

## Not A Sparrow Falls

My life has always been a rather boring one, but a happy one. I don't really get why everyone bitches and moans about high school: it's really not THAT bad. Every time you turn on the TV, you see these crappy movies about how bad and evil high school is nowadays. The other day I was watching the Lifetime channel – don't ask why, I was just really bored for some reason – and there was this craptacular flick... allegedly a “true story”, but come on – about some chick who got in trouble for writing Columbine-esque crap in her journal. Well, what do you expect, chick? I mean, come on, if you've got to declare your undying love for two dead dudes from Colorado, do it at home. Or develop handwriting as bad as my friend Kaliya's, and no one would DREAM of having any clue what you were writing.

Tragically, I appear to have gone off topic. It's the story of my life. I suspect I was born off-topic, so let me do a brief recap of how I was born. I'm Paige Raywood, by the way. Paige Marie Raywood.

My mother is Lynn Darden. She's Lynn Darden because she got divorced from my father, Thomas Raywood, when I was six. He lives in Florida, which supplies a pretty cool summer home, albeit one mobbed by obnoxious tourists. After my parents got divorced, my mother married Ray Darden (if men took women's last names instead, maybe he'd have ended up Ray Raywood, which would have been kind of weird). Ray is pretty cool, in meaning that he's nice, but he's also excessively boring, and so is my mother. My father is less boring, but that's probably because I don't see him all that often and absence makes the heart grow fonder.

I live in East Rutherford, New Jersey, the most boring town on the face of the Earth. Everyone around here lives to go to Giants games at Giants Stadium. In other words, no one has any kind of life to speak of.

Which is why the fact that anything interesting ever happened to my friends and I was an amazing experience. It would probably not have been as amazing if we had lived in Los Angeles or New York, or if we had been characters on one of those family dramas, but it was amazing to us. What I'm talking about is when we met Clarke Pascal.

First, let me explain who I mean by “my friends”.

My best friend of all-time is Rez Thompson. Her real name is actually Lillian, but everyone calls her Rez because she's a huge Nine Inch Nails fan (and Nine Inch Nails is headed

by Trent REZnor... get it?) We grew up together, on the same street; our mothers even grew up together and went to high school together. So, we've known each other since before she was Rez, back when she was Lily or whatever she was back then. We used to sit on Rez's porch and play with her teddy bears, making them have pretend tea parties and stuff. We got into the same kind of music and always did the same kind of things. The only place I didn't follow Rez was church, because I don't really have the motivation to sit in a wooden seat for an hour and listen to an old guy tell me things I could read on my own if I really wanted to know them.

So, when we got to freshman year of high school, we were still best friends, but there were two other members of our clique, as well.

The first to join us was Allison "Alli" Corder. Alli is very hard to get to know, because she doesn't like a whole lot of people. Sometimes I'm not even entirely sure she likes US. But Alli moved here from Georgia in eighth grade, and we bonded over a mutual love of KoRn. Now, personally, I think Slipknot is better than KoRn, but Alli would beat me about the head with a rock if I were to proclaim this to the masses. Alli's a blonde, though I'm not sure if it's her natural color or not. She usually has her hair tinted with pink. She is obsessed with Jonathan Davis, from KoRn, and is convinced that she will marry him at some point in time. The fact that he is already married is quite an object of consternation with her, and she hates his wife, Deven.

Then, there's Kaliya Camden. She just moved here at the beginning of freshman year, but we all hit it off with her pretty fast. She wasn't a KoRn fan when we met her, but we converted her pretty easily. She likes Munky, the guitar player. Unlike Jonathan, Munky is divorced, so in four years Kaliya will probably have an easier task ahead of her than Alli does. Kaliya is kind of shy and times, but she's a lot of fun. Her stepmother is a real bitch, though, and she is always grounding her.

I suspect that I've gotten off-track again, but let me explain where all this is going. It was December, nearly the end of our first semester of freshman year (Thank God!) and Kaliya, Rez, Alli and I were sitting at our usual lunch table. Kaliya had just been in another fight with her on-again, off-again kind-of-sort-of best friend, Joan-Marie. Joan-Marie went to Catholic grade school, so we didn't really know her that well, except that Kaliya had been really close with her over the summer. However, Joan-Marie had a boyfriend whom none of us could really stand, and Kaliya and she were like oil and water sometimes. They were always fighting, and then making up on the spur of the moment. Most of the time, lately, their fights centered around Joan-Marie's

boyfriend, Eddy, who had a tardy list the size of Mount Everest and a rather poorly-spelled MySpace account to boot.

“I can’t believe her,” Kaliya was ranting, “Ugh... She’s choosing everyone over that NASTY boyfriend of hers.”

“Can the topic please be changed to something a bit more photogenic?” Alli inquired.

“Like Deven?” Kaliya shot back, grinning. Alli glowered.

“There’s a new kid in my English class,” Rez told us. “His name’s Clarke, and he’s really cute.”

“Ooh!” I exclaimed, always on the lookout for new cute guys. “Is he in this lunch? Point him out PLEASE.”

“Hold your horses, Paige,” Rez said, “Let me look around. Oh, there he is. Aww, he’s sitting alone.” She pointed over to a deserted table, where a boy with reddish-brown hair was sitting, reading a book. He looked very lonely, as if he was the only person left in the world... No matter how incredibly pretentious it seems when I actually USE that phrase. “We’ve got room here, we should invite him over.”

“Miss Rez, collector of weirdos and outcasts world-wide,” Alli said, biting on the pen she was using to write in her diary.

“Of course. How do you think I got you?” Rez teased, grinning and walking over to the table that Clarke was sitting at. She bent over somewhat, and we could see the two of them talking, but they were too far out of earshot to be understandable. A few seconds later, however, he was collecting his things and walking over to our table. Alli was rolling her eyes, slightly, but also observing Clarke in a way that made it obvious that she was interested but trying not to appear so.

Rez and Clarke arrived a few seconds later, sitting across from Alli and Kaliya and next to me.

“Hey, you guys,” Rez said, “This is Clarke.”

“Hi,” Clarke said, blushing. I locked eyes with him and felt like I was going to faint. His eyes were these beautiful blue eyes... I love blue eyes on a guy (my favorite would HAVE to be Corey Taylor, of course). I mean, Clarke wasn’t anything to write home about, but he was definitely cute. And I was probably about to screw it up, because words were not properly coming out of my mouth.

“Hi, Clarke,” I managed to stammer, “I’m Paige.”

“Hi, Paige,” Clarke responded. “So, is there anything to do around here?”

We all immediately chorused, “No.”

\*\*\*

My nervousness around Clarke faded almost immediately. He became “one of the gang” nearly before the end of that first lunch.

“So, what brings you here to East Rutherford, Land of Boredom?” I inquired.

“Well, I’m originally from Kansas,” Clarke replied, “But, um, my mom moves around a lot, ‘cause she’s always changing jobs, so we keep moving around... I’ve been in Colorado, Florida, um... South Carolina – the beach was cool but the people were lame – and, um... oh, yeah! Michigan. So, um, now my mom’s working up in New York City... she’s, like, a ticket-taker at a big movie theater in Times Square.”

“New York!” Rez exclaimed, “Only the best city EVER.”

“Yeah,” I chimed, “We actually just went there, like, a month ago. To the Hammerstein Ballroom, to see KoRn.”

“Nice,” Clarke replied, “I’m not really a big KoRn fan, though.”

“What DO you listen to, then?” asked Kaliya.

“Well, I don’t know, basically whatever’s on the radio, I guess,” he continued, “I like some classic rock, too, like Metallica and things like that. I don’t really have a favorite band, though.”

“That’s cool,” I said, “So, what classes are you stuck in?”

“Well, I have Biology, and English, and gym – ugh – and, um, my last class is History.”

“So, I assume you’re a freshman, I guess, right?”

“Yeah,” Clarke replied, “But I’m fifteen, not fourteen, because my grades got screwed up somewhere in changing schools. So I should really be in tenth grade.”

“That sucks,” I said.

Our discussion was, alas, interrupted by a Snapple bottle flying through the air and landing on Alli’s lunch tray. She glowered, and we exchanged looks. It didn’t take a genius to

figure out exactly who had hurled it at us, and she immediately got up and stalked over to the table two behind us. It was the table that the “preps” sat at – a bunch of snotty, snooty types that liked to rule Meadowlands because they thought they were the cat’s meow. The two who liked to mess with us most of all were Rosie and Steffie Rutgers, Kaliya’s stepsisters. They were completely unlike her in basically every way – they liked to put people down because of everything from looks to voices to the way people walked. They just weren’t very nice, but in a different way than, say, Alli wasn’t very nice. Unlike Alli, they seemed to want to go out of the way to provoke an altercation with people. Alli, on the other hand, was just very likely to get fired up as soon as any kind of altercation began. Which was exactly what she was doing right about now.

“What the hell was that?” Alli raged, as Kaliya, Rez, Clarke and I got up and walked over to her, in an attempt (most likely in vain) to try to stop her from getting herself suspended.

“What do you mean?” Steffie asked in a syrupy-sweet voice. “We weren’t doing ANYTHING, were we, Rosie?”

“Yeah!” Rosie shot back, “We weren’t doing anything, so why are you talking to us, you loser?”

“Because you threw something at me, you slut!” Alli shot back. As you can tell, “slut” happens to be on Alli’s list of favorite words.

“I didn’t throw anything! Go get screwed, you dyke,” replied Steffie. Alli clenched her fists and stepped forward.

“It’s not worth it, Alli, stop it!” Rez said, grabbing her hand. She glared at Steffie and Rosie. “You two should be ashamed of yourselves. One of these days you’re not going to be able to pull this kind of crap anymore.” Steffie and Rosie just snickered.

“I think the circus is in town, Rez,” said Rosie, “Why don’t you go join it with your other freaky little friends?” She turned to Kaliya and then added with a grin. “Oh... Hi, sis.”

“Come on, let’s go,” Rez snapped, nearly pulling Alli towards our table. She rolled her eyes and sat down, glaring at the other table for a moment before returning her gaze to us.

“Doesn’t that stuff get to you?” Clarke asked quietly. “Do they do that stuff a lot?”

“Yeah, basically every day,” Rez replied, “But, whatever, we get used to it...” She looked over at Alli, who was nearly in tears. “At least I do.”

“They’re just a bunch of bitches, aren’t they?” asked Clarke, shrugging, “They’re the same at every school I’ve been to.” He looked at Alli and gave her a reassuring smile, then opened his backpack and pulled out a Hershey bar. “Hey, I’ve got one of these left, want it?” She smiled back warily and took it from his hand, mumbling thanks.

It was then that I decided that I really liked Clarke Pascal.

\*\*\*

December began to whisk through and before any of us knew it, it was the last week of school before Christmas break. Well, I always call it Christmas break, but apparently now it’s officially “winter break” so no one gets offended or anything. I’ve never really gotten the point of this, because if I were Jewish or Muslim or whatever I wouldn’t really care what the hell they called it as long as I got a week off from school, but there you go.

Rez had gotten the idea in her head that Kaliya, Alli, she and I should go to New York City to do our Christmas shopping so we could get stuff that was actually pretty good. The two of us had succeeded in years of getting our parents paperweights and calendars and other things that they had acted appreciative about getting but had never actually used, and she’d decided that it was time for a change, now that we were in high school and all. Also, we all agreed that there was always a good reason to go to New York.

So, the four of us hailed the bus from Giants Stadium and made our way off to the city so nice they named it twice. Along the way, we began discussing where each of us was allegedly supposed to be.

“I said I was sleeping at Rez’s house... which is, well, HALF-true,” said Kaliya. That was usual, because Kaliya’s stepmother never let her do much of anything. She was convinced that Rez, Alli and I were devil-worshippers and refused to accept any evidence to the contrary. It really upset me, sometimes, because none of us had done anything to deserve it. Just because we weren’t popular, didn’t listen to boybands, and didn’t spend all of our time buying lipstick at the mall didn’t mean there was something wrong with us. But then again, as Kaliya had pointed out once or twice, maybe being hated by her stepmother was the greatest compliment we could ever

be paid, because I would never want to be anything like Rosie and Steffie. That would just be unlivable.

“I said I was sleeping over Rez’s, too,” Alli chimed. “But I don’t think my mom’s really going to care either way.” Alli’s mother is a bit on the odd side. She can sometimes be really nice, but other times she can get really angry at Alli and her sister Kerri about the stupidest stuff. Because Alli can’t really figure out what kind of mood she’s in half the time, she just never tells her anything. I shrugged.

“I just told my mom and Ray that I was going out,” I added, “They just said to be back by ten.” My mom and Ray were all right, as far as parents go. They weren’t anywhere near as cool as Rez’s parents, who are the coolest parents ever to walk the earth, but they weren’t borderline evil like Kaliya’s stepmom or neurotic like Alli’s mom, so I had it pretty good.

“It was my mom’s idea,” Rez said, shrugging and giving a grin. “She said, ‘Don’t you girls NEED a day out in the city?’”

“Like I always say,” I said with a sigh, “Rez’s ‘rents ARE the coolest.” Rez blushed.

We ended up in the city around one o’clock, and started off with going around Times Square. We hit the Virgin Megastore, then a bunch of the tourists shops, before heading back to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street station and discussing where to go next.

“We should hit Chinatown,” suggested Alli, “Those Chinese shops always have the cutest little model animals. I want to get one for Kerri.”

“I think we should hit Greenwich Village after that,” I chimed, “I saw a show on TV where they were showing some of the shops in there, and they looked really nice – but kind of expensive!”

We continued walking until we found ourselves somewhat lost, and over at the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

“I think we made a wrong turn somewhere,” said Rez, “We’ll have to go out and check the sign... Hey, wait, you guys...” She pointed out the window of the terminal. “Look on the side of the street...” she continued. We all followed her finger again, and saw a red-haired boy walking down the road, next to the theater. “He’s the splitting image of Clarke, isn’t he?”

“That’s so weird,” I said, “He is. But what would Clarke be doing here? I mean, I know his mom works up here, but what are the chances? Let’s get closer.”

We walked out the door and tried to surreptitiously move closer to the boy, without him realizing that we were scoping him out. We dropped behind a patch of bushes and found ourselves now directly behind him. There was suddenly no question – we were definitely staring at Clarke Pascal. But what was he doing? He was walking up and down the road, now, seemingly pacing and gesturing to cars going by.

“What the hell is he doing?” Alli whispered, “Is he trying to hitch a ride or something? It’s New York! He can just take the...” She shut up as a car pulled up alongside Clarke, and we all craned our heads to hear.

“Fifty... fifty?” Clarke’s voice.

“Forty,” a deep voice replied.

“Forty-five,” Clarke’s response.

“Okay,” the other voice. The door opened and Clarke popped inside the car. The car drove off, and my jaw dropped.

“That couldn’t...” Alli began, “You’ve got to be shitting me.”

“I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation,” Rez began. She scratched her head a moment. “No, there’s not.”

“Is Clarke dealing drugs or something?” I asked, not really getting what was going on. “It sounded like they were arguing about a price.”

“Clarke’s selling something, but it’s not drugs,” Alli said knowingly. “You guys, come on. He gets in the guy’s CAR after arguing about a PRICE. Clarke’s selling tricks!”

“What?” wondered Kaliya. Alli sighed.

“He’s a prostitute. Clear and simple. Our friend is a whore.”

\*\*\*

I found myself playing this over and over again on our way home.

“But WHY?” I wondered, “Why would he do that?” I felt betrayed, actually, and I didn’t entirely know WHY I felt that way. Clarke had seemed so nice, so innocent, so sweet... Now I wasn’t sure if I even liked him at all. How could I be friends with someone who was selling

himself on the street to people he didn't even know? I cringed to think about what Clarke was actually DOING with these guys.

The next day, we went to school and at lunch we sat with Clarke like always, but a certain tension hung in the air.

“So,” Alli inquired, “How have YOU been lately, Clarke?” There was a bit of an edge to her voice.

“Not too good,” Clarke replied, “My mom’s boyfriend kicked me out of the house.” Alli gasped and I immediately felt bad for what I’d been thinking about Clarke before.

“That’s awful,” Rez said, “Where are you staying?” He shrugged.

“Around.” That was all he would say. “Around.”

\*\*\*

The days continued to go by, and when we were together we would always end up discussing Clarke’s situation, but never coming to any ideas about how to fix it. I couldn’t very well consider my mom and Ray letting a guy live in our house with me, and even Rez’s parents weren’t THAT inviting. Shelters were almost as bad as wherever Clarke was actually living, and the possibility of calling CYS on Clarke’s mom would probably just get him tossed in some horrid foster home. It was a total Catch 22 and there was no answer to it. Until...

“Paige, darling, did you hear?” my mom said excitedly as she walked through the door on one Wednesday evening. “There’s a raffle going on for a whole five grand. It’s down at the community center, it’s to raise money for a new elementary school or something. I think I’ll toss in a chance or two, how about you?”

My mind began working faster than a movie projector. Five grand. Five grand could get mad apartment rent for Clarke. Five grand could get him off the streets... Five grand could do it.

\*\*\*

I presented my grand scheme to the others the next morning.

“We can stuff the box with entries in Clarke’s name so he’ll HAVE to win!” I said, “All of us can chip in...”

“I could even get Joan-Marie and Eddy to help out,” Kaliya said, rolling her eyes, “If I can stop fighting with her. When’s the drawing?”

“Christmas Day,” I replied, “So we have about two weeks.”

“How much are entries?” she asked.

“Five dollars each.”

“I’ve got one hundred dollars,” Rez offered. “I was going to get an Xbox, but... It can wait...”

“I’ve got at least forty saved up,” I chimed.

“I have, like, thirty-five,” Alli offered.

“I have fifty, I think,” Kaliya said. “My Aunt Clarice sent me it for Christmas ahead of time.”

“Who is this mysterious Aunt Clarice?” I asked. “You’ve never mentioned her.”

“Oh, she lives in California, I never see her, she just sends money every so often.”

“Best kind of aunt!” Alli said, “My aunts like to buy me hideous sweaters and pinch my cheeks, and YOURS send you money!”

That’s Alli for you.

\*\*\*

I became overcome with a need to see Clarke, and in private. I didn’t know what I would say, but I felt like I had to see him when the others weren’t around. So, on Saturday, I took the bus to New York City, without telling anyone where I was going. I told Mom and Ray that I was going to a movie, and hoped that they wouldn’t think to interrogate me or anything when I got back.

Sucking in my breath, I arrived at the Port Authority and walked over to where I had seen Clarke before. I wondered if I’d even see him – what if he didn’t come back? What if he frequented different places? What if he wasn’t even here today, and what if I was making a huge mistake? What would I even say to him, anyway? It wasn’t like I knew him that well... REZ would know what to say, I thought with a sigh. Why did it always seem like Rez had me bested on everything? She’d always had the cooler parents, the better house, was nicer and was

prettier... It was time for me to do something to stop living in my best friend's shadow, or I'd really start resenting her. Now was the time to stop saying "let Rez deal with it". Now was the time to do what I needed to do, and that was to help Clarke.

It seemed like my internal monologue had done its trick, because I suddenly caught a glimpse of a red-haired boy walking out of a vehicle, towards the bus station. I quickened my pace to meet him, and I exclaimed loudly, "CLARKE!"

His head turned sharply (he had begun to gaze at one of the buildings on his left), and he stared at me.

"Paige!" he said in shock.

And then he collapsed on the sidewalk.

I ran over and knelt by his side, asking, "Clarke? Are you okay?"

He groaned, and rolled over towards me. I could see his face clearly now, and I noticed that his upper lip was busted.

"What happened? Who did this?" I asked.

"Doesn't matter, I'll be fine," he mumbled.

"No you won't!" I screamed at him. A few people walking by stared at me, but then turned away and continued right along on their way. "We're going somewhere and you're getting cleaned up." But as I helped him to his feet, I realized that there was no place around here that we could go. The Virgin Megastore was close by, but it wasn't like we could get privacy in there... I realized that Clarke knew New York far better than I did, so I inquired, "Where can we go to be alone?"

"I know a hotel," he responded, walking painfully, putting all of his weight on his right leg.

"Did you hurt your leg?" I asked him. He shook his head.

"It's something else," was all he would say.

"Where's the hotel?" I asked. He nodded towards the subway stop, and we climbed on the 1.

"Get off here," he mumbled as we passed Houston (pronounced "House-ton", as I learned) Street. We climbed off and, in silence, he led me towards a small building on which was scribbled "The Houston Motel - \$30 for three hours."

I wasn't entirely sure how prices usually fared with by-the-hour motels, but for a place like New York City, this seemed pretty low-rent even by seedy-motel standards. However, I followed Clarke inside, wondering to myself what the hell my mom would think if she knew I was cavorting around sleazy motels.

We walked inside, and Clarke scrounged out thirty bucks from his pocket and laid it on the counter. The receptionist, an oft-tattooed man who seemed to be in his mid-fifties, gave me a look like he was about to ask how old I was, but then appeared to decide that he didn't want to know. He simply handed me a key with the number 213 on it, then pointed upstairs.

"Is there an elevator, sir?" I inquired. The man nodded and pointed to the left, and I took Clarke's hand and led him to the door. We pressed the button to the second floor, and I walked him to room 213. Opening the door, I put him on the bed and sat next to him, sighing. "Clarke, what the hell happened?"

"Why are you even here, Paige?" he inquired, moaning and laying back against his pillow.

"I got worried about you," I admitted. "What happened to you?"

"I got beat up," was all he would say.

"Here, let me help you..." I said, walking into the bathroom and wetting a rag. I walked back in and began to wipe away the dried blood collecting on his upper lip. "Where else are you hurt?" He blushed and gestured with his head downwards. I got slightly flushed myself and gently inquired, "Can I help you?"

"I think I'll do it myself, thanks," he said with a small smile, "Just help me get in there..." I took him by the hand and maneuvered him over to the bathroom, before walking out and staring at the wall of the motel. The paint was chipping and I thought I could smell something really suspicious. With a sigh, I allowed the reality of the situation to sink in. In one sense, I was in the last place I was supposed to be. Hell, I was a fourteen year old girl. What was I doing in a sleazy motel?

But in another sense, I was in the place I was supposed to be. I had to help Clarke. Our scheme with the raffle HAD to work. I HAD to get him out of this life before it killed him...

I sighed, trying to figure out what the hell I was supposed to say and do. I wasn't THAT naïve, I could figure out that something had gone wrong and Clarke had gotten... it weirded me out to even think of the word applied to a friend of mine... raped...

I tried to remember all of those random little pamphlets that I had leafed through at Meadowlands, that had stuff about “what to do if you know someone who got raped” and whatever. But usually those were written about people who got date-raped or whatever... Not guys who are male prostitutes... FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD male prostitutes.

I sighed. What would my parents ever think of I told them about this? If this were some cheesy TV show, I could just go, “Mom, Ray, my friend is hooking on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and we want to help him, what should I do?” ... And they’d come up with an idea and it would be resolved by the end of the hour... But real life just wasn’t like that.

A few moments later, the bathroom door opened and Clarke shakily made his way out into the bedroom, before nearly collapsing on the bed beside me.

I put a hand on his shoulder and began to give him a backrub, the same way I used to do for my father when I was a little kid and he seemed tense. Clarke smiled shyly and eased into my hands.

“Clarke, why?” I asked. Those two words seemed to ask a mountain of questions. It asked, why are you doing these disgusting things? Why did someone hurt you? Why did you let them? Why are you here and not home in your bed? Why am I here and not doing whatever I should be doing? And why couldn’t I keep away from you if I tried?

He stared at me with those blue eyes of his and seemed to understand all of those questions, and the pause that he took before answering made me realize he was still trying to figure out the answer to at least one of them.

“Paige,” he said slowly. “So, you know? You know everything?”

“Not everything,” I replied quietly. “I think I’ve figured out... what you do.” He blushed, looking at me with the kind of look that someone must get when they’re at the end of their rope, when they have no human dignity left... I wanted to cry. “But that’s all right,” I said gently, running a finger over his neck. “You’re still the same Clarke, right?” He shrugged.

“You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

“No... Well, Kaliya, Alli, and Rez already know. They were there with me when we saw you... Clarke,” I said slowly, “Why are you doing this?” He shrugged.

“Better than home.”

“What’s going on at home?” I couldn’t fathom any home worse than what was going on out of the streets.

“Worse than this,” he mumbled. “My mom’s boyfriend kicked me out of the house, I told you that already. He did it ‘cause I stuck up for her when he was beating the shit out of her. So, he beat the shit out of me and said that if I didn’t like if I didn’t have to live there and could go live on the streets.”

I stared in shock, how he could say these things so matter-of-factly, without any hint of fear or anger, just as if he was saying that he was going to the store. I started to rub his back again, gently, laying my head on his shoulder. I felt so safe with him, for some reason, that was why I was taking these liberties that I had never taken with a boy before.

“It will be okay, Clarke,” I whispered gently in his ear. “Okay.” Clarke nodded. Then he sighed.

“You’d better get home, Paige. People will be looking for you.”

“And people aren’t looking for YOU?” I shot back, “You’ve gotta go somewhere.”

“I have enough money, I can stay at the motel until...” he trailed off, but I caught the unspoken ending: until I can go back to “work”.

“Are you sure?” was all I could say in response. My hands felt as if they were physically tied together. I wanted to scream and pound the walls, but in this nasty motel they would probably fall down if I did it. He nodded. I was powerless... Unless this plan worked... unless this plan worked... This plan had to work.

\*\*\*

I went home on the next bus... There was nothing else that I could do. The next day, I told Rez everything. She had dropped by my house to pick up her Nintendo DS, which had somehow ended up wedged under my bed, and I took her into the basement, where I knew my mom and Ray couldn’t hear us, not that they’d really care to.

I blathered out the whole damned story and I was nearly in tears by its end. Rez gripped my shoulder gently and brought me into an embrace.

“Paige... Our plan will work, somehow...”

“But how... it just seems like Clarke is... freaking... like forgotten, like he’s slipped under the cracks.”

“Paige...” Rez said quietly, “I hate to get all religious on you, but... There’s a part in the Bible when Jesus says something like... that you can buy sparrows for a cent... but not one of them falls without God noticing... And that we as the chosen people of God are worth far more than sparrows.” She looked into my eyes. “Clarke is worth far more than a sparrow, and we WILL save him.” I nodded. I wanted to believe it, but it seemed damn near impossible. We looked at each other for a moment, staring wordlessly. Rez sucked in her breath and suddenly exclaimed, “CRAP! Tomorrow is Christmas Eve! The drawing is TOMORROW! We need to buy those tickets!”

We jumped up and were immediately upstairs, calling Kaliya and Alli and telling them to meet us at the parking lot behind Giants Stadium. Hesitating slightly, Rez added that Kaliya should bring Joan-Marie, if she could, being that we needed all the help we could get. I just hoped that Eddy wouldn’t be coming along.

I sighed – the differences between Eddy and Clarke were so stark that they were nearly blaring, now that I looked at them. Eddy was brash and obnoxious, a big fan of telling people things they had no desire to know. He also hung on Joan-Marie’s every move, and the two were constantly touching each other, most often he would be spotted batting her ponytail like he was a cat playing with a ball. Gross.

And here he was, possibly getting involved in something to do with MY Clarke.

Wait... MY Clarke? Where was all this coming from? I’d never even LIKED guys before – well, except for Corey Taylor – and now suddenly I was in over my head with someone with baggage like Clarke’s... But, I resolved, Clarke’s baggage was not his fault... He was kind, gentle, friendly, loving... I closed my eyes and tried to imagine his gentle red curls, but all I could see was Eddy’s greasy black hair and that moronic look on his face. I wanted to hurl.

But this was no time to be projectile-vomiting. We had to get to Giants Stadium! We rushed out of my house with a quick yell of something barely intelligible to tell my mom and Ray where we were off to, and then we began down the road (luckily, I only live a few blocks from the stadium). A few minutes after we arrived, Kaliya, Alli, and then Joan-Marie rolled in (the latter, thankfully, minus Eddy).

“We’re buying raffle tickets,” Alli said, with a glare at Joan-Marie. “We’re buying as many as we can and all putting the name Clarke Pascal on them.”

“...Why?”

“Don’t ask questions, just do it,” Alli snapped. Joan-Marie looked offended, but also slightly afraid of Alli, and didn’t say anything.

We began our trek off to the town hall/community center without another word. When we arrived, the guy collecting the money seemed rather confused when we all shoved our money in his face and requested the tickets, but handed them out and retired to the back while we sat on a bench and filled them out. I took the time to write out “Clarke Pascal” very clearly on each ticket, while Alli was doing the old trick of writing a “C” on every ticket, then going back and adding an “L”, etc. Kaliya was scribbling, and I corrected a few of her tickets because the name looked like something in Sanskrit. Joan-Marie wrote the slowest of us all, but at least her writing was legible and she had managed to only misspell Clarke’s name slightly (with no e on the end of Clarke, but an e on the end of Pascal). When we were finished, (having put each of our phone numbers on the tickets, since we didn’t know Clarke’s or even if he had a cell phone) we presented the tickets to the guy behind the counter, who luckily didn’t take a look at the names and just stuck them in the bin.

“Clarke HAS to win,” I said, as we walked towards Rez’s house.

“Well, the drawing is tomorrow,” she pointed out, “We’ll find out then. We just have to have faith, I guess.”

\*\*\*

I didn’t sleep that night. I just kept tossing and turning and hoping. Even praying, though I’m not big on God and stuff like that – seems to work for Rez, though.

The next morning, I woke up at 6AM on the dot, and ran downstairs. My mom was staring at me like I’d just grown a second head, and one that liked to do the tango or something. I ran right over to Rez’s house and started banging on her door. Her mother, to her eternal credit, let me in and did not hit me over the head for disturbing her slumber – can’t say I’ll do the same when and if I ever have kids. Rez and I then spent the next few hours hopping up and down in her room, while listening to KoRn to relax (we chose Untitled because it has the only songs that KoRn has done that can really be known as, well, relaxing).

By eight o’ clock we figured that civilization had probably woken up, and this included Kaliya and Alli. We walked over to Alli’s house first, then to Kaliya’s. Unfortunately, Kaliya’s bitchy stepmother answered the door.

“WHAT? What are YOU doing here at this hour?” she complained.

“Um, it’s eight o’ clock,” Alli mumbled. Kaliya’s evil stepmother glared. I wondered where she kept the pointed hat, and whether she wore it for special occasions.

“It’s TOO early on a day OFF,” the stepmother said, grumbling, “But I’ll go get her.” Instead of going to get her, the stepmother simply screamed up the stairs, “KALIYA! GET DOWN HERE NOW!” A few seconds later, Kaliya was standing in the doorway, looking irritated until she saw Rez, Alli, and I. Then, she still looked irritated, but brushed off her stepmother and followed us outside.

“I WAS sleeping, y’know?” she pointed out. I shrugged.

“I couldn’t sleep... Clarke...”

“I know,” Rez said sympathetically. “I keep thinking about everything that could go wrong!”

“I know!” Kaliya said, “What if some asshole bought the winning ticket?”

I sighed.

“When is the drawing?”

“Five hours...” said Rez. “Let’s hang out at my house.”

With a shot to my heart, I wondered if Clarke was even still alive. What if whoever had hurt him had come back to finish the job? I shuddered, and Rez noticed, putting a hand on my shoulder. Alli glanced over and gave us an odd look, but I chose to ignore it.

We left about Rez’s house two hours later, with what was left of our money (or, more specifically, our parents’ money) and started to walking around for the remaining three hours. We ended up frequenting Giants Stadium, counting scalpers and trying to cool the butterflies in our stomachs. By the time that the drawing was about to begin, I was nearly about to crawl out of my skin. I thought that I would throw up or scream or something, but I managed to not do any of those things and simply walk to the community center in silence. I wondered vaguely if, if one of Joan-Marie’s tickets got picked, if she’d pick up the phone and claim it for Clarke. She didn’t get it and she never could, but I hoped that she could do that one thing for him.

I whimpered quietly. Clarke. He was so kind and soft and gentle... And he’d been in that hotel room with me, alone, no one around and he hadn’t even tried to make a move. I wondered if Clarke was gay, then decided that it didn’t matter. I loved him, and that was that. I was in love with Clarke Pascal.

We found a row of seats near the front of the auditorium in the center (which we hadn't even known was there – for a building we passed on a daily basis, I'd never actually been inside the community center before), and waited nervously. I was biting my nails, Rez was doing something that looked like a cross between praying, yoga, and interpretive dance, and Alli kept mumbling stuff about how Deven was a slut.

“And now we have the \$5,000 drawing,” said some guy who I guessed was the mayor or something – I'd seen him on TV once but had no clue what his name was and really didn't care. “And the winner is...” We all sucked in one breath, waiting for the announcement of Clarke's name. It never came.

We had lost.

\*\*\*

Later that day, I fidgeted at home, about ready to bawl. I had really thought it would work. I walked in to where Mom and Ray were sitting at the dining room table. I sat down. I burst into tears and explained the whole thing from the beginning. I felt like I was a two-year-old. My mother stared at me a moment when I was done, and brushed back one of my bangs – I hate when she does that.

“The only thing to do is...” My head began to trail off. They'd call CYS. Clarke would go away. I'd never see him again. “...is to have Clarke move into the basement.”

“Wait... WHAT?!” I exclaimed.

“Paige Marie, you march out there right now and call him,” my mother commanded. “He's been through enough, and he needs some hot chocolate.”

I picked up the phone and began to dial his number...

And Clarke Pascal moved into my basement. It's kind of interesting having him there, but sometimes a pain in the ass as well. We're not quite boyfriend and girlfriend, in fact I don't really know what we are. I'm still in love with Corey Taylor, and I'm not sure Clarke can fill the void. However, they're both redheads... And have blue eyes...

So, I suppose Clarke does well enough.