

## Chapter 1

On a gray, dreary morning, Alex woke up to the sound of his father yelling in the kitchen. This was part of his daily routine: yelling, orders, and endless criticism. His father was a domineering man who saw Alex as nothing more than an ungrateful failure. His mother, on the other hand, avoided confrontation, content with her role as an indifferent observer, never missing a chance to throw in a cutting remark.

Alex, a seventeen-year-old boy, lived in a small town where nothing exciting ever seemed to happen. He felt like his life was stuck on repeat, a monotonous cycle of school, home, and fights with his family. Yet, deep inside, Alex held onto something precious: his dreams. He had a deep longing to escape this reality, to live freely, far away from the chains his family had placed on him.

At school, Alex didn't have many friends. He was quiet, often sitting in the back row, sketching in his small notebook. His drawings reflected worlds of imagination, places he had never been but could picture in vivid detail: towering mountains, tranquil lakes, and skies filled with endless stars.

That day, after school ended, Alex walked home slowly, dragging his feet along the cracked pavement. The autumn leaves crunched under his shoes, the golden and red hues contrasting sharply with the dullness he felt inside. Upon arriving home, he was greeted by his father's accusing glare and a new round of insults about his "lack of ambition." His mother chimed in with a comment about how he'd never amount to anything.

Alex didn't respond. He had learned long ago that arguing only made things worse. Instead, he retreated to his room, his sanctuary where he could at least pretend to escape. His room was small, with peeling wallpaper and a single window that faced the night sky.

Sitting on his bed, Alex pulled out his sketchbook and began to draw. This time, he sketched the stars, connecting them into constellations only he could see. The stars had always been his solace, a reminder that there was a vast world beyond his tiny, suffocating existence.

As he stared out the window, his mind drifted. He imagined himself far away, standing under a different sky, living a different life. But the weight of reality pulled him back. With a heavy sigh, Alex closed his sketchbook and lay down, staring at the ceiling.

For a moment, he let himself dream of a life where he wasn't defined by his family's anger or his mother's biting words. A life where he could be free.

But dreams, Alex thought bitterly, were for people with hope. And hope, he told himself, was something he wasn't sure he had anymore.

The chapter ends with Alex staring at the stars through the window, longing for a better life, yet feeling trapped in his present.

## Chapter 2

The next day, Alex's routine unfolded as usual: a quiet breakfast overshadowed by his father's grumbling and his mother's cold remarks, a silent walk to school, and hours spent avoiding attention in the back of his classes.

But that day, something unexpected happened.

During lunch, Alex wandered into the school library. It was one of the few places where he felt at peace, surrounded by the smell of old books and the quiet hum of whispers. He wasn't much of a reader, but he liked the stillness of the library. It was a place where no one bothered him, where he could just exist without feeling judged.

As he walked between the shelves, running his fingers along the spines of the books, he heard a voice.

"Looking for something specific?"

Alex turned, startled. Standing a few feet away was a girl he had seen in passing but never spoken to. She had auburn hair that caught the light streaming through the windows and a warm, curious smile.

"Uh, no," Alex mumbled, looking down at the floor. "Just... browsing."

She tilted her head slightly, studying him. "You're Alex, right? From Mr. Carter's history class?"

He nodded, unsure what to say.

“I’m Emma.” She extended her hand, her smile never wavering.

Alex hesitated, then shook her hand briefly. Her grip was firm but gentle.

“You’re always so quiet,” Emma said, leaning slightly against the nearest bookshelf. “I’ve seen your notebook. You draw, don’t you?”

Alex’s heart skipped a beat. He never showed his drawings to anyone, and the idea that someone had noticed him sketching made him uneasy. “Yeah, sometimes,” he replied cautiously.

“Can I see?” she asked, her tone genuine and curious.

Alex hesitated. Normally, he would have refused outright, but there was something about Emma—her openness, her lack of judgment—that made him feel like he could trust her. Slowly, he pulled his notebook from his bag and handed it to her.

Emma flipped through the pages, her eyes lighting up as she took in the intricate drawings of landscapes, stars, and imaginary worlds. “These are incredible,” she said, her voice filled with admiration. “You’re really talented, Alex.”

He felt his face heat up, unused to compliments. “Thanks,” he muttered, avoiding her gaze.

Emma closed the notebook carefully and handed it back to him. “You should do something with this, you know. Your drawings... they’re amazing. They deserve to be seen.”

Alex shook his head. “They’re just... something I do. They’re not a big deal.”

Emma frowned slightly, as if she didn’t agree but decided not to push. Instead, she said, “Well, I think they’re a big deal. And I’m glad I got to see them.”

For the first time in a long while, Alex felt a small flicker of something he couldn’t quite name. Not happiness, exactly, but something close.

“Thanks,” he said again, this time a little louder.

The bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. Emma smiled at him one last time before heading toward the door. “See you around, Alex,” she said, her voice light and cheerful.

As she walked away, Alex watched her, a strange mixture of emotions swirling in his chest. He didn’t know why, but he felt like something had shifted, like meeting Emma had cracked open a tiny window in the dark, suffocating walls of his life.

For the rest of the day, Alex couldn’t stop thinking about her. Her smile, her kindness, the way she had looked at his drawings as if they were something special.

That night, as he sat in his room staring at the stars, he found himself sketching her. Her hair, her smile, the light in her eyes. It was the first time in a long while that he drew something other than imaginary landscapes or constellations.

He didn't know what the future held, but for the first time in as long as he could remember, Alex felt a flicker of hope. And that flicker had a name: Emma.

The chapter ends with Alex holding the sketch of Emma, his heart heavy with unfamiliar emotion but lighter than it had been in years.

## Chapter 3

The following days passed in a blur for Alex, but this time, it wasn't the usual monotony that consumed him. Instead, he found himself looking forward to lunchtime when he might see Emma again. He wasn't sure why she had taken an interest in him, but the thought of her smile, her warmth, and her encouragement lingered in his mind like a small, steady flame.

On the third day, as Alex entered the library, his heart skipped when he saw Emma sitting at one of the tables near the window. She was flipping through a book, her auburn hair catching the late morning sunlight.

"Hey, Alex," she said, looking up as he approached.

"Hey," he replied softly, slipping into the seat across from her.

Emma closed her book and leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand. "So, what's your deal?" she asked with a playful smile.

"My... deal?" Alex repeated, confused.

"Yeah, you're always so quiet. You sit in the back of the room, you sketch these amazing things, but you never talk to anyone. I'm curious."

Alex shrugged, looking down at the table. “I don’t know. I guess I just… keep to myself.”

“I noticed,” Emma said, her tone gentle. “But why?”

Alex hesitated. He didn’t know how to explain the weight he carried every day, the constant pressure of living under his father’s thumb and his mother’s cold gaze. He didn’t want to scare her away or seem pathetic.

“It’s complicated,” he finally said.

Emma studied him for a moment, her expression softening. “Okay. I get that. But… you don’t have to keep it all in, you know? Sometimes, it helps to talk about things.”

Alex didn’t respond right away. He wasn’t used to people caring about how he felt. Most of his life, he’d been told to toughen up, to stop being weak. But Emma’s words didn’t feel like pity—they felt genuine.

“Maybe,” he said quietly.

Emma smiled, and for a moment, they sat in comfortable silence. Then she spoke again. “You know, I’m not exactly the most talkative person, either. But I think when you find the right people, it’s easier to open up.”

Alex glanced at her, surprised. “You don’t seem shy at all.”



Emma laughed softly. “That’s because I’m not shy—I’m just careful about who I let in. But with you... I don’t know. You seem different.”

“Different how?”

“Like... you’re carrying something heavy. And I guess I just want to help, if I can.”

Her words hit Alex harder than he expected. He looked away, unsure how to respond. No one had ever noticed his sadness before, let alone cared enough to mention it.

Before he could say anything, Emma changed the subject. “So, what’s your favorite thing to draw?”

Alex hesitated, grateful for the shift in conversation. “Stars,” he finally admitted.

“Stars?”

He nodded. “I like how they’re constant, you know? No matter how bad things get, they’re always there. And they’re... far away, like they’re watching everything but not part of it.”

“That’s beautiful,” Emma said softly. “I’ve never thought of stars that way.”

Alex shrugged, feeling a bit embarrassed. “It’s just something I think about.”

Emma smiled again, and they spent the rest of lunch talking about art, books, and the things they dreamed of doing someday. For the first time in years, Alex felt like he could breathe, like he wasn't completely invisible.

As the days turned into weeks, Alex and Emma's friendship grew. They started meeting in the library regularly, sharing bits and pieces of their lives. Emma talked about her love for photography, how she wanted to travel the world and capture its beauty through her lens. Alex listened, captivated by her passion and the sparkle in her eyes when she spoke about her dreams.

In return, Alex began to open up, little by little. He told Emma about his sketchbook and the way drawing helped him escape. He even mentioned that things weren't great at home, though he avoided going into detail.

Emma didn't push him. She seemed to understand that he needed time, and her patience made Alex trust her even more.

One afternoon, as they sat in the library, Emma said, "You know, I think you could do something amazing with your art. Like, really amazing."

Alex shook his head. "It's just a hobby. I'm not good enough to do anything with it."

"That's not true," Emma said firmly. "You're incredible, Alex. You just don't see it yet."

Her words stayed with him long after they parted ways that day. For the first time in a long while, Alex began to wonder if maybe—just maybe—he could be more than what his father said he was.

The chapter ends with Alex sitting in his room, sketching a new drawing inspired by Emma’s encouragement. It’s a picture of a night sky filled with stars, but this time, there’s a figure standing beneath them, reaching up toward the light.

## Chapter 4

The sound of the front door slamming echoed through the small house. Alex had barely stepped into the hallway when his father’s voice cut through the air like a blade.

“Where the hell have you been?” his father barked, his tone sharp and accusatory.

Alex froze, gripping the strap of his bag tightly. “I was at school,” he said quietly, not daring to meet his father’s eyes.

“School ended an hour ago,” his father snapped, stepping closer. “Do you think I’m an idiot? I know you’ve been sneaking around somewhere, wasting time like the lazy good-for-nothing you are.”

“I was just studying,” Alex mumbled, his voice barely audible.

“Studying,” his father scoffed, his face contorted with disdain. “You? Studying? Don’t make me laugh.”

From the kitchen, Alex’s mother appeared, her expression blank as always. She leaned against the doorway, crossing her arms. “He’s probably just sulking in some corner, like always,” she said dismissively.

Alex felt a familiar heat rising in his chest—a mix of shame, anger, and helplessness. He wanted to defend himself, to tell them they were wrong, but he knew it wouldn’t matter. It never did.

His father’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t you dare talk back to me, boy. You think you’re so clever, don’t you? Hiding away with your stupid little drawings. You think that’s going to get you anywhere in life?”

Alex clenched his fists, his nails digging into his palms. He could feel the weight of their words, their disdain, pressing down on him like a physical force.

“I’m trying,” he said quietly, his voice trembling.

“Trying?” his father repeated, his voice rising. “You’re not trying hard enough! You’re a disappointment, Alex. Always have been.”

The words hit Alex like a punch to the gut. He glanced at his mother, hoping for even the smallest sign of support, but she simply looked away, her disinterest as painful as his father’s anger.

“I’ve had enough of this,” his father muttered, turning toward the living room. But before he left, he grabbed Alex’s bag and tore it open.

“Hey, stop!” Alex protested, panic flaring in his chest.

His father ignored him, pulling out the sketchbook. “What’s this?” he said, flipping through the pages roughly.

“Give it back!” Alex said, his voice louder now, desperation evident.

His father held the sketchbook up, a cruel smirk on his face. “This is what you waste your time on? Stupid doodles? No wonder you’re a failure.”

Before Alex could stop him, his father ripped a page out of the sketchbook. The sound of tearing paper was deafening.

“No!” Alex shouted, lunging forward, but his father shoved him back.

“Maybe now you’ll focus on something that matters,” his father said coldly, tossing the ruined page onto the floor.

Alex stared at the torn drawing—a sketch of the stars, one he had worked on for hours. His vision blurred as tears welled in his eyes, but he refused to cry in front of them.

His father sneered. “Clean up this mess,” he said before leaving the room.

For a moment, Alex stood frozen, his chest heaving with suppressed emotion. His mother sighed and walked back into the kitchen, muttering something about how “boys these days” were too sensitive.

When they were gone, Alex dropped to his knees and carefully picked up the torn page. His hands trembled as he smoothed it out, but the jagged edges and creases were impossible to fix.

In his room later that night, Alex sat on his bed, staring at the damaged drawing. He felt hollow, like a piece of him had been ripped away along with the paper.

For a long time, he just sat there, the weight of everything pressing down on him. The insults, the mockery, the constant feeling of being unwanted—it all churned inside him like a storm.

But then, his thoughts drifted to Emma. She had seen his sketches, and instead of tearing them apart, she had praised them. She had told him he was talented, that he could do something amazing.

The memory of her words was like a lifeline, pulling him out of the dark spiral.

He grabbed his phone and stared at the blank screen for a moment before typing out a message to Emma.

➤ \*‘‘Hey. Are you free to talk?’’\*

He hesitated before hitting send, unsure if she’d even reply. But a minute later, his phone buzzed.

➤ \*‘‘Of course. What’s up?’’\*

For the first time that day, Alex felt a flicker of relief. He didn't know how much he could tell her, but just knowing she was there—that she cared—was enough to keep him going.

The chapter ends with Alex looking out his window at the stars, his torn sketch lying beside him. Despite the darkness of his home life, the connection with Emma gives him a glimmer of hope, a reminder that not everything in his world is broken.

## Chapter 5

The next day, Alex arrived at the library earlier than usual. He needed to see Emma, to hear her voice and feel the warmth of her presence. After the events of the previous night, the thought of talking to her was the only thing keeping him from being swallowed whole by his despair.

As he stepped into the quiet space, he spotted her sitting at their usual table by the window. She was scribbling something in a notebook, her head tilted slightly to the side as she chewed on the end of a pen.

“Hey,” Alex said softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

Emma looked up and smiled. “Hey, Alex. You’re early.”

He shrugged, sliding into the seat across from her. “Yeah, I just... wanted to talk.”

Her expression shifted, the lightheartedness giving way to concern. She closed her notebook and leaned forward. “What’s going on?”

Alex hesitated, his fingers tightening around the strap of his bag. He wasn’t sure where to start or how much to tell her. The words felt heavy in his throat, tangled with years of silence and fear.

“It’s... my family,” he finally said, his voice barely audible.

Emma’s eyes softened, and she stayed quiet, giving him space to continue.

“They’re... not great,” Alex said, struggling to find the right words. “My dad... he’s always angry. Always yelling. And my mom... she doesn’t care. She just lets him do whatever he wants.”

Emma frowned, her brows knitting together. “Do they... hurt you?”

Alex looked down at the table, his heart pounding. “Not... physically,” he said, though the memory of his father shoving him the night before flashed through his mind. “It’s just... they’re always saying things. Like I’m worthless, like I’ll never be good enough. And no matter what I do, it’s never enough for them.”

Emma reached across the table and placed her hand on his. Her touch was gentle but steady, grounding him in the moment. “Alex, I’m so sorry,” she



said, her voice full of genuine empathy. “You don’t deserve that. No one does.”

He felt his chest tighten, a mix of relief and vulnerability washing over him. No one had ever said that to him before—not in a way that felt real.

“I just... I feel so trapped,” he admitted. “Like no matter what I do, I’ll never get out of this. I’ll always be stuck there, with them, and I’ll never be... anything.”

Emma squeezed his hand gently. “That’s not true,” she said firmly. “You’re not trapped, Alex. You’re just... in a tough place right now. But it won’t last forever. I promise.”

He looked up at her, his eyes searching hers for any sign of doubt, but all he saw was unwavering belief.

“You’re so talented,” Emma continued. “And you’re kind, and thoughtful, and stronger than you think. I know it’s hard to see that right now, but I do. And I’m not the only one who will.”

Alex felt a lump rise in his throat, and for a moment, he thought he might cry. But instead, he took a deep breath and nodded. “Thanks,” he said quietly.

Emma smiled, her hand still resting on his. “Anytime. And, you know, if you ever need to talk or just... get away for a bit, you can always come to me. Okay?”

“Okay,” Alex said, his voice steadier now.

They sat in silence for a while, the weight of the conversation lingering between them. But it wasn't an uncomfortable silence—it was the kind of silence that felt safe, like a pause in a storm.

Eventually, Emma broke the quiet. “So, what are you working on in your sketchbook lately?” she asked, her tone lighter now.

Alex hesitated, then pulled the sketchbook from his bag. He flipped to the page he'd been working on the night before—the torn one with the stars he'd redrawn.

Emma's eyes lit up as she looked at it. “Wow, Alex. This is beautiful.”

“It's not finished,” he said, his voice modest.

“Well, when it is, I want to see it,” she said with a grin.

For the first time that day, Alex smiled—a small, hesitant smile, but a smile nonetheless.

The bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. As they packed up their things, Emma said, “Don't forget what I said. You're not alone, Alex. Not anymore.”

Her words stayed with him for the rest of the day, echoing in his mind as he walked home.

That evening, as he sat in his room sketching, he felt a strange sense of calm. His father's angry voice in the next room didn't seem as loud, and the weight on his chest felt just a little lighter.

For the first time in what felt like forever, Alex allowed himself to imagine a future where things could be different—a future where he wasn't defined by his family's hatred but by the kindness of someone who believed in him.

The following few days passed quietly, but for Alex, something had shifted. He found himself holding onto Emma's words, replaying them in his mind whenever his father's voice grew too loud or his mother's indifference became too much to bear.

“You're not alone, Alex. Not anymore.”

He clung to those words like they were a lifeline, a fragile thread connecting him to something beyond the walls of his house.

That Friday, as the final bell rang and students filed out of their classrooms, Alex lingered behind, stuffing his sketchbook into his bag with deliberate slowness. He wasn't ready to go home yet. The thought of sitting through another tense, suffocating evening under his father's glare made his stomach tighten.

Instead, he made his way to the park near the school. It was small and quiet, with a few benches scattered among the trees. He found an empty one near the edge of the park, where the branches cast long shadows over the ground.

He pulled out his sketchbook and flipped to a blank page. His pencil moved almost instinctively, tracing lines that soon became shapes: a

towering tree with roots that stretched deep into the earth, its branches reaching toward a sky filled with stars.

The sound of footsteps startled him, and he looked up to see Emma approaching, her camera slung over her shoulder. She smiled when she saw him.

“Hey,” she said, sitting down beside him. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

Alex shrugged, closing his sketchbook. “Just didn’t feel like going home yet.”

Emma nodded, her expression softening. “I get that. This park’s one of my favorite places to escape to.”

She gestured toward the camera hanging around her neck. “I was just taking some pictures. The light’s perfect right now.”

Alex glanced at the golden glow filtering through the trees. “Yeah, it’s nice.”

Emma tilted her head, studying him. “You okay?”

He hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah. Just... tired, I guess.”

Emma didn’t press him, and he was grateful for that. Instead, she shifted the conversation. “What were you drawing?”

For a moment, Alex considered brushing off the question, but then he opened his sketchbook and turned it toward her.

Emma's eyes lit up as she studied the drawing. "This is incredible, Alex. The detail, the way the tree looks like it's alive... it's amazing."

Alex felt his cheeks flush. "It's just something I was messing around with."

"Well, I think it's beautiful," Emma said. She lifted her camera. "Mind if I take a picture of it?"

Alex blinked, surprised. "Why?"

"Because it's worth remembering," she said simply.

He hesitated, then nodded. Emma snapped a photo, glancing at the screen on her camera before lowering it again. "Perfect. I'm keeping this one."

Alex couldn't help but smile, a small, genuine curve of his lips.

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, Emma occasionally taking pictures of the trees or the sky, Alex adding small details to his drawing.

"Do you ever think about the future?" Emma asked suddenly, breaking the quiet.

Alex paused, his pencil hovering over the page. “Not really,” he admitted. “It’s hard to think about the future when... when the present feels like this.”

Emma didn’t respond right away. When she finally spoke, her voice was soft. “I think about it all the time. About leaving this town, traveling, meeting new people... finding a place where I feel like I belong.”

Alex glanced at her, surprised by the hint of vulnerability in her voice.

“You don’t feel like you belong here?” he asked.

Emma shook her head. “Not really. I mean, I have friends and stuff, but... I don’t know. I feel like there’s so much more out there, you know? More than this little town, more than... high school drama and small talk.”

Alex nodded slowly. “Yeah. I get that.”

They fell silent again, the weight of the conversation settling between them.

After a while, Emma turned to him, a determined look in her eyes. “You should think about it, though. The future, I mean. Because you’re not going to be stuck forever, Alex. One day, you’re going to get out of here, and you’re going to do incredible things. I know it.”

Her words hit him harder than he expected. He wanted to believe her, but the voice in his head—the one that sounded too much like his father—kept whispering that she was wrong, that he wasn’t good enough, that he’d never be anything more than what he was now.

But when he looked at Emma, at the way her eyes glimmered with conviction, he felt a small flicker of hope.

“Thanks,” he said quietly.

Emma smiled, and for the first time in a long while, Alex felt like maybe—just maybe—the future wasn’t as impossible as it seemed.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the park, they stood to leave.

“See you Monday?” Emma asked as they walked toward the edge of the park.

“Yeah,” Alex said.

Emma gave him a quick wave before heading in the opposite direction. Alex watched her go, her auburn hair catching the last rays of sunlight.

That night, as he sat in his room, he pulled out his sketchbook and began a new drawing. This time, it was a scene of a distant horizon, the sun rising over a vast, open landscape.

For the first time in months, Alex didn’t feel entirely trapped. The future still scared him, but now, it didn’t feel so far out of reach.

## Chapter 6

The days following Alex and Emma's time in the park were surprisingly bearable. For the first time in years, Alex felt a sense of stability, even if it was fragile and fleeting. His father's anger didn't seem as sharp, and his



mother's dismissive comments rolled off his back more easily than before. It wasn't that their words hurt less—he'd simply found something stronger to hold onto: Emma's unwavering belief in him.

But as Alex quickly learned, any reprieve in his home life was short-lived.

It was a Friday night, and the house was unusually quiet. His father, irritated by a bad week at work, had retreated to the living room with a bottle of cheap whiskey. His mother, as always, stayed out of the way, sitting in the kitchen flipping through an old magazine.

Alex was in his room, pencil in hand, working on a new drawing. The image was vivid in his mind—a lone figure standing on the edge of a cliff, surrounded by a storm, staring at a distant patch of sunlight breaking through the clouds. He was so lost in his work that he didn't hear the heavy footsteps approaching his door.

“Alex!” his father's voice roared, shattering the silence.

Alex froze, his pencil hovering over the page. He knew that tone. It wasn't just anger—it was the kind of seething fury that meant nothing good was about to happen.

The door slammed open, and his father stormed into the room, his face flushed from alcohol and rage.

“Why the hell didn't you take out the trash?” he barked, his eyes bloodshot.

Alex blinked, confused. “I-I thought Mom was going to—”

“Don’t you dare blame her!” his father shouted, his voice reverberating off the walls.

Alex’s heart pounded as he instinctively shrank back in his chair. He knew better than to argue, but the words spilled out before he could stop them. “I didn’t mean to forget. I’ll do it now.”

His father sneered, the smell of whiskey heavy on his breath as he stepped closer. “You think saying sorry fixes everything? You think you can just sit up here drawing your stupid little pictures while everyone else does the work?”

“They’re not stupid,” Alex muttered under his breath, but it was loud enough for his father to hear.

“What did you just say?” his father growled, his voice dangerously low.

Alex looked down at his desk, his fists clenched. “Nothing.”

But it was too late. His father grabbed the sketchbook from the desk and flipped through it, his movements rough and careless. “This? This is what you waste your time on? You think this is going to get you anywhere?”

Alex’s chest tightened as he watched his father thumb through the pages, each one a piece of himself that he’d poured onto the paper. “Stop,” he said, his voice trembling.

His father Ignored him, ripping out a page and holding it up for emphasis. “This is garbage, Alex. You hear me? Garbage!”

“Stop it!” Alex shouted, standing up. He reached for the sketchbook, but his father shoved him back hard enough that he stumbled against the wall.

“You want to stand up to me?” his father snarled, his voice dripping with venom. “You think you’re a man now?”

Alex didn’t respond. He couldn’t. His throat felt tight, and his hands were shaking.

His father glared at him for a long moment before tossing the sketchbook onto the ground. “You’re pathetic,” he spat. “Just like your mother always says. You’ll never be anything.”

With that, he turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

For a long time, Alex didn’t move. He stood there, his back pressed against the wall, staring down at the torn pages scattered across the floor. His chest felt heavy, his breath coming in short, shallow gasps.

When he finally moved, it was slow and mechanical. He bent down and picked up the pages, his hands trembling as he smoothed them out. The drawing his father had ripped was one of his favorites—a sketch of a distant galaxy, its swirling stars vibrant and alive. Now, it was ruined, the image marred by jagged tears.

Alex sat on the edge of his bed, staring down at the damaged page. His father's words echoed in his mind, louder than ever.

\*Garbage.\*

\*Pathetic.\*

\*You'll never be anything.\*

He felt the familiar weight of hopelessness settling over him, pressing down on his chest until it was hard to breathe.

But then, a single thought cut through the noise: Emma.

She wouldn't say those things. She wouldn't tear him down or call his art garbage. She believed in him, even when he couldn't believe in himself.

Without thinking, Alex grabbed his phone and sent her a text.

➤ \*"Are you awake?"\*

The reply came almost instantly.

➤ \*"Yeah. Everything okay?"\*

➤ \*"Not really. Can you talk?"\*

➤ \*"Of course. Call me."\*

Alex hesitated for a moment, then pressed the call button. The line rang twice before her voice came through, soft and warm. “Hey, Alex. What’s going on?”

As soon as he heard her voice, the dam broke. He didn’t cry—he hadn’t cried in years—but his words came out in a rush, spilling over each other as he tried to explain what had happened.

“He tore up my sketchbook,” Alex said, his voice trembling. “He said it was garbage, that I’m garbage. I just... I don’t know what to do anymore, Emma. I feel like I’m drowning.”

There was a pause on the other end, and then Emma’s voice came through, steady and filled with quiet determination. “Alex, listen to me. You’re not garbage. Not even close. Your art is incredible, and so are you. Don’t let him take that away from you.”

Her words were like a lifeline, pulling him back from the edge.

“I feel so trapped,” Alex admitted, his voice breaking. “Like I’ll never get out of here. Like no matter how hard I try, it’s never going to be enough.”

“You *will* get out,” Emma said firmly. “I know it feels impossible right now, but this isn’t forever. You’re going to graduate, and you’re going to leave this town, and you’re going to do amazing things. I believe in you, Alex.”

Alex closed his eyes, letting her words wash over him. For the first time that night, the tightness in his chest began to ease.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“You don’t have to thank me,” Emma said softly. “I’m here for you. Always.”

They talked for a while longer, Emma steering the conversation toward lighter topics to help distract him. By the time they hung up, Alex felt a little more grounded. The weight of his father’s words was still there, but it didn’t feel as crushing as before.

That night, Alex stayed up late, painstakingly taping the torn pages of his sketchbook back together. It wasn’t perfect, but it was enough.

Before he went to bed, he started a new drawing—one of a small, flickering lantern illuminating the darkness around it.

It was a symbol of something he didn’t fully understand yet but could finally begin to hope for: light, even in the darkest of places.

The next morning, Alex woke up to the faint sound of muffled voices downstairs. He lay in bed for a moment, staring at the ceiling, his body heavy with exhaustion from the night before. His father's words still lingered in his mind, but Emma's voice—soft and steady—was louder, pushing back against the storm of doubt.

He glanced at his sketchbook on the desk. The taped-together pages looked fragile, like they might tear again at the slightest touch, but they were still there. That mattered.

After dressing quickly, Alex grabbed his bag and headed downstairs, keeping his head down as he passed through the kitchen. His father was seated at the table, nursing a cup of coffee with a scowl on his face. His mother stood nearby, scrolling through her phone, barely glancing up as Alex entered.

“Where are you going this early?” his father grumbled, his tone laced with suspicion.

“Library,” Alex replied, keeping his voice neutral.

His father snorted. “Library. Right. Wasting time again.”

Alex didn't respond. He'd learned long ago that arguing would only make things worse. Instead, he slipped out the door and into the crisp morning air, the sharp chill biting at his skin.

The walk to the library was quiet and solitary, but Alex didn't mind. He liked the way the streets were nearly empty this early, the world still

waking up. The library was one of the few places where he felt safe—a sanctuary where his father’s voice couldn’t reach him.

When he arrived, he spotted Emma sitting at their usual table near the window. She was leaning back in her chair, staring out at the street with her camera in her lap. Her auburn hair glinted in the sunlight streaming through the glass, and Alex felt a strange sense of relief just seeing her.

“Hey,” she said, smiling as he approached.

“Hey,” Alex replied, sliding into the seat across from her.

“You look tired,” Emma said, studying him with a concerned expression.

Alex shrugged. “Didn’t sleep much.”

Emma frowned. “Was it... because of last night?”

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Emma reached across the table and placed her hand on his for a brief moment, her touch warm and grounding. “I’m glad you called me,” she said softly. “You don’t have to go through this alone, Alex.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “Thanks for... for being there.”

Emma smiled, but her eyes were still clouded with concern. “Have you ever thought about talking to someone? Like, a counselor or a teacher?”



Alex stiffened. “No. That won’t help. My dad would just get worse if he found out I told someone.”

Emma hesitated, then nodded. “Okay. But if you ever change your mind, I’ll be there to back you up. You don’t have to face him alone.”

Alex didn’t respond. He appreciated her support, but the idea of confronting his father—or letting anyone else see the cracks in his life—felt impossible.

To change the subject, Emma reached for her camera and held it up. “I was thinking,” she said, her tone brightening, “you should let me take some photos of your drawings. You know, so you have backups in case anything happens.”

Alex frowned. “Backups?”

Emma gave him a knowing look. “You shouldn’t have to worry about anyone destroying your work again.”

He hesitated, but then nodded. “Okay. That’s... probably a good idea.”

Emma grinned. “Great. Let’s start now.”

She pulled his sketchbook out of his bag, flipping it open to the first page. Her movements were careful and respectful, as if she understood how much the drawings meant to him.

As she adjusted the settings on her camera, Alex watched her, a strange warmth blooming in his chest. No one had ever cared about his art the way Emma did. To her, it wasn't just "stupid doodles." It was something worth preserving, worth protecting.

"You know," Emma said as she snapped a photo of one of his sketches, "I was thinking about what you said the other day. About feeling trapped."

Alex tensed slightly, but she continued before he could reply.

"I think we all feel that way sometimes," she said, her voice thoughtful. "Like the world is too small, and we're stuck in it. But that doesn't mean we have to stay trapped forever."

Alex frowned. "What do you mean?"

Emma set the camera down and looked at him. "I mean... maybe we can't control everything about our lives right now, but we can still find ways to push back. To hold onto the things that matter to us, even when everything else feels impossible."

Alex thought about her words, letting them sink in. "Like my drawings," he said quietly.

"Exactly," Emma said, smiling. "Your drawings are your way of fighting back. They're proof that you're more than what your dad says you are. They're yours, Alex. No one can take that away from you."

For a moment, Alex didn't know what to say. He felt a lump rising in his throat, but this time, it wasn't from sadness. It was something else—something lighter, warmer.

“Thanks,” he said finally.

Emma's smile widened. “Anytime.”

They spent the rest of the morning photographing his sketches. Emma was meticulous, adjusting the lighting and angles to capture every detail. Alex felt a strange sense of pride as he watched her work. Seeing his drawings through her eyes made them feel... important, like they were worth something after all.

When they finished, Emma leaned back in her chair, flipping through the images on her camera. “These turned out amazing,” she said. “You should think about sharing them someday. Like, online or in an art show or something.”

Alex shook his head. “I'm not ready for that.”

“Not yet,” Emma agreed. “But someday.”

Alex didn't respond, but for the first time, the idea didn't seem completely impossible.

As they packed up their things, Emma glanced at him, her expression serious. “You're going to get out of this, Alex. I know it. And when you do, the world's going to see how amazing you are.”

Alex felt his chest tighten, but this time it wasn't from fear or sadness. It was hope—small and fragile, but real.

“Thanks, Emma,” he said quietly.

She smiled, and for a moment, the library felt like the safest place in the world.

That night, Alex sat in his room, staring at the lantern drawing he'd started the night before. He picked up his pencil and began adding details, his movements slow and deliberate.

The lantern's light grew brighter, illuminating the darkness around it. And for the first time in a long time, Alex felt like he was starting to find his way out of the shadows.

## Chapter 8

The days that followed were a blur of small, fragile moments of hope mixed with the oppressive weight of Alex's home life. He clung to his time with Emma like a lifeline, each lunch in the library or quiet walk through the park giving him just enough strength to endure the nights at home.

But as the days stretched into weeks, Alex began to notice something shifting in his father. The anger that had always simmered just beneath the surface seemed sharper, more volatile. The smallest things set him off—a misplaced cup, a forgotten chore, or even the sound of Alex's footsteps as he moved through the house.

It was a Tuesday evening when everything came to a head.

Alex had been sitting at the kitchen table, his sketchbook open in front of him as he worked on a new drawing: a towering tree with its branches tangled in the stars. His mother was in the living room, watching a soap opera, while his father sat at the other end of the table, nursing a beer. For a while, the house was quiet except for the low hum of the TV.

But then his father spoke, breaking the silence.

“What the hell are you drawing now?” he asked, his voice dripping with disdain.

Alex hesitated, his pencil pausing mid-stroke. “Just... something for fun,” he said quietly, not looking up.

“For fun,” his father repeated, letting out a bitter laugh. “That’s all you ever do, isn’t it? Waste time on this nonsense while the rest of us deal with reality.”

Alex’s grip on the pencil tightened, but he didn’t respond. He’d learned that arguing only made things worse.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you,” his father snapped, slamming his hand on the table.

Alex flinched but forced himself to meet his father’s glare.

“You’re useless,” his father said, his voice rising. “You sit around all day doodling like some kind of idiot while everyone else works to keep this house running. You think life’s just going to hand you everything because you can draw a pretty picture? Grow up.”

“I—” Alex started, but his father cut him off.

“No excuses!” he shouted, standing up so abruptly that his chair scraped loudly against the floor. “I’ve had enough of your laziness, your attitude, your stupid little hobbies. You think you’re better than everyone else, don’t you? Too good to do real work?”

“That’s not true,” Alex said, his voice shaking.

“Then prove it!” his father roared, grabbing the sketchbook from the table.

“No!” Alex shouted, standing up. “Don’t!”

But his father had already flipped through the pages, his expression darkening with every turn. “This is what you waste your time on? This garbage?”

Alex felt his chest tighten, his breath coming in short gasps. “It’s not garbage,” he said, his voice barely audible.

His father sneered. “Oh, it’s not? You think this is worth something? You think anyone’s ever going to care about this crap?”

Before Alex could respond, his father tore a page out of the sketchbook and crumpled it in his hand.

“Stop it!” Alex shouted, his voice cracking.

But his father didn’t stop. He ripped another page and then another, the sound of tearing paper cutting through the air like a knife.

Alex lunged forward, trying to grab the sketchbook, but his father shoved him back with enough force to make him stumble.

“You think this is your future?” his father snarled, throwing the ruined pages onto the floor. “You’re nothing, Alex. Nothing. And no amount of drawing is going to change that.”

Alex stood frozen, his chest heaving as he stared at the torn remnants of his work scattered across the floor. His hands balled into fists, his nails digging into his palms.

“Get out of my sight,” his father said, his voice low and full of contempt.

Alex didn’t move. His father’s words echoed in his head, louder than the pounding of his heart.

“Did you hear me?” his father shouted. “I said get out!”

Without thinking, Alex turned and ran. He didn’t stop to grab his bag or his coat. He just ran, the cold night air stinging his skin as he burst out of the house and into the street.

His mind was a whirlwind of anger, shame, and despair. He didn’t know where he was going—all he knew was that he couldn’t stay.

The streets were dark and empty, the only sound the rhythmic pounding of his footsteps against the pavement. His breath came in ragged gasps, his chest burning as he pushed himself forward.

Eventually, he found himself in the park, the one place that had always felt safe. He collapsed onto a bench, his body trembling as he buried his face in his hands.



For a long time, he just sat there, his thoughts spiraling out of control. His father's words played on a loop in his mind: \*You're nothing. You're nothing. You're nothing.\*

But then, a voice broke through the noise.

“Alex?”

He looked up to see Emma standing a few feet away, her expression filled with concern. She was holding her camera, her auburn hair glowing softly in the moonlight.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, stepping closer.

Alex shook his head, unable to find the words.

Emma's brow furrowed as she sat down beside him. “What happened?”

For a moment, Alex didn't respond. He couldn't. His throat felt tight, and his chest ached. But then, the words came tumbling out in a rush.

“He tore up my sketchbook,” Alex said, his voice breaking. “He said I'm nothing. That my drawings are worthless. I tried to stop him, but he... he just kept going.”

Emma's eyes filled with anger and sadness as she listened. “Alex...”

“I don’t know what to do anymore,” Alex continued, his voice trembling. “I feel like... like no matter how hard I try, it’s never enough. I’ll never be enough.”

Emma reached out and took his hand, her grip firm and steady. “Alex, listen to me. You are enough. You’re so much more than what he says you are. You’re talented, and kind, and brave, and... and he doesn’t get to take that away from you.”

Alex looked at her, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. “But what if he’s right? What if I really am nothing?”

Emma shook her head, her voice unwavering. “He’s not right. He’s wrong, Alex. He’s wrong about everything. And I know it’s hard to believe that right now, but I need you to trust me. You’re not nothing. You’re amazing.”

For a long moment, they sat in silence, the weight of her words settling over them.

Finally, Alex took a deep breath, his shoulders relaxing slightly. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

Emma smiled, her grip on his hand tightening. “Anytime.”

As they sat together on the bench, the stars above them shining brightly in the night sky, Alex felt the smallest flicker of hope. It was fragile, like a candle in the wind, but it was there—a reminder that even in the darkest moments, there was still light to be found.

## Chapter 9

The weekend passed slowly, and Alex found himself avoiding home as much as possible. Every step through the front door felt heavier, his father's presence like a smothering cloud that never lifted. His mother, as always, stayed silent, her indifference cutting as deeply as his father's words.

Instead, Alex spent most of his time outside, wandering aimlessly through the streets or sitting in the park with his sketchbook, though he hadn't been able to bring himself to draw since the night his father tore through his work. The pages Emma had photographed were safe, but the emptiness of the new book made his hands tremble every time he tried to pick up his pencil.

By Monday morning, the weight of everything seemed unbearable. But as Alex walked through the school's front doors, there was one thing keeping him moving: Emma.

She was waiting for him in their usual spot by the library window, her camera on the table and a warm smile lighting up her face when she saw him.

“Hey,” she said as he sat down. “How are you doing?”

Alex shrugged, not trusting himself to answer honestly.

Emma didn’t press him. Instead, she slid her camera across the table and turned the screen toward him. “I’ve been working on something,” she said.

Alex leaned forward to look. On the screen was a series of photos—his drawings, carefully framed and edited, each one glowing with an almost ethereal quality. The torn pages, the taped edges, even the faint smudges of pencil lines were all still visible, but somehow, Emma had made them look beautiful.

“They’re amazing,” Alex said quietly, his voice almost breaking.

Emma smiled. “They’re \*yours.\* That’s why they’re amazing.”

Alex stared at the screen, his chest tightening. He wanted to tell her how much this meant to him, how her belief in his work was the only thing keeping him going. But the words felt too big, too heavy to say out loud.

Instead, he asked, “Why are you doing all this for me?”

Emma tilted her head, her smile softening. “Because I believe in you, Alex. And because... I know what it’s like to feel invisible. To feel like nothing you do matters. I don’t want you to feel that way anymore.”

Alex looked down at his hands, his throat tight. “Thank you,” he whispered.

They spent the rest of lunch talking about her photography project—how she wanted to combine his drawings with her photos to create something new, something neither of them could do alone. It was the first time in weeks that Alex felt something other than heaviness.

But as the day went on, a sense of dread began to creep back in. He knew he couldn’t avoid home forever, and the thought of facing his father again made his stomach twist.

By the time he walked through the front door that evening, the house was dark and silent. For a moment, Alex thought he might be safe—maybe his father was out, maybe he wouldn’t have to endure another night of shouting and insults.

But as he stepped into the kitchen, he saw his father sitting at the table, a beer in his hand and a scowl on his face.

“You’re late,” his father said, his voice low and cold.

Alex froze. “I stayed after school to work on a project,” he said carefully.

His father narrowed his eyes. “A project. Right. More of your stupid drawings, I bet.”

Alex clenched his fists, his nails digging into his palms as he tried to stay calm. “It’s for school,” he said quietly.

His father snorted. “School. Like that’s going to get you anywhere. You think anyone’s going to care about your grades or your little sketches when you’re out in the real world? You can’t even take the trash out on time, and you think you’re going to make something of yourself?”

Alex didn’t respond. He’d learned that silence was safer, that arguing only made things worse.

But this time, his father wasn’t satisfied with silence. He stood up, his chair scraping loudly against the floor, and took a step closer.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you,” he said, his voice sharp.

Alex looked up, his heart pounding.

“You’re a failure,” his father said, his words like knives. “And no amount of hiding behind your drawings or your little friends is going to change that.”

Alex’s breath caught in his throat. For a moment, he thought he might break, that the weight of his father’s words might finally crush him.

But then, something inside him shifted. He thought of Emma, of her voice in his ear telling him he was enough. He thought of her photos, of the way she saw beauty in the things his father called worthless.

And for the first time, Alex felt something other than fear.

“I’m not a failure,” he said, his voice trembling but steady.

His father froze, his eyes narrowing. “What did you just say?”

Alex swallowed hard, his hands shaking. “I said I’m not a failure. And you don’t get to decide what I’m worth.”

For a moment, the room was silent. Then his father took a step closer, his face twisting with rage.

“You think you can talk to me like that?” he shouted.

Alex didn’t flinch. “I’m done,” he said quietly. “I’m done letting you make me feel like I’m nothing.”

His father raised his hand, but Alex turned and walked away before he could do anything. His heart was racing, his body trembling, but he didn’t stop. He grabbed his bag from his room and slipped out the front door, the cold night air hitting him like a slap.

He didn’t know where he was going, but his feet carried him forward, away from the house, away from the anger and the pain.

By the time he reached the park, his legs were aching and his breath was coming in short gasps. He collapsed onto the bench where he and Emma

had sat so many times before, his chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath.

The stars above him were bright and endless, their light cutting through the darkness like tiny beacons of hope.

For the first time in his life, Alex felt like he had a choice—a chance to leave the shadows behind and step into the light.

But as he sat there, staring up at the sky, he knew that his journey was far from over.

## Chapter 10

The park was quiet, the only sound the rustling of leaves in the cool night breeze. Alex sat on the bench, his bag at his feet, staring up at the stars. He felt a strange mix of fear and freedom, the weight of his father's words still heavy on his chest but no longer suffocating him.

For the first time, he'd stood up to his father. He'd walked away. And though he didn't know what came next, he knew he couldn't go back—not to the house, not to the life he'd been living.



His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out to see a message from Emma.

➤ \*‘‘Are you okay?’’\*

Alex hesitated for a moment, then typed a reply.

➤ \*‘‘I left. I don’t know where to go.’’\*

The response came almost immediately.

➤ \*‘‘Stay where you are. I’m coming.’’\*

Alex stared at the screen, a lump rising in his throat. He didn’t know what he’d done to deserve someone like Emma in his life, but he was grateful for her in a way he couldn’t put into words.

Fifteen minutes later, Emma appeared, her hair slightly messy from the wind and her camera bag slung over her shoulder. She spotted him on the bench and hurried over, her face full of worry.

‘‘Alex,’’ she said, sitting down beside him. ‘‘What happened?’’

‘‘I stood up to him,’’ Alex said, his voice barely above a whisper. ‘‘And then I left.’’

Emma stared at him for a moment, then nodded. ‘‘Good.’’

Alex blinked, surprised. “Good?”

“You don’t deserve to be treated like that,” she said firmly. “You did the right thing.”

“But what do I do now?” Alex asked, his voice cracking. “I can’t go back.”

Emma reached out and took his hand. “We’ll figure it out,” she said. “Together.”

As they sat there in the darkness, the stars shining brightly above them, Alex felt a flicker of hope. He didn’t know what the future held, but for the first time, he wasn’t afraid to find out.

And though this chapter of his life was closing, he knew that the story wasn’t over. Not yet.

(To Be Continued...)