

## Alone

There are many good things about having a one friend. You only have one set of inside jokes to talk about, you always have a partner for projects, and you never have to worry about who you should invite to your birthday or who you should sit by at lunch because you only have one option. It's all fun and games until one day, that friend is ripped away. When I moved to China, I had exactly one friend and I met her on my first day there.

When I stepped into the poorly air conditioned building and the first thing that caught my eyes was hundreds of poorly coloured dragonflies hanging from the ceiling. The dull light of the stormy day peeked through the glass ceiling making the whole room glow a soft grey. Rivulets of rain streamed down the windows and the pattering of the rain echoed through the mostly empty building. I had never been in a school with a glass ceiling or escalators before. A woman led us up to the welcome desk where a woman stood and greeted my parents. My sister Julia and I stood off to the side, uncomfortable and painfully still for a little while before we started playing with ropes that cordoned off the elevators. Eventually my parents called us over and explained the plan for the day. I was not focused on anything the greeter said and instead just looked around my new surroundings. It was that moment that I saw her for the first time.

Kristina Abigail Jackson.

She made eye contact with me and started down the stairs with a smile on her face. Mum and Dad hugged Julia and I before letting the woman lead us up the stairs. Abby met us half way. She offered her hand to me and I took it. It was calloused and sweaty, but it was the lifeline I craved. That was the start of something very interesting.

From that moment on, we were inseparable. Though I had other friends, life always found ways of circling me back to her. We created a club and our "club house" was in a tiny room under Abby's stairs. The wall was covered in oaths we swore to each other and to the club as a whole (it had once included Emma Tarlton, but she had to go home for good). Every

day we went to Park and Shop and got snacks. We schemed and planned and scrounged for money to buy “real” American gum from Charlie's next door. We got a little bit closer.

There were a lot of interesting little quirks about Abby that made her who she was. She spoke Russian, on the first day of school she told me, I said she was full of crap, and then she began weaving a story in a musical language I couldn't begin to understand. I was flabbergasted. She loved to steal chocolate from the fridge. She was very proud that she had been born in Kiev. She hated being called Kristina more than anything in the entire world. She could play the violin, but her voice only worked with Russian songs. Abby loved to watch Young Justice and we would hole ourselves under the stairs, marinating in the smell of sweaty feet just to binge watch entire seasons. She had long brown hair that she hated having played with and big brown eyes to match. She had buck teeth and she lied through them pretty often, but I loved her for it.

She was probably the best friend ten-year-old me could have asked for.

She and I would build worlds with our stories and lies combined. We built a spy agency for a secret that never existed and explored the rooms on the fifth floor even after we had been explicitly told not to. The thing that Abby was best at was distracting me. My mind always liked to dance at the edge of oblivion and Abby could always tell when it was bad because just before I was about to fall, she would step in. She would tell me stories and lies that I would desperately cling to like a life raft in the endless seas of Too Much. She would pull me back from the brink and in return, I was the one person she could always count on. It was a good life, but like every good thing it has to end.

Abby left for good that summer.

I knew that it wasn't her fault, but at the same time, I couldn't help but blame her for leaving me alone once more in a strange new reality. When I got back from the states in August for the beginning of the new school year, it became painfully obvious that I was alone again.

It wasn't until new teacher orientation when I looked down from the third floor of the atrium at all of the helpless new teacher's kids, huddled together like refugees in the lobby as I had done not one year before, that I had an epiphany: loneliness is a forever companion, it's a dark sea being held back by slowly crumbling dams, and when those dams eventually break you could drown.

Or you could be rescued.

Abby had been a boat in what seemed to be a never ending ocean. As I looked out at those kids, I saw myself and I realized exactly what I had to do.

I could be the hand that pulled them to safety.

I saw two girls on the floor below me looking lost, so I sewed on my best smile and walked down the stairs.

“Are you guys looking for the bathroom?”

Two sets of brown orbs looked up at me and I saw the flood of hope and thankfulness that Abby must have seen in my eyes in that very first moment.

Word Count: 984