

# **THROUGH HIS EYES**

**Kayla Howarth**

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# D E A T H

When the gunshots pierced the air, my instinct was to use my ability and shield us from the assault. As it turned out, the bullets were faster than my reflexes.

Scorching hot lead ripped through my skin, lodging itself in my chest. The smell of metal infused with my senses, and I'm pretty sure I could taste it. But that was nothing compared to the searing pain burning through me.

"I love you," I murmured when I knew it was the end.

Allira sobbed as she lowered me to the ground. She tried to be gentle, but she, too, had been shot. We hit the ground with a thud, both of us wincing in pain. She let out a bloodcurdling scream that made me want to comfort her, but I couldn't. I couldn't even hold my head up anymore.

Once I was down, the blood flow slowed a little, but I knew it was too late. *There's no coming back from this.*

There was so much to say in that moment. I didn't realise how much I'd kept inside until I knew I wouldn't have the chance to say it.

"Not your fault," I told her. I knew she was going to blame herself for this. "I love you."

She was shaking her head. "You can't leave me. You can't. Because, I love you."

I managed a smile ... at least, I thought I smiled. *She loves me.*

Everything I'd done in the last six months had been for her. The most amazing person I'd ever known, she was confident, yet so self-conscious at the same time. She astounded me. Loyal to a fault, she was stubborn, annoying, and never listened to what I had to say ... but I wouldn't have changed her for the world.

If I'd known this was how it was going to end, maybe I wouldn't have been so quick to be nice to her. I should've kept up my not-so-friendly demeanour so I could've protected her from this moment. All I ever wanted to do since meeting her was protect her. Not that she ever needed it, or wanted it. She really was that stubborn.

It didn't take me long to realise just how special she was. The second she punched me as hard as she could and almost broke her hand, I was hers. Unconditionally hooked.

Remembering that moment made me want to go back. I would've given up my freedom in a heartbeat if it meant I got to spend every day by her side.

*But now it's too late.*

“I can’t do this without you. I can’t live—”

“Yes. You can,” I said, my voice coming out raspy. “I should have shielded us.”

The pain coming from my chest was nothing compared to the hurt I felt, knowing her heart was breaking into a thousand pieces. But I had to believe there was a reason for this.

*I was put on this earth to guide her, to get her to this moment. This will end up making her stronger. She’ll fight to the end, and succeed in our cause. It’s meant to happen this way. I know that now.*

“I *need* you to be with me.”

“I always will be,” I said as the remaining life left my body.

It all happened so quickly, but I knew it was time when the coldness of death began to creep in.

I welcomed the icy darkness.

## L I M B O

“What am I still doing here?” I asked for the *millionth* time. All I got in return was their silence. *It’s all I ever get.* “When I told you I’d always be with you, this isn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

Nothing.

I’d heard about purgatory, but I never believed it was real. If I was completely honest, I didn’t believe in any form of afterlife. Now I was stuck here, wherever-this-was, a constant state of being here, but not being here. I could see and hear everything, they just couldn’t see or hear me.

“Allira. *Allira!*” Even when I yelled, she still couldn’t hear me. No one could ever hear me.

My death was meant to make her stronger. It was meant to make her want to fight. Instead, she turned into this shell of a person.

There was no more light in her eyes, no warmth in her heart.

She was no longer the girl I knew, and certainly not the girl I gave my life for.

“You’re wasting your life!” I yelled. I knew it was futile. She’d never hear me, but yelling made me feel better.

Allira and her mum, Seph, climbed into the car, and like I’d done so many times before in the last two months since losing my life, I followed. “So, where are we off to today?” I asked.

“It’ll be all right, Lia,” Seph said. “We’ll get Aunt Kenna to do a test. No matter what the result, we’re all here for you.”

“What test?” I asked. “Is she sick? Did I miss something?”

The whole ‘being a ghost’ thing sucked ... if that’s even what I was meant to be. No one could see me, and I couldn’t rattle chains or make the lights flicker. Old ghost tales and campfire stories totally glorified this shit. I couldn’t do anything. No walking through walls, nothing. Wherever I needed to be, I’d blink and I’d suddenly be there. Because of this, I tended to miss a lot.

Allira’s Aunt still worked for the Institute. I had to endure a whole car ride, over two hours of almost complete silence, just begging them to tell me what was going on.

Once we arrived, Seph took Allira straight to the infirmary.

Kenna passed Allira a pee cup, and she went to the bathroom. I didn’t follow her in—I didn’t want to be *that* type of ghost.

She returned just moments later, handing Kenna the *half full* cup. Even in my state, I liked to look at the positive. I smiled at my own joke; I never did much of it when I was alive — smiling or joking.

“It’s positive,” Kenna said.

“I know, right!” I replied without thinking. “Wait ... what’s positive?” *Can she hear me?*

Allira started sobbing.

“What’s positive?” I asked again.

I wished I could kick something, throw something, *anything!* It’s as if I’d been given the silent treatment for nine weeks. I was starting to lose it.

“We need you to have a sonogram,” Kenna said.

Pee test? Sonogram? *Oh holy shit.*

Is it possible for ghosts to faint? Because I’m pretty sure that’s what I did. Next thing I knew, we were in a small examination room, a bluish clear gel was being applied to Allira’s stomach, and Kenna had some weird stick-looking thing that she placed on Allira’s lower abdomen.

A repetitive *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh* noise started coming out of the speakers on the machine.

“That’s it?” Allira asked, astounded. A tear escaped, and she clasped her hand over her mouth.

“By the measurements, you’re about eleven weeks along. Does that sound about right?” Kenna asked, her tone sympathetic.

“Eleven weeks? I’ve been dead for nine ... I’m ... I’m...” Stumbling backward, I tried to find somewhere to sit, but the room was small, and I’d clearly forgotten I was a ghost.

*I’m going to be a father.*

\* \* \*

Allira was completely quiet on the drive back home and went straight to her room when we arrived. Sitting on the bed, staring blankly at the wall in front of her with her expression completely devoid of emotion, she was clearly still in shock.

“Say something,” I urged.

She continued to stare until there was a knock at the door. “Allira?” Seph asked. “Uh ... Shilah and Tate are here.”

“I’m not really up for visitors,” she replied, her voice croaking.

“Sweetheart, you need to come out for this.”

“Can’t you just tell them?”

“Uh ... they’re here to tell you something, actually.”

With a sigh, Allira scooted off the bed and made her way out into the living room.

Shilah and Tate were all smiles as they greeted Allira with a hug, even when she flinched at Tate’s touch. He was getting used to her cold attitude, but I could see he was going to snap soon.

“You needed to tell me something?” she asked with an iciness to her voice that almost reminded me of my mother. *Whoa. Weird.*

“We’ve decided ...” Shilah started, then looked at Tate lovingly.

“Nothing,” Tate cut him off. “It’s nothing, really. Uh ...”

Shilah looked at him with a confused expression, but didn’t push. I guess he must’ve realised Tate heard something in Allira’s head that warned him against telling her whatever-it-is they had to tell her. Probably the fact that she was pregnant with my child.

*She’s pregnant with my child.*

*A child I will never meet.*

I needed to sit down again. The mere thought of the baby sent me crumbling to my knees.

“You got me out of bed to tell me *nothing*?” Her face paled when she realised Tate knew her secret. “You heard it in my head, didn’t you?” she asked Tate quietly.

He nodded once.

“I tried to block it out ... I ... I—”

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on? Tate and I are getting married, and yet you all look as if we just killed someone.” He winced, before looking at Allira. “Sorry. Bad choice of words.”

“You’re getting married?” she croaked.

Tate nodded solemnly. “We can wait, though. Put it off.”

“Why are you suggesting we do that?” Shilah asked.

Tate turned to look at him, before glancing back at Allira. His mouth opened, then closed again.

“Tate, why do you want to postpone the wedding?” Shilah asked.

“Because I’m pregnant,” Allira answered for him, her voice coming out just above a whisper.

“What? How?” Shilah asked.

“Well, sweetheart,” Tate said dryly, trying to lighten the mood, “when a man and woman love each other very much…”

“Shut up,” Shilah said, before facing Allira. “Chad’s baby? Really?” His face lit up, as if it was the best news ever. “I’m going to be an uncle?”

Happy tears pooled in Shilah’s eyes as Allira nodded, a small smile finding her face.

Shilah rushed to her and wrapped her in a giant hug. “We’ll be there for you, you know that, right? We’ll babysit, we’ll go with you to those birthing class thingies, we’ll do whatever it takes to help you through this.”

“Thank you,” she sobbed into Shilah’s shoulder.

Tate ran his hand over his head, clearly not dealing with this bit of news. “Umm, I’m just going to get some air.” He left Allira and Shilah to talk.

Allira’s eyes followed Tate out. She remained gazing at the door as if she was hoping, or waiting, for him to come back in to console her.

“Are you really okay with this whole baby thing?” Shilah asked tentatively.

“What could I do if I wasn’t?” she snapped. “I can’t ... you know, get rid of it. It’s part of him.”

“So you’re just going to be a mother at nineteen?”

“You’re going to be a *bride* at eighteen.”

“Touché.” He laughed, even though I didn’t think she was joking. A part of me thought she really didn’t approve of Shilah getting hitched. “Are you okay with Tate and me—”

“I’m really happy for you,” she lied.

Shilah smiled, and hugged her again, not picking up on the deception in her voice.

I began to wonder if I was always this perceptive or if it was an ‘after death’ trait I’d developed.

“You should go talk to Tate.”

She nodded. “I will.”

I followed her out to the narrow balcony of the small apartment. Tate was sitting on the old patio chair, and Allira slumped down next to him.

“He should be here for this,” Tate said.

*Come on, dude. Did you have to say it like that? Prepare for the wrath of—*

“Don’t you think I know that?” Allira yelled. *Yup, right on cue.*

Tate sighed. “Can we not do that right now? I don’t want to fight with you.”

After a lengthy silence, she stood to go back inside.

“Where are you going?” Tate snapped.

“You said you didn’t want to fight, so I’m taking myself out of the equation.”

“You can’t keep pushing me away forever. I’m going to be your brother soon.”

“Yeah, and you waited a whole two months to pop the question after the guy I was meant to...” She breathed in deep and shook her head. “Never mind. You love him and you want your happily ever after. I get it. It’s just ... you didn’t think about what this would do to me?”

“Not everything is about you, Allira,” Tate said through gritted teeth.

*Yup. I knew he was about to snap.*

“Can’t even give me a year to grieve? It’s been two months. Sixty-four freaking days, to be exact.”

“Don’t you get it?” Tate yelled, standing. “Because of Chad, I don’t want to put off living my life the way I want to. Because *I* still have that opportunity and *he* doesn’t. You’re not the only one who lost someone that day, and I understand you’re upset, but everyone putting their life on hold for you is unrealistic and selfish.”

She scoffed. “You really want to talk about being selfish? Want to talk about *why* you chose to stay at the Institute when you could’ve escaped with us? We wouldn’t have had to go back to save your sorry ass had you not been so fucking selfish.”

“So that’s what this is about? You’re blaming *me* for his death now? Really?” He shook his head. “Whatever.” He went to walk past her, but stopped in the doorway of the patio. “We’re having an engagement dinner tomorrow night. It’d mean a lot to Shilah if you’d be there.”

“But not you?” she asked, regret filling her voice. She went too far, blaming him for my death, and she knew it.

“I’ll always want you in my life, Allira. You’re my best friend, and that’s my niece or nephew you’re carrying.”

He walked inside, and she sat back down on the patio chair. She grasped her chest and looked up at the sky, tears streaming down her face. “I hate this so much.”

I couldn’t help wondering if that was directed at me.

\* \* \*

She was crying again. I always knew she was a crier, but how can someone produce so much salt water?

Months of endlessly doing nothing. She lay on the couch, or her bed, day after day, nothing but the sound of her muffled sobs to keep her company. That, and she sometimes watched TV.

“Get up, Allira,” I demanded. It didn’t work. It never worked.

She continued to lay there, her face streaked with fresh tears, her hand rubbing her swelling baby bump.

After the initial shock of it all, she shut down and managed to hide her true emotions from everyone fairly easily. I guess I could blame Tate and myself for that—we were the ones who taught her how to deceive people. I’ve cringed every time she’s told someone, “It’s Chad’s way of never leaving me.” Her words were so false, I was surprised no one called her on it. Perhaps they were only hearing what they wanted to hear, or they didn’t want to push her into facing the truth.

*She’s so unhappy.*

The morning sickness, her swollen feet, sore back ... they were all because of me, and she didn’t need the constant reminder.

She rubbed her hand over her stomach again, and her tears broke my heart ... or they would’ve ... if you know, I hadn’t been dead, and my heart hadn’t stopped beating a long time ago.

“It’s just you and me, kid,” she whispered.

“That’s not true, Allira. I’m right here. I’ve always been here. I wish you could hear me.”

\* \* \*

“Push, Allira.”

“Fuck you, Tate.”

*Ah, such class coming from my girlfriend.*

“I know you’re in a lot of pain right now, so I’m going to let that slide.”

She glared at him with such intensity, I just knew they were having one of their telepathic conversations. And yeah, even though I was dead, it still pissed me off.

Things had gotten worse between Tate and Allira recently. I think it sucks that even as a ghost, I could still feel guilt. It didn’t matter how many times I yelled at both of them to stop blaming each other for my death, my ghostly voice landed on deaf ears.

I understood why Tate was getting short with Allira. Out of everyone, she was lashing out at him the most. They were trying to have a normal relationship, the kind they used to have, but it was obvious that it was an effort for the both of them. It was just getting easier to avoid each other.

The whole situation felt helpless. Neither of them knew how to fix it, and it was killing them to see each other in so much pain. Her more so than him, but he was inside her head, and there was only so much he could block out. They were both suffering.

It surprised me that Tate was here for this at all, considering how things had been between them lately.

“You can do it, Allira,” Ebb took over.

“You’re way too energetic. I can’t deal with energetic,” Allira complained.

“Lia,” Kenna said, sounding just as exasperated as Allira. “You’re almost there.”

“You said that like twelve hours ago.”

“Well, you’ve been pregnant for nine months, so in the big scheme of things, yes, you were almost there twelve hours ago. Now, focus on your breathing, and push!”

I wanted to look away, but I couldn’t. I should’ve been there for this. Like, really been there. When I died, I thought it was meant to be, that I’d completed my purpose in life. *Then why am I still here?*

Allira screamed in agony, at the same time a wailing cry came from my child. My son.

*I’m a Dad.*

Instantly, I was filled with an overwhelming feeling of disappointment. I had a son, but I was forced to watch from the sidelines. I couldn’t ever pick him up, hold him. My voice would not soothe him when he was upset, and he would never have the opportunity to turn to his dad for help.

Kenna placed the baby on Allira’s chest.

He was covered in some milky white powdery crap, and a whole heap of other stuff I pretended not to see. I didn't care about any of that. He was perfect.

He nuzzled in, cuddling up to his mother. She looked exhausted. Her hair was frizzy from dried sweat, her skin was pale, and it looked as if she hadn't slept in days. The only redeeming feature was a small smile playing on her lips, but she quickly squashed it back down.

"You're allowed to be happy about this, Allira," Tate said aloud. She must've been blocking him from getting into her head.

"What's his name?" Kenna asked.

"William."

"William Williams? Really?" Tate scoffed.

"William Daniels. I want him to have my last name."

"I love it," I said, knowing full well none of them could hear me.

## C H A N G E S

There was a knock at the door, but Allira didn't move from her spot on the couch where she was nursing two-day old William. Not until she heard her mum welcome Paxton and Drew inside. She lifted her head and stood slowly, making her way over to them.

Drew was carrying a pale blue plush toy. "Hey, William!" he beamed. Allira handed him over and Drew started swaying with William in his arms, looking at the kid with such adoration. It made me want to punch him in the face, but I didn't know why—other than it was Drew. To give the guy credit, he wasn't a total D-bag like we originally thought, but that still didn't mean that I liked him.

Allira greeted Paxton with a hug. "Haven't seen you for a while."

"Sorry I couldn't come meet the little guy sooner," Paxton said. Yet, I couldn't help noticing he hadn't even looked at William.

Even though Paxton was the mastermind behind the whole takeover, and the person most responsible for my death, Allira didn't seem to see it that way, and she'd never held a grudge against him like she did with the others. It confused me.

"What about me?" Drew said mockingly, holding out the arm that wasn't holding William for Allira to hug him.

"I see you all time these days," she said, with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Drew was working with Paxton at the Institute as one of the counsellors, and somehow—*gee, I can't imagine how*—ended up being Allira's counsellor. She was only obligated to go to counselling once a quarter, which was a stipulation Paxton had implemented when he took over as director, but she seemed to be heading out to the Institute more regularly than that just to talk to Drew.

A part of me wondered if the reason she didn't feel hostile towards Drew and Paxton was because it was their plan that pulled off the takeover, so she knew they were dealing with the same guilt she was. Other than that, I couldn't make sense of why she was friendly with them, but not Tate.

Drew may have been empathetic, but I didn't see an ounce of remorse in Paxton. I wished I could've snapped her out of whatever was making her so blind when it came to both of them—particularly Paxton.

Paxton ran a hand through his hair. “I know it’s been a while since I’ve come to see you, but—”

“It’s okay, Paxton. I know it’s crazy right now. Especially with what I’ve been seeing on the news with the government trying to contest the law and all the regulations you put in place.”

“That’s actually why we’re here.”

“Oh?”

“Do you mind if we sit?” he asked, gesturing to the living room.

“Come, sit,” Seph said. “I’ll make tea.”

“Make mine a coffee,” Allira called out.

“Mine too,” Drew said.

Seph gave Allira a disapproving look. “You know coffee isn’t good for William, it’ll affect your milk.”

I swear I could *feel* Allira roll her eyes. “Isn’t that why there’s formula?”

Paxton and Drew shared a glance, one that said, “Awkward,” and I had to laugh at them.

Seph didn’t push and started puttering around in the kitchen.

“Where’s your dad?” Drew asked Allira.

“At work. He’s helping Aunt Kenna refurbish the shopfront they’re turning into a clinic.”

William started to become unsettled in Drew’s arms, so Allira took him back. “What did the mean Uncle Drew do to you?” she cooed. Perhaps William’s discomfort was because of the fact she just called him Uncle Drew. That was my guess anyway.

“I did nothing!” Drew said.

“Maybe my son just has good taste.” I snickered.

William’s eyes immediately became droopy as Allira rocked him. “I’ll just go put him down for a sleep,” she said, heading for her bedroom.

She was back less than a minute later; he must’ve fallen asleep pretty quickly.

“So what’s this about?” Seph asked, setting down a tray of tea, coffee, and shortbread. She placed a mug in front of Allira with a teabag sitting in it.

I’d never seen a woman stare-down challenge before, but it was damn fascinating. Seph won when Allira sighed, picking up the tea to take a sip.

“As Allira said, the government are trying to change all the laws, make them tighter so things can go back to the way things were,” Paxton started.

“There have been attacks on the streets,” Drew said. “People are still scared of Defectives.”

“We’re going to be locked up again?” Allira asked, her voice more panicky than normal.

Paxton shook his head. “Since exposing Brookfield, we’ve built a large community of Defective advocates. There have been protests against what Parliament is trying to achieve, but none of that is making the news. They’re not getting far with changing the laws that affect human rights, but…” he trailed off.

“But what?” Seph asked.

“There’s going to be an announcement within the next few days,” Drew took over. “They might not be able to imprison us again, but they’ve passed new laws. All known Defectives are going to be tracked. Our quarterly Institute sessions have been bumped up to monthly, and anyone proven to have used their ability in any way will be charged and sent to prison.”

Allira visibly deflated, rubbing her temple. “It’s going to turn into a witch hunt. The hate crimes will get worse, the—”

“We know,” Paxton said.

“So we’re all going to have some tracking device attached? Like the ones the agents used to have?” Allira asked.

“They’ve developed an injectable kind of tracker,” Paxton said.

“Like with a needle?” Allira gasped, then cringed.

Paxton nodded.

“How did you find this out? Are you sure it’s really happening?” Seph asked.

“That’s the other reason why I’m here,” Paxton said. “I’ve got some news and I wanted you guys to hear it from me before you see it on the TV. Since taking over the Institute, I’ve kind of attracted a lot of attention from political parties and high-profile people. They want me to run in this year’s presidential election.”

Allira’s eyes widened. “Really? I don’t mean to sound so shocked, but ... really?”

Drew laughed but tried to hide it.

“I could do so much for this world,” Paxton said, his eyes gleaming with ambition.

“I know. And I think you’ll be great, but aren’t there steps towards doing that sort of thing? I didn’t think you could wake up one morning and say ‘Hey, I’ll think I’ll run for president this year.’”

“My career has kind of been fast-tracked. I need to strike while the iron’s hot.”

“Okay. Then who’s going to run the Institute?”

Drew lowered his head as he raised his hand.

Allira should’ve laughed. It was what I was doing. Instead, she sat stunned, her mouth opening and closing as if she was trying really hard not to say what she was thinking.

“I know it’s crazy, but I finally have a chance to make up for what I did back then. I’ll be working towards a future where I can truly help.”

“Like you helped when you were an agent?” Allira asked.

“Allira,” Paxton scolded. “It was my decision to put him there. He’s worked hard to redeem himself. He saved your life—”

“I know, I know,” Allira said, throwing her hands up in defeat. “I’m sorry. I guess it’s just hard to train my brain into trusting you again. Wait ... that came out wrong. I trust you, I really do. But—”

“You’re still expecting me to show you my ugly side at any given moment. I get it,” Drew said. “And I’m sorry I make you feel that way.”

“If it helps, I don’t *want* to feel that way.”

He half-smiled at her. “I know.”

“Okay, so what you’re saying is, Paxton’s running for president, Drew’s taking over the Institute, and we’ll be even bigger targets than we are now?”

Everyone looked solemn as Paxton and Drew nodded.

Allira shook her head, mumbling, “What has the world come to?”

I couldn’t figure out if she was being serious or joking. Knowing the mood she’s been in for the last year, I doubted very much that it was a joke.

# W E D D I N G    B E L L S

“Where is he?” Tate was pacing the small prep room of the ceremony venue. “He should’ve been here by now.”

“He’ll be here,” Paxton tried to reassure him.

Tate and Shilah decided on an outdoor wedding, and thought the botanical gardens just outside the city would be perfect. There was a small dwelling on the premises where the reception was being held, and where they had private rooms to get ready for the day.

They’d decided to walk down the aisle together, and Shilah was meant to have arrived already.

“He’s out back with Allira.” I knew they couldn’t hear me, but the need to help Tate calm down took over my vocal cords.

“He loves you,” Paxton said.

“We had a fight last night,” Tate replied with a sigh.

“What?” Paxton pulled back, aghast. “The most perfect couple in the history of couples had a fight?”

When Tate asked Paxton to be his best man, I was a little surprised, and if I was completely honest, also hurt—which was ridiculous, considering I was dead. It wasn’t like I could’ve been there, no matter how much I wanted it. Tate and Paxton had never been overly close, but they did serve together on the council of the Resistance, Paxton saved Tate’s life when he organised the takeover, and now they’re going into politics together. So I guessed it made sense.

I always knew Tate would do great things. Unlike Allira, who was destined to stand out, Tate was groomed for it. Being raised by the Resistance, being put on the leadership council at a young age, he was trained to be a leader.

“We’re far from perfect,” Tate said.

“Nonsense! All couples fight. What happened? Did you want to ... you know ... talk about it?”

I laughed at Paxton’s awkwardness. He never was the kind of guy you could easily open up to.

“It started out because of how things have been with Allira since Chad died. But then it escalated into the fact that you’ve asked me to be your running mate in the campaign, and

that I'll always be on the campaign trail and I'll never be home. Then came the big thing—that he's only eighteen and he's getting married.”

“It just sounds like he's freaking out a little. It's completely understandable given the circumstances. Hell, I was a wreck the night before my wedding.”

“And how did that turn out for you?” Tate asked sarcastically.

“She was a bitch, though. You're not a bitch. Well ... not much of one, anyway.” He smirked, making Tate crack a smile. “Have you told anyone else about running beside me for president?”

Tate shook his head. “No one. Not yet.”

“I guess there's still time. We should probably focus on the other big thing happening in your life right now. Want me to go see if I can find Shilah?”

“Give him five more minutes.”

“I'll go check on him,” I said. “Not that I could tell you guys if he ran off or not.” I shook my head at myself.

I made my way outside where Allira was sitting with Shilah on the back steps of the building.

“I just don't know if I can do this. What if you and Tate never go back to how it was? I can't spend my entire life in the middle of you two. What if ...” he trailed off.

“Shilah,” Allira said, clearly exasperated, “it shouldn't matter how Tate and I feel about each other. You only need to ask yourself this, do you love him?”

“Of course I do.”

“Do you ever see yourself with anyone else?”

“No.”

“Will you ever choose Tate over me?”

Shilah furrowed his brow.

“I'm not asking you to choose, I'm merely pointing out the fact that you would refuse to choose one of us over the other, because you're not that person. You're not going to lose me if you marry him. Tate and I may be going through some stuff right now, but he promised me when we all found out about William, that he'll always be my best friend. We just have issues.”

“It's almost been a year.”

*Have I really been dead that long?*

“When are you going to move on, already?” Shilah knew he'd said the wrong words as soon as they left his mouth. “I'm sorr—”

Allira held up a hand, shaking her head. “Don’t.” She stood, preparing to go inside and hide the fact her eyes were welling up. “He’s waiting for you. Go marry him.”

\* \* \*

“I’m right here, Allira. Just put one foot in front of the other. Breathe. You’re almost at the end.” I truly didn’t know why I bothered anymore, but it’d become a habit—talking to everyone as if they could hear me. I think it was keeping me from going insane.

We arrived at the altar, and I never left her side.

*This could’ve been us.*

White flowers hung from the wire canopy of the altar, a long white aisle running down the middle of completely full guest chairs. On one side, my family, on the other, Allira’s.

*This should’ve been us.*

My mother didn’t turn up. Her nephew was getting married, and she couldn’t put her anger aside. I wasn’t all that surprised, though. She hadn’t been by to see William, either. Not that I thought Allira would’ve let her anyway.

Allira wasn’t handling being a mother too well. Her mum and aunt kept blaming the hormones, but I knew better. She wasn’t handling being completely alone.

Allira’s eyes glistened as she watched her brother and my cousin exchange wedding vows. All I wanted to do in that moment was reach out to her, take her in my arms, and tell her everything was going to be okay.

She looked out into the crowd where her parents were holding our eight-week-old son. That was enough to cause the tears to spill over and down her cheeks.

Tate and Shilah were holding hands, unable to take their eyes off each other.

Shilah began to get teary as he choked on his words. “I never thought this was going to be me, standing in front of the person I love, giving my heart completely and fully. Before you, I never dreamed of this possibility for me. I planned to spend my entire life hiding away from the world because of who I was, but you showed me how to be proud of who I am. I fall in love with you more every day, and I promise myself to you forever.”

*Married at eighteen.* I shook my head. I was happy for them, sure, but part of me couldn't stop thinking how crazy they were being. Although, Tate was twenty-five, so there was that. I guess I shouldn't have been too hard on them, since I had every intention of marrying the girl I was standing next to. You know, before I died.

## T H E   I N C I D E N T

Allira escaped the wedding reception early, using William as an excuse to leave.

Drew offered to drive them in Allira's parents' car, which had Will's car seat, and then return to the reception so her parents still had a way to get home.

When they got back to the apartment, she asked Drew in for coffee.

I knew it was a mistake as soon as she suggested it, but could she hear me telling her that?

Drew made coffee while Allira put William down to sleep.

"You need to tell him to leave. You know I don't like him," I pleaded.

She walked out of her room and into the kitchen, still wearing her long red bridesmaid's dress. Her hair was unpinned and flowed down her back in loose curls.

Damn, she looked sexy. But that wasn't a good thing with *him* being around.

She smiled warmly at him, but it didn't reach her eyes.

*Good. She's totally faking being happy that he's here.*

"Coffee?" he asked, holding out a freshly brewed cup. He surprisingly didn't ogle her when she approached him.

"Oh my God, I love you," she replied, snatching it out of his hand greedily.

He chuckled. *Actually freaking chuckled. Ugh.*

They made their way to the couch in the living room, where they sat close to each other but not touching.

"So, how are you? Really?" he asked.

She threw her head backwards, resting it on the back of couch. "Fan-freaking-tastic," she said sarcastically.

"I know today was hard for you. I'm just making sure you're okay." His hand moved to her knee in a reassuring gesture, but all it did was make me see red.

"He's not good enough for you, Allira!" I yelled.

"My brother got married today. I'm happy for him." She took a sip of her coffee.

"You don't sound too convincing," he said in reply, finally removing his hand from her leg. The five seconds it was there was five seconds way too long.

She pursed her lips in thought. "Yeah, okay, I'm a little bitter. But I truly am happy they have each other. Anyone's lucky to have that."

"Do you really think if they'd put the wedding off you'd feel differently?"

She let out a loud sigh. “I guess not.” She leaned forward and put her barely touched drink on the coffee table in front of them. He followed her lead.

*Uh oh.*

She moved closer to him and lay back, putting her head on his chest. “It’s just ... it still hurts. So much,” she whispered.

He was awkward at first, not really knowing where to place his hands. I was pretty sure I could see the Adam’s apple in his throat bobbing as he swallowed hard. He finally wrapped his arm around her and pulled her in tight. “I know it does,” he whispered back.

They sat there for a while. She cried her heart out, and he just held her, rubbing her back in a soothing manner.

When she pulled away, sitting upright, she was wiping tears from her eyes. “I’m sorry I just dumped that on you. Maybe you should go.”

*Good girl.*

“Hey,” he said gently. He moved in closer, his hand reaching up to cup her face.

“Don’t you dare touch her like that!” I yelled. He continued to do it. “Shit!” My hands went to my hair, trying to pull out clumps of it.

“You can dump all the emotional crap on me you want. You need an outlet, Allira. You’ve been holding it in for too long. I’ve seen you. You’re not happy, and you’re not coping. You don’t have to pretend with me. You *never* have to pretend with me.”

Without warning, her lips met his. *She kissed him.*

He didn’t react at first, he kind of seemed taken aback by her sudden advance. But then he moaned and opened his mouth to her, pulling her in tighter and wrapping his arms around her.

His hand entangled in her hair as he leaned back on the couch, bringing her lips with him.

Without breaking apart, she climbed on top of him, straddling his lap. Their kiss escalated quickly and became frantic, making me want to throw up.

I always knew she’d move on eventually, but really? *Drew?*

Allira moved her hands to Drew’s shirt, undoing the top button.

He moaned again, but it came out more pained this time. His hands found hers on his shirt and held them still. Surprisingly, he broke the kiss.

“Allira,” he whined, breathlessly. He gently moved her off of his lap and stood up, running his hands through his hair. “We can’t do this.”

She looked at him with a confused expression. “Why not?”

He laughed, but it was a sad laugh. “Because you don’t actually want to. Are you forgetting that when you touch me, I practically become like Tate? I could hear your brain screaming at you to stop.”

She didn’t respond, just hung her head, embarrassed. “You ... you don’t want me?”

“Are you insane? I’ve wanted this for as long as I’ve known you.” He started pacing in front of her. “I mean, I haven’t really thought of you that way since finding out about William, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t jump at the chance to be with you, to give us a real shot ... if you actually wanted it. But you don’t, and I’m not the same guy I was when I met you. I’m not going to put my selfish wants above your feelings. I’d rather have you as only a friend than not at all. If we were to ... you know ... it’d ruin us. I know it would.”

Allira hung her head in her hands. She knew he was right. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered, starting to sob again.

He sat back down next to her on the couch, putting his arm around her. “Don’t ... You’re in pain and you want comfort. It’s just ... with our history...” He sighed. “I just can’t be the distraction you’re looking for.”

*Holy shit. I think I just started to like the bastard.*

“Can we just forget this ever happened?” she asked, timidly.

“Maybe we should ask your mum to erase it for us,” he joked.

She giggled, but then got a look in her eye that scared the crap out of me. I did *not* want to know what she was thinking. A lightbulb practically appeared over her head.

“I really don’t want to be rude, but do you mind if you get going? I kind of just want to shower and go to bed,” she said, suddenly faking an innocent demeanour.

“This isn’t going to make it weird between us, is it? Please tell me we’re not going to resort to only seeing each other when you come for your meetings at the Institute now?”

“That’ll never happen,” she said, smiling politely. “And it’s still weird to me that *you’re* the director now.” She giggled.

*So fake.*

He laughed with her. “It’s only my first week. It’s still weird to me, too.” He leaned in and kissed the side of her head. “I’ll leave you to it. We’ll catch up soon, okay?”

She nodded and walked him to the door, the look of determination never wavering from her face. How Drew wasn’t picking up on it was beyond me.

“Allira, what the hell are you planning?” My question went unanswered, as usual.

# F O R G E T T I N G

“Mum?” Allira asked tentatively. They arrived home not long after Drew left. They’d probably been waiting for him to get back with their car.

Allira had just gotten out of the shower, having washed the thick wedding makeup off and the stiff spray out of her hair.

“Have you given Liam his bottle?” Seph asked as she tidied the kitchen.

Allira shook her head. “He fell asleep without it. And for the last time—his name is William.”

Seph sighed. “You do know that means he’ll be awake in a few hours screaming for it, right?”

“Well what do you want me to do? Wake him so he can feed? He’ll let me know when he’s hungry.”

“You know how important it is to get him into a routine.”

“He’s two months old! I don’t know how much more of a routine he can get in considering all he’s doing is sleeping and feeding.” Allira’s anger was boiling. Her nose flared, her cheeks flushed pink, and if she glared at her mother any harder, Seph may’ve exploded. She threw her hands in the air. “Why don’t you do it if you know so much more than me?” she yelled.

“What are you talking about?” Seph snapped, throwing the dish towel on the bench.

Suddenly Allira wasn’t so angry anymore. She lowered her head, gazing at the floor. “I ... I can’t do it anymore,” she practically whispered.

“Can’t do what, sweetie?” Seph said, matching Allira’s defeated tone.

“I want to forget.”

“Lia, what are—”

“Please, make me forget him?”

“Forget who?”

“Chad. I can’t do it anymore. I just can’t. He’s everywhere. Every time I look at William, I see his face. Every time I look into those eyes, I see the light fading from Chad’s. I want it all to go away. I can’t do it, I can’t do it.” She sobbed as she sank to the floor in the middle of the room.

Seph went and picked her daughter up off the ground as I stumbled back, leaning against the wall for support. Her words cut through me, and caused more pain to take over me than when I was shot.

*I'm doing this to her.*

Her mum hugged her, squeezing her tight as Allira continued to cry. “You’re not asking ... what I think you’re asking are you?”

*What is she asking?*

“Please can you erase him for me?” Allira pleaded.

“You want to forget me?” I yelled irrationally.

“Lia, you don’t want to do that.”

“It’s too hard without him,” she sobbed.

“I know it’s hard, but—”

“You have no idea how hard this is!” Allira yelled, pulling away from her mother.

“You think I don’t know what you’re going through? Are you forgetting that I had to live without your father, without you and Shilah, for eight years?”

“That was by choice! We weren’t ripped away from you!”

“You don’t think it was hard for me to stay away when I knew you were right there but couldn’t go to you without putting your lives at risk? That the thing I wanted most in the world was right at my fingertips but I wasn’t allowed to have it?”

“It’s completely different. We were still a possibility. Chad isn’t. He never will be.”

“He *is* a possibility—in William.”

“It hurts too much.”

I’m not ashamed to admit it—I sank to the ground and cried. She wanted to erase me.

“I can’t do what you’re asking,” Seph said.

“You can’t or you won’t?”

“Both. My ability doesn’t work like that, and what you’re asking is wrong. William has already lost his father, he can’t lose his mother, too.”

“He’d be better off without me,” Allira mumbled.

“No, he wouldn’t be,” I said, pleading for her to hear me. “He needs you.”

“Lia—” Seph started.

“I’m going to bed,” Allira said, turning and storming down the hall to her room where our son was sleeping.

Seph was shaking. She pulled out a chair from the dining table, sinking into it slowly.

Allira's dad, Miles, walked in, rushing to Seph's side the instant he saw the look on his wife's face. "What happened?"

"She ..." Seph sobbed. She cupped her hand over her mouth. "She wanted me to erase him."

"Huh?"

"Allira. She asked me to erase Chad."

"Can you do that sort of thing?" he asked.

"You think I should?" she raised her voice.

"I don't know!" He threw his hands up in the air. "We have to do something. She's miserable."

"This isn't the answer. She'll never move on if she can't learn to deal with him."

"So take him out of the equation."

*Wow. So much like his daughter.*

"You don't mean that."

"We're all at the end of our rope here, Seph!"

"Anything could go wrong. She might end up forgetting her entire life. I'm not doing it! End of discussion!" It was Seph's turn to storm down the hall.

Alone with Miles, it was the first time I'd seen him truly broken. His heart was aching for his daughter, and he didn't know how to fix it. I knew this because his expression mirrored my own. I didn't know how to fix her, and I was being forced to sit by and watch her deteriorate into someone I didn't even know. Or like.

When I blinked again, I was in Allira's room, watching over her as she sobbed into her pillow again.

*She should probably give that thing a wash. Probably not the thing I should be focusing on.*

She sat up quickly, determination written all over her face. "If she won't do it, I'll do it myself," she muttered to herself.

"No! Allira, don't do this. You can't."

She scrambled to her desk, grabbed a piece of paper and a pen, and then sat on her bed with her back against the wall. Facing William's cot, she watched him as he slept. Her breaths were deep, and came in ragged.

Hesitating for the briefest of moments, a tear fell down her cheek, landing on the notepad on her lap.

Then she started writing.

*He's better off without me.*

*I'm better off without him.*

*I didn't know it was possible to love someone so much, but despise seeing him every day. And I do. I see HIM every day. William's hair, his eyes, his smile ... they all came from HIM. William's the constant reminder that Chad's not here, and it's my fault he has to grow up without a father.*

*Doing this will mean he won't have his mother, but if I'm completely honest with myself, he deserves better than me anyway. I'm doing this for him.*

*He deserves someone who can look at him and not see death. Someone who will love him because he's a beautiful child with a big heart, just like his father. At least, I hope he turns out like his father.*

*Chad was strong, and I broke him. Everything is my fault. I can't deal with the guilt anymore.*

*"Allira, stop. Please stop. I can't take this anymore."*

She dropped the notepad on her bed, stood up, and walked over to William's cot. Standing beside her, I looked over her shoulder and down at our sleeping child. *Our gorgeous child.*

He'd grown so much in the two months since he was born. Time seemed to be moving extremely fast but in slow-motion at the same time. It made no sense, and yet it's how it always seemed to be in life. And death, evidently.

Allira leaned over William's cot and picked up the sleeping child.

He sucked in a startled breath, but didn't open his eyes. His big, pouty lip wobbled in and out of his mouth a few times before his breathing became drawn out and heavy again.

William didn't flinch or even register that he'd been moved from his warm, safe bed. He felt safer in his mother's arms.

Allira was a natural at being a mum, and yet she thought she was failing. No one ever saw these moments where it was just Allira and William. She looked at him so lovingly, with so much awe. No one would've even been able to tell how much it was killing her to be that close to him.

"This is for the better," she whispered to him, running her forefinger down his cheek. "I promise you, William, you will never be lonely. Your entire family loves you, and they will dote on you always. I can't ... I just can't do it anymore. I hope one day you'll forgive me."

She kissed his forehead and breathed in his scent before placing him back in his cot. She wiped away her tears and stood straighter, her confidence and determination returning.

I remained silent, because of many reasons—she couldn't hear me anyway, it would've been pointless—but mainly because I had nothing to say.

She stepped away from the cot, left the room, and trudged down the hallway. The sound of the spare bedroom clicking shut echoed through the apartment, or maybe it was just the ringing in my ears.

She was giving up, and I wanted to join her.

*What's the point of trying when the thing you're fighting for no longer exists?*

# F O R G O T T E N

I stayed with William after that, refusing to follow Allira down the dark path she was taking.

But upon morning, as William started stirring, a strange pulling sensation took over me. It wasn't the first time I'd felt this pull, and it usually happened before I'd blink somewhere else.

When I reopened my eyes, I found Allira's sleeping face next to mine. We were in the spare bedroom, and all I could do was hope she'd changed her mind and hadn't gone through with her plan.

My stomach churned when she opened her eyes and sat up straight, looking around the room as if she was lost.

Grabbing at her head, she winced in pain. "Why am I in the spare room?" she asked herself aloud, but her voice didn't sound like her own. It was coarse and gruff. At least she knew where she was, that was something.

She rubbed her eyes, and let out a groan, climbing out of bed.

As she walked into the living room, her eyes landed on William who was sitting in his little baby bouncer. Allira's parents must have woken up to him.

Seph was in the kitchen, preparing a bottle. She looked tired and worn-down. She clearly hadn't slept well.

I wanted to cry out when Allira furrowed her brow, looking at William. There was no recognition in her expression at all. Anywhere.

"What have you done?" I whispered.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Miles said, sitting at the dining table with a cup of coffee. "Why did you sleep in the spare bedroom last night?"

"I ... uh ..." she muttered, still looking at William. "Whose kid are we babysitting?"

Seph dropped the bottle of formula, the contents spilling all over the kitchen floor. She cursed under her breath, and ran to get paper towels to clean up.

Miles, looking aghast, gaped at Allira. "What do you mean, whose kid are we babysitting?"

"Uh ... nothing. Never mind." She took a seat at the table, opposite her dad, her eyes never leaving William.

Seph and Miles shared a look. The room fell silent as Seph finished cleaning the mess on the floor and went back to fixing William another bottle.

Allira remained staring at William while she rubbed her temple.

Seph placed the bottle in front of Allira, but she didn't grab for it, just looked at it, confused. "Did you want me to feed ..." she looked at William, her expression giving away her perplexity. She didn't even know the kid's name.

"What did you do?" Seph paled. "You used my ... Oh my God, how did we not see this coming. Oh my God, it's all my fault. Why didn't we—"

"Seph?" Miles asked, worried. He stood and walked over to her, embracing her. "What are you saying?"

"Lia, who's ... Chad?" Seph chokes out.

Allira narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean 'who's Chad'?"

"Do you know who Chad is?" Seph asked, slower this time.

Allira's eyes began to water. "It's still too fresh," she mumbled quietly.

"What's still fresh, sweetheart?" Miles asked.

"He only died a month ago. I don't want to talk about him. I'm not ready."

Miles flinched, and Seph gasped.

*A month ago? She only managed to erase what ... eleven months?*

*She remembers me, but not her son. She erased William instead of me!*

## N O H O P E

“Lia, concentrate.”

“I am! But it’s hard to concentrate on something I don’t remember!”

They were both getting frustrated. Breaking the news to Allira that she’d erased her memory hadn’t been easy, but they didn’t give Allira time to freak out. Seph went straight into ‘fix it’ mode.

“Your bedroom. Now,” she’d said. She turned to Miles, “You take Liam for a walk. This is going to be a while.”

Her dad didn’t even hesitate or question, he was out of the apartment quicker than anyone with a two-month-old should’ve been physically able to leave. With all the bottles, nappy bag, stroller ... the kitchen sink. *Who knew babies had so much crap to drag around?*

They’d been going at it for well over an hour, and they hadn’t made any progress.

“Deep breaths, Lia!” Seph placed her hands on Allira’s head and closed her eyes. Her eyelids fluttered as her eyeballs moved rapidly below her skin. “I just have to find them,” she muttered. “Where are they?” She gritted her teeth while trying to find Allira’s lost memories.

Allira threw her hands up in defeat. “It’s no use! I understand why I wanted to do it, but I just don’t understand why it’s so important to get those memories back. Why do I want months of grieving to flood my mind?”

“Lia, it’s important. You ...” Seph couldn’t find the words.

“Don’t tell her,” I urged. “She can’t handle it.”

“Maybe we need a break,” Seph said.

A part of me had hoped she heard me, but I knew it was impossible.

\* \* \*

I'd never seen a room full of such heartbreak before. Everyone was there. Only a few days earlier, they were a group of people celebrating a wedding, and now they'd turned into a group of people flooding Allira's parents' apartment with solemn anguish.

Miles distracted Allira and William by taking them out for the day, so Seph could organise this meeting to work out what they were going to do from here. After spending days trying to get Allira's memories back, she knew it was time to tell everyone what Allira had done.

Shilah, Tate, Ebbodine, Drew, Aunt Kenna, and Paxton all filed into the small apartment, taking up seats in the living room. Ebb and Drew grabbed dining chairs, bringing them over to sit on.

"Something happened a few days ago," Seph started. "The only reason I didn't tell any of you sooner was because we were hoping we could fix it. Now we don't know what to do."

"Mum, what happened?" Shilah asked. "Is it William?"

Seph shook her head. "Allira."

"What's she done now?" Tate asked, his tone cold.

"She left this," Seph said, taking out the note Allira wrote before erasing her memory. As she read the words aloud, everyone drew quiet, and most of them had tears pooling in their eyes.

Tate grabbed hold of Shilah's hand, Ebb covered her mouth with her hand, and Drew sat staring straight ahead, his expression grim.

"When did she do this?" he asked.

"It ... uh ... was the night of the wedding," Seph said, avoiding eye contact with Shilah and Tate.

"Shit," Drew muttered under his breath, but then went silent. His leg bounced, he avoided eye contact with everyone, and he started chewing on his nails.

"But there's more. She went through with it, but it got messed up somehow. She ended up erasing William, not Chad. She erased everything from the day she found out she was pregnant. She's sunk into an even deeper depression because she's back to where she was a year ago when Chad first died. She thinks he's only been dead a month."

"How did you explain William to her?" Kenna asks.

Seph looks down at her shoes. "We didn't. We told her what she'd done, and her first reaction was to assume Liam was her new baby brother."

"And you didn't correct her?" Tate yells.

"In the fractured state she's in, do you really think telling her she's actually his mother would help her mental state? I've been working with her, trying to re-piece her memories

together, but all she can seem to remember is wanting for forget Chad. That's it. That's all I could get from her for now."

"How did you try to get her memory back?" Ebb asks.

"Erasing time is easy, picking and choosing memories to alter is really difficult, and I've never even tried it. I've been too scared of doing something like what she's done. Through meditation and a whole lot of concentration, I've been attempting to get inside her head and piece back together what I could, but after three days of it, I just don't know what to do anymore. Nothing is working, and the more I push, the more she's getting fake memories back. Either that, or she's lying to reassure me that it's working. She swears she remembers me being pregnant with Liam."

The room fell silent, too silent for a cramped room with seven people in it.

"I don't know what to do anymore," Seph said in a tone that begged the others to tell her what to do.

"Maybe she just needs some time away from William," Aunt Kenna said.

"What? She should be spending more time with him," Tate countered. "She needs to bond with him."

"She can't do that when all he does is remind her of Chad," Ebb said.

"What do you suggest, then?" Shilah asked Ebb. She shrugged in return.

"She needs a distraction, an escape," Kenna said. "She can't continue to live here with William. It might be making her worse, having to see him every day."

"She's his mother!" Tate yells. "Are you seriously telling me you want to take her kid away from her?"

"She wanted it," Seph said. "She was at breaking point, and she's been at breaking point ever since she found out about him. I think ... with everything ... she finally snapped."

It was clear the room was divided down the middle. Shilah and Tate wanted to force Allira into living her life, Ebb, Kenna, and Seph wanted her to take a break from it all.

Drew remained quiet the whole time, but shifted in his seat uncomfortably. I could tell he was beginning to wonder if he was partially responsible for Allira finally breaking.

"She can move in with me," Paxton offered. He was the only other one who hadn't had any input so far.

Tate and Shilah shared a smug look, one I couldn't decipher.

"It's expected of me to have someone accompany me to political functions and events," Paxton continued. "We can make it sound as if she'll be doing me a favour. She can live a normal life for a while, something she's never had the opportunity to do."

“And how long do you expect her to live this ‘normal’ life, full of benefits and socialising?” Shilah asked.

“If you think Allira would go for that—dressing up, wearing makeup, and smiling at people, hell just getting her to smile in general—you don’t know her as well as you think you do,” Tate said.

“Maybe you don’t,” Ebb said. “Yes, she hates those things, but she’ll do them if a friend asked her to. She’d do anything for her friends and family.”

Tate scoffed. “Not anymore.”

“Okay, so what are we doing?” Shilah asked. “We’re just going to let her forget she gave birth to a child? Is that really something someone could forget? Wouldn’t her body be all ... you know ... different after giving birth?”

Seph shrugged. “She doesn’t seem to feel any different, from what she’s told me. I know my body was different after having you two, but you were fifteen months apart. We didn’t exactly give my body a break before I was pregnant again.”

Shilah screwed up his face. “Not really something I want to hear about, Mum.”

“All I’m saying is, she might have no clue that she gave birth a little over two months ago, or maybe she does but she’s just not ready to admit it.”

“This feels wrong,” Tate said. “We’re making decisions for someone else’s life. Doesn’t she get a say?”

I had to agree with Tate, but he hadn’t seen what she’d been like the last few days. She had no desire to get any of her memories back. “I think she needs space too,” I mumbled. I didn’t want to admit it, but I had no idea what else to do anymore either.

“Maybe we could get her involved in the clinic Ebbodine and I are starting,” Kenna suggested.

“We can put that to her after she’s settled in with me,” Paxton said, his voice authoritative.

I was sure I was reading into it, but he seemed overly eager to get her to move in with him. Surely he wasn’t after her romantically ... *right?* I shook the idea from my head, it was insane, but I couldn’t keep the nagging feeling away. Something wasn’t right with his offer.

“You’re awfully quiet, Drew,” Tate said, his sneer unmistakable.

Drew shifted in his seat again. “I don’t feel like it’d be right for me to have an input in this.”

“Why not?” Shilah asked. “You and Allira are finally friends again. Pretty good ones, too, from what I can tell.”

Drew cleared his throat but didn’t answer.

“Are you going to tell them, or should I?” Tate asked.

*He knows what happened.*

“Get out of my head, Tate,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Drew and Allira hooked up the night of the wedding,” Tate states.

Drew ran a hand through his hair before resting his elbows on his knees. “No ... we ... it ...”

“What the hell, dude?” Shilah exclaimed, standing in a flourish of anger.

Drew stood also, his hands going up in surrender. “It’s not what you think. Nothing happened. She just ... kind of ... kissed me. But I pushed her away. I knew she wasn’t ready for that kind of thing. I stopped it, I swear.”

“So you rejected her right before she erased her memory?” Shilah yelled.

“Would you have preferred me to sleep with her?” Drew yelled back. “How was I to know she’d do this? This might have nothing to do with me, and everything to do with the fact that she’s not dealing with Chad’s death the way she should be. Maybe it has everything to do with William and nothing to do with me.” He ran his hand through his hair again. “I need some air,” he said, walking out to the patio.

“I was not expecting that,” Paxton said, sitting back in his seat.

Ebb’s mouth was wide open. “I don’t think anyone expected *that*.”

Shilah was still seething.

“Shilah,” Kenna said in a soothing tone. “It’s not his fault. Allira’s not herself anymore, and you’re looking for people to blame. Drew may be an easy target, but he doesn’t deserve that. You know how he feels about your sister.”

“How is this not his fault?” Tate lashed out. “A few hours after making out with him, she wants to forget the guy who *actually* loved her?”

Shilah’s shoulders slumped forward as he sighed in defeat. “No, Tate. Aunt Kenna’s right. I’ll go apologise.”

“I’m not going to apologise,” Tate muttered.

\* \* \*

Before Shilah was even out the door, the room had gone back to debating what to do about Allira again, and I just didn't want to hear it anymore. I decided to follow Shilah out to the balcony where Drew was sitting on one of the patio chairs.

"So, do they all blame me now, too?" Drew asked, his eyes not leaving the horizon where he was staring off into the distance.

"We don't blame you." Shilah took the seat next to Drew. "Well Tate does, but I think he's trying to deflect the blame off of himself. Those two haven't gotten along in months. Longer, really."

"I shouldn't have taken her home from the wedding, but I just wanted to make sure she was okay. It was a bad idea, I know that now."

"You weren't to know what was going to happen. She's really messed up. How did it happen anyway, aren't you dating someone?"

"You want me to give you the details of your sister throwing herself at me?" Drew raised an eyebrow. "And you say *she's* messed up."

Shilah laughed. "Not *that*. It's just, I thought you had a girlfriend. Stella, yeah?"

"Allira didn't know about her, though. We weren't really serious enough for me to tell her. I'm sure she wouldn't have kissed me if she knew. Besides, it doesn't matter now. Telling Stella I made out with my ex didn't exactly go down well. As soon as I realised that my first thought after kissing Allira *wasn't* about my girlfriend, who I'd just cheated on, I figured it was time to end it."

"How did she take it?"

"About as well as I expected. She threw her shoe at me."

Shilah laughed. "Her shoe?"

"Yup, her shoe. She was storming out and her high heels were at the door, so she picked one up and pegged it at my head. Then she took the other one home with her. I still have the one she threw at me." He shook his head, as if he still can't believe it happened.

Shilah laughed again, but his expression quickly turned sombre. "So if you told Stella about the kiss, does that mean you want to be with Allira?"

Drew let out a loud sigh. "I think I'll always have 'what-ifs' with her, but like I told her when she tried to take my shirt off, I'd give it a chance if it's what she truly wanted. But it's not. I always envied the way she looked at Chad. She was in awe of him and used to look at him with such adoration. Even when we were 'dating'..." he used air quotes, "she only saw me as a high school crush. It was nothing compared to how she saw him."

"Sorry, dude."

Drew laughed. “I’m sure I’ll be fine. I think I just need to stay away from brunettes. I need to date baggage-less blondes who have terrible aim. Or at the very least, don’t wear high heels.” He rubbed the side of his head as if he was reliving the shoe incident again.

Shilah smiled, but it faded quickly. “Okay, so ...”

“Just say it, Shilah.” His dejected tone was something I wasn’t used to hearing from Drew.

“While I don’t blame you for what Allira did, you didn’t exactly help.” There was a short pause before he spoke again. “You know what I’m about to ask, right?”

Drew looked back out over the horizon, and nodded subtly. “You want me to stay away from her until she’s better.”

“I just don’t want to confuse her feelings even more. Like you said, there’s a lot of ‘what-ifs’ that surround you two. If you’re meant to be together, it’ll work out that way. She just needs to focus on getting better. If she comes to you for help or whatever, then by all means ... but yeah, I’m asking you to not cause her any more confusion when she’s as screwed up as she is.”

Drew’s jaw worked from side to side, tensing as he gritted his teeth. “I understand.”

I had to admit it, I was starting to feel sorry for Drew. Allira would always hold a place in his heart, but he—and everyone else—knew it wasn’t meant to be. He was clearly hurt that Shilah asked him to stay away, but he understood.

Whatever Drew and Allira had, or could have had, was gone.

\* \* \*

Back inside the apartment, Drew said a few quick goodbyes and left, leaving Shilah to explain what happened out on the balcony. Everyone agreed with what Shilah asked of Drew, except for Ebb who insisted that Allira might’ve just needed a fling to get over her hang-up on me. I was glad I wasn’t the only one who rolled their eyes at her typical Ebb-like suggestion.

“Kenna, can’t you prescribe something to help? Like medication or something?” Tate asked.

Kenna shared a look with Seph before answering him. “We’ve discussed this, and maybe we can bring it up with Allira again, but the last time we talked to her about it, she didn’t want to hear it. She kept saying she was grieving, she wasn’t depressed. I don’t think she understands that sometimes they’re one and the same. She’s consumed by her guilt and her loss. Her whole life revolves around it.”

“Then what are we going to do?” Tate asked. “You want us to pretend we don’t know she erased her memory? We’re meant to pretend that William is our little brother, and not our nephew? You know she hates it when we lie, how do you think she’ll react when she finds out we’ve deceived her in the biggest way yet?”

“You think medicating her is a better plan? Make her so numb she acts like a robot instead of a human being?” Seph asked.

“That’s not exactly how medication works,” Kenna said.

“I don’t think that matters anyway—Lia will never agree to it. We just need to make sure we’re there for her, and we all need to support her. Even if that means taking a step back from her. I can keep trying to get her memories back, but I think it’s time to look at other options.”

Tate shook his head. “I don’t want to be a part of this charade.”

No one else agreed with him, and it suddenly felt a hell of a lot like a year earlier, when the Resistance council decided Allira’s fate without her consent.

“The decision’s been made, Tate,” Seph said with authority.

“I’m out.” Tate stood, prepared to leave.

“Tate, wait,” Shilah pleaded.

“You need to promise us you won’t say anything to her,” Seph said, blocking his path to the door.

“Lucky for you, your daughter doesn’t seem to give a crap about what I do or say anymore.”

“Promise us,” Seph said again.

Tate sighed. “I promise I won’t tell her the truth. But if this backfires, it’s all on you guys. This is my official protest.”

“Noted,” Seph said. She let Tate pass, and Shilah followed after him, briefly kissing his mother on the cheek before chasing after his husband.

“I should get going too,” Kenna said. “There’s a lot of plans to be laid for this clinic. Opening day is only a few weeks away, and we still need to find more staff.”

“You want me to come help?” Ebb asked.

Kenna smiled. “No, Ebb, I’ll be working you hard soon enough. Enjoy your last days of freedom while you can.”

“Thanks for being here, sis,” Seph said, hugging Kenna.

“Love you,” Kenna said, walking out the front door.

“Are you sticking around to talk to Lia about moving in, Paxton?”

“Sure. Can I just use your phone to check on Nuka and the new nanny?”

“You can use the one in our bedroom,” Seph said, gesturing down the hall. Then she turned to Ebb. “Did you have somewhere to be? Lia would like to see you. At least, I think she might.” She sighed. “I never can tell what that girl wants these days.”

Ebb didn’t budge from her spot. “I was actually hoping to see her. You know, check in on her after ...”

“Are you going to be able to do this—keep her from finding out what she did?” Seph asked.

Ebb nodded. “I think you guys are right. She needs normalcy in her life. What’s more normal for her than me bugging her about boys, right?”

Seph grinned. “Just, don’t push her too hard. Maybe tone down the Ebbodine a bit.”

“Hey, I’ve been toning it down for a year.”

“Which has only been a month to her.”

Ebb hung her head. “Of course, I didn’t think of it like that until now.” A tear formed in her eye. “I hate she got to that point and felt like she couldn’t come to me.”

“She didn’t want to go to anyone. There’s nothing you could’ve done to stop this. But we can all prevent it happening again. We all have different strengths that could help her. Shilah’s a shoulder to cry on, Miles and Paxton are the strong supportive type, you’re a distraction, Tate and I are the ‘cruel to be kind’ types, and Kenna is the mother I never was.”

Ebb wiped a tear from her eye and reached for Seph’s hand. “You’re a great mother. You were there for me when I first came to the Resistance to hide out.”

“Kenna always seems to know what to say, and I always seem to screw things up.”

Ebb smiled. “At least we know where Allira gets it from.”

Seph started laughing before stopping abruptly when the front door swung open. Allira walked in, trailed by her dad pushing William in his pram.

“What’s going on?” Allira asked, looking between a red-eyed Ebb and her mother.

“Come sit down, Lia. We need to talk.”

## B E G I N N I N G     A G A I N

“What’s this about?” Allira asked tentatively, taking a seat on the couch.

Paxton was returning from the bedroom when she arrived, and went to sit next to her. “I need a favour,” he said, casually.

“I’ll go put Liam down for a nap,” Miles said, leaving the room.

It was surprising he wasn’t getting involved. He raised Allira, and if anyone was to have a valid opinion on what she should do, it’d be him.

The fact he avoided eye contact with Seph, and that she just waved him off, I figured they weren’t under a mutual opinion that something this drastic needed to be done.

From what Allira had told me of growing up with her dad, he was always one to avoid conflict but would take charge when needed to keep her and Shilah safe. I started wishing he’d take charge now.

I wasn’t sure if what they were doing was right or not. I was of two minds about it. Then I remembered it didn’t matter what I thought, because there was absolutely nothing I could do about it anyway.

The toll of being a ghost was starting to weigh heavily on me. I hated feeling helpless, and I’d been this way for a year now. It was hard to understand why I was even there in the first place.

“Paxton, I’m still kind of recovering from the last favour you asked of me.” As soon as the snarky words left Allira’s mouth, her jaw fell open and she dropped her gaze from him.

*It took her erasing her memory to realise Paxton was just as much at fault as Tate?*

“I guess I deserved that. Anyway, as you know, I’m running for president in the upcoming election, and—”

Paxton didn’t even miss a beat, getting straight into it, despite Allira’s comment and solemn mood.

“You’re what?” she blurted out before quickly regaining her composure. “I mean ... of course you are. I ... uh ... just forgot for a moment, sorry.”

He waved her confusion off as if it was a natural thing to forget. “Anyway, I need to start attending a lot of public events—benefits, conferences—and I’m going to need a date to each of them. I know you’re not exactly busy these days ... wait ... that came out wrong.”

Allira screwed up her face. “Take Ebb, she’d be perfect.”

“No way in hell,” Ebb commented. “No offense, Paxton.”

“None taken. I need someone serious who won’t get drunk and flirt with all the members of Parliament. No offence, Ebbodine.”

Ebb shrugged. “You have a valid point.”

“I’d need you close, and we’d need to look like a couple.”

Her eyes widened.

“Don’t worry, I’m not actually asking you out.” He laughed. “But in exchange for you being my arm candy, I have a spare room in my penthouse apartment. I’m sure Nuka would love having you there.”

“You want me to move in with you?” She bit her lip nervously.

“It’ll all be temporary,” Seph said. “I was just telling Paxton how cramped you’ve been feeling here lately, and that you might need a change of scenery for a while.”

Allira’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “I don’t think ...”

“Allira, you’d actually be doing me a pretty big favour,” Paxton said. “I don’t really have the time or energy to date anyone for real, and Nuka loves you, it’ll make her happy. Plus, I just hired this new nanny, but I’d feel much more comfortable having someone I know there.”

She was silent for a long while before she finally said, “Yeah, okay. I guess.”

“How enthusiastic of you,” Paxton said dryly.

“I’m going to go shower and then I’ll start packing.” Without another word, she got up and went to the bathroom. I started to wonder if it was possible for a door to be depressed—it made the saddest little click as Allira pushed it shut.

“That was easy,” Paxton said quietly.

Seph huffed. “I can assure you, that wasn’t easy. She’s waiting for you to leave before she explodes.”

\* \* \*

That pulling sensation took over me again, and when I blinked, I was in Allira’s room. Miles was there, bouncing William in his arms, trying to get him to sleep.

“I don’t know what to do anymore,” he said to William, his voice cracking. “I thought she’d be okay once you were here, that you’d be real to her, and she would’ve fallen in love with you the second she saw you. That’s what I thought was going to happen. I never thought she’d ...”

He was trying to be the strong man he was known to be, but I could see tears forming in his eyes.

“She does love you. She’s just confused right now. I promise I’ll never let anything bad happen to you. Just a few months, that’s all she’ll need to get better.”

I wasn’t sure anymore whether he was trying to convince William or himself.

Allira walked in, fresh from her shower, and stalled as soon as she saw her dad. “Oh, sorry. Didn’t realise you were in here.”

“I was just putting Liam down for a nap.”

Allira swallowed hard, looking at William in her father’s arms. “I’m going to start packing.”

“Packing?” Miles asked. He moved to the cot, placing William gently on the soft mattress.

“I’m going to be staying with Paxton for a while,” she said, her voice devoid of any emotion.

“What? When was this decided?”

“While we were out. Are you saying you didn’t know about it? That this wasn’t the plan all along?”

He shook his head. “I seriously had no idea. You can’t ... I mean ... you have to be here.”

“Mum doesn’t trust me anymore. She needs me out of her hair. You have a new child to raise ... and ...” she trailed off, looking at William again.

Hope started to form in the pit of my stomach. *Is she remembering?*

“Can I ask you something?” She changed topics. “Why was Liam’s cot put in here with me?”

*She knows! She’s remembered!*

“Why do *you* think we put him in here?” Her dad asked tentatively.

Allira’s gaze dropped to the floor. “Because of something I’m terrified of,” she said quietly.

Her dad sat on the edge of Allira’s bed and pulled her down next to him. “I understand your fear, I do. I can’t begin to understand what you’re going through. It breaks my heart to know that you’re never going to see Chad again, and if it’s doing that to me, I don’t even want to contemplate what’s going on inside you right now. I don’t want you to move out.”

“I don’t want to either ...”

“But,” Miles continued, “if it gives you some space, and helps you gain back some of what was lost when Chad died ... I just don’t want to see my little girl like that anymore. It’s unfair for your mother and me to live through your pain when you won’t even help yourself to fix it.”

Something about seeing a grown man break down did me in.

Her meltdown was too hard to watch, yet Miles was with her every day, feeling the same pain that Allira was. He was at a loss for what to do. He was trying to be supportive, but didn’t know how to be anymore. I could tell he desperately wanted her to ask if William was hers, but he couldn’t flat out tell her or it might’ve hindered her small progress.

Watching Allira, the way she was studying William, I think both Miles and I knew that deep down, Allira felt a bond with him. She was just fighting it, too scared to contemplate the possibility.

“If you can’t find a reason for you to stay here,” he said, looking at William, “you need to move in with Paxton and come home to us when you ...” he trailed off, not really knowing how to finish that sentence.

“Sort my shit out?” she replied with a small smile, causing her dad to break a smile in return and nod. “I’ll try, okay Dad?”

“That’s all I can ask of you, sweetheart.”

“What if I never get better?” she asked quietly.

His silence scared the hell out of me.

\* \* \*

“All packed up?” Seph asked as Allira walked out with her two duffel bags.

Allira didn’t respond.

“Really? Going to do the teenager thing?”

“Did you tell Paxton what I did?”

Seph sighed. “Does it make a difference if I did or not? You need help and he offered to take you on.”

“To get me away from you, you mean.”

“I’m just doing what’s best ...”

“Bullshit! You’re trying to get rid of me because you’re scared I’ll do it again! Dad said as much, just in not so many words.”

“You’ve shown no remorse for what you’ve done. None at all. You have no desire to get any of those memories back.”

“What memories? Of me sitting on my ass for a year, crying into a pillow? That’s all you’ve told me that I’ve been missing! Unless there’s something else you’re keeping from me?”

*She’s fishing again.* “Just tell her,” I yelled, about to lose my mind. “She knows! And you refusing to tell her the truth is just pushing her away!”

“I’m not going to do or say anything that will jeopardise your recovery,” Seph said.

“You know, if you’d just done as I asked, I wouldn’t have screwed it up and you wouldn’t be going through this.”

“And you’re wondering why we can’t trust you to not do it again?” Seph yelled. She shook her head. “Just go. I don’t want you around Liam, or anywhere you could be a danger to yourself.”

“So now you’re kicking me out?” Allira yelled. “I thought you wanted to help me!”

“This is helping you,” Seph said dejectedly. “I’ll check in on you in a few days.”

“Don’t bother.”

# T H E   C L I N I C

I started splitting my time between Allira and William, blinking between them regularly.

William was doing well, although sometimes I felt he really needed his mother—no one was ever quite as good at calming him like Allira. Seph would wear an old shirt of Allira's, but it wouldn't fool him for long. He missed his mother. Or perhaps I was reading into it. I wasn't sure if babies could actually tell the difference between people or not.

I found Allira on the rooftop of Paxton's apartment. It had an amazing view of the city, and she was visiting the spot frequently.

"How about that guy down there," I pointed. It was a game we played ... well, she played. I played along too, even though I knew she couldn't hear me. "I think he's cheating on his wife. Harsh, I know, but he's wearing a wedding ring and keeps looking at the asses of every girl that walks by."

"He has three kids to three different women," she said with a giggle.

Sometimes we'd pick the same person on the street and I could've sworn she knew I was right there beside her, helping her come up with the stranger's whole fake life. It was moments like that that led me to believe I was here for a reason. I just needed to find out why. There was no logical explanation for it. Then again, I was a friggin' ghost. That in itself wasn't logical.

"That woman over there is in love, and is so wrapped up in her love, she's blissfully happy all the time." Allira let out a loud sigh. "At least some people can have a happy ending."

My gut pinched. "You'll get yours. I promise."

"I thought I saw you today," she said, slightly raising her head to look into the sky.

It was something she'd started doing recently—talking to me as if she knew I was there, as if she could sense me.

The first time it happened a few weeks back, I yelled at her for three hours straight, telling her I was right there, that I could hear her. By the end, my throat felt raw, and I gave up.

But she'd never done it before moving in with Paxton and I wanted to believe it meant something.

"I see you a lot," she continued. "I might be going crazy." She laughed as she wiped a tear from her face. "Miss you."

She always ended with that. Allira started making her way back inside, trudging down the stairs with heavy feet.

Paxton and Nuka were sitting at the dining table, eating, when she walked in.

“Hey,” Allira said with a warm smile. Warm, but fake. She gave Nuka a kiss on the head, then went and sat in her spot on the other side of the table.

Paxton didn’t look up from the paperwork he was studying.

“What are you looking at?” Allira asked.

“Just numbers and projections for your aunt’s clinic,” Paxton replied dismissively.

I could see it in her face, she had no idea what he was talking about, but just like a lot of things she pretends to remember, she didn’t question it. And just how everyone had been pretending not to notice Allira’s confusion, Paxton didn’t press her on the matter.

“Can I take a look?” she asked, reaching for the folder.

Paxton hesitated for a moment before relenting and handing it over.

“Why do you have all of this?”

“Kenna’s looking for investors.”

“Are you going to help?”

“I spoke to my campaign manager last night, and he thinks we should distance ourselves from it for the time being. We’re a Defective party, but we need to show we’re also interested in other issues as well. If all of our platforms include a Defective element, we’ll lose voters. We need to be supportive, but without being too ‘in your face’ about it.”

“Maybe there’s a way I could help,” she said. I think it was more to herself than Paxton, though.

“Maybe you should wait and see how you handle your campaign duties first. It’s your first appearance tonight. Do you think you’re ready for it?”

“What’s there to be ready for? All I have to do is look pretty and smile politely.”

He smiled at that. *Sure, because we don’t want her to talk or have an opinion or anything. Arm candy doesn’t have a voice.*

“Speaking of pretty, are you going to call Ebbodine to come help you get ready? She’s into all that hair and beauty stuff more than you.”

*Really, Paxton?* “Don’t listen to him, Allira, you’re gorgeous without makeup.” *Why am I even bothering?*

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

It wasn’t the first time Paxton made some sort of comment like that. And each time he’s said something that would normally make Allira bite back, she’s just nodded and accepted it.

How could my death tear away the person she used to be? The person she always was? She was raised to be strong, to fight, to stick up for herself. *Where the hell is she now? How do I get her back?*

It'd only been two weeks since Allira moved in with Paxton, but if anything, she was disappearing even more.

When Ebbodine arrived, Allira took her straight to her bedroom.

"So, how are you doing?" Ebb asked, her usual peppy tone solemn.

"Honest answer or generic?"

"Since when do you and I do generic? Come on, Allira, it's me."

Allira smiled one of her fake smiles that she'd gotten so used to doing these days. And she was really friggin' good at it. "True. I'm doing better, I think." She shrugged. "I'm not crying as much. That counts for something, right?"

"Are you sure you're going to be okay tonight? Are you ready to be Paxton's 'girlfriend'?" Ebb shuddered. "So weird."

Allira actually let out a little laugh. Ebb's head snapped to hers, just as mine did. *Did that really just happen? A laugh?*

"It is weird, but it kind of feels ... nice."

"Please tell me you don't have a thing for Paxton!" Ebb yelled.

"Shh," I found myself saying. I really didn't want Paxton overhearing. Why, I wasn't sure.

"Not like that. I don't think." Allira flopped onto her bed. "I didn't tell you about the vision I had while I was in the hospital after getting shot, did I?"

Ebb narrowed her eyes. "No?"

"What vision?" I asked.

"In my vision, Paxton and I were all dressed to go to some benefit, and he proposed."

"He what?" Ebb and I yelled in unison. I was thankful Allira could at least hear her.

"I know. Total shock to me too. And yeah, it's weird right now, but clearly I'm going to outgrow it if we get close enough for him to propose."

Ebb pinched the bridge of her nose. "You know visions aren't set in stone. Please don't put all your hope in getting over Chad and moving on with Paxton. Of all people."

"What do you have against Paxton? He's handsome, smart..."

"Boring, old," Ebb finished for her, making me smile. I knew he had ulterior motives to taking her in.

"He's twenty-nine, that's not old."

“And you’re nineteen. He’s old.” Ebb started pacing. “You can’t seriously be interested in him?”

Allira shook her head. “Not yet.”

“Not ever. I won’t allow it.”

“If it’s what gets me over *him*, then I don’t really care right now.”

“I know plenty of guys you can use to get over Chad.”

“Whoa, I don’t like that idea either,” I said.

“Ebb,” Allira said with a sigh. “You know I—”

“You’re not ready for that yet. But one day you will be, and I will do everything I possibly can to make sure it’s not Paxton you turn to.”

“*Why?*”

“Because there’s something not right with him. I don’t know what, but he’s weird.”

“I agree,” I said.

“He’s not weird. He’s a grown-up. Something you’re clearly not used to being around.”

“That’s fine. He can be a grown-up, but you’re still a teenager and you *need* to act like one.”

“Hmm, all drama and angst. Don’t you think I have enough of that with Chad? You try losing the love of your life and see how much you want to party, date, and stress over what your nail colour should be.”

Ebb sighed. “Let’s just get your hair and makeup done, okay? I need to go to the clinic after this.”

“Aunt Kenna’s clinic?”

“Yeah, we’re about to open and we’re short-staffed like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Why didn’t you say anything? I can help out. I don’t know how, but it’s not like my days are filled with anything.”

Ebb pulled back, examining Allira’s face. “You’re serious?” It wasn’t an accusatory tone, just a shocked one.

“I asked Paxton about it before, and he said I should see how my campaign duties go first, but I don’t see why I wouldn’t be able to. The benefits and events are less than once a week. It’s more like once a fortnight to every three weeks that Paxton will need me.”

For the first time since Ebb walked in, she got excited, bouncing on her heels with her signature smile plastered on her face. “You should come do nursing with me! You can study on the job and everything, it’s great.”

“Uh ... you do remember I want to faint at the sight of a needle, right?”

“It’s super easy, and you’ll get over that with some practice.”

“It might be easy for you, but I was thinking more along the lines of office work or filing. You know, easy stuff.”

“Don’t you want to help people? If you think about it, we’re the reason why they need the clinic in the first place.”

Allira pursed her lips, her brow furrowed in thought. It didn’t take long before her expression morphed to one of guilt, realising Ebb was right. “I’ll ask Aunt Kenna about it tomorrow.”

“Seriously, Allira, I think this is the best thing for you.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

\* \* \*

Of course Kenna was ecstatic Allira was interested in the clinic, practically giving her a job on the spot. She had six weeks of intense training, just so she could learn the basics of everything, and then she had signed on to take more classes, but at a slower pace than Ebb.

Paxton had voiced his concerns, but Allira assured him once her training was done, it was only going to be a casual thing; filling in here and there when she was needed.

Then opening day came, and it was pretty clear that wasn’t going to last long when the clinic was packed full of people.

And as predicted, with the months that followed, Allira became bogged down in nothing but clinic work and campaigning events.

But she was doing better. She was working her ass off and barely had time to sleep, so instead of restless nights with her face streaked with tears, she was crashing from exhaustion and sleeping better than she had since I’d died.

She’d also stopped talking to me. I liked to think it was because she was doing better, but I missed it. It was the only time I felt as if I was still connected to her.

## N E W B I E S

Allira was sitting across from some loser, preppy boy with designer pants and a stupid playboy attitude.

“Sorry. I thought this was a mutual set up. I didn’t know Ebb was keeping me as a surprise,” Dex said. “I can go if you’d like?” He started to get up out of his seat.

“No, that’s okay.”

“What are you doing, Allira? Get rid of him! He’s a dickhead—that much is abundantly clear from the way he’s dressed.”

He sat back down, and they smiled at each other.

It was happening. Allira was on a date.

*I don’t want to watch this*, I inwardly groaned.

That mere thought had the pulling sensation taking over me.

I expected to blink to where William was. Instead, I found myself somewhere new, with people I’d never seen before.

The apartment I was in was small—combined dining/living area with a tiny kitchen big enough for only one person to stand in there at one time. There was a bedroom off of the living room, then a hallway with only two doors—I presumed one was another bedroom and one was a bathroom.

“Where am I?” I mumbled to myself.

“That Max girl called again,” the blonde girl in front of me said. “You really have to stop leading them on if you’re not going to get serious.”

I turned to the guy she was talking to, coming face to face with a six-foot-three wall of man. His ash blond hair was scruffy and not at all neat, and it looked as if he just rolled out of bed, even though it was dinner time.

“Jenna,” he whined, “do I poke around in your love life? Oh wait, you don’t have one.”

Okay, so the girl’s name was Jenna. That still didn’t answer why I was there.

“Screw you!” she yelled, throwing a couch cushion at him.

“Come on now, sis, you know I’m only joking. Sort of.”

She grunted and stormed out of the room, but then came charging back out. “When are you going to grow up, Jayce?” *Okay, the guy’s name was Jayce.* “I realise you still have another year of uni left—”

“More like four if I go ahead with this PhD thing.” He shrugged.

“This is exactly what I mean! You have no direction, no other goals other than your degree, which you’re not even all that fussed over.”

“I have goals!” he said.

“Yeah, seeing how many girls you can screw without calling them back.”

“Not that you *need* to know this, but I don’t screw them. I never slept with Max.”

Jenna narrowed her eyes at him. “Why do I feel like you’re lying?”

Jayce laughed. “Because you think I’m some kind of manwhore? I don’t know how you came to that conclusion considering *I’m* the one who’s in my bed every night. You’re hardly ever here.”

“You may have heard of a little something called a job. You might like to try getting one someday. It’s what I have to do to pay my half of the rent. Unlike you who only has to bat his eyelashes at Mum and Dad and they cover you.”

As confused as I was, wondering what I was doing there, their argument was enthralling. I’d always wished to have a brother or sister. Now I was glad I was an only child.

“You know they would’ve done the same for you had you chosen a different career path. Mum and Dad didn’t bust their asses so we could become *public servants*.” He shuddered.

“Oh, whatever. Don’t be such a snob! I’m making a difference in the world!”

“I will too, once I get my PhD. Until then, I can do whatever ... and whoever I want.”

“Real charming, bro.”

“Hey, the reason I didn’t sleep with Max, even though she’d made it abundantly clear that I could have, is because I know she’s not the one for me. If I was the asshole you think I am, wouldn’t I have just used her?”

“Whatever. I just hope you meet someone someday who knocks you on your ass. Your ego could use a hit.” She walked out of the room again, but shut her bedroom door behind her this time.

Jayce’s face fell, like his playfulness was all an act. He looked solemn as he mumbled to himself, “Secretly, I hope for that too.”

Still confused as hell, I was relieved when I blinked again and found myself next to William’s cot, watching over him.

*What I wouldn’t give to hold my son, just once.*



## L E T T I N G   G O

Standing inside the clinic, I watched Allira work. It was quiet for a Friday night, so she wasn't doing much—just sitting behind the reception desk, waiting for someone to come in.

“You need to let her go.” The deep, familiar voice came from behind me, and I assumed it was for Allira, but when I turned, I realised the voice was directed at me.

My brow wrinkled in confusion. “Hayden?” I asked in disbelief. “But you're...”

“Dead?” He chuckled. “Takes one to know one.”

I wanted to jump for joy and break down and cry at the same time. I wasn't alone.

He strutted over to me, looking far more comfortable with our predicament than I was. His white hair almost glowed under the lights of the clinic, giving him an angelic quality. If it hadn't been a feature he'd always had, I would've wondered if he *was* an angel.

Hayden died in the same gunfight where I lost my life. We were both members of the recruiting department for the Resistance, and we used to spend quite a bit of time together when we were alive.

He reached out his hand and shook mine, bringing me in for a man hug. “I'd say it's good to talk to you, but that'd be a lie.”

“You don't exactly seem shocked to see me. What ... what are you doing here? How are you here?” I asked, totally confused.

“Well we're both dead, aren't we? Wouldn't it make sense that we were sent to the same realm?”

“So you've been stuck here for the last eighteen months, too?”

“Is that how long it's been? Shit. Time doesn't seem to exist to me anymore.”

“Where *are* we?”

He leaned in and whispered, “I'll never tell,” then smirked. “How am I meant to know where we are? I figure it's some sort of limbo or purgatory. But I've been sent to you because you can't seem to sort your shit out.”

“Sent to me?”

“I'm not a hundred percent sure on how it all works. Just like that pulling sensation when we transport? It's like that. I just know what I have to do. And that's to tell you to sort your shit out.” He grinned.

“Don’t give me that ‘unfinished business’ ghost crap. I don’t have any unfinished anything.”

Hayden laughed and nodded towards Allira behind the reception desk of the clinic. “What do you call that, then?”

“Then why are you still here? You didn’t have a girlfriend.” I nudged him playfully with my elbow, but then let out a big sigh. “I can’t believe how much I’ve missed actually talking to someone and have them hear me.”

Hayden nodded. “Gets a bit like that. I was here for ... other reasons. I eventually sorted them out and got out of here, but I’ve been sent back for you.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I kept my eyes trained on Allira as I spoke. “Sent back from where? By who?”

“You need to let her go,” he said, ignoring my questions. “It’s the only way to get out of this place. To move on, you both have to release the hold you have on each other.”

“Who did you have to let ... oh, your little brother.”

Hayden nodded. “He didn’t handle my death too well, and being there, watching over him, it just made everything worse.”

“But he wouldn’t have been able to see you, or hear you. How did he know you were still there? How would she know I’m here?” I gestured towards Allira. “I’ve tried to talk to her. Repeatedly.”

“Trust me. She knows. Maybe not on a conscious level, but she’s still connected to you. Same with your little boy. I’m guessing she’s having trouble moving on?”

“That’s a bit of an understatement.”

“It’s because you’re not letting her. You’re the one holding her back.”

“So I’m just meant to leave her? I was ready to do that the day I died, but I still got put here—wherever this is—anyway.”

“You may have thought you were ready, but you didn’t know about the kid then. You have to choose to leave them both. It’s that easy.”

“And that hard,” I mumbled.

The door behind us flew open, and a guy with ash blond hair came charging in, carrying a girl in his arms.

I recognised him immediately. He was the no-goal-manwhore who I witnessed having a fight with his sister.

Allira stared at them wide-eyed, taken aback by the girl in his arms. She’d been beaten pretty badly.

“See that guy,” Hayden said, pointing.

“Uh-huh,” I dragged out the word.

“You see how Allira’s staring at him?”

“Like she stares at everyone else?”

Hayden shook his head. “I hate to be the one to tell you this, bro, but he’s the one she was always going to end up with. Whether you lived or died.”

My brow furrowed. “She wouldn’t have left me. We have a kid together.”

“Like that stops anyone?” He raised an eyebrow, but sighed when he saw the hurt in my eyes. “Okay, I was trying to sugar coat it for you. But here’s the thing, you were never going to live. Whether it was getting shot during the takeover or in a car accident a few months later, you were never meant to live.”

My mouth flew open to object to his words, but I couldn’t. I was already dead, I couldn’t argue that point.

“Hard to hear, I know. But if you don’t release your hold on her, and soon, she might miss her chance with the one guy who can bring her back from the lost place she’s living in right now.”

“And that’s how it all ends? I’m just meant to ... let her go as if she meant nothing to me? How does anyone do that?”

“When you realise that being here isn’t worth their pain and suffering. My brother’s future is unsure now, because I was like you. I refused to let him go. I didn’t want to miss out on him growing up, and now ...”

“I’m sure Bray will be fine. Just like Allira. I’m not going to leave her or my son.”

“Grief is like cancer, a big mass of ugly that can kill you when you least expect it. If she never moves on, she’ll never lead a normal life. What has she done in the last year and a half that doesn’t seem like her?”

I scoffed and mumbled, “Everything.”

“She’s going to lose herself if you don’t let her go.”

“I’ll take the risk.”

“You always were a stubborn ass.” With that, Hayden disappeared, blinking to wherever the hell it was he came from.

He had to be wrong. She was doing better. I’d been with Allira and William for this long. There had to be a bigger reason for me being stuck here.

## S T U C K

“Why am I here again?” I yelled at whoever was listening as I blinked back into Jayce and Jenna’s apartment. “I should be with Allira!” I was hoping Hayden—or whoever had sent Hayden to me—could hear me. Usually the mere thought of Allira or William would cause me to blink where they were, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t leave the tiny apartment. And I had no doubt some stupid higher power was at play. Even in death, I had no control over my life. *That’s a bit of an oxymoron.*

Jayce entered the apartment looking tired and weary after spending the night at the clinic waiting for his neighbour ... and hitting on Allira. That was not fun to watch. It was fun to watch her say no, though. I couldn’t help grinning.

“Where the hell have you been?” Jenna asked, storming out of her room as if she was a parent catching a child sneaking back in from being out too late. “Thought you said you weren’t a manwhore?”

He grunted. “I’m not. Although, I did meet someone.”

Jenna rolled her eyes. “Here we go.”

“No I’m serious. There’s something about her.”

“I’m sure there is. Where did you meet this special someone?”

“She works at that Defective clinic.”

Jenna visibly stiffened. “What were you doing in that part of the city? And why did you go in there?”

“Wow, now who’s being the snob? Just because they’re Defective—”

“No, that’s not why I’m asking. You just need to stay away from that place, okay?”

“Why?”

“I can’t talk to you about it.”

“Ah, work stuff. Gotcha.”

*Work stuff?* That’s when I noticed the badge sitting on the kitchen counter. *A cop?*

“At least tell me the one you like is the redhead?” Jenna said.

“Brunette, actually.”

“Dammit, Jayce!”

“What?”

“You really have no idea who she is, do you?”

“Apart from the only girl to ever turn me down?”

Jenna burst out laughing. “She what?”

“Hey, it’s not that funny, but yeah ... I asked her out and she said no. Actually, at first she looked at me like I was on drugs.”

“If she wasn’t Allira Daniels, I’d tell you to marry her.” She was still laughing.

“Allira who?”

Jenna stopped laughing and shook her head, walking over to a desk in the corner of the living room. She pulled out a newspaper and threw it at him. “Get your head out of your ass, Jayce. If everything goes the way it’s going, that crook right there will be the next president of this country, and look who’s on his arm.”

*Crook?*

Jayce skimmed the article with a furrowed brow. “But...”

“You sure can pick ‘em! You’re chasing after the very possible next First Lady, dumbass.”

“The article doesn’t actually say they’re together.”

Jenna groaned. “Just stay away from that clinic, okay? They’re being investigated, and I don’t want to have to worry about you being involved too.”

“Why are they under investigation?”

“That’s what I want to know,” I said.

“You know I can’t tell you that.”

“Then I don’t see why I can’t volunteer at the clinic. You did say I need to do something about finding a job and having goals.”

“Goals that don’t include screwing the future Mrs. President.”

“I’ll be helping people. Like I helped Tina last night.”

“Wait ... what? What happened with Tina?”

He shrugged. “I dunno, she wouldn’t tell me, but she was beaten pretty bad. Found her on the front stoop of the apartment.”

Jenna grunted in frustration. “Why didn’t you lead with that? I have to go make sure she’s okay. Where is she?”

“Back in her apartment.”

Jenna was out the door before he’d even finished his sentence.

\* \* \*

“What are you doing here, Jayce?” he mumbled to himself, standing outside the clinic.

“I don’t know, but I’m friggin’ stuck to you, and it’s been eight days since I’ve seen her. So could you please go inside so I can see my girlfriend?” I asked him.

“She’s not worth it,” he mumbled again.

“Actually, she is,” I said. “And as much as I don’t want you to work that out, I want to see her, so start moving.”

Jayce let out a big sigh and pushed forward, both of us disappointed when we discovered Allira wasn’t in. He told Kenna he was there to volunteer.

When Allira came in less than ten minutes later, I saw it—the look. Hayden said she’d looked at Jayce differently last week. Standing there, watching as she tried to contain her nerves ... I saw it.

But that still didn’t mean anything. I had to keep telling myself that because I refused to believe I was sent here just to say goodbye.

“I promise I won’t ask you out again,” he said when she started showing him around.

“That sounds like a lie,” I said.

He followed her around the clinic, all the while chatting, all the while ignoring my taunts and eye rolling.

“I live with my sister. She... uh, has a lot of newspapers. For her job,” he said.

“What is she, a journalist or something?” Allira asked.

He actually nodded.

“Lies!” I yelled. “We may as well dye his hair and call him Drew.”

I looked up at the roof and started cussing. “Really? *This* is the guy who supposedly is going to raise my child, be with my girlfriend, and lead what should have been *my* life?”

I was getting frustrated, I just didn’t know what to do anymore. I wasn’t going to disappear, but I didn’t want to watch Allira fall for another guy, either. Not that I had a choice. I was somehow stuck now—with Jayce of all people. *At least it’s not Drew.*

\* \* \*

“Why Jayce, why? Just answer me that.” Jenna was yelling.

He shrugged. “I can’t explain it. This girl ...”

“You’re doing this all for a girl? Have you at least got any dirt for me?”

“Did you seriously just ask me to become a CI? Do you know me at all? Also, I feel shit enough having to tell her you’re a journalist. I’m not going to betray her. Although, I did kind of lead her on a bit so she guessed it, then I just didn’t deny it.”

“Ha! If you think Allira isn’t going to see that as lying, you’re in for a rude awakening. Trust me, I know.” I sighed. *If only you could hear me.*

“You’re choosing this girl over your own sister?”

I had to admit, it was admirable of him.

“Not at all. I’m making you do your job. You want to make sergeant one day?”

“Jayce,” she whined.

“Jenna,” he mocked back.

I really hated the fact I was beginning to like the guy.

Looking up again at the invisible force keeping me here, I yelled, “Is that why I’m stuck with him? You’re making me stay until I accept him?”

## C A N ' T   G O   O N

It was when her lips touched his for the first time that everything became clear. I fought Hayden's words for weeks, I didn't believe him. I didn't want to. But something happened when I realised what he said about Jayce was true. It was something I couldn't explain—a mixture of being punched in the gut and having the heaviest weight lifted from my chest at the same time.

*Clarity.* I wasn't searching for it, yet it hit me like a ton of bricks. It was instantaneous, but I couldn't say I was all that surprised. After spending the last few weeks with Jayce, it was building to a point where I knew I'd have to give in to it eventually.

I realised that even with the enormous piles of drama and crap going on in Allira's life, this guy would be there for her no matter what. He was there for her when I couldn't be.

If someone had told me when I was alive that I'd witness Allira kiss someone else and I wouldn't actually feel bad about it or want to smash the guy in the face, I would've laughed. No, I probably would've punched *them* in the face.

Since Jayce and Allira had been hanging out, I saw something in her that I hadn't seen since before I'd died. When she wasn't concentrating so hard on trying not to forget me and move on, she actually let her guard down around him. She showed him a side of her that only a handful of people had ever seen. I was pretty sure Paxton hadn't even seen it, and they were living together. The bond between Jayce and Allira was obvious.

So when he tentatively kissed her, his lips soft and unsure, not knowing what her response would be, I was surprised that I found myself hoping she'd kiss him back. And when she did, I wasn't angry. I was relieved.

I always felt she was mine to protect, but the thing is, I was never meant to be hers.

When Allira abruptly pulled away from Jayce, my heart sank. She pulled away because of me, and in that moment, I knew exactly what I had to do. I was ready.

\* \* \*

It was the first time in weeks that I'd been able to blink away on my own accord.

"Hey, buddy," I whispered, leaning over William's cot.

He looked up at me and smiled. It was moments like this one that made me think he really could see me. They say kids have extrasensory perception, and I liked to think that it was particularly true in William's case. Because this was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do, and I hoped that he could at least acknowledge my existence in some way. Just once.

"Finding out I was going to be a father at twenty wasn't exactly the way I'd planned out my life. Then again, neither was dying. Life's shit like that sometimes.

"You know what sucks? Knowing that I'm never going to hold you in my arms. I'll never kiss your mother again. But most importantly, I'm not going to be there—for anything. Birthdays, celebrations ... they all belong to the living.

"I hope you grow up to be happy. That's all a parent ever wants for their children. Sure, we hope you'll become successful, or do something truly amazing and heroic with your life ... but we can't all be your mother. Am I right?"

I was sure it was a coincidence, but William giggled.

"One day, you'll meet someone who turns your whole world upside down, and the only piece of advice I can give you is, love her every single day as if it's the last one you'll ever spend with her ... or him, if you're into that. The future is unpredictable, even to people like your uncle Shilah who can literally see glimpses into the future. Spend every last second, every minute, every single chance you get to be with the person you love. Don't fight over the trivial stuff, and when you do get mad, make sure you apologise profusely afterwards.

"At the end of the day, you need to show them how you feel while you're alive, because once you're dead, there's only one thing you're able to do."

I took in a deep breath, ignoring the logistics of a dead man breathing, and let it out as I closed my eyes.

"Let them go."

\* \* \* \* \*

Thank you for reading Chad's novella!  
I hope you enjoyed reading about the lost months.

\*\*\*

### **Why Through His Eyes was written.**

The giant gap in between Resistance (book two) and Defective (book three) of The Institute Series was a bit jarring to some readers. While there were reasons for needing that gap, the audience missed out on a lot of events that happened over that time.

The idea behind Through His Eyes came from my reluctance to let go of Chad. I had nothing against the guy—I actually loved him during The Institute. I didn't even know he was going to die until I was halfway through writing Resistance. When I realised that, I made him start acting out so I'd *want* to kill him, because I knew I wouldn't have had the guts to kill him off if he was the perfect guy I had imaged in my head.

I brought my idea of filling in the eighteen months gap and my sorrow over the loss of Chad together in the hopes it would provide a little more closure and give Chad a proper goodbye. But I also wanted to give readers a bigger insight into how Allira handled the roughest time in her life and how she almost lost herself while doing it.

It was only a short novella, but Chad's afterlife story was one I felt I had to write.

## **Other Works by Kayla Howarth**

**LOSING NUKA**

Book One of the Litmus Series  
(An Institute Series spin off)

**PROTECTING WILLIAM**

Book Two of the Litmus Series

**SAVING ILLYANA**

Book Three of the Litmus Series

Go to [www.kaylahowarth.com](http://www.kaylahowarth.com) to find out more!

## Acknowledgments

To all you Chad haters out there, thanks for giving me the inspiration to share his story. I actually didn't have plans on publishing this part of my work until you. Yes he was arrogant, yes, he didn't always do the best thing, but his intentions towards Allira were always honourable. I wanted to show a different side of him and try to show the Chad I knew—the one who was in my thoughts for two whole books.

To all of my betas, thanks for your feedback and advice. Hannah, Michelle B, Michelle L, Linda, Bethany, and in particular the Queen of the Anti-Chad Club, Kimberly. I'm glad I could turn your around on Chad.

Patrick Hodges, my very own personal comma police, thanks for editing.

And to the usual suspects: the many friends and family, thank you for supporting me throughout this whole adventure.

## **About the Author**

Obsessed with YA fiction, I'm still a teenager at heart.

My love of reading and movies inspired me to start something I never dreamed possible: Writing my first novel.

One book turned into two, two turned into three, and now there's another trilogy, a spin off to The Institute Series. Nuka, William, and Illyana each get their own story in The Litmus Series.

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