

Through Anyone Else's Eyes

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Chapter 1

You are alone with her for the first time. Well, you have been alone together before, but this time is different. You are sitting together on her bed. Your head rested firmly in her soft lap. She is gently twirling your hair. The feeling would be divine if you were not self conscious about literally everything you were saying or doing. Willing your body not to do any unnecessary shifts and to not fidget with your hands or anything else. You occasionally try to catch a glance up at her and each time dread that she might notice. You just can't help yourself.

You are listening to music that is just a little too loud, both the volume and track are her choice. Each question she asks you about the music or your life gives you pause as you have to consider how stupid you might be sounding. You know how much she cares about this kind of stuff, which makes you want to try to care about it more than you would before. You make some comments about the percussion or the artist's intentions, you have a moment of trepidation after the words leave your mouth but her sweet voice starts to build off what you said and all is right with the world. At some point you make a terrible pun and she gives your hair a bit of a sharp tug before she starts laughing. She tells you that your bad jokes aren't going to be free around her.

As this moment continues for what feels like both an eternity and an instant you wonder how she is feeling. You wonder if she is as nervous about this whole situation as you are. Does she also have thoughts racing through her head? Is she overthinking every single thing she is doing? As you think about it more and more you conclude that there is no way she is having the same thoughts as you. You have always seen her as so confident and happy. So sure of herself. She is nothing like you. She would never get so stuck on the little things. You wonder a bit what she sees in you. You wonder if there really is any truth to that opposites attract thing. You really want it to be true. Your desire to just get an ounce of understanding makes you dare to take another glance. This one far longer than any of your previous attempts. You get so caught up in her smile and gleaming eyes as you gaze at her that you forgot the reason you looked in the first place. And you forget to turn away as she looks down at you and has and starts to form a look of surprise to see you staring so intently.

Time feels like it stops as you get overtaken by embarrassment. You think about looking away before realizing it is far too late for that. You try to think of words to say but can't find any. You can't even think of what expression to make with your face.

But then she smiles at you, and you have to smile back. She tenderly places a hand on your face and it feels so warm and nice. She guides you up until you are cross leggedly facing each other on the bed. She takes your hands in hers and starts to aimlessly interweave with your fingers. Your palms are sweaty but she doesn't seem to notice. For the first time you see flecks of nervousness on her face. She is looking

anywhere but directly at you. And the confidence you always expect in her posture is waning. You go against every fiber of your being and trepidatiously push a strand of hair out of her face. She put her hand over yours as you do so and you meet eye to eye for an instant. Then she grabs your hand and starts to pull you towards her.

Your heart threatens to beat a hole in your chest and you feel short of breath. With how close she is you hope to god that she can't hear it. The music should at least help with that. You wan't to just experience this and let it happen but your restless mind can't stop its worrying. You have never kissed anyone before. What if you screw it up? Where should I put my hands? Who takes the lead? You have no idea. As you get closer you remember those small signs of worry you saw on her earlier. Maybe she is more like you than you thought. Maybe you are just feeling the same thing and should just be there for eachother in this moment. Not judging each other or yourselves. You force your thoughts to the back of the mind and give in to her lead.

Your lips are just about to meet and...

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Sprits. Sprits. She was jolted out of the moment by the feeling of cold liquid on her face. She was confused as she looked around the room to get her bearings, and figure out what the hell just sprayed her. Taking in the darkened interior around her. She saw rows and rows of shelves. Each one filled with uncountable stacks of vials on them. Each filled with glowing liquid swirling in a vortex of varying colors, providing the only light source around. Each one beautiful and unique. Casting a shifting dim and prismatic

glow on everything around them. Her gaze settled on a middle aged man holding a vial and a spray bottle, blond hair thinning but well kept, and studious attire that would have been very in style a decade ago. Behind his glasses with their impossibly thin rims was a look of disappointment etched onto his face, and directed right at her. That look snapped her back to reality. She wasn't Jeremy, experiencing love for the first time. She was Reyla, she was at work, and she had screwed up.

She fumbled around for something to say to this man, Emric, *her boss*. Nothing would get her completely out of this situation, but she hoped to at least find something to make it seem less terrible. She found nothing. He watched this, glaring at her expectantly. Eventually realizing with a sigh that she wasn't going to explain herself without prompting. "Now, Reyla, why did I get through an entire shelf while you were drooling over the same memory? We are supposed to be cataloging, not going on vacations in other people's glory days."

"So. um..." she muttered out before thinking through her response. She thought through exactly what to say. Would she just tell the truth? Tell him how fascinating what she had seen was? He is the manager of memory brokerage, and he used to do that archival stuff for the university, at least some piece of him would hopefully understand. But, he was also straight laced as hell. She had never even seen him crack a joke in the months she had worked there. And he talked about all the product in such an academic way. A guy like that, with no hint of fun in him, probably wouldn't understand jack shit about what she was feeling before, how *raw* it all felt. He probably treats them like

research papers more than anything. Yeah, she was just going to have to fess up, apologize, and get on to the scolding.

She realized how much unconscious movement she was doing with her feet and willed them to stop before straightening up. "I'm sorry about—"

"Stop." He said, lightly raising a hand. The other moved his glasses up as he scrunched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath, she couldn't tell if this was done in exasperation or as an expression of intense internal debate. For her sake she really wanted it to be the latter. "Look, I know exactly what you were doing so let's stop wasting time. I know how you are feeling."

He does? She thought.

"All this knowledge around you, hundreds of years of accumulated experience, it is hard not to want to take advantage of that."

He doesn't. She thought.

"Back when I first started at the university..."

She reminisced about how much he loved to monolog, and how she should probably pay attention to what he was saying. She already lucked out, no reason to

tempt fate. But she could only do so for so long before her mind wandered again. He did this before about politics, history, store management. All the boring things. So she should have guessed that he would be that way about his personal life. Once a monologuer always a monologuer. For a brief second there she felt that maybe she had the wrong impression of him, I guess she should doubt herself less. At least he wasn't yelling at her. So that was a plus. Let the geezer reminisce about the good old times and get off easy is always a good plan. What she really cared about was how that memory finished. He stopped her right when things were getting good. She started to imagine how it all would have ended up and get a fraction of the feeling back before he began saying something that snapped her back into the "conversation".

"...You obviously can't be looking at memories without paying for them, and definitely not during company hours. But, if you want to come to my office after work I could show you some of my personal collection and how to look at them with an analytical eye."

She wasn't so sure about all that "analytical eye" stuff, but this was too good of an opportunity to pass up. Even if it was just the type of stuff Emric liked. There still had to be some amazing things in there. At worst they would be there by accident. But a good thing that happened by accident is just as good as a good thing that happened on purpose.

So she didn't have to work much to add some excitement to her voice. "Yes, I would love to see your collection. I am sure you have found some fascinating stuff working here for as long as you have."

"Great, you know where it is. See you there after closing. Now we both need to get back to work. No more getting lost."

Reyla gave him a nod before he turned back to his station. As he did so she caught the briefest hint of a smile. Maybe he needed someone to talk to about all this as much as she wanted to keep experiencing amazing moments in people's lives. This perked her up for a moment where she thought this could go better than she expected, before a shiver ran down her spine as her mind turned to all the enthusiastic monologues she was going to be inundated with.

As she walked back to the shelf to return the vial she took one final look at it. She became absorbed in its entangled liquid, ever shifting. In this case a beautiful mix of red that reminded her of a blushing face, and a roiling bright green. Each color engaged in an almost combative dance. One taking over a larger portion of the flask before being pushed back by the other. Interweaving and mixing. She thought about Jeremy and his anxiety and joy in that moment. This seemed like a very apt representation of that.

She went to put it back in its place on the shelf and for the briefest moment contemplated going back in and finishing it. It would only take a minute or two. Emric

might not even notice. And she just had to know how it ends. It felt so warm in her hand. The small changes in its heat almost felt like a pulse. A beating heart. A wave beckoning her in. She started to twist the lid, her eyes locked on the path of the liquid. Torn between getting it done as quickly as possible and the slow shaking of her hands from trepidation and excitement. Then she heard the sound of clanking vials as Emric must have slipped while putting one back just a few rows of shelves over. This was enough to give her a moment of pause, of reconsideration. Was it worth it? She just had to wait a little, there would be more chances later. Taking one last longing look she tightened the cap, making extra sure it was secure, and placed it back on to the shelf before getting back to cataloging. Steeling herself at getting too absorbed in the memories she was about to dive into. She had a long day of work ahead, and a hopefully exciting night to look forward to.

So she returned to work. Finishing up cataloging the inane things people were selling to them, engaging just enough to write a few word description on the vial. Occasionally she would come across something actually interesting and have to stress through getting the minimum possible information and getting out. Emric would not be so kind the second time. Give a strong impression of what her day to day is. Then it was on to vial stacking. Which took just enough mental effort to be annoying. She learned that when she completely zoned out and broke some pretty expensive vials during her first week. Eventually she ended up behind the counter, hoping she would have some interesting patrons for once. She would be left disappointed. Everyone coming in and making the most basic small talk. Asking for everyday memories and your run of the mill happy stuff. No one wanted anything exciting. At this point in the job she had given up

on suggesting things to customers. They never took her up on it. It had been weeks since anyone asked for something even remotely out of the ordinary. Anything you could imagine, and everyone wanted beautiful sunsets. Or happy days on the beach.

Through all the work she toys with various fantasies and daydreams. The tasks getting repetitive enough that she can get into the rhythm and have time lose all meaning. She imagines what happens with Jeremy. How their relationship plays out. She imagines lovers' spats. Heated arguments over the most inane things. Cheating. Work issues. Trouble with inlaws. Issues with conception. She decides she doesn't like that and just starts playing out happy moments between them in her head. Moments of intimacy. Moments just for them. Their wedding day. The birth of their first child. Their house search. Helping each other pursue their dreams.

All of them felt hollow in comparison to the real thing. She could never inject enough detail or truth to make it feel... *complete*. There was always something off. It was both the little details and the big picture. Her imagination just could not match the feeling direct from the source. No matter how hard she tried. It all lacked meaning, color. And eventually these faults pulled her out and back into the endless monotony of her day job. Her one escape from boredom, the thing she had used for years, was no longer working. It may never work again. It wasn't enough anymore. Actually, it made her want those experiences even more. She needed a change. She now knew that in some way, she had to have more experiences like that.