
by Kristina M. Sanchez

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For Pammy. I miss you. I love you.

Chapter 1: Ani

The persistent rhythm of little fists on her bed and a rising chant of "Dah-dee, Dah-dee, Dah-dee" drew Ani out of sleep. She reached behind her and patted her still fast-asleep husband. "Jett. Daddy, you're being hailed."

Jett grunted. The noise vibrated on her skin as he had somehow ended up with his nose buried against her neck during the night. His arm, draped over her waist, tightened, and he burrowed closer.

“Dah-dee.” Mara, their barely two-year-old daughter, sounded exasperated with her father’s unwillingness to snap awake.

“This is what you get for making her a daddy’s girl.” Ani grinned and snuggled further down under the covers.

By then, Mara had resorted to clambering up on the bed. “Okay, monkey. I’m awake.” Jett rolled away from Ani onto his back. “The question is why are you awake.”

Mara sat on his chest, her hair a mass of scattered curls the same deep brown shade as her mother’s. “Juice,” she said.

Jett sighed at his daughter. “That’s what you woke me up for?”

“Have fun with that,” Ani said. “I’m going back to sleep.”

“You think so, huh?”

“I do.”

“Mara. Tickle Mommy.”

“No, don’t—Mara. Jett!” Trying to thrash away from their fingers without sending her baby daughter flying proved a challenge, especially when she began to gasp for breath. Mara’s giggles reached a pitch that could make dogs howl. Her baby laughter mixed with Jett’s deep chuckle Finding Purgatory was one of Ani’s favorite sounds.

When her sides ached, Jett finally called off the attack and sat back on the bed. Ani wiped away tears, pretending to scowl at him, but she couldn’t keep it up for long. Her husband stared down at her with an impish grin. His eyes were lit with a devotion and adoration Ani didn’t ever want to Finding Purgatory get used to. She reached up and ran her fingers along the smooth skin at his jaw. He’d just shaved off the neat beard he’d worn the last few months, and while he looked quite dashing with his strong chin, she was going to miss the rough scratch of his whiskers between her thighs.

“You got her riled up at—” she turned her head to glance at the clock “—three twenty-nine in the morning. Good job, Daddy.”

Jett pressed a quick kiss to her lips before he scooped Mara up. “Come on, Finding Purgatory then. Let’s get you some water.”

“And a cookie?”

Jett tapped her nose. “Don’t push your luck.”

Ani watched, drinking in the Finding Purgatory firm lines of her husband’s back as he

got out of bed. The flex of his shoulders and arms as he managed to hold Mara and put his robe on at the same time did pleasant things to her body.

When he was out the door with the baby, Ani fell back against her pillows. She yawned, drowsiness pulling at her consciousness, and then—

BANG!

Ani jumped, disoriented and displaced in time. Her heart sped, but she was confused as to why she wasn't in her bed. She'd been in her bed almost asleep when the gunshot rang through the house.

BANG! BANG!

Each loud crash went through her body like a bullet. Her thoughts were anything but concrete. She was made of emotion then. Not a feeling she had a name for, but a sensation. The sensation of destruction. A nightmare space of shadowy figures and the shattered pieces of her broken life.

BANG!

She jumped again, and a single thought zinged through the mess of her mind.

The night it happened, there had only been one gunshot. One bullet. Not this many. One bullet from one gun, from one young man who had chosen this house in this neighborhood to break into—that was what it took to break the quiet of the night and with Finding Purgatory it the peace of her existence.

That thought was a foothold, and she scrambled for another.

She wasn't in bed. Ani was on the floor, her back against the door. Her front door. And someone was knocking. Hard. Urgent.

"Ani, open up. I know you're there. I know you can hear me."

The sound of her brother-in-law's voice pushed her from one hell into another.

He sounded so much like Jett.

If she could have concentrated, she would Finding Purgatory have been able to pick up on the nuances that separated Ian's voice from her husband's. Finding Purgatory They'd been identical twins, not identical people.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Her hand clenched in a fist and she banged on her side of the door with as much strength as she had, irritated. Every time she started to grab hold of rational thought, his incessant knocking sent her back to her room in that moment when the gun went off. If he'd give her a minute to think, she Finding Purgatory could pull herself out of this spiral.

She heard him sigh. "You're scaring Mom, Ani."

Ani pressed her Finding Purgatory palms over her ears and pushed.

"We just want to help."

He could help a lot by shutting up. She would tell him that, but she couldn't remember how to make her mouth form the words, and anyway, her throat was too dry.

Why on earth had the family sent him? She loved her Finding Purgatory brother-in-law, but she couldn't see him right now. They should have understood that.

Really, she didn't want to see anyone.

They all wanted to help—Jett's family, their friends. That was what she'd heard over and over Finding Purgatory for two months. They were here to help.

Their version of help depended greatly on how they thought she *should* react to this tragedy, how they thought *they* would react. She'd listened to "we just want to help" for weeks Finding Purgatory until she finally went to see a psychologist for the sake of placating them. A month ago, they'd been relieved at the sight of the prescription pill bottles in her bathroom. None of them noticed they'd never been opened.

Ani took another deep breath, calming, and of course, Ian chose that moment to call her name Finding Purgatory again, making a shiver go down her spine. She banged on the door and, mercifully, he fell silent.

Because she knew better than to think he was going to take the hint, Ani groped at her side, trying to find her cell. Her cheeks were wet, her eyes blurry with tears she wiped away. She fumbled at her phone, her hand trembling too much at first. After a few Finding Purgatory more breaths, she was able to swipe the screen, dismissing the notifications of twenty-seven unread text messages.

Her friends and Jett's family were worried again. She understood why. She'd been avoiding them all, but it was something she needed right then. She didn't want to see the pity in their eyes when they looked at their spouses and children and said, "*I can't even imagine.*"

She didn't want to feel like a sideshow freak. They all tended to stare at her, as though they were waiting for her to collapse, to curl into a ball and wallow in anguish. How was she

ever supposed to try to feel normal again when they looked at her like that?

Ani sniffled, sitting up straighter against the door. There wasn't anything wrong with her. Her husband and baby were dead. That was hardly a mental illness on her part.

As Ani dialed, a cold calm came over her. She brought the phone to her ear when she heard Ian's phone ring on the other side of the door. Before he could start talking, she cut him off. "Don't speak." He didn't, Finding Purgatory and she continued. "I'm not going to do anything stupid. I'm coping, but I need time before I Finding Purgatory can see you. Knock once if you understand."

There was a pause, but then he knocked once. Ani breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry, Ian. I'll call you when I'm ready. I love you. Tell everyone I love them."

He knocked again. Ani rested her head against the back of the door and listened for the sounds of his retreat with Finding Purgatory a bittersweet taste in her mouth. She tapped out an e-mail on her phone to her most persistent friends with much the same message: *Please leave me alone. I need time. I'll be fine.*

Ani shut her phone off so she wouldn't have to deal with their responses. For long minutes, she sat with her back against the door, letting her frazzled nerves smooth themselves out.

For all they were trying to help, Ani was never more out of control than when someone was bugging her about all this. When she Finding Purgatory was alone, she could focus on the rational. Thirty-four years of life had taught Finding Purgatory her the heart was resilient. Yes, her heart was broken, fractured even. Her life Finding Purgatory was upside down and unrecognizable, but she wasn't the first person in the history of the world to lose someone. Others had survived worse, and she would survive, too.

She had survived.

Out in the driveway, Ian's car started.

It wasn't as though she wanted to keep them away forever. Maybe in a few more weeks they wouldn't drive her into these fits. That was what she needed—a few weeks without having to see anyone from her broken life. A few weeks away from Jett's family with their too-familiar features. A few weeks without her friends dropping by with their children who reminded her too much of her baby's chubby cheeks and brilliant smile. Anyone could understand why she needed time to reset. Just a few weeks to get used to the fact she wasn't part of a family unit anymore; it was just her. Table for one. It seemed impossible, but it was reality, and she needed time to get used to the idea.

Then she would let them all back in.

The next Finding Purgatory time someone knocked on her Finding Purgatory front door, it wasn't a loud pound but a timid tap. Ani wouldn't have heard it at all except she was in the living room, stretched out on the couch. She blinked in the midmorning sunlight, disoriented. She'd been reading, but she must have fallen asleep.

The tip-tapping came again, easing some of her automatic anxiety. It had been two weeks since she asked Jett's family and their friends to leave her alone. None of them would knock the way this person was knocking. "Hold on," she called, rubbing her eyes.

At this time on a Saturday she expected a salesperson or a Jehovah's Witness. As long as they weren't friends Finding Purgatory or family, she welcomed the distraction. Three and a half months after Jett and Mara's death and Ani was running out of things to do.

Finding Purgatory

For a while, she'd been able to keep her feet moving. She'd planned a double funeral and then methodically tackled the endless paperwork that came when two lives were cut short. She'd settled accounts, written Finding Purgatory letters, made phone calls until, one by one, she crossed off every item on her to do list.

She'd spent a surprising amount of time *not* doing things. It was like muscle memory, like her body tried to do the things she'd done in her day-to-day life. She waited for Jett to interrupt her stolen moments of solitude with excited chatter about his latest project or for Mara to demand her attention. On her days to make dinner, she came home after eight hours at work doing Finding Purgatory her usual mental inventory of what there was to cook only to remember dinner for one was much Finding Purgatory easier than dinner for two and a half. There were no two year-old-messes that needed to be cleaned, no bedtime kisses, no late nights making love with her adoring husband.

Finding Purgatory

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