

CHAPTER 17

It wasn't believable, at first, that the blame for this whole ordeal would be placed on *her*. A real person was yet to confirm that this was really, truly happening, but it felt far too real. She had tried cutting the strings, but there were no strings. She had tried setting traps, but that didn't seem to work, either. The mind behind all of this obviously wasn't physical in the same way that, for example, *her* mind was.

There was a ghost up there, planting seeds. He was working around the clock, growing intelligence, giftedness, and charm, into our bodies and our personalities. But he favored the pretty ones - the few lucky souls remaining in this world, preparing for the wonderful future that would no doubt lie ahead of them. We were not born with this knowledge necessarily; the knowledge that only a few lucky individuals would be given the gift. Rather, we were taught this concept repeatedly.

From the moment you were born, you knew which side you were on. And every single day, someone would be bold enough to bring up the distinction between them. Because there was an obvious difference, one that couldn't be forgotten.

They would go on for hours about this. And the gifted ones, they would grin the entire time.

She could still picture them smiling. All of them. Maybe even laughing. But this time, it wasn't a laugh. It wasn't even a smile. It was a bright light, staring down in her face.

It represented every horrible thing that had ever happened. Every single lost opportunity.

And it was proud.

"Shut up!" Care's mother said. She shook the terror from her face, picked it out of her eyes, and returned to her prior position.

But the lamp would not quit staring. The lamp wanted the world to itself, so it could talk to the chairs for all eternity. So it could *be* the chairs for all eternity. And perhaps the walls, too. And everybody that dared to look at them.

The lamp was a tall, gifted man, but he didn't exist. The only thing left was a tall, gifted lamp.

The house was dark, but the bright light made everything visible. Not just her surroundings, but her flaws and her fears. And every single thing about her that people didn't like was made fifty feet wide and fifty feet tall.

"Stop looking at me," she said.

The light grew brighter.

"Stop it," she repeated.

Of course, that was certainly not going to happen. The lamp man was getting just what he wanted. But, unlike other people, he knew of her flaws, and he accepted them.

He wanted nothing more, however, than to be alone with himself. And the only way to do that would have been for both him and Care's mother to morph into one. That would be his happy ending, as well as everyone else's. Nobody would bother getting in the way of such a thing - except, of course, for one person. And that person didn't matter anymore, for he was off on his own impossible adventure saving somebody that couldn't have been saved.

The lamp man had this planned out for a very, very long time. You see, the day before all of this happened, he had approached this person. He proceeded to have a nice, civilized chat with him, before leaving a small note and sending him off to his doom.

And that was it. That's all it took.

"Say something," Care's mother said. She couldn't control any part of herself anymore. "Don't just stand there and stare at me, say something!"

She grabbed hold of the lamp and shook it violently. The light flickered on and off, as if to get her attention.

"You will stop," said the lamp.

She let go of it and stepped far back, bumping against the wall behind her. The lamp continued to shake before finally coming to a rest.

The room was silent for a full minute.

"You surprised me," she began, standing up straight. "I didn't think it was you."

"Get over here," the lamp said.

She walked back to the table, where the lamp stood. It began to flicker again.

"What?" she asked.

"I want to dance," he said. "Right now."

The light ceased its flickering.

"Oh," she responded, picking up the lamp. Everything seemed to make sense, even though none of it did. "If you say so."

She tried her very best to hide her happiness.

"Hey Care," I said.

It was raining quite hard. The sound was almost frightening, like every single droplet of water had several reasons for wanting both of us to die a slow and painful death, and they were going to make that happen as soon as possible. You could definitely hear the determination.

Care didn't seem to take notice, being asleep and everything.

"Care!" I repeated, tapping on her shoulder.

Perhaps she was dreaming about rain. An alternate reality in which the rain droplets had succeeded in their primary goal. It sounded like a thrilling dream to me.

"Seriously, Care, wake up."

I shook her several times, accidentally hitting her head against the car door. Whether or not she was awake *before* this happened didn't really matter at that point.

She grabbed her head and groaned.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"I have a question," I replied, still shaking her. She broke free and pushed my hands away.

A few seconds passed and nothing happened. Care looked at me, like she was waiting for me to continue.

"Okay, so - what time is it?" I asked. The rain began falling even harder than before. It surprised me quite a bit.

"I don't know," she said. She pulled down her sleeve and covered her watch, looking away.

"That was my question, though. You *have* to answer it. Those are the rules."

"Rules?" she asked.

"This is a game, Care. Keep up, will you?"

I figured that, with kids, you needed to make everything a game. It seemed to make sense to me, though I can't say I ever understood children all that much.

"I don't know what time it is," she replied.

"You have a watch under your sleeve. I'm not an idiot."

She pulled her sleeve back slowly, lifting her arm. I looked forward and checked the time - almost ten.

"Care, pardon me, but—" I began, grabbing her arm and holding it up. "What are you doing with *my* watch, anyway?"

Care pulled her arm away.

"It's not yours," she said.

Possibly realizing that brute force wasn't the answer, the rain calmed down. But it still stuck around, with hope that somehow a miracle would occur and everything would go according to plan. Never in the history of the Earth had this happened, but the rain never gave up.

I always wished that I could be just as determined to accomplish my own goals. Maybe that wish finally came true.

The pride spread through my body in a sudden jolt. I almost exploded with glee.

"Of course it's mine, Care," I said. "But you wouldn't know. Unlessâ€¦ I told you my secret."

Care's eyes widened. I had all of her attention from that moment forward.

"Secret?" she asked, sitting up straight.

"Oh, yes," I began. "I have many secrets. You see, behind these amazing glasses is somebody that you may know *very* well."

"That's not a secret," Care said, laying back in her previous position. "Those dumb glasses don't hide anything."

"Huh? What?"

"You chased me down to my house, with that camera," she said, pointing to my Taper in the back seat of the car.

The Taper looked just as proud as I was. If it could smile, then *damn*, would it smile.

"Ah! Good job," I said. I took my glasses off anyway, because they were really bothering me. "But that's not nearly good enough. What *else* do you know about me?"

She pondered this question for a while. The rain continued to calm down until it had completely vanished.

"You have a car," she said. "And you're driving it now. You also know me. And your camera looks cool."

I could almost feel the Taper's joy from hearing that. He had never recieved any kind of compliment before.

"Nice," I said.

I was going to say more, but I realized that we were arriving at her house. Everything became very, very clear at that moment, as the car came to a stop. There was a long silence, and Care peeked out to see a familiar house in front of her. It would have been more

thrilling, if the black paint and memories associated with it hadn't seemed like a quick slap to the face. Though, at the same time, it was much better than a closet.

"Care," I said. "This is *it*. You can't even comprehend how amazing this is going to be."

She didn't look excited, but she certainly wasn't miserable either.

"I want you to follow these simple orders," I continued, opening the door. "First, you *wait*. I want you to remain completely and utterly silent for as long as I say."

"Okay," she said, nodding. I took a step out of the car.

"Good," I said. "Now, when I stomp on the ground with my *left foot*, you're going to open the door, and you're going to run into your mother's hands."

She didn't nod that time.

"Alright," I said. "Good."

I was a little distracted at that moment. Care turned away and looked out the window, staring at the front door of the house with fear in her eyes. At that moment I observed something rather odd.

"Wait," I said, reaching forward. "What's that on your neck, Care?"

She quickly turned back around, but made no comment.

"Your mother's gonna think I hurt you or something," I said. "Cover that up when you leave the car, alright?"

I closed the door before she could answer, positive that it would have been "yes indeed, sir!" or something of the sort. Surely it would have been.

The world felt like it was being sucked into me, like every single thing that ever existed was suddenly in my possession, and I was more powerful than anyone had ever been. It was all about to be handed to me, just like it was always meant to be.

The time I spent that morning finding Care did not feel wasted in the least. I was about to win.

And I really mean it; I was expecting to win *everything*. If life was just a game, and if every single thing we did had one primary goal or end point, then this was definitely that end point.

I was picturing every single way that this could have played out. Every variation.

For instance, I ordered a separate area of my mind to figure out what would have happened if I knocked on the front door with my left hand versus my right. Then I tried different variations from

there, thinking of thousands of different ways to say "hello," or to stand, or to smile.

Every single variation resulted in a happy ending. It was unavoidable. Even if I *wanted* to ruin my life, I knew that wouldn't be able to.

I ultimately chose to knock on the door with my right hand, but even if didn't, things would have turned out just fine for everybody. The only difficult part was waiting, but I managed to retain my smile for the entire time. Care watched from the car; I gave her a little gesture to get out of sight.

The door began to open. I tried to look as calm as humanly possible, but it wasn't easy. There was too much on my mind.

"Hello?" she said, still opening the door, looking in the opposite direction.

She almost closed it upon seeing my calm, collected face, but I stopped her. Suddenly she looked incredibly unhappy and disgusted, which certainly was not the case before she saw me. In fact, at that precise moment before turning around, she looked happier than I had seen her in many, many years.

Positioned in her arms was a lamp. A very tall one.

"Hello, my dear!" I said.

She refused to speak to me. For a brief moment, it was quiet.

"Our last little *encounter* still bothering you?" I asked. "Because it's bothering me too. Fortunately, I'm here to fix everything for you."

"Are you?" she asked. She gripped to the lamp tightly.

"Of course I am. That's what my life's about - pleasing *you*."

"Oh," she said, yawning. The light on her lamp was flickering wildly, but she didn't notice because it was behind her head. Closer observation revealed that the lamp was not actually plugged into the wall at all. This bothered me, but I tried to ignore it.

"So, are you going to *please me* any time soon?" she asked, quite rudely. "Or will you simply leave right this instant? I would prefer that you leave."

"I'll choose the former," I said. "If only because you're looking quite good today."

She didn't look pleased.

"I suppose this would be a good time to cut to the chase?" I asked.

"Sounds good."

I looked back at the car, hoping that Care wasn't visible. Thankfully, she was not.

"Okay," I said. "I'd like to tell you a story. It has three parts to it."

She didn't respond, but seeing how excited I was, she couldn't help but feel the slightest bit amused.

"One," I began, holding up one finger. "I wake up in a fantastic mood and eat a nice nutritious breakfast. This is key."

She rolled her eyes and leaned against the wall next to her. She nodded, as if telling me to move on.

"Two," I continued. "I decided that I wanted to be a hero. This was my goal, and I set out to accomplish it."

She nodded again.

"And three?" she said, almost in anticipation.

"Three," I said, stomping my left foot on the ground as hard as I could. "*This* happened."

At that exact moment, one of the doors to my car suddenly opened. Another jolt of pride passed through me - I couldn't help but smile with dignity. Care ran with full speed toward both of us, almost blindly.

Her mother's eyes widened like never before. She dropped the lamp, and as it hit the ground the light bulb shattered.

Neither of them said a single thing. Care jumped into her mother's arms and they enjoyed a rather lengthy hug. This lasted for several minutes, and I stood proudly as it all took place.

I couldn't help but repeat to myself - "I did this", "I am a hero." It filled me with joy.

"Where was she?" Care's mother asked.

"Oh, it's a very long story," I said. "A fun one, nonetheless."

"No," she responded, putting down Care. She gave me that disgusted look again. "You're not going to fool me."

I was shocked. It wasn't playing out exactly how I had pictured it.

"Fool you?" I asked. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"I respect you for returning her," she said. "It was a very good thing to do. But I will never forgive you for taking her in the first place. And lying to my face, as you have just done."

"I don't think you understand."

"I understand completely," she said, before closing the door in my face.

