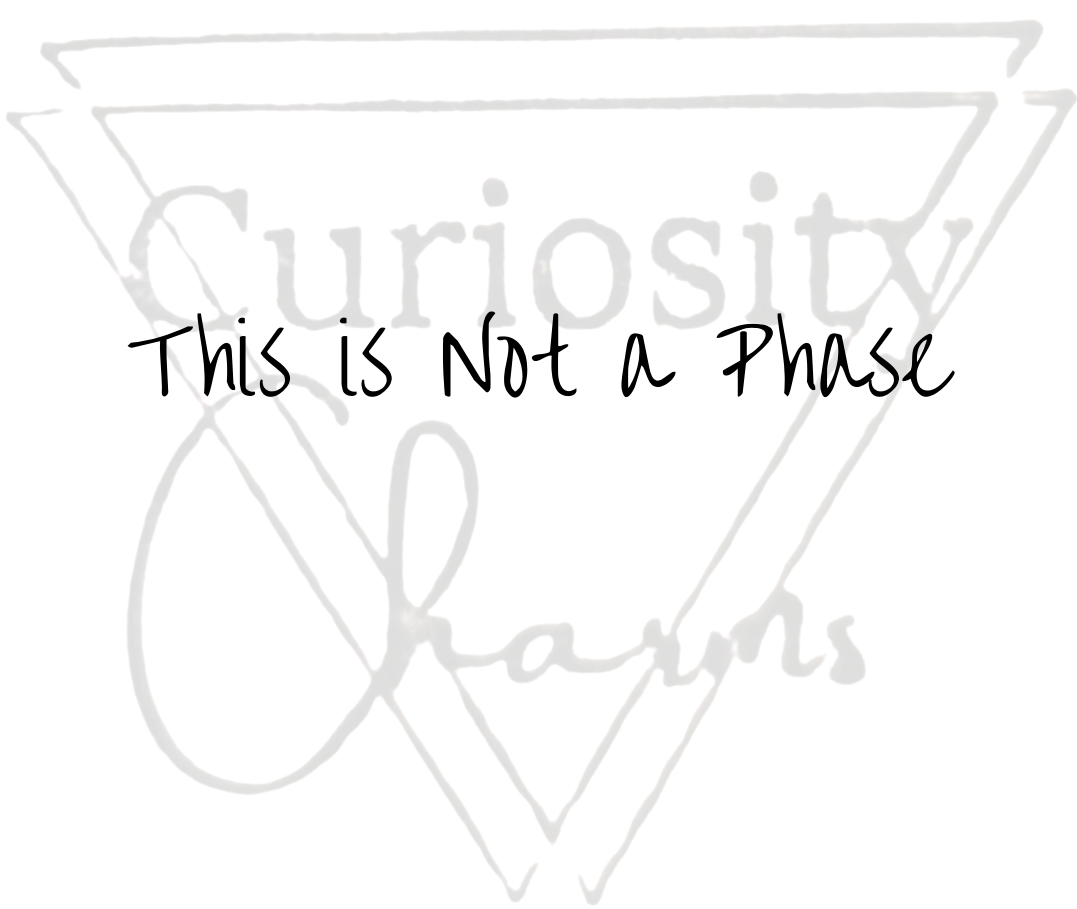




Curiosity
This is Not a Phase
Chams

I should feel angry or sad, right? It's a little frustrating for sure, but numbness is what spreads through my veins like ice. I stare at the cluttered coffee table. Empty take-out containers spread out from weeks of not cooking, scattered magazines with trashy gossip, and sticky stains from spilled drinks. Then right on top of the growing mess are different worlds. Pages of people exploring real and fantasy places to the fullest; defending a kingdom from an evil king, flying a dragon into battle, going to a New York skyline party, or traveling the open sea on a small boat, etc..

With numb fingers I reach out to grab one, but drop it back on the stack as a pounding bass of music explodes into the air. It feels as though every surface of my apartment is vibrating. The thin walls make it so easy to hear my neighbor move around the house, most likely preparing for another party where the music is too loud and the scent of pizza and weed sweep through my side of the duplex. At the beginning, I made small comments to them, but they smiled and said life is too short not to party. So I just shut my mouth and returned to my little pit of despair. I didn't mind at first, because I would usually be at Leia's, my ex-girlfriend's place, but that's not an option anymore. Maybe I could pick up more shifts at work.

Taking a deep breath I search for my noise-canceling headphones. They were somewhere on the table, right? I stare down at the fallen pages. The words turn fuzzy as tears pool in my eyes. Shit, why can't I stop crying? It's already done and over, another terrible family dinner full of people being disappointed in me. I have to pull myself together. I aggressively wipe my eyes as I pick up the book. I know it well, the illusion of tiny waves at the bottom of the page. Descriptions of an icy sea with beautiful sunkissed waves that are shining with colors of amber and gold. The characters laugh together as they travel to new corners of the world to find themselves with eye-opening adventures.

Maybe I could be like them. There is nothing here for me anymore. Leia and I are done. There's no way I could ever go back to her narcissistic lifestyle.

I think of my family and flashes of the backhanded comments, snarky whispers, and smug looks from dinner earlier flood my mind. My parents care so much about appearances. In public, they seem to support and love their 'unsuccessful' gay daughter, but behind closed doors, the criticism flies. Instead of going to the school I wanted, I went to their choice program. I made it one semester before I crashed and dropped out. I took my meager scholarships and worked two part time jobs to enter an amazing trade school to earn myself an associates degree in industrial maintenance. Instead of working in an office doing paperwork, I work at the local fish market servicing vessels when they come into dock. It's not the best smelling job, but I like the people I meet and work with. Recently, I have come to realize, I want more. I want excitement.

Leia gave me the attention that I never received. I thought all the small things she gave me were wonderful, but they were only tidbits of love to make me stay and devote everything to her. Despite that, the one good thing she gave me was the first stepping stone out from under my parent's thumb. When I came out, they screamed their outrage and then gave me the silent treatment. It took my grandpa demanding me back at family gatherings for them to somewhat ignore my relationship and go back to criticizing the other parts of my life. It feels like no matter how well I think my life is going, they will never be satisfied or happy for me.

I close the book and grab my headphones. When I go to turn on an audiobook to try to drown out the pounding bass below, I notice a text notification. A breath of relief automatically escapes my lips. The picture of a sunburnt man with his messy chocolate brown hair tied in a high bun, with bright pink stained cheeks, and mud covering the rest of him brightens my screen. Kayden, the best big brother I could ever have. I can't help but be jealous of his freedom. Being the child of our father's first marriage, he spent half his time with his mother. Lucky for me, as we were only three years apart, his mother didn't mind when Eli, our other sibling, and I tagged along occasionally. Over time sadly, his mother showed up less and less. He started

focusing more on us and his own life. He would stand up for me against our father's expectations and my mother's goal for perfection. As teenagers, he took us to grandpa's ranch to get away from it all. In spite of his efforts, I grew up still wanting their approval while he is out in the world doing what he wants without caring about what anyone thinks or says. Like right now he works as a lookout firefighter and lives in the Oregon mountains in a small shack. Due to that, his messages are sporadic and responses take days to go through.

Opening the first long text. *"I am alive! But I can't promise I'm not a zombie."* I giggle at his stupid joke. *"I know you laughed at that! Eli messaged about dinner."* Lucky me, it appears he has service tonight. *"Why didn't you tell me about Leia before you told dad and mom? I could have facetimed and distracted them. And fuck them for thinking it was a phase! If they try to set you up with the Colton clan, run!"* I smile as I remember mom's attempts to set him up with one of the Colton girls. That family aims to have their own reality show. He came home one time with claw marks on his face. He refuses to be anywhere near them after that debacle.

I continue reading his series of texts. *"I am also receiving your mountain of sob texts. Damn no cell service!"*

Oh no.

"And gosh girl, I can tell you were drunk. Next time, lock your phone up. I don't want to listen to the voicemails, but I'm gonna."

I hope when I see my call log, I didn't leave any. Sadly, I can see many whining drunk memes heading my way.

"Anyways keep your head up!"

The following text dampers my mood.

"At the moment, they are extending my post, so I will not be back until after your birthday. I'm sorry to abandon you, but along with your birthday favor, I grant you an extra favor. Imagine it, two favors! You can make me do anything with no repercussions. Love ya, baby sis!"

A sad smile forms on my lips as I skim all the messages again. I won't have my biggest supporter at the next gathering. The one family dinner that is

supposed to be happy and all about me, yet never is. Instead the negative comments seem to grow ten fold. I have one month until then, and something needs to change. It won't be my family, so I need to facilitate that change for myself.

I focus back on my phone and go through my contacts. I know someone who can help me. I tap his name on the screen and wait as the phone rings. "Hello, Fridge, what can I do ya for?" I laugh at the stupid nickname that will haunt me forever. It takes one time getting trapped in a walk-in freezer to get stuck with a terribly hilarious nickname.

"Hey Dain, you remember that life advice you gave me. Let's do it."

My living room is bare. I shipped out most of my boxes ahead of time. I have my essentials and my duffel bag, which I will live out of for the next week as I cross the country.

I look at myself in the bathroom mirror as I pack the last of my toiletries. When I first made this decision, I was so stressed, but now my skin is glowing, the bags under my eyes are gone, and I truly look like myself. I am happy and I am doing this. No more second guessing my choices.

"Knock, knock! Your favorite person has arrived and brought - Oh, shit!" I race to the living room to see a giant mountain man standing in my doorway with his mouth gaping open. I couldn't help burst into laughter at the look on Kayden's face. "What happened? If you needed help, I could have chipped in. You didn't need to sell your stuff." He drops his bags on the floor and walks over to me. He grabs my face and wipes away the few tears that escaped from laughing so hard. "What did you need the money for? Is it a smutty book addiction? I heard that it can get serious."

I swat his hands away and give him a big hug. "I thought you weren't coming in for a couple more weeks."

His arms squeeze me so tight I struggle a moment to breathe before he releases me. "They found coverage earlier than expected, so I came to surprise you. However," he looks around the empty apartment, "it seems you have surprised me instead."

I grin. "I was going to surprise you at the lookout." He arches his eyebrow. "I'm leaving."

"Leaving? Like in this crappy duplex?" He looks at me with a lopsided grin.

"More like this state." I laugh. "I'm abandoning all common sense and adventuring to the arctic."

"That's amazing. I am so proud of you. Where are you going?"

"The plan was to see you for a while in Oregon before going north to Alaska."

"Alaska! What brought this on? I mean don't get me wrong. I am happy you are finally leaving this shell of a town and doing something great for yourself."

I shake my head. I'm stunned by my own actions. "I'm twenty-five now. I've lived my entire life for someone else's approval. After Leia and the last family dinner, something in me broke. I was devastated. I realized I don't have close friends, and my only support was you, Eli, and grandpa. I have nothing in my life I am truly proud to call my own." He nods at me to continue. "One night at a bar, one of the dock workers was there. He told me I need to get out of this town and put my skills to use."

"I agree with him there."

"Yes, yes. Anyways, he told me about the cruise life in Alaska. He has connections up there with some of the captains and his former crew mates. He recommended me and I did some phone interviews. I got a job as an assistant engineer and I start in two weeks."

"Wow. What has the family said about all this?"

"I wasn't going to tell them. The only person who knows is Eli. I don't need them trying to talk me out of it."

Wide-eyed Kayden says. "That is wild, sis!" He hugs me again. "Are you my sis or a clone on a mission?"

"Yes, and my first mission is to shave your head." I jest with a scissor gesture towards his long hair.

He pulls back protecting his hair with his hand. "You wouldn't."

"Depends. Are you going to help carry the last of my boxes to my truck?"

He looks at the remaining boxes. "Deal. When you heading out? Are you going to make a big show and give everyone the middle finger tonight?"

I thought a lot this week about my birthday dinner. "No, I'm leaving as soon as everything's packed up."

"So you're not going to dinner?"

"Nope. I don't want to leave on a sour note. I don't matter much to them, so why would I want a big send off? I am done with this life and want to start fresh without the backlash."

He whistles. "Well that explains why Pa wanted me to give you this. Said it was a private birthday gift. How he finds his intel with how little he speaks is eerie." Very true, grandpa is always quiet, barely speaking a few words, if any, at our family gatherings. He spends most of his time at the ranch tending to the cattle and horses. His crew is well seasoned and when temps do come around, someone else is in charge of them. He does speak up when it matters, which is something I respect about him. However, he is never surprised by anything. As we joke, he is "All knowing". There were talks that he may be Santa with his growing beard, but Eli pointed out he's not fat enough to be Santa, still Kayden refuses to give up his theories.

Kayden reaches into his drop bag and pulls out a yellow envelope with my name printed in grandpa's writing on the front. The first thing I pull out is an old locket. I remember it well. It was the one thing grandpa cherished and told me stories about it. I open the locket to see a young woman with a small portrait painted inside. It's my great grandmother. The story was that she had fallen in love at a young age with a boy. She worked the orchard fields whilst he worked at his families' furniture shop, though they both had bigger dreams,

she wanted to own a flower shop, and he wanted to be an artist painting beautiful landscapes. Unfortunately, their dreams would remain as such and nothing more. The aspiring artist had to trade his brush for a gun when war threatened all he held dear. Before departing, he took what paints he had and spent the last of his savings to buy two lockets and painted my great grandmother's portrait inside one and his in the other. To keep one another close, he took the portrait of her and she kept his. In the end, only the locket and his dog tags made it back to her. The war may have been won, but my great grandmother's love was lost. All she had to remember him by was their memories, dreams, and the two lockets.

Like me, grandpa loves that story. It's partially what inspired him to serve his country and when he joined, he asked for the locket of his mother. Fearful of losing her son too, she pleaded with him to stay, but grandpa swore he would return to her and the locket with him. He kept that promise too and was gifted both lockets when his mother passed away. Kayden leans over. "I still find it weird how much you resemble her." He follows my gaze to the small portrait. The painting expresses her gentle smile and big kind eyes. I never saw myself looking like her but I always wanted to *be* like her, a woman who took on risks and fought for what she loved. Why give this to me? "I think you should read this next." Kayden hands me a torn notebook page as he takes back the envelope to dig through it himself. He is too nosy for his own good.

I look down at the page to see grandpa's polished cursive writing, "Youngling, you have a delicate soul. The world has caged you in, but I see now you have opened the door to step outside. Take the locket. Live *your* life. I expect letters. Love Pa."

"Oh, shit! Lucky you! I expect a room."

"What?" He just hands me more paperwork in answer. "What is this?"

He grins, "Read it."

I shuffle through the rest. "A house? That's way too much!"

"Don't over think it. It's only a two year lease. He did something similar for me when I moved to Oregon. He wants you to focus on your life. He will

expect you to take over payment if you choose to continue living there or you can decide to move after the lease ends. Trust the trust.” He winks.

I skim over the papers again. “He doesn’t like free loaders, but he wants us to explore things we enjoy.”

“Why now?” I shake my head, trying to fathom my new reality.

“You had to make the first leap. If he gave it to you before now, you would have used it to do something that pleases our parents instead of yourself.”

Tears well up in my eyes. “I need to thank him.” I never expected this from him. He hardly gets involved in other’s lives.

“Nope, he is already heading to the family gathering. Plus, he doesn’t like the gooey mush. I’m just telling you what he told me. ‘Show your appreciation by living a happy life.’ Now let’s get these boxes and hit the road.”

“We?” I raise my eyebrow in question.

“You think I’m going to sit back and not join you on a country road trip? Think again.”

“What about the family?”

“I already said hi to Pa. I talked to Eli and he said he’s coming to dinner then going right back to the university. Knowing what he knows now, he will probably record their reaction. Actually, I’m going to demand that he does.” He pulls out his phone to text our younger brother with his ridiculous request. “Now let’s go. We are going to pick up Dede’s cupcakes to celebrate.”

We grab the last of the boxes. I stand at the entryway and look at my empty room, feeling a bit of pride growing inside me. This chapter is done and I finally feel ready to move onto the next. With a bright smile, I close the door to a life I had hated for years, “Happy birthday to me.”