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Retrograde

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Retrograde

Darian Rose Dolan

The boy with goat eyes learned a new word each week and tried to use it at least three times. The same way he liked to say her name underneath his breath each night, hoping to send its sweetness into his subconscious. He had always been a dreamer, sewing balloons onto his shirts when he was younger in a feeble attempt to lose some weight. But she, this girl, was no dream. She had forest fires for eyes and her kisses always tasted like cough drops. She ran through his veins with the swift electricity found in her smile.

Elle.

The girl who liked to wear white summer dresses. The girl who always tucked her caramel hair behind her ears when she got nervous. He fell in love with the details, like how she would tap three times when she was thinking deeply about something or how she crossed her eyes just enough while gazing at Christmas lights so they looked like stars. He always could tell when she was having a bad day. When she was sad she wrote with pencils instead of pens and bit her lips until they bled. She was art, soft and sweet while in your face with beauty and pain and joy all at the same time.

She was a beauty amongst beasts. But she still fell in love with him. Everyone called him devil, demon, Satan, or monster. But it was always the worst when they called him nothing. The hallways parted around him in the way marbles scatter from the places they are dropped. People avoided him like the plague, even though last time he checked goat eyes weren't a symptom of Ebola. Yet everyone still kept his or her distance. This was why he never understood how the most angelic thing he had ever seen had also seen him.

“Look! These ones can make you look like a cat,” Elle chirped. She turned the glow of the laptop screen towards Fitz. Pictures of cat-eye contact lenses from shades of brown to hot pink filled the webpage.

Fitz shifted on the bed, his neck craning away from the thesaurus he had been skimming. His eyes squinted at the bright screen.

“Yeah, so I can look even more freakish? No thanks,” he said, returning his gaze to the pages in his hand.

“Ooh. What about these all black ones? Very spooky. But also kinda hot. Like, *I’m here to steal your soul in a super sexy way* kinda vibe.”

A laugh burst from Fitz’s lips. “Elle,” he said. “You can stop now.”

Elle gave him a wry smile and placed the laptop at the edge of the bed. She curled up next to him, laying her left leg over his lap and her head on his chest. “I don’t see why you even want any. You know I love your eyes...”

“You know, I’m beginning to worry about you,” said Fitz.

“What?” Elle lifted her head from his chest. “Why?”

“Because you think goat eyes *aren’t* extremely terrifying. Which they are, just b-t-w.”

A small laugh escaped Elle’s lips. “You’re so dumb.”

“You don’t have some goat fetish do you?”

Elle inhaled sharply. “Oh. My. God.” She hit his chest with her hand. “You’re gross.”

It was 7 in the a. m. and he was not about to deal with losing his shit in biology class.

I’m gonna lose my shit... Or my stomach. Oh god.

It seemed to stare up at him. He glanced at the small blade in his fingers. His hands were shaking so badly that it

looked like he had a severe case of Parkinson's. He decided to set the knife down before it flew out of his grip and into some poor unsuspecting classmate.

It's a sheep's eye. Not a goat. Not a goat. Not a—oh shit.

He could feel his hearty breakfast of Cocoa Puffs and coffee climbing up his throat. He knew about 70% of the room was staring directly at him, waiting for a reaction. He wanted to spite them all with a cool collectedness, but he couldn't keep it down.

"Ex-excuse me," he mumbled as he pushed away from the dissecting table and out into the hallway. His lightheadedness caught up with him as soon as he made it out the door, and he had to lean against the wall to keep from passing out.

Classic Michaels. Goddamn biology with its shitty ass eyes.

He leaned over and held his head in his hands, trying to will the nausea away.

"You too?" a soft voice spoke next to him.

Fitz turned to see her. She had brown hair that barely brushed her shoulders. Her deep green eyes held the smallest freckles of gold within. She gave him an understanding smile, her head slightly tilted to the right, with dimples framing each corner of her lips.

"I get queasy at the thought of sticking a knife into anything." She mimicked a small shudder. "Guh-ross."

Fitz laughed and nodded his head. "Yeah, not really my thing either."

Her smile grew wider. "I'm Elle."

"Fitz."

"Like Fitzgerald?"

"Yeah. Both my parents loved *The Great Gatsby* and for some reason thought that a last name could work as a first name."

A bell-like laugh slipped past Elle's rosy lips.

“At least they didn’t name you after a letter in the alphabet.” She gave him a teasing look that pulled at his chest in a way he didn’t understand. “It was nice to meet you, Fitz. But I got to go. See you next class!” She flashed a quick smile and strode down the hallway and out of sight.

Something about her lingered with him. Whether it was her sweet scent or the comfort of her smile, he wanted it to stay.

“Do you know how you got them?” Elle turned over on the grass to face him.

Fitz turned his gaze upward to the night sky. They had driven out to the best lookout he knew of, a large grassy hill at the top of the local graveyard.

“No... But if I ever find my parents I’ll be sure to ask them.” He turned to give her a smile, so she would know this was something he wasn’t sad about any longer. “Growing up where I did, I had a lot of people trying to tell me who or what I was. Some tried calling me the antichrist.” He chuckled. “Even the nuns didn’t take me in, so I just ended up either in the system or on the streets.”

“So they never told you anything about them? Your parents?”

Fitz shook his head. “I don’t think my parents even had the decency to introduce themselves. Maybe I *am* the antichrist.”

Elle laughed. “You’re too nice.”

“I am *not* nice.”

“You are *so* nice. Don’t lie.”

The cool nighttime summer air pressed down on his chest.

“Sometimes... Sometimes, I wish I knew.”

Elle looked up at Fitz earnestly. “Knew what?”

“Them. Myself. Why I have these goddamn devil eyes.”

Silence hung in the air around them, thickening it.

“Sometimes I don’t ever want to find out.”

What good was an empty chest but a place to collect dust and remind him of what used to be, what used to beat, before? What good was to come of the stones in his stomach? What of the blades in his throat? He never considered there to ever be a Before and After. He had always known to never make a home in a person, but she always left the porch light on. Everything they were, everything she was, had always been a hurricane thunderclap. It was a bright intensity, an electric magnetism, something that burned too hot and too fast for either of them to keep up.

They didn't quite know where it went wrong, just that one day something went missing. She started writing all his letters in pencil and her lips became constantly cracked. There was something so casual in the way she said "I loved you" that made his stomach twist. Then there were the bad nights, the nights where he could feel fury in his fingertips. Conversation became competition as she curled his open palms into fists and caught his words, just to twist them into things he never meant. He threw fighting words at her like "I love you" and "Are you proud of me?" and felt so goddamn *insignificant* every time he tried.

She said that she was suffocating for something she wasn't ready to die for, but how could she suffocate on the air he needed to breathe? She was the storm that left an unforgiveable quake, and week after week it still sent tremors up his spine. She left echoes everywhere. He didn't think he would ever forget her dewdrop laughter, or the papercut curve of her smile, or the constellation of freckles on her back. He wouldn't forget any of it, and he hated himself for that.

It was easier for him to kiss strangers than it was to kiss her. Kissing girls at parties was fun and simple, but kissing Elle

felt dangerous. It was like he was standing on the edge of something, figuring out if he was ready to fall.

He stood there, looking like an idiot.

“So, I guess I should say goodnight?” Elle stood by a dark gate, her white cotton dress giving a slight hint to the curve in her hips. She slightly swayed in the wind, the nighttime air touching all the parts of her he wanted to.

Elle tilted her head and raised an eyebrow, that similar smirk tugging at her lips.

He had to do it.

Fitz moved towards her; he could feel his heartbeat in his throat. Their faces grew closer and closer as he closed his eyes. Then it happened. A shockwave rolled through his body as her lips closed around his. She tasted like lemon and honey and he could feel the heat from the blush in her cheeks.

How could someone be so sweet? he thought.

Elle’s fingers knotted through the back of his hair as her tongue slightly teased his lips, and it drove him mad. He pulled her even tighter to him.

“I just don’t see how you could be mad about this,” Elle said.

Fitz squeezed his fists, his nails digging into his palms.

“You were flirting with him right in front of me. How could I not be mad about that?”

“It’s called being *friendly*, Fitz. You should try it sometime.”

“What are you even talking about?”

“You push everyone away and then blame them for your own isolation. You know, maybe—just maybe—you wouldn’t be so ‘alone’ if you at least *tried* talking to people.”

“How can I hold up a conversation with someone if they won’t even look at me? How Elle? Please, enlighten me. Because I’d love to know.”

Elle groaned. “God Fitz. Get over yourself. No one cares about your eyes, okay? I love your eyes and I love you. If people turn you away because of something like that, they don’t matter. But if you don’t try, you won’t ever make any friends.”

“I don’t need them. I have you.”

“Fitz...”

“What?”

“I can’t be anyone’s everything.”

“Okay, don’t look until I say so. Okay?” Elle floated off into the bathroom as Fitz lay patiently on his bed. They had been dating for five months now, to the day.

“My eyes are closed.”

He could hear the door open and Elle’s light footsteps as they made their way into the room.

“Okay...you can open your eyes.”

Fitz sat upright on the bed and saw her standing there. The black lace of her lingerie hugged her petite hourglass frame. Elle did a slight twirl, then stopped and looked at him expectantly.

“So?”

“You look goddamn perfect.” Fitz gazed in awe at his girlfriend, struck with the disbelief that this, that *she*, was his. “Come here,” he said, a smile growing wide on his face.

Elle pranced over to him, and he wrapped his hands around her waist. He kissed her neck and brought his fingertips to her spine to play with the ribbons that held the thin lace together. He could hear her breath quicken. He dragged his lips lightly up her neck, across her jawline, and up to her ear.

“I just don’t get it.” His voice was weak and he hated it.

Elle looked at him from across the table, her thumb nervously rubbing the off-white coffee mug she held in her hands. Her eyes were damp as she looked back down again. She hadn’t drunk any of her mocha, and now it had gone cold.

“I—I don’t either. I didn’t mean for this to happen.” Her small voice grew impossibly smaller. Her bottom lip began to quiver and she bit it to make it stop. The taste of copper dripped into her mouth.

“What do you mean? How could you say that?” Fitz could feel his stomach twist. He looked over at the other tables in the small café, making eye contact with an aging man who had probably been watching the whole time. Fitz’s face grew hot and he quickly broke his gaze to stare back down at his own table. Some couple had scratched their initials into it with a butter knife, with “4 evr” underneath. It made him sick. “Why...”

“What?” Elle looked up at Fitz. Her round watery eyes looked straight into him. She shouldn’t be allowed to do that anymore. How could she be upset right now when she was the one tearing him apart? How could she be so selfish?

“Why?” he asked. His eyes burned into hers. He didn’t even know if he cared for the answer. But he wanted her to hurt as much as he did.

“All we do is fight... And I wanted to be happy. I wanted us to work, more than anything. I mean it. I just—I don’t think it can anymore.” She couldn’t even look at him. Her eyes darted everywhere in the café but never dared to rest on him.

Fitz sat in silence. He felt like he was having an out-of-body experience, like he wasn’t there anymore. Not in the café, not with Elle, not anywhere.

“I still love you. I always will.” Elle gave him a look of weak hope. A second passed and it faded quickly as her

expression grew dim. She looked back down at her cold coffee, her small voice shattering the walls. “But I’m not in love with you anymore.”

He choked on the words as she said them.

“I love you so much it makes me sick.” Fritz grabbed Elle in his arms and swayed with her. “Okay? I said it. I love you.”

Elle laughed and turned around to face him, her eyes warm and full of something that looked like home. “I love you too.” Her smile stretched so far across her face Fitz thought it might break.

They stood outside his truck, the doors left open so the soft sounds of the radio could fill the warm summer air around them. They had brought a million blankets that overflowed from the truck bed so they could stargaze all night. But then decided to take a break to dance on the grassy field.

Elle closed her arms around him as they rocked back and forth underneath the starlit sky. Fitz buried his face in her soft hair. They stood like that for a while. They could’ve stood like that for his entire lifetime.

“Forever,” Elle whispered.

“What?” asked Fitz.

Elle looked up at him, her face glowing in the moonlight. He swore that he never saw someone so beautiful, so perfect.

“I’ll love you forever.”