

Spelunking Ashton Hall

When my phone rang at four AM, I knew who it was before I opened my eyes. No one else would have the nerve to call before seven. While I fumbled to answer, my beagle howled in harmony with the ringtone.

“Nomi?” I asked. I reached down to rub Jinx’s ears. She licked my fingers.

“Hey,” she replied. “Let’s go hiking.”

“Where have you been? I haven’t heard from you in-”

“There’s a new park I want to check out. It’s only three hours away,” Nomi said, breathless. She sounded like she’d just taken the stairs to the top of a skyscraper. “It’s got a lot of cool trails-”

“Honey,” I said, rubbing a hand over my face. “You know I love you, but I have class. And work. I’d love to go hiking and catch up, but can we do it Saturday?”

Nomi breathed into the phone. “Saturday. Yeah, okay. I can wait until then.” She paused. “Sorry. This was weird.”

“No. You know you can call me anytime. It’s a bestie perk.” I yawned. “Thanks for inviting me, just don’t wait so long to call next time. I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” Nomi replied. “Thanks for answering.” She took a breath, like she was about to say something, and the line went dead.

I watched the phone for an entire minute, waiting for it to ring again. But it never did. If there was one thing Nomi hated, it was saying goodbye. If there was one thing I hated, it was a lack of closure. As a compromise, I sent her a text: *Love you! See you soon, bitch!*

“C’mere, Jinx,” I said, patting the covers beside me. Jinx leapt onto the bed in one bound. She turned in a loose, luxurious circle and nestled down against my side.

“This is just for tonight,” I said to her. “Don’t get comfortable.”

She huffed and went to sleep. It took me much longer.

Nomi pulled up in Chanelle, the dented Jeep she bought in high school. It was one of the boxy pieces of junk familiar to anyone who'd ever bought a used car. But Nomi made it special. She hung crystals from the rearview mirror and reupholstered the back seat with cheetah-print fabric she found at a flea market.

"I brought snaaaa-acks," I sing-songed as I buckled into the passenger seat. "Licorice for me, trail mix for you. And, of course, some blue Gatorade for the road."

"Light blue or dark blue?" Nomi asked. Her mouth was pulled into a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"Dark blue, of course. Wouldn't want to ruin your life." I smiled back, but it was like Nomi was a mannequin in the store window. She looked real enough, but there was something artificial about her expression. Normally, our in-joke made her crack up, and she'd launch into "remember when?" Instead, she pulled away from the curb and headed for the highway.

We drove in silence. The air felt charged with static electricity, making the hair on my arms stand up. Nomi was known for her ability to outtalk a radio televangelist. I'd heard her go on for half an hour about gossip she'd overheard at Whole Foods.

"Nomes," I said as we wove in and out of a line of semi-trucks. "It seems like you're feeling something. What's up?"

Nomi smiled her mannequin smile and pushed her kinky hair away from her face. "Nothing," she said. "I'm just excited to go hiking with my best friend."

"Okay, but-

"Do you mind if I turn on the radio?" Nomi asked.

I swallowed what I really wanted to say and sat back in my seat. "Uh, sure. That's fine."

Nomi and I, we'd played this game before. In high school, Chanelle had been one of our safe places. How many times had Nomi and I sat in these seats, smiling at each other, until one of us broke down in tears? Chanelle has seen the aftermath of my first visit to a therapist, the famous Fourth of July blowout, when I'd come out as Renee, Nomi's first few

Spelunking

weeks on antidepressants, and when she'd kissed me because there was no one else around for her to kiss. The car was so jammed with emotion that I could feel it blow out of the vents when we turned on the air conditioner.

The countryside blew past the window in a green blur. Corn fields turned into tangled woods while staticky pop music spilled from the car speakers. Nomi and I didn't speak a word until she pulled onto a dirt road and parked the car with two wheels in a ditch.

"We're here," she said.

I glanced around. On one side of the road, gnarled oak trees stood shoulder to shoulder. On the other, a bare field was strewn with the remains of last year's harvest. As I followed Nomi, an ominous feeling blossomed in my gut like a poisonous flower.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" I asked, turning in a slow circle. "I don't see any signs."

"It's not an official park," Nomi said. "It's more a word of mouth thing. There's a huge cave with some passages that haven't even been explored."

A cave. "Nomi, you told me we were hiking."

"We are hiking. It's at least a mile to the cave from here."

"You know what I mean."

Nomi crossed her arms over her chest. A floral sleeve crawled down her left shoulder, covering up her scars; it had as many thorns as it did roses. "We used to go caving all the time. I don't see why this is such a big deal."

"You know it's—" I stopped and took a deep breath. "I just wish you'd been honest with me. You know I'd still have come." I didn't mention that she'd dropped off the face of the Earth. I'd be willing to go snorkeling in a landfill to make sure she was okay.

"I know you don't like caves anymore."

"They're not as fun as they used to be," I said. "But I know you still like them. And I've forced you to watch the entire Monty Python collection. Best friends do things for each other."

Nomi looked down at her boots and kicked a pebble across

the road. "You're scared."

"I don't like the dark. But you brought flashlights, right?"

"Two flashlights and two headlamps. With extra batteries."

I smiled and swallowed past the tightness in my throat.

"See? It'll be fine. Caving Queens for life, right?"

"I'm sorry, Renee," Nomi said, still staring at her shoes.

"It's okay," I said. "I'm still happy you brought me. Now, let's get a move on before I lose my nerve."

Nomi led the way into the forest. Although there was no marked path, she walked over the carpet of decaying leaves with long, sure strides.

"How do you know where we're going?" I asked.

"I've been here before," Nomi replied.

"By yourself?"

"Yeah," Nomi said.

We hiked without stopping. The pace made my chest tight. When we used to hike together, Nomi and I would meander around, tucking flowers behind our ears and stopping to snoop in rotten tree trunks. She'd always been mindful that she was taller, leaner, stronger than me. But now it was like she was working hard to leave me behind.

I was winded when we stopped. A blanket of clouds obscured the sun. There was a bite in the breeze but sweat still dampened the collar of my crewneck. The entrance to the cave was hardly more than a hole in the ground. It looked a bit like the mouth of a buried giant; its yawn contained a piece of the void. My skin prickled.

Nomi pulled the lights out of her backpack. We geared up in silence, routine taking over. When I pulled the headlamp over my pixie cut, I felt like we were sixteen again. Two girls willing to do anything to get away from our small town—including descending into the underworld itself.

It was not a period of my life that I'd missed.

Without a word, Nomi flicked on her headlamp and dangled her legs over the lip of the cave. For a moment, she seemed to hang in empty space. Then she jumped, hitting the ground with a solid thunk that made my ankles ache in

Spelunking

sympathy.

Her headlamp illuminated the clammy brown and white walls of the cave. I could smell the chalky perfume of the underground already. It was like I was standing in the doorway of a childhood home – everything ancient but familiar. Then light began to fade, and I realized Nomi was walking away from me. Again.

“Nomi! Wait!” I called.

The light bobbed in place.

My pulse pounded in my ears, but it was either jump in or let Nomi go alone. And the latter had never been an option.

I closed my eyes and jumped into the hole.

My boots struck slick stone. My foot skidded. My ankle turned. I dropped, skinning my knees against the gritty limestone. Blood welled up and mixed with the mud on the floor.

“Ow,” I huffed. I rose to my feet. My ankle panged. “Ow!”

“Are you okay?” Nomi asked. She put a hand on my shoulder.

“Great,” I huffed. “Just a couple scrapes. And I think I might have twisted my ankle.”

“Sit over here,” Nomi said. She led me to a stone shelf, and I sat. Moisture seeped through the seat of my pants. It was like sitting in a cooler.

Nomi knelt to examine my ankle. In the white light of my headlamp, her skin looked taut and ashen, her dark eyes sunken into her skull. She was a consumption victim, straight out of a period drama.

“Do you mind if I put a little pressure on it?” she asked.

I blinked at her, and she transformed back into the Nomi I knew. “Be my guest,” I said.

Nomi supported my heel with one hand and pushed the toe of my shoe back with the other. My ankle screamed.

“Okay! Okay! Stop!”

Nomi stood, crossed her arms over her chest. “Don’t have to be a doctor to know you twisted that pretty good,” she said.

I closed my eyes. I could feel blood dripping down my shins.

“Sorry. I really wanted to explore with you.”

“No. It’s not your fault.” Nomi glanced at the hole. “I should’ve brought a rope.”

“Well, it’s not your fault either. You know how clumsy I am. Remember when I tripped down the stairs in the commons and broke my arm?” I forced a laugh.

Nomi didn’t laugh with me. “You would not believe how much I’ve been fucking up lately,” she said. “This isn’t the least of it.”

“Fucking up? What are you talking about?”

“I mean, you’re hurt, and... Never mind.” She shook her head. “I didn’t mean anything. I’m just being dramatic.”

“Nomi, you *did* mean something,” I said. I tried to soften my voice. “I’m worried about you. I haven’t heard from you in weeks, and you’ve been cryptic all day. Plus, you’re caving again. I wanted to give you space if you needed it, but I’m scared. The last time we went caving...” I swallowed. “Please tell me what’s happening, Nomes.”

Nomi turned so that I could only see a sliver of her face. Her figure cast a severe shadow on the wall, all sharp angles. Her shoulders were so tight it seemed like they could pop out of their sockets at any moment.

“Nothing’s happening,” she said. Her voice echoed through the cavern, bouncing back to us over and over. “I’ve just been a little stressed. It’s fine.”

I gritted my teeth. “Stop being so stubborn. You’re acting like I don’t know you.”

Nomi shook her head. “We’ll talk about it on the way home, okay?” She wrapped her arms around herself. “We came all this way... I’d really like to check out some of the passages first. Clear my head. Is that okay?”

When we were kids, Nomi had made me muffle frustrated screams in the crook of my elbow on a weekly basis. I was tempted to do that instead of answer. But we weren’t kids anymore.

“As long as you promise we can talk about it in the car, I’m happy,” I said. “Go explore. Just try not to get lost, okay? I’ll be waiting for you.”

Spelunking

A few muscle fibers in Nomi's shoulders relaxed. "Thank you," she said.

"If I see a single spider, though, I'm going to scream, and you'd better haul ass to get here."

"I'll do my best," Nomi said. She readjusted her headlamp. "Be back soon."

"Have fun. Don't die!"

That usually made Nomi laugh, but she didn't even smile before turning around and heading for a passage so small that she had to bend double. Before she squeezed through its stone jaws, she glanced back at me. I wiped my bloody hands on my pants and flashed her a thumbs up. With that, she disappeared into the darkness, and I was alone.

I tried to think about the chores I had to do around the apartment, projects at work, my upcoming finals, but nothing stuck in my mind for more than a heartbeat. Distractions were like moths flying into a zapper—dead on contact. All I could think about was Nomi wandering the cave alone, descending further and further from the surface. With secrets she didn't feel like she could share with me.

Dread soaked me like a downpour. Every time I closed my eyes, I could see a slumped figure, a limp hand, a slicked floor. Gritting my teeth, I limped toward the passage into which Nomi had disappeared and ducked inside.

The part of caving that I'd always hated the most was the narrow passages. There was something chilling about not knowing what was going to be around the next bend. My breaths were fast and tight, but I pushed forward.

I found Nomi beside a tumble of broken stone. She had her back to the wall and her face pressed into her knees. She trembled like she'd been caught in a blizzard.

I dropped to my knees beside her. My shins oozed fresh blood.

"Nomi," I said, "honey, are you okay?"

Nomi didn't reply. She didn't even raise her head to acknowledge me. I put a hand on her back, and her muscles jumped under my touch.

“Nomi, I’m here. It’s okay. Are you hurt?”

Nothing. If it wasn’t for the shaking, I’d worry she was dead. I scanned for new cuts, another blade, a fresh puddle of blood, but there was nothing. Just Nomi, curled in on herself, as small as she’d looked freshman year.

I plopped beside her, close enough that our thighs brushed together.

“Now that we’re gathered here together, the twenty-second official meeting of the Caving Queens can commence.” I felt a knot forming in my throat. “Today’s agenda includes our dating lives, mean things people have said to us in the last two weeks, and why we’re sitting in this cave, miles from civilization, instead of going to brunch. Does the co-president have anything to add to the agenda?”

Nomi raised her head. Her eyes were bloodshot. Tears and snot slicked her face from cheeks to chin. “I think–” she said, voice thick, “that it’s the twenty-third official meeting.”

I could feel tears well in my eyes. “Let it be known that the co-president states that it’s the twenty-third official meeting and that the other co-president does not give a shit.”

Nomi made a sound that could have been a laugh or a sob. Or both.

I wrapped both my arms around her, pulling her as close to my chest as possible.

“It’s time to talk,” I said. “No more bullshit. No more lies. No more dodging my questions.”

“Okay,” Nomi said into her knees. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, just be honest. What’s going on?”

“I haven’t been feeling great, lately.”

“Yeah?” I pressed.

“Yeah. The last few weeks have been... bad.”

“How bad?”

“I, uh, lost my job. So I don’t have insurance anymore. And you know how expensive my pills are. I just feel like–” Nomi choked back a sob. “This just felt... Inevitable, you know?”

“What felt inevitable?”

“I just wanted to get it over with,” Nomi said. She shook her head and tears dripped from her chin. “Thursday morning,

I came here to kill myself.”

My breath jammed in my throat, and I coughed. “Oh,” I said. What else was there to say? That’s horrible? Why would you want to do that? I’m so glad you didn’t you unbelievably stupid asshole?

“I was in the car, about to get out, when I remembered the dumbest thing. Do you remember the pact we made sophomore year?”

“Of course I remember it.” It was right before I started hormone therapy and Nomi started to question the oppressive fog in her mind. When we couldn’t pick apart hormones from loneliness from mental illness. Our pact, where we promised never to kill ourselves while the other person was alive. It was the only reason I survived high school.

“Yeah?” Nomi said. “Well, I was thinking how shitty it would feel to break a promise to you.”

I felt tears slipping down my face, but I didn’t have the strength to wipe them away. “Good. That’s the point of a promise, bitch.”

“I just kept-” she shook her head, “I kept thinking about us as stupid kids. And how horrible it’d be if you broke our promise. If you were gone, I wouldn’t be here anymore. I know it.”

I squeezed her so tight that I heard her bones grind together. “I’m so glad you called me, Nomi. I’m so fucking glad.”

She squeezed me back, just as hard. “Me too.”

“I swear to God, if you ever try to drag me into a cave again-” I shook my head and tears fell from my chin onto my bloody knees.

“No,” she said. “I’m done.”

“Good. Get up. You’re coming home with me.” I kissed her damp cheek. “Jinx is just going to have to get used to sleeping on the floor again.”

“I’m not sleeping in your twin bed with you. You’ll spoon me,” Nomi said.

“I will, and you’ll love it. It’s going to be so comfy I doubt you’ll ever leave. In fact, I’m feeling a cuddle coming on now. Let’s go, before it overtakes me.”

We shared a wrung-out, exhausted laugh. Nomi stood and pulled me to my feet along with her. Later, there would be a reckoning. And more tears. And renewed promises. But first, we had to leave the cave. Together, Nomi and I wove through the passage, leaving the darkness behind us.