

Chapter 4

Irene

Wednesdays are always more exhausting than other days.

Maybe because it's the midpoint of the week, the weekend seemed so far, and the tiredness of the days that had passed washed all over me as I cleaned the stairs again. These days I felt like my back and my feet weren't my own. And it was about to get worse.

It was almost two in the afternoon when I got a text message. It was from Jim, but not his own number. Why? Because he was contacting me from the police station.

I almost dropped my phone. I was literally shaking as I made my way to the fifth floor, where I could find Mrs. Doolittle.

I located her quickly and told her to cover for me. I knew I would eventually answer for why I had le early before finishing my work. But at the moment, I didn't care. I just needed to get to Jim quickly.

"Don't worry. I got it. Just go, I'll get your cleaning supplies for you," Mrs. Doolittle said as I had explained the situation.

"Thank you! 30th floor, stairs," I wrote. She nodded, and I rushed to the lockers, changing my clothes in record time and then rushing out. I ignored all the weird glances I got from people I passed by. I must have looked like a mess.

I hailed a cab for the first time in my life in the city. It had always been cheaper to travel by bus or subway. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

The cab got me to the police station, one close to where I lived. I paid the cab driver and hurriedly made my way inside.

I spotted him as soon as I stepped in. Among the crowd of police officers and security men, a bunch of teenagers were easy to spot.

I was heading for him when someone tapped my shoulder. I turned towards a man who was probably in his late twenties. I guessed he would be considered handsome in his black hair and light hazel eyes that stood out against tan skin.

"Are you here for one of them?" he asked, frowning as he pointed to the teenagers.

I nodded and then fished out my notebook. My hands were still shaking when I wrote.

"Jim Hooper. I'm his sister." I held up the notebook for him, and he frowned, looking between the notebook and me.

"Deaf," I wrote hurriedly. He nodded, his brows lighting for a second, then ushered me to follow him.

"You know what I'm saying?" he asked when we got into another space, a less crowded one with only officers in.

"Lip read. Why is he here?" I wrote down. I wasn't in the mood for chat chat. I was worried about what was going to happen, about what had happened.

"Underage Drinking. They were caught outside on the corner of a street, in plain sight. weren't even trying to hide it," he said, gesturing for me to take a seat in front of a desk. His, I realized. He sat on the rolling chair across from me, looking around the chaotic desk.

"Is he in trouble? What's going to happen?"

He frowned, looking at the notebook then at me. "This is the first time, so he's going to get away with a fine," he replied. "But he should be careful in the future."

I sighed and slumped back in my chair, nodding. The officer gave me a kind smile.

"What about your parents?" he said, glancing down at a paper on his desk. "I know he said you're his legal guardian, but he didn't mention anything about your parents."

"Passed away five years ago," I replied, although it wasn't exactly true. Jim was my half-brother, we shared a mom. I never knew who my biological father was, but I had always considered Jim's dad my own ever since my mom married him when I was five.

The officer read, then nodded with a frown. After that, I took care of the fifty dollars fine and the officer brought Jim to me.

"Be careful, kid," he said, looking at Jim, who just shot the officer a glare and looked away.

I sighed and wrote, "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He nodded. He looked like he was considering something before he pulled a small card out of his pocket. "This has my number on it. If you ever need help with something, just give me a call."

I nodded at him with a thankful smile. His eyes blinked for a moment too long, then he smiled back.

We took the subway home afterwards. I figured there was no use in getting back to work. By the time I would be there, the day would be over already.

So we headed home, Jim being extra grouchy the whole way back. We both were dreading the impending talk we had ahead of us.

We hadn't really talked ever since that night we argued. It wasn't that we didn't try, it was more that I was never home except for the night, and he was rarely home at night.

Jim walked into the apartment after I had unlocked it, then slumped on a chair by the kitchen table. I sat across from him, and looked at him in silence.

Silence as always.

And as always, he avoided my gaze. His eyes were trained on his fingers that tugged relentlessly at his sleeve.

"Why weren't you at school?" I wrote then slid the notebook into his line of sight on the table. He read it then rolled his eyes.

"I skipped," he said. "There's nothing to do there. I only get detention whenever I show up, so why bother?"

"Because you must be doing things that deserve detention!" I wrote, a familiar frustration bubbling in my chest. He rolled his eyes again. I had the sudden urge to take his eyeballs in my hands so he wouldn't do it again. He stayed silent, though, and didn't even bother with a response.

"Do you want to try and change schools?" I wrote. He read it then shrugged.

"It'll probably be the same."

I sighed. "Then what do you want to do? You can't keep skipping, Jim." He smiled derisively. His shoulders jerked like he had scooped. "I can skip if I want. Don't worry about me, just worry about yourself."

I glared at him. I was about to take the notebook and write on it again when his hand clamped down on it, holding it hostage against the table.

"Give it back," I signed to him, narrowing my eyes. Jim had learned a little bit of sign language with me when I had been learning. He wasn't very good, so he preferred not to use it.

"Or what!" he said, standing up with the notebook in his hand, waving it like a fan. "Look, let's just forget anything happened today. I'll get you back the money you paid, okay?"

"How would you get the money?" I signed, narrowing my eyes in suspicion. He froze before shrugging.

"I can take care of myself," he replied, turning to walk to his room. I walked around the table so I could block his way.

"How would you get the money?" I signed again, a no-nonsense expression on my face. As far as I knew, he didn't have a job.

He bit his lip, looking over my shoulder, then shrugged. "I'm going to start working."

"Doing what?"

"It's not important," he said with an annoyed scowl. "Point is, I'll take care of myself, and you take care of yourself. Just stay out of my business."

I started signing, but he pushed past me, bumping my shoulder. I turned in time to see him throw the notebook on the plopped down on the couch, holding my head in my hands.

What's happening? had a really bad feeling about all of this. What work could he be doing? I just wanted him to focus on school. I'd give him anything he needed. Why couldn't he just do that?

What should I do? he wouldn't listen to anything I said. What should I do!

My eyes filled with frustrated tears. I had forgotten about my problems with him these last few days because of my time on the rooftop. That little hour I spent with the blue-eyed man meant more to me than he could probably imagine. It was like only the two of us existed, and it felt so liberating... so safe.

Maybe because he never seemed impatient with my mode of communication. He didn't make me feel any less normal.

He was also such a big man. The first time he appeared, I was so scared because he just looked so intimidating, but his eyes somehow changed in an instant. He was just so... nice. Next thing I knew, I found myself sitting down next to a stranger on top of a rooftop.

But it didn't feel like such a wrong thing to do. I really enjoyed his company, especially after the amazing strawberry cheesecake he had shared with me today.

I shook away the thoughts that made everything seem alright. It wasn't alright. My little brother was messing up his life, and I had no idea what to do about it. Who should I turn to?

Who? I had no one...

Before I could dwell on my thoughts any further, my eyes caught sight of the time, and I jumped to my feet. I still had another job before being done for the night.

I rushed to the small restaurant right in time for my shift. It went as usual. Mindless dishwashing as everyone else rushed around the busy kitchen.

It must be really noisy, I thought, looking around the place. Kitchen utensils clattered. People shouted at each other. Food sizzled in pans. Glass shattered on the floor when someone dropped a plate.

I looked back at the sink, finishing my job as my eyes filled with tears again, but I pushed them back. What was the point anymore? What was the point of going on? The only reason I was fighting against myself all this time was because of Jim.

But now that he didn't want or need me anymore. Who was I doing all this for?

All I ever wanted was for him to have a great life, to just be a good man. Was it so much to ask?

Like usual, I reached home around midnight. The lack of sleep was getting to me.

Maybe I should quit my second job? Just for some time?

I showered and went to bed, sleeping like a log until my phone vibrated under my pillow.

4:30

It was getting tiresome. The growing bags under my eyes were proof enough. But I couldn't quit. Not yet. I still had to save more for Jim's college.

I ate some breakfast for Jim, who was still in his room.

Getting out of my room, I was pleasantly surprised to find out Jim was home. I let him breakfast and went to work in a slightly better mood than yesterday.

As I cleaned the outside glass on the ground floor, still too early for employees to come, I spotted someone from afar.

It was the blue-eyed man. I really need to ask for his name next time we meet.

He had just walked out of a car, then handed the key to a man. He was pretty far away from where I was standing, so he probably didn't spot me. He walked to the building with confident strides.

I wondered what his position was? It was still an hour before employees started trickling in.

I guess he loves his job.

I finished my work on the ground floor and then headed for the dreaded stairs.

Nine hundred and eighty-six steps in total. I remembered because I counted them twice while I cleaned. The morning went like usual. Very rarely someone would use the stairs, so I was left to myself, like always.

Until lunch break.

I was on the rooftop. All the negative thoughts drained out of me when I sat cross-legged on top of the building.

I felt like the weather was getting chillier. I should probably start wearing something else over my short-sleeved blue uniform to ward off the cold.

I had been munching on a bite out of my bologna sandwich when he appeared.

"Hey," he said as he sat cross-legged facing me. A smile instinctively formed on my face as I waved at him.

"Hey yourself." I wrote, then held up the notebook. He smiled, and even though I hardly knew him, I could tell he wasn't used to smiling much.

His eyes flickered to my sandwich. His shoulders heaved with a deep sigh. He unwrapped his lunch, and we ate in silence.

I truly didn't feel the sense of lacking I felt when I was with other people. The fact that I was deaf didn't seem to bother him in the slightest, and I was glad he treated me like a normal human being.

I was surprised when he showed up the second day. To be honest, I expected him not to. I mean, who would want to bother with spending time with me. I didn't provide much entertainment.

I finished my sandwich at the same time he finished his salad.

"Wanna share my dessert? Or do I have to threaten to throw it out the building again?" he said, pointing to a small box with a self-satisfied smile.

I narrowed my eyes at him, though my lips twitched up, then shrugged.

"If you can't finish it all by yourself, sure," I wrote. He bit back a smile as he opened the box. There was a large piece of chocolate brownie that made my mouth water. He took the fork and split the piece into two, giving me the bigger slice.

I looked at him for a while. He looked over my shoulder towards the edge of the building, his eyes crinkling in amusement.

I all but snatched the piece from his hand before he could threaten to throw it away again.

It tasted so, so good. I had forgotten how good chocolate was. My sigh was one of deep content as the chocolate melted in my mouth. It was heaven.

I was so focused on my dessert I didn't see him staring at the drawings on my notebook. The wind had flipped the pages over.

I only noticed when his hand reached out for the notebook, a page where I had drawn a small portrait of my mother.

"This is amazing," he said, blinking at the drawing before looking up at me with amazed eyes. "Did you do it?"

I nodded, feeling my cheeks heat up. No one had ever seen my drawings, other than my parents. I hadn't been comfortable showing other people. I guess I was afraid of their opinions.

I had always thought that my parents told me I was good because, well, because I was their daughter. I was never confident about my drawing skills.

"You're really good," he said, shaking his head, his brows raised as he flipped to another page that had a sketch of the buildings. It was the view that surrounded us.

He smiled, looking around then at the sketch, comparing the original to the drawing. "This is really good."

"Thanks," I signed. He looked at my hand, then at me.

"Let me guess, that means thank you."

I nodded. He gave me my notebook back and then had a bite of his brownie half.

"How long have you been deaf?" he asked after washing down the brownie with some water. I blinked. He was the first person to actually ask me that question. People usually tiptoed around the subject. I was grateful that he didn't. I smiled at him.

But as memories of the accident flashed before my eyes, my smile dimmed.

My parents in the front seats of the car, crushed beyond recognition. Intense pain in my head. Flames surrounding me. My hand automatically went to the top of my chest where I still had burn scars. Scars that covered the right half of my torso and extended all the way around to my back and down my thigh.

A gentle touch on my forearm made me jump out of my memories. Blue eyes filled with worry as he smiled at me.

"You don't have to talk about it," he said. "I'm sorry."

I shook my head, then wrote. "It's okay. I lost my hearing in a car accident 5 years ago."

He nodded, then considered something for a few seconds before asking, "You communicate in sign language?"

I nodded while writing. "I learned it when the doctors told me the hearing aids wouldn't work for me. My head was very damaged in the accident."

He nodded again, a sad look in his eyes. It wasn't pity, for which I was grateful. He was feeling genuinely sad for me. I don't like the fact that he wasn't smiling anymore, so I tried to lighten the mood a little.

"But it's not all that bad."

He read and his frown deepened. "How so?"

"I was hit so hard in the head that I actually became a sort of genius after the accident."

"A genius," he said with an arched brow, and I nodded.

"My memory became really great. I can see something and learn it in no time at all."

He looked suspicious. "Really?"

I bit back a smile and nodded. Then wrote on my notebook something which I hadn't really talked about to anyone before. Even Jim didn't know the extent of my newfound ability to remember. He knew that after the accident I was able to remember things in great detail, but he didn't know I was almost a language genius.

"I learned a lot of languages. Although I don't know how they sound perfectly since I can't hear them. But I can understand what I read."

"So, what languages do you know?"

"French, Spanish, German, Chinese, Japanese, Korean. The last one I was learning was Russian, but I got busy, so I sort of dropped it."

He read, his brows disappearing in his hairline. "Are you serious?"

I nodded, laughing silently. I was glad the sadness in his eyes melted away. It turned into surprise as he regarded me, skeptical.

"And I can sign in all those languages too," I added, and he leaned back.

"Wow," he said. His shoulders shook as he chuckled, shaking his head. "That's amazing."

I shrugged and looked down at my notebook. It would have been amazing if I still had my hearing, there wasn't much I could do.

He dipped his head, catching my eyes. I looked up at him as he grinned before taking out his phone.

"You said you can learn things quickly," he said, looking between me and his phone as he unlocked it and pressed something.

I nodded then he handed me his phone. "So you can memorize my whole contact list?"

I shrugged and took his phone. A contact list would actually be much easier since it had names. Names were easier to remember for me.

I looked at the contact list, scrolling down the names. My brain did the work I wouldn't have been able to do before the accident. Sure, I had been a little smart, and my memory was decent, but by no means to this extent.

After scrolling down his contact list, which had one hundred and fifty contacts, I handed him back the phone.

"Done?"

I nodded and held up my notebook where I wrote. "Since it would take time for me to write down all hundred and fifty names, why don't you pick a letter of the alphabet and I'll write the names under that letter?"

"Alright, how about I give you a letter, and you give me just the three first contacts under that letter?"

I nodded. He was smiling. He enjoyed the little game as he scrolled down his contact list.

"Okay, the letter L," he said, then watched as I wrote down the first three names under the letter L in his contact list.

"Lander Stevens, Lisbon Inc. Secretary, Lydia Brownings."

His brows shot to his hairline as his eyes looked from his phone to my notebook before flickering to meet mine.

"Okay," He scrolled down his phone again. "The letter V."

"Valery Stark, Vladimir Androv. That's all you have under V."

He smiled, shaking his head. We played that little game until it was time for me to go. I let after he promised he would bring a deck of cards next time to teach me how to play poker. Apparently, I would be very good at it, thanks to my memory.

The rest of the day consisted of the same joyful activity. Cleaning.

I was in a considerably chippy mood, though. It must be the chocolate.

The only good thing about the new schedule I had was that I got to leave early. So I reached my second job with plenty of time to spare.

I couldn't believe I had actually forgotten to ask about his name. Again.

Jim was waiting for me at home when I arrived a little after midnight. I was shocked, to say the least. I expected him to disappear after our little argument the night before, so imagine my surprise to find him waiting for me by the kitchen table, eating some macaroni and cheese in the middle of the night.

"Finally, you're late," he said after swallowing a mouthful of food.

I sat across from him after getting my small whiteboard from the kitchen counter.

"Got caught up in work later than usual," I wrote, and he nodded.

"Look," he began, then ran a hand through his blonde hair. "Is me going to school really that important to you?"

"It is," I wrote. "You just have to focus on school. You don't need to worry about working, I'll take care of everything."

"Listen, I want to work," he said. I was about to write a retort on the board when he held up a hand.

"I want to work," he continued, "but I can also go to school. If you think it's important. But I really want to work. I don't like the fact that you're out there working two jobs while all I'm doing is sitting in school".

"Well, you haven't been doing much "sitting in school lately". I held up the whiteboard with an arched brow.

"Point is," he ignored my remark. "I want to work. I'll go to school. But I want to work."

I bit my lip. His eyes were determined. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea? I mean, I worked too when I was in high school. But I did focus on my school work.

He was already absent enough in school, so I worried that if he took on a job, he would get more distracted than he already was.

Or maybe it will keep him busy enough so he could get away from that bad company he seems to keep these days...

I considered that thought for a moment. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea, after all?

"Okay. But I want you to attend school seriously. If I get another text about you getting into trouble, you'll stop. Alright?"

I held the small board up for him to read. He did so, then grinned widely before nodding.

"Don't worry. I'll attend school. Perfectly too," he said, and I felt myself relax, because, for once, he looked me in the eyes while saying something. I truly hoped he was honest.