

## CHAPTER ONE

*Elsie*

“Ms. Barnikoff... I’m terribly sorry to tell you this, but your heart is failing.”

“Uh-huh.” I return my attention to my laptop, on which my Greek Lit paper is taunting me with its awkwardly worded third sentence. “Go on.”

Dr. Moore clears his throat. “Ms. Barnikoff—Elisa—I’m not sure if you heard me—”

“Call me Elsie, please.”

I correct the sentence and look up in time to see the doctor throw a confused glance at my mom, who’s quietly wiping away tears in the corner. My dad, standing next to her, is stoic as always, but even he looks paler and stiffer than usual, which is already pretty pale and stiff.

I sigh and close my laptop, giving my full attention to the doctor—a slim, youngish man who looks like he’s

desperately wishing he were anywhere but in this hospital room in Cleveland, delivering this news to us.

I feel bad for him. Almost as bad as I feel for my parents. Which is why I paste a smile on my face and say, “It’s okay. Just give it to me straight. Am I dying?”

He nods grimly. “Unfortunately, due to your medical history, you’re not a candidate for a transplant.”

That’s nothing I didn’t already know. “How long do I have?”

He winces. “Weeks. Possibly days.”

Mom lets out a snuffle, and Dad wraps an arm around her, pulling her closer.

“Gotcha,” I say and open my laptop. “I’d better hurry and get this paper done then. It’s due in two weeks.”

Dr. Moore looks like a guppy as he opens his mouth and closes it several times. “Ms. Barnikoff—Elsie—I’m not sure if you—”

“Oh, no, I get it, really. I just have work to do, that’s all.” I turn my attention to the screen in front of me, ignoring the erratic rhythm of the dying organ in my chest and the fatigue threatening to fog up my brain.

There’s a long minute of silence, during which I correct another sentence in my paper while Mom snuffles some more. Finally, Dr. Moore says in a strained voice, “If you don’t have any questions, I’ll leave you three to talk it over.”

“Thank you! You were very helpful,” I call after him as he exits the room, closing the door behind him.

It’s important to be gentle with doctors. They suffer greatly when delivering bad news.

Mom’s snuffles grow louder as she approaches my hospital bed. She perches on the edge and reaches for my computer. “Elsie...” Her blue eyes are red-rimmed and swollen. “Darling, why don’t you let me take that and—”

“No.” I snap the computer closed again and stuff it under my blanket. The slender laptop weighs a pound and a half at most, yet moving it tires me out—yet another sign that Dr. Moore isn’t lying. Not that I have any reason to think he is.

Between the never-ending cough, the dizziness, the nausea, the heart palpitations, and the swollen legs, I have all the symptoms of heart failure, and I’ve known it for a while, which is why I resisted coming to the hospital for so long.

“Darling, please...” Mom lays her hand over the blanket covering my laptop. “I know how dedicated you are to your studies, but that’s not what’s important right now. You should—”

“What, travel? See the world? Eat all the food that makes me vomit?” My tone is sharper than I intend, but I can’t help it.

My parents have been on a mission to make me “live” ever since this all started, a.k.a. since I was in diapers. If they’d had their way, I wouldn’t have attended school or done anything other than frantically grasp at experiences that are, at best, uncomfortable and, at worst, fucking agonizing for someone with my physical limitations. They can’t seem to comprehend the fact that my body does not want me to have fun or enjoy life in any way, shape, or form. My best bet at a semblance of happiness is escaping into my mind, which is exactly what I do when I focus on my studies.

I may only have a few days left on this earth, but I’ll be damned if I spend them moping about my fate and gazing at the sunset or whatever. I have a fucking paper to finish.

Mom must realize she’s not going to win this fight, so she sniffles a bit more, kisses my forehead, and stands up. “Okay, darling, whatever you want.”

“You are the strongest girl we know,” Dad says gruffly, coming to stand next to Mom. “If there’s anything you need—”

“I’ll be fine tonight.” I cough and pull out my laptop from under the blanket, doing my best not to show how much effort the movement entails. “Thank you, guys. I love you.”

“We love you too,” Mom says, wiping at her wet face. “So, so much. We’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

“Okay,” I say and blow them an air kiss. “Bye.”

It’s not until the door closes behind them that I drop my face into my hands and start to cry.

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I CRY for about an hour before I pull myself together. So what if I’m dying? Aren’t we all, in a way? Granted, most of us get seventy, eighty, maybe even a hundred years on this planet, while I’ve just barely made it to twenty-two, but that’s twenty years more than I might’ve had if things had gone differently, so it’s really a win.

I’ve had a lot of practice dying. Well, almost dying.

My first bout with childhood leukemia happened when I was just thirteen months. I don’t remember any of it, so that ordeal was definitely rougher on my parents than it was on me. I beat it, obviously. Then the leukemia returned when I was three. I do remember that time. Lots of needles and hospital visits and parents crying. Not fun for a child. Zero out of ten, would not recommend. But I beat it again. Yay, go me.

My third and final round with leukemia took place when I was seven. The doctors were convinced that this was it. None of the chemo drugs were helping, so I was advised to say my goodbyes. My parents withdrew me from

school and signed me up for one of those Make-A-Wish things, where I got to meet a singer that I once told them I liked. In person, she was much less impressive and way too awkward about the fact that I was a little bald kid who was dying. Then my parents took me to Disney World, which I absolutely hated as I felt deathly ill the whole time. And that was supposed to be the end of me, except the day before I was due to enter hospice, I got enrolled in an immunotherapy trial and my stubborn cancer actually responded to it. Elsie—three, cancer—zero!

Of course, with my luck, the cancer wasn't the only thing that responded to the immunotherapy. My immune system did too. It decided to go into overdrive and attack whatever it could get its grubby killer cells on. My pancreas was the first to go—hello, type 1 diabetes. Then my stomach kept acting like I was still on chemo, so they discovered I also had Crohn's. Then lupus. Then rheumatoid arthritis. To control all that, they prescribed me a witch's brew of immunosuppressive drugs, and then I got diagnosed with melanoma when I was fourteen—despite the fact that I was hardly ever out in sunlight. Thanks to my practically living in hospitals, the melanoma was caught early, so I just have a nasty scar on my leg as a reminder of that fun little battle.

So yeah, when my kidneys failed shortly after my seventeenth birthday, I took it pretty much in stride. Dialysis three times a week is nothing compared to the fun that is chemo. With all my autoimmune issues, I knew I wasn't a candidate for a transplant, and I was fine with it. Then my body started to attack my heart.

More drugs, more trials, yadda, yadda, yadda, and here we are.

I'm officially dying. Again.

This time is probably for real, though. My parents have

reached out to just about every medical establishment on the planet, and nobody is pulling a miracle out of a hat for me. Once the defective ticker inside me goes, that'll be it.

In the meantime, there's my Greek Lit paper to write. And Physics final to study for. The latter is in three weeks, so I might not make it, but on the off chance I do, I want to be prepared. It's bad enough I'm a college freshman at the age of twenty-two thanks to my parents pulling me out of school each time I had a health scare. If my body holds up, I *will* finish this semester. And I will do it with straight fucking As.

My vision, which is not all that great to begin with, is blurring by the time I finish editing the paper. It's come out pretty well, if I say so myself. Writing is not my forte—I'm more into math and science and all things logical—so I have to put a lot of effort into the humanities side of the core curriculum. I do enjoy the challenge, though.

It keeps my brain from ruminating on things it shouldn't.

With my last remaining strength, I save the paper and email it to my professor. That way, if I croak tomorrow, he'll have it. I doubt my parents will bother sending in my assignments while dealing with funeral arrangements. I told them I want to be cremated and have my ashes used as fertilizer on our lawn, but I'm pretty sure they're going to do the whole coffin and fancy burial bit.

I love them dearly, but they never listen to me when it matters.

Yawning, I close my laptop and rub my burning eyes.

Then I rub them again because what the fuck?

There are lights flashing.

In a circle.

In the air in front of me.

I blink. And blink again.

Still there. And getting brighter.

Blue, purple, and pink lights, all swirling together into something utterly surreal.

Shit. Did I die without realizing it? Is this the portal to the afterlife? Am I about to see my body from above, meet the angels, and all that stuff I don't believe in?

But no. I'm still in my body. Still feeling shitty to the max. Yet the lights are right there in front of me, the circle gradually widening and drawing nearer until it's... oh, fuck!

I scream as it sucks me in, and everything inside me breaks apart.