

Chapter 1

β Riona was chained to the wall, unable to move. They were throwing daggers at her. Terrified, she closed her eyes as a hundred sharp knives were launched at her simultaneously. She waited for the pain but didn't feel anything. Slowly, she opened her eyes and found herself on an empty island... With Trey. He had saved her, again. Only... it wasn't really how Trey looked. Over the years, through her dreams, Trey's face had started evolving into a different person ... She just couldn't figure out whom her mind was confusing him with... 'Trey... what are you doing here?' 'Rio, I've always been here. Always been with you.' Suddenly he clutched his chest and dropped to the floor. 'Trey!' Rio screamed. She bent down and saw a shiny stained knife coming out straight through his heart, among a massive pool of blood... β

Riona Marionette woke up with a start. Still not used to her nightmares, she trembled on her bed in the darkness, and waited for the pictures in her mind to slowly fade... It was only 1:34 A.M.... Not late enough to stay awake. She knew she'd have to go back to sleep eventually, considering she had a long day tomorrow.

Not being able to handle another sleepless night, Rio tip toed to her parent's medicine cabinet and, hesitantly, swallowed two sleeping pills. Another hour passed by as she lay still in bed, staring at the ceiling, till she finally felt her eyes close into an eventless sleep...

"Mom, I've got everything," Riona sighed, as she carelessly brushed through her brown curls. She quickly tied her hair, put in her honey-colored contact lenses, and threw on a cap. It was eight o'clock in the morning and there was never more commotion in the house.

"Do you have to wear those huge, baggy pants? They don't even fit you properly! They're too short! Can't you dress like a girl for once Rio?" her mother tried tugging the bottom of her jeans to pull them down.

"They're called Harem jeans, mom. And they're meant to be three-fourths. I look fantastic!"

Riona constantly wished that she had inherited her mother's model-like looks. Now as she secretly compared her shorter, athletic frame to that of her tall, lean, and red-haired mother's, Rio grimaced and turned away from the mirror.

"Sherri! I've got the car ready out front! Let her go! We have to be there at eight hundred hours! I don't like being late," Riona's father yelled. He was a tall, big built man with a broad frame. Even with a scar running down his bald head from his military days, he was very good looking.

"What about your blanket Rio, and your guitar? Oh! And your vitamins, don't forget your vitamins darling, you need them every day! Oh dear!" Riona watched as her mother scurried around the place. Considering her only child was about to leave home for six months to play basketball in a boys' team, her mother was quite calm.

“Mom, I’m going to be late! They’re already at the airport! And I’m going to be living in a hotel... with blankets. Also, I don’t even know how to play the guitar and I’m not going to die without vitamins there... so can I leave now?”

Her mother came up to her with an armful of herbal medicines in small bottles and stuffed them in her overflowing sports duffel bag.

“Rio, take this one especially.” She said pointing at a bright blue bottle. “It will help with the night- with your sleep.”

“I sleep well now days mom.” Rio boldly lied, taking the bottle anyway.

"Rio... You can still change your mind. You don't have to go. I mean, you all are just children!"

"Mom, please don't... We're all at least 18 or 19 years old. We're not kids anymore..."

"I just want you to know that you can come back ANYTIME you want... even if it's in the middle of the tournament... If you feel uncomfortable at any point-"

"Mom, you know me... I'm with Jake and all! I'll be fine! Love you!"

"Sherri, don't tear up, she'll be fine. Make us proud Rio." Her dad said, opening the door so that Rio could throw her luggage in the back of the big four-wheel drive.

“I will... Okay, bye Mom! I’ll call!” Riona quickly dived into the car before her mother remembered something else to burden her shoulders with.

“You and Jake take care of each other now!” Her mother yelled after her.

Riona Marionette was the only girl selected to play in the International basketball tournament. Countries around the world had picked their best high school senior

basketball team to compete. After a lot of hard work, the Dubai Thunderstorms had finally made it. They really were an International team in itself, as they had teammates from all over the world. The team was full of her buddies, the same guys that Riona had known since she was around eleven years old. Now that they were all seniors, Coach Carl had them working really hard to improve their game and their hard work paid off. They were flying to a hotel in the U.S.A, where they would stay for the next six-to-eight months, depending on how far they got in the league.

Riona was the last one to reach the airport, so she braced herself for the remarks her Coach was going to pass about her constant tardiness.

“Ahh, Riona! You decided to make it. Good. You’re bunking with Mishone.” Coach Carl was pretty direct.

“Arriona? Huh, sounds like a name I’ve heard before. Do we know anyone called Arr- Oh, snap. Wh-wait a minute! Coach, did you just say... Mishone!? Is *my* roommate? Like, in a serious tone? You playin’ me, right?” Rio panicked.

It was a well-known fact that she and Mishone Shobir were the only two on the team that had never gotten along well. They were always on each other’s case with sarcastic comments and constant bickering. Mishone took particular joy in making sexist comments about Rio, only because of how she reacted to it and Rio, on the other hand, never let go of an opportunity to mock him about something or the other.

Riona looked over at Mishone now, who was staring at his reflection in a shop window. He smoothed over his black, wavy hair and winked at himself with his light

amber eyes. Then, when he finally got his hair to stay in place, he ruffled it up so that it was messy again, smiled, and wandered inside the shop.

Rio sighed, "Coach, there are nine other guys in the team that you could've paired me up with! What happened!?"

"Sorry but I don't monitor the politics around here." He said gruffly with his arms folded and head held high in pride.

Then he whispered, "Mishone was the only one without a partner, and you were too late to pick your own. That's what happens when you let your mother pack all your household furniture into your tiny bag."

No matter what happened, you couldn't pass one ...or two, over the coach. He always knew everything.

"Wait, so you're telling me, that someone even chose Victore, the NEW guy, over Mishone?" Rio asked in wonder.

"Yup."

"Now that's just harsh."

"You're the only two that still fight like little girls. Need to learn how to get along and work with each other!" Coach said, as he checked everyone off his list.

"You put us two together on purpose!" Rio realized.

"Don't know what you're talking about. Let's go."

After grumbling, complaining, moaning and even a little begging... Riona still had the same roommate.

They filed into plane for the seven-hour flight and one by one, the excitement faded...

Although she still felt sleepy, Rio forced herself to stay awake. She looked around at her team with pride.

In the seat next to her, Jake Carlson, Rio's best friend and one of the shorter, fit guys on the team, was smiling to himself as one of the girls on the plane 'eye flirted' with him. Jake knew he was handsome with his tanned skin, dark blue eyes, and model-like Italian looks, and he never failed to take advantage of that fact. He had sharp jaw lines and just enough stubble on his face to make him look rugged.

He waved his hand through his black hair, then, to the girl's disappointment, Jake hid his face with his cap and pretended to fall asleep.

Rio looked at him and sighed. She knew this tactic well.

The random girl turned away from Jake and looked at Mike, who was in the seat next to her, staring angrily at the little screen in front of him.

Rio could see her looking Mike over, taking in his 6 foot 2 frame; light skin, strong jaw and ruffled, dark blond hair.

"Nie! That's one MORE turnover for the books! You really want to go that far!?! Oh, ref-er-ee! NO!" Mike cussed aloud, completely oblivious of the girl next to him.

"Hi, I'm May. Where are you from?" The girl asked Mike.

"Tso? I mean, what?" Taking a few seconds to realize she was talking to him, Mike pulled one of his earplugs out to hear her repeat the question.

"Oh. I'm Mike Jancel. Half Polish and half Hungarian. From Dubai." And before she could start talking again, he had his headphones in, and had returned to the game.

Rio chuckled to herself. She knew that the basketball-obsessed Mike would barely acknowledge the girl, especially if he was watching a game.

Suddenly a pillow hit Mike's head and he angrily twisted around to look at Jerricho Bean Boomerang and Marcus. They were both trying not to laugh as they pretended to be asleep. Jerricho was tall, dark and skinny while Marcus Kiffen was only slightly shorter, fair and had a broad frame. They were 'those guys' on the team. Always together, causing mischief and commotion.

"Hey guys!" Roobin Kale, who always tried to fit in with them, pointed at a pillow in his hands and grinned, indicating that he was going to throw it at Mike as well.

Roobin was a heavy-accented Indian with pale white skin and dark brown eyes. He was the tallest and skinniest person on the team, but got teased the most.

Jerricho and Marcus looked at each other, and then wickedly gave Roobin the thumbs up.

Roobin leaned forward to get a good shot of Mike, but the pillow ended up skimming Mike's hair, and hitting his airplane TV instead.

"That's it! That crappy shot HAS to be Roobin!" Mike trudged towards him intimidatingly.

"It-it was Victore!" Roobin said, shrinking back behind Victore who was in the aisle seat next to him.

Mike looked at Victore doubtfully. Since Victore was new to the team, no one really knew him at all. The team had made an effort, but every time someone tried to talk to Victore, he was rude and remained secluded.

Now, Victore, with the most unique aqua, blue-green eyes with a hazel tint, lifted his up his head to give Mike a piercing glare.

Rio was poking her head out from her seat to see the look Victore was giving Mike. It was quite a look. Although Victore hadn't said anything, his expression was full of intimidation and arrogance.

"Roobin, shut up. Annoy me again, and you'll get smacked." Mike, battling with a bit of an anger management issue, walked to his seat to catch up on the game.

For the first time, Rio actually noticed how handsome Victore looked. He had perfectly tanned skin, was clean-shaven with a firm jawline, high cheekbones and black, longish hair that fell just above his eyes and curled slightly at the back of his neck. He was tall, muscly and one of the best looking people on the team, Rio concluded after her analysis.

'I never figured out where he was from...' Rio realized, thinking back to the first encounter she had ever had with Victore Deville. His response wasn't very helpful either.

'You like puzzles, figure it out.' He had said.

And that was the first and last conversation she'd had with him.

'How'd he know I like puzzles?' Rio now thought bitterly as she squinted at him from across the aisle in the plane.

Suddenly realizing that Victore had been staring back at her the whole time, Rio quickly looked away in embarrassment.

Midway through the flight, bored of staring at the tiny screen, Rio gave up and let the sleep consume her.

Two hours later, Rio woke up slowly and in great confusion. She shook her head to clear it of the yet again, terrible nightmare, and looked around the plane.

‘Wait a minute. Didn’t I start out sitting with Jake??? Why is my head on Mishone’s shoulder? Eew. Oh my Gosh, there Jake is! Of course! Sitting next to that chick. I knew it. His ridiculous tactic worked again... Where'd he sent Mike to? Anyway, I really need to pee but Mishone's blocking my way. Now if I can just maneuver my way around his legs and try not to wake him up. I'll have to move like... like a ninja. Or I could just...’

She unbuckled her seatbelt slowly, so as not to disturb him, and then... smacked him right on his shoulder.

“Oops, my bad, but now that you're awake you might as well let me pass!” Rio said in an extremely honey sweet, obviously false, manner with a huge, mocking smile plastered on her face. Since Mishone was still in the process of realizing what was happening, she pushed past him and crept towards the empty bathroom stalls (still in Ninja persona).

Squeezing her way in to the tiny bathroom door, Rio looked into the small mirror in and thought about what her mother kept saying.

This outfit doesn't look too ...un-girly, does it? Rio thought as she eyed her black tank top and jeans.

It's the Converse shoes. Mom wanted me to wear heels. Hah. I've never worn heels in my life... It could be the cap. Maybe it is a bit over the top. And my hair could look better... But what's the point? I'll never look like mom. Or any normal girl... I like to

live in comfort. That's not a crime. I don't have to go through the pains of dolling myself up just to impress a few guys! I'm focused on my game anyway. It doesn't mean that I don't have any fashion sense... or style. Cuz I do.

Rio sighed, relieved her bladder, washed her face a couple of times and went back out.

She came back to find Mishone passed out on both seats. After debating whether to push him to the floor or poke him awake, she decided to just find another place to sit. Stepping over Jerricho's foot as he tried to trip her, Rio headed towards the empty seat next to Jellio Maceo.

Jellio had curly black hair, dark skin, matching eyes and was smiling at her widely with his pearly whites.

"Rio, I know you like talking, but don't disturb me. I'm trying to sleep." Jellio said, grinning.

"Get out! I didn't come here to chit chat either!"

Crashing it with Jellio was all right. It was just Rio's sleep talking that ruined things. What bothered her, was that Jellio was listening, recording, making comments and laughing at her throughout. And every time she woke up, he got mad at her because she had ruined his whole entertainment show...

After the hustle to get through immigration and a LONG wait for everyone's luggage, they got to the decent hotel they were meant to live in, and went to unpack.

Riona and Mishone's room, 502, was right in front of the elevator on the fifth floor.

The whole floor, except for one room in the corner, belonged to the team.

The rooms were fairly sized and basic with two medium sized beds, two dresser tables, a TV, a radio and one bathroom. There was a gap between the two beds where a small drawer was fitted with the telephone on top.

Mishone, somehow still sleepy, even though he slept throughout the plane ride, threw his bags on the floor and claimed his bed by crashing into the right one.

"Pig." Riona commented.

He responded by snoring extra loudly.

Realizing that it was no point making faces at his back, Rio threw her bags on the bed and went to the bathroom to freshen up.

She came back out, unpacked and then decided to go see what the rest of the team were doing.

Rio walked out of the room, still a bit hazy from the travel, and suddenly felt the impact of someone's body smack straight into her own. The person had knocked her right down to the cushy concrete and had landed on top of her.

"Blasted! Oh, for Goads sake! Sorry love." The guy immediately got off of her and apologized in a really strong British accent and seemed to be in a huge hurry. From the few seconds that she got a glimpse of his face, Rio could tell that he was around her age.

"Oh, that's all right! I love being reduced to a *floor* mat!" She called out, shocked that he was about to run off, leaving her on the floor that way. He quickly flung her back on her feet, barely even looking, and then continued whatever journey he was on.

"Gravity still works! You don't have to throw people down to check!" Rio yelled after him.

Jerk. Well, looks like leaving the room wasn't a good idea. She thought to herself Rio just stood in the hallway for a few minutes, dusting herself off and wandering what to do when the coach came out of the elevator with a stack of papers in his hand.

"Ahh Riona, I see you've found the *outside* of your room. Glad you've made yourself at home. Now be useful and give one set of papers to each of your teammates. Tell them to try to read it." The coach seemed pretty worn out too.

"Mmm, sure Coach." She replied, glad of someplace to go.

Strangely enough, none of them were in any of the rooms. She figured, starved as they were, only finishing *all* of the food on the plane, they'd gone to the dining hall. She put two copies in every room and then, her own copy in hand, went to look for the guys.

Sure enough, they were in the dining hall stuffing their faces with so much food, you'd think there'd been a famine for years. Rio dumped some fries on a plate, and sat down between Jerricho and Jake.

"You guys, is it just me or do these fries look gross?" Rio asked.

"Nope." Jerricho mumbled, already digging into her plate.

"Jerr, do you even taste the food? The main purpose isn't to just swallow you know."

Rio laughed.

"I have a rep to keep up with. You see, I'm known as the fastest guy... in everything. Running, I'm fast. B-Balling, oh-super fast, talking-pretty fast and eating-well, you get it. They call me speedy." He quickly replied.

“Yeah, the only part that needs to catch up is yo’ brain. That old thing has its own rep.” Rio teased.

“Whachu mean? How can my brain have its own...?” He asked, genuinely confused. While everyone else laughed, Marcus tried to explain but Jerricho was too engrossed in his food. Having polished off Rio's plate, Jerricho took advantage of Roobin's laughing distraction and started scarfing down his food too.

"Hey! We brothers have to stick up for each other man! You can't eat your own brothers food!" Roobin told Jerricho in his ‘wanna-be-black’ voice.

Jerricho was African-American, Anslo Ferneil was a dark skinned Indian, Marcus was Jamaican and Jellio Maceo was from Africa, so Roobin automatically referred to them as his brothers.

"Furst of all. It's bro. Just bro. Not "brothers". And thirdly, you the whitest person hya!" Marcus exclaimed while the others just cracked up.

"I'm black on the inside yo! You white people, I swear! Just don't understand."

"Oh, get outta here." Anslo, laughed and shook his head.

“Yo, what is that?” Roobin pointed at Rio's copy of the papers.

“Oh yeah, I put your copies on your bed. It’s our schedule. Days of matches, calendar, practice sessions, special dinners, blah blah.” She read. “Can you believe we’re actually getting a celebrity promoter? Who do you think it’s going to be?”

“I don’t know. All I know is, whoever it is, better promote our team well. Better than anyone else’s team.” Jellio said.

“Myph! I gno-who’o shit.” That was Jerricho again, trying to talk with, what seemed like, a whole turkey in his mouth. Everyone turned to look at him questioningly.

“So, who is it?” Roobin asked.

"Damn, Roobin understands stuffed pig language." Anslo whispered.

“*Gasp!* Jerricho! You? Know something? You can’t drop something like that on us so suddenly!” Rio teased.

“Ygou Gnow," He took a big gulp of water and continued, "what? Just for that comment, I aint gonna to tell you which singer he is.” Challenged Jerricho, extremely happy with himself for not revealing anything.

"Someone should capture this rare moment in history." Rio continued ragging on him.

“No way!”

“We’re getting a singer?”

“Whoa!”

"Hahaha, Rio shut up!" Anslo laughed.

“Jerr, who is it?”

“Tell us!”

Everyone started questioning at once.

“Okay, okay,” Jerricho grinned, completely milking in the attention.

“We are getting...” He paused for dramatic effect.

“CJ Mike!”

“All RIGHT!” Roobin screamed with his fist in the air, as if he had just won the championship trophy.

C.J Mike was a very popular singer, and Roobin's ultimate favorite person in he world.

"What? He's a brother!" He tried justifying to the rest of the team as they just stared at him.

An hour later, the still sleepy Mishone and the coach came in to announce that tomorrow was going to be a jet lag recovery day.

"The *only* resting day. From day after, the schedule is going to be very hectic. You're just going to get breaks to eat food, and then it's back to practice. So use tomorrow well." Coach announced.

"So whachu wanna do tomorrow guys?" Jake asked.

"Sleep." Mishone yawned.

"Eat!"

"Practice our drills obviously!" Mike said, shocked that the rest would even consider anything else.

"Nothing?"

"Movies!" Jellio was a complete movie buff.

Came the various responses.

"Wait, isn't CJ Mike supposed to come tomorrow morning?" Rio reminded, secretly dying to meet him too.

"Yaaaaa!" An over enthusiastic Roobin perked up, "We should all wake up early to welcome him!"

“WHAT? Wait, what’s this nonsense about waking up? I was asking about the evening!” Jake quickly put in.

“I tell you whad Roobin,” Marcus snickered, “Why don’t you just sleep at the entrance? Then you wouldn’t miss a second of ZeeJ.”

“Yeee, if you’re lucky, he might even step ON you to get around!” Rio laughed.

"Please! He would not do that to a brother like me." Roobin whined, unconsciously pointing a knife at Rio.

"Whoa, whoa! Roobin, yo! Get that knife away from me, man." Rio said, instantly leaning back and looking away.

"Oh, sorry. It won’t touch you. I can’t even reach you from here anyway!"

"Roobin, haven't you noticed Rio's fear for knives? She even eats with a fork and a *spoon* instead." Jake added to lighten up the mood.

"Ha. Ha. Very funny." Rio smiled dismissively.

Half an hour later, a waiter with the name ‘Troyyolla Sperk’ flashing boldly on his name tag, kindly asked them to ‘get lost’ so that they could clear the table.

Together the team took the stairs up, but halfway there, Rio realized that she had left her papers downstairs. To her, and their pal Troyyolla's irritation, she went back into the dining hall, grabbed the papers and sped up to catch the team.

Just as Rio reached the top of her floor, out of nowhere, she ran into something strong, warm and, later realized, quite humanly.

Although she didn't really feel herself falling backwards she knew it was happening. No matter what people say, it didn't happen in slow motion. It's just that the brain takes a few seconds to process what was going down. (In this case, Rio was.)

One minute she was falling and about to crack her head open, and in the next, someone had grabbed her by her hand and held her in place.

In her, fortunately still intact, head she could just see how this looked. Riona, hand in hand with a stranger's, almost parallel to the floor, only her toes at the tip of the staircase...

Not knowing how strong the guy was, Rio tried to grab the banister with her free hand but he seemed to manage easily and pulled her vertical so that she was staring straight into a big pair of anxious, light-butterscotch eyes. Even in her dissociative state, she recognized... the gravity-testing dude.

'Looks like he wins round two.' Rio thought to herself bitterly.

While she tried to get her head to stop spinning she couldn't help but notice that he was quite good looking with thick light brown hair carelessly pushed to the side, full lips and soft features giving him a perfectly cute, boyish look. He opened his mouth to apologize but wisely shut it at Rio's '*zip it*' gesture. Wide-eyed, he stared at her anxiously, waiting for her reaction.

Gathering her thoughts, she decided to just get out of his way before he knocked her out again. So, to his immense curiosity, Rio held her head high, and stomped off, muttering under her breath.

She headed straight to her room to find the whole team (apart from Victore) crashed out there. According to them, room 502 had the biggest TV and the most space. She shuffled over to her bed where Jake had nicely made himself comfortable.

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