

HERE

by BrianBK



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Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Fireworks.

Glittery lights flicker across the sky. Concussions ripple through the air and pound my chest. As I watch the embers slowly drift down to Earth, a pair of wet lips press against my cheek. More fireworks.

“I guess you’re my midnight kiss! Happy New Year, bestie.”

It was a tradition as old as the two of us. Once every 365 days, I welcomed the new year with my best pal, Sasha Chapman. Holiday or not, the two of us did almost everything together. We sat side by side in church every Sunday, passed notes to one another in school, and even rode our bikes together. Sasha found her balance first, of course, but you’d better believe I shredded more than a few layers of skin off my kneecaps trying to keep up. If Sasha was going somewhere, you wouldn’t find me far behind.

Sometimes it got me into trouble. I’d always been a shy, timid and fearful little girl. If a rule existed, I followed it. Boundaries to cross? Rest assured, Mikaela Amica would remain comfortably inside of them. I was

a raised-right rule follower, honest to Pete. It's just that I was even more so a Sasha-follower. I'd been warned more than a time or two. The authority types weren't shy about telling me that girl was a bad influence, and if I knew best I'd keep my distance. But I paid no mind to the naysayers, and through it all we remained inseparable.

Not even the universe itself could keep us apart. I'll be darned if it didn't try from time to time. Like in the third grade when Sasha came down with a stomach virus. She had to miss a couple days of school. They shipped her off to some fancy hospital down the street and I had to sit next to an empty desk. I lasted about five minutes before I realized I didn't enjoy other people as much as I did Sasha. Other people are gross, especially in the third grade. The girl who sat across from me ate glitter and glue. The chubby girl in the seat behind me tried to pull my hair. And I don't have any concrete evidence to substantiate this claim, but I'm pretty sure I saw one of the boys pick a booger and wipe it on his own pant leg.

My odds of surviving the day without Sasha appeared dire. I had to take control of the situation. By counting down the minutes until lunchtime, I was able to tolerate half a day with the other twenty-two little hellions. More than enough for Mika. When we got to the cafeteria, I put my plan into action. A childhood peanut butter sandwich emergency made me aware of a mild but useful allergic reaction to certain nuts. I knew acquiring said nuts would give me a one-way ticket to Sasha town. Thanks to a caring and compassionate Auntie who packed my lunchbox proper, I had all the ammunition I needed to craft a couple of lunchroom trades. I had to give up a chocolate fudge brownie and

a highly coveted fruit snack, but within minutes I had a shirt stuffed full of enough peanut butter to make a circus elephant break out in hives. Before the end of the day, I had Sasha by my side once again. There isn't much to do in the hospital other than watch game shows on a crummy old television set, but doing that while sick with Sasha beats cracking the books with booger boy any day.

I couldn't imagine my life without her. When I lost my first tooth, Sasha was there. First road trip? She was there, too. First crush? Sasha was the only one who could get a confession out of me. It was her shoulder I cried on when my favorite boy band broke up, and her toothbrush I borrowed when I forgot mine at summer camp. When my Auntie Maia officially adopted me, Sasha was the only friend we took out to celebrate with us. Almost every time I ever got in trouble, it was all Sasha's idea. Every moment brought a new adventure, and the only thing certain was that the two of us would face it together.

Our New Year's tradition, though, held a special place in my heart. A fresh batch of days represented a brand new empty canvas, just waiting for Sasha and I to color it in. With Sasha by my side, I could safely bet the year would take me places that I couldn't even imagine on my own.

We certainly had no lack of places to explore. I lived out in the country with my Auntie Maia. Sasha lived just three houses down. Free to roam acres and acres of tree-covered property and do as we pleased. My older cousins would share fantastic tales of the exciting things they encountered in those woods. They practically

gushed recollecting legends about automobile graveyards found in shadowy corners of the forest. I wanted desperately to have a story to swap with them, but was far too scared to explore that far. That is, until Sasha brought out the courage hidden inside of me.

"Come on Mik, don't worry," she said, extending a hand, "There isn't anything out there that's scary enough to stop us."

Me? I'd have personally preferred to stay inside with a pile of good books. The woods were full of bugs and spiders and all other sorts of creepy-crawly critters. Not to mention the dust and dandelions floating about. Every time I came back early from a trip with the boys, my nose itched for four hours. No thank you. I was perfectly content to stay in and leave the adventures to the plastic figurines I collected. Today was Raggedy Anne's birthday party! How could I miss that?

Each of my dolls was perfectly groomed and comfortably nestled away in their little doll beds. Inside of that dollhouse they were safe and warm. They could rest assured that nothing would disturb their slumber or smudge their makeup. Their porcelain skin would remain unblemished forever as they remain trapped in their dream house, just like me. Not like Sasha though.

Somehow, Sasha always managed to coax me out of my comfort zone. She held out an open palm that invited me into her world. I gazed into her dark, pleading eyes and saw my ticket out of the dollhouse. I saw danger and adventure waiting to sweep me away. It terrified me, but for some reason I reached out and grabbed her hand anyway. The apprehension melted away the moment we

touched. Her soft hand covered mine in a blanket that, in spite of her intrepid nature, felt infinitely more secure than my dollhouse could ever be. Sasha could have led me through the bowels of hell that day, and I'd have felt safe in her warm, familiar grasp.

That didn't mean I loved the woods. The uneasiness in my gut mounted the further from Auntie Maia's house we ventured. My tiny feet tripped over stray roots and the brittlest of branches. My arms tired after swatting what felt like a hundred zillion pests away from my vulnerable face. Dirt mounted up under my freshly done nails. This was no place for a girl like me. But whenever I felt ready to turn tail and head for the comforts of home, Sasha was there beaming at me. She wasn't more than a month older than I was, but oh so much more courageous. When our eyes met, somehow that courage transferred over to me, and I found the strength to carry on.

Over the years, I reckon we explored every square inch of those woods. The lakes, streams, and meadows too. I quickly came to love all those slimy critters I was once so scared of. Even named a few of 'em. Our daily meetups with Max the bullfrog and Remy the raccoon made the creepy woods feel familiar after a while.

Once the woods felt like home we moved on to exploring the rest of the world. Wherever Sasha went, I followed along with her. She always had her nose in her computer, snooping around for the next unexplored corner of our little town. She'd use satellite images and miniature drones to scout the scenery. Once she scoped out something interesting she'd drag me along for a

closer look. Nothing was ever off-limits to Sasha, and sometimes it got us in trouble. I spent the better half of my fourteenth birthday locked in a holding cell thanks to her. She snuck us onto an active runway to watch the airplanes take off. Her idea of a surprise party, but the local police did not appreciate the gesture. Happy birthday to me, I guess.

Fortunately, as good as Sasha was at getting into inaccessible locations, she was equally adept at talking herself out of suboptimal situations. These skills came in handy once again on my fifteenth birthday when she took me to “test drive” the convertible I always wanted. And again when she snuck us backstage to see her favorite rock band for her sweet sixteen.

She interacted with a magical sort of ease. Most people make connections by conforming and fitting in. Sasha got along by being so different it was stylish. She talked funny, she dressed overly-casual at all times, and she was just flat out oblivious to social norms. Still, everyone thought she was just the coolest. Even her enemies wanted to be friends with her. The first time she got us arrested, she ended up inviting the officer to her school science fair... and he showed up! The girl slid seamlessly from one social clique to the next. Every circle she interacted with bent into a square to accommodate her style. I envied her ability to make new friends so easily, and I was jealous of every moment they spent with her. Deep down, I feared that one day someone might step up to challenge my bestie status.

Sasha had a way with my family, too. She practically became a live-in sister. Most of the adults in my life

frowned upon me befriending the teenage troublemaker, but her charm was undeniable. Auntie Maia just loved her to pieces. Sometimes I think she liked her even more than she liked me.

In her eyes, Sasha could do no wrong. She couldn't even stay mad the morning after my seventeenth birthday when I came home with a white lotus tattooed onto my shoulder. Auntie Maia raised me clean-cut and old fashioned. Honestly, I'd never dream of risking her disapproval by inking my body, but months earlier I'd seen Sasha put a similar design on her skin and I just had to have it. She picked the lotus on an impulse, but to me it had a much deeper meaning. It meant we were connected at the aura. Blood sisters in a sense. On a spiritual level we would never separate. To be honest, I thought we'd always be together in the geographical sense as well. But in order for the new year to bring new life, sometimes it has to erase your old one.

I wiped Sasha's New Year's kiss from my cheek and snapped myself out of my midnight daydream.

"Sorry, Sash, what was that?" I asked, "I lost myself in the fireworks for a moment there."

"I said you're my midnight kiss," she reminded me, "I mean, look, I know you've got plenty of hot cousins for me to choose from and all, but I wouldn't want to share my midnight kiss with anyone but my bestie."

"Oh, shut up..."

I blushed at the thought of Sasha referring to my cousins as 'hot'. Gross. I gently punched her in the

shoulder as punishment. I knew I could never stop her from flirting with my family members. Believe me I'd tried. She also had a real problem of soliciting dates on my behalf. I constantly had to apologize to the boys at school for her coquettish advances. How embarrassing. If my skin weren't so dark it'd have been bright red most of the time.

She wasn't seriously interested in my cousins, Jason and Marty. They were more like brothers to her than potential romances, but flirting with everyone in sight was an unbreakable part of her personality. Disgusting comments aside, I was flattered by the reminder that she would always choose me to christen the arrival of a new calendar.

"...but thank you, Sash. I wouldn't trade you for any other bestie. Together for another year and forever!"

Sasha's beautiful beaming smile dropped for just a moment. A room full of jubilee slowed nearly to a halt. Champagne bottles popped and confetti streamers burst through the air in slow motion. Fireworks crackled above the neighbors yards and colorful noisemakers spun in the hands of celebrating relatives.

Yet my world went silent. A million shiny distractions couldn't hide from me the briefest flicker of emotion as it flashed across Sasha's face.

"What's wrong, hun?" I inquired, knowing better than to expect a response.

"I got you something!" She deflected, her wondrous white smile returning in an effort to mask the emotion she had mistakenly revealed to me.

She was trying to keep her feelings a secret by distracting me with a present. I'd known her too long to fall for that. But the pearlescent blue wrapping paper on the gift she held out for me sure did dazzle the eye. Ohh, okay, fine! I'll bite.

After making a mental note to interrogate Sasha later, I gave in to her distraction tactic. I peeled back the wrapping paper and savored the sound of its gentle crinkle. With care, I slid the paper back to reveal a cyan colored cardboard packaging. On the outside of the box, a thin white typeface read "ERE "

"Gee, thanks Sash," I reacted, "This is awesome. I'm very grateful and all, but, uhh, what is it?"

"The latest and greatest babe," Sasha responded, "you know your girl always comes through with the hook-up."

No lie in that statement. If you asked your favorite friendly AI equipped device to define the term "early adopter," a picture of Sasha would pop up on your screen. She always had the fresh new gear before anyone else in our social circle even knew it was coming out. She gifted me my first cell phone years before my Auntie would even consider allowing me to have one. It may have just been a hand-me-down to her, but for me it was one more door to the world. One that I never would've opened had my best friend not pushed me through it. Normally, I never kept secrets from Auntie Maia, but

a device that allowed me to chat with Sasha 24 hours a day was well worth hiding. I loved the feeling of having access to her at the tip of my fingers. If I ever felt anxious or excited, or remembered something funny from our past, it only took a couple of clicks to instantly share those feelings. Too many sleepless nights we spent chatting under the glow of a tiny LCD screen. Topics of conversation ranged from everything to nothing at all. Boys, books, bicycles. From ice cream to isotopes, we discussed everything with each other. From our favorite flavors to our wildest theories about the realities of the universe. Thanks to communication technology, I felt connected to her like never before.

I had to stay on my toes. It seemed like every couple of months Sasha would move on to a new app or device, and I'd have to learn the latest tech all over again. Fortunately, she always kept me up to date. Thanks to her I stayed in the loop, ever hip to the latest flavor of the month trend in technology. I always thought of it as a bit much. Honestly, who needs a rainbow-colored poop emoji to speak for them? (Fortunately that particular phase faded quickly.) Most of the latest knick knacks seemed unnecessary to me, and staying updated was a constant chore. I did it all anyway, just so I could stay in touch with my friend. Sometimes it seemed like the only way to connect with her, but that alone was worth the hassle of regularly relearning my way around new platforms. The added bonus of receiving all Sasha's discarded tech didn't hurt either. The stuff she gave away was typically two models ahead of the average kid on our block.

Occasionally, she kicked me some brand new devices that the general public didn't even have their hands on yet. I could tell this was one of those times. While unboxing the device, I realized it was an innovation unlike anything I'd seen before. Holding it in my palms, I felt nothing. It appeared weightless, as if it might float away if I lowered my hand from beneath it. Describing its hue would challenge even the most experienced colorist. In fact, I had to focus my eyes to determine whether it reflected any detectable color at all. Studying it, one brilliant shade of purple or green or magenta would bounce off my retina for a moment, before flickering away the very next.

"It's so we'll always stay connected, no matter what." Sasha explained, "Remember when we were little kids and I gave you that bracelet with half of a broken heart attached to it?"

Of course I remembered the friendship bracelet Sasha gave me in second grade. She wore a matching one around her wrist. When the two of us put our wrists together, it formed a completed heart shape. She told me that as long as we both wore the bracelets, we'd always be best friends forever. Two weeks later she broke hers climbing over a fence. Naturally, I pretended not to care, but I'd be lying if I told you I didn't have my half stashed safely in my dresser drawer to this day.

Sometimes I worried that our friendship would fade as she became closer with some of her more outgoing and socially connected buddies. I valued our relationship more than anything, because without her, I had no one. I could care less for trinkets and tchotchkes, but I

cherished Sasha's gifts because they reminded me that I still had a special place in her heart. That we were still best friends and would be forever.

"As long as we both have these, it can always be like we're together," she explained, describing the Here device while removing a second identical gadget from her back pocket, "It temporarily builds a digital duplicate of your body and allows you to see and feel what she feels. As long as you're connected to another device in the destination location, you can more or less travel anywhere in the world without actually leaving your hometown. As long as we both have one, we can always stay connected. Sort of like the friendship bracelet, just much much more practical."

For some reason, this particular gift felt different than the friendship bracelet. Something was off about it. Why did the expression in her eyes look more like a "goodbye" than an "I'll always be here"? I'd already noticed a tell in her poker face.

"That's cool, I guess. But why would we need these, Sash? You live right at the end of the block. I can walk to your house in ninety seconds. I don't need some fancy device. I mean, it's beautiful, but will it even boot up that fast?"

Sasha flinched and broke eye contact.

"Sash. What aren't you telling me?"

Another long pause.

I knew I wouldn't like what came after the silence broke.

“It’s just... not going to be that simple anymore.”

Confusion. Terror. Sadness. Nightmare. Shock. Pain. One thousand times fifty thoughts and emotions ran a blitzkrieg on my brain. I saw it coming. I still couldn’t process what my friend was saying. I wish I could have pulled myself together enough to simply ask for an explanation. I couldn’t eek out more than a syllable. My head swirled and stung like I’d just wrecked it on the side of a mountain. I felt the pain before Sasha’s words pummeled my eardrums.

“I’m _____ leaving _____
_____ Science experiment _____
_____ internship _____ this week.”

Only bits and pieces of Sasha’s statement registered in my brain. My rattled head lacked the composure to put the full sentence together through the ringing in my ears. I didn’t need to. When you live your entire life in fear of losing something, you can smell it miles away.

“I know, Mik. It’s not going to be easy, but with this device it’ll feel just like I never left. Promise.”

“No. no. no. No no No nonono.”

My teeth dug into my lips, nearly breaking the skin. Tears burned at the bottom of my eyelids. I turned my shoulder and pulled my hoodie up over my face before I let Sasha see them. With two disbelieving head shakes I tossed my device at her feet and ran in the opposite direction.

“Mik!” she shouted, as if forcing me to face the issue would stop her from disappearing.

I burst across the lawn and through the living room door to find my aunts and uncles still guzzling champagne and sharing belly laughs. On the video screens, confetti covered newscasters inquired with celebrities about meaningless opinions. I tightened the strings on my hoodie, hoping no one would notice me.

Inconspicuous as I knew how, I stomped up the stairs to my bedroom. The door slammed shut behind me. Scent of six hour old drunken noodles hit my nostrils. A half eaten carton sat open on the nightstand next to my bed. The pain of the night flooded my sinuses. Sasha and I had shared the Thai specialty earlier in the evening. It was a pleasant memory. Was.

I launched the leftovers.



The flying tiger carton exploded against the pastel pink wall. Soy sauce splatter slowly seeped down my wardrobe mirror. Brown stripes obscuring the reflection of a seething Mika Amica. Look at the lukewarm, room temperature mess this hot mess has made. I'll clean it up in the morning. Tonight I just want to cry.

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Twelve times it buzzed. Silence. Then twelve more times and twelve again. I wasn't ready to answer. I had yet to clean the Thai sauces off my walls. The noodles slunked to the baseboard over the course of the night. Midday sun rays creeped through the window blinds, illuminating every morsel. Surely it would soon start to stink. I ignored it all. I couldn't stay angry forever, I knew that. Didn't stop me from trying.

My cell phone buzzed on and on throughout the morning, refusing to shut up. I eventually stopped rolling over to read the messages. I hid my ears. Face to pillow, buried in blankets wearing nothing but an oversized t-shirt, underwear, and the warmest pair of socks I could find. Desperate to feel anything close to comfort. If only the sun would go down so I'd have an excuse to stay this way for another twelve hours. I wouldn't get that luxury.

**KNOCK! KNOCK!
KNOCK!**

"Come on Mik, open up! I know you're in there."

Sasha called to me from the other side of my bedroom door. Part of me wanted to run to her. To yank open the door, take her in my arms and never let her go away. The rest of me petitioned to remain upset and cry. Before I could make my decision I noticed the Thai containers strewn about the room. Panic!

"Play it cool, Mik. Play it cool!" I told myself. Sasha already saw me lose it and run home, but I can't let her know the extent of my overreaction. How embarrassing.

My bedroom door was locked, but I knew that wouldn't keep Sasha out forever. The girl could break into a gun safe in less than ninety seconds. If she wanted in, my flimsy little doorknob wouldn't stand a chance. Within minutes she'd be staring at my mess. How can I salvage this?

I glanced around the room and planned my escape. Sliding my bed against the wall for a boost, I bounced once and reached for the window. Fortunately for me, I had done a relatively good job of sticking to last year's resolution. I may have slacked off for a week or two here and there, but for the most part I made it to the gym each morning. Toned shoulders and a frame fifteen pounds lighter allowed me to easily pull myself up through the window and out onto the roof.

The door knob jiggled as I ducked around the corner. I tiptoed delicately over the shingles and broke for the hydrangea lattices climbing up the side of the house. My socks snagged every diamond on the way down. I never liked heights, but I'd climb the Brooklyn Bridge to avoid social discomfort of this magnitude.

I got this. I reminded myself again and again. Slowly but surely I lowered one foot beneath the other until I felt the frost covered grass beneath my toes. My little piggies went numb almost instantly, but I made it. Internal celebration dance!

"You dropped this," said a voice intent on interrupting my private victory parade.

Sasha stood at the bottom of the lattice, just waiting for me. She held the discarded device I'd left behind the night before. Of course.

"She's the one who taught you this escape route in the first place, dummy," I scolded myself, "Should have known better than to try and use it against her. Stupid Mik."

I turned and smiled sheepishly, trying to pretend I had done nothing out of the ordinary. Maybe she wouldn't notice I'd just climbed from the second story into negative wind chill sans shoes or pants. Sasha played along, ignoring the odd circumstances. She had more important things to talk about.

"Look, Mik, I know this isn't ideal," she started, shyly, "It's going to suck being away from each other, but listen. You're not losing me. With this tech-"

"No. Stop it!" I didn't give her a chance to explain. No opportunity to talk away the issues, "You don't get to try and convince me that everything is going to be okay the way you always do. I don't believe you anymore."

"But Mik, I-"

The soft, welcoming nature of her dark brown eyes almost coaxed me into hearing her out. No. Not this time. She didn't get to talk. The cool demeanor I thought I could hide behind had already scampered off. Sad, mad and freezing my butt off, I had nothing to hold back now.

"I know exactly what you're going to say, Sash. You'll tell me that everything I've ever worried about has always worked out in the end. That you've always been right and I've always been okay. You don't get to tell me that this time."

My nose began to fill up and freeze. I probably sounded like a crying kindergartener with a cold.

"This time is different. Because every other time I had you to get me through those problems. You were the reason I knew everything would turn out alright. You were the light at the end of those dark tunnels. You were the one holding my hand. Without you, look at me! I'm a mess, Sash. What am I going to do if I lose you?"

"Mik! Stop it. That's nonsense. You're not going to lose me! I'll be back before you know it."

"That's just it Sasha, You don't even know when you're coming back! I'm just going to miss the hell out of you."

"Well I'm here right now. So don't waste me," She challenged, "Let me show you something."

She nimbly flicked her fingers across the translucent prism in her hands. The device glowed in response to

each gentle tap, as if engaged in an exciting conversation with Sasha's fingertips.

"Give it a second," she suggested, "It takes a little bit longer the first time. Needs to get to know you... Oh, here. Take this."

Sasha strapped a thin, clear bracelet around my wrist. It immediately synced up to the Here device in her hand, and began participating in the brilliantly colored discussion. I could feel warm bursts of energy vibrating through my skin and catching a ride on the currents of my bloodstream. A euphoric tingle flowed through my veins, up my arm and into my heart before forcefully expelling itself out through my arteries. I felt faint as the vibrations blasted into every corner of my body. My tingling toes twitched and trembled. My eyes closed tight in an effort to concentrate on what I felt. I blocked out my surroundings to help my brain focus on this new and exhilarating sensation. Then in an instant, before I could make sense of them, the feelings vanished. Replaced with a wispy cold against my skin.

When I opened my eyes, I first noticed the goosebumps populating my naked legs as the freezing winds blasted against them. I found myself standing on a slick metal surface in the midst of a gusty wet haze. My wool socks began to slip on the moist steel, and I nearly lost my footing before Sasha's bright pink mittens reached out to balance me.

Those mittens truly were atrocious. The hot pink hue was vivid enough to burn someone's eyes out. To make matters worse, a row of white kittens paraded across the knuckles and wrapped all the way down to

the wrist. For some unfathomable reason, turquoise trim graced the hemlines. Whoever designed them either had a deep hatred for all that is fashionable, or was desperately trying to get themselves fired. Winter after winter, I begged Sasha to stop wearing them. Every year she refused. I have half a mind to believe she wore them simply because she got a kick out of how much I hated them. It was oh so embarrassing to be seen in public next to them, but today I was grateful they were there to catch me.

Dangling like a frightened feline from Sasha's kitty mitts, I noticed that the slope on which I stood quickly led to a steep drop off. Sasha and I stood at the spire of a massive skyscraper. Gripped by instant panic, I sat down with my feet facing out and pressed my back against the spire as firmly as possible. Every muscle in my dark, toned legs stood at attention as I pressed my feet to the surface with maximum pressure. My fingers scrambled desperately in search of any sort of crack or crevice they could cram themselves into.

"Whoa, easy there Mik. I've got you," Sasha assured, "try not to lose your bracelet this time, love. That thing controls your Here device. Tell it where you want to go and as long as you have a projector on location, it'll take you there. Plus, it's synched up to your cloud, so you can finally get rid of that prehistoric cell phone of yours."

"Home," I yelled into my wrist, "I want to go home."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, not so fast, Mik. We haven't even got to the good part yet."

Despite breathing a half a dozen times per second, I attempted to focus on Sasha's words. Nothing else could calm me. She explained that the bracelet around my wrist connected me to my Here device. It scanned my body and created a digital version, which it recreated and projected through a second Here device. Sasha pointed up, and I noticed a second device attached to the spire. Nothing more than a couple thin strips of blue duct tape held it in place. No matter how far technology advances, Sasha always managed to find a problem that only her favorite low-tech adhesive could solve.

"It helps to have friends who can get to high places, I suppose." Sasha said, grinning.

"Sash, where the hell are we?"

"Well, technically, we're still in your backyard, but your mind believes we're on top of the Chrysler building in New York City. The device on your wrist ports your consciousness into the digital copy projected by the device above our heads. Pretty neat, isn't it?"

Dozens of questions raced through my head. If Sasha could have taken us anywhere in the world, why did she choose the top of a skyscraper in the middle of winter? How is any of this possible? Who under the age of forty-seven still uses "neat" as an exclamation? I couldn't bring myself to ask any of them. For that matter, I could barely bring my eyes to look at Sasha. They remained fixed on my own fuzzy feet, flexing desperately to maintain any type of traction against the slippery surface.

"I always promised you I'd bring you here one day," Sasha reminded me, "I don't know how much time I'll have to keep that promise, so hopefully you'll settle for being Here™. Still counts, right?"

No, this did not count. This was nothing how I pictured it. I always imagined New York City would be bright, sunny and beautiful. For the longest time, fantasies filled my head about wandering the city streets, popping in and out of the stores on 5th avenue, and coveting designer handbags we could never afford. Slurping down noodles from curbside food trucks and staring up at the massive skyscrapers that I'd seen only on television. Maybe, if we got lucky, we might even catch sight of a famous movie star casually strolling the streets amongst the common folk.

Instead, she brought me to the tippy top of one of the city's tallest buildings with hardly a handrail to hold on to. I was cold, wet and terrified. No, this most certainly did not count.

Just when I thought Sasha's misguided attempt at promise keeping couldn't make me feel any more miserable, she let go of my arm. Another jolt or panic further tightened my already way too tense muscle fibers. She began to slide away from me, down the steep metal roof. I clung for dear life as my still dearer friend careened towards her certain doom. My screams filled the coastal sky as suicidal Sasha slid rapidly towards the edge. Halfway down, she spun around and I noticed a sickeningly familiar Chesire smile on her face. The smile she smiles when she amuses herself at the expense of my abject terror. As she reached the edge of the rooftop,

she curled her legs in towards her body and used them to launch into a back-dive that ended in her plummeting out of sight.

My lungs closed in terror, forcing an icy scream from my purple lips. I just watched my best friend in the entire world leap off a skyscraper. She left me cold, alone and horrified with no way to escape other than to join in her death stunt.

“Your turn!”

Shock replaces anger instantly in the face of the unexplainable. When I heard Sasha’s voice less than half a minute after watching her disappear beneath the haze, I forgot about all the fear and betrayal. I instinctively lept into her arms, neglecting the precarious placement of my wet feet.

“Sasha! What the-? How did you-? What? How?” All the questions tried to force themselves from my mouth at once. Felt like a circus full of elephants, all trying to fit through the same hula hoop. None made it out.

“What the who in the what now?” Sasha mocked my confused stutter.

“How are you alive?”

“Better than alive,” Sasha explained, “We’re quite invincible actually. Digital projections, remember? We can still feel the rain and the cold and the wind, but it isn’t actually affecting our real bodies. Those are still safe and sound a couple of hundred miles away. That’s how

you are going to jump off this building and not suffer a single consequence.”

My body pressed that much tighter into Sasha’s. “Uh... uh. Nope. Not happening. NeverNoNever.”

“Mik. There is nothing to fear. Just trust me,” Sasha pleaded, “or don’t. You just watched me jump off this building. You saw it with your own eyes. What more convincing do you need?”

“Okay, okay, I believe you. Somehow this little device on my wrist allowed you to survive the leap. That’s all well and good, but if we can sense every drop of rain that hits our so-called ‘skin’, I’m not the least bit interested in finding out what a face full of concrete feels like. No thank you, miss.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that,” Sasha assured, “I found a nifty little loophole in the system. The signal range on these bad boys doesn’t allow us to travel more than a few hundred feet from the projecting device. You won’t make it halfway down before snap, crackle, pop! The communicator shorts out, crashes your session and you’re right back in your aunt’s garden. Some call it a bug. I call it my favorite feature. If I were you, I wouldn’t wait around for the next upgrade. You never know when they might patch up my little base jumping exploit.”

My eyes locked onto Sasha’s, pleading for a way off of this roof that didn’t involve a seventy-seven story freefall. The outstretched hand of my lifelong pal countered my reservations, asking a question to which I could not respond with anything but affirmation.

“Princess, do you trust me?”

Honestly, I shouldn't have. Knowing that she was planning on abandoning me, I knew better than to trust her. How could I trust someone who I knew would break my heart in a matter of days? I don't know, but the soft spot in my soul made it impossible to do otherwise. I reached out and placed my life firmly in the grip of her fluffy winter mitten. Instant regret.

Without giving me time to reconsider, Sasha gently placed her foot behind my heel and swiped it out from beneath me. I was back on my bottom, screaming with what little air was left in my lungs as we slid down the sloped metal surface towards the drop. Sasha nimbly swung her body to straddle my own and placed her hands beneath my arms. I curled into a ball as if bracing for a collision.

As we approached the edge, Sasha pushed off again with her legs, sending us flying into free fall. The cold wind blasted through my hair and against my skin. I couldn't scream anymore. Maybe because I'd expelled the last of my breath, or perhaps I no longer wanted to. To my surprise, I almost felt secure in Sasha's arms despite plummeting towards the Earth.

Once we fell clear of the fog coverage, the entire cityscape appeared before my eyes. Hundreds, if not thousands of pedestrians scurried anxiously through the streets. Not one of them noticed the two tiny flying girls hurtling towards the Earth. They were all transfixed on their own commute. Their own errands and tasks and shopping sprees. Each living their own nine to five, filled with agendas and instant messages. I imagined myself

as one of them, piling into a taxi cab that could barely hold the dozens of shopping bags I had accumulated throughout the day. Exploring the city for as long as my legs would carry me, stopping only to eat lunch like the child sitting on the curb chewing his chicken chow mein.

I could almost smell the soy sauce wafting up from his container as I came closer and closer to contact. Finally, he looked up at me. His jaw dropped, and from it, a noodle dribbled down onto his shirt. Suddenly, streaks of purple and blue static interrupted my experience. The wind against my legs began to sputter and the sounds of the city faded to fuzz. I blinked. I rubbed my eyes. By the time I regained my focus, I stood safely in my own backyard. My feet firmly planted on hard, icy ground.

For the past twelve minutes, I'd longed to feel the solid earth beneath my toes. I yearned for nothing more than to be able to stand up and catch my balance. Back on Earth, my heart rate slowed down and my nerves leveled off. No longer clinging to Sasha for dear life, I almost wanted to jump again. To feel the rush of the cold breeze against my face as I studied the sights of the city from the perspective of a soaring bird. To my chagrin, Sasha spotted a grin stretching across my face.

"Aha! You liked it, didn't you?" She exclaimed. I tried to erase my smile as quickly as possible.

"You can't hide your pleasure from me, Mik. Just look at yourself. Stick a pin in you and you'd burst!"

"What? No! That was... that was..."

Breathtaking. Exhilarating. Nauseating. Incredible. Terrifying. Unforgettable. A million words could have finished that sentence, but I didn't want to admit any of them to Sasha. I refused to give her the pleasure of knowing she'd once again given me the thrill of my life. Not if she was just going to leave me for the whole new world she had promised to show me. So I never added an adjective.

"It's alright. You don't have to say so," Sasha said, an all-knowing smirk across her face. "We both know you enjoyed that. You'll probably go do it again as soon as I leave. Be careful, it's addicting."

"You're wrong, Sash." I responded, "I mean, yeah, I did enjoy it. But I would never do anything like that without you. I wouldn't be able to. Don't you get that?"

My eyes burned worse than when the Manhattan wind pounded them. Warm and nearly wet, they tried desperately to prevent themselves from allowing a tear. Stupid eyes.

"I just wish you could stay," I added, "I'd jump off that stupid freakin' building over and over again if it'd make you stay."

I wondered if Sasha's eyes were also struggling to hold back the same grief. If so, they did a much better job of hiding it than mine did. I studied them, hoping for a drop of condensation that would tell me she was going to miss me half as much as I would miss her. Maybe if I saw that, I'd feel a little bit less awful. Why couldn't she just cry with me? Instead, her eyes just scanned the ground trying to find the right words.

Searching for a way to make me feel better. Just like she always did, she put on a brave face to make me strong. But this time I needed to see her be weak. I needed to see that I wasn't alone in my pain. I needed her heart to break along with mine.

"Come here, Mik," she said, holding out her arms and pulling me in, "I love you."

Close enough.

I sat there soaking in that final embrace for as long as I could. When she tried to loosen her grip on me, I tightened mine once again. I didn't ever want that moment to end.

But it ended nonetheless.

Eventually I gave in. Let my arms fall to the side. Watched Sasha turn around, look back at me, blow a kiss and then turn around again. Climb into a robotaxi. Close the door and look back once more as it carried her away. All my heart hoped the vehicle would stop, turn around and leave Sasha behind with me. I'd have even settled for her coming back for just a moment to retrieve something she'd forgotten. No. All I could do was sit and watch her fade, wondering for how long would this be the last time I saw my friend. Quicker than I hoped, I lost sight of her face. I kept on staring anyway. Until her ride became nothing more than a dot on the horizon.

