

Sometimes, life doesn't just knock you down. No, not only does it knock you down, but life will keep kicking you while you're down until you don't have any other option but to stand up and fight back. In those moments, when you're faced with unexpected situations and circumstances outside your control, you discover who you are and what you're made of. My moment of clarity came when I found myself surrounded by a group of doctors, faces hidden behind their surgical masks. I'm slightly annoyed by their poking, especially when they lift the blankets to look at the countless tiny red dots splayed across my skin.

Someone clearing their throat brings my attention to one doctor standing before me. The mask doesn't hide his eyes, allowing me a clear view of his furrowed brows.

"Frankly, we are surprised you're even breathing after reviewing your lab results."

I stared back blankly, trying to understand the situation around me as the doctor's voice droned on.

"Unfortunately, we don't know how to proceed from here, so you'll have to be transported to the Henry Ford downtown, where there's more extensive equipment and staff."

A whirl of panic and emotions overwhelms me as his words sink in.

*Oh god. My dad is going to lose his mind, especially after this morning.*

My mind flashes back a few hours, replaying our phone conversation from earlier.

*"Will you shut up and just go back?"*

*I try to stay calm, taking a deep breath, the intense pounding in my head getting even worse. Calling my dad was stupid, but I didn't know if I should return to the emergency room. I mean, I was just there about 18 hours ago, concerned about the possible concussion that started this whole mess.*

*Thinking about yesterday's visit fills me with frustration, especially sitting here violently shivering. It's been a few hours, and despite the many layers of blankets I've wrapped myself in, my symptoms are not getting any better.*

*"I'm just sayin', Dad, the doctor yesterday wasn't concerned about it."*

*I grimace as I try and get the words past the cracked lips and sore mouth, courtesy of yesterday's crash landing in the bathroom. I really must've hit the tub hard when I went down. Honestly, I'm still processing that Dev found me passed out on the floor.*

*"Ashlei," I hear his Senior Chief tone creeping into his voice, warning me that there's no room for arguing.*

*"Fine," I groan, "but you're paying for the bill this time when they send me right back home." With a defeated sigh, I end the call, dreading what will inevitably be a long day.*

"I would suggest calling someone because you'll need some support."

The doctor's voice snaps my attention back to the present, and I cringe at his sympathetic expression.

The group filed out of the room one by one, and a nurse once again ran my vitals and checked my IV.

She lets me know that transport will be moving me downtown within the next few hours as she heads out to the next patient, leaving me alone with my erratic thoughts.

I didn't know who to call. I was alone here in Michigan. Devin and I were technically broken up, so I didn't want to bother him. Plus, he works midnights, so it's not like he could be there anyway. I shot a text to his parents anyway, knowing they'd still want to be kept in the loop despite our situation.

*Now, the hard part.*

My finger hovers over my dad's number. On one hand, I was terrified out of my mind. I hated the hospital, and now, I have no idea what's happening. On the other hand, I don't want to burden my dad with this problem. He already hates that I'm living in Michigan without him - I can't remember the last time he hasn't tried guilt-tripping me home. Even if he's in Virginia, I need to call him. In my mind, he always had all the answers, and I desperately needed them right now.

He picked up after the first ring.

"Hey, kiddo, what'd they tell you this time?"

"Dad," my voice comes out strained as I push past the lump that formed in my throat. "They're sending me to the downtown hospital. They don't know what's wrong with me."

"Okay. Just hang tight."

He ends the call, leaving me to go back to staring at the ceiling as I wait for whatever happens next. He isn't a man of many words, so his abruptness isn't unusual, but I wish he could've said a little more to calm me down. The silence is especially loud at this moment.

*He'd tell me to suck it up anyway, so toughen up, Ash.*

Hours pass before I'm finally lifted into an ambulance to be transported. Watching Detroit's skyline in the dusky light from the back was almost peaceful as they took me down the freeway, but the spell was broken as soon as the doors opened to the emergency bay of the

downtown hospital. Everything moves past me in a blur as they wheel me quickly into the ICU. I can't keep up with the chorus of voices and sounds around me, and my heart starts working double-time.

Wide-eyed, I look at two nurses, masked like the doctors from earlier, strapping pressure cuffs around my legs while another one is sticking me with the electrodes to connect to the EKG. I hear someone behind me changing the saline bag I've been hooked to. It was like I wasn't even there; they were working on a lifeless body. One of them finally noticed my fearful gaze, paused, and moved closer.

"This is all just to monitor you." Her eyes crinkle a little like she's smiling behind the mask. "Until they can figure out the problem, we just want to make sure we're not missing anything." She reached into her scrubs and pulled out an extra mask to hand to me. "Oh, and you'll need to keep this on for now, okay?"

I didn't trust my voice, so I just nodded in response, covering my face as she returned to her tasks.

Before long, the lights go off, and the beeping of machines is the only thing keeping me company.

*It's going to be okay. You're fine. There's really no need to think of the worst-case scenario.*

I keep repeating this to myself, a mantra of sorts. I'm beyond exhaustion, which is saying a lot since I'm permanently tired nowadays. Despite the slight squeeze of the leg cuffs, I can feel myself drifting off, hoping I'll wake up from whatever nightmare I've found myself in.

My wishes were dashed once I realized I was not getting any restful sleep or out of this hospital anytime soon. Numerous vital checks went by before I felt myself being wheeled into a private room.

"I'm here."

I squinted towards a figure walking through the door and instantly felt the wave of peace only my dad could bring me.

I couldn't believe it. "What are you doing here?!"

"I just got here not too long ago, and luckily, I caught up with them as they moved you out of the ICU."

He tries staying out of the way of the staff, and I can see how exhausted he looks, especially the way his shoulders sag.

"I just called you last night, though." My brows furrow, thoroughly confused and amazed by his presence.

My dad gave me one of his famous crooked smiles. "I hopped right into the car when I hung up. I figured I could get clothes shipped to me. We'll figure out what's up, and you won't do it alone because you've got me."

I am overwhelmed by emotion. There's no stopping the tears that start falling. Seeing my dad here in front of me, knowing he drove thirteen hours to be here, solidified the harsh reality that I was facing.

It would be a dauntless number of tests and biopsies before they could even identify what was happening to me: numerous hospital stays, countless transfusions, and a handful of surgeries. The thyroid cancer was quickly identified and cured (what's a bit of radioactive iodine in your system, right?), but I had the lucky draw of being one of the *two out of one million* people in the United States to be diagnosed with aplastic anemia, an exceptionally rare blood disease causing bone marrow failure. They had to pull all the stops out to fight that one, and thanks to an anonymous donor, I was one of the lucky ones to receive a life-saving transplant (thank you again, from the bottom of my heart).

The woman staring at me back in the mirror has seen her fair share of battles, and she's covered in scars, both mentally and physically. And yet, there is a fire in her eyes. The kind of fire that is only lit when you've hit rock bottom but fight your way back to the top. This woman looks like someone who has gone through the wringer but is still positive, exuding quiet strength. She looks like she's been given a second chance and is now ready to take life by the horns. She is both a fighter and a survivor. That woman is me.