

ONE

I nearly died after falling off a cliff.

I can almost picture it if I try hard enough—falling head first, blurry images of jagged rocks making up the cliffside as I plummet towards rushing water, the cool night air whisking by, and a scream caught in my throat. In a split second I'm halfway down.

Then I plunge into watery darkness.

My survival is nothing short of a miracle. A miracle that the river broke my fall just enough so the head injury I sustained didn't kill me. A miracle that there were campers nearby who heard the splash. A miracle that they acted quickly, preventing me from drowning in my unconscious state.

I shouldn't be alive.

And yet . . .

"There's someone here to see you."

I turn around to see my mom standing in the doorway to my bedroom. She's been the one checking in on me the most, keeping me company and trying to get me reacquainted with my surroundings. Because that's the kicker with all of this: I don't remember anything about my life before the fall.

The doctor called it retrograde amnesia. There's no cure, no definitive science on how to treat it. I sat dumbfounded in my hospital bed listening to him go into a load of jargon about the types of memory and how they work. The main takeaway was mine may or may not return, and could possibly even be triggered.

Police came shortly after that. They were well informed on the severity of my condition—that I spent seven days in a coma and was still recovering from a concussion—but that didn't stop them from asking me questions:

“Can you remember why you were at the cliff?”

“Do you recall if anyone was with you?”

“Were you pushed?”

I didn't have the answers they wanted. I couldn't remember.

But what I *do* remember is the confusion I felt upon waking up in the hospital. Bright fluorescent lights shining above me, the utter disorientation of having zero sense of where I was or who I was. Before I could even begin to formulate a coherent thought, someone noticed I was awake. My mother, though I didn't know her identity at the time.

“Janel!” She released a shaky breath, tears in her eyes as she approached my bed.

I observed her—a pretty brown skinned woman with curly hair and in her mid-forties. She looked harmless, relieved more than anything, but I still recoiled when she came to my bedside. I didn't know her. I looked around, saw everyone else, and nearly cried.

I didn't know *anyone*.

There were two more women of similar complexion in the room. One was an elder and the other looked a bit younger than my mother. Later I would learn they are my grandmother and aunt. Then there was a man: tall, fair skinned, sporting a crew cut and stubble surrounding his jaw.

“Hey, J,” he said to me, walking to stand next to my mom. “How are you feeling?”

I ignored his question, my eyes landing on the last remaining person in the room: a young girl similar in age to me. She bore a resemblance to the man, but unlike him she remained silent, her expression unreadable.

“Someone get the damn doctor!” my grandma demanded.

The other woman—my aunt—left the room to do so, calling for a nurse.

My head spun. It felt like I’d awakened from one bad dream right into another. Like instead of falling into chilly waters, this time I fell right into an alternate reality where nothing made sense. My head pounded. My heart raced. My emotions were a tangled web of shock, confusion, and fear. And amid all of this, there was one question I needed answered. One that mattered more than anything else.

I scanned the room, looked each person in the eye, and asked, “Who *are* you people?”

That was days ago. And I’m still lost.

This morning I was up early, staring in the bathroom mirror, hoping to recognize the person looking back at me. But no luck. I’ve done it everyday since coming home, examining myself; my chestnut skin; my hazel eyes; my full lips; my hair, silk pressed and reaching just past my shoulders. I scrutinize every detail, every pore, hoping to find any sense of familiarity in my own reflection.

But there is none.

Mom eyes the outfit I have on now, consisting of sweatpants and a slightly oversized shirt. It’s a notable step down from her own attire. She’s wearing a floral white blouse and a shapely skirt going past her knees to match. The look is complete with a lustrous pearl necklace, dangling earrings, and heels.

In the few days I've been out of the hospital, something basic I've come to understand is my family is pretty well off. Evidenced by our sizable house, the cars we own, and even the food we eat. Right now Mom is looking at me as if I'm a different species, a direct contradiction to the elegance our family is meant to exude.

"You're wearing that on your first day back?" she asks evenly.

I look down at the clothes on my body. I didn't put much thought into it, simply grabbing the first things I saw. "Is this not okay?"

Mom smiles, scrunching her nose. It's the kind of look you give a naive child who needs a little guidance. "Those are sleeping clothes, sweetie." She goes to my walk-in closet, rummaging through the vast assortment of hanging tops. "This"—she pulls down a sleeveless high neck crop top—"is more your speed. You love yellow." Her smile falters a bit. "Well, you *did*. Try it on anyway. The world will see that you can still be presentable."

Presentation is the last thing I care about, but I don't argue as I take the top from her.

"Compliment that with cute earrings and a pair of high waisted jeans, and it'll be like you're back to normal."

"What does 'normal' even mean?" I say, trying and failing to keep from sounding dispirited. "I don't remember my school, or the people, or—"

"Janel." She places a soothing hand on my shoulder. "The school has been informed of your condition. No one is expecting anything out of you that you won't be able to fulfill. Adjustments can be made."

"I just . . . I don't know what to expect."

“Expect people to talk. A lot of those kids will feed into the gossip, but there are some who are on your side.” There’s a slight hesitance in her voice speech, a twitch to her eyebrow.

“One of them is here now.”

“Who?”

She releases a breath. “She’ll explain. I’ll go tell her it’s okay to come up.” She grabs hold of my hands, smiles warmly at me. “I love you.”

I hesitate.

Once more her smile falters. Just a bit. She’s trying to play it off, but I see the hint of dejection in her eyes. Maybe she was hoping I’d say it back. But how could I? I hardly know this woman. I like her well enough. She’s been taking care of me, tending to my every need, and I’m grateful for that. But love?

How can I love someone I feel like I’ve only known for three days?

She leaves, which gives me some time to be alone with my thoughts. I look out of my large bedroom window and take in the scenery outside.

Haddonport is a coastal town, rich in history and attractions. Outside, the spring sky is bright and blue, the clouds like cotton candy. Seagulls soar over homes as neighbors tend to their gardens or head to their cars to leave for work.

Our home rests at the town’s highest elevation. From here I can see the pier, distant but alive, perched at the sea’s edge about a twenty minute drive away. To the right of the beach is the amusement park, riddled with rides, concession stands and various other attractions. It’s not visible from this vantage point, but on the other side of town lies the woods, and the cliff where it happened.

Where I fell.

A knock pulls me out of my head. This time when I turn around I see a familiar girl staring back at me. Not familiar because I remember her, but familiar because I've spent countless hours going through my phone. Reading text messages, looking through my browser history, checking my socials, and scrolling through hundreds of saved pictures and videos. This girl, I understand, is someone I'm supposed to deeply care for.

That is, if the several pictures of us kissing is anything to go by.

"H-Hi," I stammer.

She smiles to hide a thinly veiled sadness. "Hey. Looks like you're doing okay."

She's a bit darker in complexion than me. Her hair is in locs, decorated here and there with pieces of golden jewelry, and she's rocking a septum piercing.

She's stunning.

"If 'okay' means 'I have absolutely no clue what the hell is going on,' then yeah, I'm definitely okay." My response comes out dry and the girl chuckles a bit.

"Well, fortunately I'm charged with making sure your first day back at school goes smoothly. Show you around, be your guide. Things like that."

"That's nice of you. What's your name?"

She flinches a little. The question stings. "I'm Nia Monroe. I'm your . . . *was* your . . ."

"Girlfriend."

She nods. "Yeah. That."

I don't know what to say. To her, or Mom, or anyone. That's been the trend as of late. Mom tells me things, or shows me something, and I have no clue how to respond because it's all new to me. I can't bear to see that look in her eyes.

That hope that I'll remember.

Nia steps forward. “I don’t expect anything from you. I just want you to be as comfortable as possible.”

“Okay,” I say with a smile. “We should leave soon then. Don’t want to be late.” I realize I’m still holding the yellow top Mom gave me. “After I change, though. Apparently I like yellow.”