

Lovely, Dark, and Deep

Justina Chen



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CHAPTER TWO

I shiver, cold with sweat, lion-stalked in the middle of the savanna. My heart pounds. Escape is impossible. My skin itches and prickles and stings, assaulted by legions of mosquitoes and tsetse flies. Waking from a dead faint is nothing like stirring from a good sleep, all groggy and blurry, wispy dream remnants floating away into the ether-space of happy. Instead, think: nightmare.

“Mom?” I whisper. “Dad?”

My eyes blink open, slowly. There are strange men, and we are moving, and I’m lying in a cot, strapped down. For one panicked moment, I almost believe that I’ve been kidnapped. Isn’t this the very situation that my parents warned me about when I turned ten and was allowed to bike down the street by myself for the first time? What was I supposed to do to escape a locked van? But the men are in uniforms: crisp white shirtsleeves stitched with official-looking Medic One patches. One tells me, “You passed out. We’re taking you to the Emergency Department.”

“Roz?” I ask. “My little sister!”

“She’s with your friend.”

Friend? What friend? Then I remember Thor and fainting in front of him, not to mention hordes of strangers, and I’ve just met the guy for a nano-second and they left Roz with him? There are no words for this crisis. My parents are going to skin me alive when they find out that I’ve left her behind. As if the paramedics divine my thoughts, the older one with a buzz cut assures me, “Your sister said that your parents are already on their way from Portland.” He gives me a grandfatherly pat on the shoulder, and I

moan. Who jerks away first is unclear and doesn't matter; I'm relieved that no one is touching me. "Just rest."

I don't need to be told twice. I close my eyes.

...

Where other (normal) parents might hover and fret and liquefy into blubbery pools of utter incompetence in a crisis, mine shine. Of course they do. They're professional crisis managers. Throw in an emergency room? They'd go bioluminescent, glowing at the opportunity to come to my rescue. Only my parents aren't here. Which left me alone to contend with the on-call doctor at the Children's Hospital who ordered approximately a billion and one tests: a CT scan, a couple of vials of blood (!), and an EKG. And now I find myself the lab rat of a pediatric dermatologist, who is hmm-ing and hunh-ing in a not-so-comforting way in my new exam room in a different ward at the hospital. Dr. Anderson looks young enough (no stubble on his preternaturally smooth chin) to be sitting next to me in physiology, especially the way he's worrying his top lip like he's cramming for a test. He very well could be. As soon as I made it to registration in the Emergency Department, the nurse called Mom, who authored and emailed a mini-textbook on my medical history in ten minutes flat.

"Hmm. Are you sure there's no family history of lupus?" Dr. Anderson asks, peering at me like I'm a pickled organ he wants to dissect.

"Pretty sure. Was it just a heat stroke?" I'd seen my Auntie Ruth have one of those during our trail run on Tiger Mountain when it hit ninety-eight degrees last summer. I self-diagnose. "I was nauseous and dizzy, and I fainted."

"No, you have a rash, too," says Dr. Anderson. "Try not to scratch."

Which, of course, makes me notice that I am, in fact, itchy, and I do, in fact, have a blotchy red rash running along both arms. When Dr. Anderson returns to the intake form, frowning because Mom writes at the speed of her

thoughts, rapid, dense, and always indecipherable, I surreptitiously check my phone. My parents ought to have all the answers about my condition any moment now. Instead, there's a text from Aminta.

Aminta: *ARE YOU OKAY?!?!?*

Me: *Where's Roz?*

Me: *And how's the bake sale?!*

"Could your mom have forgotten someone?" Dr. Anderson asks, looking up with his finger on the lupus question, then frowns at the sight of me with my phone. I quickly pocket it. "Somewhere in your family?"

"Not a chance."

"Hunh."

Obviously, the good doctor has zero clue who my parents are: the principals and cofounders of Lee & Li Communications, who can transform the very worst crises into media-darling gold. All questions are locked down, checked off, and sealed shut with solid answers. So if Mom says there's no lupus in the family, then that is as indisputable as the fact that the sun will always rise from the east.

My phone buzzes.

"Maybe it's my parents," I say. The doctor nods. But it's Aminta again.

Aminta: *I took Roz to Bumbershoot.*

Aminta: *WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?!*

Aminta: *LITERALLY! WHO CARES ABOUT A STUPID
BAKE SALE.*

I do, because it's never just a stupid bake sale, not to me, anyway. As Lee & Li have intoned through the years, we speak for the speechless. They view their corporate clients as their waiter job to pay for all of their pro bono work for nonprofit humanitarian groups. Well, I bake for the powerless and

homeless and everyone in between. But just to make sure that I'm not dying, I ask the doctor, "Lupus isn't fatal, is it?"

"Hmm. Lupus is a possibility, not a diagnosis. Oh, wait!" Dr. Anderson grins as he holds up a finger as if that is good bedside manner and says almost gleefully, "I've got an idea. I'll be right back."

Even before he's safely out of the room, I begin to research my symptoms with the intensity of a scientist on the verge of a major breakthrough, pecking blurry fast on my phone. (BBC reported that cell phones don't really interfere — much — with medical equipment.)

Too soon, the doctor returns; I tuck my phone to my side.

"I don't have any of the classic signs of lupus. No butterfly rash on my face," I tell him and hope I'm right since I didn't have time to fact-check with the mirror.

"Perhaps," Dr. Anderson concedes reluctantly, yet I can see his jaw tighten with frustration, the same way Dad's does when he can't resolve a client's problem. "But being sensitive to the sun is a common sign of lupus." Emphatic tap on the iPad screen he's holding up to me now. "Photosensitivity, which can also be caused by vitiligo, porphyria, maybe xeroderma pigmentosa."

None of these sound particularly benign. What's worse, I'm back to being scared, flailing around without concrete information. So I ask, "Okay, worst-case scenario. Am I dying?"

Just then, a blur of navy blue and motorcycle boots sweeps into the room and stops at my hospital bed. It's Auntie Ruth with her distinctive scent of motor oil and cedar and risk.

"Viola! No, you're not dying," she says immediately, her brown eyes snapping with conviction. It is a very good thing that my skin no longer burns since she wraps her arm tight around me, then glares at the doctor. "Did you tell her she's dying?"

The doctor audibly gulps. How could he not be in awe? Auntie Ruth's wearing her usual uniform: custom-made mechanic's coveralls from Tokyo.

She's got one in every color of the rainbow. Today's front pocket is embroidered with her first name in hot pink, and the back features the winged logo of her auto repair shop. The waist is cinched in to accentuate her curves, and the pant legs are rolled up so you can see her beat-up boots that are scuffed gray from overuse on a real Harley, not distressed at some factory. The uniform is so sexy-utilitarian-cute that Aminta has been coveting one, but Auntie Ruth believes it's important that every woman create her own signature look.

"Sorry, I got here as soon as I could after Roz called," Auntie Ruth says to me before turning her attention back to the doctor. "I'm Viola's aunt. So what's next?"

"We need to run tests," Dr. Anderson says, all clinical efficiency now, not a hmm or hunh in hearing range.

I eye him suspiciously because what tests could possibly remain? Or more likely, is he trying to impress my aunt? (Yes.) Was decisiveness a doctor's way of flirting? (Apparently.) Was it working? (Hardly.)

"I wish your dad was here. He'd know why you'd fainted and what's up with your skin," mutters Auntie Ruth, completely missing how the doctor looks more crushed than offended.

I jump in to explain, to smooth things over with him. "My parents specialize in crisis management for humanitarian organizations. You know, tsunamis, earthquakes, famine, endangered animals. They always know what to do and say in an emergency."

But Dr. Anderson has found his own way to resuscitate his authority and says to Auntie Ruth, "Wait. It says here she was on malaria meds."

"Yeah, for a trip to Ghana," I answer, even though he's addressing my aunt, not me. "And Tanzania."

"With me," Auntie Ruth says.

"Really?" Dr. Anderson asks her, interested, as if that fact has anything to do with my current condition. "I've always wanted to go to Africa. What brought you there?"