

‘Yes I am wondering.’ I cut him off and exclaimed fiercely. A newly discovered anger had risen and had suddenly taken control. ‘I am wondering in what world does a brother abandon his sister moments after their parents funeral?’

He was shocked. I remember distinctly his eyelids flickering madly as if that could alter the situation he was facing and his mouth was partly hanging open.

‘I am wondering, how could a brother let his only sister move to another country across the world, with a woman that had turned into a legitimate monster?’ My back was no longer stuck on the mattress but had risen with force once I had found the courage to speak to my brother the way I thought he deserved. My heart was pounding under the skin of my chest and all of my powers went into my tries not to shed a tear during my tantrum.

‘I am wondering how could, *my brother*, not call or text or show up at my doorstep during all those years asking if I am alive or not?’ My voice was progressively getting louder with every word that went past my lips. I was looking at Dylan like he was the last person on earth I wanted to see at the moment. He did not look very happy either; with his brows frowned and his jaw clenching I realized he did not like what he heard much.

‘Why did you leave me?’

‘Don’t be so dramatic, Zoe.’ He said. It was my turn to be the one in shock. ‘You got to live in aunt Maria’s luxurious apartment, have everything you need handed to you—even your damn college tuition she paid for you!’ My hands were shaking underneath the thick, white hospital blanket that was covering me. I was angry; he had not talked to me for years and then instead of apologizing for ghosting me, he accused me of

having an easy life. ‘So stop complaining, okay? You don’t know how hard life can actually be.’

It felt like the millionth time I had seen my life in New York flash before my eyes. I took a moment to think about everything; it was quite a lot what I had experienced in the city. I was trying very hard to look at the events objectively and figure out whether Dylan was right or not. Was I truly overreacting to things? Had I been acting dramatically all along?

Then I looked at him. A man, he had become. A man who, when he left me was only nineteen years old, was standing in front of me, unaware of what I had been through, judging me for how I acted out on him. I did not know who he was anymore, not that I ever did. Of course, he was my brother but I didn’t know him, really. I did not know his fears, his goals, his deepest secrets or desires. I didn’t know what he wanted to do when he grew up, I didn’t know his way of thinking or how he handled various situations.

He did not know me either. He didn’t know my favorite color, or my favorite meal. He did not know my goals or fears. And he certainly did not know what I had to go through living with aunt Elizabeth in New York and everything that happened in general.

The only difference between us was that I tried to get to know him—when we were only kids, of course. I saw him standing outside our house kicking small rocks or chasing our neighbor’s cats around, and I would sneak up next to him and try to catch his attention. Or at night, I would creep in his room and ask him to read me a story with the sole purpose of getting a chance to talk with him. But he never let me in. So, I stayed out of his life and he did the same with mine.

‘You don’t get to call me names like ‘dramatic’ when you are completely blind to what has been going on in my life.’ My voice came in

a growl, like a beast's. 'And not that you will actually care, but if it were not for Gloria, I wouldn't be here having this conversation with you.' The room fell silent and I could easily notice the expression on his face changing. I waited for him to say something, anything. He did not; he stayed silent.

'But of course, you do not care.' I whispered, wiping the few tears that hung from my lashes. I laid my back on the firm mattress again, trying to catch my breath and relax.

'You said something about Gloria?' My chest felt heavier at the mention of her. *I have to go to see her soon*, I had thought. My heart aches to think about it now; quite a lot to be honest.

'Yeah... I love her. She helped me a lot. She —'

'She was aunt's friend, right?' My body tensed. He knew about Gloria and that stunned me. But what actually got me thinking was his face; lips sealed in a downwards smile, eyes filled with worry and pity. He was relaxed; all the anger seemed to have flown away from him but the way he was standing was warning.

'How do you know about her?'

He looked directly into my eyes, for the first time since he stepped foot in my hospital room. A sharp pain shot my back and my legs went numb. I was scared. He was hiding something, I was sure of it.

'And what do you mean 'was'? Gloria and aunt Maria are still friends.' The seconds that took Dylan to speak seemed to me like hours. I thought I was starting to become insane, thinking of all the possible outcomes of that conversation.

'Zoe...Gloria is dead.'

My body froze. I could not grasp what my brother had said to me.

How could she be dead?

I had not told her yet how sorry I was that I treated her like that. I had not thanked her for everything that she had done for me yet. She couldn't be dead. I thought it must be a nightmare; a terrible nightmare from which I would wake up in only a few moments.

I would wake up and Dylan wouldn't be standing in front of me, Gloria would be alive and I would still have time to run to Gloria's apartment, knock on her door and beg for her forgiveness for as long as it takes.

'They brought her in while you were asleep. She had a heart attack and...'

His voice dissolved into a whisper and got tangled along with the thunderous sound of my heart beating, my own obnoxiously clamorous breathing and a sharp ringing that reverberated in my ears.

And then it was all dark again.

'How did you find me?' I asked him.

'I knew where you were from the beginning, Zoe.' He answered softly. Hearing my old nickname from him brought crazy, loving childhood memories in my mind, warming my heart.

'I had been talking with aunt Maria for a while now actually.' I raised a questioning eyebrow at his statement. Why and how did he get in contact with her? And why did he not call *me*? 'I met with her in Paris but we were in communication long before that.' He cleaned the small nightstand besides my bed and brought the food that a nurse left in the room, on my lap.

'Yeah, that is where I have been living for the past four years.' My eyes widened and he chuckled while feeding more of the distasteful soup. 'I stayed at Vanessa's for about a year and a half and then I started working

at a hotel and they gave me a small place to live. It was cool.' I stayed still. I could not believe Vanessa agreed to let him stay with her.

Vanessa was a beautiful girl that Dylan used to have a relationship with, in high school. They were very close and everyone thought they would get married, including me. I really liked Vanessa; she was always very sweet and kind to me and she seemed to make my brother happy.

But I guess it was never meant to be. Either that, or something really messed up happened.

'It was nothing special, believe me.' He exclaimed softly, taking a small pause and looking at nothing before turning to me again and feeding me the rest of the potato soup. No one talked; we were enjoying the silence and calm of it all. Dylan seemed skeptical, though; like something was troubling him.

'Is there something wrong?' I asked worriedly. I could really not handle anything bad happening, I thought I would break. Dylan looked at me and his expression surprised me. His lips were curled in a thin line and his eyes showed weakness, misery...regret? He took a big breath and said,

'I want you to leave here and come with me.'

'You want me to leave New York and come with you, to where? Paris?' I will not lie, not only was I shocked Dylan suggested I go live with him after years of purposely ignoring me, I was also slightly excited that I might be moving to Paris. But Dylan shook his head and took a big breath once again.

'To England.'

Chapter twenty one

The following night was supremely unsettling for me. The idea of moving back to England kept twirling inside my brain leaving me with only two hours of good night's sleep. In the morning Dylan and Hannah came to the hospital, packed my things and drove me to my aunt's apartment; in the afternoon, we went to Gloria's funeral.

A lot of people came to say their last goodbye to my dear Gloria and I was not surprised in the least. She was a very lovely and kind person, too much for her own good and it would be a crime not to completely adore that woman. I went near the casket last, almost shaking from the overwhelming feeling of loss that devoured me. I desired to speak to her, tell her about all the wonderful things she had done for me and how grateful I was to have had her in my life all those years. But I could not bring myself to say anything remotely similar than that; only a few sobs

escaped my mouth and a whisper of the words 'I am sorry'. The rest of the night I spent at Hannah's apartment, silently crying myself to sleep for all those who I had lost and with whom I would never be able to speak again.

It was early in the morning when my brother appeared at Hannah's apartment to take me home. I hugged Hannah goodbye and we drove to my aunt's without speaking a word to each other. I was definitely aware of Dylan's constant stare to my direction, checking on me every few seconds. I knew he wanted me to give him an answer; an answer I did not have myself.

'I see you have not finished writing that letter, eh?' His soft voice strikes me out of my writing bliss. Walking inside, without asking for permission may I add, he takes a seat on the armchair aside from my desk and leans back, sipping his coffee.

'As you can see,' I wave the papers in front of his face making him laugh, 'I am clearly not done with it. Really close to doing so though, so if you are kind enough, get your pretty butt off my armchair and out of my room.' I tell him, trying to fake an annoyed voice, but when he looks at me, I cannot help but smile as he smiles back.

He gets up from the purple chair and walks to stand right behind me, leaning his head next to mine to read the pages in front of him. 'My name's not there.' He observes loudly and I shake my head. 'I thought that letter was about you and I. Didn't Katerina ask you to write about our story?'

‘Not quite.’

The luxurious, fancy apartment that owned my once loved aunt, was empty of her presence once we arrived. I looked around at every corner of the house, every small or large decoration she had placed on the furniture and I felt nothing but a dull emptiness about the space. Nothing meant something to me; they were all just silver and gold objects in an apartment that I wanted to escape from every single day I woke up in.

I walked outside on the balcony and took a look at New York City; a city that had brought to me nothing more than pure misery during the time I thought I wasted there. I stared at the lifeless building rising in front of me and wondered; why am I still here? Fascinating it is that, even after numerous reasons appeared in my head once I asked myself that question, I still managed to convince my heart that I needed to leave that city immediately. Going back inside with a small smile on my face and ready to announce to Dylan my decision, I found him observing the framed pictures that my aunt had placed on top of a glass buffet furniture. I walked closer to him as he picked one of the frames to observe it in detail.

‘Is that Gloria?’ he asked me. I gently took the picture he was holding and brought it close to my face. Two young girls I saw, laughing and looking at each other. The girl on the right was sure to be my aunt Maria when she was about my age. With her ginger colored hair styled in small curls, her blue eyes sparkling with joy and her lips shaped in a wide smile, I knew she was happy then. And I smiled too, thinking that there was a time when my aunt was really happy and hoped that the young woman in the picture was still hidden somewhere under the cold stone personality she had created.

Next to her, with her arm around my aunt's shoulders stood Gloria; a much younger Gloria than the one I last saw cleaning the apartment. She, too, had a huge, glowing smile on her face and eyes fixed on my aunt, filled with love and appreciation. It amazed me how two friends like them with a friendship like theirs could end up how they ended up; with a pointless employee-boss relationship.

'Yes, I think this is her.' I replied to Dylan, giving him back the silver frame. Looking at the other silver frames on the furniture, I noticed many pictures--most pictures actually-- were of my brother and I as babies, casually playing with our parents or on my aunt's arm. It surprised me to see myself at my aunt's ridiculously rich frames, as if we were still as close as we were in those pictures. Anger grew within me and Dylan was quick to notice since I walked away stomping my feet on the ground like a little child.

'She really loves you, you know.' I huffed at his bold words and at the certainty in his voice. Going through some of the drawers in her kitchen, looking for restaurant brochures, I hear Dylan approaching me.

'If she really loved me, she would treat me better than the trash she made me feel like.' I quietly stated. He let out a big breath and sat on a chair behind me, observing my moves. I could feel his judgmental stare on the back of my head.

'Look, I don't know what kind of relationship you had with aunt Maria these past four years but to me, she had been nothing but a cruel, evil witch.' I added. 'And anyway, she is not someone I want to talk about right now.' I quickly dismissed the subject, finally picking one of the many restaurant brochures in one of the drawers. I turned around to look at my brother, his face all skeptical and serious.

‘If you say so.’ He told me and I nodded my head before walking next to him and sitting on a chair as he grabbed the leaflet from my hands and went through the menu. I look closely at his face and think about my decision. Smiling, I take a big breath and let it out slowly.

‘I want to leave New York city.’

Dylan’s head shot up and the brightest smile appeared on his face. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive.’

He couldn’t stop smiling and neither could I. It felt like I was finding my brother, *really* finding him. Yeah, he came to the hospital, yeah I saw him after all those years. But had we ever really connected? Had we found what we once had?

After saying yes to going back to England with him, hope creeped its way to me. Hope for the better; a better life, a better relationship with my brother. I would have a family again. *My brother*. Oh how much I had missed him.

I wondered what he was up to while I lived in New York as I watched him order food for us. I knew he was in Paris and that he worked in some type of hotel. But what was he *doing*? Who was he doing it with?

These were questions I decided to ask him later. The serene silence that hugged us was too perfect to ruin.

‘Hey! What was so important that I needed to come down here so quickly?’ Hannah questioned. I fiddled with my fingers as she entered my room. I was sitting on my bed, my back on the headboard and my legs stuck on my chest. I did not dare to look at her, trying to prepare for the moment I would tell her I am leaving.

‘Are you alright?’ she asked me. I nodded and told her to sit next to me. My breathing was unsteady; I was so unbelievably nervous about Hannah’s reaction to me going back home, leaving New York City; leaving her. Would she hate me? Would she never want to speak to me ever again?

‘I have to tell you something.’ I finally spoke up. She looked at me and smiled. I did not know how to explain to her what I felt, afraid she might not understand. Hannah may have been with me through everything since I met her, but was not sure of her reaction to me leaving the country. For once, I was the one abandoning someone and I despised it from the bottom of my wrecked heart.

‘What is it?’ I dared not to speak up yet again, fright taking over my senses. ‘Zoe, whatever it is, you can tell me.’ She said softly and placed her hand on top of mine. A few seconds of silence went by and I could sense that Hannah was getting impatient.

‘Come on, Z. What is so big that you have gone silent all of the sudden-’

‘I’m going back to England.’ Hannah’s eyes stared at me widened. Her whole face seemed to be in shock and her lips parted open, ever so slowly. Neither of us said anything; we only looked at each other. ‘I am so terribly sorry, Hannah but I need to go.’ Hannah stayed silent, her face displaying no emotion.

‘Leaving you will not be easy and I am sorry if I will hurt you by saying that, but I need to leave New York City. I cannot stay here any longer or I will drown; the city will drown me, Hannah.’ My voice cracked during my great speech while Hannah shook her head dismissively.

‘You do not have to apologize for nothing, Liz.’ A bitter laugh escaped her mouth as she wiped the few tears that ran down her cheeks. ‘I will miss you, of course, but if that is what you need to do then who am

I to stop you?' Tears stained my skin as the realization that I was going home finally hit me.

After sobbing in my room for about an hour, Hannah and I decided we would start packing my things up. I had two weeks in New York still, but I wanted to rush everything forward. We stayed in my bedroom until dawn and more, talking and reminiscing about the wonderful time we spent together; a bittersweet feeling for the both of us. Only when Dylan started barging in and out of the room did Hannah decide it was time for her to leave for her apartment.

As the night progressed, Dylan and I ordered dinner from a Chinese restaurant down the block and watched one of his favorite movies and eventually fell asleep on the couch, just like so many other times in the past.

Neither Dylan nor I heard aunt Maria coming in at night or leaving the apartment in the morning. The thought that I had to talk to her to let her know I would be leaving brought me chills of discomfort and I knew that the day I would finally leave her precious, rich apartment would be her favorite day, despite everything that Dylan said about her still loving me.

The following morning Dylan left the building in a hurry, with an awful excuse at that. Coincidentally, Hannah cancelled our morning meeting at the cafeteria saying her brother needed some help with something. It was impossible how much of an idiot these two thought I was, and unimaginably infuriating. Nonetheless, I respected their privacy and remained quiet, even though it was quite difficult to do so.

Good thing was that thinking about my brother being into an intimate relationship with my best friend was greatly unsettling, so I made sure to get my mind off the whole situation.

So I went to that cafeteria alone; I grabbed a coffee, got some groceries, enjoyed the outside world for a little while and returned back to my aunt's building. Though the moment I arrived outside of the apartment, I realized that the calmness and serene environment of my morning would soon become just a delightful memory.

'What on earth are you doing here?' How that man had the power to activate the anger boiling inside of me I never understood. Only with the sight of him my cheeks turned red; I only knew him for a few months yet he managed to make me furious in seconds.

'What on earth are you doing leaving Hannah high and dry?' He shot back as I pushed him to the side so I could unlock the door and quickly walk right inside, Ian walking close behind me.

'Oh please, make yourself at home!' I mocked him while placing my plastic cup and bags full of groceries on the white, marble counter aisle in my aunt's kitchen. 'And for the record, I am not leaving Hannah high and dry, I am leaving this city for my own good and you do not have the right to judge me!' Once again I was put into a situation where I had to raise my voice and fight with someone. Only that time, I had no relation with the person I was arguing with, meaning I had made myself believe I had the right to say whatever I found suitable.

'I have the right to do whatever I want when it comes to Hannah's life!' He exclaimed with intensity, making my heart skip a beat. I had never backed out of an argument and neither had I felt intimidated by anyone, making it very difficult to face Ian after realizing he could weaken me.

Nonetheless, I showed to have a tough exterior and continued to fight through my newly found weakness.

‘No, you don’t have the right to do anything of the sort because that is between Hannah and I. And you are forcing your way into my life right now, something I do not appreciate in the least.’ My voice was low but every ounce of anger and frustration I had collected throughout my teenage years and after, had brought on the surface a side of me that I had never shown anyone. I felt my eyes and my whole entire body burn, only that time was not out of devastation or because of the immense amount of crying; it was out of anger, an anger towards a certain person. And even though he had made me weak for a second there, my ability to hide that from him gave me back my strength. ‘And I dare you to say one thing about my life.’ I had brought my face strangely close to his, trying to give off a type of dominance in the conversation, show him that just because he’s a man and can yell doesn’t mean he has the right to say whatever he wants. ‘You remember what happened the last time you did that, eh?’ The insinuated threat slipped off my lips so easily, I was surprised it even happened. His eyes got all dark and he tilted his head just a little, my heart pounding out of my chest.

‘Are you threatening me?’ I wanted to deny it, but his look almost left me speechless. Almost.

Backing away from his personal space, I decided the only way to regain my strength would be to stay away from him. Unaware of the obvious and real reason why he left me breathless, I continued to display my powerful persona; only without looking at him.

‘Well, you left me with no other choice!’ Distracting myself with placing the groceries in the fridge and cabinets, I felt more relaxed and balanced. ‘You come here, in my apartment and accuse me of being selfish

for leaving Hannah and taking care of myself! And all that without even knowing the whole story!’ My head was hung low and my eyes were nowhere near him all the while I was speaking. Lifting my head up, I saw him standing insufferably close to me. ‘What are you...’

‘Then tell me the whole story.’ There was a monumental shift in the general atmosphere. My arms did not feel like they had to do something in order to distract me from him, but were hung loose on my sides. My breaths came out slower and quieter; only my heartbeat stayed at its same crazy rate. For a moment, I thought he started to lean in and for another moment, my eyes lingered closed when I blinked.

But I soon came to my senses and shoved him away. ‘No! No, I will not tell you the whole story because I don’t know you! You are nothing to me, only a stranger that barged into my home and made me feel like a horrible person for leaving Hannah.’ I walked away from him and quickly paced towards my room. Going in, I felt my heart tighten to the sight of all those boxes laying on the floor. I still could not believe I was leaving New York.

‘You are a horrible person though!’ I heard him say from the kitchen. ‘Who abandons their best friend after so many things she has done for you!’ Turning around and almost running to where he is, I meet him in the hallway. I looked straight into his eyes and where I thought I would see a person who regretted what he said, I saw hatred and disgust.

‘I do it!’ I yelled at him and pushed him away; he only budged a little bit. ‘I do it, and I will do it a million times if that means I get to be happy again!’ I pushed him again.

‘You,’ my hands go up his chest and with all my strength I shove him backwards. He sat there and took it all.

‘don’t’ tears slide down my cheeks and I blinked away the ones that threaten to come out.

‘know me!’ That time he was fast enough to grab my hands before I hit him again and shove me to the wall while I sob away my overwhelming feeling. He held me tight and despite his rough movements, his touch felt so warm and welcoming.

He brought a hand to my jaw and held my face strongly until I stopped crying. His thumb went under my eyes and wiped the tears that were falling. Our bodies were so close, it felt strange, unknown. It was like every second that passed I needed more and more of him and he was willing to give it to me. Leaning his forehead on mine, I felt a big breath leave my lips as I closed my eyes to take in as much of the situation as I could. Both breathing heavily, our chests crashing to each other.

And right before he leaned in all the way, his hand fell from my jaw and his entire body felt like he was ripped away from me. I opened my eyes and was faced with Ian’s shocked face. He was slowly walking away, looking straight into my eyes with disbelief.

‘What did you do?’ He whispered. Turning around and running to the door, Ian had left me in complete shock with his words. Was he blaming me for that whole thing? I was furious, finally getting out of my trance and following him. He was out of the apartment building by the time I managed to catch up to him, February’s cold weather hitting my face and body, tensing my muscles and bringing me to reality quickly.

‘You cannot possibly blame this on me?’ I forced my voice to come out as loud as it can, hurting my throat in the process. Ian turned around and I saw the rage forming in his face.

‘Who else should I blame?’

Chapter twenty two

One week later; a week of complete confusion, self-doubt and irreversible hatred towards me from me, I found myself thinking of the past events and longing for my departure from New York. Many things happened during that week. After Ian basically told me it was my fault we almost kissed, even though he was the one to push me against the wall and thoroughly turn my life upside-down, I went looking for Hannah. Making a few calls, driving by her apartment and texting her number uncountable times were only a few things I did in desperate need to reach her. I even called my brother but he did not answer. My last chance was to go looking for her at her mother's house. Having Hannah talk about it for almost half of our friendship, it was fairly easy to find my way to it.

I felt quite uncomfortable visiting Hannah's mother's house uninvited, but I was in great need of my best friend. Whatever happened with Ian and I, Hannah had to know and inform me of what to do. A

couple of minutes passed with me just standing outside the front door, inching my finger closer and closer until I finally ringed their bell. The sound of it echoed inside, intimidating my already weakened feelings. Though, as the seconds went by and the intensity of my feelings wore off, I realized the mistake I was about to make.

Hannah was not only my best friend, but also Ian's. My own thoughts and feelings created by Ian's confusing behavior in my aunt's apartment, overwhelmed me and clouded my senses. I could not confide in Hannah when the person that stroked me out of my ordinary, was someone she really loved.

Taking a shaky breath, I turned around and walked away from the entrance. I had not taken more than three steps forward when the door flung open and a familiar voice grasped my attention.

'Thought you would never ring that bell.' It was definitely not Hannah who made that snarky comment, considering the voice was of a male's, yet I was sure to have heard it before.

'Hannah is not here if you are looking for her.' The fact that he knew I came for Hannah stopped me from walking any further and forced me to turn around to face that know-it-all.

'Surprise..' He said once my body was fully facing him.

'You?'

'Me.'

'How did you-. What are you doing here?' I questioned, obviously dazed and remarkably confused as to how he was standing there in front of me. A feeling I had gotten used to over the last few years.

'I am here for the same reason I was at the ball on New Year's eve; I am Hannah's brother.' I felt as if the ground was swept off my feet and my whole life has just been a huge scheme. The man that I was looking

for the entire time I was at Hannah's New Year's eve ball, was actually her brother. Only that did not explain why I thought I had seen him before.

'Have we met before?' I asked timidly, hoping he would not take it the wrong way and think of me as a creepy stranger. Eyes slightly shut and head tilted to the side, Hannah's brother pretended to think back on his life. A smirk formed on his lips and in a matter of seconds he broke into a pit of loud laughter, leaving me still very much confused.

Once he was done with his little show, he offered me his hand and said, 'My name is Nico and I was the guy who took care of you when you were drunk, last year.'

'I—' I didn't know what to say. I stood there speechless and with my mouth open; no breaths coming in or out. It came as a shock to me that the guy who took me to his house on the night of my birthday, right after I had ruined my best friend's and boyfriend's life, was not only standing right across from me, he was also my current best friend's brother and he remembered everything that happened that dreadful night.

After Nico stopped laughing at the dumbfounded expression I had once he told me we had met before, he took me to a waffle shop and explained everything that went down on April 11th; at least the part I did not remember. And just like that, everything made sense; why I felt like I knew him on New Year's eve, why Hannah's description of her house was so vivid; but neither of those things were clear enough only because I was drunk or terribly hungover.

But, of course, because life is always full of surprises, I found Nick's company a worthy way of spending my time. Just like his sister, Nico was warm, neutral and calm but with an extra touch of immense sarcasm that conflicted with mine and made our conversations far more interesting. We

spent hours together and when he suggested we go somewhere that was not infected by the hassle of the city, I took him to Nova's cliff.

'That's beautiful.' He said.

'The cliff?'

'Yeah. I mean, look at the view.' I did. It wasn't as beautiful as he'd made it look like. Nothing special about it.

Not one other person I had brought with me there, not even Hannah. I saw something in Nico that pushed me to do it, and I wanted him to see the place, to appreciate it like I did. That gave him the opportunity to see me in a way no one but Hannah had dared to see me.

I let him; that was the surprising part. Nico drew me in the second we started actually talking. We bonded over the small things like the relationship with our family or the pure hatred we both had for New York City, or our love for books; a love I had forgotten before him. It was like an instant connection, one that only happens one in a million times; and it happened to me, and I am forever grateful it did.

By the time I told Nico I must return to my apartment and him offering to drive me, Ian was long lost from my thoughts. We kept talking even while we were in the car. I basically told him everything and he told me a lot about his life too; he told me his favorite aunt had died in a car crash, that his favorite color is purple or blue, he told me he used to be very close with his sister but is not anymore. He did not tell me anything further about their relationship or about his father and I was more than grateful he kept it to himself. I would be very upset to be found in the middle of an argument between Hannah and him.

Besides all the talking, and sharing and connecting, I experienced something more complicated that evening. Every time he accidentally placed his hand on my thigh while we were sitting near the edge of the

cliff, or every lingering look we shared, or even when he said my name, something unexplainable happened.

I'd feel the urge to giggle like a young girl and my face would get more and more heated by every small action of his. There was no doubt that Nico was attractive; tall, curly haired and charming smile. Not to mention his unbelievably kind and fun personality which gave him a great advantage in his whole look. But I couldn't say I desired to have him any other way than just a friend.

I was too scared to even think about it.

Nonetheless, I left him in his car and quickly made my way up to my aunt's apartment, smiling. There, I found Hannah and Dylan placing boxes in the living room. Once I barged in, they both looked at me in shock, as if a stranger was standing across from them.

'What is up with you?' Hannah asked laughing. Letting out a big breath, I shrugged my shoulders and walked next to her so I could help her with the massive box in front of her. We moved to my room to finish up whatever was needed there and while we were packing the surprisingly big amount of clothes I had from my closet to the carton boxes, Hannah leaned next to my ear and whispered;

'Did you meet anyone new? You have been grinning furiously to yourself since you walked in the apartment.' Knowing Hannah for a while and hanging out with her almost every day, I knew she would detect any sudden shift in my mood in a matter of seconds but I did not want her to, considering the person responsible for that specific change was her brother; the same brother she hated, the same brother who treated her awfully on their trip to Paris, the same brother we mocked and spoke bad about so many mornings she spent during Christmas. I felt ashamed and a part of myself was regretting ever spending time with him and arranging

another meeting for the next morning especially if that meant hiding it from Hannah.

‘Oh, no, nothing changed. I did not meet anyone.’ I lied and placed another shirt in the box.

From the corner of my eye I saw Hannah’s brows frowning and her mouth opening, ready to respond to my very obvious, to her only, untrue statement. She would have managed to call me out on my attempt to hide her the truth if Ian had not come bursting into my room laughing loudly alongside my brother. Feeling my legs slowly go numb once he entered, I sat on the edge of my bed afraid my power would betray me when he started talking. I could not take my eyes away from him and if I did, visions of him being close to me were repeatedly playing inside my head.

Yet, he acted as if I was not there, like I was a ghost. Two hours it took for us to get tired and give up on packing, and every second that passed in those hours I felt like he took away my power bit by bit.

No-one had ever made me feel such a powerful rush of embarrassment and silky, pure rage at the same time, like Ian did. Only the sight of him, or just knowing that he was within arm’s reach, ticked me in a very gruesome way. Fortunately, but not so for him, while Dylan and Hannah went to get food, we stayed alone in the apartment.

It was awkward; that’s a fact. Ian stood in the middle of the kitchen, his head fell down looking at the phone he gripped tightly with both hands. I walked to stand opposite of him. Nothing. No reaction. I coughed, hoping something will happen, even just a flick of ears or a quick glance towards me. Nope, he stayed still.

‘Listen, I—’

And then he did the inexplicable. He walked away.

Without raising his head, without so much as breathing at my direction, he walked to one of the bedrooms.

Wrong move. The anger that boiled in my veins slowly rose from my belly to my chest and neck where I could almost feel the burning of it marking my skin with red.

I stormed into the room he had run off to hide in, banging my palm flat into the surface of the wooden door, making sure his head will turn around this time. And it did. Ian's head turned with such force I thought it would fly off. Unfortunately, it didn't. He stared at me with disbelief floating evidently in his eyes, as if I had disturbed him in his own private, little space.

'We didn't kiss.' I started off strong. Though his hard gaze softened, I remained angry. 'I didn't ask you to kiss me. I didn't ask you to comfort me and neither did I beg you to hold me.'

I kept a strict distance between us. That way he wouldn't accuse me of attempted murder and I would be able to control the nauseating feeling that woke when we touched.

I felt crazy. I absolutely felt crazy, With all that's been going on, with all that I've experienced when it comes to love, or anything close to it, I still searched for that pulling sensation. I still had the energy to look for the rush of emotions you feel when you're falling. The addictive taste of wanting, *needing*, to have someone's eyes on you at any given moment.

And his eyes burned on me. Every nerve in my body was aware of the long-lasting eye contact we shared. I felt it hit my chest so hard I almost choked on my empty breath. His look was addictive. And I wanted more.

But I couldn't take it, I couldn't ask for it. Not because of the obvious. Not because it was selfish of me to do. Because I would hate myself. Because my ego couldn't take it.

‘Shit, I don’t even know what to say anymore.’ I felt the thread that kept me sane start to get ripped into pieces. ‘I can’t handle any more drama, really. You don’t like me, I don’t like you. Let’s leave it at that. But stay away from my business, will you?’

I had stormed into the room to raise hell, yet I opted for peace. Inner peace; *my* inner peace. I didn’t care if his look sent my body into overdrive, or if I couldn’t get the feel of his touch on my skin out of my head. It all drove me insane, in the worst way possible. Nothing compared to how I felt that moment; my heart had grown so, *so* tired of everything and I was done. Taking everything with a grain of salt was what I wanted to do.

With a nod of my head, looking at Ian’s deadly shocked face, I exited the room.

I just had to get used to the fact that not everything is deep and meaningful. I wasn’t in love with Ian like a dark thought had whispered in my ear, I didn’t even like him. I just craved his physical attention; that’s all. All I could handle. All I wanted to handle. Not with Ian, of course.

Never with Ian.

For the following week, Dylan and Hannah, besides going on secret dates and forcing me to stay out of the apartment so they can ‘work properly’, made a schedule just so I can enjoy these last days in the city. That schedule involved walks on Central Park, discovering every hidden street, corner, neighborhood of New York City, shopping at my favorite mall, a couple of sleepovers at Hannah’s and for the great finale, a last fun night out at the city.

We would dress to impress, put on the brightest or darkest shade of lipstick we owned, drown ourselves on perfume and roam the streets until we found the perfect club to drink until dawn.

Of course, I wanted to bring Nico with us, with whom I had gotten eminently close, but that was more than unlikely; it was never going to happen, Hannah would not let it.

And what could I possibly do? Tell her that while she was secretly seeing my brother, I had been seeing hers? I couldn't; Hannah's relationship with Nico was way more damaged than the one I had with Dylan.

A fact that I did not stop reminding myself every second of every hour I spent with Nico. Every wonderful second.

It was difficult. Apart from the guilt I felt my time with Nico was life-changing. We went on four-hour-long rides in his car just listening to music and talking about everything. We spent whole mornings in libraries finishing books in one sitting and then discussing them at lunch. By the end of the week, Nico had become one of my closest friends and the thought of leaving without spending my last moments near him, drove me insane.

[More of Nico and Zoe]

'Can you give me the spatula?' I scoffed at him and made a bear-like sound for making me get up from my seat. Since Hannah told me she'd stay at home and study, I took it upon myself to spend as much time with Nico as I could. So, I invited him over to the apartment for dinner. Aunt Maria would be out with Marcus and Dylan... well, he just said he'd be out. Who knows where he was?

I did. I knew, but that'd be an awkward conversation to have with my older brother. Can you imagine? 'Hey, I know we haven't *really* talked in years and you know nothing about my life, and vice versa, but I would really appreciate it if you didn't lie to my face about possibly having sex with my best friend.'

A nightmare.

‘Would you stop acting like a child? Or better yet, an elderly woman with back problems.’ I acted hurt, opening my mouth wide open and taking a step back with my hand clasping at my chest.

He laughed and took the spatula off my hand.

I stood there, next to him, just staring at how well he operated in the kitchen. A light tug at my heart made me realize how much I’d miss him when I leaved. It was odd the speed in which he managed to make me feel so comfortable around him. My mind was a busy place, thoughts fighting with each other, never letting me take a deep breath and let go. I was always troubled. Thinking of what had happened, what was happening and what *could* happen in the next seconds.

With Nico, everything was clear.

He never let me think too much. He’d pinch me in the elbow, slap his hand on my forehead or look me with heavy eyes before whispering ‘Stop thinking. You look weird.’ And that would be it. I’d simply stop thinking and I would live.

I lived every moment with him. Whether we were at the library or in his car or even just laying on my couch; I experienced it all.

‘I’m really going to miss you.’ The words tumbled through my lips before I could stop them. Nico turned around and smiled at me, putting away whatever he was preparing for us to eat.

‘I could live without you spacing out every three seconds.’

My mouth fell open and my face went red before I burst out laughing. I laughed so hard I felt tears pool in my eyes at some point. He laughed too. I loved his laugh. So unnecessarily loud, piercing your ear with its out of tune sound but so *him*.

I felt grateful to have him as my friend. Life went by so easily with him. Nico provided me with a calmness that made me feel safe. I could actually sense my muscles relaxing when he walked up to me. My lips would get shaped in the widest, brightest smiles and every dark voice that spoke lowly in my head, begging me to fall back into the blackness of how I thought I should feel, instantly shut up.

He made me happy.

‘I’m going to miss you too.’ Nico said as he wrapped his long arms around me. I nuzzled my face in his chest. So familiar. My heart was swelling with undeniable warmth that reached up my head and made me feel dizzy.

We stayed like that for a long time. We were used to each other’s touch by then, and as days went by, Nico and I soke it out.

Thinking about it now, I laugh at how badly I looked for trouble. I could’ve easily walked away from him, if he’d let me that is. Nico was very stubborn. But if I wanted to, I would. Yet I didn’t. I had claimed to be so over everything and tired with useless romance, but I longed for it, I attracted it, I followed it.

And now I wonder.

Was it me all along?

‘You don’t have to worry about me, Loze.’ Loze was a new nickname Nico had the privilege of calling me. Somehow it slipped up that my middle name is Lauren and Nico came up with ‘Loze’. I didn’t know what was going on in his brain and how he managed to come up with that, but it was nice having him call me with something other than my actual name; I felt special.

‘We will spend time on Saturday.’ He tried to make me feel better. In fact he had been trying to make me feel better for hours that Friday, since I started whimpering like a baby about the fact that he will not be able to come with us on Sunday to party.

I sighed and adjusted my head on his shoulder so that my ear would not hurt. We were sitting on the edge of the cliff, staring at the small trees beneath and the cloudy, starless, dark sky above us. It was peaceful; only the sound of my pounding heart I could hear. Nico being so close to me, still made me giggle in my head or increase my heartbeat in seconds; even though we couldn’t be apart for so long, I wasn’t used to it yet.

I had not discovered what it was, that whole thing. Feelings for Nico were not considerable; he was way too valuable to me to see him that way. It didn’t matter that we spent most of our time together. It didn’t matter that I always thought about him when he wasn’t with me. It didn’t matter that my heart ripped every single time someone mentioned I was leaving. I couldn’t do that to him, couldn’t destroy what we had because I *thought* we’d be good together.

Everything I touched turned into ash. And I would never let that happen to Nico.

[a thousand more words]

But leaving him here felt a thousand times worse than feeling guilty about what I had done to other people in the past.

With a thought-clouded mind I returned to the apartment late on Friday night, expecting to see Dylan sitting on the couch or cooking dinner for us to eat. Instead, I found aunt Maria leaning her arms on the kitchen aisle with her eyes closed shut and whispering something under her breath. I walked away quickly hoping I would not get into a peculiar situation

involving her talking to me, despite the fact that I knew I had to if I wanted to let her know I would be leaving in two days.

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‘Zoe, I would like to speak to you for a moment.’

Hearing her voice made me feel ill. I hadn't heard her talk to me in a very long time and I loathed the day she would finally make a move and do it. Cruellest thing of it all, my head was already hustled with my own overwhelming thoughts, making it nearly impossible to start a conversation with her even for one quarter of a second. Let alone the fact that I felt as if I was about to talk to a stranger; a stranger I grew up to love but learned to despise.

I slowly turned around and walked just as slowly to meet her in the living room, where she had moved. Sitting across from her with my head held straight to her direction, my eyes wide open and my teeth biting the inside of my cheeks, I was ready to face her.

She did not seem so alarmed or prepared to fight like I was yet her body seemed relaxed, her lips were sealed in a small smile; nothing on her told me she wanted to argue. Even her looks were the exact opposite of her usual self, eyes naked of any eyeshadow, her lips lacked the bright red color that normally accompanied them, no blush or harsh eye-liner. Aunt Maria stood bare of her every-day armor in front of me and I did not know how to handle that.

‘I know you are leaving for England in a couple of days.’ She was speaking softly, completely throwing me off. ‘And I just wanted to tell you, you will certainly be missed.’ From every possible scenario of what I thought aunt Maria would tell me, that was not only the last I considered to happen, it did not even cross my mind as a possibility. At first I believed she was lying to me, playing some silly joke to pass her time. But then she smiled at me and got up to leave and I knew this was actually the reality of things.

‘You don’t think I believe that, right?’ What I said made her stop at her tracks. Turning around to face me she revealed the pure confusion that was drawn on her face. I almost burst out laughing at how ridiculous that whole situation was, but I opted to stay silent until the right moment.

‘Excuse me?’ The thought of aunt Maria being surprised by my words made the whole situation more humorous than it already was. On the other hand, I was pleased at the fact that she already knew, probably from Dylan, I was moving out to England.

I never thought I’d ever be having such cold interaction with my aunt. She was the woman who cared for me when every person in my life started leaving. She was my rock when my life tumbled like dominos. But she’d changed. Once Rick was out of the picture, she’d become a different person.

‘You want me to believe that you will actually miss me?’ She made a move with her head that told me ‘yes, I want you to believe that’.

‘Well, I don’t. So you can take that little skit of yours and put it next to those pictures you have framed. Another thing to remind you of the person you truly are.’ I walked away. And it was one of the most difficult things I had to do in my life. I loved aunt Maria from the bottom of my

heart; she was my hero growing up, someone that I looked up to and did everything according to her; to make her proud.

‘And what person am I, Zoe?’

She wasn’t a person I knew or loved. She wasn’t sweet, she wasn’t caring. And despite whatever was going on in her personal life, which I knew nothing of until the day after she passed years later, I still felt betrayed. Because the person I loved so much showed me how it is to be hated and humiliated and ashamed of over and over again for many years.

I didn’t answer. She knew what I would say all too well. So, I kept walking.

‘Are you sure she will understand that?’ Sighing for the millionth time that afternoon, I drop my pen and turn to face him. He has been sticking his head next to mine and reading whatever I wrote on the papers, asking random questions and distracting me from ever finishing writing that damn letter.

‘Am I sure she will understand what?’

‘That thing you said about your mother.’ Leaning my head on my desk and trying to ease the pain on the back of my neck by rubbing it, I refuse to write another word on that letter that is not necessary. ‘I don’t even know what you mean by that.’

Taking another deep breath I turn around to look at him. ‘Before my aunt moved to New York and before she got into that big fight with my dad over some money stuff, you know about that.’ He nodded and I continued. ‘Well before all that, my mom and aunt were very close- extremely close actually. They were like sisters,

although I barely remember it because I was quite young, but it's still in my mind.

'Anyways, sometimes my mother and aunt would take me with them on walks or to the mall for shopping. There we would talk about how much I wanted to live with my aunt and that when I grew up I would go to her. My mum didn't seem to like it very much, so one day when aunt Maria came for dinner, my mum took her upstairs to her room to have a private conversation.

'Knowing me, you will probably already have figured out that I followed them up the stairs and hid behind the door to eavesdrop on what they were saying. And that day I heard my mother admitting to my aunt that she doesn't want me to end up living with her, just because she was afraid that she, aunt Maria, would turn out to be someone who will eventually hurt me; even if she will not do it on purpose. I don't know what had happened before that, what they talked about on their own or what happened after that encounter. All I know is that my mother used the words 'That would be my worst nightmare' and that I used that against my aunt years later.'

Chapter twenty three

‘I think about you.’

Four words.

These nauseating four words were stuck replaying in my mind for however long I stood across from him. He was actually standing there, he actually said that sentence. It wasn't some messed-up part of my brain that created that insane scenario. I wasn't dreaming either.

Was he crazy? My mouth had gone dry and suddenly, going walking around the mall for three hours with Hannah for the fourth time that week seemed heavenly. I cursed myself for not going with her. But the afternoon was chilly and my favorite animation movie was playing on the TV. I couldn't leave my home even if I wanted to.

And now Ian was standing in front of me with red eyes, red cheeks and parted lips saying that he thinks about me. I almost laughed; but I kept it in. I didn't want to make him feel worse than he was probably already feeling.

He just looked at me. He uttered those four words and then he waited for my response. A response I couldn't give to him.

I searched and searched for the right words to say but I couldn't find myself coming up with anything good to tell him. He thinks about me. And what about it? I did not care, why would I? I didn't have such implied feelings for Ian, didn't even like him that much. Other than the strictly physical need that appeared when he touched me, he had zero affect on me.

'You think about me.' I stated and he gave me a nod. 'You have a fiancée.' I tried reasoning with him but he seemed to have already thought about it before knocking on y door on a Friday night.

I wondered what Dido knew of his whereabouts. What did he tell her? Did she think he was out for milk, out with friends or had he already told her about what he thought he felt for me?

Only picturing the scene of that made my stomach turn.

'I know.' I know he knew. I just hoped that would wake him up and he'd start running to his house; a house he shared with a woman he was supposed to love.

I was hopeless; I didn't know why I always seemed to find myself in these situations. I had no single idea of how to handle that, what to say to him and how I should act. Start screaming? Take it easy? Shut the door on his stupid face?

'I...'

‘Just tell me if you think about me too.’ *Yes.* But in a totally different way than how it would come out.

I only thought of him when I was angry after he’d tried to kiss me. Or when Hannah mentioned him *once* while packing. Nothing more, nothing less.

‘No.’ I finally said, thinking it was the best way to get this over and done with. It wasn’t. He wanted more. They always want more. No one seemed to be satisfied by me these days and it started to drive me crazy. Hannah, though always discreet, wasn’t satisfied with the time we were spending together, Dylan wasn’t satisfied with the lack of participation in packing, aunt Maria wasn’t satisfied with anything.

And Ian wasn’t satisfied with my answer. The one he wanted to know in the first place.

‘Why?’

Indeed, why? I didn’t know. He was good-looking and treated me like shit; a trait I discovered I liked in men.

I wanted to think about him, in all honesty. It would take my mind off things that bothered me. But my heart wouldn’t let me. It had put a stop to it since the moment I decided to leave for England. Turns out some people can easily ignore stop signs.

I didn’t get to answer. His lips were on mine before I could get to it. He took me off guard and I was one second away from shoving his body away and starting to scream at him. It seemed plausible. Until his hands touched me. Addicting. The feel of his touch was addicting. I couldn’t stop until I didn’t want to stop.

The door closed shut behind him, and I followed him all the way into a wonderful sin.

Sunday night, my final night in New York City, had arrived at last and Hannah, Nate and I were ready to head out the door and celebrate my departure from America. Well, I was celebrating that; Hannah was not celebrating anything.

Although she tried to hide it, it was crystal clear to me how miserable she was about me leaving the country. She wiped a few tears away when she thought I was not looking, she let out heavy breaths that she blamed on worrying about whether we would find somewhere to go. The whole situation was killing both her and me, but I decided to worry about that in the near future because while we walked out the building, something else appeared that worried me.

‘How are we going to get in?’ I asked my brother. ‘We are not twenty one.’ He just laughed and asked whether that was ever a problem. Coming to think about it, it was never an issue; wherever I went, they let me in as if there were no laws against it.

And with that, we got into a cab and the night had begun.

The club we went to was owned by Nate’s old friend from school, so getting in was easy. Still amazed by the fact that my brother, the same brother who I threw up and peed on multiple times when I was only a year old, got us into a massive, expensive club that was supposedly owned by one of his friends. I could not even digest the fact that my brother was old enough to have friends who owned clubs and go to them,, let alone the fact that I was old enough to accompany him.

As kids, we had not spent much time together or even truly bonded. Nate and I always fought, really fought with punches and kicks. During Christmas we didn’t get presents to each other, on our birthdays we wouldn’t wish each other ‘Happy Birthday’. We didn’t exchange cards or

play together while mom and dad watched a show on TV. We were never close and watching him now, with Hannah clinging on his left arm, smiling and shaking hands with a bunch of people I did not know but he did, I felt like this decision I made to leave with him and live with him in England would give us a second chance as brother and sister. And that made me happy, the happiest actually. I managed to forget about all the sadness of what would happen in a few hours and dance along with my best friend for the last few moments I had with her.

Walking across the club through the crowd of strangers--or not strangers, my brother seemed to know half the people there-- to get drinks and back to where we had sat, I kept thinking about how much I had grown; physically, of course. Because mentally I still felt like the sixteen year old girl who just lost her family and was forced to move across the world, alone. But I was not alone anymore. I had plenty of people around me. I had Hannah, my dearest Hannah, who would shred the world into pieces to see me smile. Who, from the moment she met me, only wanted the best for me and thrived every day to give it to me. I had my brother, Nate, who, no matter his absence for so long, had given me the greatest gifts of them all; having a family. And I will never forget about that. I will also never forget that he and Hannah seriously believed they had me fooled and thought I bought every awful, desperate excuse to get me out of the house so they can stay in alone. But hey, if they were happy, then so was I.

‘Are you having fun?’ Hannah screamed in my ear, trying to get me to hear her over the ridiculously loud music. My head automatically nodded emphatically, expressing my factual emotions; which were that I was having a lot of fun. Only something was definitely bothering me and I knew better than to let it bother me. After so many times of forbidding

myself to feel, I decided to take a moment to do exactly that. Because deep, or not so deep, down I was fully aware of what threatened to ruin my night. And I might had needed to let it.

‘I’m going outside for a bit.’ I scream out at Hannah. ‘I want some air.’ She shook her head and continued to dance around. I laughed a little bit and walked towards the back door. I saw Nate observing my movements, watching over me like the big brother he was. Mind the irony here, Katerina. I decided to ignore him and leave the place immediately, before he could approach me; I had no interest in chatting with him at the moment.

The night was a cold, freezing to be honest, but I could not care less. The place was perfect for me to, sort of, relax and spend some time with myself. Once I shut the door all the music died down and I was left with the sound of cars honking and the music of the busy streets of New York. The sky was clear but not a single star appeared in the sky. I looked up. So many things were up there; stars, planes. And we could not see anything. Everyone knew they were up there, but the city wouldn’t let us see them.

‘Hey Nova.’ The cold air was almost unbearable. The silence around welcoming me. I was alone, and the time to do that had finally come. ‘I just want to tell you,’

Keep the tears in, don't let anyone hear you, you're talking to yourself.

‘I just wanted to tell you...’

You must look like a crazy person, give it up she can't hear you.

It is your fault she's dead.

‘I miss you. I miss you a lot and I...’

The tears are out, might as well express your feeling to the sky...weirdo.

‘God, this is hard. It is so hard to want to talk to someone who you know isn’t listening. Because how can you? How can you listen when you

are dead? Is there some type of room you go to and just stay there?' I took a few breaths before I continued, tears staining my face and neck. 'All I know is that I miss you and, and that I am so sorry for what happened to you. If I could turn back time, I would change everything, believe me. I would force you to talk to me, I would force you to open up and I would definitely not let you die because of something you had no control over.'

Crying seemed right, for once. Letting go of everything that bottled up inside of me seemed so right.

'I wish you were here, Nova. I wish you were never gone, I really wish it. But you are, you are gone and I can't do anything more than never forget you.' Still looking up, I did not know whether she heard what I said or whether I did in fact look like an idiot. Frankly, I did not care. Because I needed that more than anything in the world.

'I will never forget you.'

Saying my last words to her felt like coming out of a cage where I had been staying for a long time. I wiped my tears away and slid down the wall, sitting on the ground and never taking my eyes off the sky.

'Nice speech.'

'Are you almost done?' Hearing his voice again made me wish I were deaf. A harsh thing to say, I know, but for the past week he has been bugging me about that damn letter I was trying to write to Katerina.

'Almost.' I mumble under my breath, slowly losing my patience. He sits on the armchair next to me, a piece of furniture he seemed to enjoy quite a lot during the week of my writing. 'Do

you need anything? I am trying to finish writing that letter and you are really distracting me right now.’

‘It is not my fault, darling. It is our daughter you are writing to about *our life*. I need to be sure if you are writing any of the facts wrong. She needs to have a high opinion about her dad.’ He says in a joking manner, of course, and I can’t help but laugh a little.

‘Well, if you keep sitting on that chair instead of going to your office and wait till I finish writing it, I’ll make sure she has the absolute worst opinion about her father.’ I tell him and he laughs while getting up. Giving me a kiss on the cheek and leaving the room, I think about how lucky I am to have met him.

How lucky I am that I got myself in the right mindset to make a decision he’s worth of, to be loved by a woman that he was worth of.

I remember leaving New York the next morning, with tears in my eyes and a taste of selfishness lingering on my tongue. I thought I was abandoning him. I wasn’t.

I left because I needed to. I wasn’t running, I was escaping. I was escaping a life that seemed toxic, heavy and dark. As I should, I put myself first before I put him. I took a long leap of faith in me, I listened to the bright, soft voice in my head that said it’d be alright; that it was okay to want to fix myself, to love myself more than others. It hurt, but I did it. I did it because deep down, under all that guilt and misery, I knew it was the right option, that I was worth all of the turbulence I put him through when I didn’t change my mind about leaving.

Come to think of it, I'm grateful I left.

So grateful.

Our story didn't end there, that's when it begun.

But this isn't *our* story. It's mine. A story that's stacked up in my brain, behind all the good memories I lived after that. And I reach out to it every time I feel blue, or every time I think I'm doing something wrong. I look back at these moments and not only remember what I have been through, but also smile at where I am now.

I fell down thousands of times while in New York City and a few more thousand after I left. But I got up. I put up a fight and won and I'm still winning. Every single time.

Because after all these years, I know I don't deserve to feel hopeless.

'What are you doing here?' I asked.

'I came to see you.' He answered.

'Why?'

'Because I love you.'

Zero

That is it Katerina. That is the end of my letter. It turned out to be a little longer than I expected, but I am happy I got to share that with you.

And to finally answer your question, Katerina, why I after your father told me he loved me, why after meeting so many people and kind of shaping a life that seemed to have a future in New York, I still left for England. The reason, Katerina, is not because I thought I had nothing that kept me there. It was the exact opposite, really. I left New York City because I had everything there. Hannah, who mattered the most to me, I had a special person who in all actuality changed my life, your father and I had Nova. I might not have had her literally,

but every memory stored in my brain was in New York and as silly as it may sound, it hurt to leave it all there.

There were so many things that could prevent me from going 'home,' yet I left in a heartbeat. Why? Well, because I was scared. I was scared, terrified actually, to lose it all just like I had lost everything else.

I hope you enjoy my novel of a letter, Katerina, and I hope it is everything you expected of it even if it is a bit old fashioned. I worked hard to remember everything and give you a full view of what went down while I lived in New York, even if your dad thrived to distract me whenever he could.

I love you with all my heart, your mother.

P.S. We will be waiting for you and Rachel for dinner next weekend. Don't be late please or else your dad will go crazy again.

He was sitting on his desk chair, his eyebrows trying to reach each other, his lips curled into a thin line, reading what seemed to be one of the novels of mine I handed out to him to review. I smiled; he was everything I wanted. He got me to forget about my past, focus on my present and plan for my future.

'I finished it.' I softly say and his head shots up to my direction. He smiles wide and motions me to sit on the chair in front of his desk.

'Did you now?' He asks and I nod proudly. 'Did you make it have a questioning ending?' He teased, making me laugh and shrug my shoulders.

‘Couldn’t help it.’ We just looked into each other’s eyes, enjoying the peace that engulfed us. ‘Do you want to read it?’ He just looked at me, smiling.

‘Read it to me.’

‘Dear Katerina,’

THE END