

Prologue

The world might not stop for him, but it would have for her.

It would've done almost anything if she asked it to. And if she smiled, it would be the kind of memory that someone could carry around their whole life in their front pocket.

It wasn't that she was pretty. That wasn't what made her special. Her face was round and her jawline was soft, but her eyes were sharp and a piercing kind of green. Her black hair fell in waves around her shoulders. Wisps of it would get tangled around her face and she would tuck them behind her ears when she was writing.

It wasn't something in her genes- she made herself powerful. She would change her life for an adventure, would hike a day for a view, and could articulate her thoughts into awe-inspiring words as easily as she could breathe. Everywhere she went, people followed her. They wanted to be a part of the fun that she wrought, wanted to watch her move and speak. She let them. She heard their opinions, and lent them her books, and remembered their birthdays. Still, only one person really knew her. He loved her for who she was, not what she did, and that meant everything to her, because it gave her someone to move the world for.

Chapter 1

When the sun was setting on the last day of their trip, Odin pulled Julia away from the bonfire. The waves lapped against their toes, and Julia laughed, because she could see from a distance that Percy had lit another marshmallow on fire.

"I need to talk to you." Odin looked her in the eyes.

"Alright." Julia studied his face, "are you ok?"

"I'm perfect. That's just it. It's perfect here."

“I know. I hate to leave tomorrow.” She smiled.

Odin looked over her shoulder at the horizon. A boat appeared and its blue sail flapped against the crimson sky. During the day, he thought, it must be the same color as the clouds. “Let’s stay.”

“Sorry?” Julia coughed.

“No, I’m serious. I can’t see myself back home anymore. I don’t want to be there. I want to be here. With you.” He kicked at the sand.

“Ok, so you’re crazy.”

“We’ll get an apartment in a little town. I’ll get a job at the school, and you can work at the hospital.” He smiled, but she didn’t notice

“We don’t speak French!”

“We’ll learn! Listen, Julia- this is the adventure you’ve been looking for. There’s nothing to miss in Baltimore. Not really”

Julia bit her lip and looked around the beach for help. Her eyes caught on the friends that, with or without them, would be going home tomorrow, but she settled on a lighthouse in the distance. It wasn’t red or white, but a deep gray, and its light cut through the fog. He was right- she couldn’t think of anything worth going back for. “Ok,” she started.

“Ok?” he grinned.

“Ok,” she smiled back, “let’s do it.”

Chapter 2

The road was paved with cobblestones, and their car slid from side to side on every bump. The sidewalk that lined both sides of the street was deserted- they weren't surprised, it had just started to drizzle.

They'd been driving through towns for a week, looking for somewhere to settle. The first was too big, the next too small, too touristy, too quiet. Too quaint, too much like home. Partially because of exhaustion, and partially because it felt right, they had settled on a half- town half-city by the French Alps.

"Here we are." Julia slowed to a stop in front of a brick building. It sat at two stories, and had black-framed windows and a fire escape snaking down the front. They slammed the car doors behind them and locked it with a click. The front door was open, so they walked through and began to climb the stairs. When they reached the second floor, they found the door labeled 2B and Odin pulled a key out from under the doormat. The door swung open, and they stood, shoulder to shoulder, staring at the room inside.

"It's not so bad." Odin turned to Julia.

"This is a cave. I'm serious. We'll turn on the lights and bats will come flying out of the ceiling." Julia raised her eyebrows.

Odin walked over to the window, and pulled the shutters open. Sunshine flooded the floor, and when no creatures came crawling out, Julia stepped inside.

"Look," Odin said, "We can put the table here. By the window." He moved to the opposite wall, "And here, we can put a couch. A green one, with corduroy fabric and fluffy cushions. We'll get a little coffee table right here."

Julia laughed and pointed to the door leading to the next room, “Ok, and there, by the door, we can hang a painting. And next to it we can put a bookshelf.”

“With a ladder.”

They walked into the kitchen. “We’ll put stools by this counter, and paint the cabinets white.” Julia looked around.

“We can work with this.” Odin left, and came back with their suitcases.

* * *

That night, Julia tugged her blanket around her shoulders. Odin lay next to her on the living room floor- rays of moonlight falling through the window caught his sleeping bag’s reflective fabric and turned it silver. Her body felt heavy, but she couldn’t keep her eyes closed. Her heart was hanging a string away from her stomach, and it left her chest feeling noticeably empty, and she didn’t feel like sleeping, but didn’t feel like doing much of anything else either. She was tired, but no matter how much she wanted to drift off, she couldn’t bring herself to try. She propped herself up on her elbow and leaned over to shake Odin awake. “What if we made a mistake?” She whispered.

Odin rubbed his eyes and opened them wide, trying to blink out the sleep. He pushed hair away from his forehead. His movements knocked his sleeping bag out of the light’s path, and it lay in the shadow the curtain cast. “I guess we might have. I like it here. Worst comes to worst, we move again.”

Julia dropped back onto her pillow. Odin turned over and started snoring.

Outside, under the street lamps, a tree bent against the wind and dropped its leaves onto the cobblestone sidewalk

Chapter 3

They ate fruit and toast for breakfast, and started to clean the apartment. The following days were filled with sweeping, organizing, and decoration. They bought a rug and a couch. Odin got a job at the school who, coincidentally, had been looking for a substitute English teacher while theirs was on maternity leave. Julia applied for a position at the hospital, but was told that despite her credentials, she could only shadow a doctor until she learned enough French.

Every day, Julia would finish her time at the hospital and return to an empty apartment. In hopes of avoiding the quiet rooms and the hollow feeling that dragged behind her like a shadow, she would end up on the street. The first week she explored the park. She liked the way the moss hugged the trees, and the children in their bright-colored shoes splashed in the fountain. She found a bench tucked next to a statue, and set up camp with her French 101 book and a little yellow pencil.

She always had dinner ready for Odin when he got home from work.

Chapter 4

On Monday, when Odin's key turned in the lock and Julia looked up to see the door swing open, two women and a man stood behind him.

"Julia, this is Mark, Jamie, and Quinn." He gestured around him. "I thought I'd bring them around for dinner."

"Of course! Please, come in." Julia smiled and stepped aside to let them through.

Julia and Odin settled in the armchairs facing the couch, where their guest sat in a line.

“Jamie, right?” Julia asked, gesturing to the woman sitting closest to her. Her blonde hair was cropped close to her face, and her blue eyes were soft when she smiled and nodded. “Do you work at the school with Odin?”

“I teach math to the first grade.”

“She’s brilliant,” Odin said, “the kids adore her. And she grew up in D.C, so she sort of took me under her wing.”

“He seemed like he needed it,” Jamie said.

“I don’t know, he seems to be doing all right.” Julia said. No one responded, but they all looked at each other and smiled politely.

“What do you do?” The man, Mark, asked in a french accent.

“I’m going to be working at the hospital as soon as I can learn enough French.” Julia said and looked at her shoes.

“Comment allez-vous jusqu’à présent?” Mark looked at her, and she stared back at him before looking over at Odin, forehead creased.

“I don’t think either of us are quiet there yet.” Odin said with a laugh. The room fell into silence. Julia chewed on the inside of her cheek and turned to the third woman sitting on the far left. Her long auburn hair fell over her shoulders, and she was taller than any of them sitting down. “You must be Quinn.”

The woman smiled back at her. Say something, thought Julia. She counted to five. Say anything. She counted to eight and said, “Are you a teacher?”

“No.”

“Quinn is the school counselor,” Odin said.

“That sounds fun!”

“It’s ok,” Quinn said.

Julia smiled tightly at her. “Well, I’m going to finish up with dinner.” She stood up and walked towards the kitchen. Once she was inside, she leaned against the counter with the palms of her hands pressed against the cool countertop and listened to the laughter coming from the next room. She looked through the drawers until she found a chocolate bar, and sat on the kitchen floor with her back leaning against the cabinet as she slowly pulled off the wrapper and took a bite. Suddenly, she missed Baltimore. She missed the familiar streets, she missed the harbor, and she missed the people with interesting things to say. After a minute she pulled herself up, put on her best smile, and moved back into the living room.

Chapter 5

After dinner, she promptly excused herself claiming a headache, and spent the rest of the night in her room. After giving up on reading, she picked up her phone. “Grandma, hi, it’s Julia,” she said into her phone, “I’m just missing you.” Julia twisted her ponytail in the mirror. “I don’t know, I guess I’m lonely here. I can’t work, and I don’t know anyone, and Odin is coming home with a smile on his face every day. I feel like I’m supposed to be feeling a way that I’m not- like this fresh start isn’t as fresh as it’s supposed to be. I’ve never felt so out of place before.” She sat on the bed and rubbed the corner of the duvet between her fingers. “Call me when you get this. Love you.”

She woke up the next morning and met Odin in the living room.

“That was fun last night,” She said.

“Yeah? You enjoyed yourself?” Odin said with a frown.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You ran out before anyone had even left the table. It was rude.”

“I had a headache.”

“Sure you did.”

“What do you want me to say? I was bored! You talked all night about teachers I don’t know and students I’ve never heard of.”

“I’m finally the one with friends and you can’t handle it.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“I think it is true. I think you’ve spent your entire life in the spotlight and now everything isn’t clicking for you and you’re jealous. You’re not the perfect one here.”

Julia narrowed her eyes. “Great adventure, Odin. I’m glad we’re in it together.” She shut the apartment door behind her on her way out.

Odin stood there for a moment, waiting for her to come back. When she didn’t, he started to get ready for work.

Julia found herself in the park again. It wasn’t sunny anymore, and the clouds cast shadows over the treetops. She smiled at all of the people she passed but none of them smiled back so she settled on her bench and thought about home.

Chapter 6

A week later, Odin called Julia to tell her that the school had told him that because of his credentials and hard work, he would be offered a full-time teaching position when the English teacher returned from maternity leave. He was going out with friends, he said, and would be home after dinner.

Julia got a pizza and ate in front of the tv. She looked out the window at a city full of people she didn't know and jobs she didn't know enough french to get. When Odin got home that night, she sat him down on the couch.

"I want to go home," She said.

"What?"

"I'm not happy here. I can't do anything I care about."

"But I am," he said with a frown.

"I know," she said and looked at the floor. "I'm sorry."

"I have more friends here than I ever did at home. I have a job that I love. I can't go."

"I understand, but I don't. I'm lonely and tired of it."

"Ok, if that's what you need to do," he said.

"I have a ticket booked for the end of the week. I'm going to stay with my grandmother when I get to Baltimore, and hopefully, get my old job back, maybe meet some new people."

Odin gave her a hug and tried to suppress the feeling that she was giving up too easily.

Chapter 7

The world would stop for her, but it would for him too.

He wasn't perfect, but to the people he cared about, he was the best he could be. He could teach a student a language, could make his friends laugh, and handed out advice like it was candy. Most of all, he was the happiest he'd ever been, and that made the people around him happy, too.

What made him special, when it came down to it, was that he had found for himself everything he had always wanted, and managed to hold on to it.

He missed Julia, and sometimes he even missed Baltimore, but he had found his spotlight, and he was comfortable in it. They never lost their closeness, but he found his way out of her shadow, and he thrived.