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Two in One By: Cassandra Volk

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It seems like second nature now that my friends Amare and Clara are a part of my life. There was a point when their existence together seemed impossible, that such a cliché could never form and grow. We are just like any other group of friends: Clara, the sweet, kind soul with Amare, our little flame of passion that always finds trouble and cares little for those in her way. I suppose I am just the scribe, observing the close bond Amare and Clara have. Though in pain and fear, I see just how different they can be.

Before Amare, life was simple with only two geeks with good reputations, high grades, and a contempt for the delinquents that poisoned our school. In getting ready for college, the work was easy. I had nonchalant parents that let my fate be. Poor Clara was pressured far too much. Expected to go to the best school, obtain ridiculous standards from countless clubs and volunteer groups, her family insisted that she be important someday. However, as if it mattered to them, her foster parents didn't really care about anything else and this task of family led her to go crazy, struggling to be accepted. The stress was enormous but she wouldn't allow anyone to help.

Weeks went by as nothing for her existed besides her school work for advanced classes, clubs, only joined for the prominent title, and the extensive application for one of the most difficult and selective universities in the country, Stanford. Never permitted to go out or have any fun, it was always work. She was forced to be a mindless drone under her parents' strict laws, and dreaded the consequences. It was weeks before I heard anything at all from Clara. Our schedules were as different as the land and sea, and she had become a madly running machine with no free time to herself.

The day I finally got a call from my distant friend, her voice was different. Usually light and almost as harmonious as a flute, a bellow or crackle came cooing out of the phone. "Hey I'm at the park. Meet me here." I asked if she was sick and a laugh burst through the phone, a laugh that could not have belonged to Clara. "Pshh! I'm more than ok, trust me. Now hurry up and just get here." It was like eons since I saw Clara. I didn't care how peculiar this was. I was going to see her. So I flew down to the park, perhaps lucky not to have been spotted by a cop, and there she was leaning against the railing by the fields waving like a scene from a movie.

She was wearing an ensemble that I never pictured her to achieve. A crop top with short cut-off jeans. Not the short as in just over the knee; it was quite possible she'd be mistaken for Daisy Duke herself. The biggest change was her hair, by God, it was dyed bright, cherry red! A far cry from her once reserved dirty blonde. More than color, it was falling down her shoulders, proudly displayed as a part of this beautiful young vixen. Clara had always worn a ponytail, fast and simple and not exactly eye catching.

"Well, no need to be so alarmed! You look like a poor dance like that," the voice was still there, not Clara's, but by looking at the face there she was.

Shaking my head, thinking I had to be positive about the change. "Well I'm just astonished, your parents acut"

I was cut short as the lady growled. "They're not my parents! They're mere guardians the courts handed me off to. I care nothing for them." Now that was new. Never before had she been hostile about any subject. Perhaps she'd sheepishly avoid it, but such an aggressive tone never before existed. Also, she never put distance toward her foster parents in favor or her real ones, this made me concerned.

"OK. OK. Wow. So wait why did they let you come then?"

"They didn't. I didn't tell them. It's not that shocking." She was just so different and I couldn't grasp it, but still I let it slide. Eventually, I let her lead me down the road, and before I could stop it, we were breaking into an indoor public pool. Under my breathe I prayed and loudly protested. All she kept saying was this was going to be fun. She went in and loitered around on the admissions desk, while I was looking at the empty showers and surveying for us not to get caught. Suddenly, she cackled again and hollered for us to go. Running past the desk I saw a paper in her hand, a swimming team list. She ran past me towards the pool and dropped the parchment into the water, watching it be soaked up and disintegrate.

"What are you doing?!" No answer as my shout had alerted a passerby on the street, eyeing us. She bolted past me and jumped on the opposite fence, climbing over the rest. Heart pounding and dazed, I just followed her. Dropping from the fence we made a sprint down the road. I went straight to my car in hopes to leave the confusion behind me, only to find my friend sitting in the passenger seat laughing hysterically.

I didn't question it, driving in a straight line, but then I went off. "What the Hell! Really? Are you nuts? Tell me what the whole idea of this was." She went on to explain, her longtime boyfriend, Jake, had broken up with her and was trying out for the swim team. Since she was aid for the coach, she saw the list and knew where he kept it. Her revenge plan involved switching Jake's name off the list.

No real harm, but entirely out of character for this girl. "Clara that's not like you at all." Then she looked at me bewildered, as if the name meant nothing. I glanced back at her very uncoolly. What did I have here? Dr. Jeckle and Mrs. Hyde?

Again, the cackle came at this point. It was beginning to almost fit her. "I'm not Clara! Or at least the one you know. She was weak, always letting herself be pushed around. Just too nice and sweet. She don't let me out much. Says I'll make things worse, but look at what I did for us."

This was too much. "Ugh enough! That's silly. Tell the truth!"

Her only reply was "I am. You'll see; tomorrow ask Clara about red hair. You know what? I like you. You're not like her other friends. You don't get pushed around."

That was on a weekend. I tried to call her on Sunday with no reply. I couldn't tell on her or face the idea of losing my only friend. Not to mention, I couldn't piece together her story. I might have sounded crazy repeating it. So I kept quiet. Then came Monday. I saw the posted list of swimmers. Jake wasn't on there. I looked for Clara, but obviously she was in all advanced classes. If I walked in, the teacher asked if I was lost. I'd reply "no," then be escorted to the door. I caught a glimpse of her. I'd notice that her blonde hair was back with her sweet, shy demeanor. I finally cornered her at lunch.

Oddly, every question about Saturday night was answered about the same: Jake called her, broke up with her, then it gets weird. "I don't remember, guess I just went to bed." Very odd, a student like her never forgets a thing.

I thought it was insane, but had to try. "Okay, let me talk to her. The other one." Clara became serious, understanding fully. She looked around the lunchroom and gestured me to follow her to an out of the way corridor. There she turned, body language, the whole nine yards. Instead of shy and fidgety, she stood tall and made direct eye contact with a sly grin on her face.

"I'm glad you finally get it. I'm glad I get to talk to a normal person." I still had trouble comprehending this, but it was coming easier.

"Okay, this is weird." My voice was shaking, as if it was begging to flee and escape the unknown. How I would have loved to lead the charge, but I needed to know. "Start with what you call yourself. Then how does this work?" She bobbed her head to show she could understand these questions.

"Very well. We decided that I'm called Amare. I'm like her heart. I'm her love and passion. If I'm betrayed, I get angry and make sure we are safe. She has the reason, I have the fuel. A take as old as time really." This person spoke in a sarcastic tone filled with resonance. Clara's voice was higher and lighter. That would be my first distinguishing mark.

I was nodding and getting the idea. "Jake hurt you, so you push Clara out of control and took over. Why involve me?" My voice was forced to be calm and understanding.

Amare just shrugged "Well, you got a car, duh. And, well, I saw that you were the only person in her phone. The rest were colleges, those people I live with and other boring things. Honestly, I just saw that I could blame you if we got caught, with the whole Clara-didn't-know thing." Wow, that was unfriendly! Her attitude was careless, but seeing my hurt, Clara, she peeked through and took over. I saw her head twitch, then the clam, concerned eyes of Clara pleaded forgiveness. "Ooooh, ya, I'm sorry about her. I usually have her under control. She gets away from me. Please don't let anyone know. She isn't right. Don't tell."

Now that we all knew each other, all three of us. Or two? I'm still fuzzy on the specifics, but I accept it. I have two friends now. Amare and Clara. They just happen to share one body. When one is on the surface the other is safe, as far as I can figure. Their relationship is never really simple, one will show or both at once. Having an argument and bickering over what one will want versus the other's prerogative. In person, I see just a person talking to themselves... Telling in different voices. This occurs often when one is challenged by the other for control. Clara can win, but Amare is persistent. I ask them to see if they can be cured, but Clara responds, "I'm nothing without her," and Amare says, "I can't do this all on my own, I'm not smart like Clara."

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Two Poems By: Danielle Watkins

Be Careful

She joined the world staring at the light.
Be careful they said. Or else you'll go blind. So she closed her eyes.
She joined the world with arms outstretched to all.
Be careful they said. Some dogs bite.
So she held back her hands
She joined the world with a mouth full of song
Be careful they said. You'll wake the dead.
So she shut her lips
She joined the world running with feet barely touching the ground
Be careful they said. Don't trip. So she lay down instead.
She joined the world with a beating heart.
Be careful they said. Someone might break it. So she ripped it out quietly and set it aside.
And then she died.

Whirlpool

I struggle to explain it.
The way it feels.
The way my bones ache for no reason.
The way my mind spins with no direction.
The way my eyelids fall of their own volition.
The way my heart beats with no intention.
I'm a hail storm in Antarctica.
A kite caught in a tree.
And a taxidermy lion's jaw.
I can feel power in my soul, and a stirring in my spirit.
I can feel pain in my limbs and— though you cannot hear it.

There is a part of me that's crying.
Because what use is hail in a place filled with snow?
What use is a kite that only flies low?
Or teeth that an earthquake could only make go?
I feel like a whirlpool in a plastic bottle made by a kindergartener.
Look mommy! Look what I made? Watch what I can do. Swish, swish, swish.
Look at how the water spins. Swish, swish, swish.
Wouldn't it be cool— Swish, swish, swish.

If it was a real whirlpool? I wish, wish, wish.

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Warming Up By: Stephanie Gerlach

A voice. One lonely, solitary voice was rattling around inside her head. It bounced chaotically against her skull, attempting to get out. Her head was a prison, made of steel wires and iron bars with shackled memories thrown haphazardly within. The voice was desperate; the pain as palpable as that of a broken bone. But she was strong and she would not succumb to the voice. It would not escape through unguarded lips or careless eyes that always revealed more than they should.

A door clicked open to her right, and a sharply dressed man came strutting in with a thick manila file. She remained seated, conscious that any movement she made could be seen as a threat. Her hands were beginning to ache under the table where they were cuffed, but she refused to stretch them out. Instead she stared straight ahead, her eyes barely blinking, lungs barely breathing. Unsurprisingly, she saw her own stony expression reflected back from the two-way glass embedded in the wall. She knew there were countless eyes on the other side of that glass, watching her like a caged animal. It was ironic, since she had never felt more free. The voice subsided momentarily at the thought of being watched before jumping back into the assault with renewed purpose.

A throat cleared in front of her and her eyes flickered uncertainly away from the glass. The man seated across the table from her was an intriguing specimen. His slightly balding hairline and flushed cheeks hinted at a nervous disposition while his high end clothes suggested he was well off. Most likely, he was the son of some big-shot cop who had expected his son to follow in his footsteps, but had proven to be surprisingly inept. He appeared to be in his late twenties, and was a decently attractive man. She realized that, had they met under different circumstances, they probably would have been friends. The voice continued to strain against her powerful restraints, and she felt the onset of a migraine.

The man cleared his throat again, most likely conducting his own silent, mental evaluation before he flipped open the folder with a flourish. "Hello," he said, his voice a deep gravelly rumble. "My name is Derek Carter. You must be Hannah?" His voice, raised at the end of his statement, made it a question of mock innocence rather than actual curiosity. Hannah remained immobile.

"You are 27 years old and have rarely appeared within our databases. That's quite a feat these days." He smiled an impish grin that revealed two small dimples, one on each cheek. "A lot has changed the past couple of days, hasn't it?"

The voice was revitalized by his casual nature and Hannah began to feel a pulsing throb in her forehead. She refused to acknowledge Derek and remained lock-jawed. A cop was nothing if not relentless and Derek seemed to embrace the stereotype.

"I'm going to show you some pictures, Hannah. They're pretty gruesome." He shuddered almost imperceptibly before sliding a few giant photographs across the table towards her. Hannah told herself not to look, but her eyes betrayed her and glanced down to see the shots.

A cacophony of screaming echoed inside her head when she registered the pictures in front of her. There was blood everywhere, crimson and scarlet mixing in unflattering ways, staining her mind with death. Her hands started to tremble beneath the table and she bit her lip to hold back the hysteria. They're fake she told herself. They're not real. The voice, for once, was silent. She looked up and found Derek watching her, gauging her reaction. She knew her eyes must be wild with emotion, but were they the right emotions to let her walk out of the room without cuffs?

"Do you recognize who that is?" Derek asked, his head cocked to the right with actual curiosity this time.

Hannah shook her head quickly, and her brain seemed to rattle with the movement. The rattling brought the voice out of its stupor, but it seemed more subdued than before.

"Hannah, this picture was taken three days ago at your old house." Derek stated. Hannah squeezed her eyes shut and attempted to summon tears. While her eyes were still closed, Derek whispered, "The woman in the picture was your mother." A single tear managed to slide out of Hannah's eye and slowly dribbled down her cheek.

The voice was at the forefront of her thoughts now, screaming the same three words over and over again, for the umpteenth time that day. The voice reminded her of home and childhood and good memories, but now it was linked to the pictures in front of her, a burden she would have to carry for the rest of her life.

The voice was her mother's.

And it was screaming, "You killed me!"

Hannah took a deep breath and mentally forced the voice back into her subconscious for the time being. It had all gone so wrong, so terribly wrong that nothing could have prevented the inevitable. But this could be prevented. Hannah knew that she could still walk out the door as a free woman if she played her cards right.

"Hannah, we know you were there. Your DNA was on your mother's hands. You attacked her, but she fought back. If you would just cooperate then we could--"

"Stop!" Hannah cried, her voice seeming raw after hours of silence. She couldn't let him alter her reality if she wanted to leave freely.

Hannah sucked in a shaky breath, fixed her eyes on the table, and started from the beginning of a well-rehearsed story. "My mother was an alcoholic for ten years before she had me, and being pregnant was the longest time she'd ever been sober. The doctor told her it was either my health or her habit, and surprisingly she chose me. The choice didn't last long, though." She paused, glancing up through her eyelashes to check that Derek was listening to her story. His eyes were riveted on her face, and she hurriedly glanced back down.

"Three weeks after I was born, my father died in a car accident. My mother was devastated, and she thought that alcohol was her only friend. I grew up in a run-down house that not even the rats wanted to inhabit. My mother's paycheck was for the booze and the booze was for her sadness. When I turned eight the paychecks stopped coming altogether and my mother locked herself in her bedroom. I learned how to work odd jobs and make money so that we didn't starve to death. My days revolved around my mother drowning herself in alcohol. I lived in Hell for ten interminable years and when I reached the right age, I left."

Hannah paused, allowing herself to calm the anger that the story was creating inside of her. She hated remembering this, let alone sharing it with someone else. Nonetheless, she trudged on.

"I didn't have money for college, so I turned to a more...inspired line of work. Fortunately, I made enough money to survive, but I was never more than 50 dollars from bankruptcy. One day out of the blue, four days ago to be exact, my mother called me. She said she needed to see me and that it was urgent. I told her that I would meet her for dinner at her house.

"When I arrived, the stench nearly knocked me off my feet. It was nauseating, that smell of vomit, alcohol, and human filth. I'm sure you smelled it when you took those pictures." She nodded towards the file and watched Derek squirm uncomfortably.

"Go on," he encouraged.

"Being a woman of my word, I entered the house only to find my mother in an angry drunken fit. She attacked me with a vengeance I've never seen in her before." The first lie slipped in without a hitch. "Her hands clamped around my throat and she tried to strangle me." Hannah paused and extended her neck so that the hand-shaped bruises were clearly visible. "In defense, I grabbed the nearest object and swung at her head with all my strength. I never intended to kill her, only get her off of me." Her second lie fell into place much easier than the first. "I never got to know what she wanted to tell me."

Derek was unabashedly staring at Hannah now, shock written clearly all over his face. He stood abruptly and exited the room to conference with his fellow officers. Hannah waited patiently, hoping that her story was enough.

Two hours and one cup of coffee later, Hannah was a free woman, standing on the sidewalk in front of the station in the biting wind. She smiled to herself, tugging up the collar of her coat. The voice was silent. Despite the cold, she was just getting warmed up.