

THE ART OF US

KL HUGHES



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OTHER BOOKS BY KL HUGHES

Popcorn Love

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DEDICATION

For those who dare to love in the face of hatred, discrimination, and fear. You are brave. You are beautiful. You matter. Never let anyone make you believe that you don't. Keep loving. Keep living. Keep on.

CHAPTER 1

"You look beautiful."

"You should be sleeping."

"You're crying."

"I'm leaving."

"I know."

"Are we sure this is what we want to do?"

"I think it's what we have to do. It makes the most sense, doesn't it?"

"Nothing ever made sense until you."

"You had a valedictorian medal hanging from your rearview mirror and a scholarship when you met me. So some things must have made sense."

"I'm trying to express my feelings."

"I'm trying not to fall apart."



CHARLEE PARKER BLINKS SLOWLY AWAKE, chest aching and head pounding. She wipes at her blurry eyes and feels the wet press of tears she must have cried in her sleep. Letting out a staggered breath, she glances to the space beside her.

He's still asleep.

She breathes a sigh of relief before slipping quietly out of bed. Grabbing her robe from the hook on the bathroom door, she pulls it on over her pajama pants and T-shirt and then makes her way through the loft to the kitchen. A soft moan crawls up her throat as she brews a pot of coffee and the aroma washes over her. She drops in a few teaspoons of sugar and carries the coffee with her to the far side of the loft. She won't be getting any more sleep tonight.

The sectioned-off studio, accessed through a large, red sliding-metal door, is, as always, secured with a padlock. Charlee grabs her key ring from a small hook on the wall. Once the door is unlocked, she slides it open and breathes in the smell of paint, oil, and charcoal. Comforting.

The dream, or rather, the *memory*, still haunts her, tugging at places inside her that only a pencil or a paintbrush has ever been able to reach. She has to get it out. She fixes her messy blonde hair into a ball on the back of her head and secures it with one of two bands she keeps on her left wrist. Sighing, she drops onto her stool in front of a clean canvas and reaches for a brush.

All her strokes are black or white, mixing into shades of gray—the curves of bare hips, the shadows in the dip of a strong back, the sharp angles of shoulder blades, and the cascades of bed-mussed hair. Sometimes she can still feel the ghosts of those messy curls between her fingers. Sometimes. A thin, yellow glow, peeking through the large paneled windows where fingertips linger and breath fogs, is the only touch of color.

The sound of knuckles rapping against the metal door jars Charlee back to reality, and she wipes quickly at her wet cheeks, no doubt streaking them with paint. Slipping off her stool, she pads to the door, only opening it enough to squeeze through, and then shuts it behind her. No one has seen the inside of her studio in years, not since it was a bedroom.

“Hey.” She glances to the large clock on the far wall. Quarter past four.

“Hey.” Chris’s voice is raspy with sleep. He wraps an arm around her waist and draws her in for a hug that Charlee can’t bring herself to sink into. Not now. Not with that image still seared into her mind. He chuckles and rubs his thumb over her cheek. It comes away gray-streaked in the dim light. “Midnight inspiration again?”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.” He yawns into a kiss he plants on the side of her head. His dark hair has finally grown long enough for him to wear in a small ponytail, and the hanging strands tickle at her cheek as he leans against her. Charlee does her best not to squirm away from the feeling—from him—but the image still flooding her mind makes her stomach lurch, and nothing about this moment feels right. “I just wanted to check. I’m gonna sleep a bit more before I have to get up for work.”

“Okay.” Charlee nods and squeezes his upper arm. “Good night.”

“Night, babe.”

When he shuffles off toward the bed, Charlee heads back inside her studio and leans her back against the door. Cupping a hand over her mouth, she clenches her eyes closed and sucks in sharp breaths to try to keep the sudden flood of tears at bay.

They come anyway.



“So, how does it feel to be back?” Kari asks.

Alex Woodson makes her way down the busy city sidewalk, her girlfriend’s arm slung through hers. A white cloud of fog puffs through her lips as she lets out a heavy breath. “Surreal,” she says, tucking her chin down to protect her neck from the frigid breeze. “It’s been a while.”

“Five years, right?”

“Yes.” Alex glances toward an old bookstore she used to frequent and shakes her head. Somehow it feels both old and new, this place, like a skill she’s learned but forgotten. It comes back quickly but doesn’t quite feel the same as it once did.

“It’s nice, though, right? Being back?”

“It’s cold.”

Kari laughs and tucks more tightly into Alex’s side. “It is.”

They round the corner onto the next block, and an old, familiar scent drifts over, makes Alex’s stomach clench and her eyes water.

“Wow,” Kari says. “Something smells incredible.”

“Pappy’s.”

“What?”

“There’s a pizza place up ahead. Pappy’s Pies.”

“Have you been?”

Alex nods and, for only a moment, she closes her eyes, hears laughter inside her head.

“Alex, I swear to God, if you put hot sauce on my pizza, you’re sleeping on the couch for a week.”

“You wouldn’t last ten minutes before crawling onto the couch with me.”

“I have perseverance, woman. I can hack it.”

“Hack your way through the shadows and onto the couch with me, you mean.”

“You’ll see. Put the hot sauce on. Go ahead. I dare you. You’ll see.”

“Alex?”

Kari’s snapping fingers have Alex’s eyes popping open again, and she realizes they have stopped walking.

“What?” She blurts out the word, and Kari’s brow furrows. She doesn’t ask where Alex drifted off to, but Alex can see the question in her chestnut eyes. Ignoring it, she clears her throat and shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Kar. What did you say?”

Kari gives her a gentle smile. “It’s okay. I asked if the place was any good.”

“Pappy’s?”

When Kari nods, Alex’s stomach clenches again, curls in on itself. She loves that place—*loved* that place—and she’s still never had a slice of pizza superior to Pappy’s. She used to crave it daily after she left Boston, but there is only one Pappy’s. She would kill for a slice right now. But when she opens her mouth, all that comes out is “No.”

“Oh, really? It smells great.”

“Yeah.” Alex clears her throat and tries to swallow the lump growing there. “I never cared for it, though. The sauce... It’s too thick.”

The sauce is perfect. Creamy, not clumpy, and perfectly proportioned.

The memories in that place, though? They’re too thick, too heavy. They’d only taste bitter on her tongue.

Alex isn’t ready to walk through that door. She’s not ready to share Pappy’s with anyone new, anyone else. *Will I ever be?*



“Christ, this is heavy.” Grunting, Cam loads the final covered canvas onto the dolly. A few bubbles of the protective wrap encasing the painting pop beneath her fingers. Once it’s settled, she wipes her sweaty hands on her grease-stained cargo khakis and uses the bottom of her maroon tank top to wipe her forehead. Her sweatshirt had been abandoned ten minutes into packing and loading. “This has got to be the biggest piece you’ve done in at least a year.”

“I know,” Charlee says. “I almost dropped it when I was bringing it out from the studio.”

“You know you could have left it in there, right? That’s what all my tools and machines are for, so we don’t have to carry things around that are liable to break our backs.”

Charlee uses the sleeve of her shirt to wipe her own brow and gives Cam the same pointed look she always does when her best friend tries to wheedle her way into the studio.

“Yeah, yeah.” Cam holds up her hands. “I know. No one is allowed in your super-secret studio. I’m starting to think you’re keeping bodies in there.”

“Only on canvases.” Charlee laughs when Cam gasps and places a hand over her heart.

“Nailing bodies to canvases? It’s more twisted than I thought!”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“I know.” She nudges the dolly with her toe. “So, what is this piece, anyway?”

Charlee stares at the covered work for a long moment. “Nothing.”

“You might have a hard time selling a giant canvas covered in nothing.” Cam bumps Charlee’s shoulder. “You know I’m the one who builds everything and places all the pieces, right? I’m going to see it at some point, so you might as well tell me. Where’s this one going in the show?”

“It’s the centerpiece.”

“Seriously?” Cam’s eyes widen. “This is the centerpiece? As in the piece you had me build a glass case ‘for extra protection’ for? That’s *this* piece? This piece you just referred to as ‘nothing’?”

Charlee stares silently at the floor of her loft, scuffing the toe of her boot against the concrete.

“Oh, man,” Cam says after a while, and Charlee can hear it in her voice. She *knows*.

When Cam’s arm wraps around her back, Charlee sinks into it and rests her head on a bony shoulder. It’s somehow still comforting, despite being uncomfortable.

“It’s been a while since you painted her.”

“Yeah.” Charlee tries not to think about the countless canvases and paper drawings in her studio, the pieces no one knows exist. “It has.”

“Has Chris seen it?”

“No. Would it matter if he did?”

Cam shrugs and lets out a quiet laugh. “He might wonder why you’re painting some chick in your loft instead of him.”

“He knows the female form is my specialty.” Charlee leads Cam over to the small futon couch. Pulling it out, she snaps the back down so it lies flat like a bed, and they crawl onto it, side by side, staring up at the graffitied wall next to it. “It’s practically all I ever paint anymore. Besides, it’s not like he’ll even notice that the background is the loft.”

“True.” Cam tucks her arm under Charlee’s neck and rests the sides of their heads together.

“Maybe I should go back to landscapes.”

“Or naked dudes.”

They tilt just enough to look at each other and then laugh as they both say, “Nah.”

Charlee had tried with male models before, and it hadn’t turned out well. For some reason, she was unable to bring the grace, elegance, and air of seduction to the male form that she had mastered with the female one. Drawing and painting women had always been a passion of hers, and she became known for it as an artist.

Pointing to a large green blob on the wall, Cam says, “You should do stuff like this.” Charlee rolls her eyes. “What? You don’t think your buyers would want paintings of ugly little aliens?” She pokes Charlee’s side. “I can’t believe you never painted over this.”

“Yes, you can.”

“Yeah, I can.” Cam sighs. “That little fucker’s gonna be here forever, isn’t he? Eternally probing that cookie jar for all the world to see.”

Charlee laughs even as her throat grows tight and her eyes begin to sting.



“This is the one.” Her hand dusted over the old kitchen countertop as she stared into the massive great room of the loft, the only separate sections being the bedroom, which was hidden behind a faded red barn-style sliding door, and the single bathroom. The longest wall on the far side was split—part concrete, part paneled windows. Great square panes of glass separated into smaller squares, some with the ability to tilt open. Charlee loved it.

“There’s graffiti on the wall.”

Laughter bubbled through grinning lips as Charlee pushed off the kitchen counter and soon circled her arms around a thin waist from behind. “It’s the one.”

“I repeat: there’s graffiti on the wall.”

“Yeah, of a guy playing a golden saxophone with purple music notes coming out of it.” Charlee pointed at the colorful painting, arms still slung around her lover’s waist. “How cool is that?”

Frizzy, ash-brown hair tickled against her cheek and neck, familiar and comforting, and Charlee breathed in the scent of coconut shampoo. She didn’t care that the landlord stood awkwardly to the side, watching them in silence. Smiling, she nudged her nose against a slender neck and kissed warm skin.

Her girlfriend leaned back against her chest and pointed toward the green glob of paint slathered across the concrete wall on the other side of the musician. “And an alien probing a jar of cookies.”

A loud bark of laughter escaped Charlee. “I don’t think that’s what that is.”

“What else would it be?”

“Literally anything other than that.”

“What if that *is* what it is?”

“Then I have to be honest, babe—I kind of want it even more.”

“It says, *Talk shit, git hit* under the window.”

“That’s a good lesson.”

“They spelled it G-I-T, Charlee. Git.”

“It has character.” She tightened her hold around her lover’s waist, drawing sighs from both their lips.

“It needs work.”

“We can do that. We can work on it. Together. This is the one.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I’m good at knowing these things. I knew you were the one, remember?”

Her girlfriend rolled her forest green eyes even as she smiled and squeezed Charlee’s arm. “Okay. It’s the one.”

Charlee turned, clumsily jerking the girl around with her so they didn’t have to separate, and looked at the landlord. “We’ll take it.”



“You should show me where you lived while you were in college,” Kari calls out from the kitchen, where she is unpacking dishes to put into the cabinets. “Why didn’t I think of that before?”

Although her girlfriend can’t see her, Alex shakes her head. “It’s on the far side of town.” Grunting, she scoots the couch a little farther back from where the movers put it. When it touches the wall, she releases a heavy breath and plops down onto it. “That’s a long walk, and it wasn’t very impressive anyway.”

“You didn’t live on campus?”

“Only during the first year.” Alex tilts her head back against the couch and closes her eyes. They’ve been unpacking things all day, and she’s exhausted. “I moved into a loft the summer before my sophomore year.”

“Oh, I love those old city lofts.” The sound of something shattering echoes from the kitchen, and Alex is about to jump to her feet when Kari calls out to her again. “It’s fine! I’m fine. It was just a coffee mug.”

Alex freezes, heart shooting up into her throat. “Which mug?”

Kari groans. “That one I got from the antique mall we went to when we visited my parents.” Kari loves all things vintage. It had taken Alex a while to get used to, given that her own tastes are much more modern. “The one with the pinup girl cover art.”

Settling back into the couch, Alex tries to get her heart to calm. “I’m sorry, Kar.”

“You know how clumsy I am.” A cabinet closes, the knocking of wood echoing into the living room. “I can probably find another one online. Anyway, what were we talking about? Oh, your loft. Did it have the exposed ductwork and concrete floors? You know I love those.”

Alex closes her eyes as the memory bombards her. Exposed piping and ductwork. Sealed concrete flooring. Cheap plywood cabinetry all dressed up in a dark birch veneer. The loft was inside an old factory of some kind that had been converted into rental spaces. The landlord had never made much of an effort to take care of them. They were affordable, though, and that made all the difference. Still, it had taken several days of work and a few new appliances before Alex considered it safe and germ-free enough to eat and sleep in. “It had...*character*.”

Kari’s soft, lovely laugh drifts in from the kitchen. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“No.” Alex runs a hand through her wild hair, her fingers snagging on a few tangles, before securing it in a puffy bun to let her neck cool off. “It was perfect for u—” She chokes as her eyes snap open and quickly forces a cough midsentence to cover her slip. “It was perfect for *me* at the time.”

“I’m sure it was great.”

Alex pictures the loft again in her mind, tries to run through each inch like a virtual tour. She used to do it a lot, especially in the months immediately following her move. It's been a while now, though, and Alex can't even remember when she stopped doing it. She never got far into any memory of that place before a certain blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl popped up. It only seemed right, even if it was painful. That place was *theirs*.

Even now, she barely gets five imagined steps through the door, the kitchen to her right and a long, colorful wall to her left, before the ghostly presence of arms she hasn't felt in years slinks around her waist. Alex opens her eyes and kills the image. But not the feeling. Her stomach flutters, and her throat goes dry. She rests a hand over her eyes and lets out a quiet breath. "There was graffiti on the wall."

"Yikes. That would've had to go."

"That's what I thought at first too." Alex is thankful Kari is in another room, unable to see the smile teasing at Alex's lips, the way she clenches her thighs together as she says, "It grew on me, though."



Alex pressed her lover's back to the cool concrete wall and pumped quickly in and out of her, loud and wet with every thrust of her fingers. "All the ways I've imagined fucking you, and never once did I imagine doing it against a poorly painted image of an alien probing a cookie jar."

"First time for everything." The breathless voice panted against her shoulder. Dark blonde hair rubbed along her jaw.

"It's staring at me."

Her girlfriend wrapped a leg around her waist. "Look at me, then."

Frowning, Alex kept her eyes on the wall, but she never once slowed the hand working between thick, trembling thighs. "It's staring at me while it probes the cookie jar."

"And you're staring back at him while you probe, uh, my cookie jar. He probably feels just as uncomfortable."

"It is a painting. It doesn't have feelings."

A gasp sounded sharply against her ear as her girlfriend thrust down right when Alex thrust up, and her long fingers sank in deeper than ever.

"Fuck." Her lover grunted. "Less talking, more probing."

Alex laughed against her lips. "I love you."



"There isn't a title card for this piece, Charlee."

Charlee turns, and freezes when she sees where Chris is pointing. The giant canvas, encased in glass, hangs in the center of the gallery's main showroom. Chris glances down at the few remaining title cards in his hands while Charlee gapes at him, unable to make her voice work.

"I'm sure I grabbed all the cards," he says, thumbing through them. He'd asked to help set up for the weekend show, so Charlee had given him a few simple tasks. He wasn't familiar with the layout of the gallery, which changed every time Charlee had a new show coming up. It was one of the reasons

she'd bought the space—easy to transform. “It's marked as number fourteen, but there isn't a matching card. Did you make one?”

Before Charlee can say anything, Chris looks up at the large canvas that doesn't have a name and says, “Damn. This is huge. Is this the one that's been keeping you out of bed all month?”

Charlee's throat is too dry for words, so she just nods.

“It's really good.” He steps a little closer to the glass casing. “The windows kind of look like the ones in your loft.” He points out the yellow glow in the painting. “There's even an annoying streetlight shining in and everything.”

“Um.”

“The card's my bad,” Cam says, climbing down from the ladder she was poised on. “I must've dropped it or something when I left the shop. It's probably on the floor by the printer or still sitting in the tray. I'll print a new one tonight and bring it in tomorrow before the show.”

Chris nods. “Okay.” He glances past Cam to Charlee. “I'll just finish up the rest of them, then, and then I gotta go, babe. I'm meeting the guys for drinks tonight, remember?”

Charlee spurs herself into action and crosses the room to take the cards. “Actually, Cam and I can handle these last few if you want to go ahead. I know you wanted to shower before you went out anyway.”

“You sure?”

“Of course.” She leans up to kiss his cheek. “Go ahead. I'll see you in the morning.”

“Let's make it late morning. You know I always end up drinking a little more than I plan to. I'll swing by your place around eleven.”

“Okay.” Charlee nods. “Be safe.”

“Always am,” he says with a wink, then drops a quick kiss to her lips before waving to Cam and heading out of the gallery.

Once he's gone, Charlee's shoulders sag. She stares down at the name cards in her hands as Cam lets out a long, low whistle and crosses the room to stand beside her. “That was awkward.”

“Yeah.” The single word stays thick in Charlee's mouth, like something she needs to swallow.

They stand together, staring up at the piece for a long time before Charlee finally says, “Do you like it?”

“I think it's incredible.” No hesitation, as though Cam has been holding in the words since the moment she first laid eyes on the piece. “The way the lines flow, and the way you've worked with the light. I mean, it's beautiful. Not that that's surprising. Your work is great, Charlee. It always has been.”

“Well, maybe not freshman year,” Charlee says, and Cam grins.

“Yeah, maybe not.” After a moment, she leans over and nudges Charlee's side with her elbow. “I think I've seen way more of her body than I was ever supposed to, though.” She laughs, obviously trying to lighten the mood, and Charlee gives a wet chuckle in response.

The silence seeps in again, and it's like the past has suddenly drifted in through the cracks under the

doors, invading every inch of the here and now.

“It’s kind of haunting.”

Charlee closes her eyes and nods. “You have no idea.”

She feels Cam’s arm wrap around her. “You always painted her best, though.”

Charlee sighs and leans into Cam’s embrace. “Sometimes I wonder if it’s ever going to stop feeling like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like I lived my entire life in those four years that we were together, and now I’m just killing time.”

“Until what?”

“Until I die.” Charlee laughs, an empty sound, and wipes at her eyes. “I don’t know. Sometimes I just feel like all the good is behind me. I love Chris—I do—but I don’t think it’s supposed to feel like this, you know? I *know* it’s not.”

“Moving on isn’t supposed to be easy.”

“That’s the thing, though, Cam.” Charlee shifts to look at her. “It’s been five years. That’s longer than we were even together. I mean, not by much, but still. I shouldn’t *still* be moving on.”

Cam grabs the two old beanbag chairs they keep around during setups for breaks. A few beans spill from one of the worn-out things as she drops onto it and motions for Charlee to do the same. She swipes a hand over her forehead, still slightly slick with sweat. “It took you *years* to even be able to start dating again, so give yourself a break. Baby steps. You’ll get there.”

“I’ve been with Chris for eight months,” Charlee says. “And I still don’t love him the way I loved her.”

Cam resituates herself on the beanbag so she is facing Charlee. “Look, you know I hate this emotional crap, but I can tell you’re in a rut right now, so I’m going to get stupid and sappy for a second, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I saw you two together, remember?” Reaching over, Cam pokes her knee, and Charlee can’t bring herself to look at her, so she just stares at her hands as they tangle together in her lap. “I was there for the epic gay fairy tale.”

“Cam.”

“Anyway, my point is that I saw you two together, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you never love *anyone* the way you loved her, the way you still love her. And that’s okay. It doesn’t mean you can’t still be happy, but it’s something you might have to accept in order to actually *be* happy. You know, stop holding on. Stop comparing everyone to her. It’s not fair to you, and it’s definitely not fair to the people you date. And maybe... I don’t know, Charlee. Maybe that kind of love only happens once in a lifetime. So, if all you’re doing is waiting to feel that way again... I mean, I think you might always be waiting.”

A quiet sigh eases free as Charlee tilts her head back and closes her eyes again. “Maybe you’re

right.”

They fall quiet, and after a while, Charlee nearly falls asleep, curled into her beanbag with Cam’s comforting presence nearby. She feels like she hasn’t slept in days. When Cam says her name, though, Charlee jerks and turns toward her. “What?”

“You need to sleep.”

“I know.”

“Come on.” Cam pats her knee. “Let’s get you home.”

As they pull themselves onto their feet again, Cam points to the centerpiece. “So, since you apparently never made a title card for this piece, and I know *I* didn’t, we should probably add that to the to-do list.”

Charlee rubs at her eyes and yawns. “Yeah.” Her stomach sinks as she stares up at the painting.

“What do you want to call it? You can’t just call it *Alex*, right?”

Charlee flinches at the sound of the name. She lets out a hard huff of air as if those two syllables have somehow knocked the wind out of her. Her friends and family almost never speak it anymore, knowing the kind of pain it dredges up. Hearing it is always like a punch to the gut.

She covers her eyes with one hand and shakes her head. “No,” she says, then changes to “I don’t know.”

Behind her hand, she blinks until the stinging in her eyes stops. “I really don’t.”

CHAPTER 2

CHARLEE BOUNCED ON THE BALLS of her feet in front of the small corner building. The Sold sign in the window shined like a beacon in the winter sun, and she kept pointing at it. Each point and nudge made Alex's smile grow a bit more.

"I'm so excited I could puke," Charlee said, leaning into Alex's chest.

"Please don't." Alex wrapped her arms more firmly around Charlee's waist, chin resting on her shoulder as they stood on the sidewalk and stared. They trembled, shifting on their feet to keep warm, but Alex couldn't bring herself to make Charlee move. Her girlfriend was too excited.

"We're outside," Charlee said. "It'd be fine. I'm sure people puke on these sidewalks all the time."

"I'm sure the people who *don't* vomit on the sidewalks all the time would greatly appreciate it if the people who do would stop."

"They might make an exception for a ridiculously excited amateur artist who just bought her first gallery space."

Alex smiled against Charlee's shoulder and kissed the fuzzy material of her coat. "I don't think they would."

"You're killing my buzz, babe."

"I'm very excited, Charlee."

"Me too." Charlee turned just enough in Alex's arms to look back at her and kiss the underside of her jaw. "I mean, it's crappy and small and in need of a ton of work before it's ready, but it's mine."

A large chunk of the money left to Charlee in her father's will bought the small space, with a little left over for fixing it up and replenishing her art supplies. Alex had been with her every step of the way, from the moment they saw the For Sale sign in the window to the moment Charlee's mother curled her lip at it because there was rat poop in the corner and one of the windows was cracked. She stood by as Charlee signed her loopy signature atop a dotted line, and she was with her now, holding her as they stared at the sign that they knew meant, even if in only the smallest of ways, that Charlee Parker had arrived.

"It will be perfect." Alex tightened her hold. "It will."

"Cam's going to freak."

"Cam's going to groan when she sees all the work that needs to be done."

"True, but she'll freak first."

"Perhaps she'll vomit."

"Maybe she will. You never know." Charlee squeezed Alex's hand as they swayed together on the sidewalk. "You should join the club. You're going to be the only one not vomiting out of excitement. I'd hate for you to feel left out."

“I’m vomiting in spirit.”

Laughing, Charlee whirled in her embrace and slung her arms around Alex’s neck. “This’ll work, right?” The words puffed between them, a white ball of fog. “I’m going to be somebody.”

“You already are.” Alex reached up with a gloved hand to push a few wild strands of hair behind Charlee’s ear. “You’re the best somebody I know. But yes, Charlee, you are going to be very successful.”

“You really think so?”

“I really do.”



Alex’s throat is tight, too tight, as she stands on the sidewalk and stares at the small corner building. The sweet smells of baked goods filter out into the air when the door opens with a jingle and a man walks out with a white paper bag sporting a logo that reads *Off the Wheaten Path*. Her stomach clenches as she watches through the large glass windows. People line up at the counter inside, ordering their gluten-free baked goods, and for just a moment, Alex thinks she might be sick.

Closing her eyes, she tries to imagine the paintings on the walls; the laughter of a girl on top of her as they lay on a pallet on the floor, paint-covered and exhausted; the smiles on their faces when the first piece sold and how they never wanted to hang another in its place.

It all scatters and drifts away like a dandelion in the wind when she opens her eyes again. Gone. It’s all gone.

She’s gone.

Alex swallows down the feeling and forces herself to turn from the building. Makes her feet move, carry her off. Away.

The sudden ring of her phone startles her, and she nearly drops it when she pulls it from her pocket with gloved hands. As she gets a steady hold on the device, she checks the caller ID and rolls her eyes.

“I’ll be there shortly,” she says when she answers.

“Well, at least you’re alive. My mind was going to morbid places, like finding you under a car in the middle of the street somewhere or caught in the dawn of a zombie apocalypse that hasn’t reached my side of the city yet. Oh, or mauled by a rogue bear that decided to wander its way into the—”

“Don’t be dramatic, Vinaya.”

“You’re fifteen minutes late,” Vinny says. “And you’re *never* late. I would call that being sensibly concerned, Alex, not dramatic. And don’t call me Vinaya.”

Alex clears her throat and reaches up to rub at her eyes, blaming the ache in them on the cold despite knowing better. “It’s your name” is all she says before ending the call and shoving the phone back into her pocket.

She gives one last glance over her shoulder. Another person exits the bakery, and it leaves Alex breathless, like a weight has dropped onto her chest. She heaves out a hard breath before tucking her chin down and picking up her pace.

When she reaches the café, she finds Vinny outside in the cold, leaning against a brick wall with a smoking cigarette pinched between her lips. Clad in a dark denim jacket with a gray fur collar, Vinny is as fit as ever. Long and lean, lanky like Alex. Her dark blonde hair, streaked with blue, falls over her shoulders in loose waves. Skinny jeans that are shredded along the knees tuck down into her heavy, black motorcycle boots. Her Harley sits at the curb less than thirty feet from her, gleaming in the bright winter sun. At the sight of her, Vinny flicks her cigarette to the ground and scoops Alex up in an aggressive hug.

Alex releases a light laugh, the sound strained by the force of Vinny's embrace. Her arms are stiff at her sides, trapped by her sister's. "Since when are you such a fan of physical affection?"

"Since I haven't seen you in forever." Vinny drops Alex abruptly to her feet, catching her by the arm when she stumbles. "But if you want to be rigid and unloving, fine. I won't cry about it." She chokes back a fake sob. Alex scoffs at her as they make their way inside the café.

"So, you finally come to visit me after five years," Vinny says when they finish ordering and take their seats at a small window table. "And all it took was your company deciding to open a new branch here and sending you to run it. In other words, you had no choice in the matter. I feel so loved."

"I'm only *one* of the people running it, and we saw each other more than once in the last five years," Alex says, and Vinny pins her with a hard stare. "Besides, we talk on the phone nearly every day. We don't even have to catch up, because we're already caught up."

"Yeah, but talking on the phone and actually *seeing* each other are two very different things. And we only saw each other the few times we did because *I* am the only one of us capable of purchasing a plane ticket."

"I purchased a plane ticket."

Vinny only continues to stare her down. "Yeah, but I'm the only one capable of actually *boarding* the flight."



"I can't do this." Alex panted into the phone, unable to calm her pounding heart.

"You're already at the gate, Alex." Vinny's voice was like a warm hand on Alex's back. "Just move your feet, one step after another, until you're on the plane."

"I want to." Alex cleared her throat. Forced down the lump building there. "I—"

"You're afraid."

"I'm not afraid."

"You are. What have I always told you about fear?"

"Fear is the best motivator."

"That's right. The more something scares you, the more you know you have to face it, the more you know you have to just suck it up and do it, right?"

"I still say that's faulty logic." Alex scrunched her eyes closed and rubbed her fingers over the space above her heart. Her chest was tight, clenching harder every second she spent inside the

godforsaken airport. She glanced up at the large letter and number hanging over her gate. C16. Fucking Gate C. Of course.

“Alex, you aren’t going to run into her,” Vinny said, and Alex wondered, not for the first time in her life, if her sister could read her mind. “The city is huge. Besides, you don’t even know if she’s still here. It’s been almost a year since you spoke to her, and I’m pretty sure Charlee isn’t psychic. She’s not going to just sense that you’re in the city and suddenly pop out of thin air.”

Her heart stuttered at the mention of Charlee, at the sound of her name, the way it haunted and haunted her like it would never stop.

“You don’t even have to leave my apartment if you don’t want to, if you’re that worried about it. Just get on the plane, and we’ll figure it out when you get here.”

The gate taunted her. Teased her with the city she loved—the place where she’d grown up, the place where she found her family, the place where she found love, the most incredible, consuming love. Her stomach curled and knotted, threatened to revolt. When the voice came over the loudspeaker to announce that her flight was boarding, the taunting only increased. The nausea intensified. The fear only seemed all the more biting.

“I can’t, Vinny,” Alex whispered into the phone. “It wouldn’t be right, being there and not, not—”

“Not being with her.”

Silence devoured the line until Alex finally decided to move. When she turned and walked away from the gate, she didn’t look back. The only thing she could bring herself to say was “I’m sorry.”



“It was too late.” Alex removes her coat and folds it over the back of her chair. “Or too soon. I don’t know.”

“I know,” Vinny says, nudging Alex’s foot under the table. “I get it. I was just teasing you.”

The smile Alex conjures up feels more like a grimace than anything. She imagines it likely looks like one as well.

“Have you been to any of the old haunts yet? Pappy’s?”

Alex shakes her head.

“Damn. I figured you’d be hurting for it, have a hot-sauce-slathered slice between your lips no less than fifteen minutes after getting off the plane.”

Alex uses her fingers to brush her hair back into a frizzy bun. The farther from her face while she eats, the better. She secures it with an elastic band that will likely snap before the day is out. The damned things never last long with her hair. It’s too thick. “Nice use of alliteration,” she says. “Mrs. Garrison would be so proud.”

“Ah, Mrs. Garrison.” Vinny grins. “Best teacher I had in high school.”

“You had a crush on her.”

Vinny responds by wadding up a piece of napkin, dipping it in her water, and chucking it at Alex’s face.

She dodges the direct hit, but the spray of cold water still grazes the edge of her ear. Groaning, she

wipes at the wetness. “You’re a child, Vinaya.”

“Nice use of deflection, *Alexandra*,” Vinny says, rolling her eyes. “Dr. Thompson wouldn’t be proud at all.”

“Good thing we stopped seeing him when I was fifteen, then.”

Vinny laughs and bumps her foot under the table again. “We should go sometime.”

Alex’s brow furrows. “To Dr. Thompson?”

“To Pappy’s, you idiot.”

The silence Alex slips into is answer enough, and Vinny doesn’t push it. They let it linger through their meal, only a few words passed between them here and there. A thick sort of silence, but not uncomfortable.

When they step back out into the cold afternoon air, Alex walks Vinny the few feet to her bike. She stands still and silent, hovering while Vinny dons the heavier leather jacket from her saddle bag, then her scarf and her thick leather gloves. When she’s ready to go, Alex opens her mouth to thank her for the meal, but what comes out instead is entirely unexpected.

“It’s gone,” she says, the words choked as they slither through and out. Vinny arches a brow.

“What is?”

Alex sucks in a cold breath through her nose. She hadn’t meant to say that, hadn’t meant to start this conversation at all, but the door is already open, so she doesn’t stop herself from going through.

“Her gallery.” She shakes her head as if she can’t believe it still matters so much to her. Then again, it never stopped mattering. *I don’t think it ever will*. “It’s a bakery now.”

The soft collapse of Vinny’s curious expression tells Alex this isn’t news to her. “Yeah. It’s been a bakery for a couple of years now.”

“Oh.” She doesn’t ask the questions that instantly bubble up, the questions that scream inside her chest. Vinny likely wouldn’t have any answers for them anyway, so Alex holds them in, holds them down, and lets them drown.

They stand quietly together for a long time before Vinny throws her leg over her bike and settles onto the seat. “You good?”

Alex blinks, shakes herself back to the moment, and nods. “Yeah.” She looks over her sister’s face, all sharp angles and high cheekbones, with narrow hazel eyes, a long, slender nose, and slightly chapped and smirking lips. Warmth spreads through her chest. “I’ve missed you, Vinny.”

Vinny reaches out and clasps Alex’s forearm for just a moment. She then drops her hand back to her lap. “So, I’ll see you soon, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Alex says. “Kari wants to meet you.” When Vinny’s lip curls, Alex rolls her eyes. “Why are you so against her?”

“I’m not *against her*. I just know she isn’t the one for you.”

Alex crosses her arms over her chest. “You’ve never even met her. So you can’t possibly know that.”

“I disagree.” She slides on her helmet and snaps the visor up so she can still be clearly heard. “But

if it'll make you happy, let's do it. Text me a time and place, and I'll do my best to be there, but let's avoid early mornings, deal? I know you like to get up with the sun, but some of us bartend and don't get home until three in the morning."

"Deal."

"All right. I'll be there, then."

"And you'll be nice?"

Vinny smirks inside her helmet. "No promises." Her Harley roars to life a moment later, and Vinny yells over the rumble, reaching out to briefly touch her sister's forearm again. "This is your home, Alex. I get that this place is nothing but memories for you, but you have to let yourself live. Go to Pappy's. Get some pizza. Make new memories."

Alex barely manages a smile before Vinny pulls away from the curb. The walk back to her apartment seems almost too cold to bear.



Charlee watches herself in the bathroom mirror as she secures her remaining diamond earring in her left lobe. The way it sparkles in the fluorescent light makes her feel warm and nostalgic. She used to sit on her parents' bed when she was little and stare as her mother dressed and donned these same earrings, a gift from Charlee's father. They found their way into Charlee's possession not long after the funeral.

"You look great." Chris's face swims into view beside hers in the mirror's reflection just a second before his arms slink around her waist.

Charlee gives him a small, tight smile. "Thanks." His cheek brushes against hers, and Charlee chuckles as she reaches up to gently turn his chin away. "You need to shave."

"I thought I might grow it out."

They both know he won't actually let it grow. It always comes in patchy—thin in some places, thick in others, entirely absent around the points of his square chin. He attempted to grow it out shortly after they got together, and that effort resulted in the most ridiculous beard Charlee had ever seen.

"Are you nervous?" He squeezes her sides and rests his chin on her bare shoulder.

"About tonight?"

When he nods, she mirrors the action. "I've done this so many times, but I still get nervous. It's always weird watching people take in the things I've created, discuss them, *buy* them. It feels personal."

"What do you mean?"

The shrug of her shoulder causes Chris's chin to bounce a bit, but he stays put. "I see someone looking at something I've painted. I hear them talking about the colors and the blending and the subject, and all I can think is that that's the painting I did when I was half-drunk and on my period, still sobbing over some dumb, sad movie I shouldn't have watched while I was hormonal. Or that's the one I had to start over halfway through because I knocked over the easel and then the table *next* to the easel and spilled my Cheerios all over it. Or I'm remembering exactly how lonely or angry or sad or good I felt when I made each one. Every piece has a part of me in it, you know? People are taking

home little pieces of me when they buy my work. It's weird."

He is silent for a long time, both of them just standing in the bathroom, staring into the mirror but not really at one another. When he speaks again, he whispers. "Are you okay?"

Charlee blinks and focuses on his dark brown eyes in the reflection. "Of course," she says, the words croaking in her throat unexpectedly and sounding anything but convincing. "Why?"

"You've just been quiet lately. Sad, maybe. I don't know. Just different."

She stares into her own eyes in the mirror. *Like blue fire*, her dad used to say. But now, they seem dull. A little empty. And she feels like she is really seeing herself for the first time in a long time. Her full cheeks are pale. Her lips dip at the corners. She looks every bit as lost as she feels. In a blink, though, the look is gone. Her eyes brighten again as she forces a smile and shakes her head. "I'm fine, Chris." She rubs his arm where it hangs around her waist. "I'm fine."



"I love the city in winter." Charlee walked with her arm slung through Alex's and smiled like she didn't have a care in the world. "It's beautiful."

"It's cold." The wind bit at her neck, so Alex yanked her beanie down over her ears more and shifted closer to Charlee, so close they stumbled over each other's feet and nearly fell.

Charlee let out a wild laugh and gripped Alex's arm tighter. "You love it."

"Why don't we move somewhere where it's warm year-round?"

"Because you'd miss your oversized sweaters and your beanies and your leg warmers and your three cups of coffee a day and my ridiculously adorable wintertime smile."

Alex pursed her lips. "Maybe just that last one."

"And all the others too." Charlee popped up on her tiptoes to press a cold kiss to Alex's cheek.

"I could give those up."

"You would sacrifice all your faves?"

"For the greater good?" Alex nodded. "Yes, of course."

"Warm weather is the greater good?"

"It is right now. My toes are numb, and my ass is freezing, even through my jeans."

"A good rub should warm you right up."

"You're going to rub my ass?"

"Wouldn't be the first time." Her tinkling laughter lingered in the chill. "See? The cold has its benefits."

"You wouldn't rub my ass if it was already warm?" Alex poked Charlee's side with her elbow. "My warm ass doesn't appeal to you?"

"Your ass appeals to me at all temperatures, babe."

"Good."

"The air is so crisp and clean," Charlee said after a moment. "The sky is so clear."

"The ice is so dangerous." Alex steered Charlee to the right to avoid a patch that had settled atop the sidewalk.

Charlee bit Alex's shoulder through her coat. "Just admit you love the city in winter."

"It's cold."

“It’s beautiful.”

“So you’ve said.” Alex bumped their hips together. “Where’s this gallery we’re going to again?”

“Just off Newbury. Not much farther.”

“Who has an art show in the middle of winter?”

“Artists who understand how magical winter is, Alex.”

“Magical?” Alex pinned her with a hard stare.

“Yes, magical. The phrase winter wonderland exists for a reason, you know.”

“Coined by an artist, no doubt.”

“Narnia was a winter wonderland, and that place was amazing.”

“Weren’t children eaten by a lion in that book?”

Charlee snorted so hard she choked. “Attacked by a witch.”

“Horrendous either way.”

Shifting, Charlee slid both arms around her girlfriend’s middle and pulled one of Alex’s arms around her shoulders. It made for an awkward walk, but Alex didn’t care. The air smelled crisp, and Charlee smelled fantastic, and even in the frigid weather, she was so, so warm.

“You love winter,” Charlee muttered against the material of Alex’s coat. “I know you do.”

It was true. Despite all her complaints and despite the fact that she would never admit it, Alex loved winter. She loved it for all the reasons Charlee named and a thousand more. Mostly, though, she loved the way it lit Charlee up, like the sun on fresh snow, and the way Charlee talked about it, the way she smiled and laughed and breathed as if she couldn’t get enough of it. Winter somehow made her even brighter and all the more stunning.

Alex chuckled and squeezed Charlee’s shoulder. “It’s cold.”

“It’s beautiful.”

With a sigh, Alex dropped a kiss to the top of her head. Her lips came away wet from flakes of snow melting into the strands. “*You’re* beautiful.”



“You made the dinner reservations, right?”

Kari clings to Alex’s arm in the cold breeze as they walk briskly down the sidewalk toward the art-show venue. She’d seen a flyer for the show tacked to a corkboard at the coffee shop near their new apartment and practically begged Alex to take her. Their first official date in the city. A firm no had nearly slipped from Alex’s lips. She’d lost her love of art shows long ago. But Kari’s eyes had been so wide, and her smile so bright, that Alex couldn’t turn her down.

The cold nips at the skin of Alex’s legs, and she curses the thin material of her dress slacks. “Yes, Kari, I made the reservations. When have I ever forgotten to do something you asked me to do?”

“The time I asked you to snake the drain in my apartment.”

“That was *one* time! And it wasn’t a big deal.”

“The kitchen flooded,” Kari says. “The countertop was soaked.”

Alex huffs and shakes her head, briefly wishing she had brought her earmuffs. She’d had Kari fix her hair into a tight bun at the back of her head, and while it looked good, her ears were now achingly exposed to the cold. “Well, I didn’t forget to make the dinner reservations tonight. Eight thirty.”

“Okay, good,” Kari says, grinning at her. “I’m excited. It’s our first night out since we moved.”

“I know.” Alex gives a thin smile. “It would be nice if it wasn’t so cold, though. My toes are tiny blocks of ice at this point.”

Kari laughs. She stumbles a bit when one of her heels catches in a crack on the sidewalk, but she clings to Alex to keep from falling. It only makes her laugh harder. “Your toes aren’t that small.”

Alex glares at her in the thin light of the early evening and says, “I could’ve let you fall.”

Another loud bark of laughter jumps from Kari’s lips. “You have long toes,” she says. “Cute but long. It remains a fact whether you let me fall or not.”

“I’ll go home,” Alex warns. “You will suffer this frigid date on your own.”

“No, you won’t. It’s too cold for you to walk home by yourself.”

“True.”

The wind picks up as they turn a corner, and Kari shuffles closer. “How is it possible that it’s *this* cold?”

“New England winters are rough. You wouldn’t know anything about that.”

“Hey, we have winter in Sacramento.”

“Okay.” Alex snorts. “Sure you do.” She holds up her gloved fingers to make air quotes. “*Winter*.”

“We do!”

“You forget I lived there too,” Alex says, “for years.”

“Oh, shut it.” Kari pops up on her toes and smacks a kiss to Alex’s cheek. “I’m surprised you survived so many years here before that. You hate winter.”

Alex’s lips dip with a frown, a flash of pain sparking in her chest. It strikes her so hard and so fast that she sucks in a sharp, icy breath, and for just a moment, she thinks about saying “it’s cold,” but she doesn’t.

It’s beautiful. The words jump into her mind as an automatic response to her own briefly considered words, an instinct. She can almost hear them and half expects them to split the air any second, but they don’t. They *won’t*. Because this isn’t *then*, and Kari isn’t Charlee.

Alex shakes her head and lets her hand be drawn into Kari’s. She watches as their gloved fingers lace together, and she says, “Yeah, you’re right. I do.”

When Kari suddenly stumbles to a stop, Alex jolts and blinks away the memories making a foggy cloud of her mind. Kari smiles at her, pointing toward the door of a beautifully lit building with large glass windows that peer into a massive space. It is adorned in art and packed with people. “This is it.”

Alex doesn’t bother reading the words stamped across the building. She simply lets Kari lead her through the door and into the merciful warmth. An older gentleman greets them at the door and offers to check their bags and coats while they browse. Alex takes their collection ticket and stuffs it into her pants pocket.

The flow of traffic in the gallery seems to be moving counterclockwise, so she and Kari move to the right and take in the first piece they encounter—a pen drawing of a woman’s body in profile. She’s bare and holding a swollen, pregnant belly with one hand while the other dusts across her neck.

It is simple yet elegant, and Alex finds it lovely. Kari, though, scans it quickly, shrugs a shoulder, and pulls Alex along to the next piece.

Twenty minutes later, they find themselves standing in front of a collage painting that spans nine small canvases positioned into the shape of a square. Each individual canvas is painted with different pieces of flowers, but when looked at as a whole, the nine flower paintings create one collective image of a woman's mouth. Thick lips are slightly parted, and a pale pink tongue peeks out under stark, white teeth.

"That's incredible," Kari says, and Alex nods as she takes a glass of champagne from a passing server. "I think I like the paintings better than the drawings."

Alex smirks. "Yes, I noticed that after the third drawing you dragged me away from."

"I like the colors," Kari says, poking her. "The paintings feel more alive somehow, like the pictures are moving."

"That would make for a large number of naked women moving around this place," Alex says, and Kari laughs loudly before cupping a hand over her mouth.

They duck their heads and glance quickly around.

"There are definitely a lot of naked women in these paintings," Kari says, whispering.

"I'm not complaining."

"Of course you're not."



"I have no arm candy."

Charlee looks over and takes in Cam's red cocktail dress and sparkling flats and her long, straight, dark hair resting over one brown shoulder. It's rare to see it down. Cam almost always wears it in a ponytail. "You *are* the candy, Cam. You don't need any extra on your arm. I've already seen at least five different people ogling *you* instead of my art."

"That's true." Cam gives Charlee a wicked grin. "I'm so bad for your career. Why do you keep inviting me?"

"The gallery is just as much yours as it is mine. You build everything and transform the space every time we have a new show, so, really, we're *both* featured artists here."

"You are like compliment crack." Cam releases a dramatic sigh. "I wish I had a pull-string-doll version of you that I could have around all the time just to boost my ego."

They both crack up, and Charlee says, "Because *that* wouldn't be creepy."

When their laughter dies down to silence again, Charlee quietly says, "I'm glad you're with me."

Cam doesn't look at her, but Charlee sees her nod out of the corner of her eye. "So, where's Massey?"

"Bathroom, I think." Charlee shrugs a shoulder. She hasn't seen Chris in at least fifteen minutes. "Or likely posted up at the minibar. He wa—"

The elbow digging into her side cuts her off. Charlee looks at Cam. "What?"

Cam subtly points across the gallery. "Looks like you've got some potential buyers for your giant pining." She coughs. "I mean *painting*."

“Rude,” Charlee says, but her gaze locks on to the two women studying the centerpiece, and her heart begins a heavy thumping. The thought of selling the piece is painful, but she shouldn’t keep it. It needs to go.

She needs to let *it* go. Then maybe *she* can let go.

“I suppose I should go talk to them,” she says, grabbing a fresh glass of champagne from a passing server.

Cam nods, calling quietly after her as she heads toward the center of the main room. “That painting is ten thousand dollars, Charlee. Give them back rubs if you have to.”



Kari’s sudden gasp startles Alex, drawing her attention. “Oh my God,” she says, waving her hand to beckon Alex toward the next painting.

The canvas stretches over a large portion of the post it’s attached to and is encased in glass. Alex absorbs it in sections at first, in details—the blending of black and white, the way the shadows dip over this woman’s body, visible only from the back. A bit of yellow light peeks through windows where breath fogs the panes, making it feel delicate and intimate. It’s a stunning piece of work in all its meticulous mastery, but it feels familiar. Even in pieces, it’s familiar, and Alex has to take a few steps back to look at the painting in its entirety. When she does, her heart slams against her ribs, and her throat grows so tight, she feels like she can’t breathe.

“This is beautiful,” Kari says, her tone soft and reverent. “It reminds me of you. Her hair is wild just like yours. Alex, I love this.”

Every single shallow inhale through Alex’s nose is a desperate effort to get air into her lungs, but it just won’t go down. It won’t reach, and Alex quickly begins to feel light-headed and dizzy.

“Ten thousand dollars,” she hears Kari say. “Damn.” It sounds muffled in Alex’s head, like someone has suddenly cupped their hands over her ears. She hears Kari’s words, but they never fully sink in, just like the air evading her lungs. “How much would I have to beg to get you to agree to buy this painting?”

Alex’s voice comes out strained. She’s surprised it comes out at all. “You don’t really want it.”

“I thought you might try to convince me of as much.” Kari’s laughter reaches Alex’s ears again in muffled thumps of sound. She hasn’t yet peeled her eyes from the painting, so she doesn’t see Alex’s panic. Alex wonders if it’s even evident at all, if her barely maintained facade of control and calm has visibly crumbled. Because her insides are on fire. In ruins. She feels like she might collapse any minute.

“I’m sure I can talk you into it, though.” Kari steps away from Alex, closer to the painting, and Alex watches her. She *has* to watch her, because she can’t look at the painting. She can’t look at the lines, the lighting, the curves of the body she recognizes. The body she *knows*.

“*Home is a Lover in Low Light*,” Kari reads off the sign to the side of the piece before letting out a sigh and stepping back into the space beside Alex. “Even the title is gorgeous.”

“Thank you,” says a voice from behind them, and Alex’s entire body goes cold. Her stomach drops

like it is trying to push down into her legs, and her heart jumps up into her throat as if it intends to escape through her lips. She is going to tear apart with the stretching.

That voice.

Alex would recognize that voice anywhere, anytime. She spent *years* with that voice. Years with it murmuring against her skin, whispering in her ear, laughing against her lips, and haunting her dreams.

Once, that voice was *everything*.



Charlee smiles when one of the women admiring her painting turns at her words. A bit shorter than Charlee, though not by much, she's beautiful. Her thick curves, clad in a flowing, deep green dress, draw Charlee's gaze, and she quickly corrects herself, locking back on to the woman's face. Her hair is long, falling over one shoulder in a straight, shiny wave—dark and beautiful like her eyes. Freckles dot the spaces around her nose, spreading out under her eyes, and her smile is radiant enough to cause Charlee's to widen.

“Oh,” the woman says, stepping toward her. “Are you the artist?”

“Yes. Charlee Parker.” Meeting her in the middle, Charlee shakes her hand before stepping back again. “Do you like the piece?”

“I love it,” she says. “I feel like I'm already in a long-term relationship with it.”

Charlee laughs, but the sound is too soft, too sad even to her own ears. The painting will be gone by the night's end if this woman has anything to say about it. It's an unsettling feeling. Like she is gearing up for another loss.

“I'm glad you like it,” she says. “It's one of my more personal pieces, and it'll be hard for me to let it go, but if you love it as much as you seem to, then I suppose I wouldn't mind sending it off to live with you.”

“Well, I'm going to have to convince my girlfriend here to loosen her pockets,” the woman jokes, and Charlee's eyes flicker to the stiff figure beside her.

The other woman's back is still facing her, and she hasn't moved since Charlee approached, hasn't murmured a word. Something about her, even from the back, seems familiar: the long length of her exposed neck, the bit of her strong jawline that Charlee can just make out from the side. Her hair is up in an elegant bun, and her slender body is long and lovely in its sharp angles—dressed in a pair of dark classic flares and a green top to match her girlfriend's dress. Charlee can't help but stare.

She has an artist's eye, she tells herself. It's natural.

Looking back to the woman still smiling at her, Charlee says, “Well, the piece is pricey, so I understand, but a lot of heart and work went into it.”

The woman nudges her girlfriend. “You hear that? A lot of heart went into it. It deserves a good home.”

When the other woman still doesn't turn, Charlee addresses her. “You *do* seem rather enraptured by it,” she says, teasing. “Can I ask what you think of the piece?”

Charlee could almost swear the woman trembles in response to her question. She half expects her

not to answer. Maybe even walk away. She's never encountered weirder behavior in her gallery. *I shouldn't have come over. Maybe she feels pressured to buy it now.* The idea makes Charlee uncomfortable. She'd hate for someone to shell out thousands of dollars they don't have or that they don't actually *want* to give.

She opens her mouth to excuse herself, to give them time to discuss, when a hard, staggered breath shakes out of the woman just before she turns around.

Charlee's champagne slips from her hand and hits the floor. The sound of shattering glass breaks through the soft buzz of the gallery. Her lips part before she has time to think about what might come rushing out, and then her voice echoes through the room.

“Fuck.”

CHAPTER 3

"So maybe we shouldn't say goodbye."

"What do we say, then?"

"The same thing we always say when one of us leaves."

"And then what?"

"Then I'll go."

"You're just going to turn and go?"

"I don't know how else to do it. If I stay, if I linger, I might never get on that plane."

"Okay."

"Okay."

"So I love you."

"I love you."

"Alex, wait!"

"Charlee, that was supposed to be our goodbye."

"I know. I know. I just... This is hard."

"I know, but this isn't the end. We'll say hello again. I promise."

"When?"

"Soon, I hope."

"Okay. Soon."



THE ROOM IS SPINNING EVERY second Alex stands unmoving under a painting of herself, unable to breathe, while both Kari and Charlee try to gain her attention. When she finally turns around, it's as if the entire place slams to a sudden, jarring stop.

Charlee's glass of champagne hits the floor, shattering on impact, but Charlee's eyes don't shift from Alex's. Their gazes catch instantly, like the pins of a lock all clicking into place, and suddenly, the door to the past swings swiftly open.

"Fuck."

The word slams from Charlee's lips, breathless and guttural, and Alex feels it acutely, as if it could have jumped from her own mouth. She isn't surprised by Charlee's reaction or by the broken glass on the floor. The only reason her own champagne glass isn't currently at their feet is because she's gripping it so tightly she's shocked it hasn't crumbled to dust in her hand.

Charlee doesn't move an inch, and neither does she, and Alex still can't breathe. She can't move. Can't speak. Charlee is looking at her like she's a ghost, and maybe Alex is. She *could* be a ghost, because her body is too still, her insides too silent. Everything is frozen in time.

"Whoa," Kari says, shuffling forward as if to help. *"Are you okay?"*

Charlee doesn't answer. She continues to stare at Alex, her eyes wide like those of a deer caught in headlights. Alex is the car that just rounded the corner and crashed into her.

Alex can feel Kari looking at her, looking between the two of them, undoubtedly confused, but Alex can't turn to her. She can't stop looking at Charlee. Her blue eyes are like something out of a dream, mesmerizing.

It's incredible seeing her again. It's incredible and painful, and *incredibly painful*, and Alex somehow is floating and drowning simultaneously. Charlee is just as beautiful here, now—in her sleek, strapless white dress and black pumps—as she is in Alex's meticulous memory. As beautiful as she has been in every secret, sacred, unspoken fantasy that's painted her mind in the last five years.

The urge to move, to run to Charlee, is immense, like the instinct to throw out your arms when falling, to grab anything, *anyone*, nearby. It's natural, automatic, and yet Alex can't help but wonder if she'd be rejected, if Charlee would let her fall.

Her eyes sting horribly, and she can see the sheen of tears already coating Charlee's as well. She wonders whose will fall first, or if they will be able to hold the tears back. Hold them in. Like a dam blocking the current of all they used to be to one another.

She knows it's only a matter of time before the dam bursts wide open and drags them both under, along with everyone else in their lives.

“Alex?”

Alex turns, finally yanked from her frozen position by a new but also familiar voice. Camila Cruz stands only a few feet away from her, staring at Alex much the way Charlee continues to, as if she is seeing a ghost. Any response Alex has escapes as nothing more than a strangled jumble that barely makes it from her throat to her tongue, passing through on sheer luck. It's better that actual words won't come, because no words can do justice to this moment.

Her knees are shaking.

Cam's arms are around her before she even realizes that the other woman has moved, and Alex stiffens. She's a rigid board in Cam's embrace, but Cam doesn't let her go. She only jostles her a bit and says, “It's been five damn years, Alex. *Hug me.*”

Releasing the breath trapped in her lungs feels like relief, like collapse. Alex sinks into the feeling, into the embrace, and wraps her arms around Cam.

“Cam.” She grips her tightly, and she tries not to look, but Charlee's always been like the sun—her sun—the gravitational pull yanking Alex into her orbit. Her eyes lock with Charlee's again over Cam's shoulder. Charlee's cheeks are streaked with tears, her makeup rapidly growing splotchy and smudged.

Surprisingly, though, there is affection in her eyes. There's also pain. That one look is like a mirror reflecting all that is suddenly storming through Alex's insides.

Hello, Charlee mouths, and Alex nearly splinters apart. Even without sound, that small movement of her lips stirs something wild and wonderful and wretched inside of Alex. She closes her eyes for a moment before locking on to Charlee again and mouthing her reply.

Hello.

It's years past due. Years too late. *How can something so painful feel so good?*

When Cam steps back from the embrace, her eyes, too, shimmer with unshed tears, and she laughs mockingly at herself as she fans her hand at them. "It's about time you came home," she says. "When did you get back? How long are you staying? Wait, are you *living* here again?"

Her lips spread with a wide smile as she bombards Alex with questions, but it quickly falls when Cam's gaze darts past Alex to the elephant in the room behind her. Alex watches Cam's eyes widen to the point that they are practically bulging, and dread pools in her gut.

Exactly, she thinks. She doesn't know what to do with the situation they've all found themselves in, because as far as Kari has ever known, Charlee Parker didn't even exist until tonight.

After they split, it was painful to talk about Charlee, so Alex didn't. She thought it might grow easier with time, but it never did. Eventually, it just became easiest to let all that they were stay buried in the past. In the dark, quiet places inside her where she's never since allowed anyone access.

Kari never asked about exes, so Alex never told her. They never talked much about the past at all.

Now the past is staring Alex in the face, and Kari's looking at her like she has some explaining to do. Alex doesn't want to touch that explanation with a ten-foot pole.

"So, you three obviously know each other," Kari says before Alex has a chance to answer any of Cam's questions. Her stomach rolls as the room begins its second round of spinning.



Charlee's chest tightens as she watches Cam move without thought, without hesitation, and sink into Alex's arms. If she did the same, would Alex embrace her? Would she still feel like home?

When Alex's gaze locks on to her again over Cam's shoulder, Charlee's lips move without command. *Hello*.

One word. One word that feels heavy and overwhelming. Much like the moment itself. *Does she know? Does Alex know all that swirls within it?* Does she know that that hello is adorned in their past and in their present and in all the painful syllables of *it wasn't supposed to be like this?*

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

"So, you three obviously know each other."

Charlee is yanked almost violently from her thoughts at the sound of the woman's voice. This is the woman who, only moments ago, had been so eager to buy her painting, the woman who Charlee now knows to be Alex's girlfriend.

She shakes her head, collects herself. "Uh, y-yes." Closing her eyes, Charlee curses herself for her inability to speak without stuttering. She's twisted and torn, shaken out of her skin. Her insides squirm, and the sensation claws its way into her voice.

"Yes," she says again after clearing her throat and wiping at her wet cheeks. She shuffles awkwardly around the server who has come to clean the mess at her feet. He offers her a small towel. She takes it with a quiet thank-you and cleans the sticky drink from her feet and ankles.

The gallery crowd has mostly gone back to their browsing, and Charlee's thankful to not have any additional eyes on her. She glances at Cam, still standing next to Alex. They both face Kari now as

well, their expressions nearly identical—wide-eyed and silently screaming for an escape.

Cam is the first to recover, though she plasters on a smile so toothy it's unnerving. "Yeah, we, uh, we go way back. College."

"Oh!" Kari's eyes widen. "I was wondering if we might bump into any of Alex's old friends when we moved here." She steps toward Cam and holds out her hand. "Kari Patel. I'm Alex's girlfriend."

"Kari," Cam says, nodding and taking a hesitant step forward to shake the woman's hand. She takes another glance at Charlee, and Charlee knows they're going to be up all night over this. And drunk. Definitely drunk. "Camila Cruz, but you can call me Cam. Nice to meet you."

Kari shakes Cam's hand before turning toward Charlee expectantly. "And you said it was Charlee, right?"

With a nod, Charlee takes Kari's hand. "Charlee Parker, yes."

She waits to see recognition in Kari's brown eyes. Waits for a subtle gasp or an understanding nod. A knowing remark. Something along the lines of "Oh, so you're *that* Charlee," as if there are hundreds of artists named Charlee Parker scattered around the city and she just happens to be the one who used to lie in bed with Alex, talking about whether or not God exists and what they might name their future children. *That* Charlee Parker indeed.

No such recognition ever comes, though. A spark of pain flickers through her chest. It doesn't flourish into flame—she doesn't let it. She can't really blame Alex. They're even *more* alike than perhaps they ever realized.

"Alex never told me she was friends with such a talented artist."

Kari's grip is firm, her small hand soft and smooth. Charlee does her best not to think of how effortlessly those hands must glide over Alex's body, how often, how intimately. The thoughts come anyway, stabbing with each new arrival.

"Oh, well, thank you." She briefly thinks she might throw up.

"You must've been surprised, dropping your glass like that," Kari says, one eyebrow ticking slightly up.

The statement's loaded. She can feel the weight of it, more of a question than a remark, probing. Charlee knows exactly what Kari is asking.

"It's been a long time," she says, avoiding the real answer, but she sees it swimming in Alex's eyes when she glances her way. She sees it wobbling in Alex's throat, even from a distance.

The truth is going to spill out like a fucking flood, and there's nothing they can do to stop the mess. At most, they can try to contain it.

"We dated," Alex blurts out a second later, and Charlee closes her eyes. There it is.

When she opens them again, Chris is standing there, having just reached her from the opposite side of the gallery where the bar is set up. He glances between Charlee and Alex. "Who did? You two?"

Charlee sighs and nods. "Yes."

"Huh," Chris says before lightly shrugging. He then steps over and holds his hand out to Alex. "Chris Massey."

Alex looks at Charlee, then back to Chris. “Okay,” she says, as if he just offered her a raincoat in the middle of a drought. She takes his hand regardless. “Do you work for Charlee?”

“Oh—no, no.” He laughs and tucks a loose strand of hair behind his ear. “We’re together.”

“O-oh.” Alex stutters out the word, and that certainly catches Charlee’s attention. Their eyes meet again—one hard, tense stare—and then Alex looks quickly away. “Nice to meet you then, Chris. I’m Alex. Alex Woodson.”

Charlee does her best to get Cam’s attention without moving a muscle, staring so intensely at the side of her head that she is surprised she can’t read Cam’s thoughts. It works. A second later, Cam turns to look at her, and Charlee bugs out her eyes in an obvious sign of distress. If anyone can get them out of this situation, it’s Cam. Charlee can only hope Cam has something up her sleeve.

“Um, cool, yeah. So, it’s nice to meet everyone,” Cam says. “And, Alex, it’s great to see you again, really. We should make a plan to get together soon and catch up, but right now really isn’t the best time for a chat. Charlee has to, you know, mingle with people, try to sell those paintings and all of that, and we’re all sort of blocking the flow of traffic, so…”

“Oh yes, right.” Alex jumps into action and steps away from the centerpiece painting. “We’ll get out of your way, then. Kari, are you ready?”

Charlee has to stop herself from letting out an audible sigh of relief. She’s about to make her escape when Kari says, “Oh, I see it now.” She points up at the painting, and Charlee’s stomach bottoms out. “This is why you didn’t want the painting, Alex. It’s *you*.”

Alex’s face pales until it looks as if her soul has left her body, and Cam inches away from her, looking basically the same. Charlee’s insides writhe, and she can’t seem to make any words form on her tongue. *This cannot possibly be real. When am I going to wake up?*

“Well, I must say, Charlee.” Kari licks across the front of her teeth before putting on a smile that looks borderline painful. “You have *quite* the detailed memory.”

“Um. Well, I…” Charlee forces herself to calm down and tries again. She pushes the truth down as far as it will go, because there would be no coming back from *those* words. There’s a part of her, though, deep and aching, that yearns to say them.

Nothing has ever inspired me more than the curve of her hips, the tilt of her lips when she smiled at me, sleepy and satisfied; the way she whispered ‘forever’ against my skin.

Instead she says, “I specialize in the nude female form. I’m sure you’ve noticed from the rest of my work here. Artists draw from memory all the time. It’s nothing personal. We use people in our lives as inspiration or models for our work, and um—”

“Oh yeah, totally,” Cam chimes in, slinking to Charlee’s side. She waves her hand dismissively and wraps an arm around Charlee’s back. “Charlee paints everyone. I mean, you should see all the naked paintings she’s done of me, both with and without my leg on.”

Cam knocks her hand against her left leg as she says it. At the sound of her knuckles thumping against her prosthetic, Charlee closes her eyes and releases a heavy breath through her nose. She knows Cam is only trying to help, but she has a feeling this sort of “help” might actually make things worse, or at least more awkward.

“It’s like, geez, how many times do you need to see me naked?” Cam laughs far too loudly for it not to sound forced. “But, I mean, she’s the best, so who am I to say no, you know? There should be more paintings of naked women with prosthetics. Am I right? And Alex looks good here, you have to admit. This is some great work, an—”

“Stop talking,” Charlee says under her breath, subtly elbowing Cam’s side, and Cam immediately clamps her lips closed. Charlee clears her throat. Her cheeks feel like they are on fire. “You two have a nice night.”

She can’t bear to stand here any longer. The tension rippling through the air and over her flesh burns. The haunted look in Alex’s eyes—eyes fixed on her when they should have been looking at Kari. *I’m going to be sick.*

Pulling Cam with her, Charlee starts to walk away, but before she can take more than five steps—
“Wait.”



“I have to go, Charlee,” Alex said, seeing her boss wave her over from across the room. The woman wore a stern expression, and Alex knew she was going to be lectured about personal calls on company time. Again. But since she was *always* on company time, when was she supposed to take calls? She hardly ever got to go home.

“What? No.” Charlee groaned. “Alex, we’ve only been on the phone for two minutes. I’m not exaggerating. Literally two minutes, and that’s the longest we’ve spoken in a week!”

Alex curled herself into the wall a bit more and lowered her voice. “I know, but I’m at work.”

“You’re always at work.” Charlee’s voice collapsed, tired and worn and tinged with hurt; Alex ached at the sound of it.

“I know.” She swallowed. “I know, and I’m sorry.” She was. Every time Charlee sighed on the phone, Alex was sorry. Every time Charlee cried her *I miss yous* over the line, Alex was sorry. Every time Charlee’s voice went quiet and cold, Alex was sorry. She was sorry all the time, because this internship was opening so many doors for her career, but it was closing so many on her relationship. Alex felt torn in two. “I have to go now.”

“You always have to go,” Charlee said. “You realize that practically every call we’ve had in the last eight months has ended with you telling me you have to go, right? You always have to go, Alex.”

“Charlee, please, try to understand.” Alex glanced back at her boss again to see the woman tap her watch. *Shit.* “You know I’m not supposed to be on my phone.”

“Then why did you answer when I called? Why didn’t you just let it roll to voicemail like it usually does? Why didn’t you just leave me to ramble on in a message you probably wouldn’t have listened to for another month anyway?”

“Because I miss you,” Alex said, the words escaping as hardly more than a whisper. Her throat was too tight. Her voice broke, cracks spreading through it like the ones in Alex’s heart every time Charlee’s pain bled through the phone.

“Oh, you miss me? Then why is it you never have time for me anymore? It’s like I’m just a burden for you now. We’re falling apart, and you’re too busy to even care!”

Alex bristled, too exhausted to quell the anger that rippled through her, too exhausted to keep from being defensive. “Well, the world doesn’t revolve around you, Charlee!” She bit out the words before she could stop herself. “You may get to set your own work hours, but I don’t. I can’t be on the phone with you every second. I’m trying to make a life for myself.”

Silence.

For several long seconds. Alex bit her tongue as her own words flitted back through her mind. She had to hang up, but she held on anyway. Waiting. She slinked around the corner so her boss could no longer see her and darted into a nearby supply closet. Alex clicked the door closed behind her and slid to the floor in the dark room.

When Charlee spoke again, the words tore like bullets through Alex’s chest, ripping through flesh and muscle and bone—fatal. “I guess I’m not a part of the life you want to make for yourself anymore.”

Her voice was ragged, rough. Charlee was crying. It only made Alex feel worse. It made her hate herself for letting stress and anger and exhaustion get the better of her. She broke, tears pooling in her eyes.

“Don’t say that. You know it isn’t true.”

Charlee let out the smallest hiccup of a sob and said, “You said this was forever, Alex. You said we would last forever.”

With a trembling sigh, Alex knocked her head back against the door. “I meant it, Charlee. I did. I still do.”

Her head swam with Charlee’s tortured murmur of “What’s happening to us?” Then the line went silent, dead, and Alex wanted to scream. She grabbed the nearest object to her, a box of paper towels from the bottom of a shelf, and chucked it as hard as she could against the back wall of the supply room. A single loud sob ripped free as it flew.

It hit the wall with a hard thud and crashed to the ground. Alex winced at the sound. She wiped roughly at her eyes, ignoring the mess, and left. She didn’t have time to fall apart.



“So, that was uncomfortable,” Kari says as she and Alex enter their apartment and shed their coats. Dinner had been a mostly silent affair, awkward and tense. Thankfully, Kari stopped trying to initiate conversation after the third time Alex gave her a short, clipped reply.

Alex walks through to the back of the apartment, stripping off her shirt as she goes. She doesn’t want to have this talk, yet she knows it will happen no matter how she tries to hold it off. That doesn’t stop her from trying. “Not now, Kari,” she says, rubbing at her tired eyes and changing into her pajamas. “I’m exhausted.”

“And I’m confused.” Following Alex into their bedroom, Kari plops down on the bed and watches as Alex changes her clothes. “Why didn’t you tell me about Charlee?”

“You never asked.”

“I never *knew* to ask.”

“Why would I talk to you about my ex?” Alex turns to face her. “Is it normal to gush about past

lovers with current lovers? Because to me, that seems like something to be avoided.”

Kari’s brow ticks up. “Gush?”

“What does it matter?” Alex ignores the challenge. “It’s in the past, much like all the other things we’ve never discussed and likely never *will* discuss.”

“I don’t ask about the past, Alex, because it’s obvious the past is painful for you,” Kari says. “I thought it was because of your time in the foster system, and maybe it mostly is, but it’s clear now that some of it is due to this relationship I knew nothing about. What did she do to you?”

“Nothing,” Alex snaps as a flash of fierce protectiveness ignites in her chest. “She did *nothing* to me. *I* am the reason our relationship ended, and I take full responsibility for that.”

“Okay.” Kari puts a hand up in surrender. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know, but maybe that’s why you should tell me. We’re going to have to see her again, so I think it would be nice to have a little backstory.”

Alex swipes a hand down her face. “I cannot *believe* you invited them to dinner. As if the whole introduction wasn’t awkward enough. What were you even thinking?” She shakes her head. “This is a complete train wreck.”

“I was trying to be nice!” Kari shouts at her, and Alex reels at the crack in her voice, the way she jumps off the bed like she’s about to leave. “Those people seemed important to you, so I was trying to... Do you have any idea how it felt for me to stand there in front of a massive painting of my *naked* girlfriend? Painted, may I remind you, by my girlfriend’s *ex*-girlfriend, who *also* happened to be there? Do you, Alex? Do you have any idea how that made me feel?”

Alex crumples on the spot. The whirlwind of seeing Charlee again had been so overwhelming that she hadn’t stopped to think about how the whole thing must have made Kari feel.

Reaching for Kari’s hands, Alex tugs her into a tight embrace. “I’m sorry,” she says. “You’re right. I’m an asshole.”

Kari collapses against Alex’s chest, looping an arm around her waist and breathing against her neck. “I didn’t say that.” She kisses Alex’s neck before leaning back to look into her eyes. “And I don’t want to make this about me, because, yeah, it was awkward and uncomfortable, but it wasn’t like you knew it was going to happen. We were only there because I took us there, so it isn’t your fault.” She follows as Alex crosses to the bed. “And I guess the fact that you never told me about Charlee isn’t something I can hold against you either. You’re right. We’ve never talked much about our pasts, and that’s on both of us. But I’m asking now, Alex. I want to know, if *you* want to tell me.”

The bed shakes a bit as Alex sits and flops backward, her back sinking into the quilt atop their mattress. When Kari settles down beside her, Alex keeps her gaze focused on the ceiling, and Kari remains quiet, waiting for her to tell their story. To say something, *anything*.

“We were together in college,” she says after a long silence. “It was...intense.”

“First love?”

“Yes.”

“First loves are always intense. Mine was too.” She plays with Alex’s fingertips. “How long were you together?”

“Four years.” Alex closes her eyes. “Almost five. The entire time we were in college and a little after.”

“Wow.” Alex can hear the surprise in her voice. “That’s a long time.”

“Yeah.”

“You said the breakup was your fault?”

A sharp stab of pain pierces her chest. “My sister would say otherwise. Maybe Charlee would too.”

It’s hard to say her name again, to force the sound of it through her lips, but it also feels good. Like some kind of release. *Maybe that should scare me, but it doesn’t. It feels too good to fear it.*

“Maybe it wasn’t really anyone’s fault,” she says. “I was doing what I thought was best at the time, what I *still* think was right for me, but I still feel responsible. I always have.”

“What did you do?”

Alex swallows, then swallows again, to soothe the tightness in her throat. It doesn’t work. Her voice strains, and she wants to stop. She wants to let the words die, let the story fade back into the background. She wants to crawl up onto her pillow, close her eyes, and sleep away the sorrow clogging her throat and throbbing in her chest.

She’s never been good at talking about her past, not any part of it. It’s always been too hard, too hard to talk about the things she remembers, the things she’s lost. Her parents. Her grandma. Her childhood. Charlee. Those experiences, and carrying the weight of them, is enough. Talking about them is like adding an extra weight, so she doesn’t. Rarely does anyone ask her to anyway. And maybe it was wrong not to tell Kari about Charlee sooner, but it’s always been so much easier to carry the weight in silence and let the past stay in the past. It made living in the present...bearable.

“I applied for a year-long internship with the company before I graduated.”

Kari shifts toward her. “Encore Creative? The one you work for now?”

Nodding, Alex picks at the quilt with her fingers and keeps her gaze fixed on the ceiling. “I never thought I’d get it. They were based on the other side of the country, and they only ever took on three new interns a year. It was a long shot, but they were one of the biggest and most successful staffing-and-planning companies in the country. It was an incredible opportunity, so I applied. When I hadn’t heard from them by the time I graduated, I assumed it meant I wouldn’t be hearing from them at all, so I let it go.”

“But you *did* get the position?”

“I was an alternate,” Alex says, nodding. “They called almost four months after graduation. Charlee had just opened her first gallery space and had taken on a job at a community theater too, with Camila—they both did a lot of work in scene design. You know, building and painting backdrops and props and things like that.”

“Oh, that’s cool.”

“Yeah,” Alex said, releasing a long breath. “She couldn’t uproot and leave, not when things were beginning to take off for her. I wouldn’t ask her to do that, and she wouldn’t ask me to stay for her. We wanted each other to have those opportunities, so we decided that I would go and we’d try long

distance until the internship ended.”

Alex’s voice cracks. “It was good for a while, exciting even, but I was *so* busy. Busier than I was prepared to be. I was always at the office, always at some event. I hardly even saw the inside of my apartment. I basically lived on fast food and energy drinks and the care packages Charlee’s mom sent me every week. I barely had time to *live*, let alone to spend on the phone or on Skype. It broke us, you know. In that slow kind of way you don’t even realize is happening until it’s too late to do anything about it anymore. Until you don’t really even want to.”

Kari squeezes Alex’s side, drawing up a sigh.

“We tried, though. We hung on for a long time. Charlee just knew we could fix everything when I came home, but...”

Alex covers her burning eyes with her hands. Moisture soaks into her fingertips, and she draws another shaky breath through her lips. Every word that follows is broken, rough like gravel. “At the end of the year, they offered me a full-time position as a junior event director with guaranteed promotion if I brought in new clients. It was an even better opportunity than the internship had been, and I couldn’t say no. I just couldn’t. So I didn’t. Charlee didn’t blame me for that, but it was the last straw. It was too much, you know. Too hard.”

Alex feels Kari shift. When warm lips touch the back of her hands still covering her face, she breaks. She lets it free for a moment, lets herself go, and just cries for only a few painful seconds before she rolls toward her girlfriend.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I know how this must look for me to be so emotional about this, but you have to understand that after Vinny, Charlee was the first person to ever really love me. The first person since my parents, since my grandma. The first to make me *feel* it.” She wipes a hand under her nose and blows air up toward her wet cheeks. “She never batted an eye about my past, and she never once made me feel like I was less than her. She wasn’t just my first love. She was my family—her and her parents and Cam and Vinny. They were my family.”

“So you lost a lot more than a girlfriend,” Kari says, and Alex nods against the mattress, wiping almost angrily at new tears popping up until Kari scoots closer and rubs a hand down her back.

Alex hates herself as she imagines Charlee’s arms around her when she sinks into Kari’s embrace.

“It’s okay,” Kari says, and Alex feels a flash of pain between her ribs.

It’s not, she thinks. It’s not okay.



“Charlee, you have to get out of bed.”

“I can’t,” Charlee said, avoiding her mother’s eyes. She remained buried under her covers, the thick blanket drawn up over her nose and eyes so only her forehead was exposed. The bitter smell of her own bad breath assaulted her, but she didn’t move. She hadn’t left her bed, *their* bed, in days.

“You need to shower and eat.” Standing over the bed with her hands on her hips, Gabrielle Parker stared down at her daughter while Cam, who was plopped next to Charlee, did her best to comfort her. Charlee could feel her mother’s gaze like a laser through the covers. “You’ve visibly lost weight, and you smell.”

Charlee closed her eyes under the covers and tried to block out the world. “I don’t care.”

“Honey, I know it hurts,” Gabby said. “I know what it feels like to lose the person you love, and I’m hurting over this as well. We all are, but I don’t believe this is really the end, and I don’t believe that *you* believe that either.”

“Yeah, Charlee.” Cam patted Charlee’s blanket-covered thigh. “You might be on a break now, but everybody knows you and Alex will end up together. It’s just the way it’s supposed to be.”

Charlee let out a hard sob, threw back her covers, and sat up in the bed. She could feel how wild her hair was, greasy and sticking up in places. Her mouth was thick with the grime of days without brushing, but she didn’t care. “We’re not on a break,” she snapped at them. “We’re not taking some time apart, okay? We’re done. We’re over. She chose to stay there, and that’s it. That’s the end of it.”

“You still have to live,” Gabby said.

Charlee threw up her hands as fresh tears leaked free. “How am I supposed to do that, Mom? How am I supposed to just go on like we...like we’re not supposed to be...?” Her voice cracked, an awful croak of a sound. “Like *any* of this is okay?”

The mattress dipped as Gabby settled down beside Charlee and wrapped her up in her arms. She kissed Charlee’s wet cheeks and rocked her back and forth as she cried. “You just do, baby.”



“I want to die.”

“Stop,” Cam says, kicking Charlee’s foot with her own as they lie together in Cam’s bed and stare up at the ceiling.

“Did you see her, Cam?” Charlee’s vision blurs a bit as she stares upward. The six shots of vodka are really starting to get to her now. Her head’s fuzzy, and a pleasant warmth floods her body and flushes her cheeks. She feels good. A far cry from how she felt earlier. “We didn’t even speak to each other, but did you see the way she *looked* at me?”

“Like she just found her purpose in life again?” Cam turns her head to smirk at Charlee. Her speech slurs. “Yeah, I saw that.”

“She did not.”

“Did too.”

“God, she’s beautiful.”

“You have a boyfriend.”

“I know.”

Cam rolls over to fully face her, propping up on her elbow. “You know he doesn’t stand a chance, right?”

“Who?” Charlee rolls to face Cam as well. “Chris?”

“He was a goner the second Alex walked into that gallery.”

“No,” Charlee says, though it doesn’t sound defiant. It doesn’t hold any strength. In fact, it sounds more hopeful than anything else, even to Charlee’s own ears. *Maybe that’s just the alcohol.* “It’s not the same anymore.” Her hair making a swishing sound against the pillow sounds thunderous to

Charlee's ears. "We're not the same. Me and Alex. It's over. It's been over for a long time."

Cam sighs, and her eyes droop tiredly. "It was never over, and you know it."

"I know."

"And you don't want to die," Cam says, laying an arm over Charlee's stomach and holding her close in a sloppy side embrace. "I think, for the first time in a long time, you really want to live."

CHAPTER 4

GREAT GROUNDS MAKES AN EXCELLENT caramel macchiato and an even better vanilla bean scone; or at least they used to. That's why she's going twenty minutes out of her way. She is *not* deliberately going on the off-chance she might bump into Charlee. No. And she definitely is not going because it used to be Charlee's favorite coffee shop. No way.

She has a craving. That's it. That's all it is.

The fact that the place is on the other side of the city—a twenty-minute freezing walk out of the way from her new office—is completely irrelevant. The fact that it's Alex's lunch break and that Charlee always used to get her coffee at noon instead of first thing in the morning is also totally irrelevant. The fact that Alex's stomach hasn't stopped flipping since she left work...

Alex walks through the door to find her ex standing in line, swaying in place to the music overhead. And suddenly, all those irrelevant things feel terribly *relevant*.

The bell chimes with Alex's entrance, and Charlee turns, almost as if she expects Alex to be there. Their eyes meet. It's automatic, magnetic, and it isn't the first time. In fact, since their awful, awkward reunion at Charlee's gallery, it's the third time in ten days that they've bumped into one another.

The first was at the corner convenience store downtown where they used to go to buy cases of ramen noodles for three dollars. It's a crappy little store, cluttered and not exactly clean, but convenient. One of few places that stocks classic candies that have otherwise become difficult to find.

They bumped into one another at the entrance, Charlee leaving and Alex arriving, and there had been a moment, of course. They stopped, door propped open on Charlee's elbow and the universe screeching to a near-violent halt, but neither of them said a word. It was like they'd forgotten how to speak. Instead, they just stared at each other. Then Charlee gave the smallest hint of a smile and walked off.

The second time, they simply passed by one another on the sidewalk. Just outside a strip of shops and an old café they used to frequent with Charlee's mother. Alex tried not to turn, tried not to look back after Charlee passed, but she couldn't help herself. When she glanced over her shoulder, Charlee was looking back at her too. The words jumped from Alex's lips before she could stop them.

"It's cold," she called over her shoulder, hoping Charlee wouldn't let the moment die on the wind. Her chapped lips nearly split with her smile when Charlee called back to her.

"It's beautiful!"

Alex tells herself the meetings are only coincidence, that she's just falling back into old habits and routines from the years she lived here before. Part of her knows, though, knows what she's really

doing—seeking out the one person she shouldn't. Some part of her knows she should feel guilty, but she doesn't. Seeing Charlee, being near her, feels too good—too *right* to be wrong.

The line at the counter is long, and once Alex takes her place at the end, Charlee turns to face the front again. Several people fill the space between them, but it somehow feels like they're the only two there. The air thickens as Alex stares at the back of Charlee's head, at her windblown hair. She can practically feel it running through her fingers, just like it used to. She scans down the curving lines of her body, over her soft shoulders and full hips. Thick thighs. Alex's fingertips twitch. She once mapped every inch.

Charlee's name is called before Alex even places her own order, and their eyes meet for a moment—just a fraction of a second—when Charlee retrieves her drink. Alex thinks this is it. They'll share this one look, this one look she *definitely didn't walk twenty minutes for*, and then Charlee will go. They'll return to their separate days. Their separate lives.

When Alex retrieves her drink and scone and turns to leave, however, Charlee is seated at a small two-person table near the door, her back to Alex. Alex's heart kicks into overdrive, her insides twisting in turmoil. Does Charlee want her to sit down? Is this a sign that she wants to interact?

They've seen each other four times, including the night at the gallery, and only once have they actually exchanged words. Out loud. *With* one another. They haven't connected or caught up, haven't touched or embraced in any way. It's like they are tiptoeing around some invisible line that they're too afraid to touch, despite how desperately they both want to cross it.

Am I foolish to think Charlee might want to interact with me? Maybe she's simply resting, enjoying the cold afternoon at a favorite spot of hers. Maybe she's perfectly fine with staying on her side of the invisible line.

It takes all of seven seconds for Alex to convince herself and decide to make as swift an exit as possible without actually sprinting past Charlee and crashing through the glass door. Her body apparently has different plans. Three steps into her confident exit, she finds herself dropping into the empty seat.

Charlee's eyes lock on to her when she sits, and for a brief moment, Alex is sure she got it wrong. Charlee doesn't want her company, and she's going to ask her to leave. But then she smiles. She smiles like it's exactly what she wants, and a relieved sigh rushes from Alex's lips before she can stop it. It draws a laugh from Charlee, and before Alex even realizes what is happening, the sound bubbles up from inside her, and they're *both* laughing.

Softly, their melodies synchronize, and they fall into the rhythm of the moment, enjoying it. It ends in a gentle sigh from Charlee as she rests her chin in her hand, her elbow propped on the table, and gives Alex a once-over.

"You look good," she says, the words barely audible, like she didn't mean to say them out loud.

Alex's lips tug up with a smile as she looks over Charlee's face, takes in every familiar detail. Her button nose. The small cleft in her chin. Thin, dark blonde brows to match her tousled hair. Soft, slightly rounded cheeks. One shallow dimple dots the left. Alex has always loved that dimple. "You

too, Charlee.”

They stop at that, at the way Alex’s voice wraps around Charlee’s name like an old, favorite sweater—warm and gentle in its caress, familiar. She hears it on her own tongue and revels in the way it causes Charlee to briefly close her eyes.

“It’s strange, you living here again,” Charlee says after a moment.

Alex hums, fingers rubbing along the outside of her warm coffee cup. “Surreal.”

“Are you happy?”

“Are *you*?”

They stare at one another, both slipping back into silence, and then Charlee lets out another quiet laugh and shakes her head. “I’ve missed you.”

It’s enough to make Alex’s head spin. Enough to make her heart race. It is enough to remind her of all the ways they fit together and of why she *should* feel guilty for this—for the twenty-minute walk she took to be here and the hope that sparked in her heart every step of the way. Guilt should plague her for the way Charlee’s laughter makes her want to waste her day away in this chair, at this coffee shop, across from the person who used to be her everything.

Clearing her throat, Alex resituates herself. She can’t quite meet Charlee’s gaze when she says, “I was afraid you’d hate me.”

“For what?”

“The way things ended.” Her voice strains. “The fact that I didn’t come home.”

“Ah.” Charlee nods but says nothing else of it, and Alex can’t help but feel like that might be a bad sign. “So, dinner next week.”

Alex groans, not sure what to make of the subject change, but she goes with it. “I told Kari a double-date was a bad idea after we left the gallery. Feel free to cancel. I’ll even create an excuse *for* you, if you want.”

“I think I can handle it, but thank you,” Charlee says with a smile. She shifts in her seat. “Speaking of my gallery, though, why were you there? Did you not think that might be a difficult situation, or an awkward one at least?”

Alex’s stomach rolls, uneasy. “I’m sorry about that. I honestly didn’t know it was your gallery. *Had* I known, I wouldn’t have—I didn’t mean to just spring my presence on you like that. Kari found a flyer and asked me to take her. I didn’t read it. I didn’t even look at the name on the building. I…” She hesitates. “I went by your old gallery, a few days after I was back in the city.”

Understanding dawns on Charlee’s face. “Oh.”

“I thought you were gone.”

Charlee glances down at the table, takes a deep breath, and lets it out in a slow release. When she looks back up at Alex, she shrugs. “Well, I guess a little awkward never killed anyone.”

“It could’ve been worse,” Alex says, relief flooding her gut. A smile works its way over her lips. “You could’ve had an enormous painting of your bare ass hanging behind you.”

Charlee’s cheeks flush a light pink that looks lovely on her pale skin. “At least it’s a nice ass,” she

says, and Alex can't help but laugh. It jumps out of her like it demands to be free, and she's thankful for it. The sound saps the tension right out of the air, and for just a moment, they're back to being who they once were.

The vibrating buzz of Charlee's phone effectively kills it, though, and she glances down at it and sighs. "I need to go. I have a private showing with a collector in an hour."

Alex's laughter dissipates, but her smile remains. "I told you, Charlee."

"Told me what?"

"That you'd be somebody."

Charlee stares at her through one long, breathless beat of silence. Her gaze flits up toward the ceiling, eyes wet, and she lets out a tiny huff of air. With one hard nod, she rises from her seat. "I'll see you at dinner next week."

Alex lets her pass before standing to head out as well. She grabs the bag holding her uneaten pastry as well as the steadily cooling coffee she's yet to take a sip from and makes her way toward the street corner. She doesn't get very far, though, before her name cuts through the air.

"Alex!"

She spins on the spot and her heart jumps into her throat. She barely has time to swallow it back down before Charlee is jogging down the sidewalk toward her, short breaths clouding out in front of her with each rapid step. The last one puffs against Alex's own face just seconds before Charlee throws her arms around her neck and yanks her into a hard, gripping embrace.

The cold air pricks as it pushes into Alex's lungs and burns on the way out, as if the tears she'd only just seen in Charlee's eyes have somehow slipped inside her and are scorching, like acid, up the length of her airway. She doesn't hesitate when Charlee's chest melts against hers, when Charlee's arms curl around her, and when one hand slides into her hair. Alex wraps her own arms around Charlee's waist and holds her close, turns her face into Charlee's neck, breathing in the familiar scent of all her used-to-bes and forget-me-nots. She tries to let this be enough. It will have to last her a lifetime. She tries to *make* it enough.

"I could never hate you," Charlee says. And with the warm whisper against her ear, Alex knows that it isn't.

It isn't enough.

It will never be enough.



"You can't just quit, Alex."

Alex curled around her pillow, phone tucked between it and her ear. For the first time in weeks, she had the opportunity to sleep in, but she couldn't. She barely slept all night, and now the sun was glaring through her window. Her eyes felt like tiny balls of fire in her skull.

Across the room, a hole in the wall glared at her, television remote still protruding from it. There was a broken plate in the kitchen sink that she had zero intentions of doing anything about and a poorly bandaged cut on her hand from breaking the damned plate. Her pillow was so damp from tears and snot that the feel of it made her cringe. She'd never cried so much in her entire life, but throwing

things, breaking things—*that* she was familiar with, thanks to plenty of temporary parents with anger issues.

She felt drained.

“What does it matter?” she grumbled into the phone, voice scratching along her throat. “What does any of it matter if I can’t share it with her?”

“It matters, Alex,” Vinny said. “You know it matters.”

“More than Charlee?”

“You have to stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

Vinny sighed. “You can’t keep comparing your career to your girlfriend. You shouldn’t have to choose, okay? I know what you have with Charlee is rare or special or whatever, but you have to live your life. Charlee’s here living hers. She might be a blubbering mess right now just like you, but she’s doing it. She’s selling her work. She’s doing exactly what she planned on doing, and that’s what you’re doing too. You worked your ass off for the grades you got so you could make a life for yourself, one way fucking better than what we started with. You went out there to take this opportunity by the balls—”

“Gross, Vinny.”

“Okay, so you went out there to take this opportunity by the *ovaries*—better?”

“Not really.”

“*And* you did. Look how far you’ve gotten. They offered you a full-time job, Alex. That’s huge.”

“I know.”

“I know you know, so stop. Stop talking about quitting. Stop talking about how it isn’t worth it, because it is. You deserve this. I know you have a hard time believing that, and, trust me, I get it. It’s not like we grew up with an abundance of people believing in us or whatever, but you deserve this, okay? You deserve this opportunity. You worked so fucking hard to get it, so you’re going to take it because you know you should. You know you want to. And you know Charlee wants you to take it too.”

“Charlee wants me to come home,” Alex said against her pillow, reaching up to rub at her burning eyes. “She wants me to come home.”

“Yeah, she does, and that’s because she loves you, but she also wants you to succeed. She wants you to take this opportunity—”

“By the ovaries.”

“—by the fucking ovaries, that’s right, and she wants you to have your dreams. And Alex?”

“Yeah?”

“That, too, is because she loves you.”

“I’m going to lose her.” Alex’s chest ached so hard at the thought that she had to physically press her hand to it. “I’m going to lose her, Vinny, and I don’t think I can bear it.”

“Do you know what I think?”

“That I’m being childish?”

“No,” Vinny said with a soft laugh. “I think life has a way of surprising us. I never thought I’d find my family, you know. Especially not with some scrawny kid who punched a grown man in the face for trying to touch me. I never thought I’d have anyone to love, Alex, but I have you, and you have me, and I think that’s just the way it was meant to be. It’s the same with you and Charlee.”

Alex buried herself farther into her sticky pillow and rubbed at her eyes again. They ached like they would flood any second, but she didn’t think she had any more tears in her to give. She whispered into the phone. “Meant to be?”

“Meant to be.”



This is, without a doubt, the most painfully awkward situation Charlee has ever been in, and that includes the time she and Alex got caught hiding in an empty campus art studio with their hands *literally* down each other’s pants. Still, this dinner—it’s worse. Much worse.

Restaurant patrons murmur to one another, having quiet conversations that seem to go on seamlessly, but at *their* table—nothing. Silence endures, interrupted only by the scraping, squeaking sounds of forks against plates and teeth. Charlee’s skin crawls. Already on her third glass of wine, she’s desperate for it to be over so she can run home, bury her head in her pillow, and scream until her voice gives out.

Why, *why*, had she agreed to this?

Oh, right—because she felt guilty about the awkward situation at the gallery, about the elephant-in-the-room painting that had only made the situation worse. Well, that and because Chris had accepted the offer before Charlee even had the chance to open her mouth to decline.

Charlee glances over at Alex. She can’t stop herself. Every ten seconds like clockwork. She glances up, and as if she can feel her gaze, Alex looks up too. Their eyes meet for a brief moment before they both go back to staring at their plates, back to the tense silence that has turned this dinner into the exact opposite of what it was meant to be.

Kari had suggested they could get to know one another. Yet, here they are, eating in the same uncomfortable silence that has persisted since they were shown to their table.

Chris clears his throat. It shakes Charlee from her thoughts. Closing her eyes, she prays he’ll suck that sound right back down and decide that attempting conversation isn’t something he really wants to do after all. She wants this awful silence to send them flying straight toward the end of this disaster as quickly as possible. Any interruption is only going to slow the process.

“Food’s good,” he says, receiving nothing more than two courtesy smiles from Alex and Kari and a barely contained groan from Charlee.

“So, Alex.” He tries again. “You and Charlee used to date, huh?”

The urge to slide off her chair and hide under the table has never been stronger. She has to physically force herself not to. She’s partway to convincing herself no one would notice if she scurried out from under the table like a rat and made a break for it. Then again, she can already feel Alex’s glare boring into her face as if she can read her thoughts and is silently screaming something along the lines of *don’t you fucking dare, Charlee Parker!*

Alex downs a gulp of wine so large it looks painful to swallow and plasters on a smile that almost makes Charlee laugh. “Yes,” she says, and that’s all she gives—one short, clipped word that, to anyone other than Chris, would have read loud and clear as the warning it was.

Chris, however, merely nods and carries on. “How long were you two together?”

“Four years.”

Chris chokes on the piece of shrimp he’d only just popped into his mouth.

Alex’s voice drones as she arches a brow and says, “Are you all right?”

Practically guzzling her wine, Charlee gives Chris one good, hard smack on the back. “Yeah, sorry,” he says, coughing. “I just wasn’t expecting that. That’s a long time.”

“It surprised me as well,” Kari says.

Chris releases an awkward, gruff laugh that makes Charlee’s eye twitch. “Well, I guess it’s nice we can all be friends,” he says, and Charlee snorts into her now-empty glass of wine.

When Alex looks up at her at the sound, Charlee can only shrug and try not to burst into laughter. This dinner is so awkward it borders on painful, and Charlee can feel the heat of her buzz flushing her cheeks, steadily sapping away her ability to give a fuck.

“Hopefully we can, yes,” Kari says, and Charlee snorts again. Louder this time.

She feels a hard kick to her shin under the table, a kick she knows came from Alex, but she really can’t bring herself to care. This is a goddamned train wreck.

Chris pats her knee, but he doesn’t otherwise acknowledge her behavior. In fact, no one does. They simply carry on with their dinner and their stilted conversation as if Charlee isn’t there at all.

“So, how did you two meet?” Chris asks, and Charlee can no longer keep quiet.

“Oh, let me tell this!” Charlee beams as she reaches for her glass only to remember that it’s empty. She shrugs and reaches for Chris’s instead, taking one big gulp before launching into her story.



Charlee was cutting it close. She only had ten minutes to get parked and find her way to the right building before orientation was set to begin. She would’ve gotten there sooner, but traffic had been awful, which she also could’ve avoided had she not had to drive. But all of her stuff was in her car, since she was moving into her dorm after orientation.

A cherry-red Camaro was backing out of a space in the already packed parking lot just as Charlee turned in, the first fortunate thing to happen to her all morning. Her midnight-blue Mustang roared as Charlee whipped into the parking lot and into the free space as soon as the Camaro cleared it.

Slinging her backpack over one shoulder, she turned off the car and climbed out.

“Get back in your car!”

Charlee whirled on the spot and came face-to-face with a tall, leggy brunette with wild curly hair and stunning eyes, green like a sprawling forest. Only, at that moment, the forest was on fire. Charlee blinked. “What?” She blurted the response. “Me?”

“Yes, you! Get back in your car, put it in reverse, and get out of my spot!” As soon as the words were out, the girl bit her lip and shifted on her feet. Visibly uncomfortable. She then sharply added,

“*Please.*”

“Your spot?” Charlee toyed with the strap of her backpack with one hand and used the other to smooth out a wrinkle in her gray university T-shirt. “Um, I’m pretty sure there aren’t reserved or assigned spots in this lot. It’s public parking.”

“I know that, but I was waiting for this spot because the rest of the lot is full.”

“Well, I didn’t see you.” Charlee shrugged. “But I really don’t have time to move my car. I’m going to be late for orientation, so I need to go. I’m sure you can find another spot. Sorry.”

She started to walk by, but the other girl blocked her path. “You didn’t see me? You didn’t *see* me? Are you serious?”

For some reason, even in her anger, Charlee found the girl charming—something about her bushy hair and bright eyes, the way her skinny legs couldn’t seem to keep still. Something about the annoyed little *please* she added onto her earlier demand. It almost made Charlee laugh, and she couldn’t help but to want to push her buttons a bit. “I mean, that’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“I know you saw me sitting here.” She pointed to her beat-up teal Sunfire, old and dented, but very clean. A medallion hung from the rearview mirror, catching the sun as it swiveled in place. “With my blinker on. Waiting for this spot. I know you did!”

“You’re like three cars down. How was I supposed to know you were waiting for this spot?”

“I was giving the guy space to get out!”

“That’s a lot of space,” Charlee said, and the girl looked on the verge of exploding.

“Look, I waited seven full minutes for this spot,” she said, “because the idiot in the Camaro had to sit in his car and, I don’t know, text someone a freaking novel or something before he finally decided to move.” She rolled her eyes so dramatically it looked painful, and Charlee suppressed a smile. “And *I’m* going to be late for orientation too. So I’m sorry, but I don’t care what *you’ve* got going on. I was here first. I waited. This spot is mine, so move your damned car!” The girl huffed at her, blowing hair out of her face, and then, again, tacked on another annoyed little *please*.

“Wow,” Charlee said, unable to stop the smile from blooming this time. “And I thought *I* had a rough morning.” She jingled her keys at the girl. “I’m moving it, okay? Take a breath.”

“Thank you!” She turned to head back to her own car, mumbling loud enough for Charlee to hear her. “Of course I have to get stuck waiting seven minutes for a spot only to have some rich, blonde ditz with a sports car think she can just take it. And I wouldn’t have even been late if Vinny hadn’t—”

“Did you just call me a ditz?”

The leggy brunette froze in place for a moment before spinning on her heel to face her. Charlee walked around her car to move into the girl’s space.

“Did you?”

All clenched jaw and hard eyes, the girl didn’t apologize but simply rested her hands on her hips and seemed to be silently daring Charlee to say something else, to prove her wrong.

Charlee glanced past her again and nodded toward the girl’s car. “That medal hanging from your mirror. Did you graduate with honors?”

The girl seemed surprised for a moment, stiffening and glancing toward her car before turning back to Charlee. She nodded. Brief. Ever annoyed. “Valedictorian,” she said, the word clipped.

“Looks a lot like the medal I got for having honors in all my subjects,” Charlee said pointedly. “I didn’t get valedictorian or salutatorian, but I was third in my class overall. But, you know, if that makes me a ditz, then sure, I guess I’m a ditz.”

When the other girl’s expression crumpled, Charlee knew she had her. “So maybe you’re not a ditz,” she conceded, though her body remained drawn up, still standing tall. “But you’re still incredibly rude.”

Charlee couldn’t help the laugh that worked its way up and out into the summer air. “You’re kind of an asshole,” she said, delighting in how the girl’s jaw dropped, “you know that?” Charlee shook her head as she let out another laugh. “A cute asshole, but an asshole nonetheless.”

She didn’t let the girl get a word in before climbing into her Mustang and backing out of the parking spot. She ended up being late for orientation, but Charlee thought maybe it was worth it. The cute asshole was there too, and Charlee noticed that she couldn’t seem to stop staring from across the room.



Charlee loses herself in the story a bit, laughing as she does her best to imitate Alex’s voice and body language in that first encounter. She smiles at the memory, as vivid as the day it happened, but when she snaps back to reality at the story’s end, her smile falls in seconds.

The table is silent once again. Everyone but Alex seems to be avoiding her gaze. Kari stares down at her plate, brows visibly arching toward her hairline as she shifts her food around with her fork, and Chris has taken to finishing the rest of his wine. There is such sadness in Alex’s eyes that Charlee can hardly bear to hold her gaze.

“What?” she blurts out, unable to hold it in. “You asked.”

Chris scratches at the back of his neck and says, “Uh, actually, babe, I was talking to Kari. I was asking her how *she* met Alex.”

Her entire body goes cold but for her burning cheeks. Her stomach drops as if she just went into free fall. For one hard, painful, *breathless* moment, Charlee’s afraid she might actually pass out.

“It’s fine, though,” Chris says, patting her knee again. “That was a funny story. I’m surprised you two ended up dating after that.”

The air suddenly feels hot, too hot. Charlee jumps from her seat, nearly knocking her chair to the ground. Her head spins from the alcohol in her system, and she can’t breathe. Everything’s rushing around her, warping in and out of focus, and it’s still too hot. Charlee stumbles from the table. She barely registers the sounds of both Chris and Alex calling out to her.

The cold stabs at her face, a relieving kind of pain as she staggers out of the restaurant and onto the busy city sidewalk. She gulps in great mouthfuls of the icy air, trying to force it down into her lungs, but it only sticks in her throat. Hardening. Choking her. Tears well in her eyes as she makes it to the curb and throws a hand in the air, flicking her wrist. She needs to get home. Needs to get away. Needs

to *breathe*.

A cab jumps from the busy street and pulls up. Charlee's fumbling with the door handle when arms suddenly close around her from behind and yank her back.

"Chris, let go." She gasps around the words. "I can't. I can't bre—"

"Charlee, *stop*."

She immediately stills at the sound of her name on Alex's tongue, at the realization that Alex's arms are around her instead of Chris's. She gasps even harder for air that just won't soothe. But she melts back into Alex's arms. "I can't," she says, wheezing. "I can't breathe."

"I know," Alex murmurs in her ear. "Listen to me. Focus on my voice."

"Alex, please."

Alex latches onto Charlee's hands from behind. "Listen to me," she says, holding Charlee's back against her chest and pressing the pads of their fingers together. "Can you feel my hands? How many fingers do I have, Charlee?"

"Ten," Charlee gasps out. "T-ten."

"Are you sure?" Alex taps her fingers against Charlee's again. "Count them for me."

Charlee forces in a shallow, useless breath and grabs Alex's thumbs first. "One," she says. "Two." The next breath comes a bit easier as she moves to Alex's index fingers. "Three." She sinks a bit more into Alex's chest. "Four."

"That's good." Alex's voice is soft and soothing, warm against Charlee's cheek in the cold night air. "Keep going."

The cab driver takes off before Charlee even makes it to seven, but she keeps her focus on Alex's fingers and Alex's voice—on counting and breathing. By the time she reaches ten, she's relaxed in Alex's arms. Though her chest is still aching, she can breathe deeply again.

Charlee collapses a little more, resting her head back against Alex's shoulder as if she has been drained. "Thank you."

"Yeah, thank you."

At the sudden sound of Chris's voice, Charlee and Alex jolt, stepping quickly apart from one another. He and Kari had apparently been lingering by the restaurant entrance, watching. He makes quick work of wrapping an arm around Charlee when Alex steps away.

"I've never seen that happen to her before," Chris says, rubbing her shoulder. "I wouldn't have known what to do. Thank you, really."

Alex doesn't say anything. She merely nods, and Charlee can't stop staring at her. She can't stop feeling the heat of Alex's chest, the warmth of her breath lingering on her neck, on her cheek, on her ear.

"Are you all right, Charlee?" Kari steps forward and loops her arm around Alex's waist. "I've had a few anxiety attacks before. I know how awful they can be."

"Yes." She is unable to fully meet Kari's gaze. "Thank you."

"We covered the bill," Chris says, holding up his arm to hail another cab. "I'm going to run her

home so she can rest, but, um, thanks for dinner, you two. We should do it again sometime.”

No, we definitely shouldn't. But Charlee doesn't say anything. She simply lets Chris lead her back to the curb when a new cab arrives. She glances up at Alex just as Chris rattles off her address to the cab driver, and her stomach bottoms out when the last thing she sees before the door shuts her inside is the widening of Alex's eyes—the realization sinking in.

Charlee's still living in their loft.



The third floor of the university library was mostly empty, the majority of shelves dominated by the Theatre and Arts collection. Mostly only drama nerds and artists found their way up there. The occasional sleeper grabbed one of the moth-eaten couches, though, which Charlee completely understood. Eight a.m. classes were designed by the devil.

She was browsing through the alphabetized shelves, looking for art collections that might spark a bit of inspiration for one of her first class projects, when she caught sight of a familiar bush of brown hair. Charlee felt a smile begin to form as she rounded the end of the aisle just in time to block the girl's path to one of the small private study rooms no one ever used. No one but this girl.

“Well, well, if it isn't the cute asshole who insulted me on my first day here.”

The girl startled at first, but then her full, pouty lips flattened into an uninterested line that only made Charlee's smile widen. She looked just as gorgeous as she had in the parking lot, all long legs and eyes like the forest. Just as annoyed too.

“Oh, the rude blonde who stole my spot,” the girl said. Charlee winked at her, eliciting an annoyed huff. “Have your feet been glued to the floor, or are you capable of moving?”

“What brings you up here?” Charlee couldn't stop grinning like an idiot. She tried, but her damned mouth just wouldn't cooperate. “Theatre student? Are you a theatre student? I bet you are. I can totally picture you on stage, giving some snobby, pretentious monologue to an audience that can't stop weeping over your elegant neck and sharp, dramatic voice. Tell me I'm right.”

“You're wrong.” She rolled her eyes. “Now, move.”

Moving out of the way, Charlee watched the girl enter the study room. She followed, but the door quickly closed in her face. Charlee laughed out loud, then clamped a hand over her mouth and glanced around. She was in a library. Predictably, the aisles were mostly empty. She didn't bother to knock before throwing open the door to the study room, stepping inside, and closing it behind her.

“That was rude,” she said, leaning against the door and looking over the pocket-sized room with its single wooden table and two small office chairs. Cushioned—nice. “We were talking.”

The other girl gaped at her for a moment before saying, “We weren't, actually. *You* were talking. I was hoping you would disappear so I could study.”

“First week of school and already so serious. That's cute.”

“You realize that's the third time you've called me cute since we met, right?”

“We're getting serious. I'm thinking of taking you to meet my mom.”

“She wouldn't approve.” Her mouth tugged up at the corners with an easy smile, and Charlee's

stomach flipped. The girl was beautiful when she scowled and stunning when she smiled. Even that small hint was like sunshine, making Charlee feel warm all over.

“You’d grow on her. You’re growing on me.”

“You seem to be growing on me as well, like a fungus. I should seek medical attention.”

“Nah, let me grow,” Charlee said, still grinning so widely it nearly hurt, but she didn’t care. “Let me live. You might like how I look when I’m covering your body.”

“Wow.”

“I know.” Charlee’s cheeks burned. “I can’t believe I just said that.”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“Well, that depends. Would you be susceptible to me flirting with you? Because if yes, then yes. If not, then no, I am absolutely *not* flirting with you.”

The brunette rolled her eyes again, despite the slightest hint of a laugh escaping her. It made Charlee’s heart race. “What do you want?”

“Well, obviously, I want you to get out.” At the girl’s shocked expression, Charlee said, “It’s just that I’ve been waiting for this study room for seven minutes. *Seven* full minutes, okay? And I know you saw me. I was here first. I waited. So you need to get the hell out.”

The girl’s lips pursed as though she was trying to hold back another laugh, but it broke free a moment later, and Charlee felt like she was floating on the sound of it. “I can keep going.”

“Please don’t.” She didn’t offer a verbal apology, but regret was clear in her eyes. Fleeting, certainly, but it was there. “What do you *really* want?”

“I can’t just want to get to know you?”

“No, you can’t.”

Charlee still felt like she was floating as she crossed the short space between them and dropped her art books on the table. She then squatted beside the girl’s chair and looked up at her. “In that case, I’ll just say this: I’m Charlee Parker, and I really want to paint you.”

“What?” Her voice went high-pitched, and her eyebrows knitted together. “Why?”

“Because even though you’re an asshole, I wasn’t kidding about your elegant neck.” Charlee searched the girl’s questioning eyes, her stomach fluttering with every word. “I think you’re beautiful.”

She was stunned for a moment, silent and gaping. When she spoke again, her voice escaped in a murmur so soft and disbelieving it made Charlee ache. “You think I’m beautiful?”

Charlee hesitated only a second before she reached out and lightly rested a hand over the girl’s knee. “*So* beautiful.”

It was a surprisingly tense moment, heavy, like they suddenly knew each other, like they were seeing each other in a new way. And Charlee expected it to break. Those sudden heavy moments always did. They were just too much to endure for most people, so they shattered around awkward laughter, clearing throats, or turning heads. She expected her hand to be shoved away any second now, expected the girl to laugh at her or ask her to leave.

She was caught completely off guard when, instead, the other girl leaned forward, nearly falling out

of her chair in the process, and pressed her lips to Charlee's. It was only a quick, gentle kiss, one that clearly surprised them both. They separated only seconds later, and Charlee searched the girl's green eyes for any hint of regret.

It wasn't there.

Instead, she saw shock and wonder, a touch of embarrassment, a spark of thrill. That same wide smile blasted again across Charlee's lips. She leaned in, stretched up on her toes, and claimed another kiss. Her heart raced. It was as if this one touch, rapidly escalating, was the first, or maybe even the best, impulsive thing she had ever done in her life, and, well, Charlee was living for it.

There was something so intoxicating about the kiss. They both sank into it. A moan vibrated into Charlee's mouth, and Charlee clamped her thighs together. She rose to her feet, wrapping her arms around the girl's waist as she drew her up with her and pinned her against the wall. One hand slid up to curl into her hair, and Charlee wedged her thigh between skinny legs.

They broke the connection for only a moment, panting and staring at one another, and Charlee thought it was over. Surely this beautiful stranger would put a stop to whatever the hell was happening between them, this strange, spur-of-the-moment magic, but she didn't. Instead, she reached for Charlee's hand and brought it to the top of her jeans.

"This is stupid," she said against Charlee's lips, breathless.

Charlee nodded. "Maybe."

"I don't know you."

"I'm amazing. I promise." Charlee planted another kiss on her lips. "And also, you know, a dork."

"This is stupid," the girl said again, still holding Charlee's hand at the top of her jeans. She was smiling now, though, smiling as she muttered into the minimal space between their lips. "Stupid and reckless and *stupid*."

"We can stop, uh..." Charlee wanted to say her name, but then she remembered she didn't even know it, so she just bit her lip and repeated herself. "We can stop."

The girl stared at her for one long, heated moment, her gaze flitting back and forth between Charlee's eyes and lips. She licked her own before saying, "My name is Alex," as if she knew it was what Charlee was searching for. She then popped open the button on her jeans and pushed Charlee's fingers down into her underwear. "And I don't want to stop."

When Charlee dipped inside Alex for the first time, she already knew she didn't want it to be the last.

CHAPTER 5

“NO WAY. YOU’RE MAKING THIS shit up.”

“I’m not.” Alex hustles down the street toward her office. “I couldn’t make this up if I tried, Vinny.”

“You forget I knew you as a kid. You used to get away with the most ridiculous lies.”

“I’m not lying.” Alex tucks her head down against the cold breeze. “My life is a cruel joke.”

“You seriously went to one of Charlee’s art shows without knowing it was *her* art show?”

“Yes.”

“You actually expect me to believe you didn’t know it was her art show?”

“No, Vinaya, you’re absolutely right,” Alex says, droning. “I willfully planned to take my girlfriend to my *ex*-girlfriend’s art show so we could mutually admire a giant painting of my naked ass together.” She tossed a hand in the air as she carried on. “But why stop there? Why not proceed to have the world’s most awkward dinner, ending in my ex-girlfriend having a panic attack, which I heroically swoop in to soothe away while my *current* girlfriend and my ex-girlfriend’s *boyfriend* stand by and observe?”

A hard laugh shakes through the line. “Okay, okay,” Vinny says. “I get it. You can’t make this up. But holy hell.”

“I know.”

“That’s some seriously mortifying shit, Alex.”

“That’s what I’m trying to communicate to you, yes.”

“Like, that’s worse than the time Charlee’s art professor caught you guys in that studio, screwing.”

Alex stops at the crosswalk and jabs the button. “This conversation is making me hate you.”

“This conversation’s making my life.” Vinny laughs again, deep and echoing. Alex suspects she is holding her belly. Or rolling on the floor. “I mean, this is some grade-A fuckery.”

Alex tugs her beanie down to cover more of her forehead as she crosses the street. “Can we move on from your shock and amazement, please?”

“Why can’t you and Charlee ever do anything like normal people? You throw down in a parking lot the day you meet. Then you screw in a library, because ‘we just clicked, Vinaya.’” The voice she uses to mimic Alex is drawling and painfully accurate, and Alex wants to hate her for it, but it only makes her smile. “And then a year later, you’re telling me she’s the love of your little gay life and moving into a shitty loft with a perverted alien on the wall.”

“Which she’s apparently still living in,” Alex says, licking her chapped lips and shaking her head. “I heard her boyfriend give the cab driver the address.” Vinny suddenly goes quiet, and Alex feels like a weight has just dropped in her stomach. She stops in her tracks. “Did you *know*?”

“Alex, listen, I—”

“No, Vinaya, tell me you didn’t *know* Charlee was still in the city,” Alex says. “Tell me you didn’t know she was still living in our—” She stops, closes her eyes for a moment. “In *that* loft. I need to hear you say it.”

“Would it be so bad if I knew? It wouldn’t have changed anything.”

Alex blinks, stunned. “Have you been *talking* to her? Did you stay in touch with her all this time?”

“No,” Vinny says. “Well, for a while, but not all this time, no. We haven’t talked in a long time, and I haven’t seen her since she asked me to stop coming around. You know that. I’ve just been keeping tabs on her. Mostly just making sure she’s okay from a distance. It’s not like we’ve been going out every weekend, Alex.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you never would have gotten your shit together if you knew. You would’ve just obsessed over it and asked me a million questions every time we talked, and you wouldn’t have been able to live.”

Alex leans against the brick wall of a random building. “I can’t believe you kept in touch with her.”

“If you can even call it that. I don’t think an occasional random text really counts as keeping in touch.”

“Still.”

“You kept in touch with Gabby all this time. She calls you every Wednesday, and Charlee doesn’t even know about that.”

“That’s different. The woman is practically my adoptive mother.”

“Yeah, well, Charlee is practically my sister.”

The words hit Alex like a punch to the gut, and her own words to Kari come rushing back to her. *Family*. They’d been a family—she, Charlee, Vinny, Cam, and Charlee’s parents. She and Charlee hadn’t been the only ones who lost something.



Alex and Charlee leaned tiredly against each other as they sat at the Parker family cabin’s kitchen island, watching Gabby flip pancakes on a massive skillet. The radio on the kitchen counter churned out old classic tunes, and the sun beat through the window over the kitchen sink. It was the second day of the family vacation they’d agreed to take with Charlee’s parents, and they hadn’t gone to bed until nearly three in the morning. Charlee had been too excited about the sky and how visible the stars were away from the city, and Alex had been too excited about Charlee’s excitement to drag her inside to bed.

“Why are we awake?”

Charlee yawned. “Pancakes.”

“It’s ten o’clock,” Gabby said, shaking her head at them. “You two act like the sun just came up.”

“And it’s not our fault you stayed up all night whispering sweet nothings to each other under the stars.” Charlee’s dad came down the stairs, sandy-blond hair sticking up in places. He looked so like Charlee, the same round cheeks and blue eyes. His hair was just a bit lighter than hers, but they

had the same cleft chin and the same sense of humor. Charlee's button nose and gentle smile were all Gabby, though. Alex's chest warmed with a sad sort of pleasantness: she had never looked in the mirror and seen anyone's features but her own. She could hardly remember her parents at all.

"They were definitely sweet *some things*, Dad." Charlee waggled her eyebrows.

Alex blinked. The warmth in her chest spread to her cheeks, and she pinched Charlee's side. It drew a wild laugh.

Drew stopped at the island to drop a kiss to Charlee's head. "Good morning, sweet pea."

"Morning, Dad."

Moving over to Alex, he kissed the top of her head as well. "Good morning, sweeter pea."

Alex laughed at Charlee's offended gasp. "Good morning, Drew."

"Why is Alex the sweeter pea?" Charlee tugged at Alex's hair as she leaned back into her chest. She pulled Alex's arms around her even as she glared at her dad from across the kitchen. He'd already moved to wrap his own arms around his wife.

"Good morning, sweetest pea," he said before planting a kiss on Gabby's lips. He ran a hand over her shoulder-length brown hair, copper tones catching the light from the window, and kissed her again. He then popped a blueberry from a bowl by the stove into his mouth and leaned against the counter, facing the girls. He grinned at Charlee. "You know Alex is the sweeter one."

"It's true," Gabby said. "She's so well mannered."

Charlee laughed. "It's all an act, you guys. She's mean, Dad. So mean."

"I am not."

"Are too."

"I was mean to you one time, and I'm not even sure it qualifies as being mean."

"It qualifies."

"You called me a douche canoe three days ago over a bag of potato chips. I don't even know what that is, but I'm pretty sure I didn't deserve it."

"You finished the bag before I got home!"

"I was *hungry*."

"I can't wait for you two to get married," Drew said. "I can see Alex now on family vacations, coming down the stairs with her hair flowing around her in that movie wind that seems to follow her everywhere she goes."

Charlee let out a loud bark of laughter. "Seriously, though. How do you do that with your hair?"

"Maybe she's born with it," Drew said.

"Maybe it's Maybelline," Charlee countered, and Alex had to fight to suppress a smile.

"That's makeup, Charlee," Alex said. "Not hair products."

"Whatever. It's magical."

"You'll come down the stairs, hair blowing, and then..." Drew put on his best imitation of Alex's voice. "Good morning, Father-in-Law, Mother-in-Law."

Gabby joined him, adopting the same voice. "What a sufficiently enjoyable day we are having,

wouldn't you say?"

Snorting, Alex grabbed a plum from the fruit bowl on the island. She chucked it at Gabby and Drew. Charlee threw her hands in the air and cheered when it smacked Drew in the head and left a stain of purple juice behind.

Gabby squealed as Drew grabbed the plum from the floor and tried to rub it on her face, but just as she ducked away from him, the song on the radio changed, and Drew whirled on the spot. The beginning notes of The Temptations' "My Girl" floated from the speakers.

Cranking the volume up, Drew shouted, "Come on, kiddo. It's our song." He darted around the island, dragged Charlee up from her chair, and immediately began twirling her around.

They danced wildly and without rhythm, silly and out of sync. Drew spun Charlee around and dipped her to loud shrieks of "Don't drop me!" Alex laughed. She'd seen this so many times now, but it never failed to touch her.

This was what family was. This was what it was supposed to feel like.

When the song died down, Charlee slung her arms around her dad's middle. "Love you, Dad."

"I love you too, Charlee," he said, patting her back. "More than all the stars in the sky."

Another upbeat song followed, and Drew grabbed Alex from her seat. "Your turn, kiddo!"

Alex could only laugh and try to stay on her feet as he spun her around and around, Gabby and Charlee watching from the kitchen with identical grins.



Charlee shakes the water from a bundle of large spinach leaves before placing it in her bag and passing the vendor some cash. She loves the farmers market, especially this one. It's always so lively and open year-round, though only on Wednesdays and Saturdays in the off-season.

Bundled-up street musicians line the spaces just outside the massive awning. They fill the air with music, and Charlee hums along to a few classic songs she recognizes. She gently swings her bag to keep from swaying her hips and makes her way down to the next stall. She nearly drops the small container of garlic cloves she's just purchased when she glances up to see a familiar figure hunched over a row of potted plants.

Bent at the waist, Alex buries her nose in the soft petals of a bright blue flower, and Charlee can't help staring. Alex's slender figure appears graceful, no matter her position. It always has. Her hair hangs over one shoulder in large, loose curls, and her long lashes flutter as she closes her eyes and smiles. Something stirs in Charlee's gut and flutters between her ribs, aches in her fingers. She itches to put the image to canvas. Her feet move without command, closing the distance between them in seconds.

"You always had a weakness for flowers."

Alex stiffens, jerking up quickly and turning to face her. "Charlee."

Charlee closes her eyes at the sound of her name coated in Alex's soft, lovely voice. It feels like all the best parts of their past winding through the air around them in two short syllables.

"Hi."

"Hey."

Charlee glances around for a sign of Kari. When she doesn't see her, she says, "Just you today?"

"She's sleeping," Alex says. "She has a deadline and was up all night working."

"Oh."

"She's a writer."

Charlee nods. "So, *some* dinner, huh?"

"Some disaster." Alex's eyes soften as she looks Charlee over, and Charlee has the most immense urge to step into her space, to hold her the way she'd been held at the curb. She wonders if Alex would still feel safe and loved in her arms the way Charlee felt in hers.

"Thank you, by the way," Charlee says, "for what you did for me. I haven't had an anxiety attack since, well, you know. Since after Dad died."

"I'm glad the counting still helps."

"I'm surprised you remembered that."

"No, you're not," Alex says with a slight smile.

Point. She had helped Charlee through every attack during that awful year. "Is it weird that—"

"Do you want to—"

Stopping midsentence, they laugh, and Alex says, "Go ahead."

"I was just going to ask if you think it's weird we keep bumping into each other."

"It's been nearly two weeks since the dinner."

"Still, it's a huge city, you know."

Alex ducks her head a bit. "I think our places will always be our places, and I think we're always going to gravitate toward them. It's unavoidable."

Charlee nods again and sighs. "Yeah."

"Do you want to shop together?" The uncertainty in Alex's eyes is clear, barely masking a glimmer of hope. "Would that be—"

"Inappropriate?" When Alex nods, Charlee shrugs. "I don't think so. We're friends. Well, we *can* be friends."

"We can?"

A sad smile paints Charlee's lips, the words burning inside her. "I hope so."

"Okay."

"Okay."

They fall into step together. It feels as natural as breathing—being with Alex again, walking through the farmers market together as they used to. Conversation comes easily, and all the little ways they know each other, the ways they've *always* known each other, begin to jump out at Charlee like signs she can't ignore.

They fit.

Alex leads them by the homemade-soap stalls without stopping, and without even a word, shifts to the opposite side of the lane so Charlee doesn't have to draw too near. There are always too many lotions and soaps made with eucalyptus, and Charlee's allergic. Even the smell makes her eyes itch.

At the refreshments stand, Charlee orders an additional coffee for Alex, then asks the cashier if the creamer is liquid or powder, because she knows Alex doesn't like the latter. When the cashier confirms powdered creamer, Charlee asks for two packets of sugar instead and stirs them in for Alex before passing the drink along. She doesn't miss the way Alex looks at her, searching. *Knowing*.

When Alex attempts to put her hair in a ponytail, only to have her hair band snap, Charlee merely laughs and hands over one of the two bands she keeps on her left wrist. She'd always worn an extra for Alex, a habit she still hasn't broken.

They still fit after all this time.

As they near the market entrance in their third loop, Alex says, "You kept the loft."

Charlee chokes on her coffee and has to force it down, coughing until her throat clears. She turns to Alex, not sure what to say or how to explain, so she sticks with being simple, being honest. "I couldn't let it go."

"And you live there now with Chris?"

"No. He doesn't live with me. He stays over sometimes, but we don't live together. I couldn't share that place with anyone else."

"But you do," Alex says. "He stays over, so you do."

Charlee shakes her head. She doesn't launch into a complete explanation. She can't. It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be fair. There are too many things she shouldn't—couldn't—reveal. So instead she says, "You don't understand." Alex arches a brow at her. "There are just some things you don't know."

Alex remains silent as if waiting for Charlee to continue, waiting for her to tell her all the things she apparently doesn't know. It isn't going to happen. It can't. Eventually, Alex simply nods and says, "Okay."

They pass the market entrance again, and the music from the street performers drifts over. Charlee stills in place as the familiar opening of "My Girl" touches her ears and sends her heart plummeting into her stomach. It's been years since her father's death, but this song still chokes her up. Her eyes water as an image of him, his smile wide as he reaches out to her, fills her mind.

She jumps when hands clasp onto hers, and Charlee blinks hard. She looks down, part of her expecting to find her father's hands gripping her. Instead, she finds Alex's slender fingers tangled with her own. Green eyes are rife with sorrow and understanding, and Charlee has to take a breath, blink away building tears.

Alex sets aside their bags before reaching for Charlee again. She braces one hand on her waist and uses it to send her twirling. Charlee stumbles around before winding back toward Alex, and she understands what is happening. The tears she fought away come flooding back.

The cold air doesn't seem cold at all as Alex leads Charlee into a wild, offbeat dance, messy and ridiculous. They step on each other's feet more often than not, but Charlee finds herself laughing through tears as Alex spins and dips her and reminds her of all the reasons she always knew Alex was the one.

They dance like they're the only two there, like the world has narrowed around them and there's only music and only them. When the musicians wind down the song, their dance burns out to a slow sway, Alex's hands on Charlee's hips and Charlee's arms looped under Alex's long hair. Charlee's face is buried against her neck.

"He still loves you," Alex says, a whisper. "More than all the stars in the sky."

Charlee shudders, and fresh tears fall as she grips Alex harder. Nudging closer is a nearly unconscious action, Alex's familiar scent driving Charlee to burrow in deeper. "Thank you," she says as her hand glides up the other side of Alex's neck and braces there. Charlee closes her eyes and lets her lips just barely dust over warm flesh.

The hands at her waist clench, dig in. Alex's chest heaves out against hers, and Charlee's eyes snap open at the feeling. She jerks back.

"I'm sorry," she says immediately, stepping out of Alex's embrace and running a hand through her hair. "Oh my God. I'm so sorry, Alex. I just, um—you were comforting me, and I—"

"Got caught up in the moment," Alex says. Her eyes are wide, glossy, and Charlee can't hold her gaze. "It's okay."

"No, it's not."

"It's not, but it has to be." Alex grabs her bag from the ground and tilts her head away. In some direction. Toward her car, her house, Charlee doesn't know. "I should—"

"Go," Charlee says, nodding. "Yeah, me too."

They linger only a moment longer, Charlee shuffling in place and Alex tangling her fingers together around the strap of her bag. Then Charlee clears her throat, turns, and forces herself to walk away.



"I don't think this is a good idea," Alex says as she looks over her outfit in the mirror. Black jeans, shredded to hell, run the length of her long legs and disappear into her tall boots. The loose button-up she wears hangs open at the bottom, and she keeps the sleeves rolled above her elbows. Her hair is brushed back away from her face, braids running through it and down her back. She knows she looks good. But that might be the problem.

"Too bad." Vinny yanks on one of Alex's braids as she flits by her to grab a few pieces of jewelry from the top of her dresser. "Besides, Kari said it was okay for you to go."

"Kari *said* it was okay. That doesn't mean Kari actually *thinks* it's okay."

"Well, then, she should say what she really thinks." Vinny fastens a silver triple-chain necklace behind her neck. "You already agreed, so you're going. And you *know* you want to go."

"You don't think that me and Charlee, an unlimited amount of booze, and a body-packed dance floor in a dark bar makes for a dangerous combination?"

"I think I don't care," Vinny says. "Because, one, we both need a night out, and, two, I want to see Charlee. It really isn't fair that you've gotten to spend time with her and I haven't. I want to see Cam too. I haven't seen her since my car broke down last year."

Alex narrows her eyes. "You told me you took it to Jiffy Lube."

"Well, I lied."

“She isn’t even a mechanic.”

“Doesn’t mean she can’t do an oil change,” Vinny says. “She might design theater sets for a living, but the girl can fix basically anything you put in front of her. She’s a freakin’ genius.”

Alex groans, and Vinny throws her wallet to her from across the room. Catching it with ease, she shoves it into her back pocket. “Are you trying to ruin my relationship? Is that why we’re doing this?”

“No, why? Are you saying it would be *that* easy to ruin? Just put you in a bar with Charlee and then game over? Because if that’s the case, Alex, then you should probably rethink your relationship anyway.”

Alex winces at the words, taking them for what they are—a slap in the face. “Fine.” She turns her back to her smirking sister and makes her way toward the door. “Let’s just go.”



“I still can’t believe that happened,” Vinny says as she passes a third round of shots around their booth. They’re tucked into a corner booth of an old bar they used to frequent together in Back Bay. “I’m partly convinced this is just some elaborate shit you two made up.”

“Why would we make up stories to embarrass ourselves?” Alex throws back her shot, already having a good time. There’s an ease among them that saps the tension away in seconds and helps her relax. She falls back into the group like she was made for it—they were all made for it—and it’s almost as if no time has passed at all, almost as if she never left.

“It happened,” Cam says. “Well, the gallery thing did. I was there for that. It was painful. They could be lying about the dinner, though. I wouldn’t know because I wasn’t invited.”

Charlee holds her hand up at the passing server and orders another round of shots before turning back to Cam. “You should be thanking us for that.”

“Never.”

“Anyway, we aren’t lying. It happened. The world’s most uncomfortable double date.” Charlee swallows down the drink in front of her. She’s situated between Vinny and Cam in the circular booth with Alex on Vinny’s opposite side, almost directly across from her. The lime she stuffs in her mouth muffles her speech as she points to Vinny’s chest and says, “I swear on your nipple rings.”

With a bark of laughter, Vinny slings an arm around Charlee’s neck. “I’ve missed you.”

Smiling, Charlee spits out the lime and smacks a loud, wet kiss to Vinny’s cheek. “I’ve missed you, too, Vin.”

“Yeah, well, we all know Vinaya missed *me* more than anyone.”

Alex nudges Vinny’s arm. “Why don’t you get onto *Camila* about calling you Vinaya?”

“Because you only call her Vinaya when you’re annoyed,” Charlee says, laughing.

“And *I* say it with love,” Cam says. “Anyway, she missed me the most. In fact, *everyone* missed me the most. Alex missed me the most. Vin missed me the most. Even Charlee misses me when we’re apart for too long.”

Alex wads up a napkin and throws it at Cam’s head. “Maybe you should skip the next round of shots. Your ego is drunk.”

“*Or—*” Cam swats the napkin away “—maybe I should get an *extra* round of shots since I’m clearly everyone’s favorite.”

When the next round arrives, they all tap their glasses on the table before clinking them together and swallowing down the clear liquid. Alex pops a lime into her mouth afterward and tries not to gawk at the way Charlee licks along the lines of her lips like she’s trying to savor the flavor.

They drink until their eyeballs are practically floating, and Cam drags Vinny out into the small stretch of open space that a few drunk lovers have turned into a dance floor. The air seems to buzz in their absence, Charlee and Alex left alone to stare at one another, heavy-lidded and grinning like fools.

“How did we end up agreeing to let them take us out, only to watch them get drunk and dry-hump to oldies rock?”

Alex shakes her head. “You’re just as drunk as they are.”

“I’m not slurring yet, so I’m good.”

“You just slurred the word *slurring*,” Alex says, and Charlee bursts into loud laughter.

“Shut up!” She dips her fingers into her drink and flicks the liquid at Alex from across the table.

“You’ve had just as many drinks as me. How drunk are *you*?”

“Do you want me to scale it?”

“One to ten.”

“Twelve.”

“No way!” Charlee pops another lime in her mouth, sucks on it for a moment, and spits it out again. Narrowing her eyes, she points at Alex. “If you were a twelve, you’d be hitting on me by now.”

Alex’s stomach coils up at the words, and she clamps her thighs closed under the table. “You wore those jeans on purpose.”

Charlee’s tongue swirls around the slim straw in her drink like she’s playing with it—deliberate and undeniably sexy. “Yes, I did,” she says, her voice laced in both amusement and pride.

“That’s mean.” Alex frowns, jutting out her bottom lip. She’s pouting, but she can’t help herself. Her body feels hot and floaty, and Charlee’s just as intoxicating as the liquor in Alex’s system. She always has been. “And that top too. That’s *not* a winter top, Charlee. That’s a mean, *mean* top.”

“You have, like, *two* buttons fastened on your entire shirt, so you don’t get to talk about being mean.”

“Yours is meaner.”

“How is mine meaner?”

“Because your boobs are bigger,” Alex says, trying not to look down as soon as she says it, but her gaze shoots straight to Charlee’s chest and then back up to find Charlee grinning at her. Evil, that woman. *Evil*. “And just *better*.” One more glance. “And, you know, *right there*.”

Alex quickly downs one of two shots set in front of her, nearly choking herself. The liquid gurgles at the back of her throat when she speaks again. “So yeah, meaner.”

“It’s only mean if you’re looking.” The words make Alex want to scream. “*Are* you looking?”

She takes a deep breath through her nose, the bitter scent of her second shot wafting up into her

nostrils. She uses it as a distraction, clearing her throat and kicking back her whiskey, letting the alcohol burn its way down her squirming insides. She doesn't answer Charlee's question, because they both know the damned answer anyway. Instead, she waves her hand at a passing server, holds up two fingers. One for her. One for Charlee.

"Two more?" Charlee arches a brow at Alex. "Liquid courage. I guess you *are* looking."

"Stop, Charlee," Alex says, staring her down.

She laughs but nods. "Okay. I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."

"I know." As soon as the words are out of her mouth, Charlee stands and sways a bit on her feet.

"Where are you going?"

"Bathroom," she shouts over the noise of the packed bar, then smiles dangerously. "Wanna come?"

Alex gapes at her. Her mouth closes and opens again, but no words come out. Charlee doesn't wait for an answer. She just turns and starts toward the back of the bar.

"Fuck." Alex buries her face in her hands, her stomach curling into knots. "Fuck. *Fuck.*"

When she slides out of the booth and takes off after Charlee, body hot with the alcohol coursing through her system, her legs shake with every step. She keeps moving, though, and not once does she consider going back.

She finds Charlee near the front of a short line waiting for the bathroom. It's a tiny room. One toilet. One sink. One door that thankfully locks. So there is *always* a line. She brushes past people, ignoring their protests, and steps in line beside Charlee. Her hand curls around Charlee's waist as if it has a mind of its own, and Charlee is warm beneath her fingertips.

She doesn't say anything when Alex touches her, and she doesn't pull away. When Alex looks over at her, Charlee only bites her bottom lip and keeps her eyes focused on the bathroom door.

Once inside, Alex closes the door behind them, and Charlee stumbles over to the toilet. She drops her pants and lets out a raspy laugh as she sits down.

"What's so funny?"

"How long's it been since you've had to listen to me pee?"

Alex rolls her eyes but says nothing, her arms crossed over her chest and her body drawn tight with anticipation. She can barely breathe.

Charlee nearly falls over when she stands again, and Alex shoots to her side. Her hands run down the length of Charlee's legs and latch on to the top of her jeans and underwear before slowly tugging them up to Charlee's waist again. The action's too close and too intimate. It brings their chests together, their faces only inches apart.

"Thanks," Charlee says, but Alex can't focus on anything but the proximity of Charlee's mouth, the way her hands are still gripping Charlee's hips. The way *Charlee's* hands fold over her shoulders, thumbs rubbing along Alex's collarbones.

They breathe hotly together, unmoving, before Charlee abruptly lets go and slinks around Alex to get to the sink. She washes up and exits the bathroom, leaving Alex, scrambled and overheated, to

follow. The long hallway at the back of the bar seems to stretch on forever as Alex chases after her, and when she catches up, Charlee looks over at her and smiles.

Alex's lips have barely begun to tilt up when Charlee suddenly grabs her and pins her against the wall. Her back hits the thin wood with a thud, and Alex sucks in a deep breath as Charlee slides up the length of her. Their chests rub together as Charlee runs one hand around the back of Alex's neck and brings their lips barely an inch apart. Their noses brush. Static pops on their skin at the touch, but neither pulls away, and Charlee breathes heavily against Alex's mouth.

She mutters to herself, just loud enough for Alex to hear it. "I want this," she says. "*God*, I want this. I want *you*."

Alex clamps her eyes closed and digs her fingers into Charlee's waist. Tries to anchor herself so she doesn't float away or fall, because she can't breathe. She can't think. It's as if her face is going to catch fire, as if her bones are going to break from the pressure of clenching her thighs together. Her heart's going to pound its way out of her chest any minute. She should push Charlee back, put a stop to this before it can begin. But she doesn't. She doesn't speak. Doesn't move.

The gap never closes, though. Charlee doesn't press their lips together or ask Alex to, and when their noses brush again, Alex feels a trickle of wetness against her skin. Her eyes snap open, and she eases Charlee back just enough to see that she is crying. The sight stabs at her insides. It pulls her soul up to the surface so that she feels like she's choking on it. She doesn't have to ask why Charlee is crying. She already knows. Her own eyes sting with tears, and Alex knows it isn't from the cigarette smoke clouding the air around them.

This is too much. This. Them. Everything.

Alex swipes her thumbs through the wet tracks on Charlee's cheeks. She sighs. "Your eyes are always so blue when you cry."

The words draw a hard sob up from Charlee's throat as she leans into Alex's touch, shaking her head between her palms. "We fucked up, Alex," she says, fresh tears falling free.

Even in her drunken haze, Alex knows she doesn't mean right here, right now but years ago, when she boarded that damned plane.



Charlee's head lolls as she leans heavily against her door. She blinks down at her keys, seeing double. They nearly fall to the floor when she fumbles, but she manages to catch them just in time. She stops, closes her eyes for a moment, and takes a deep breath to steady herself. When her hands stop shaking, she tries again and manages to insert the correct key into the lock with little trouble.

Once inside, Charlee tosses her small purse to the floor, keys landing on top of the crumpled material. Her shoes fly as she kicks them off, stumbling through the loft, stripping as she goes. She pops open the button on her jeans and nearly falls over in her effort to keep walking as she shimmies them off. When she yanks her shirt over her head, she stops to breathe in the scent of Alex lingering on the material. It's faint, mostly masked by the smell of smoke and sweat, but it's there. It makes her eyes burn, sparks up a throbbing between her legs. Charlee throws the shirt toward her studio. She

watches it smack against the locked door and drop to the floor before she turns toward the bathroom.

Panties and bra hit the floor only seconds before Charlee trips over the side of the tub and into the shower. She pulls the curtain mostly closed behind her before turning on the water, hissing as the first blast of the cold spray smacks against her skin. It takes a few moments for the water to warm, and then it is steaming, so hot it beats Charlee's skin red in seconds, dizzying her. But she doesn't adjust it. She doesn't care.

Bowing her head beneath the spray, she lets the water wash through her hair and pelt against the backs of her ears. She lets it drip down her cheeks and over her chin and neck. It rushes down the length of her flushed body as quickly as her own hands do, and she has to steady herself against the wall as the room spins and her fingers dip between her legs.

"Alex." She sighs the name into the roar of the shower.

The water pounds against her flesh, and steam billows up around her until everything is a blur. In the haze, Charlee can almost convince herself that Alex is there, that it's Alex's hand rubbing against her clit, Alex's fingers gliding into her.

"Yes," she says, melting down from the wall until she's on her knees in the shower, one hand holding her up. The shower rain drums against her back as she braces her knees against the porcelain surface, thighs pressed against the edges, and pumps in and out of herself with three soaked fingers.

Charlee's eyes clamp down hard, and Alex's face bursts into vivid color behind her eyelids like fireworks—all her little smiles and looks. She hears her voice. Soft laughter saved only for her. Her name curling across Alex's tongue like it was born there.

A moan rumbles up from her chest as she rides her hand harder, faster. Her back bows and her knees ache. Pain blends into pleasure. The heat makes it hard to breathe, but she doesn't stop. She can't stop, not when she can see Alex so clearly, can feel the ghosts of her kisses and of her teeth, the hot puffs of *I love yous* murmured against her clit.

She comes with her own teeth digging into the side of her arm, a groan vibrating against the shower-soaked flesh. It will leave a mark, she knows, but right now, she doesn't care. All she can think about is Alex—Alex's fingers buried inside her, Alex's hot breath at the back of her neck, Alex's soothing hands running down her back and arms—and her voice, so soft, gently urging her, "Breathe, Charlee."

Blurry spots, little specks of black, dot her vision at the edge of passing out. She gasps in a shallow breath, trying to steady herself, and collapses onto the floor of the shower. The water has cooled a bit but is still warm. Tears rise and fall, disappear in the spray, and Charlee curls up as best she can against the hard floor of the shower. She shakes with every sob that rips up and out of her until her throat is shredded and the water is cold and she is utterly alone.

When she finally forces herself up, she doesn't bother with even a quick wash. She simply shuts off the freezing shower and climbs out. She barely even dries herself off before padding to the door, naked and dripping all the way, to grab her phone from her purse. The ringing sounds uncomfortably loud in her ear as she crawls onto the couch and wedges the phone between the cushion and her

cheek.

When the call connects with a murmured greeting, Charlee licks her lips in the dark and releases a shaky breath. Her voice is ragged but sure when she says, “I can’t do this anymore.”



The persistent buzzing of her phone under her pillow stirred Charlee from sleep. She blinked against the bright light of the screen, and when her eyes focused enough to read the name glaring up at her, she froze, her breath sticking in her throat. Her heart stopped for a split second before kicking into overdrive.

Hesitant, she hovered her thumb just over the name, unsure of whether she should answer. After a moment, though, she swallowed down her nerves and swiped across the screen. When she was met with only silence but for a quick, inconsistent hiccup on the other end of the line, she said, “Alex?”

“You picked up.”

Alex’s voice spilled through, tired and heavy, and Charlee’s insides seemed to rattle at the sound of it. Her palms were sweaty, one clutching her phone against her ear and the other curling into the sheet wrapped around her.

“Are you okay? It’s—” She pulled her phone away to look at the time before bringing it back to her ear, heart thundering all the while. “It’s four in the morning.”

“I’m drunk.”

“Oh.”

Silence seeped in again, so thick Charlee was sure she could choke on it. But she couldn’t bring herself to say anything more. So she waited. She waited for Alex’s shaky, hiccup-riddled breathing to break open with words—anything, everything—or for the silence to lull them both back to sleep so they could wake the next morning and pretend this never happened. Go back to being separate and silent and so goddamned broken.

Months had passed, *months*, since they last spoke, and Charlee wasn’t even sure how it happened. Everything had fallen apart, crumbled. They scrambled to collect the pieces, to put them all back together like a puzzle that just needed a bit of glue between the seams to remain clear and collected. But little chunks just kept falling away. The pieces wouldn’t hold. The distance, the time, the absence...it was too much. After a while, it just became easier to avoid it all than to try to face it head-on. It became easier to let go than to cling.

“I’m tired.”

Charlee closed her eyes at the quiet words, at the worn quality of Alex’s voice. She sounded as if there were centuries growing inside her soul. A soul far too young to hold them. “Then you should sleep,” Charlee said. “It’s late, and you’ll feel better if you get some rest.”

“I won’t feel better,” Alex said. “I never do.”

Tears pricked at Charlee’s sleepy eyes. She nodded against her pillow, despite the fact that she was lying in the dark alone. Alex was thousands of miles away, and she couldn’t see her. Still, Charlee nodded like she was there, an inch away, breathing the same still air and only seconds from curling

into Charlee's chest and letting sleep finally take her. She nodded as if the middle of the night and too much alcohol could make reality slip away, even if for only a moment, and two people who fell apart could be whole together again.

"I know." And she did. She did know.

"It's been a long time," Alex said. "Months. I tried calling. I called you over and over, and you stopped answering."

"I know." Her voice cracked. "You chose to stay, and we were fighting so much. I guess I just got tired of us hurting more than helping each other. It got too hard to hold on."

Alex sighed into the phone, and Charlee could imagine the weight of that sigh. The rise and fall of Alex's chest. The scent of alcohol on her breath.

"I know how hard it is to hold on," she said. "I'm still doing it, even if you've let go."

"Alex."

"I didn't call to bother you. I just—I want to know that you're okay. I want you to tell me you're okay. I need that."

Charlee wanted to tell her the truth, that she hadn't been okay, still wasn't okay, might never be okay again. She wanted to tell her that there was an Alex-sized hole in her bed, in her life, in her body, one that nothing and no one else could fill. Instead, she said, "Yeah, Alex," and struggled to keep her voice steady. "I'm okay."

The line was silent for one long, dragging moment—nothing but the sound of Alex's breathing coming through. And then, "Good. That's good."

Charlee wasn't sure how something could sound so forced yet so genuine at the same time, but those words did. They sounded like understanding and bitterness mashed together, like relief and sorrow tangled into one. They sounded like a prelude to the line going dead, to the end of the call. This one moment of connection out of thousands of missed attempts and thousands more deliberately avoided chances. It scared Charlee. It terrified her.

So she swallowed, despite her constricted throat, and said, "How are *you*?" Because for the first time in months, she thought maybe forced, idle conversation was better than no conversation at all.

Alex was silent so long Charlee thought she'd finally succumbed to her exhaustion. She checked that the call was still connected. It was, and Charlee couldn't bring herself to hang up, even if Alex *had* fallen asleep. She just held the phone to her ear and closed her eyes. She was nearly asleep herself when she heard Alex's answer finally come through.

"Still terribly in love with you."

CHAPTER 6

THE WORLD TREMBLES AROUND HER, pulses like the heavy organ in her chest, and Alex steps inside as quietly as possible. She drops her keys onto the small table by the door and messily strips off her coat, scarf, and gloves. She opts to leave her shoes on because trying to take them off would only result in her ass hitting the floor. Her legs are like jelly beneath her, her feet unreliable as she makes her way through her apartment. The walls are alive, pushing in toward her and back out—in and out and in and out and in again. She stumbles to a stop in the hallway and presses her cheek to the cool surface of the wall. Closing her eyes, she takes a deep breath and attempts to force the world to be still again.

When she no longer feels like another step might send her tumbling to the floor, Alex puts one foot in front of the other again. The hallway seems like something out of a funhouse, miles and miles packed into a few feet of space, and she creeps along its length with her fingers braced on the wall. It keeps her grounded and balanced.

Why she'd thought it a good idea to drink herself nearly into a coma, she doesn't know, but she is paying dearly for it now. Her stomach writhes with every step, her liquid dinner sloshing around inside as she staggers through the bathroom door at the end of the hall. Her knees crack against the floor only seconds before she spills her stomach's contents into the toilet.

It's silent but for the quiet gagging sounds at the back of her throat and the splash of liquid in the bowl. Unlike Vinny, who frequently sounds like a dying animal when vomiting, Alex has always been rather quiet when sick, and in this moment, she's thankful. She can't stand the thought of Kari waking to find her wasted and on her knees, vomiting up a night filled with far too many close encounters.

Her arms keep her hair out of her face until she's finished retching, and then Alex lets out a bitter sigh and slides down to rest her burning face atop the cold bathroom floor. It's nice and sobering, and she's tempted to close her eyes and drift away. But her bones and joints wouldn't thank her for it in the morning, so after a few moments, she forces herself off the floor and over to the sink.

She fills and refills a Dixie cup, drinking every drop down until her throat stops burning and her head feels significantly less fuzzy. Then she gargles a bit of mouthwash before shuffling down the short path to her bedroom.

The open doorway is like an invisible barrier, and Alex finds herself unable to cross the threshold. She stands in the frame, hands braced against the wood, and stares into the dark room at the covered lump in her bed. She stares, unmoving, until her feet start to hurt and she starts to feel sick again. She can't go in there. She can't *be* in there, not in that bed, not with Kari. Not when her head is filled with images of someone else. Not when her body is still thrumming with an almost kiss and her cheeks and jaw are still stained with the heat of Charlee's fingertips. The salt of Charlee's tears still coats her

palms, and her throat is still tight, choking around the one word Alex had never truly been able to say to her. The one she still can't forcibly form on her tongue—goodbye.

She can't be here.

The hallway isn't as warped as before. Alex trudges back toward the living room. Her legs still wobble beneath her, but the rest of the world, at least, has stopped shaking.

Alex drops onto the couch and swipes a hand down her face. Rubs at her eyes. She can feel her makeup smearing beneath her knuckles, but she doesn't care. Lying back, she tries to let sleep come and wash away the night, but it doesn't. There are too many tremors in her chest. Too many ghosts haunt the darkness behind her eyelids, and there are too many echoes whispering inside her head.

We fucked up, Alex.

We fucked up, Alex.

We fucked up.

"I can't do this," Alex says to the empty room before rolling off the couch and heading for the door. She redons her coat, scarf, and gloves, adds a hat to the mix, then grabs her keys and heads out into the cold.



"Alex, you need to sleep. You've been up for days. It's seven in the morning, and you still haven't gone to bed."

"I'm in bed right now."

"You know what I mean," Gabby said, deadpan. "You're exhausted from work and dehydrated from crying."

The early morning sun spilled through Alex's window and across her face. She blinked against it and jerked her comforter up over her head; hid in the dark, suffocating hollow of her bed; and pressed the phone harder against her ear. "I can't sleep," she said. "I have to get up for work."

"No, you don't."

"What do you mean?"

"You aren't going to work today—or any day, for that matter, at least not for the rest of the week. I called your boss and told her you'd be out for a while."

"You what?" Alex choked on the words, voice shredded and deep. She jolted up in bed, throwing her comforter off her body. "Gabby, you can't do that!"

"Yes, I can. And I did. It's done."

"Wha—how? What did you even say to her?"

"I called as your doctor, because I am, and told her you have pneumonia and require rest and round-the-clock care. I faxed her a signed doctor's excuse, so you don't need to worry."

"Gabby, I—"

"I mean it, Alex," Gabby said. "Stop worrying. Stop panicking. Stop. You need rest and fluids."

"I don't actually have pneumonia, you know."

"No, but you *are* making yourself sick. You won't take care of yourself, so I'm taking care of you. That's what mothers do. So don't argue with me."

Alex blinked away a fresh wave of tears. “Yes, ma’am.”

Gabby let out a soft chuckle. The sound rolled down from Alex’s ear to swell in her chest, comforting and familiar. “Good. Now, hang up the phone. I’m going to call you back on FaceTime.”

“What?” Alex groaned. “Why? I look awful.”

“I’ve seen worse. I’m about to leave for work, but I want to make sure you drink some water and take a sleeping aid first.”

“Fine.” Alex huffed and hung up. When the phone rang again a second later, she clicked to accept the FaceTime call and couldn’t help grinning when Gabby’s kind brown eyes and easy smile popped up on her screen. The button nose that so reminded her of Charlee. They’d spoken on the phone almost daily for the last two weeks, and weekly prior to that, but Alex hadn’t seen Gabby’s face in months. It was both an ache and a comfort. “Hi.”

“Oh, honey.” Gabby looked Alex over. “You need to wash your hair.”

Alex rolled her eyes and shoved her tangled hair away from her face. “Do you want me to *drink* the water or wash my hair with it? Make up your mind.”

“In the modern world, we have this wonderful thing called plumbing, which allows you to do both.”

“We have this wonderful thing called the End Call button too.”

Gabby laughed. “I forgot how grumpy you get when you’re sick.”

“I’m *not* sick.”

“Yes, you are. Honey, you’re heartbroken, and that is absolutely a sickness.”

“Yeah?” Alex closed her eyes to stave off her building tears a bit longer. “Do you have a prescription for that?”

“Time,” Gabby said. “Just time.” When Alex opened her eyes again, Gabby put on a sad, strained smile. “And, of course, plenty of fluids and rest.”

The tiniest hint of a laugh puffed through Alex’s lips as she nodded. “I hear you.” She stood and trudged toward the kitchen. Propping her phone up against the toaster, she filled a large glass with water from the sink and turned to hold it up in front of the screen before chugging it down.

“Thank you,” Gabby said. “Did you pick up the medicine from the store like I told you?”

With a nod, Alex opened the cabinet above the microwave and grabbed the small bottle of tablets and shook it in front of Gabby’s face. “Are you sure this will make me sleep? Because I took Benadryl a few days ago, and it made me drowsy, but it didn’t make me sleep.”

“Only one way to find out,” Gabby said. “It’s a different active ingredient than Benadryl, and it always works for Ch—” She cut herself off with a sharp clearing of her throat, but Alex didn’t miss the near slip. “It always works for me.”

Alex’s chest tightened to the point of pain, but she said nothing. She simply bore the feeling as she had been for far too long, popped a pill into her mouth, and drank it down with a fresh glass of water.

She and Gabby did little more than stare at one another for a moment before Gabby spoke, her voice a strangled whisper. “Back to bed, then.”

Alex shuffled back to her bed, plopping down against her pillow. “Do you have to go?” She hated feeling this way—weak and needy—but she knew she couldn’t hide from Gabby, so she didn’t try. Plus, Gabby was the closest thing to Charlee she still had in her life.

Cam had stopped answering her calls, though she sent Alex the occasional text that typically said something along the lines of “soon” paired with a heart emoji. Per Charlee’s own request, Vinny had stopped seeing Charlee, so she could no longer be a bridge for Alex. Gabby was all she had left, and Alex couldn’t help but cling. They didn’t talk about Charlee; it was too painful for her, too much right now. Charlee’s presence was there in every call, and that was enough for Alex. It had to be.

“I’ll stay on the phone with you until you fall asleep,” Gabby said. “How about that?”

“You’ll be late.”

“So I’ll be late,” she said, and though Alex’s eyes were closed, she knew Gabby was shrugging. She could hear it in her voice, the easy way she dismissed everything else to make this moment and Alex her priority. It reminded her so much of Charlee.

She caved to the feeling of falling apart and asked for what she really wanted. “Talk to me about her.”

“Alex, I don’t think—”

“Please, Gabby.” Alex moved her phone closer. She could feel Gabby’s eyes on her, but it somehow only made her feel better, closer to home. That was what she needed right now—the feeling of home. “Talk to me about her.”

“You asked me not to, honey, and maybe it’s better that we don’t, at least not for a little while.”

“Maybe,” Alex said, her head growing heavy as she melted further into her pillow and sighed. “Okay.”



She’s standing in front of a familiar door before she even realizes she’s gotten off the subway, having traveled the city on autopilot. Her heart has lodged itself in her throat like a piece of hard candy, and she wonders why it is that her feet have betrayed her. The last thing she needs tonight is another emotional overload.

The night is quiet around her, as if the snow has muffled out the sounds and made the world softer and more silent, as if everything has frozen in place and is waiting to see what she’ll do. Large, dirty mounds stand at the edges of the street just off the stoop, shoved from the road to make a path for the city’s traffic. They stand in stark contrast to the thin sheets of flakes that blanket the sidewalk, some gleaming and virgin, some already riddled with footprints, the closest being Alex’s own.

Alex glances around her, takes it all in. She contemplates retracing her steps, finding her way back to her apartment, back before she decided to let her heart do the walking. She should’ve known it would walk her right down memory lane. Still, she can’t deny that part of her, perhaps the largest part, wants to stick to the course no matter how awkward or painful or emotional it could become.

As soon as her index finger jabs the doorbell, Alex knows there’s no going back. She spends the next five minutes clenching her hands in and out of fists, hoping no one answers the door. But then—

she winces as the porch light clicks on, momentarily blinding her—the door swings open.

“Alex.” It’s said with a touch of awe, a hint of confusion, and a great deal of affection, and that is enough to draw a small, helpless smile to Alex’s lips.

“It’s late,” she says, doing her best to look as apologetic as she feels for having woken Charlee’s mother at four or five or whatever the hell time it is in the morning. Her eyes feel like they’re peeled a little too wide, though, and she worries she might be coming off as more freaked out than apologetic. But her face is too numb from the cold for her to properly correct it. “I know it’s late.”

Gabby leans her head against the door. “It’s early, actually,” she says around a yawn. She shivers in the cold air coming in through the open door and wraps her robe tighter around her body. “And from the look of your pupils, I’m assuming you’re drunk.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Alex says, eyes still far too wide. “Though considerably less drunk than when I left my apartment. If you have vodka, I’d like to correct that.”

Letting out a quiet laugh, Gabby reaches out to take Alex’s gloved hand and pulls her inside the mercifully toasty house. She doesn’t give Alex a chance to take the place in or even shed her winter gear before bringing her into a tight embrace and kissing the side of her head. “It’s never too late,” she says, patting the puffy back of Alex’s coat, and even in her slight haze, Alex hears the weighted truth in the words. It’s never too late to come home. “I’m glad you finally came to see me.”

Alex melts into the embrace and rests her chin on Gabby’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner.”

“You’re here now.” Gabby eases back to smile at her. “I’ll pour you a drink.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Well, you’re an adult, and while I’d prefer you not torture your liver in order to avoid your problems, you’re probably going to do it anyway. So, if you’re going to do it, you may as well do it here where you can be monitored.”

“You’ve always taken care of me.” Alex follows Gabby into the kitchen and settles onto a cushioned stool at the kitchen island while Gabby pours her a drink. A tiny tumbler of vodka. She then pops a few pieces of bread into the toaster. Alex is surprised that it doesn’t feel strange being back here. It feels familiar. Comforting. Alex tries to take in as much of the space as possible: the framed photos around the great room, a bit too blurry to actually recognize in her state, and the old leather armchair across from the television. It’s still visibly ripped at the back from when she and Charlee tried to have sex in it, only to knock it over and bust a seam. They never told Charlee’s parents that part, and now that Alex thinks about it, she can’t even remember the story they conjured up to cover themselves.

Alex blinks away the memory and turns to face the woman she used to think would one day be her mother-in-law. “I feel like we should catch up,” she says. “But I guess we don’t really need to since we never stopped talking.”

“It does take the awkward out of it, doesn’t it?”

“Thankfully, yes. I’ve had enough awkward in the last two months to last a lifetime.”

“I heard.” Gabby places a plate of toast in front of Alex. “Now, eat. Your organs don’t like swimming.”

“You know about the stuff with Charlee?” Alex removes her gloves and sets them aside. She bites into a piece of toast and washes it down with a swig of vodka. “The gallery and the dinner? You never said anything when we talked Wednesday.”

“I assumed you wanted to avoid talking about it.”

“You assumed correctly.”

“You two never can do things the easy way, can you?”

“That’s the understatement of the year.” Alex drains the remaining vodka in two sharp gulps and then lets out a long, loud sigh. “How did things get so messed up?”

“That’s the way it works sometimes,” Gabby says through another yawn, leaning her elbows down on the island. “We make plans, and then most of us spend our lives watching them fall through at one point or another.”

“That’s depressing.” Alex frowns. “What do we do?”

“What do you mean?”

“When our plans fall through? What are we supposed to do?”

She smiles sadly. “We make new plans.”

“And when that doesn’t work?”

“Well, then we’re miserable.”

“Is this supposed to be a pep talk?” Alex quirks a brow, too tired and intoxicated to care that she’s talking with her mouth half-full of toast. “Because if it is, it’s the most morose pep talk I’ve ever been given.”

“I’m glad the alcohol hasn’t affected your vocabulary.”

“Scrabble master, remember?”

“I remember.” Gabby laughs. “And, no, it isn’t a pep talk. It’s a truth talk.”

“Well, truthfully, I’m screwed up enough as it is,” Alex says with a bitter huff, dropping a piece of half-eaten toast onto her plate. She starts pulling at her clothes as she talks, trying to get her coat off. It’s much too warm in Gabby’s house to stay bundled up. “I think that’s about all the truth I can handle.”

“You aren’t screwed up.” Gabby comes around the island to help with Alex’s coat. She removes Alex’s scarf and hat and then quickly unzips her coat for her. “You’re sad.”

A sigh of relief slips free as Alex’s coat falls off her and onto the floor along with the rest of her winter gear. “I’ll pick those up.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Gabby waves a hand dismissively. “It’s not the first time your clothes have been strewn around my house.”

Alex’s cheeks redden. “Charlee promised me you two wouldn’t be home that night for at least another two hours. I’m still embarrassed about that.”

“Well, Drew thought it was hilarious, so I suppose that was the upside,” Gabby says. “I still don’t

understand the appeal of having sex in your parents' house, especially when you have your own place. But you two rarely kept your hands to yourselves, so I can't say I was surprised. You could've avoided the kitchen counter, though."

"I think I need another shot."

Gabby chuckles as she turns to grab the bottle. "All right, but this is the last one. I'm cutting you off."

Kicking the vodka back as soon as it's poured, Alex revels in the burn slithering down her throat and in the pleasant buzz that seems to swarm around her brain after. She spins a bit on the stool and takes in the rest of the great room. After a moment, she stands and moves toward a large framed photo on the wall.

Her own face smiles back at her, hair windblown and wild as she stares into the camera, the Parker family cabin behind her and Charlee pressed to her side. Charlee's nose squashes against Alex's cheek, and her blue eyes are closed as if she is absorbing the moment, breathing Alex in. Looped around Alex's waist, Charlee's arms are sunburned, and there is a visible sheen of sweat coating Alex's forehead. The summer sun beats down on them. It's beautiful. Alex has never seen so much joy in a single shot before, in a single captured second; she's never seen so much joy in her own face, in her own body language. This, she thinks, is what life is supposed to look like. This is what *love* is supposed to look like.

With her back to Gabby, Alex closes her burning eyes. The only thing that will soothe them is the watery release Alex so often fights against. Here, though, faced with a perfect glimpse of a past she's spent too much time aching over, she lets the release come. She lets the tears build, lets them crest. Lets them fall.

"Everything's so blurry," she whispers. She's surprised when Gabby's hands settle on her shoulders and steer her toward the couch.

"That's the alcohol."

"No, it's me." Alex drops onto the end of the couch. "It's this. It's *us*." She waves her hand aimlessly through the air, nearly knocking a glass vase from the end table.

"Us?" Gabby winces as the vase wobbles, then eventually settles back into place.

Alex rubs at her eyes, no doubt smearing whatever makeup is left. "Me and Charlee." Her voice cracks, begins to crumble. She's helpless to stop it. She's been falling apart for years.

"Alex, you don't ha—"

"Everything is blurry," she says again, shaking her head. She doesn't care about her broken voice or her wet cheeks, the tremble in her bottom lip. She needs to say this to someone, needs someone to hear it and understand it. Maybe she just needs to say it out loud, the bits and pieces she keeps buried so deep.

"It's been blurry for years, like I'm only seeing a warped version of the world. All the edges are fuzzy, and nothing ever fully defines. It's like that all the time, every day, but then I come back here. I come back here, Gabby, and I see her, and, God, it's like my entire world...it's like *everything* just

snaps back into focus. Everything's clear. Everything's *beautiful*, even when it's ugly, even when it hurts." She rubs small circles over her heart. "And I don't feel like I'm two seconds away from falling off the edge of the earth anymore."

Putting the feeling, or at least part of the feeling, into words and saying those words out loud lifts a massive weight from her shoulders. There's a sadness to it, a soreness left behind, but being able to explain to someone she knows will not only listen but also understand—it's exactly what she needed.

There are tears in Gabby's eyes. "That's the first time you've talked about her in a long time," she says. "Like *that*, at least."

A wet laugh bubbles through Alex's lips, humorless. She shrugs a shoulder. "Must be the alcohol."

Gabby pins her with a knowing stare that makes Alex's insides squirm. "You should tell her."

"I can't do that."

"We've been tiptoeing around the subject of you and Charlee for years, Alex, but now you're back. And you're talking about her again like you used to. You're talking about her like you *want* to. That means something."

"It means I'm fucked."

Gabby lets out a loud bark of laughter, wipes a tear from the corner of her eye, and reaches over to pat Alex's leg. "It means it's time, honey."

"Time?"

"There is so little clarity in this life. But Charlee, she's your clarity, and you're hers. You shouldn't let that pass you by."

Alex runs her fingers through her hair, wincing when they snag on tangles and messy braids. "It already has."

Gabby's lips purse together as she continues to stare Alex down.

"Things are complicated," Alex says, propping her elbow on her knee and her chin on her hand. "I can't just—we can't. It's complicated."

"So uncomplicate it. Life is too short to let complicated stop you. It's too short to let little things get in the way. You know that."

"I don't think thousands of miles and years of separation and both of us being with other people count as little things, Mom."

A smile slowly works its way across Gabby's lips. "It's been a long time since you called me that."

"It's been a long time since a lot of things." Alex's lip trembles as her voice drops to a whisper, like she is afraid to continue the conversation aloud. She is. She's afraid to say the things brewing in her chest, afraid to ask how late is too late. Afraid to even think it. She's afraid of the way she feels, of the way she knows those feelings will only hurt her, hurt everyone. She hasn't stopped being afraid since the moment she walked into that gallery and saw that painting. "I don't want anyone to get hurt."

"People are already hurt, honey." Gabby scoots across the couch to wrap an arm around Alex's shoulders. "*You* are hurting. Charlee's hurting." She rests her cheek against her head as Alex leans into her. "People get hurt, and then we heal, and then we get hurt again. That's the way of it. You can't

always throw your heart aside because you're afraid of hurting other people. Sometimes you have to put yourself first."

"At Kari's expense?" Alex swipes almost angrily through her tears. "At Chris's?" A hard huff jumps up from her aching chest, and Alex shakes her head, takes a deep breath, and lets it slowly back out. "I can't. We can't do that."

Gabby is silent a long time before she tightens her arm around Alex and says, "Okay." She stands and holds out a hand. "I think it's time to put you to bed. Come on."

Once on her feet, Alex only wobbles a bit before shuffling down the hall behind Gabby, their hands still clasped. Gabby leads her into Charlee's old room, and Alex has to fight off a fresh wave of tears. It's a fight she barely manages to endure when Gabby pulls one of Charlee's old T-shirts, long enough to be worn as a nightgown, from the dresser and hands it to Alex.

"Go ahead and change so you'll be more comfortable," she says. "I'm going to get you some water and something for the headache you're bound to have when you wake up."

When Gabby leaves the room, Alex lifts the old T-shirt up to her nose and breathes in the faint but lingering scent of Charlee, of home. It drains the last bit of fight from her, and her eyes well up against the material. She glances around the room in the early-morning light coming through Charlee's window and tries not to let her gaze linger too long on the bits and pieces of *them*, of who they used to be together, strewn about the place: strips of snapshot photos tacked to a corkboard so Charlee could have pictures of them both at the loft and at her childhood home; the hole in the closet door from a disastrous but memorable game of Twister after too much Christmas eggnog and too much encouragement from both Cam and Vinny; their initials etched into the bed's wooden headboard and the heart carved between them. She tries not to linger on those pieces. But she does. Of course she does.

Alex curses her drunken self for being so weak and quickly removes her clothes to replace them with Charlee's T-shirt. It hangs loosely on her, just down to midthigh. She then crawls onto Charlee's bed and under the covers, breathes in the same familiar scent on the same familiar pillow she occasionally shared years ago, and hopes sleep will finally come easy.

"Here we go," Gabby says, walking in a moment later. She places a glass of water on the bedside table along with two small pills and then settles down on the edge of the bed. "You need anything else?"

Alex shakes her head against the pillow, clutching the blanket tucked under her chin.

"Okay." Gabby brushes the hair out of Alex's face. "You get some sleep."

"You always knew, didn't you?" Alex whispers the words, catching Gabby's gentle eyes in the morning light. Chestnut. Not Charlee's color, but they shared her kindness. Her caring.

"Knew what?"

"About us. Charlee and me."

Gabby tucks another wild strand of hair behind Alex's ear. "What about you?"

"That we were, you know—" Alex shrugs a shoulder and sniffles, wipes at her runny nose, "*—us.*"

“Yes,” Gabby says after a moment. “Yes, Alex. I knew that you were *you* and Charlee was Charlee, and together you were—”

“Us.”

Gabby’s answer is a gentle nod before she pats Alex’s cheek. She stands. “Try to get some sleep.”

Without another word, she exits into the hall and closes the door behind her. Alex stares at the wood and wonders when the ache in her chest will pass. Part of her is certain it never will.



Charlee wakes with an entire construction site inside her head. Saws whirl between her ears, and hammers pound away at her skull. Someone must have even gutted the place and rewired her entire system, because the lights are suddenly too bright, and they won’t stop flickering behind her eyelids.

“Oh God, no,” she groans, slinging one hand over her eyes and the other over her stomach. Nausea spreads beneath her fingers like a plague, adding to the torment of the power tools inside her brain. “No.”

She tastes the bitter film of bile and leftover whiskey as she smacks her lips and runs her tongue over her teeth. That, paired with the strain in her stomach muscles and throat, tells her she must have gotten sick at some point. The realization only adds to her misery. “No,” she whines to herself again. “*Why?*”

A muffled shushing sound from behind her makes her jump so hard she smacks the top of her head on the wall her bed is situated against. She lets out a loud squawk of both surprise and pain and rolls quickly over to find nothing but a pile of blankets and a flood of dark hair.

Charlee’s eyes blow wide, and her heart stutters into a panic. What she last remembers is Alex’s palms on her cheeks, Alex’s arm wrapped around her waist as they left the bar, the ache in her chest, and the sticky heat between her legs as she and Alex sat nearly on top of one another in the backseat of a cab on the way to Charlee’s loft.

She racks her aching brain trying to remember what came after, how she ended up in her bed. How *this* happened. But there’s nothing. Everything’s blank beyond the nearly unbearable tension of the cab ride home and Alex’s cologne filling the small space like an intoxicating, dizzying haze.

Pulse racing, Charlee rubs her eyes and blinks rapidly before focusing again on the hair. With a second, clearer look, she realizes it’s too dark to be Alex’s, and far too straight. Alex’s hair is a bush of curls, and her bedhead? It’s a wild, thorny thicket only the bravest of souls dare venture into.

Charlee tries not to dwell on the wave of disappointment that washes through her. She tries not to hate herself for the parts of her that so desperately, selfishly yearned to find her ex-lover in her bed. The guilt builds like a prickly lump in her throat, though, and Charlee can do little more than swallow it down to add to her preexisting nausea.

Slinking one hand out under the covers, she pokes the lump beside her.

“Chris?”

“Guess again, Drunky,” comes the ragged reply, and a rush of relief spills through Charlee’s cells.

“Oh, thank *God*.” Charlee quickly shuffles over in the bed and wraps tightly around Cam.

“You’re making me hot. Get off.”

“I’m making a Camila burrito,” Charlee says, burying her face in Cam’s hair. It still smells like smoke from the bar. “Burritos are supposed to be hot.”

“I’m going to shove a burrito up your ass if you don’t get off me.”

“Why are the lights on?”

“Too tired.”

“Why did you let me drink so much?”

“Why did you let *me* drink so much?” Cam uses her ass to try to bump Charlee away from her. “I’m seriously going to throw up if you don’t get off me. I’m so hot.”

“Then why are you under a mountain of covers?”

“Stop asking me reasonable questions,” Cam growls, bumping Charlee with her ass again and wrapping the blankets more tightly around herself. “I have a hangover, or I might still be drunk. I don’t know. Logic fails me when there are tiny people with tiny jackhammers inside my brain.”

Charlee laughs, then immediately frowns when the action makes her head hurt, and she rolls away from Cam to put her pillow over her head. The cool underside is a relief against her skin. She breathes in the smell of laundry detergent and her own familiar perfume.

“What time is it?”

“Time to go back to sleep.”

Something thuds against the pillow covering Charlee’s face, and she gropes around for it. Her fingers collide with the cool face of her phone, and she lifts the pillow just long enough to check the time. 5:19 a.m. blinks back at her. She covers her face again. “Why am I awake?” She couldn’t have been asleep more than a couple of hours. “How did we even get here?”

“You don’t remember?” Cam rolls over and pushes the pillow off Charlee’s face. “You’re going to suffocate yourself.”

Charlee stares up at the concrete ceiling and frowns. “The last thing I remember is being in a cab with Alex.”

“Yeah, we were *all* in that cab, Charlee. But of course you’d only remember Alex.”

Charlee’s cheeks heat with a blush she uses her hands to hide, playing it off like she needs to rub the crust from her eyes. “So, you came home with me? Did Alex go back to Vinny’s?”

“I don’t know where Alex went,” Cam says through a bitter-smelling yawn that makes Charlee’s stomach hurt. “And, no, I didn’t come home with you. I went to my place after the cab dropped you off, and then you called me an hour later. You said you couldn’t do ‘this’ anymore.” She makes a mock quotation mark with one hand that is only partially visible at the top of the blankets. “You never actually explained what ‘this’ was, but you told me to come over before you did something stupid, so I called another cab and brought my drunk ass over here.”

“And?”

“And then I had to use my spare key to get in because *your* drunk ass was passed out on the couch when I got here.”

“Oh.”

“Naked.”

“*Oh.*”

“Exactly. Your hair was wet, and there was a towel on the floor, so I guess you took a shower. I don’t know. I had to wake you up to get you to put a shirt and some underwear on, and we *barely* managed that. Then you threw up, which I didn’t clean up by the way, because I love myself, and then you dragged me over here and said it was nap time.”

“Um.”

“Yeah, I don’t wanna know why you decided to call me and then wait for me naked.”

“I couldn’t tell you anyway. I don’t remember.”

“Life is merciful that way sometimes.” Cam draws a snort of laughter from Charlee. “I need bacon or maybe a burger. Or a bacon burger. And ten more hours of sleep.”

“I didn’t say anything else?”

“Only that you love my face and that Alex still has a nice ass.”

“I did *not* say that.”

“It’s true, though.”

“No argument here,” Charlee says, rubbing at her eyes again. “Roll over. Your breath smells like tequila and nightmares. It’s making my stomach hurt.”

Cam remains firmly in place. “Right, because that’s so much worse than your vomit breath. You’ve been breathing the seventh circle of hell on me since you passed out, so stop complaining.”

“We’re tragic.”

“Right now, I agree with you. Later, I’ll argue that we’re awesome.”

“Why are we awake?”

“Because you woke us up.” Cam smacks her lips and grimaces like she has just smelled her own breath for the first time. “You owe me bacon.”

“I’m sorry if I freaked you out, Cam,” Charlee says. “With the call, I mean.”

Despite her claim of being overheated, Cam slips her arm around Charlee’s waist under the covers. “You sounded pretty upset. You don’t remember why?”

Charlee closes her eyes and tries to drag the memories up from the murky haze of last night’s intoxication. They come back to her in fuzzy fragments that never quite form a solid sequence but are recognizable enough for her to piece some of it together. She remembers being in the cab with Alex, and now that some of the blanks have been filled in, Charlee can recall Cam squished under her on her other side. She thinks she remembers saying goodbye to everyone, and Alex’s hand clinging to hers until Charlee finally had to let go to close the car door.

The rest comes in fast flashes—the wobbly walk to the elevator inside her building, her key in the door, water on her back, her hand between her legs—

“*Oh.*”

“I take it you just had a lightbulb moment?”

“You could say that,” Charlee says. “I think I’m having a lightbulb year, honestly.”

“Care to share with the rest of the class?” Cam snuggles in closer, one leg thrown over Charlee’s knees and her residual limb, or what Cam refers to as her “nubby,” pressed warmly against Charlee’s thigh. “What was the stupid thing you so desperately needed me to save you from doing?”

“I almost kissed Alex last night.”

Cam actually sits up at those words. Her eyebrows inch toward her hairline as she stares down at Charlee. “And?”

“I almost kissed her and I—I wanted...” Charlee covers her eyes with her fingers and tries to rub away the sudden burning sensation but somehow only makes it worse. “God, I wanted so much more than that.”

“So, the stupid thing you needed saving from was your own libido?”

Charlee can tell Cam is trying lighten the moment, to keep her from falling into the despair they can both hear creeping into the edges of her voice. “I don’t know,” she says, trying her best to give Cam even a hint of a laugh, but it only comes out as a breathy sigh. “I don’t know what I was afraid of—myself, I guess. Maybe I was afraid I would call her. Or Chris. I don’t know. I think I just needed to not be alone.”

“I get that.”

“I don’t think I can do this anymore.”

“I hate to break it to you, but I don’t really think you have a choice in the matter. You’re just going to want who you want.”

“No, I mean I don’t think I can keep pretending like I *don’t* want her anymore.” Charlee shakes her head. Her hair makes a quiet swooshing sound against the mattress. “I don’t think I can keep pretending like I’ve moved on.”

“You’re going to tell her you still love her?”

“No. God no, Cam. I can’t do that. She’s with Kari.”

“So?”

“So, I’m not going to put that kind of pressure on her. I’m not going to make her feel like she has to choose between us. I just, I know I can’t keep doing this to myself and to Chris. I can’t keep lying.”

“So?”

“So, I have to end things with him.” When Cam doesn’t say anything, Charlee looks at her expectantly. “Well,” she says, “what do you think?”

“Honestly, Charlee.” Cam drawls out the words. “I’m just stunned. I’m completely surprised by this shocking news that I never saw coming, not once.”

Charlee stares at her for one long moment before grabbing her pillow and whacking Cam in the face with it. When Cam cackles, Charlee’s throat bubbles up with laughter, and she wipes away her tears before tackling her best friend in a hug. She’s rewarded with a kiss planted to her hair, which is still slightly damp.

“It’s going to be okay, Charlee,” she says. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

CHAPTER 7

“Mom?”

Charlee steps into the house, placing her spare key back into her pocket, and glances around the great room. She moves to the side as Cam comes in behind her, and they quickly remove their winter gear, hanging their coats, scarves, and gloves on the rack by the door.

“Mom?” she calls out again as Cam makes a beeline for the kitchen, grabs a soda from the refrigerator, and hops up to sit on the counter.

“Weird,” she says, popping open the tab on her soda can. “You think she’s still sleeping?”

Charlee checks her phone for the time. “It’s ten thirty. She’s always up by eight.”

“Well, maybe she had an errand to run. We weren’t supposed to be here for lunch ’til noon, so she probably figured she had time. It’s not your mom’s fault you woke us up at the ass crack of dawn.” Her stomach growls audibly, and she winces. “But seriously, she needs to come on, because I need something in my stomach circa yesterday.”

Charlee moves toward the hallway. “I’ll check her room, but yeah, she probably went out.”

“Hey, whose clothes are these?” Cam calls out before Charlee can make her way down the hall. She jumps off the counter to pick something up off the floor and pops up from the far side of the kitchen island a moment later, holding a dark green coat. “There’s a pile of clothes over here.”

“What the hell?” Charlee walks over to inspect them. It only takes a glance for her to know they’re not her mother’s. Something’s familiar about the coat, but Charlee can’t quite place it.

“Ugh, smells like a bar.” Gasping, Cam drops the coat a second later and says, “You don’t think Gabby has a, you know, *lady friend*, do you?”

Charlee wrinkles her nose. “Stop.”

“I’m just saying.” Cam puts her hands up in a show of surrender. “Tousled, abandoned lady clothes. Bar smell.” She grabs an empty glass from the island next to a plate of half-eaten toast. Her eyes widen as she sniffs the inside. “Vodka.” She holds the glass under Charlee’s nose. “All signs point to lady friend.”

“No way,” Charlee says, shaking her head. “Besides, there’s only one glass.”

“Oh, so you think she was just flying solo and got wild with it?” Cam’s voice strains from holding in laughter.

Charlee shudders at the thought and shoves Cam away from her. “I hate you.” She moves back toward the hall. “I’m going to check her room.”

Gabby’s bedroom is at the end of the hall on the right. The door is open when she gets there. The bed is made, and Gabby is nowhere to be found. Charlee glances around for anything unusual or out of place but finds nothing. She’s about to head back into the kitchen when she hears a quiet groan.

The sound draws her attention to the door across from her mother's, the one to her own childhood bedroom. Charlee wraps her hand around the doorknob and sends up a silent prayer that she is not about to find her mother in her room with a drunken hookup. There are some things you just can't come back from.

She pushes the door gently open and peeks inside. Instantly freezes. Her heart shoots up into her throat so fast and so hard that she nearly chokes. She barely has time to take in the sight before she is scrambling for the doorknob in a panic and closing the door again.

"What the hell?" she mutters under her breath. "What the hell? What the hell?"

Charlee smacks her cheeks a few times, convinced she's seeing things or is possibly still drunk. She shakes her head hard enough to make herself dizzy and then dares to peek into the room again.

Her jaw drops when the sight is the same, and she can't breathe. She barely has time to process the thought before she hears a door open down the hall, followed by the rustling of bags and a loud greeting from Cam. She closes the bedroom door, then darts down the hall into the great room.

Gabby turns when she enters the room, eyes wide and face ashen. "Charlee," she says, setting her grocery bags on the floor. "You're early."

"What the hell, Mom?" Her heart is racing. "What's going on?"

"Dude, she just went for groceries." Cam laughs. "Calm down. I was obviously wrong about, you know, that *other* thing."

Gabby glances behind her toward the hallway and then locks eyes with her again. "Charlee, listen. I need to explain."

"Yeah," Charlee says. "You *do* need to explain. You need to explain to me why the hell Alexandra Woodson is asleep in my bed."

A choking sound splits the air as soon as the words are out. Charlee turns and sees Cam gagging and sputtering, having accidentally snorted soda mid-drink. She coughs until her throat is clear and wipes at the liquid dripping from her nose. "Alex is here?"

"She showed up in the middle of the night," Gabby says. "Drunk."

"She drunkenly decided that *my mom's* house was where she needed to be?"

"Well, she was upset."

"Okay, but that still doesn't make any sense," Charlee says, confused. "She just showed up here? She hasn't talked to you in years, so wh—"

"That's not actually true. It hasn't been years since we've talked." She lets out a heavy breath. "It hasn't even been a week."

Charlee's eyebrows shoot toward her hairline, and her throat goes dry. "*What?*"

"This just got too real." Cam slinks around the kitchen island.

"I didn't know how to tell you."

"It's easy, Mom. It goes something like this: 'Charlee, I've been talking to Alex behind your back!'"

"Honey, please."

"How long?" Charlee snaps. "How long has this been going on?"

“I thought it would be better if you didn’t know,” Gabby says. “At least, not for a while. But then I kept putting it off. It just took such a long time for you to start living your life again, honey. I didn’t want to risk upsetting you.”

“Spit it out, Mom! How long?”

“I never stopped.”

Charlee feels breathless with the revelation, and Cam pops her lips and shuffles toward the door.

“Okay, then,” Cam says, clapping her hands gently together. “I’m just gonna go pick us up a pizza and take the longest route possible to give you guys some time to, you know, kill each other or whatever.” She puts on her coat and gloves, then grabs Charlee’s keys from her coat pocket. “Back in ten years.”

The door is barely closed before Gabby starts in again. “I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t want you to find out this way.”

“All this time?” Charlee drops down to sit on the floor. Her legs feel like jelly. “Why?”

Gabby crosses the room in three long strides and settles onto the floor in front of Charlee, her voice low and sad. “Because you couldn’t.”

Charlee rubs at her temples, then covers her face with her hands. “I’m too hungover for this.”

“I should’ve told you.”

“Yeah, you should have.” She shakes her head against her palms. “I can’t believe you’ve been talking to her all these years.”

“I’m not going to apologize for that. I *am* sorry I didn’t tell you, but I’m not sorry for keeping in touch with Alex.”

“She’s not *yours*, Mom. *I’m* your kid.”

“And I’ve always taken care of you,” Gabby says. “Alex may not actually be my child, but she *is* family, and she was over there. Alone.”

“She *chose* to be over there.”

“And you *chose* to be here.” Gabby squeezes Charlee’s knee. “You had all of us here to help you through everything, honey. You had all your pictures and belongings. The loft. Everything you two made together and *were* together. And you had us here to help you. Alex didn’t have anyone.”

Charlee’s chest feels constricted, like her heart doesn’t have enough room to move. Like her body might just cave in on itself.

“You know how much of a mess you were when things fell apart. She was the same way, but she was alone. She had to go through that alone.”

“So you called her?” Charlee’s voice strains. Her eyes feel like fire.

“I called her, and so did Vinny, of course. I talked to her every week, every *day* in the beginning. I made sure she was sleeping and eating. I sent her money when she needed it. I took care of her.” She runs her thumb back and forth over Charlee’s knee, soothing. “Because she’s family and because you love her. And I love her. And your father never would’ve forgiven me if I didn’t look after her. You know that.”

Tears build quickly, and Charlee lets them fall. Wipes them away as they come. “We were together last night,” she says. “All of us—me, Cam, Vinny, and Alex.”

“Oh, so I have you to blame for Alex’s drunken visit?” Gabby chuckles as she shifts over on the floor to wrap her arm around Charlee’s back. “I suppose that would also explain your hangover.”

Charlee leans into her mother’s embrace. “I almost kissed her. I thought we could... I *wanted* to.” Sniffling, she wipes at her nose. “I miss her.”

“I know.”

“I *miss* her, Mom.”

Gabby nods against the top of her head. “Me too.”

“When I’m with her, it feels like we could just pick up where we left off, but it’s not that easy.”

“Nothing ever is, honey.”

“I never really got over her.”

“I know.”

They sit in silence for a long time, Charlee doing her best to breathe through the tightness in her chest, and Gabby rubbing small circles into her back. The floor starts to feel cold after a while, seeping in through Charlee’s pants. She shifts, runs her hands up and down her thighs to warm them. “I guess we should call Cam and tell her she can come back now.”

“I can’t believe she went to get pizza after I bought all these groceries to cook for you two.”

“Cam’s always up for seconds.”

“Good point.”

Charlee climbs to her feet, then reaches out to help her mother up as well. They stand awkwardly together, unmoving, as Charlee glances toward the hallway. “I guess I’ll go wake her up,” she says. “See if she wants some pizza.”

“I can wake her up, honey. She’ll probably be too embarrassed to stay anyway.”

“She shouldn’t be embarrassed.”

“I know, but that won’t matter and you know it.”

“I’ll wake her,” Charlee says, still holding Gabby’s hands. “I need—I should apologize for last night anyway. I kind of crossed the line with the almost-kiss and everything.”

“Okay.”

Charlee doesn’t shift from her spot.

“Charlee?”

With a sigh, Charlee steps in to embrace her. She grips her tightly and rests her chin on her shoulder. “Thank you.” She burrows her face into her mother’s neck to breathe in the familiar, comforting scent of her. “For taking care of her.”



The car’s air conditioning offered little relief from the sweltering heat of a mid-July afternoon. Charlee’s palm was slick and sweaty against hers, but Alex didn’t let go. Their fingers remained tightly together as they sat in the backseat of Gabby’s SUV, the cemetery disappearing behind them in

the glare of the sun.

Charlee trembled beside her, fighting to hold herself together. On her other side, Cam silently cried, little hiccups escaping every few seconds, and Gabby's soft shuddering breaths sounded from the passenger seat. Vinny tried to subtly wipe her eyes under her aviators as she drove them back to Gabby's house. Every quiet little detail jumped out at her, screamed in her blood and bones, and Alex had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep her own tears at bay.

Everyone else was falling apart, and someone would have to pick up the pieces.

No one said a word throughout the entire fifty-minute drive back to Gabby's house, and little was said when they finally arrived. Vinny and Cam switched over to Vinny's new motorcycle, claiming they wanted to give Gabby and Charlee some time alone but promised to check in later. Alex offered to go as well, but Charlee's grip on her hand was painful, and Gabby urged them both toward the house, so she stayed. She never wanted to leave anyway.

It was her home too.

He was her loved one too.

It was cool inside the house but not relieving. The space felt suffocating, filled with a silence that seemed to suck the oxygen out of the air and leave her lungs burning. Alex couldn't bring herself to look at the walls. The various photos hung about like haunting reminders of everything they'd lost.

Gabby only took a few steps inside before turning to pull Charlee and Alex into her arms. She held them close, a quiet sob escaping her. When she collected herself, she planted a kiss first to Charlee's temple and then Alex's. "I'm going to lie down for a while," she said, her voice tired and her eyes drooping. She'd barely been holding herself together since the car accident.

A man had fallen asleep at the wheel during morning rush hour. Swerved into the wrong lane. And that was that. One mistake and everything changed. The man had died in the crash, along with Charlee's father, and had injured two others. Alex liked to think Drew was killed instantly, that he felt no pain, even if it wasn't true. She didn't know. Only that he was dead by the time the police arrived. Still, the thought gave her a little comfort.

Gabby kissed Charlee's temple again, then her forehead. "I love you," she said, briefly cupping Charlee's cheek. She didn't wait for a reply before turning and disappearing down the hall.

Charlee turned to look at Alex. Her makeup was streaked and smudged, the foundation tracked with tears, and her eyes were bluer than Alex had ever seen them—sapphire and sad and lovely. She held Alex's hand with slick fingers and tilted her head toward the hall.

When they crawled into Charlee's childhood bed together, still in their black clothes, Alex curled around Charlee from behind.

"Alex?"

Alex nuzzled the back of Charlee's neck in answer and waited.

"My dad's dead."

The words hit hard, like a storm in the middle of the night—a fast, quiet kind of destruction. She closed her eyes and forced in a breath, the scents of sweat and Charlee's perfume filtering in with it.

She did her best to keep steadily-building tears at bay, because every second was testing her resolve, tempting her to break. She had to stay strong. She gripped Charlee's hand where their fingers remained tangled over Charlee's stomach. "I know he is."

"My dad," Charlee said, tremulous. "My dad. My dad's dead. He's dead. He's—my—he's—" Her voice cracked open, earthquakes between her teeth.

"Okay," Alex said. "Okay, come here." She tugged at Charlee's side to get her to turn. "Come here."

Charlee buried herself against her chest and gripped the front of Alex's shirt like she intended to shred it. She muttered the same words over and over between great, groaning sobs, and Alex held her as tightly as possible.

"Breathe, Charlee." She was far too close to making herself sick. "You have to try to calm down so you can breathe, like your mom said. Remember?"

Just the day before, Charlee had had the first anxiety attack Alex had ever known her to have. It scared them both, Charlee gasping for air between forceful sobs and choking on her words. Alex had screamed Gabby's name hard enough to make her throat hurt, then sat by and watched as Gabby calmed Charlee down with counting and breathing.

Alex rubbed Charlee's back, thankful when she felt her breathing begin to even out. Each breath came slower and steadier than the one before, separated by little hiccups, and Alex kissed the top of Charlee's head. "That's good," she said, and Charlee nodded against her chest.

They lay together in silence for what felt like hours—years—before Charlee shifted back to rest her head on their shared pillow. Their faces were only inches apart. "I hate this."

"Me too."

"This is wrong." The pillowcase absorbed Charlee's tears as she wiped her face on it, a ring of moisture forming just under her cheek and nose. "This is—"

"Wrong," Alex said with a sigh, brushing away a strand of hair stuck to Charlee's wet cheek. "I know."

"I feel like I'm living someone else's shitty life." Charlee closed her eyes at Alex's touch. "Like this can't possibly be real. I just want to wake up and realize this isn't my life. It's just a bad dream. I just want it to be a bad dream, Alex, so I can wake up and you can hold me and all of this can go away."

Alex scooted closer until their noses bumped together. She released Charlee's hand to wrap her arm around her waist instead. Rubbed circles into the small of her back. "I can't wake you up from this, Charlee, but I can still hold you."

Charlee placed her hand just above Alex's heart. "I don't want to go home tonight. Can we stay here?"

"Whatever you need."

"I just need to be here."

"Okay."

"And you," Charlee said, tapping her index finger over the small swell of Alex's breast. "I need

you.”

Alex took in Charlee’s closed eyes, the skin around them raw and red. Her face was puffy and tired, streaked with tear tracks and makeup, and Alex found the sight heartbreaking and terribly beautiful. “You have me.”

Charlee snuggled in closer. “Talk to me.”

“About what?”

“Anything,” Charlee said. “Everything.”

“Everything? That could take a while.”

“Your voice makes me feel better.”

Alex drew Charlee closer. Her cheek smooshed against Charlee’s forehead. “It *is* a nice voice.”

“It is.”

Alex grabbed the spare quilt from its perch on Charlee’s bedside trunk and messily threw it on top of them. Charlee helped her by kicking her feet under the quilt until it spread out over their legs, then she wasted no time in burrowing in again.

“Tell me a story about us,” she said, one hand slipping under Alex’s shirt to rub her back while the other remained squished between their bodies.

“You know all the stories about us. You’re half of all of them.”

“I love you, Alex.”

“I know.”

“Tell me about the time we got drunk and went to the diner and had to wash dishes to pay for our food.”

Alex smiled. “How did we remember to put pants on but forgot our wallets?”

“Good question.”

“You wore your bicorn pants,” Alex said, remembering that night. “I still say that’s the best coming-out gift anyone’s ever gotten.”

“Leave it to my dad to buy me a pair of pink pajama pants with rainbow bicornes all over them as a way of saying, ‘Hey, kid, we accept you.’” Her voice fractured around the words, each one rougher than the last, and Alex felt each break like a fissure through her soul. “I don’t even know where he got them.”

Alex grabbed the top of the quilt and threw it over their heads so the bright sun spilling into the room was muted.

“What are you doing?” Charlee whispered.

“Making the world go away.”

“It’ll still be there when we come up for air.”

“So then we’ll take a deep breath and dive back in.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

It was stiflingly hot under the blanket, but Alex refused to move until Charlee was ready. She didn’t

care that she could already feel the sweat beading along her spine and between her breasts. Sometimes, hiding from monsters was better than fighting them.

“Charlee.”

“Alex.”

“I love you.”

“I know.”



Charlee stands in the open doorway of her old bedroom and stares at the partially covered lump in her bed. She takes in the long, bare leg sticking out from under the covers and the polka-dotted panties adorning the firm ass peeking out from under one of Charlee’s own T-shirts. She takes in the gentle sound of Alex’s breathing and the tangled mess of hair that looks to have devoured her pillow. Even with Alex’s makeup smeared around her eyes and halfway down one cheek, Charlee could look at her forever. She absorbs the sight, the sounds, the moment, and lets it all sink in before finally moving fully into the room and closing the door behind her.

The bed creaks, a quiet sound, as Charlee perches on the edge. She reaches out and carefully pushes back a wave of hair, brushes the back of her hand down Alex’s cheek. Her chest swells with the touch, with the intimacy of the moment. It feels familiar, painful. It feels right.

“Alex,” she says, unable to stop herself from running her thumb across a plump bottom lip.

A tiny groan escapes the sleeping woman, making Charlee smile. She glances to the door for a moment before taking a deep breath and shifting on the bed. She lies down beside her, their heads sharing the same pillow, and takes in all the lovely lines of Alex’s sleeping face. Guiding her fingers from Alex’s cheek up into her hair, Charlee scratches lightly at Alex’s scalp and pretends it is okay. She pretends she’s years younger. She pretends Alex is still hers.

“Alex,” she says again, a little louder. A thrill rushes through her system at the quiet sound of pleasure rumbling in Alex’s throat. “Wake up.”

When Alex’s sleepy green eyes open and lock onto Charlee, a lazy smile draws up one corner of her mouth. “God, you’re beautiful.”

Charlee’s stomach flips and flutters. “And you’re asleep in my bed in my mom’s house.”

Alex’s brow furrows for a moment before her eyes bulge, and she rockets up in the bed. “Shit,” she says. “Shit. Shit. I thought I was dreaming.”

“Stop freaking out.” Charlee grabs Alex’s arm and encourages her back down. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” Alex says, tugging back up.

“It’s *okay*.” Charlee gently pulls on Alex’s arm again, and this time, Alex lets herself sink back down. “It’s okay.”

Alex settles onto the pillow, her face only inches from Charlee’s. “It’s not okay.” She closes her eyes. “I don’t know why I came here. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.”

“You’re not mad?”

Charlee ignores the question. “Do you dream about me often? About how beautiful you think I am?”

Alex gapes at her. A slight blush colors her cheeks. “Are you serious?”

“You look like a raccoon.”

“I probably smell like one too.”

“I won’t disagree with that.”

Alex rolls her eyes, and Charlee reaches across the space between them to poke her arm.

“About last night,” she says, but Alex quickly interrupts.

“Don’t. We were drunk.”

“That doesn’t excuse it.”

“No, it doesn’t, but you don’t owe me an apology. Nothing happened.”

“Something *could* have happened.”

“Well, I didn’t stop you,” Alex says. “I *wouldn’t* have stopped you. It’s both our faults.”

Charlee tries not to dwell on those words. “*I wouldn’t have stopped you.*” Tingles ripple down her spine, prick pleasantly at the base.

“You’ve been talking to my mom all this time.”

Alex licks her dry lips. “Yes.”

“I’m not mad.” She scoots closer so her knees bump Alex’s.

“You’re not?”

Charlee says nothing for a long time, simply lying next to Alex and looking her over. And then, “You never came home.”

“I know.”

Their hands find each other of their own accord, as if there are magnets in their fingertips drawing them together. Charlee weaves her fingers between Alex’s, holds her hand between their bodies, and says, “I never went after you.”

Alex nods against her pillow, the swishing sound practically thunderous in the quiet room. “I know.”

“I gave up on us.”

Alex’s eyes turn wide and wet as she nods again. “Yes.”

They tilt forward until their foreheads press together. It’s amazing, Charlee thinks, how everything can feel so right and so terribly wrong at the same time, in the same breath. The same touch. The same moment. “I gave up on us, and you were alone.”

“Yes.”

The crack in Alex’s voice makes Charlee feel sick to her stomach, and she releases Alex’s hand long enough to lean over her. She grabs her old quilt from the trunk beside the bed and flings it out over them so it covers their bodies, clouding over their heads. When they are encased in the dark of the quilt cocoon, Charlee scoots as close as she can and wraps her arm around Alex’s waist.

“What are you doing?” The question is hardly more than breath, and Charlee brushes a hand down Alex’s back in response.

“Making the world go away.”

“Oh.”

“Alex?”

Alex’s breath is hot against Charlee’s face, bitter. “Charlee.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Alex’s sharp intake of breath comes only seconds before her lips press gently to Charlee’s forehead. “So am I.”

Silence envelops them as they remain wrapped around one another, and despite Alex not moving or making a sound, Charlee can feel her tears soaking the pillow beneath their cheeks.

“Cam’s bringing pizza,” she says after a while, giving a soft tug to Alex’s borrowed T-shirt.

A wet sigh slips into the space between them. “I should go.”

“Wait.” Charlee grips the shirt tightly. “Can we just stay here a little while longer?”

“We have to stop.” Alex’s voice rocks around the words like she has to force them out, like she would prefer to do anything, *anything* but stop. “We can’t keep doing this, seeing each other and touching each other like this. We have to stop.”

“I know. I *know*, but—just a little longer? Please?”

“How long?”

Charlee shifts and runs her hand from Alex’s back to her hip. Her fingertips tap over Alex’s naked thigh, evoking a gentle gasp before she latches onto Alex’s hand again.

“Until I forget,” she says, hoping Alex will understand. She wants to forget that this isn’t real, that this isn’t who they are anymore. The world will still be there when they come up for air.

Charlee knows Alex understands when she feels her nod against the pillow, their foreheads brushing. Their fingers tangle together between their bodies as they hide from the world and stare at one another in the dark, pretending for a breath in time that some things can last forever.

CHAPTER 8

“THIS IS A GOOD STEP.”

“So you’ve said.” Charlee and Gabby watched Cam plop down onto yet another mattress and spread out like a child making snow angels.

Gabby nudged Charlee with her elbow. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I’m fine, Mom.”

“So *you*’ve said.”

“You’re a doctor, Mom, but not a psychiatrist, so stop trying to analyze me. I keep saying I’m fine because I’m fine.”

“Yeah, Gabby, she’s *fine*,” Cam said from her place atop a king-size mattress. “She’ll be even finer when we get her one of these memory-foam mattresses.”

“Memory foam?” Charlee poked the mattress. Her finger sank in and left an impression that slowly faded when she pulled it back out. “Why do I need a memory-foam mattress?”

“Because you love me.”

“So, what you really want is for me to buy a mattress for you? You know you have a bed in your apartment, right?”

“But I sleep at your place more than at mine.”

“What does that say about your life, kid?” Charlee teased, sounding so much like her father, even to her own ears. She smiled to herself at the thought and noticed the tiny hint of an echoing smile on her mother’s face as well.

“It says I have a best friend who always has a stocked fridge and is down with binge-watching Netflix with me any time I want,” Cam said. “Why *wouldn’t* I always be at your place? You even rub my nubby when it’s sore.”

Charlee snorted. “That sounds vaguely dirty.”

“That sounds blatantly dirty,” Gabby said. “There’s nothing vague about it.”

Cam winked at them, cackled, then flopped onto the next bed.

“You should get the mattress you want, honey.” Gabby drew her attention back to the task at hand. “This is about you. You’re making new strides, changing things up. Getting back to being yourself.”

“To being *by* myself, you mean.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. But, yes, it applies.”

“I’m just getting a new bed, Mom. It’s not a big deal.”

“And turning your bedroom into a studio,” Cam said from her new position, curled up in a ball on a pillow-top queen. “Which you still haven’t let me see, by the way.”

“It’s a work in progress.” Charlee turned her back to them and focused on the mattress nearest her.

Her stomach curled in on itself as she thought of the locked door in her loft. Lying to them was hard, but Charlee could no longer take Gabby's sad looks or Cam's late-night motivational speeches, which, depending on her mood, ran the range of everything from holding on, to letting go, to getting back out there, to Cam's own rendition of "Independent Women" by Destiny's Child.

They worried about her being all "doom and gloom," and Charlee hated to make them worry. She wasn't ready to start dating again, but she thought maybe this one small step would be enough to make them think she was finally starting to heal enough to set her family at ease.

"Besides," she said, "an artist's process is private, so her workspace should be too."

"Yeah, but you'll let me see it eventually, right?"

Charlee pointed toward another queen-size mattress two sets down. "What about that one?"

Distracted, Cam quickly moved over and crawled on top of it. "Hell yes," she said, sinking down into the mattress with a sigh. "Good choice."

"Good. Let's go with this one, then. We've been to three stores already. I'm tired of looking."

Gabby smiled. "I'm glad we were able to make a decision today."

"It's not like she really had a choice." Cam waved her hand at the sales rep across the store to call him over. "She already got rid of her other mattress. She can't sleep on the floor."

Charlee laughed, the sound hollow in her chest and atop her tongue, and tried not to think about all the things she wasn't saying, all the things they didn't know.



The silence in the loft is deafening as Chris stands across from Charlee, his eyes wet and bloodshot, and gapes at her. She feels uncomfortable, breathless as she holds his gaze and waits, waits for him to say something. She'd expected the anger, the confusion. What she hadn't expected was for it to pass so quickly, to dissipate in minutes, to be replaced with nothing but this tense, weighted, *quiet* hurt.

"I don't understand," he says after what feels like hours.

Charlee shifts on her feet across from the man who has shared her life for the last ten months. "I'm so sorry."

"Why her? Wh—" He runs a hand through his hair, down his face. "What is she to you?"

She doesn't know how to answer, doesn't know that she *should* answer. Telling Chris that this decision had something to do with Alex hadn't been part of the plan. But he'd guessed. He called her on it, on how different things had been between them since that night in the gallery—how little she contacted him, how she avoided his touch, how she avoided sharing his bed, or letting him share hers.

She's spent too many years lying about this. Too many years holding the truth in. "Everything," she says after a moment. Chris deserves the truth. "She's everything."

"Everything?" A bitter, broken laugh barrels free. "She's *everything*? Then what the hell am I, Charlee? A way to kill time?"

"No," Charlee says. "*No*, Chris. That's not what I meant. You are special to me."

"But Alex is everything."

“It’s complicated,” Charlee says. “It was different with her. What we had was—”

“Everything. Yeah.” Chris uses the neck of his red cotton T-shirt to wipe at his cheeks before letting it fall, slightly rumpled, back into place. “Then tell me this, Charlee. Why didn’t I even know she existed?”

Charlee stares at him for a moment, unsure of how to answer, but Chris doesn’t give her the opportunity.

“I get that you two had a relationship and it was great. She was your first love. I *get* that.” He steps toward her and reaches for her hand. “I get that seeing her again is overwhelming and you’re feeling the rush of that, but that’s *all* it is, Charlee. It’s adrenaline. Nostalgia.” His voice cracks again as he clutches her hand, and Charlee closes her eyes at the sound of it. “It’s *temporary*.”

“It’s not temporary, Chris.” Charlee pulls her hand from his. “I’m sorry, but this isn’t going to pass.”

“We’ve been together ten, almost *eleven* months, and her name has never even come up. Not *once*. Don’t you think that means something?” He turns from her, pacing. “And you’ve obviously been fine without her. It’s been five or six years. I don’t know. But you’ve been fine without her, so she can’t be *that* important. I mean, you still go out. You still have fun. You haven’t fallen apart, Charlee. You have a life. A *good* life.”

“I know I have a life,” Charlee says. “I’m not saying I *can’t* live without Alex. I can. I’ve done it for years now, and I did it for years before I met her. I’m saying I don’t *want* to live without her. I can have a life without her, but it’s not the life I want.”

Charlee runs a hand through her hair, frustrated, unsure of how to make him understand. She glances toward her studio, feels her stomach lurch. After a moment, though, she sighs and motions for Chris to follow her. She grabs her key ring from the hook by the studio door and unlocks the padlock. Opens the door and steps out of the way.

“Go ahead,” she says. “See for yourself.”

Chris stands frozen outside the studio for a moment, his gaze darting back and forth between Charlee and the open door. “You’ve never let me in there before.”

“I know, but you need to see it.”

Chris hesitates only a moment longer before stepping past her into the small studio. A second later, Charlee hears his small intake of breath. She steps in beside him, sees his mouth hanging open as he takes in the room.

Canvases of various sizes adorn the walls, the same sad, lovely face staring out from most of them and interspersed between newer, commissioned works and pieces for the gallery. Old photographs and playbills are tacked to a large corkboard mounted over Charlee’s supplies table. Pieces of Charlee’s past have been frozen in time and color: Vinny and Alex laughing together, Cam pointing to her name in the playbill of the university’s spring showcase, Charlee wrapped in Alex’s arms and pressed against Alex’s lips. Mementos are stacked about, placed wherever space is available: old pieces of jewelry, a T-shirt from an Alanis Morissette concert Alex gushed about for weeks,

souvenirs from spur-of-the-moment road trips, and sticky notes still sporting the loopy handwriting of her former lover.

Alexandra Woodson's green eyes haunt from nearly every surface, in pictures and paintings, doodles and drawings, and in the largest depiction of her, which hangs just over a full-sized mattress shoved into the back corner of the studio. Dark gray sheets and two worn pillows decorate the bed where Charlee sleeps when she's home alone, the bed she swears still holds Alex's scent.

Stepping into this room is like stepping back in time. It's a way for her to disappear into the past every chance she gets, and she knows. She knows what it must look like to someone who can't see inside her, to someone who doesn't—who *can't* understand—but Charlee hasn't felt like herself in so terribly long. All these little pieces, all these memories—they're reminders of when she was truly happy, when she knew who she was and where she was headed. When everything was as it was supposed to be. Surrounding herself with all these pieces, with the past, with *Alex*—makes her feel connected and inspired, creative and *alive*. Even when it hurts, it makes her feel like she's home.

"I never told you about her because I never talk about her." Charlee crosses her arms and leans against the open doorway. "I never talk about her because it *hurts* to talk about her. It hurts because I still want her. I never stopped wanting her. We had a future planned. We had a life we were supposed to live together, but everything just got so messed up, and then..."

Her breath stutters between her teeth, stings in her throat as she blinks away tears. "When things fell apart, it wasn't like a breakup for me. It was a loss, like losing a part of myself, because she wasn't just my first love. She was my soul mate. She *is* my soul mate, and it's impossible to explain what it feels like to have that space inside you filled up so *completely* and then have it drained out again."

"This is why you never let anyone come in here." Chris stares into the room. His lips are still parted, eyes wet, and the sight of it makes Charlee feel sick and guilty. "I thought you loved me."

"I do." She wraps her arms tighter around herself, a brief comfort. "I do love you, Chris, but not—" "Not the way you love her."

She blows a cool breath up toward her burning eyes. "I wanted to," she says. "I *tried* to, but I could never make myself give her up. I could never make myself give all of *this* up. The life we had together and the life we were supposed to have together." She waves a hand, indicating the messy room. "A part of me never stopped hoping she would come home so we could just pick up where we left off. Part of me never stopped believing she would."

Glancing around the room, she lingers on little pieces. She bites the inside of her cheek until she tastes the faint hint of blood. "I'm so sorry," she says in a whisper. "I never should've gotten involved with someone, but I wanted to try. I wanted to feel something again. God, I was *desperate* to feel something again." Tears finally break, drip down and over her chin, disappearing in their descent to the floor. "And you were so sweet to me. You *are*, and I wanted to feel the way for you that I do for her, but I just can't. I can't, and I'm sorry."

They stand together in silence, Chris's back to her and Charlee's heart in her throat. When he finally

does turn, he moves swiftly and surprises her by gently cupping her cheeks and leaning his forehead against hers.

“I’m in love with you, Charlee,” he says, tilting up just enough to kiss the corner of her mouth. He holds her face in his hands as if he’s trying to memorize the softness of her skin, and Charlee closes her eyes. She lifts her hands to wrap her fingers around his arms, runs her thumbs over the insides of his wrists, and does her best to hold onto this moment. This goodbye.

“No one else is ever going to be enough for you, are they?” Charlee feels the break in his voice as if it’s inside her, cracking open her heart in a way she knows will leave a scar. “*I won’t ever be enough for you.*”

She releases Chris’s wrist to rest one hand on his chest, just over his kind heart. “I’m so sorry,” she says again, and she hopes he knows how much she means it, how long those words will echo inside her.

CHAPTER 9

“STEALING MY FAVORITE MUG AGAIN, I see.”

Alex sipped at her freshly brewed coffee and hummed. “It’s my favorite too.” She turned the mug in her hands to look at it. A cartoon lightbulb looked back at her, two squiggly arms stretching over its brilliant yellow head like they were holding up the phrase scrawled above them. Alex chuckled to herself as she read it, then looked up to find Drew smiling at her.

“Can I get a watt watt?”

They said the words in unison, and Drew’s smile widened. “Never gets old,” he said, ruffling Alex’s sleep-mussed hair before moving around her to grab a glass from the corner cabinet.

Charlee walked into the kitchen, rubbing her tired eyes, and made her way toward the refrigerator. “You two are total nerds.” She took a glass from her dad as she passed and filled it with the freshly squeezed organic orange juice her mother insisted on buying every week from Whole Foods.

“Don’t be jealous, Charlee,” Alex said.

“Jealous of what?” Charlee smacked a brief kiss to Alex’s cheek and shuffled over to the island to sit down. “Ridiculous puns that would only make a ten-year-old laugh?”

“Wow. I must be a genius to be in college at only ten years old. That’s impressive.”

“You think *that’s* impressive?” Drew poured some orange juice for himself and took a sip. “Try having a wife and a kid and being a full-time engineer at only ten years old. *That’s* impressive.”

“That must be incredibly challenging, sir,” Alex said.

“Yes, miss, it truly is.” With a dramatic sigh, he held up his juice. “Orange you glad you don’t have to deal with that, Charlee?”

Alex snorted into her coffee.

Charlee rolled her eyes. “I hate both of you.”

“When I die, I’m willing my coffee mug to Alex,” Drew said, grinning. “She can torture you with it ’til death do you part.”

Alex laid a hand over her heart. “I’m touched.”

“You should be.”

“What are you leaving in your will for me?”

Drew tilted his head as if pondering Charlee’s question. “I’ll will Alex to you.”

“Oh, lucky you, Charlee,” Alex said with a rare toothy grin, and Charlee sighed.

Keeping her eyes on her girlfriend, she said, “You can’t will Alex to me, Dad. She’s already mine.”

Alex winked at her over the rim of her mug, the warm ceramic pressed to her chin as she held it just under her nose. She swore, in that moment, that coffee and home smelled exactly the same.



Alex rests her forehead against the wooden door of an upper cabinet, her stomach touching the countertop, and stares down into her coffee. She traces along the worn image of the cartoon lightbulb, years of oily skin having eroded away bits of yellow and black. The ceramic is hot under her fingertips, almost burning, but she doesn't pull away.

That burn is a searing brand, keeping her firmly in the present even as every cell in her body yearns to be yanked back into the past.

Her body feels heavy, like there are stones on her chest and chains tied to her ankles. For days, every movement has felt slow and sluggish, like she's trying to wade through rapidly drying cement. Every thought feels as if it is being run through a sieve. The mushy pulp of the person she used to be presses through against her will, thoughts of Charlee always seeping in between the wires—dominating, surviving. Every inch of her is eaten up with *used to be* and *almost* and *forbidden*, and her skin is fucking *crawling*.

“Hey.”

Alex closes her eyes at the sound of Kari's voice. She clutches onto her mug and lets out a long, quiet breath before summoning every ounce of energy she has left in her bones and standing up straight. Turning around, she forces the hard line of her lips into a partial smile, and says, “Morning.”

In the open space of their small kitchen, they've been flung apart across entire galaxies. They float in their opposite orbits, staring at each other from afar, and Alex feels sick to her stomach. When had she untethered herself? How had she gotten this far?

“You're up early,” Kari says, rubbing at her right eye under the thick, orange-rimmed, square glasses she wears when she doesn't have her contacts in. She's dressed in a pair of Alex's plaid boxer briefs, which hug her wide hips so tightly they strain, and a loose-fitting white cotton T-shirt. Despite this having always been Alex's favorite way to see her, she can't bring herself to soak in the sight today. Her gaze darts around as if she is desperate for something, *anything* else to absorb. “The sun's not even up yet.”

Alex nods curtly but says nothing, still clutching her mug like a lifeline. She holds it just over her chest, trying to warm a path through the icy walls she sculpted under her ribs sometime between the whisper of Charlee's breath against her cheeks and now.

“I guess you've got a lot to get done with the banquet coming up.” Kari shifts on her socked feet and uses her index finger to scratch at a place behind her ear. Visibly uncomfortable.

Alex clears her throat, skin still crawling. The sensation only intensifies with every shift of Kari's feet. Mutual discomfort and a tense strain have spawned between them over the last few months, like a cancer hidden just beneath her exterior.

“Yes,” she says. “This is the first big event for the new branch, so it has to be flawless. That means extra hours for me, and the holidays certainly aren't helping with lightening the load. Scheduling's a bit of a nightmare right now.”

Kari crosses to the coffee machine, skirting around Alex. “Are we still having dinner with your sister next week?” She grabs a mug from the cabinet and sets it up for a new brew.

A quiet groan escapes Alex as she moves out of Kari's way. "I completely forgot about that. I'll have to call her later today to see if she's finalized any plans. It might be better to cancel."

"I really don't want to cancel." Kari turns and leans her back against the counter. "It's been months. She lives less than five miles from us, and I still haven't met her."

Alex closes her eyes and lifts a hand to knead at one aching temple. "Fine. All right."

"Alex."

"No, you're right. I'll make it work."

"Thank you."

Alex hums in response and heads toward the living room. "I've got to go."

"I'm guessing you'll be home late?"

"Most likely." Alex glances back to see that Kari has followed her into the living room, and the disappointment in her dark eyes is as clear as the morning light spilling through the windows as the sun begins to rise. Both are blinding.

Alex places her mug down on an end table and grabs her coat from the rack on the back of the front door. She dons it along with gloves and a hat. Her gloved fingers tremble when she picks up her coffee again, and she turns her attention back to her girlfriend. Her stomach sinks down into her knees. "I'm sorry, Kari."

Every word feels sticky between her lips, sticky with the present and the past and the static cling of Charlee's sweaty fingers at the small of her back. More than a week has passed, and Alex still feels like she is hiding under a quilt in Charlee's childhood bedroom. Pretending.

When Alex turns to face her again, Kari's gaze is a mess of all the things that have gone unsaid, all the things Alex knows she wants to say, all the things Alex knows will break their fragile structure and teach them the catastrophe of collapse.

Kari's voice is nearly inaudible when she says, "I miss you."

Alex swallows thickly and forces a smile. "I know," she says. "But things will go back to normal once the banquet is done." Her grip on the doorknob is painful as she steps through the frame. "All of this will be over before you know it."



"Is there a reason you're calling me at eight-fucking-a.m., or do you just want me to hate you?"

"I'm calling to remind you about dinner next week." As she swivels in her office chair, Alex stares down at the latest copy of the banquet guest list. The seating chart is tucked just under it, both having changed three damned times already. "Thursday night. Seven o'clock at the Oyster Bar."

"Alex, I literally can't even function right now."

"Fine." Alex huffs into the phone. "I'll text you the information, then."

"Better."

"It's your responsibility to mark it on your calendar, though, Vinaya."

"Yes, Mother. Thank you, Mother. Go away now, Mother."

"I'm serious," Alex says. "This dinner is the last thing in the world I have time for right now—"

“Gee, thanks.”

“—*but* Kari is determined, so making this happen for her is the least I can do.”

“Damn.” Vinny’s voice is muffled as if her face is still half-buried in her pillow. “Someone in the doghouse?”

Alex turns in her chair to put her back to her work, tired of looking at it. She stares at the back wall instead, empty but for a few photographs from various successful events she planned and hosted. She hasn’t had much time to focus on decorating, and she never much cared for it anyway. Work should feel like work, not home, and a cluttered office is an unproductive one. “I just haven’t had much time for her lately,” she says. “This banquet has been demanding.”

“You sure that’s all there is to it?”

“Yes.” She doesn’t manage to sound quite as convincing as she intends, and Alex hopes Vinny is too tired to press her on it.

But she knows better.

“Sure you’re not avoiding her?”

Alex scoffs, despite the guilty pulse in her chest. “Of course I’m not avoiding her. Why would I be avoiding her?”

“Maybe because you almost kissed your ex and then laid in bed with her for an hour in your underwear, crying about the past. I don’t know, Alex. Maybe *that*. You tell me.”

Alex squeezes the phone in her hand until her fingers hurt. “Vinaya.”

“Alexandra.”

“Stop.”

“You tell your girlfriend about that yet?”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“Seven o’clock on Thursday,” Alex says, and she doesn’t give her sister a chance to respond before she slams her thumb over the End Call button and thankfully hears the line go dead.



“Nice ass.”

Charlee jerks and nearly topples over from where she’s bent in front of one of her display cases, wiping down the glass. She’s been cleaning for hours. Vinny is there when she turns around, in a pair of leather chaps over jeans, a leather jacket over a red top, and her trademark black motorcycle boots. Her blue-streaked, dark-blond hair rests in a knot at the nape of her neck, and her helmet is propped under her right arm. She leans against the wall just inside the main door of the gallery, one leg propped up and a smirk settled on her lips. Charlee rolls her eyes at the sight.

“Really, Vin?”

“Really, Char?” She kicks off the wall and makes her way across the room. Glances around the place, taking it in. “So, I’m finally seeing the inside of the great CPC.”

“Charlee Parker Creations at your service,” Charlee says, motioning for Vinny to follow her to the

small minibar at the back of the gallery's showroom. "Something to drink?"

"It's one in the afternoon."

Charlee arches a brow. "Something to drink?"

Vinny laughs and points to the small refrigerator just behind the bar. "Tell me you've got a beer in that mini fridge."

"Of course." Charlee grabs a bottle, pops the top off with the bottle opener built into the bar, and passes the drink to her guest. "So, we're back to friendly visits now that your sister is back?"

"To be fair, you're the one who told me to stop calling and coming around." Vinny drops onto a barstool and sets her helmet to the side.

Charlee reaches across the bar for Vinny's beer. She smacks her lips after a quick sip. Avoids Vinny's gaze. "I know. I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be. You did what you had to do. It wasn't easy for you, I know."

Charlee grabs a towel from a drawer and wipes her brow. A quick look down confirms that it creates a ridiculous bulge between her breasts when she stuffs it down into the front pocket of her denim overalls. "That's an understatement."

"Okay, so it totally sucked for both of us," Vinny says. "But still, I get it. I got it then, and I get it now." When Charlee doesn't look up at her, Vinny taps the bar with the palm of her hand. "Stop moping."

"There are just a lot of things I think I should have done differently. I think if I could go back—"

"Don't do that," Vinny says. "Thinking like that will eat you up if you let it. Focus on what's in front of you."

"You're in front of me."

A wide grin stretches Vinny's lips. "Exactly."

Charlee shakes her head and laughs. "What are you doing here?"

"Fine. Truth time." Vinny drums her hands against the bar. "I'm here because I'm wondering why the hell my sister called me this morning to remind me about dinner with her and Kari next week."

Charlee does her best to ignore the lurch in her stomach. "Well, using basic logic, I'm going to assume it was so you wouldn't forget about dinner next week."

"Obviously. I meant *why* am I having dinner with Alex and Kari?"

Hearing their names paired together claws at Charlee's ears, itches at her flesh. She tries not to feel so affected by it, tries not to let it soak in and sting, but it does. It does. Her stomach rolls without her consent, and her chest aches with the same raw rebellion.

She forces herself not to recede into the feeling, but she is rapidly approaching her limit with this conversation despite it having only just begun. "Because humans require sustenance in order to survive," she says. "And while it may be questionable, given *your* otherworldly cheekbones and Alex's weaponized jawline, I'm pretty sure you're both actually human." She pauses a moment, and when she speaks again, there is the slightest bitter edge to her tone. "I can't speak for Kari, though. I don't know anything about her other than that she has great taste in art. And in women."

“Come on, Charlee.” Vinny taps the bottom of her beer bottle against the top of the bar. “I’m asking you *why* Alex is still trying to get me to meet Kari.”

“I don’t know!” Charlee snaps before clamping her mouth closed, instantly regretting the outburst. “Why...?” She huffs. Plants her hands on her hips. “Why are you doing this? Talking to me about this? Why not Alex?”

Vinny’s expression softens. “Because you’re the only one who can tell me why you still haven’t told Alex that you broke up with Chris.”

Charlee digs her fingers into her hips and tilts her head back. Fixes her gaze on the vaulted ceiling. She can’t stand the way Vinny is looking at her, like she knows—she *knows*—and she does. She knows way too much.

“You’re the only one who can tell me why you still haven’t told Alex you want to be with her.”

Charlee grits her teeth and rocks on the balls of her feet. She blows a gust of air up toward her eyes. “Stop.”

“You’re the only one who can tell me why I have to go meet Alex’s girlfriend,” Vinny says, pushing it. “Because the last time I checked, I already *met* her girlfriend. I met her years ago, in fact. She was a pain in my ass then, and she’s a pain in my ass now.”

A shallow breath stutters its way through Charlee’s lips as she dips her head back down and braces her hands against the edge of the bar. “What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to say what you feel.”

“I feel like—”

“Not to me. To Alex. You need to tell Alex.”

“I can’t do that.” Charlee moves around the bar and heads back toward the front of the gallery. She doesn’t wait for Vinny to follow, and silently she hopes she won’t. But heavy boots thud against her polished floor as expected, and Vinny is right on her heels.

“Why not?”

Charlee retrieves her cleaning supplies from the floor. “Please just go home, Vinny.”

“I don’t disappear just because you want me to, and neither do your feelings.”

“She knows!” Charlee throws her supplies to the ground again and whirls around. Her face feels hot. Too hot. The heat spreads down her neck, through her chest, and into her stomach until she feels flushed and nauseated, until she feels like she might explode. Part of her wishes she could. Disintegrate into dust. Be nothing but air. Then maybe this weight, this awful weight, would simply fall away and she wouldn’t have to feel like this anymore. “She *knows*.”

“She needs to hear it.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Charlee says. “She doesn’t need to know that I broke up with Chris or that I still want to be with her or any of it. I made a choice for myself. I’m not going to make a choice for her. Our history is heavy enough. I’m not going to put my feelings on her and make her feel like she has to choose right now. Or *ever*. If she wants me, she can decide that for herself without any influence from me.”

“I’m not telling you to propose,” Vinny says. “I’m just telling you to open up a bit. Tell *her* that it isn’t over for you, that you still have feelings for her. It’s an open door. That’s it. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Because?”

“Because I can’t!” Her voice breaks, rough at the edges and weak in the middle. Frustration claws up the length of her throat. “You think I can just call Alex up and say, ‘Hey, I have feelings for you’? You think it’s that easy? That I can just graze the tip of the iceberg and not sink? Not completely fucking *destroy* myself?”

“Charlee.”

“No, you want to know why I can’t tell her, Vinny?” A strangled, humorless, *helpless* laugh barrels through her lips, its final note crashing into a restrained sob. “I can’t tell her because if I open my mouth, it’s not going to be ‘I still have feelings for you.’ It’s not going to be easy or simple or something that can be stuffed into a neat little package she can set aside to deal with later. It’s going to be everything. It’s going to be ‘I don’t want to be your friend. I can’t be your friend. It’s *killing* me to be your friend, because I don’t want a friendship with you.’”

Charlee drags in a wet breath, tears pushing through her lashes. Closing her eyes, she imagines Alex is right in front of her. “I don’t want a few stolen moments in a bar or awkward double dates or heated glances across the room. I don’t want a history that we never talk about or all these tiny broken moments. I want a lifetime. I want *nothing less* than a lifetime.”

Her knees shake like they might buckle beneath her, but Charlee manages to stay on her feet. She opens her eyes, blinks away her blurry vision, and looks at Vinny. “Because that’s what we promised each other.” Charlee wipes angrily at her cheeks and swoops to pick up her supplies again. “That’s why I can’t tell her what I want.” Her voice falls flat, melts into an almost whisper. Defeated. “Because I want things that aren’t mine to want anymore, things that haven’t been mine in years.”

Crossing the short space between them, Vinny places a hand on Charlee’s shoulder. “Maybe that’s why you *should* tell her. What’s the point of a lifetime if you never actually live it?”

“I can’t. I won’t be that selfish.”

She sighs. “Okay.” She turns and heads back to the minibar, grabs her helmet, and makes her way toward the front door.

A rush of winter air blows in as she opens it, and Charlee shivers.

“Let me ask you this, though.” Vinny pauses in the doorway to put her helmet on and secure the strap. “You broke up with Chris because you didn’t think it was fair to be with him when you’re still in love with Alex, right?”

Charlee nods.

“So, what’s more selfish?” Vinny pins her with a challenging stare. “Telling Alex how you feel so

she knows she at least has a chance with you? Or *not* telling Alex how you feel and letting her think there's no hope, so she stays in a relationship with someone who deserves way fucking better than being her second choice?"

Charlee gapes. She can't summon any words to her lips, can't make her voice form around empty air, but Vinny isn't looking for an answer. She's driven home her point. Charlee can feel its sharp tip slicing through the muscle in her chest.

"There are more hearts at stake here than just yours and Alex's." Without another word, she walks out of the gallery and into the falling snow.

CHAPTER 10

“TAKE THIS OFF.”

Charlee couldn't bring herself to care that their private study room happened to be in a very public campus library or that the door didn't lock. She let Alex yank her shirt off and toss it aside, then Charlee bunched up Alex's own shirt so there wouldn't be a barrier between them. The static on Alex's skin, popping against Charlee's stomach, made her head spin and her spine tingle, and Charlee swore in that moment she'd never wanted anything more than she wanted this—this touch, this girl she had only just met. She felt drunk with the wanting.

She closed her eyes as Alex kissed down her neck and across her collarbone, lingered over the swells of her breasts. She wrestled her hand down into Alex's pants and found her slick and wanting. Everything about the feel of her, the way she clenched around Charlee's fingers, felt both new and familiar, like she'd mapped Alex's body a thousand times before but always found her surprising. Every breathy moan was a hidden treasure, every tremor a landmark, and Charlee was alive with how it felt to discover her.

When she felt fingertips brush her stomach at the top of her jeans, she jerked. Her hips twitched. A quiet, guttural sound crawled through her lips when Alex slipped under the material a second later and swiped through the moisture collecting between Charlee's thighs.

“Oh God,” Charlee said, breathless.

Alex dipped into her, just the tips of her fingers. Once. Twice. When she thrust in fully, Charlee clamped down around her and let out a loud moan, muffled by Alex's other hand. At the first delicious curl of slender fingers, she felt ready to burst.

As their breaths puffed, hot and ragged, against lips and cheeks and chins, they rocked against one another, and Charlee had to swallow down a sudden lump in her throat. Alex was watching her, her green eyes searching, steady. Charlee felt exposed in a way she hadn't expected to, like more than just her shirt had been stripped away.

Alex climaxed before her, moments only, and Charlee felt every perfect tremor. When she finished seconds after, Alex leaned up and pressed a whisper of a kiss to her bare shoulder, then her neck, then the corner of her mouth. Each was surprisingly tender, and suddenly everything about the moment felt raw and sensitive in a way Charlee thought it shouldn't. But it did. It did.

There were tiny aftermath echoes in her thighs and Alex's breathing in her ears. The small room's silence was wired, electric, and they were still buried inside each other.

“Wow,” Charlee said. Her pulse was a marching band, drumming its way from inch to inch. She could feel it in her thighs, in her stomach. It hammered between her ears.

Alex didn't say anything but simply nodded—one little dip of her chin—and the moment was

broken. All the awkward reality of what had just occurred began to seep rapidly into the room. Charlee felt it like a wave washing over them.

When they pulled out of one another, Alex rose shakily to her feet, straightened her clothes, and settled back into her chair. Silent. The room became unbearably hot as Charlee followed her lead, putting her shirt on and grabbing her books. She lingered by the desk, then near the door.

“Okay,” she said, unsure of how to maneuver in the aftermath. She wiped a hand through the sweat on her forehead and took a breath to try to calm her heart. It still felt wild beneath her ribs. “So, you want me to go or...?”

Alex didn’t look at her. She took shallow breaths, still visibly winded, and her fingers trembled over pages Charlee knew she likely wouldn’t be reading anytime soon. “If you want to.” She shrugged a single shoulder. “Um, yes, yeah. Maybe that would be best.”

“Okay, cool.” Charlee let out a strangled little laugh that she internally cursed herself for. “I mean, not *cool*, but just, you know, that’s fine. You probably want to study, so...” She shifted from foot to foot. Rubbed one sweaty palm on her pants. “Anyway, so, um, I’ll see you around campus, then?”

Alex glanced briefly over. Their eyes met in one tense, almost questioning look, and then Charlee stepped out of the stifling room.

She made a mistake, though, leaving so quickly. With so little information. She spent the next two weeks unable to do anything but hope she might randomly bump into Alex again. She had no contact information for her. Nothing. Not even a last name. In fact, the only things Charlee *did* know about her were that she was valedictorian of her high school class, she was *not* a theatre student, and she whimpered when she came.

So she was stuck with hoping Alex might randomly pop into her path so Charlee could tell her all the ways she had occupied her mind since their spontaneous tryst in the university library. No such luck, though, and Alex seemed to be actively avoiding the library, or at least the third floor, because Charlee had spent quite a lot of time lurking there and had yet to spot a snarky brunette with a weakness for banter and blondes.

She thought she saw her once. Just a glimpse. Walking into Rich Hall only a week or so after their encounter. It wasn’t Charlee’s dormitory, so she didn’t follow. But she spent the next week and a half walking by Rich Hall every chance she got. Getting shit for it from her roommate every other day.

“Why didn’t you get her number?”

“I don’t know, Cam.” They walked together toward the Commons, the early morning breeze nice against Charlee’s face. “It just didn’t seem like a good time.”

“Post-sex isn’t a good time to ask for someone’s number? Since when?”

“Since it was more than what it was supposed to be. I think.”

“Meaning?”

“I don’t know,” Charlee said. “We had a moment.”

“Like a real moment? Or like a moment you thought was a moment but wasn’t actually a moment?”

“I’d answer you, but it’s early, and I’m too tired to understand anything that just came out of your face.”

“You know, sometimes when you’re all high on your orgasm and out of breath, you *think* you’re having a moment, so you’re like, ‘Oh my God, this could be love,’ only to realize later that it was actually your vagina having a moment, not you.”

Charlee shook her head. “I don’t think so.” She let out a sleepy laugh. “It felt real.”

They entered the Commons, and Charlee nearly tripped over her own feet. There was Alex. Sitting across the way by a large window. Eating a banana.

When Charlee stopped, Cam smacked into her back. “Dude, you can’t just hit the brakes like that.”

“That’s her,” Charlee said, doing her best to motion toward Alex with her head, because thrusting out her arm and pointing seemed a touch too dramatic for seven a.m.

As she took a bite of her banana, Alex looked up, and their gazes locked. Charlee swore she could hear the other girl choke all the way across the building. She started to make her way over, but Alex nearly dropped her breakfast in her effort to bolt out of the nearest exit.

“Hey!” Charlee took off after her, suddenly energized. When she rushed back out into the warm fall morning, though, she found Alex was nowhere in sight. “What the hell? Can this girl teleport? She just freakin’ disappeared.”

“Looks like it,” Cam said, walking up beside her and clapping her on the shoulder. “You got it on with a bona-fide wizard, dude. Congrats.”

Charlee laughed despite the pain in the pit of her stomach and let Cam lead her back inside.

After another week, Charlee began to feel discouraged. She didn’t know why she cared so much, but she did. Her stomach hadn’t stopped swooping since the library, and she had to know if what she felt was genuine, if it was mutual. But Alex certainly wasn’t making it easy. Charlee briefly considered drastic measures, like drawing up a rough sketch of the girl and posting signs around campus with a caption that read: *If you’re this girl I had sex with, I think I might love you, so could you maybe stop avoiding me, please?*

But then there she was again. Alex. Walking down the sidewalk just ahead of her. It was early evening. Little traffic was milling about campus, and most of it was likely headed home or to a late class. Alex disappeared inside the building for the School of Hospitality Administration, and Charlee took off after her. When she caught up, she didn’t think before grabbing the girl’s arm and yanking her into the nearest room, an unoccupied classroom.

Alex squeaked. “What the hell?”

The lights were off, and Charlee barely got the door closed behind them before she felt her arm being jerked and then twisted behind her. In a matter of seconds, Charlee found herself face-first against a wall with Alex pinned to her back.

“Holy shit.” Charlee grunted. “You’re a ninja.”

She heard the tiniest intake of breath. “Charlee?”

“Hi,” she said, cheek squished against the wall. “I’ve been looking for you.”

The strain in her arm eased as Alex instantly released her and stepped back. When Charlee turned around, there was already half a classroom of space between them. Alex was straightening her shirt

and the strap of the bag on her shoulder. She looked uncomfortable.

“Sorry, I—”

“—obviously took a self-defense class at some point,” Charlee said, rubbing her shoulder.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, totally. It was my fault. I kind of just grabbed you. Sorry about that.”

“Did you follow me?”

“You’ve been avoiding me.” Charlee chewed her bottom lip.

Alex stiffened. “No.”

“Really?” Charlee gave her a knowing look. “You choked on a banana when you saw me and then teleported.”

Alex’s brow quirked up. “So first I’m an asshole, and now I’m what—a witch?”

“If the disappearing shoe fits,” Charlee said, and the barest hint of a smile touched Alex’s lips.

They stared at each other for a long time. Charlee could tell Alex wanted to bolt again and assumed she had a class, so she definitely had an excuse. But Alex didn’t move. That fact made Charlee’s chest burn with hope.

“Why have you been avoiding me?”

“I don’t know you.”

“Okay, but we—”

“I’m aware.”

“I know it got a little awkward after, but you don’t have to avoid me.”

“I’m not sure what you want me to say.”

“Maybe just how you feel.” Charlee shrugged, unsure of how to proceed. So she rambled. “I don’t want you to feel like you owe me anything, like a date or whatever, because you don’t. I don’t expect anything from you. I promise. And if you want me to go, I will, but if you’re just avoiding me because you think it’ll be awkward—”

“Why have you been looking for me?”

Charlee took a deep breath. “I can’t stop thinking about you,” she said, cheeks flushing with heat. “About, you know.”

She swore she saw Alex’s hard, curious gaze soften a bit. “Yes.”

“I just wanted to know if you, if there’s any chance”—Charlee shifted and rubbed at her shoulder again. —“if there’s any chance you feel the same way. I mean, if there’s a chance you might, you know, be thinking about me too.”

“There is,” Alex said after a short silence, glancing toward the floor. She cleared her throat before meeting Charlee’s gaze again. “You’re right. I *have* been avoiding you. I thought it would be uncomfortable. I don’t know.” Her shoulders seemed to cave a bit. “I see you on campus sometimes, and I think about talking to you. I wasn’t sure if I should.”

Charlee swore her heart grew three sizes. She smiled and took a step into the daunting space between them. “Alex, do you believe in love at first, um,”—her brow furrowed and she shrugged

—“first fucking?”

Alex gawked at Charlee for several silent seconds before her composure cracked entirely and a loud, echoing laugh spilled out of her. Charlee’s smile stretched until it hurt, and she crossed the room in three great strides. With a thud, Alex’s bag hit the floor as Charlee wrapped a hand around her neck and pulled her in, muffling her laughter with a searing kiss.



A familiar face greets her as she rounds into the next aisle of the supermarket. Charlee pauses only a moment before letting a wave of laughter bubble up and out. “Why am I not surprised to see you here?”

Alex visibly tries to tame a smile. “Because you’ve been following me?”

They park their carts side by side and linger. Charlee props her feet on the lower bar of her cart and leans her forearms down on the upper, like a child. “Is that right?”

“Second time this week.” Alex drops a package of crew-cut socks into her cart and leans her back against a shelf. “First at the bakery and now here. You’re following me. It’s the only explanation.”

“You’re right.” Charlee leans slightly over to peek at all the items in Alex’s cart. “Holes in your workout socks?”

“Am I that predictable?”

“Of course.”

Alex’s response is a one-shouldered shrug that causes her long, frizzy hair to slide off her shoulder and hang in her face. She tucks it back behind her ear again, revealing a small, lopsided smile that makes Charlee’s insides feel loose and liquid. “So, you were saying? Something about me being right?”

The old metal cart creaks and groans as Charlee bounces on its lower rung. “Oh, totally. I had Cam plant a tracker in your phone.” Her own messy hair sticks out from beneath a knitted beanie as blue as her eyes, poking at her cheeks and making her itch. She swats at it, annoyed. “Now I know where you are every second of every day.” She waggles her eyebrows and sings the theme music from *The Twilight Zone*.

Alex snorts. “You should have had her install a spy camera as well. Then you could see my bored expression while I hide in the bathroom at work and play games on my phone.”

“Who said she *didn’t* install one? Watching you play games on your phone while you pee is my new favorite kink.”

“Is this your idea of flattery?”

“Why?” Charlee narrows her eyes. “Would you be susceptible to my flattery? Because if yes, then yes. If not, then no, I’m absolutely not trying to flatter you.”

“It needs work.”

Propping up one elbow, Charlee rests her chin in her palm. Her stomach jitters as she looks Alex over, her head flooding with pictures of the past. She thinks of Alex wrapped in her T-shirt, tucked in her bed, makeup runny and thighs bare. Charlee’s voice comes out soft, intimate. “How are you?”

A throat clears from behind her, making her jump. An older woman is posted up in the aisle, lips pursed in an obvious sign of disapproval, and her cart only an inch or so away from smacking into Charlee's ass.

"Oh, sorry," Charlee says with a little laugh. "I guess you need through." She moves her cart up and jerks it as far to the side as she can get it. Once the woman has passed, Charlee steps over to lean on Alex's cart instead. "Not the first time an old woman has given us the stink-eye. Probably won't be the last."

"True," Alex says. "We should probably stop occupying the aisle, though."

Charlee's stomach sinks. "Yeah, I guess."

As if she can see through Charlee, see inside to the sinking, Alex says, "I'm sure we'll bump into each other again soon."

The words jump from Charlee's lips before she even considers the consequences. "Or we could plan something."

"We should drink dessert wine more often," Charlee called from the couch. "It's delicious."

The dishes clanked against the sink as Alex scraped them clean and set them in. "It's a little sweet."

"It's a *lot* sweet. That's why it's so delicious."

Alex finished storing their leftovers in the fridge, then crossed the loft to collapse next to Charlee. A pathetic groan escaped her as she untied her pajama pants and rubbed her stomach. She was not entirely sure she would survive the night. "Why did you let me eat so much?"

"It's Christmas." Charlee ran her hand through Alex's hair and gave it a gentle tug. "Pretty sure it's tradition to eat until you want to die."

They stretched out along the full length of the couch, and Alex crawled up Charlee's body before dropping on top of her like a stone. She wrestled her arms up under Charlee's back and buried her face in her chest. Breathing in the familiar, comforting scent of her, Alex nuzzled her nose against a naked swell of flesh poking out the top of Charlee's tank top.

"Thank you for putting the food away," Charlee said, drawing small circles with her fingers in the space between Alex's shoulder blades.

Alex could do little more than grunt, her body sluggish and likely on the verge of slipping into a coma. She managed to give Charlee a gentle squeeze, though, and shifted one socked foot up to rub it against hers.

"Sleepy?"

Another grunt, then Alex kissed Charlee's chest. Her voice was muffled against warm skin. "I love your boobs."

"Thanks. I grew them myself."

"I'm thankful for them."

"It's Christmas, babe, not Thanksgiving."

"Best Christmas present ever."

“Even better than last year, when I bought us that set of edible body paints?”

“We ran out of paint.” The image in her mind caused a pleasant tug in her lower abdomen. Charlee splotted with paint and poised on top of her, gasping as the strap-on appendage between Alex’s legs thrust up into her. Alex clenched her thighs with the recollection, smiled, and held Charlee tighter.

“Ah, and we never run out of my boobs, right?”

“They’re so abundant.”

“Does that mean I never have to get you another Christmas present? I can just be topless every Christmas, and that’ll be enough for the rest of our lives?”

“I vote yes.”

“Even when they’re sagging down to my knees?”

Alex laughed into the valley between Charlee’s breasts. “We’ll just have to get a longer couch.”

“Are you going to pass out on top of me?”

Her response was more of a *yeth* than a yes, her lips smashed against skin. She had never been more content in her life, even with an aching stomach.

“You don’t want to stay up to watch Christmas movies?”

“Sleep.”

An easy laugh made Alex’s head bounce lightly atop Charlee’s chest. “Okay.”

Alex leaned up, just long enough to kiss Charlee’s chin—the moment short and sweet—and then her lips. “I love you.”

“I know.”

“If I start to get heavy, just throw me on the floor.”

“Will do.”

Alex buried her face in Charlee’s chest again and closed her eyes. She was on the crest of sleep when Charlee spoke again. “You sure this is all you want for Christmas? Food, boobs, and a nap? That’s it?”

“Just that and forever.”

Charlee’s lips pressed against the top of her head in a loud kiss, then the warmth of a fuzzy blanket encased her as Charlee grabbed it from the back of the couch and spread it over them. The last thing Alex heard before falling asleep was a whisper.

“I can do that.”



The lights of the miniature Christmas tree twinkle from the corner, dusting the dark living room in a multicolored glow. They’re the only flicker of movement in the otherwise still and silent room—white to blue to green to red to yellow—and Alex can’t bring herself to look away from them.

“Thank you for the flowers.”

Kari’s voice buzzes at her ear in a way that makes Alex’s jaw clench and twitch. Her skin feels tender, like her flesh has been peeled back, her nerves made vulnerable. No matter how she tries to snap herself out of the feeling, every inch of her continues to ache and itch. She can still hear the tapping of Charlee’s thumbs, the tapping of her number into Alex’s phone, and she feels exposed.

She forces the small curl of a smile to her lips but doesn't shift her gaze from the tree. White to blue to green to red to yellow. "You already thanked me."

"I know." She feels the couch cushions shift, then Kari's body heat prickles over her tender skin; it's too close. "But we said we weren't going to get each other anything, and then you surprised me with flowers. So I just wanted to tell you again."

White to blue to green to red to yellow. "You're welcome, Kar."

"Alex."

"Hm?"

An answer doesn't come for a long time, the silence only punctured by Kari's gentle breathing next to her. "Are we okay?"

It's the first time in nearly half an hour that Alex has been able to force her gaze from the changing lights. She feels like she has grown into the cushions, like there's foam between her teeth. "Of course."

Kari's eyes appear wet in the glow. "Are you sure?" She reaches out, the tips of her fingers grazing along the line of Alex's jaw. Just the hint of a touch, like she is checking to see if Alex is real, and Alex feels sick to her stomach.

The moment feels shrunken and sharp, like a jagged pill lodged in her throat and choking her until her eyes water to match her girlfriend's. "Of course," she says again, and the strangled words barely make it through. They come out sore like her skin, like her bones. Like her soul. She feels pulled open and stretched, thinned to within an inch of her life. She's so tired.

Alex turns back to the tree, takes in silent breaths of relief through her nose. White to blue to green to red to yellow. She nearly jolts when a hand cups around her cheek mere seconds before the couch dips and Kari shifts fully into Alex's lap. Warm, thick thighs straddle her own, and her mouth is covered before she can prepare herself, before she can take another breath. Before she can process.

Forcing her hands to unclench, Alex rests them on Kari's thighs. She shuts her eyes hard, breathes through the stinging, and tries to let herself fall into this, into Kari's familiar rhythm. The kiss is full and deep, and Kari's fingernails scratch at Alex's scalp in a way that makes her throat rough with sound.

Kari rubs against Alex's lower stomach, the material of her jeans made tight and straining around her rocking hips, and Alex whimpers. She shuts her eyes even tighter, and hazy images fizzle and pop in the back of her mind, steadily making their way to the forefront. Alex's eyes snap open again when she feels hands on her chest and lips on her neck and the wrong name bubbling at the back of her throat.

"Stop." She chokes out the word against Kari's lips, pulling back just enough to catch her breath. "I..."

"What is it?" Kari leans back. The dancing glow of the changing lights haloes around her head. "Are you okay?"

"I just—I'm sorry." Her voice trembles, then breaks. With one shaky hand, she cups her forehead. "I'm feeling a little dizzy."

Brushing her hand aside, Kari places her own on Alex's forehead. "You don't feel warm." Her hand slides down to curl around Alex's cheek again. "We haven't—it's been a long time since the last time we—"

"I know."

"Not since right after we moved here."

Alex wishes she could sink into the floor. "I know."

"Is it me?" Kari crumples a bit in Alex's lap. "Is it something I did? Because if it is, I wish you'd just tell me."

"It's not," Alex says, shaking her head and wrapping her hand around Kari's where it still rests against her cheek. She runs her thumb along the soft skin of her inner wrist. "It's not you. I promise. You're perfect."

Kari leans forward and rests her forehead against Alex's. "Then what is it?"

The truth sits bitterly on the back of Alex's tongue, silent. "It's just been a rough couple of months. I'm exhausted."

"You sure?"

Alex can't bring herself to lie any more than she already has, so she tilts up and presses her lips to Kari's again, a chaste, gentle kiss. "Let's go to bed."

"Okay."

When Kari shifts off Alex's lap, the glow of the tree seems brighter and more blinding than before. She reaches out for Alex's hand, and together they trudge down the hall to the bedroom. Alex empties her pockets onto the bedside table, her phone and some loose change thudding and clinking against the surface, then strips down to her underwear.

She ignores the chime of her phone as she pads into the bathroom to brush her teeth. Probably a text reminder from her assistant. Alex is supposed to meet with a florist for the banquet before the shop opens in the morning.

When she finishes in the bathroom, she returns to find Kari sitting upright in bed and staring down at the bright glowing screen of Alex's phone.

"Is it about the meeting with the florist tomorrow?"

Kari lets out a strangled, bitter laugh and says, "Only if the florist is Charlee Parker."

Alex's stomach bottoms out. "Kari."

"Can't wait for dinner this weekend!" Kari chirps the words, grip tightening around the phone. "Fucking *wink* emoji."

"Kari, it's not—"

"It's not what it looks like?" Kari cuts her off. "Really, Alex? Because it *looks* like you've been spending time with your ex behind my back."

"You knew I wanted to try to be friends with her."

"And that means making plans with her and not telling me about them?" Kari scoffs. "That means hanging out with her when—what?—when you're telling me you're too busy with work to even come

home?”

“I haven’t been hanging out with her.”

Kari’s voice cracks when she tosses Alex’s phone across the bed and says, “This fucking wink emoji says otherwise.”

“I promise you I haven’t,” Alex says, throat tightening by the second. She crosses and drops onto the bed, and Kari instantly shrinks away from her. “I *haven’t*.” She doesn’t know what to do with her hands, with her body. She can’t reach for Kari, can’t wrap around her, so she just curls them into the blanket beneath her knees and hopes the hold will keep her grounded. “We just ran into each other at the supermarket. She suggested we have dinner this weekend, as friends, and I agreed. That’s it.”

“Then why keep it a secret?”

“It just happened today.” Tears build in her eyes as she watches Kari curl in on herself, knees to her chest and cheeks already streaked despite her obvious anger. “I was going to tell you.” The words feel heavy in her mouth, heavy like the lie Alex knows them to be.

“Have your late nights even *been* at the office, Alex?”

“Of course they have.” She reaches out. As expected, Kari smacks her hand away. “I’m not cheating on you, Kari. Please, believe me.”

“Except you are,” Kari says, the anger draining from her voice. The sudden change is jarring. She sounds more defeated than anything, like she is saying goodbye, and Alex wants to scream. “You’ve been cheating on me since that day in the gallery.”

“I haven’t,” Alex says, adamant. “I haven’t touched anyone but you.”

“You haven’t touched *me*!” Kari shouts the words, another jarring change, and jumps from the bed. Crosses to the far side of the room. She paces, laughing. It’s a sad sound, humorless and hurt, and her body shakes around the hand she holds to her chest, like she is trying to soothe a pain that won’t be soothed. “And the worst part is that I *knew*.”

Hot tears burn in Alex’s eyes, scorch down her cheeks. No words come to the surface. She thinks maybe no words would suffice to repair what she can see splintering between them.

“The more I think about it, the more it makes sense,” Kari says. “I waited for you to make a move. I waited...” She stops and leans her head against the dresser, her back to Alex. “Ten dates, Alex. *Ten* dates before you ever even kissed me. Before you ever even *tried*! When does that ever happen?”

“Kari.”

Ignoring her, Kari shakes her head. The squeaking sound of her skin rubbing against the wood makes Alex’s fists clench and her eye twitch. The tension in the room is so thick she can hardly breathe.

“I thought you just wanted to take things slow. You know, maybe you were hurt before. Maybe you were shy.” She lets out another hollow laugh. “But then it never changed. Every step in our relationship.” Her eyes lock onto Alex’s in the lamplight. “Sometimes you came willingly. But most of the time, it was *me* making the step, me dragging you along. And I tried to tell myself you were just laid-back—you know, traditional. You had trust issues. I don’t know. I told myself that at *some* point,

you would be as excited about us as I was.”

“Kari, please.”

“You didn’t even want to move in together. I saw you, the way you panicked when I said we could get our first apartment here, start that part of our lives. It was written all over your face. You didn’t say no b—”

“Because I don’t want to hurt you!” The words rip free. Alex shakes her head, shrugs. Feels uncomfortable in her own house, her own room, her own skin. “I don’t want to hurt *anyone*.” She doesn’t know how to fix this, how to hold them together. Hold herself together. “I didn’t... I don’t.”

Kari’s expression crumples. She crosses back to the bed and drops onto the end of it. “I know that,” she says. “I know. But you *are* hurting me, Alex.”

Alex reaches across the bed, and this time, Kari doesn’t pull away. She holds Kari’s hand so tightly she imagines it must hurt, but she can’t help herself. “I love you, okay?” The words hiccup across her lips, broken by the sobs trapped in her throat and chest. “I do.”

As she turns her hand in Alex’s, Kari locks their fingers together. The action only makes Alex ache more, thins her out further until she feels herself begin to tear in places. “Not the way I need you to love me,” Kari says, and Alex closes her eyes. Doesn’t deny it.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Be *honest*,” Kari says, letting go, then she stands. Hovers. “Because I can’t keep doing this, Alex. Making myself sick over all the things you’re not saying.” She crosses to the door and lingers in the open doorway, her back to Alex. “Wondering how often you’re thinking of *her* when you’re looking at me.”

Alex feels her last bits of resistance shatter, no longer able to hold herself together against the stretching. The truth slices through her insides and through all the parts of her tied to the woman now leaving the room, now leaving her behind. The small spaces between them suddenly feel like miles, and Alex thinks maybe they haven’t been flung apart after all.

Maybe gravity never held them together in the first place.

CHAPTER 11

THE SNOW FALLS IN SHEETS across the windshield, making it difficult to see. The wipers can't keep up, so the car crawls along the street, and Charlee is glad she isn't the one driving. They left Gabby's early enough that they are thankfully only a block from the loft now, but it's been a long, slow holiday drive.

"Cam?"

"Huh?"

"Are you going to answer me?"

"Sorry," Cam says, never taking her eyes from the road. "It's just hard to see."

"Yeah, it's really coming down." Charlee shifts in the passenger seat, faces her more fully. "So you think I should tell her, then? I haven't been able to stop thinking about it since Vinny came by the other day."

"No shit. It's all you've talked about."

"Well, I'm trying to get your opinion."

Cam scoffs. "No, you're trying to get a *particular* opinion."

"Yeah," Charlee says. "*Yours*. What's wrong with you? Are you mad at me or something?"

"I'm trying not to drive us into a fucking pole, Charlee."

Charlee shrinks back against the passenger-side door. "Fine," she says before snapping her mouth closed and crossing her arms over her chest.

They make the rest of the trip in tense silence, but as soon as they are out of the parked car, Charlee starts again. "Why do you keep snapping at me?"

"I'm just in a bad mood. Let it go."

They stomp their shoes against the mat once inside Charlee's building, then step into the elevator.

"No, you've been like this the last few days, and I can't for the life of me figure out what I did. So why don't you just tell me so I can apologize and we can move on?"

Cam leans against the wall of the elevator, her eyes ringed with exhaustion and one hand rubbing at her thigh. "If only it were that easy."

"Oh my God!" Charlee huffs. "Just spit it out, already."

"Okay." Cam turns to face her. "I'll fucking spit it out, then."

The elevator dings with their arrival before she can utter another word, and Charlee walks out, already pulling her keys from her pocket. Cam follows in silence, but as soon as they're inside, she picks up where she left off.

"I'm tired of this," she says, moving past Charlee into the kitchen. She limps a bit as she goes, massaging her thigh with every step. "I'm tired of having to hear about this over and over and over again."

“Oh, well, sorry for wanting to talk to my *best friend* about what I’m going through,” Charlee says, and Cam slams her hand down on the countertop.

“Let me finish!”

Charlee jumps at the words. She hasn’t seen Cam this angry in a long time, and it makes her insides squirm.

“Don’t ask me what’s wrong if you don’t want to listen.”

Charlee crosses her arms and holds herself. She feels sufficiently scolded. “I’m sorry. You’re right.” The sigh that shakes through Cam’s lips is heavy and hard, and Charlee shifts back and forth on each foot as she waits for whatever is about to come out of her best friend’s mouth.

“Everything’s been about you and Alex since she came back,” Cam says. “And whatever, you know. It’s a lot. I get that. But *I’ve* had a lot going on, too, and normally you’d be aware of that. You’d be *present* for it. But you’re not. You haven’t asked me about the set design I’ve been doing for the winter showcase, even though you know how much it means to me. You didn’t ask how it went with my mom, even though you know I went to visit her the other day. We still can’t stand each other, by the way.”

She hisses a bit as she sits on a barstool and rolls up the leg of her baggy sweatpants, unlocks and then detaches her prosthesis. She leans it against the kitchen bar and slides her prosthetic sock down to reveal reddened skin and a large blister on the side of her thigh.

“You haven’t asked me about *this*.” She points to her leg. “Even though I told you my leg was starting to pinch and I’d probably have to get a new one soon. You haven’t asked me about any appointments or even offered to go with me like you usually do. All you can fucking talk about lately is Alex. And I feel invisible.”

Tears prick in Charlee’s eyes. Her heart sinks into her stomach and burns. She takes a step forward, eyes fixed on the angry red of Cam’s thigh. “Let me help you.”

“No.” Cam bites out the word. “Stop. I’m trying to say something here.”

The floor squeaks beneath Charlee’s damp boots as she steps back again and drags her gaze up from Cam’s thigh to her eyes.

“For five years, I haven’t known what to say to you about this,” Cam says. “I tried to reassure you in the beginning. Tried to tell you everything would be okay. But you didn’t want to hear that.” She massages the sore skin around her blister. “Then, after a while, you acted like you wanted to move on, so I tried to encourage you to do *that*. But then you didn’t want to hear that either. I couldn’t win with you. I’ve spent the last five years learning how to read your mood on this just so I could know what to say in case it came up.”

“I—”

“Still talking,” Cam says, shooting her a hard glare.

Charlee snaps her mouth closed again and huffs through her nose.

“And then we just stopped talking about it altogether. About Alex. About entire *years* of our lives together. And then someone would slip, say something, remember the shit we were supposed to forget, and everything in our lives would have to grind to a halt again, and I’d be left trying to figure

out how to fix it. What to say to you. And it was like I didn't lose anyone at all. Like your mom didn't lose anyone. Like Alex wasn't someone we loved too."

"That's not fair," Charlee says, forcing a word in.

"No, you're right. It's not." Cam shrugs a shoulder. "It's not fair. Nothing is fair. Nothing about the way the world works is fair, Charlee, and neither is the position you've put me and everyone else in since you guys broke up."

"And I'm sorry about that, but—"

"Me and your mom. Vinny. All of us," Cam says, cutting her off again. "You and Alex have made a mess of things, and that's something only *you and Alex* can fix. You can't just keep dragging the rest of us through the mess and expect us to keep telling you it's okay. So just figure it out. *Do* something. Because I'm tired." Cam swipes a hand over her ponytail and releases a thick sigh. "I'm tired of all this hurting and crying, tired of you being miserable and Alex being miserable. All of us being miserable about this. About this one thing that actually *can* be fixed. But we can't make you do it, and we can't do it for you. *You* have to do it. You and Alex."

"Cam." Charlee takes a step forward again, and when Cam doesn't call her off, she takes another. And then another. When she's finally standing next to her, she timidly places a hand on Cam's shoulder. "I'm..."

"You're going through shit," Cam says, nodding. "You've *been* going through shit. And that's okay. You have every right to go through it, and I'll be there with you. Every step of the way. I've got your back. You know that. But I have shit too, Charlee, and every once in a while, I just need us to take a break from your shit and focus on mine." She reaches up, wipes through a stray tear, and turns her head away from her. "I just really need to not be invisible right now."



"I need to fix this," Alex says, face buried in her hands and elbows propped up on her knees. Her head throbs as she sits on Vinny's couch, stomach sloshing with too much bourbon. They were supposed to be at the Oyster Bar, having dinner. Vinny was supposed to be meeting Kari. This night was supposed to be a beginning, a happy beginning. Instead, Alex is drunk, Vinny's tipsy, and neither of them has any clue where Kari is.

"You need to listen to her." The hand on her back is warm, too warm, as Vinny rubs slow circles between Alex's shoulder blades. "Let her go."

"I feel like I broke her, Vinny."

"Well, maybe you did a little," Vinny says. "Sometimes we hurt people. It doesn't make you a bad person, Alex."

"We just need some time, I think. I need some time. Some distance."

"Distance from who? From Charlee?"

Alex doesn't say anything but simply stands and paces in front of the couch. She props her hands on her back, just above her hips, and her head pounds with every scuff of her boots against the floor. She can't look at Vinny when she finally nods in answer.

“Yeah, that’ll work.” Vinny’s indignant snort makes Alex bristle.

“What do *you* know?”

“I know you had five fucking years of distance, and you’re still in love with her,” Vinny says before downing the last bit of her bourbon. “You think not seeing her for a while will cure you of that? It’s not a disease, Alex. It’s just a fact, and the sooner you and Charlee stop ignoring that fact, the better for everyone, including Kari.”

“You don’t even know her.”

“No, you’re right. I don’t know her, but I know she deserves better than this.”

Alex’s words slur as she glares at her sister. “Better than me, you mean?”

“Better than being second best.”

Vinny lets the words slice through the tension in the air, lets them knock the wind out of Alex, lets them linger. She carries her glass into the kitchen, and Alex can only stare at her back and watch her go. When her lungs begin functioning again, she clomps into the kitchen after her, hands tightened into fists and a storm brewing in her chest. Her temper has always been terribly short with alcohol.

“We’re not going to do this,” Alex says when she enters the kitchen.

Vinny pours herself a new drink. “Seems to me we’re already doing it.”

“Why are you being like this?”

Vinny leans against the counter. “Because I want you to be real about this. I want you to wake up.”

“I’m awake,” Alex says bitterly, wiping at her brow and pulling at the neck of her sweater. Her face feels flushed, her body overheated. She’s on the verge of passing out.

Vinny nudges her toward the back door. “Outside, before you keel over.”

Alex lets herself be shuffled out onto the small slab of concrete that makes up Vinny’s miniature backyard-slash-smoking-pad. The cold bites at her face in the best way, and Alex is relieved to be washed in a wave of winter. She breathes in frigid bursts of air as Vinny lights a cigarette and leans against the brick wall of her apartment building.

“You need to be honest.” She takes a deep drag, and smoke billows out from her nostrils.

“Be honest.” Alex scoffs. “Be honest. Why does everyone keep telling me to be honest?”

When Vinny only stares at her in response, stares as if she can see straight into Alex’s soul, Alex thinks she might explode.

“What?” she shouts. “What do you want me to say? What?” She paces the concrete slab like a caged animal, distraught and desperate for release. Her voice rises with every word. “You want me to stand out here in the freezing fucking cold and what? Wax poetic about what it’s like to love someone and lose them? It’s over. It’s done. She *has* someone, Vinny. And so do I. It’s done. So what do you want me to say? Why can’t you just let it die?”

Her cigarette sizzles as it hits the snow, and Vinny kicks off the brick wall. Her words shake through her lips in small bursts of white mist. “Because if this dies, Alex, if you let this go and you don’t at least *try*, a part of you is going to die right along with it. And you won’t ever come back from that.”

Still pacing, Alex shakes her head. She runs trembling fingers through her hair.

“*You*,” Vinny says. “The you I know and love. My baby sister. You’ll be gone just like you’ve been gone for years.”

Alex whirls on the spot, arms tossed out, open, as if she expects the weight of the world to fall into them. “I’m right here!”

The words make harsh echoes between and around them, bouncing off bricks hard enough to leave prints behind. Alex winces at the sound. Vinny, though, is unshaken. Her voice is a firm fist around Alex’s heart.

“No, you’re not.”

For several long moments, they stare at each other, both silent and coiled tight with tension. The only sounds are those of the city.

“I’d love to let this go, Alex,” she says. “I’d love to mind my own business and stay the hell out of it, but I can’t. I can’t because staying with Kari is a mistake, and you know it. Because you and Charlee are complete fucking boneheads who can’t get it together.” Vinny closes the gap between them and places her hands on Alex’s shoulders. “Because you’re my sister. My family. My responsibility. And you’re broken. You’ve been broken for a long time now.”

Nausea roars in Alex’s gut. Burns in her throat. She wraps her hands around Vinny’s elbows, uses her sister to brace herself, and collapses just the tiniest bit. The cold doesn’t feel so relieving anymore. She exhales hard, and the scent of bourbon burns her nostrils.

“I feel like I have to fix it,” she says, voice dropping to a whisper. “Kari. I feel like I... Vinny. I don’t know what to do.”

Vinny clears a track of tears from Alex’s cheek, tears Alex hadn’t even realized she was crying. “Kari will be okay,” she says. “She’ll find someone new. You need to let her go.”

“I broke her heart.”

“This isn’t about breaking anyone’s heart. It’s just about the truth, and the truth is that it’s Charlee. It’s always been Charlee. It’s always going to be Charlee.”

Alex snuffles between her sister’s palms, grips her arms like she’ll crumble to dust if she doesn’t. “I never stopped loving her,” she says.

A small, wet laugh slips through Vinny’s lips. “I know, kid.”

“I feel like I’m drowning.” Alex’s voice breaks around the words. “Like someone’s holding my head underwater.” Fresh tears fall as she closes her eyes and leans in, lets Vinny pull her into an embrace. “Like I’m dying but I never die.” She rests her face against Vinny’s shoulder. “I’m just a kick away from breathing, but I can’t ever get to the air.” She presses in harder, clutches at the back of Vinny’s thermal, and chokes on a hard sob. “I can’t get to the air.”

Vinny runs her hands up and down Alex’s back. The warmth of her touch soothes her. “You will.”



Clouds loom overhead as they step outside of Pappy’s, the sky darkening by the minute. The air is wet and sharp and freezing, but Charlee’s stomach is full, Alex is at her side, and she feels warmer

than she has in a long time.

“Was it as good as you remembered?”

Alex smiles. “Better.”

“Were you even able to taste it? You put so much hot sauce on it, your taste buds have probably been burned off.”

“I ate it the right way. You’re the one who missed out.”

“So you’ve said.”

“I’m glad we did this, Charlee.”

Charlee looks over at her. Without allowing time to second-guess herself, she moves closer and loops her arm through Alex’s. “So am I.”

Their early dinner had gone smoothly, familiar banter punctuating easy conversation, but it remained at surface level. Playful. Charlee hadn’t been able to bring herself to punch through the ice and dive in.

A crack of thunder splits the air, drawing their attention to the sky. “Should we call a cab?”

Charlee bites her lip at the question, chews on it. She knows they should, but if they do, then her time with Alex will be over much sooner. “The loft isn’t too far,” she says. “I think we can make it. You can call a cab from there. What do you think?”

Alex agrees without hesitation, and they make their way down the snow-covered sidewalk. They’re only a block from the loft when the storm decides it’s tired of waiting and the sky wrenches open. Sleet pelts down on them, pricking and then melting in, and Charlee lets out a shriek. She takes off running, arms thrown over her head and Alex right beside her.

They slip and slide along the way, Alex nearly falling and Charlee catching her, but they still make it in record time, both soaked. When they step through the building’s front door, breathless and with their knit hats practically melted atop their wet heads, Charlee looks over at Alex and is surprised to find her smiling. A second later, laughter shakes up, and it’s free; it’s the loveliest sound.

“You look like a wet rat.” Charlee reaches for Alex’s hand without thought and leads her toward the elevator. Once inside, they don’t let go of each other, their slick hands locked and chests still vibrating with laughter. “I can get you some clothes.”

“No, that’s okay. Just a towel, please.”

When they enter the loft, Alex stops just inside the door. Her gaze roams, absorbing the space, and Charlee leaves her to it, heading to the bathroom for a towel. When she returns, she grabs Alex’s soaked hat from her head, lets it drop to the floor with a plop, and replaces it with the towel.

“Is it strange? Being back here?”

As if stirring from a daze, Alex blinks and reaches up for the towel. She dries her face, then wraps the towel back around her hair, a gentle nod her only response.

“It’s good, though,” Charlee says, wiping her own face with a second towel. “It’s not a bad strange, right?”

Alex leans back against the door, shivering. “It still feels like home in a way. That’s weird, I know,

but I have so many memories here. It still feels like mine.”

“It *is* yours,” Charlee says, hearing a touch of sadness in her own voice. “It’s ours.”

“Charlee.”

Charlee turns and walks toward the kitchen. “Coffee? You’ll probably want to wait to call a cab until the storm calms a bit. It’s really coming down out there.”

They can hear the sleet popping against the top of the building, pecking at the large paneled windows that make up the far wall. It sounds like it might never let up.

“Thank you.” The barstool creaks beneath her as Alex settles atop it and rests against the counter. “I hope it doesn’t last long.”

Charlee tries not to feel offended by the statement, but her face apparently doesn’t get the message, because Alex quickly amends her words.

“Because of the ice,” she says. “The roads won’t be safe if this keeps up for long.”

“You can always stay here,” Charlee says before she can stop herself.

The color drains from Alex’s face. It rushes back a moment later, her cheeks full and flushed with it. “I don’t think that would be a good idea, Charlee.”

“Okay.” Charlee hands her a fresh mug of coffee and, with a grin, teases her. “Scared you won’t be able to keep your hands to yourself?”

Alex tightens her grip around her coffee mug. “Charlee.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, laughing. “I shouldn’t have said that.” At Alex’s tortured gaze, her laughter falls away. “I was joking. I’m sorry.”

A tense silence envelops the space, almost too tense to bear. Alex clears her throat, takes a sip of her coffee, and pops off the stool. She walks around the loft like she’s searching for something to distract her, like she’s desperate to keep her hands and attention anywhere but on Charlee. And Charlee is content to watch her, just a tad amused.

She follows along as Alex moves in front of the old graffitied wall and looks over the probing alien still carrying on with his cookies. It warms her to see the smile that spreads over Alex’s lips and the way she skates over the image with her fingers. She lingers only a moment, though, before moving on. Charlee’s work dots the walls, vivid and dynamic, and Alex stops in front of nearly every one.

“There’s more art than before,” she says.

“I’ve been busy the last few years.”

“I can tell.” Alex turns to look at her from across the room. “You’ve grown so much as an artist, Charlee. These are beautiful.”

Charlee smiles, lets her gaze dip down to her coffee and linger. “Thank you.”

“I’m proud of you.”

At that, Charlee looks up again, searches Alex’s eyes, and finds only sincerity. Her stomach flutters. “I’m proud of you too.”

They hold each other’s gazes for several long moments before Alex turns away again. She points across the loft. “The bed’s out here,” she says—an observation.

Charlee's pulse quickens as she glances back and forth between Alex, the bed, and the studio door, no longer padlocked. "Yes."

"What's in the bedroom, then?"

"I turned it into my studio. Sort of."

"Sort of?"

"Sort of."

"Would you like to elaborate?"

Charlee chews at the loose skin of her chapped bottom lip. "I really don't think you want me to."

That draws Alex's brows toward her hairline. "Meaning?"

"Remember when I told you I could never share the loft with anyone else? That there were things you didn't know?"

Alex nods, and Charlee walks over to the studio. She hesitates, one hand on the door.

"What's wrong?"

Her voice shakes. "I'm nervous."

"About showing me your studio." It is somewhere between a statement and a question, and Charlee knows Alex is lost, confused.

"Up until a month ago, I hadn't shown it to anyone. No one had seen the inside of this room in years, not since I turned it into my work space."

Alex moves closer to Charlee then, still wrapped in her towel and slightly shivering. "What happened a month ago?"

"I showed it to Chris."

"Oh."

"I showed it to him, and then we broke up."

Alex's eyes widen, and Charlee hears the quiet gasp she tries to cover with a cough. She licks her lips, turns toward Charlee, and manages a small smile. "Are you hiding bodies in there?" It's a joke, something to lighten the moment, but Charlee can see the sympathy in Alex's eyes; she can feel it in the hand Alex gently places on her shoulder. She searches for something more, something like hope, in Alex's gaze, despite knowing she won't find it. Alex is too kind to think of herself. "Because if so, I must say, Charlee, I don't approve."

"Shut up."

"Do you want to show me?"

"Are you going to freak out?"

"So, there *are* bodies in there."

Charlee rolls her eyes. "Seriously, are you going to freak out?"

"I can't say."

"Will you try not to freak out?"

"I'll do my best."

Charlee slides the door open. She closes her eyes as Alex steps past her and into the room, but she

still hears the sound of that gasp. It tears through the silence, and her fingertips go numb. Her breath sticks in her lungs like it suddenly can't move, and her heart starts to beat too fast. She feels dizzy.

"Charlee," Alex says, a blip of sound that seems unintended, more out of shock than anything. It's enough to make Charlee want to look, to see the room through Alex's eyes.

When she opens her eyes again, Alex is standing frozen in the room that is still so obviously their bedroom. She takes in the sight of her own face and body speckling the walls, all the while with one hand pressed to her chest.

"I told you," Charlee says. "I couldn't share this place with anyone else. This bed is ours. This room is ours. This place—it's ours. It's always going to be ours. I couldn't let that go. I don't think I ever will."

Alex is silent so long Charlee's skin starts to crawl, and she still can't get her breath to unstick. Everything feels too tight. "Alex?"

When Alex turns, her eyes glisten. Her towel falls to the floor, and wet hair sticks to her face. Charlee reaches out before she can stop herself or be stopped. Slowly, she brushes Alex's hair back behind her ear, and then they're trapped—too close, too tense, too silent, too...*much*.

They stare at one another, surrounded by their history. It's overwhelming, but somehow, it's exactly what Charlee needs. Her lungs loosen and her heart slows. The closer Alex is, the clearer and calmer everything becomes. Charlee's gaze flickers down to Alex's lips, and she hesitates before moving closer, stepping well into her space. Their chests brush. With a hand trembling against Alex's cheek, Charlee moves in, closes her eyes again. She can feel Alex's breath against her lips, close, so close.

Then Alex splutters out a gurgled sound, gently grabs Charlee's wrist, and pulls her hand away from her face. She eases Charlee back. "I—I'm sorry. I can't. Things with Kari... We haven't officially... I can't. I have—I should go."

She doesn't wait for Charlee to say anything before darting around her and practically sprinting for the door.

"Alex, wait. Let's talk."

"I can't." She doesn't even stop to put her coat on. "I can't stay here."

"But you haven't called a cab."

Alex is gone before she can even fully get the words out. Charlee knows why she's running. She's desperate to get away from the tension—the wanting, the forbidden, the memories. Everything. She thinks, briefly, that she should let her go, but her feet are already moving.

"Wait, Alex!" Grabbing her keys, Charlee sprints out after her. She can hear Alex's boots stomping against the stairs a flight below her as she races down, and when she hits the lobby, she catches a glimpse of her just before Alex spills out into the storm.

"Alex, wait!" She follows Alex outside. The cold stabs at her damp clothes, pricks through and bites at her skin, but Charlee doesn't care. She has to say the things she's been holding in. "Please! Don't leave me like this!"

That stops her. Alex skids to a halt on the slick sidewalk and nearly falls. She barely manages to

catch herself, throwing her arms out for balance, and Charlee gains on her. When she rights herself and turns, Charlee is only a foot away.

Alex blinks hard against the sleet as she takes a few steps toward her ex. “We can’t do this, Charlee. We can’t be around each other, not y—”

“We can’t *not* be around each other,” Charlee says. Sprays of water fly off her hair as she shakes her head. She doesn’t care that they are doing this in public, in the freezing rain, because this is it. This is the moment. This is when they finally crack through that fragile exterior and get down to the meat of things. Down to the reality. Down to the truth. They were always meant to be together, and there is no getting around it.

“We can’t, and you know it. What we had, what we were to each other—it’s not something we can ignore.”

“I know.”

Charlee moves closer, shivering. Her teeth chatter as she talks, but she doesn’t stop. She doesn’t retreat. “We loved each other.”

“We did,” Alex says, her voice choked and sad.

“I still do,” Charlee says. “I know I’m not supposed to say that. Not like this. Not when things are so messed up and you’re still with someone else. I know I’m not supposed to say it, and I’m sorry for doing it like this, but I can’t *not* say it anymore.” She shoves her wet hair out of her face, blinks through the water on her lashes. “I can’t keep pretending like I’m okay with just being your friend when I want you in my bed.”

Alex closes her eyes for a brief moment, trembles.

“*Our* bed.” Charlee steps in closer. “I want you, Alex. I want you like I’ve always wanted you. I never stopped.” Her words start to strain, and Charlee has to force them out. “I still want to marry you in the middle of winter. In the snow. I still want to adopt ten annoying, perfect kids with you and argue over who has to change diapers and where to send them to school.” She takes another step. “I still want to grow old with you, Alex. I want it all, everything, and that’s why I can’t hold it in anymore. It’s been killing me.”

“I know.” A sob escapes her, lost in the rain. “It’s killing me too.”

Charlee reaches out then, grabs Alex’s hand, and tugs her in. They shiver against each other as Charlee looks into her eyes. “You love me,” she says, and it isn’t a question. It’s a simple truth. Something they both know in their souls—as old and rich as time.

“I’ve always loved you,” Alex says, cupping Charlee’s freezing cheeks. She glides her thumb over Charlee’s quivering bottom lip. “Charlee, you’re the love of my life.”

Charlee feels her lip split with the force of her smile, but it falters and falls when Alex shakes her head a moment later and steps out of her embrace.

“But there are things I have to take care of now.” Her voice sounds shredded. “Promises I made that I have to break. Apologies I need to...” She runs her hands over her wet face. “We can’t just smash ourselves back together and pick up where we left off, Charlee. As much as I wish we could,

we can't. That's not how it works."

She steps in again, briefly, and presses her lips to Charlee's forehead. Charlee is too numb to feel it, but nothing saves her the pain of watching Alex turn and walk away.



"So, maybe we shouldn't say goodbye."

"What do we say, then?"

"The same thing we always say when one of us leaves."

"And then what?"

"Then I'll go."

The words echoed in Charlee's mind, over and over and over, as she trudged from the elevator and slid her key into the lock. She couldn't bring herself to turn the handle for the longest time, simply leaning her head against the door and trying to breathe.

"You're just going to turn and go?"

"I don't know how else to do it. If I stay, if I linger, I might never get on that plane."

"Okay."

"Okay."

"So, I love you."

"I love you."

"Alex, wait!"

"Charlee, that was supposed to be our goodbye."

Turning the knob, Charlee finally opened the door and stepped inside the loft. The silence was deafening as she shuffled farther in, shutting the door behind her. Her chest tightened as she looked down at the floor.

Alex's boots weren't by the door.

Charlee briefly closed her eyes. She knew what she would find as she moved through her home, their home—absence, more and more absence.

Alex's wallet wasn't on the counter. Her toothbrush wasn't on the sink. Her underwear wasn't squished into the top drawer next to Charlee's.

"...this is hard."

"I know, but this isn't the end. We'll say hello again. I promise."

"When?"

"Soon, I hope."

"Okay. Soon."

Charlee crawled onto the mattress on the floor, wiggled over to Alex's side, and buried her face in the pillow. The smell of Alex washed over her, drawing tears to the surface. It was only a scent, something intangible, something that would fade. Alex's absence was still there, still obvious, still haunting, and Charlee could do little more than exist in it. Alone.



Near-violent tremors rack Alex's body as she opens the door to the mercifully warm apartment. She

toes off her boots and strips herself bare at the door. Grabbing a blanket off the back of the couch, she wraps herself up and heads toward the kitchen.

The Keurig whines with the start of a fresh cup, and Alex calls out through the house. “Kari?”

No response. Alex pads down the hall toward Kari’s office. “Kar?” She peeks in, but the room is empty, and Alex feels the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. Her stomach bottoms out.

“Kari?” She moves toward the bedroom, farther down the hall. When she steps inside, something about the space feels off. Empty. Alex’s vision blurs with tears as she zeroes in on the open drawers and the small sheet of paper on the bedside table. With trembling fingers, she picks it up. Kari’s loopy handwriting stretches across the page.

Alex,

I deserve to be someone’s first choice.

I’m going home.

Be happy,

Kari

Alex reads the words over and over, walking aimlessly through the apartment, unable to hold still. She shivers with every step, every loopy letter, and grips the paper in her hand until it crumples. When she can’t look at it anymore, she drops onto the couch and feels the full weight of the disturbing silence press down on her.

The changing lights of the Christmas tree still brighten the room with their glow—still colorful while the rest of the world fades.

White to blue to green to red to yellow.

CHAPTER 12

WELL PAST MIDNIGHT, THE NEED for sleep itched in her bones and curled at the edges of her mind, but the stars shone too brightly for Alex to want to close her eyes. The grass was dewy and cool beneath them and the air cold enough to sting. But Charlee's expression, lips parted just slightly and eyes wide as she gazed up into the vast expanse, was too beautiful for Alex to want to go inside.

She stared at Charlee the way Charlee stared at the sky, attentive and reverent. Her eyes traced the angles of Charlee's face. They made constellations from lashes to lips, from brow to chin, and Alex felt breathless with the old discoveries, every feature she had memorized. Every expression. Every bit.

The feeling in her chest, the expansion forced between her ribs by a vibrant girl building a home inside her heart, was the best kind of pain Alex had ever felt. She was alive with the stretching, the growing, alive with learning what it was to love and be loved by Charlee. It was good.

It was so incredibly good.

"Every time we come to the cabin, I want to paint a million things," Charlee said, shaking up the silence. Her words puffed into the air in white clouds, and Alex watched them leave her lips and drift up toward the stars. They didn't get far before disappearing.

Charlee's fingers squeezed around Alex's. "It's so beautiful here."

Her hair swished in the grass when she turned her head and smiled, blue eyes bright in the moonlight. Alex suddenly felt like everything—every broken path she'd traveled, every night spent yearning for family, every time she whispered to herself not to give up, not to ever give up—had led her here. To this. To Charlee.

She felt heavy and weightless all at once, grounded and floating.

Licking her lips, Alex opened her mouth to agree, and something else came out. "I love you, Charlee."

It was only a whisper, so quiet it was nearly nonexistent, but Charlee's smile stretched wide, and Alex felt it in her bones. They were growing together, always growing up from the ground like the dewy grass, up toward the stars like their gentle breath.

"You know I love you," Alex whispered, tightening her grip on Charlee's fingers. "Right?"

"I know."



"Alex?"

Alex jerks from sleep and glances toward the doorway. The first thought that sparks in her mind is that Kari has returned, but the thought fizzles as Alex wakes. She knows that voice. She tries to force herself to move, make herself unravel from the blanketed ball she has become on the couch, but she

can't seem to make her limbs work.

"The door was unlocked, so I let myself in."

Alex brushes her hair away from her face, the strands still damp from being out in the storm, and tries to move again. Manages to get herself up into a sitting position, still leaning heavily against the arm of the couch. She wraps her blanket tighter around herself and fixes her gaze on the changing colors of the Christmas tree. "In here," she says, though she knows the words aren't loud enough to carry.

Her eyes cloud as she hears footsteps draw nearer. The couch dips beside her, and an arm slides around her shoulders.

"Oh, honey," Gabby says, and Alex allows herself to be drawn in.

She sinks into Gabby's chest, and the sigh that escapes her shakes the tears from her eyes. They drip down her cheeks and over her chin, and Alex can't bring herself to care enough to wipe them away.

"Kari's gone," she says, the words muffled against her blanket and Gabby's sweater. She turns her head, breathes in Gabby's familiar scent, and tries to let it soothe. "She took her clothes, some of her things. I tried calling. Over and over. I tried, and she won't..." She stops when her lip quivers, when her voice threatens to fail her. Then she takes a breath and tries again. "She isn't coming back."

Gabby's hand kneads soothing circles into Alex's blanket-covered back. "Do you want her to come back?"

Alex lifts her head and looks at Gabby. "I want to make things right," she says. "That's what I came back here to do. That's why I needed to see her. I need to make things right."

"How would you do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what exactly did you come here to do that you think might have made things right?"

Alex can do little more than stare at Gabby, unsure. Her lips move wordlessly. *What was I going to say to her? What could I have said?* After a moment, she manages to organize her thoughts and speak. "Apologize," she says. "I wanted to apologize."

"Okay. What else?"

Sitting up more fully, Alex fixes her blanket around her shoulders and settles her gaze on the Christmas tree again. "I wanted to explain. Or *try* to explain. Tell her she was right. She was right about all of it, about me, about how I feel—about how I've always felt."

"How you feel about *her*?"

"About Charlee."

"Oh."

"Yeah." Her back hunches as she drops her chin to her chest. The disappointment she feels in herself and the guilt that has been brewing in her gut for far too long nauseate her, make her hate herself. Part of her wishes she could just curl back into a ball, close her eyes, and make the world go dark. Disappear.

"She was right," she says. "And God, I should have realized what I was doing to her, to myself. I

should have..." Her voice cracks on her tongue, then dies entirely. Her eyes flood. "I want Charlee. I've always wanted her. I never imagined I would spend my life with anyone else, not really, but I didn't want to hurt Kari. I never wanted to hurt her. I never wanted to hurt anyone."

"I know that." Gabby runs her fingers through Alex's hair. They snag on tangles, and Alex winces. "I need a brush. This is a mess."

"In the bathroom," Alex says. "Down the hall, on the right. Door's open."

Gabby heads down the hall. She returns a moment later with Alex's large square hairbrush and settles onto the couch again, turning Alex's back to her. With care, she begins to brush through Alex's half-dry, half-damp hair, and the bristles scratch comfortably across Alex's scalp with each pass.

"That's nice," Alex says, and Gabby hums.

"Remember when I used to have to brush your hair out after you and Charlee swam in the lake? You used to whine that Charlee was too rough with the brush."

"She was." A ragged laugh escapes. Alex wipes her nose with the back of her hand and sniffles. "She pulled out more hair than she detangled."

Their quiet laughter melds together and slowly fades into silence, nothing filling the room except the changing lights and the steady sound of the brush through Alex's hair. Alex lets herself rest in it for a minute, finding it a far lighter weight to bear with Gabby there than it had been on her own, then she quietly asks, "How do I make this right if she won't answer my calls?"

Gabby sets the brush aside on the coffee table. "I think the best thing you can do is to let go and move forward," she says as Alex pivots on the couch to face her. "What good will talking to her do when all you can tell her is she was right?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean how would that benefit Kari?"

"She needs to know she was right about everything."

"Honey, she *knows* she was right about everything. That's why she left. She's heartbroken, Alex, but she made the right choice for herself. You calling her or seeing her again only to say, 'You were right; I *do* want to be with Charlee,' is only going to hurt her more."

"But—"

"This is about you." Gabby places a hand on Alex's knee. "You feel guilty, and it's eating away at you, so you think acknowledging your guilt to Kari will make that feeling go away. You want everything wrapped up in a neat little package so you can tuck it away and say, 'There, this is finished. I took care of it. Now I can move on to what I want.' But, honey, it doesn't work that way. Life's too messy." Gabby's voice softens as she speaks. It's the same voice she has used with Alex a thousand times before, even when teaching her a lesson. Her hard truths always come in gentle tones.

"We don't always get the chance for forgiveness," she says. "No matter how much we might want it. Life doesn't always give us the chance to say what we need to say, or it *does* and we just don't take it because we're too scared or too proud or because we think there will be another chance later." She pats Alex's leg. "But even when we take the chances we're given, the people we hurt aren't obligated

to unburden us with forgiveness or even with understanding. Some things, we just have to carry.” Gabby tilts her head and gives a sad smile. “You know that.”

Alex’s stomach lurches as the words sink in and burn. “I was trying *not* to hurt her,” she says. “And I was trying not to hurt Charlee. And I ended up hurting them both.”

“And yourself.” Gabby wipes through a fresh track of tears on Alex’s cheek. “But you can choose to forgive yourself and do better from now on. It doesn’t mean you won’t mess up again, because you will, and Charlee will too. We all will. But as long as we acknowledge our mistakes and keep working to do better, that’s what matters. You understand?”

Alex nods and shifts to lie down. Still bundled, she rests her head in Gabby’s lap. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Well, your sister called me,” Gabby says, patting Alex’s arm through the blanket. “Said she tried to call you a few times before her shift, but you didn’t answer. So she sent me to investigate.”

“Inspector Mom.” Alex lets out a ragged laugh.

“Not a bad title.” Gabby scratches lightly at Alex’s scalp. “Seems like you need one right now.”

“One what?”

“A mom.” She squeezes Alex’s arm. “Good thing you have one.”

Her heart swells at the words. “Thank you.”

The events of the day flood through Alex’s mind again as she lies in Gabby’s lap. She sighs. “I was with Charlee. Earlier, I mean, before I came back here.”

“And? Should I be worried about her as well?”

“I think she knows I’m with her,” Alex says, rolling in Gabby’s lap to look up at her. “I think she knows. I just needed—”

“To be with *only* her.”

Alex nods again. “I don’t ever want anything between us to be tainted. I don’t want our first kiss, the first time we really hold each other again... I don’t want to feel guilty or dirty or like I’m betraying anyone. I want to do it right, because loving her is the purest thing I’ve ever done. It’s the purest thing I’ve ever had.” A sick feeling claws its way up Alex’s throat as she thinks of Charlee’s eyes in the storm, pained and desperate, understanding but sad. “She knows I love her, right?”

Gabby smiles down at her. “She knows.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Gabby pokes her side. “Now, let’s get you dressed. A blanket is not an outfit.”

Alex’s lips tug with a small smile, but it falters as she thinks about her empty bedroom. The hurt she caused Kari comes rolling back in waves, and she hesitates.

Gabby seems to understand, though, because she pats Alex’s arm and says, “You wait here. I’ll pack you a bag. You can stay with me tonight.”

She plants a kiss on Alex’s forehead before sliding out from under her, and Alex’s chest burns with an overwhelming feeling of gratitude, of love. She never thought she would get to have a mother, the kind who loves fiercely and unconditionally and never lets you forget it, but she does, and it’s good.

It is so incredibly good.



When her hand found only empty sheets, Charlee blinked awake and sat up. She was alone in bed, but she could hear the water running in the bathroom, so she knew Alex hadn't left for class yet. She buried her nose in Alex's pillow and breathed in the smell of her. It made her chest feel heavy in the best way, like it was slowly filling up, filling and filling and becoming so full that she could burst.

Charlee slipped out of bed, slid open the bedroom door, and padded across the cold concrete floor to the bathroom. A smile spread over her lips, sleepy but wide, when she found Alex standing at the sink, naked but for her green underwear, with toothpaste foam decorating her mouth and chin.

Steam clouded the mirror, and a haze hung in the air from the heat of Alex's shower. Her wet hair was set in a loose knot at the base of her neck. Unnoticed, Charlee leaned against the doorway and watched as Alex rocked back and forth on her heels and scrubbed at her teeth, humming to some song Charlee couldn't place.

Her chest felt heavy again, filling and filling. Suddenly, she was overwhelmed with what it meant to have someone in this way, to see forever in simple moments, in everyday routines, in foamy lips and wet hair and pillows that simultaneously smelled like a lover and like home.

Charlee stepped into the bathroom and wrapped around Alex from behind, pressed her naked chest to Alex's bare back. She rested her ear against Alex's shoulder blade, closed her eyes, and listened.

When the water shut off, Charlee could hear Alex's heartbeat. It was steady and strong, and she drew in a deep breath at the sound. Tears fell from her lashes and rolled down her cheeks, melted into Alex's skin.

Alex's fingers played over Charlee's arms. Foam muffled her voice enough to make Charlee smile. "Are you okay?"

Charlee nodded against her back, her cheek squeaking against damp flesh. "You're the love of my life, you know."



The damp pillow sticks to her cheek as Charlee burrows further into her old mattress and yanks the covers over her head. She's pretty sure there's snot running down her face, but she doesn't care. Everything's a blur in her mind, yet at the same time, everything's clear. She can still feel Alex's cold fingertips and the heat of her breath against her forehead. Alex's words bounce between her ears, between her ribs.

Charlee, you're the love of my life.

The feeling of her walking away is just as strong and alive as the image in Charlee's mind, and both make the breath in her lungs feel solid and sharp.

She startles when the door to her studio suddenly opens. With her head buried in blankets, she hadn't heard anyone come into the loft. She jerks up into a sitting position, body tense. The sight of her mother standing in the doorway, however, relaxes her.

Gabby gapes, taking in the space, and Charlee huffs out a breath.

“Surprise,” she says, her voice drawling. She settles back into place and pulls the covers over her head again. “This is what I’ve been hiding in here all this time.”

A short silence follows before her mother speaks. “I see.”

“It’s a legitimate shrine, I know.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Don’t make fun of me.”

“Honey, my closet’s still half-full of your father’s clothes,” Gabby says, and Charlee can hear her maneuvering around the room. “I still spray his cologne on my pillow sometimes.”

Charlee closes her eyes under the covers, imagines Gabby running her fingers over Drew’s shirts. Her throat constricts and her eyes begin to burn when she feels the blankets lift and the mattress dip a second later. Tears drip over her nose and disappear into her hair and pillow. They only come faster when her mother scoots in behind her and wraps her arm around Charlee’s waist.

“I heard you spilled your guts,” Gabby says, lifting her hand to brush down Charlee’s messy hair. She kisses the back of her damp head. “In the middle of a storm, no less.”

A wet laugh spills free as Charlee snuffles and relaxes back into her mother’s embrace. “And here I am, crying into my pillow, probably in the beginning stages of a cold.”

“And here *I* am,” Gabby says, “being incredibly proud of you for being brave enough to tell the person you love that you love her, even though things are a little messy right now.”

“She knows what she wants.” Charlee wipes her cheek on her pillowcase. “But she can’t just...” She shrugs. “She feels like she owes something to Kari, I think. Like she has to make sure everything’s finished before we can, you know, start over or whatever, which I mean—”

“Makes sense.”

“It wasn’t a rejection, Mom.”

“I know that.”

“I know,” Charlee says. “I’m just saying. It wasn’t.”

“Okay.”

“She just...you know how Alex is.”

“I do.”

Charlee sighs and wipes her nose on her sheet, resolving to wash everything later. “She’s good.”

“I know.”

“She’s just *good*.” Charlee rolls onto her back and pulls the covers off her face. The cool air of the room is a relief, and she takes a deep breath.

Gabby shifts to adjust to Charlee’s new position but stays close. Her hand finds Charlee’s under the covers. “So are you, honey.”

“I’ve never seen her so worn down.” Charlee stares up at the ceiling and squeezes her mother’s hand in little pulses to help keep her anxiety at bay. “She’s been killing herself just trying not to hurt anybody.”

“Things are complicated,” Gabby says, gently rocking Charlee beside her, “but Alex will get to

where she needs to be. You both will. You need to trust in that.”

Charlee rolls over and burrows in against her mother’s chest, finds her familiar scent there but also Alex’s. Its presence overwhelms and comforts her, and she closes her eyes.

“Is Alex okay?”

Gabby doesn’t respond for a moment, her hands working silently through Charlee’s hair and over her back, but then she says, “Kari left her.”

A flash of pain sparks through Charlee’s chest, a familiar kind of pain. She thinks of the hurt in Chris’s eyes when she broke up with him and imagines a similar hurt in Kari’s. She imagines all the ways Alex must be torturing herself over this, and she aches even harder.

“She’s going to stay at the house for a while.”

Charlee turns her head just slightly so her ear rests against her mother’s chest and listens. The steady, thumping rhythm of Gabby’s heartbeat comes through, and Charlee’s entire body relaxes at the sound. It makes her feel small again. Small and safe.

“Everything is so messed up,” she says, every bone in her body exhausted.

Gabby runs one hand up and down Charlee’s back. The other scratches at her scalp.

“I wish she’d come home, Mom.”

“She will.”

CHAPTER 13

“IT’S HOT AS TITS OUT here.”

“It’s not as bad now that the sun’s down,” Alex said, leaning against the sidewalk’s metal railing and fanning her face. It had been a long walk in the heat.

“True.” Cam took off her sleeveless shirt so she sat in only her sports bra and mesh shorts. “And we needed this, so screw the heat.” She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and then tied her shirt around her head like a bandana. “Two weeks in and I’m already overwhelmed with projects.”

“I know.” Alex passed their half-smoked joint back to Cam. “I’ve got another week before my first big assignment is due, but Charlee’s already up to her eyeballs in paint.”

“I legit almost walked out three minutes into Shop yesterday when some freshman asked me how I lost my leg.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.” Cam laughed, exhaling a long stream of white smoke. Alex watched as it slowly disappeared in the summer heat. “I just looked him dead in the eye and pointed at one of the circular saws. Pretty sure he almost pissed himself.”

Smoke burned in Alex’s nose as she snorted. She shook her head, eyes watering but a smile stretching her lips. “Terrorizing the freshman.”

“That’s what they get for being nosy little shits.”

“True.”

“Charlee likes to lecture people about privacy and respect and all that, but I just like to fuck with them.” When Alex passed back the joint, Cam took a deep drag and trapped it in her chest. “I don’t know why people get it in their heads that they need to know every detail of a person’s disability.” Smoke drifted from her nostrils in thin tendrils as she spoke, and for just a moment, Alex thought she looked like a dragon. “I mean, I get being curious and everything, but that doesn’t mean you’re entitled to the information. And then to just outright ask someone? A freaking stranger, no less? Like, you don’t know what kind of trauma you might be bringing up. Plus, it’s just not your damn business, you know? Not cool.”

“Agreed.”

“Life would be so much better if we didn’t have to adult all the time.”

“We’re smoking pot on a bridge in the middle of the city.”

“Okay, so we’re teening and adulting at the same time. I’m going to call it *tadulting*. We’re *tadulting*.”

Alex wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. “Please delete that word from your vocabulary.”

“I’m going to delete your name from my vocabulary.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Cam grinned and passed the joint back after another small hit. “We should come up with fake names in case we get caught,” she said. “You know those bicycle cops like to ride the walk sometimes.”

“You’ve got a medical-marijuana card.”

“Yeah, but you don’t,” Cam said. “So, names. I’ll be Margarita Sanchez.”

Alex laughed. “You’ve been thinking about this, haven’t you?”

“Pick a name.”

“Why don’t we just throw the joint overboard if a cop comes?”

“Overboard?”

“Overbridge?”

“Over my dead body,” Cam said. “Pick a name.”

“Fine. How about Frankie?”

“Frankie?”

“Frankie.”

“Frankie what?”

“Um, DeVito? Canterino?”

Cam stared at her, deadpan. “You need to stop watching mob movies with Vinny.”

“She likes gangsters.” Alex shrugged. “So does Charlee.”

“I can’t believe Charlee took a night class this semester. She could be out here with us right now, melting, but she’d rather be in an air-conditioned classroom learning about blending techniques.”

“She’s nurturing her talent.”

“Oh God.”

“She’s going to be amazing.”

“You are the gayest of the gays, Alex.”

Alex smiled and leaned back to stare up at the bridge lights. Smoke curled down into her lungs and then billowed back out between her lips, and the haze that clouded her mind turned the bridge lights overhead into stars in the city sky. Alex stared up at them and pretended she had floated into outer space.

“I love it here,” she said, and she heard Cam sigh.

“Me too.”



Alex tugs her coat tighter around her torso. The freezing concrete seeps through her jeans like ice water, and she shifts from side to side to keep warm as she waits. The air smells clean, pure in a way only winter air can smell, and it tastes just as sharp and cold as it feels.

She straddles the metal railing, her legs kicking out over the open air. The river below looks almost black, glinting in the moonlight as the cloud coverage clears its path every few moments. It’s beautiful, and Alex aches with the sight of it, the grip of nostalgia tight around her heart.

“You’re not going to cry, are you?”

Alex flicks her gaze toward the dark sky, the bridge lights spotting her vision, and blinks away tears. “It’s about time,” she says, turning to find Cam making her way down the sidewalk with a massive grin on her face. Her gaze drops to the heavy limp in Cam’s walk, and Alex frowns. “Is everything okay? Is your leg bothering you?”

“Yeah.” Cam shrugs as she reaches her. “Nothing I can’t handle, though.”

Alex shifts from the railing and reaches up to take Cam’s hands. Helps her lower herself to the ground. “You should have told me. You didn’t need to walk all the way out here when you’re hurting.”

“Don’t worry,” Cam says. “I got a cab, so I only had to walk a little bit.” She settles in next to Alex. “I’m totally about to take this leg off, though.”

Alex scoots closer to help her. “Why didn’t you just leave it at home and use your crutches instead, or your chair?”

“I already had it on. I had to work at the theater today, and it’s just easier to get around with the leg. Even when it hurts.” She rolls up the leg of her sweatpants and holds the material out of the way while Alex unlocks and detaches her prosthesis. “I’ve got an appointment with my prosthetist in a few days. Had to wait until after New Year’s.”

“God, I can’t believe it’s already the New Year.” Alex hands the leg to Cam and ties the empty part of Cam’s sweats into a knot to keep the cold air out.

Cam sets her prosthesis aside. “And we didn’t even celebrate.”

“It hasn’t exactly been a great time for celebration, Cam.”

“Yeah. Things have been pretty messed up lately.”

“Yes.”

“But we’re going to celebrate now.”

“We are?”

“Guess what I brought.”

The shit-eating grin that follows is enough to tell Alex exactly what Cam brought with her. “You didn’t.”

Cam reveals a small, clear bag and dances it around in front of Alex’s face. Three perfectly rolled joints bounce around inside. “I definitely did.”

“I haven’t smoked since college.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Cam selects a joint and tucks the bag back into her pocket. “Have you done *anything* fun in the last five years?”

“I had a lot of Wii Sports competitions,” Alex says. Cam snorts as she fires up the joint.

The first inhale is deep, loud. Cam speaks as she holds in the smoke. “Are you as sore a loser at video games as you are at board games?” Her voice takes on a muted, nasal quality that makes Alex’s chest feel like it is expanding, like she is growing back into her old self—as free and open as the night sky.

“I think I’m better now.”

Cam laughs, exhaling the smoke with the sound. “Doubt it,” she says. “I still crack up every time I think about you shouting at Vinny for trying to play ‘clit’ in that Scrabble tournament.” She puts on an exaggerated imitation of Alex’s voice. ““That’s not a word, Vinaya! Add an ‘oris’ or fuck off!””

“This isn’t what I wanted my Scrabble legacy to be.”

“Too bad. Here.”

Alex sighs as Cam holds out the joint. She pinches it between her fingers, her nose scrunching a bit at the familiar skunk smell. “I’m going to be so high.”

“So high you can fly.”

Alex takes a deep drag. “What about you?” Smoke sticks and curls in her chest. She holds it in until she coughs, then fans the smoke away from her face.

“We’ll fly together,” Cam says, bumping Alex’s shoulder with her own. “Like we used to.”

Alex is surprised at the way the words sink straight to her heart. She shifts to lie down, and Cam mimics her so that their bodies face in opposite directions, Cam’s head next to Alex’s. They stare up at the twinkling bridge lights together and pass the joint back and forth, watching thin wisps of smoke meld with their frozen breath and float up toward the heavens, dissipating along the way.

“How did we get like this?” A pleasant sort of haze permeates Alex’s mind. “We all used to be so close, then everything just fell apart. We stopped talking. We stopped being family.”

“We never stopped being family.”

Alex closes her eyes. “It felt like it sometimes.”

“I know.”

They fall into silence for a while, and Alex tries to let herself revel in the feeling of weightlessness. Floating. She feels numb from the cold, but her senses feel overloaded. Traffic sounds become a symphony, horns and percussion creating a familiar tune, and the air seems even crisper than before. Her fingertips tingle, and Alex just wants this to last.

“Broken things can be fixed, you know,” Cam says, her voice adding to the symphony. “If something falls apart, you can put it back together.”

“Tell me what to do.”

“Since when do you not have a plan?”

“Since all my plans fell apart,” Alex says, mouth dry and vision suddenly clouded with tears.

Cam shakes her head, her temple bumping against Alex’s. “There’s no formula for starting over. Trust me. There’s no right way or time. You just have to start.”

“I just want to go home.”

“Then go home,” Cam says, her words slightly muffled by the dwindling joint held between her lips. “What are you waiting for?”

“I don’t know.”

Cam sits up and rests her back against the railing. She nudges Alex’s shoulder with her residual limb. “You remember our code names if the cops come by?”

Alex forces herself up with a groan, snatches the small stub of a joint from between Cam’s lips, and

settles against the opposite railing. “Honestly,” she says after taking a short puff, “whatever cop happened upon us right now would probably be more alarmed by this torso-less leg we’re hanging out with than by the pot.”

For three solid seconds, Cam’s response is silence, her face blank as she stares at Alex and blinks. And then she breaks, bursting into loud, raspy laughter. Alex follows. The joint falls from her lips into her lap and then rolls off onto the concrete. It catches the breeze and zips off the edge and out of sight before Alex can grab it.

Both Alex and Cam gasp, their laughter briefly catching in their throats, and stare at the edge where the joint disappeared. They gape at each other for a moment. Then Cam snorts, and they explode into laughter again.

Cam grabs her prosthesis. “What do you say, Frankie?” It makes a metallic thudding sound as she bounces it against the railing. “Should we feed the damned thing to the fishes?”

“I’m not jumping in after it when you change your mind.”

Their laughter melds together again, and Alex lets the sound slip down between her ribs and wrap around her heart. A mending kind of music, it makes her feel alive again. When it dwindles away on the cold air, they sit comfortably in silence until Cam reaches over and pats Alex’s shin.

“You don’t have to wait to be happy, you know.”

“Don’t I?”

“There aren’t any rules here, Alex. There isn’t some respectable amount of time you have to wait. You and Kari broke up because you’re in love with Charlee, so, like, go be in love with her.” She pinches the material of Alex’s jeans and shakes it, jostling Alex’s leg. “Stop wasting it. That’s how you do better. You know? By not making the same mistakes you made the first time. Just follow your heart. That’s how you make it right.”

Alex lets the words sink in. “Maybe I’m a little afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Of everything falling apart again.” She wraps her arms around herself. “The world doesn’t just flatten out for love, you know. It keeps flinging us around, keeps pelting us with everything it has. And we just have to figure out how to stay standing, how to hold on to each other.”

Cam pats her leg, and Alex covers her face with her hands. “You’re so poetic when you’re high.”

Alex laughs into her hands, the sound wet and rough, and rubs at her eyes until they feel raw. Tears smear against her fingers and palms, and she sighs, looks up at Cam’s small smile. It almost dips at the edges, caught somewhere between joy and sorrow. “I never... Before Charlee, I never knew love could be like that. You know? She makes everything feel so *full*. Like, even simple things have some kind of magic in them. And I’m terrified to have that again because I’m terrified to lose it again.”

“Well,” Cam says, “as your sister would say, fear is the best motivator.”

Another small laugh escapes, and Alex nods. “I guess it’s not faulty logic after all. Don’t tell Vinny that, though.”

“My lips are sealed.” Cam reaches for her prosthesis. “Now, help me get my leg back on. My ass is

frozen, and I can't feel my face."

"You're not wearing that leg." Alex stands, blinks until her vision clears and she feels steady, then holds out her hand. "Come on. I'll carry you down, and we can call a cab."

Cam narrows her eyes as she grabs Alex's fingers with one hand and the railing with the other. "How high are you?"

"My legs feel like jelly, my mouth is a desert, and I literally just said Charlee makes life feel magical."

Cam laughs as Alex pulls her up. "Yup. You're soaring."

"Yes, I am."

"You don't sound like a very reliable chariot, Jelly Legs," Cam says, "but I'll take it."

She hops onto Alex's back and loops an arm around her neck, while Alex's arms hook around her thighs. Cam grabs her prosthesis where it leans against the railing. "Okay. Good to go."

Alex blinks to keep her vision clear as she makes her way down the sidewalk, holding tightly to her passenger. When she feels Cam's chin drop to rest on her shoulder, she says, "I'm really sorry I missed out on the last five years of your life, Margarita."

Cam leans their heads together and sighs. "Me too, Frankie. Me too."



Alex paces in the elevator. Her palms feel sweaty inside her gloves, so she takes them off and shoves them into her coat pockets. Her stomach knots and flips with every breath she takes and every floor she passes. Her head is a hazy mess of echoes.

"You don't have to wait to be happy."

Another floor passes. A ball of tension builds at the base of Alex's spine. Every inch of her body feels taut and wired despite how relaxed she felt on the bridge.

"You're in love with Charlee. Go be in love with her."

When the elevator lurches to a stop, Alex closes her eyes. The doors grate and squeak as they separate, and when she opens her eyes again, her heart begins to race.

"Go home."

Alex hesitates so long that the elevator doors nearly close again with her still inside. They jolt back open when she propels herself forward and crosses the hall. When she reaches the door, she rests her forehead against it and tries to calm herself down. Another deep breath and then she raises a fist to knock. The sound is loud and echoing in the empty hallway, and it makes her heart race faster, harder.

She doesn't have a clue what she wants to say; she's not even sure where to begin. The second that door opens, though, words no longer matter. Charlee's sleepy, bloodshot blue eyes lock onto her, and Alex feels all the rest of the world melt away.

"Alex."

At the croak of her name, all the pieces Alex has kept quiet and contained for years soar up to the surface and bloom in the flickering fluorescent light of the old hallway. Tears flood her eyes, and the tension drains from her body.

“I can’t sleep.” Her body feels riddled with both excitement and exhaustion, every inch of her trembling. “I close my eyes, and I see your face. I feel your breath on the back of my neck. Hear your voice like you’re right there beside me. But when I open my eyes—”

In her pajamas, Charlee stands in the open doorway, leaning against the door. “I’m not there,” she says, and Alex nods.

“And I can’t sleep.” She wipes at her cheek with sweaty fingertips. “I can’t sleep, because my head is so full of you.” A shallow breath shudders across her lips. “Because my heart is broken.”

“Alex.”

“Because I love you so much, Charlee. I love you so much, I feel like I can’t fit it all inside me. I feel like I’m going to burst with it. I love you so much, it hurts.”

Charlee’s eyes water. Her lips quiver. “It hurts to love me?”

The toes of her boots inch over the threshold as Alex reaches for her. She cups her cheek, caresses her. “It hurts the way your first deep breath hurts when you break the surface.” Another step. Her hand slides down from Charlee’s cheek to her neck. “When you’ve been underwater too long.” Her fingers trace over Charlee’s exposed collarbone, over her shoulder. “It’s fast and sharp.” She trails down her arm. “Dizzying.” She dips down to Charlee’s hand and squeezes the pads of her fingertips. “But it’s the best feeling in the world, that breath.” Another small step. “Because it’s *exactly* what you need.” She releases Charlee’s fingertips to run her hand along Charlee’s waist.

The tears caught in Charlee’s eyelashes break free as she closes her eyes at Alex’s touch, at Alex’s fingertips pressing into her side. *Nothing and no one has ever been more beautiful.*

“It’s how you stay alive,” Alex says, lifting her other hand to Charlee’s neck and taking another tiny step, just enough that their bodies brush together. “It’s how you *know* you’re alive.” Another small step. The tips of their noses brush, and Alex can feel Charlee’s warm breath against her lips. “It’s how you know you’re going to be okay.”

Charlee opens her eyes again, blurry and bright, and they’re so close. They hold each other’s gazes, and Alex’s heart thuds roughly against the walls of her chest. For a moment, they’re still, frozen just outside one another, and then Charlee closes the gap.

Their lips connect, gentle and wet, for the first time in nearly six years. That one soft touch shakes through every inch of Alex’s body, and she can *breathe*. God, she can breathe again.

The air stutters between her teeth. She takes it in, overwhelmed, before tilting her head and diving in again. A sob is muted against her lips as Charlee kisses her, as Charlee’s hands grip onto her, desperate and pleading. Alex can’t stop trembling.

When they separate, they barely part, foreheads still resting together, noses touching. Charlee’s pulse thuds rapidly under Alex’s fingertips where they rest at the side of her neck. “Please stay,” she says, her voice ragged and her cheeks tracked with all the ways they’ve loved and lost and suffered. “Please, Alex. Please come home.”

Alex feels the quiet words like thunder in her bones—echoing and rattling her insides. “That’s the thing,” she says, leaning in just enough to kiss the wet surface of Charlee’s cheek. “I never really had

a home. Nothing permanent. Nothing precious. Not until you.” She nudges her nose against Charlee’s and kisses her other cheek. “I made my home in you. *With* you. And it *was* precious. It was the most precious thing I’d ever had, and it was—”

“Permanent?”

For the first time in years, hope curls around Alex’s heart and clings. She pushes every ounce of it into her trembling voice. “God, I hope so,” she says and lets Charlee lead her into the loft.

They stumble with every step, never letting each other go, and Charlee kicks the door closed. She plants gentle, unhurried kisses on Alex’s lips and cheeks and chin and neck as she leads her through the loft. Alex lets herself go to the feeling, to the leading. She lets herself be guided along through the space they once shared, through the home they built together, and it’s the most natural thing in the world.

Like it could never be anything but theirs.

When they reach the studio, the door is open. The room is lit by only a small lamp, and everything, from the smell of paint to the pile of freshly slept-in blankets on their old mattress on the floor, makes Alex feel dizzy. She is awash in both past and present. The little details jump out at her, tug at her heart. It’s Alex who covers the walls, but it’s Charlee who fills up the room. She’s the damp spot on the pillow and the splatter on the nearby canvas. She’s every stroke in every image. Every point of every tack pinning their memories to corkboards and plaster. She’s the perfume in the air and the fingertips tracing Alex’s jawline, rubbing over the metal line of the zipper on Alex’s coat.

“Can I take this off?”

“Yes,” Alex says, so quiet she barely even hears herself.

Charlee unzips and pushes the heavy material over and off Alex’s shoulders. The coat hits the floor, and Alex’s breath comes even easier.

“And this?”

Alex nods and lets Charlee pull her thermal up and over her head so she is down to her tank top. She shivers despite feeling flushed, and Charlee runs her hands down Alex’s arms.

“Is this okay?” Charlee asks, eyes wide and wanting, and Alex loves her. More and more and more, she loves her.

“Take everything.” She runs her fingers up the length of Charlee’s neck, swipes her thumb over Charlee’s bottom lip, and leans in, follows the motion with her mouth. She kisses Charlee on the corner of her lips, kisses the freckle just above, kisses her full and deep and breathless. “Take everything.”

Alex places Charlee’s hands at the bottom of her tank top. She sighs when Charlee pulls the material free and leaves her bare. No bra. No barriers.

Charlee maps Alex’s exposed flesh, her gaze as loving and reverent as it has always been. Her fingers caress the smooth skin between Alex’s breasts, draw an easy circle around a pebbled nipple, and trace a line down the plane of her stomach. Her hands drop to Alex’s jeans then. She toys with the smooth metal button before popping it open and wrestles the tight denim down Alex’s long legs, down

to the boots out of which Alex wriggles her socked feet.

Alex closes her eyes as Charlee peels her socks off, one by one, then presses her lips to Alex's shins. To her knees. To her thighs. When Alex opens her eyes again, Charlee is on her knees in front of her, fingers tucking under the band of Alex's underwear. She stares up at Alex, vulnerable, and Alex runs her hand over the top of Charlee's head, down a strand of blonde hair. She nods, and Charlee slides the final barrier down and away.

Alex is entirely bare. Charlee leans in to her and rests her forehead against her lower abdomen. Warm breath skitters over the sensitive skin between her legs, and Alex's throat tightens. Her eyes burn with new tears as Charlee's hands rub down her thighs, and her lips plant a whisper of a kiss at the top of Alex's slit.

"Charlee." It's hardly more than a breath. Charlee nods against Alex's stomach.

She stands and makes quick work of her own tank top. It drops to the floor, followed by her pajama pants, and Alex's breath catches in her throat as she takes in the sight of Charlee in only her striped panties. A second later, they, too, fall to the floor.

"I missed you," Alex says, fingers tracing over Charlee's chest and stomach and hips. She dips along the curves of Charlee's sides before sliding around to her back and bringing them flush together. She kisses Charlee's shoulder. Her neck. Her ear. "I *miss* you."

Charlee backs them toward the bed. They crawl in side by side, facing one another, and she leans over Alex to switch off the lamp. The room goes dark, plunged into shades of black and white but for a yellow glow flooding into the open doorway from the paneled windows of the great room.

They stare at each other in the dark, as they have done countless times before, with fingers tangling together in the slim space between their bodies. Neither breathes a word. Alex smells Charlee on the pillow under her cheek, feels the heat of her body only inches away, and is overwhelmed. Dizzy with it all.

Every step she had taken to get herself here had been hazy, a blur. But now, lying across from Charlee... "I don't think I've ever seen anything more clearly in my life than I see you," Alex says, and her voice is a mess from crying—rough and gritty like gravel.

Charlee takes a deep breath. Her lips draw up at the corners as she shakes her head slowly against the pillow. "I'm going to love you so hard, Alexandra Woodson."

They inch across the minute space between them and wrap their arms fully around one another.

"And so soft," Charlee says against Alex's neck.

Alex shivers, clings to her. She buries her face in Charlee's hair and wonders if this will ever stop feeling like a dream. Moisture dots her vision when Charlee's fingertips skate up and down her back in soothing strokes that lull her toward sleep. It's the best she has felt in longer than she can remember.

"Sleep," Charlee says, still stroking along the length of Alex's bare back. "I'll still be here when you wake."

Alex closes her eyes at Charlee's gentle urging, and sleep comes free and easy, as it hasn't in so

terribly long.

With their bodies tangled together, they hold each other in the dark, and there's no need to pretend. Some things *do* last forever.



“You look beautiful.”

Alex turned at the sound of Charlee's raspy voice, found her leaning against the open door of their bedroom. “You should be sleeping.”

“You're crying.”

“I'm leaving.”

Charlee crossed her arms over her naked chest, shivering a bit, and walked to the windows. “I know.”

Alex opened her arms, and Charlee burrowed in against her chest. “Are we sure this is what we want to do?”

“I think it's what we have to do,” Charlee said against the warm swell of Alex's breast. “It makes the most sense, doesn't it?”

Alex's arms tightened around her, and her heartbeat thudded beneath Charlee's ear. Slow and steady. “Nothing ever made sense until you.”

Tears pricked in Charlee's eyes, but she blinked them away, cleared her throat, and poked Alex's side. “You had a valedictorian medal hanging from your rearview mirror and a scholarship when you met me. So some things must have made sense.”

“I'm trying to express my feelings.” Alex's nose nuzzled against the top of Charlee's head.

Charlee closed her eyes, breathed in the comforting scent of Alex's skin. “I'm trying not to fall apart.”



Charlee jerks awake. She'd rolled over to wrap around Alex and found only cold, empty sheets. Her stomach drops when her vision focuses. Alex is gone.

“No,” she says, heart stuttering beneath her ribs. “No, no.”

Charlee scrambles out of bed, nearly toppling herself in tangled sheets, and crosses to the opened sliding door. She stumbles, a half step out the door, and sees Alex just outside their bedroom. With a deep breath, she forces her heart to calm as she takes in the sight of her standing by the paneled windows of the far wall.

Her naked body is washed partly in shadow and partly in yellow light from the streetlight glow coming through the glass. Her sleep-mussed hair hangs down her back. She stands with one hand pressed to a square pane—an image from a dream. Charlee's mouth goes dry.

Tingles ripple down her back as she takes a quiet step forward and says, “You look beautiful.” Alex turns to face her, a smile forming on her lips. “What are you doing out here?”

“I was just thinking.”

“What about?”

“You,” Alex says and then waves a hand to indicate the space around them. “All of this. Your art.”

“My art?”

“Mm,” Alex hums. “I was wondering what it must be like to see the world through an artist’s lens.”

“What do you mean?”

“You never doubt what you feel, Charlee. You never look at a situation and see all the ways you’re boxed in. You see all the ways you can set yourself free. You see possibilities.” Alex turns back toward the window and stares out at the city for a moment. “You look at a raindrop, and you see an entire universe.” She turns back to her with a shrug. “All I see is rain.”

“Alex.”

“And if I could see the world the way you do, maybe I wouldn’t have waited so long. Maybe I would’ve followed my heart sooner. Maybe we wouldn’t be so broken.”

“What happened wasn’t your fault.”

“I spent a long time blaming myself, though.”

“I know.”

They stare at one another in the dim wash of the streetlight. Even slouched and cold and teary-eyed, Alex is the most beautiful thing Charlee has ever seen. “Are you okay?”

“Are you?”

“I will be.” Charlee licks her dry lips. “*We* will be.”

Alex crosses her arms over her bare chest and sighs. “We hurt people.”

“Yeah,” Charlee says, wiping a hand down her face and rubbing at her tired eyes. “We did.” She walks over to the futon couch and motions Alex over. They sit down together, and Charlee grabs a blanket from the back of the couch. She wraps it around their shoulders and rests her head against Alex’s. “We hurt each other.”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll be okay.”

“Yeah.”

“Alex?”

“Charlee.”

“What are you thinking about now?”

“You,” Alex says again. “And me.” Her voice wavers. “All I want in the world is for us to be us again.”

“Even if it hurts sometimes?”

“That’s the only way it would be real,” Alex says with a wet, breathy laugh. “So yes.” She shifts to lie down, pulling Charlee with her so they are squished together on the couch, facing each other. “I want to work at it.”

“Me too.”

“I want to find *us* again, you know? Learn what it means to love each other again.”

Charlee’s insides stir with the words. Her breath stalls at the hitch in Alex’s, at the strained nature

of her voice.

“I want to know we didn’t tear ourselves and everyone else apart for nothing, that we did it because we know we’re going to trust each other, take care of each other, hold on to each other.” Alex kisses Charlee’s nose. “Because we know that being together, no matter the obstacles, is worth it, and because we know that what happened before—”

“—isn’t going to happen again,” Charlee says, and Alex closes her eyes. Releases a slow breath, a confirmation.

Charlee lifts a hand, wipes it through the wet tracks still lingering on Alex’s cheeks. “Alex,” she says and waits for those green eyes to open again. When they do, Charlee cups her cheek and kisses her lips. “You want to know why you only see rain?”

Alex’s brow wrinkles for a moment, but then she squeezes Charlee’s side in answer, and Charlee smiles. She runs her thumb along Alex’s bottom lip.

“Because you *are* the universe,” she says, and every bit of her heart spills up into the words, the truth she has carried inside her since the day she followed a strange, beautiful girl into a private study room and kissed her like she was her soul mate. She was. She is. “And I see you.”

Alex draws in a ragged breath and clamps her eyes closed again. “I’m so sorry for everything, Charlee.”

Charlee kisses her again. Again and again. “So am I.”

When Alex urges her closer, she tucks farther in, and they hold each other so tightly that it borders on pain, but Charlee doesn’t care. It’s the best kind of pain. She yawns against Alex’s neck and feels her do the same.

“You should be sleeping,” Alex says, and Charlee eases back to look at her. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

“You were crying.”

“Do you want to go back to bed?”

Charlee hesitates as Alex blows a gust of air up toward her cheeks and eyes and blinks away leftover tears. Her stomach lurches as she nibbles her bottom lip. When she doesn’t say anything, Alex looks at her. Her eyes soften, then Charlee is being embraced again.

“I’m staying, Charlee.”

Her chest expands, and Charlee feels her heart steady and then bloom.

“I’m staying.”

CHAPTER 14

AS SHE WAITS, CHARLEE'S FEET kick out back and forth over the edge of the table she's sitting on. Her bottom lip is raw from chewing on it, and her stomach hasn't stopped clenching since she arrived.

When the door opens, she stills.

"He'll be with you in a moment," a voice says from behind the doorway, at an angle where Charlee can't see.

"Thanks." Cam limps through the door a second later. She only manages a few steps into the room, the door closing behind her, before she looks up and freezes in place. One brow ticks up as she glances around the room and then back to Charlee.

"Hi."

"Hey." Cam's voice is a bit rough, guarded. "What are you doing here?"

"Being a better friend," Charlee says, and Cam's shoulders lower just a touch. Her expression softens, just enough for Charlee to know that her being here isn't as unwelcome as she feared it might be.

Cam glances down to the floor and scratches at the back of her head. "I guess Gabby told you about my appointment?"

"Yeah." Charlee crosses the room to stand in front of her. "She told me last week that you asked her to lunch today, since you'd be at the hospital. I put the two together."

"And then you got your mom to break the rules to find out when my appointment was."

"No."

Cam narrows her eyes.

"Maybe."

When Cam's expression doesn't change, Charlee huffs.

"Yes. My mom is friends with Aaron. I'm awful."

Cam doesn't say anything for several painfully long moments, but then she shrugs. Her lips lift at one corner. "Yeah," she says. "But you're kind of great too."

A wide, unfettered smile breaks over Charlee's face, a breath of relief rushing free.

"If you think this means you're invited to lunch, though—"

Charlee launches forward, cutting Cam off with an embrace so tight it makes her wheeze. "I'm so sorry."

"Me too," Cam says, returning the embrace.

"Don't." Charlee shakes her head, chin brushing atop Cam's shoulder. "You have nothing to be sorry for. I've been in my head and completely tuned out, and I'm glad you called me out on it."

They hold each other for one long, silent moment before Cam mumbles into Charlee's hair. "How

are things with you and Alex?”

“Today isn’t about me and Alex. Today is about you.”

“My shit?”

“Yup,” Charlee says. “Your shit. Not mine.”

“Okay, I might consider letting you come to lunch if you’re paying.”

Charlee laughs. “I can do better than that, actually.”

Pulling back, Cam looks at her with narrowed eyes. “What’s better than free food?”

Before Charlee can answer, the door opens again and the prosthetist enters, a middle-aged man with a toothy smile and more hair on his face than on his head. He wears a white lab coat over jeans and a navy tie over his light-blue button-up.

“Camila,” he says. “I thought I wouldn’t be seeing you again until your biannual in March.”

“Yeah, well, remember in September when you said it was time for a new leg and so we did the fitting but I was like, ‘Nah, I’m cheap. It can wait a little longer’?”

Aaron laughs. “Can’t wait any longer, I’m guessing?”

“Bingo.” Cam follows him to the table. She unbuttons her cargo khakis and drops them down her legs. Once she hops onto the table, Charlee helps pull her shoes off, then slides the khakis the rest of the way down and sets everything aside on the table.

“You remember Charlee?” Cam points at her, and Charlee gives a little wave.

“Charlee,” Aaron says with a nod. “Twice in one week. Good to see you again.”

“Twice in one week?” Cam’s face scrunches with confusion. “What does that mean?”

“Um, I came in earlier this week.”

Cam looks back and forth between them. “Did you lose a limb and neglect to tell me? Because that’s not cool, dude.”

Aaron chuckles. “You’ll see. But first, why don’t you tell me what’s been going on with your leg?”

Cam gives him the rundown as she takes off her prosthesis. She groans at the stern look he gives her once she pulls her sock down. “I know, I know,” she says. “I’m supposed to come in when it hurts, but I’ve been busy. Like, *so* busy. So, please, spare me the lecture.”

“You’re lucky this hasn’t developed into an open pressure sore,” Aaron says, palpating the reddened skin around the blister on Cam’s thigh.

“We can totally skip the guilt trips along with the lectures.” Cam winces a bit at Aaron’s touch. She rolls her eyes when Charlee holds out her hand, but ends up taking it anyway. “I’ll get enough of that from Charlee’s mom later.”

“It’s true,” Charlee says. “She will. It’ll get brought up at least twice a month ’til next Christmas.”

“Fine,” Aaron says. “At least *someone* gets to lecture you.”

Cam laughs. “This is why you’re my favorite prosthetist.”

“I’m your only prosthetist.”

“True. Still my favorite, though.”

Cam sits through a few more minutes of painful palpating, her face scrunching a bit with each

squeeze. “Normally, the nubby massage is my favorite part, but I’m really not feeling it today, Aaron.”

Aaron gently pats the top of Cam’s thigh. “All right,” he says. “Well, it looks like the issue is mostly with your socket. As I said in September, it’s time for a new prosthesis. You’ve kept this one longer than recommended, and you’ve had some size variation in your residual limb. It’s swollen right now, which is due to the sore and likely also the weather we’ve been having, but overall, you’ve had some shrinkage. That’s what’s been causing the rubbing. It’s a bit much to fix with a sock change or adjustment, which I’m sure you’ve already figured out. So, we’re just at that point.”

Cam groans. “Okay.”

“At least you won’t have to wait long.”

“What do you mean?”

Aaron looks at Charlee, which prompts Cam to look at Charlee, whose nerves are on fire. “Um,” she says while Aaron slips away and out of the room. “Remember how I said I could do better than buying you lunch?”

“Don’t tell me you bought me a new leg,” Cam says, teasing. When Charlee only stares at her, her mouth falls open. “Charlee.” Her eyes blow wide. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Well, you only held off in September because you had *Twelfth Night* to work on and because of the cost, so I—”

“So you *paid* for a new leg for me?” The question is practically squeaked, and Charlee can’t help but laugh a bit.

“That’s kind of why I didn’t get you a Christmas present and also why you won’t be getting a Christmas present for, like, the rest of your life.” She shuffles in place. “And just so we’re being completely honest here, Mom paid for most of it, because holy hell. And obviously, she was the one who talked to Aaron about going ahead with everything so it would be ready for your next appointment. So, you know, it wasn’t all me, but...”

Cam gapes at her.

“Are you mad?” Charlee asks.

Before Cam can answer, Aaron returns with a large box. “Now,” he says, “we’re still going to have to try it out and make some adjustments over the next couple months, but I imagine we shouldn’t have too many issues. You know how it goes, though, so we’ll see. But I’m not letting you on it until your skin is feeling better and this blister has resolved. I’m serious. I don’t want you wearing the leg. *Any* leg. It’s strictly crutches or chair until I give the go-ahead. Clear?”

“Crystal.” Cam nods eagerly.

“And no more ignoring the pain. If you’re having issues, you come in. Okay? I don’t care how busy you are.”

Cam salutes. “Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and I want to talk to you about some new liners we’ve—”

“Just show me the damned thing, already!”

Aaron smiles. “All right. Enough anticipation, huh?”

When he pulls the new prosthesis from the box, Charlee holds her breath. Purples and blues swirl around the socket and foot, galaxies soaring over the length and speckled with stars. Charlee swells with pride at the way Cam gasps at the sight of it.

“Charlee, did you—”

“Yes,” Charlee says, glancing from the prosthesis to Cam and back. “That’s why I came in earlier this week. I asked Aaron if I could paint it, and he agreed, as long as I didn’t damage it in any way.”

“Charlee.”

Cam reaches out for the piece and runs her hands over the design. She holds it in her lap for a long time, just staring down at it, and when she finally looks up at Charlee again, there are tears in her eyes.

“After what you said at Christmas, I felt awful,” Charlee says. “Because everything you said was true. I *have* been neglecting you, and I just wanted to do something to show you—” She sighs as her throat tightens. “I wanted you to know how special you are to me. I get a little too caught up in myself sometimes, I know. But you have to know how much it means to me to have you in my life and to be able to be a part of yours.”

Cam sets the gift aside and reaches for Charlee. Grabbing her arm, she practically yanks her onto the table and envelops her in a tight hug. “Thank you.” She trembles with the words. “Thank you so much.”

Charlee doesn’t care that there’s a third party present. She sinks into Cam’s arms. “You’re never invisible to me, Cam. You’re my best friend.”

“You’re mine.”



“You were both naked.” Vinny leans back in the chair across from Alex’s desk and twirls the letter opener between her fingers. “And you just slept?”

“Yes, we just slept.”

“So, just clarifying here—you definitely did *not* have sex?”

“No, we didn’t have sex. And, no, I won’t be sharing any details with you when we do.”

“I just had to sit through you basically reciting a damned poem about how good it felt to be skin to skin with her again, and you’re telling me I’m not going to get sex details?” Vinny drops the letter opener, launches across the desk to grab Alex’s stress ball, and chucks it at her head. “I’m disowning you.”

Alex catches the ball before it can do any damage and throws it back at Vinny. “Don’t act like you actually want to know.”

Grinning, Vinny says, “You’re right. I just like seeing you happy.” She tosses the stress ball back. “You *are* happy, aren’t you?”

“I am.” A small smile touches Alex’s lips. “Or, at least, I’m getting there.”

A quiet knock sounds on the door just before a young redheaded woman pokes her head in.

“Ms. Woodson.”

Vinny snorts at the address, and Alex scowls at her.

“Sorry to bother you, Ms. Woodson.”

“Please stop calling me Ms. Woodson, Rachel,” Alex says. “It gives me a headache.”

“Sorry, Ms. Woodson.”

Vinny laughs out loud, and Rachel winces.

“Sorry,” she says again, cheeks reddening.

“What did you need?”

“I just wanted to let you know that I took care of that purchase we discussed,” she says. “I had the package placed in the conference room until you’re ready for it.” She walks across the office, pulling a piece of paper from the slim compartment inside her plastic clipboard. “Here’s the receipt.”

“Oh.” Alex takes it. “Thank you.” They stare at one another for a moment. “Is that all?” she asks pointedly.

“Oh, sorry.”

Rachel leaves the room quickly, and Alex and Vinny look at one another for one tense, silent moment before they both burst into laughter.

“Your assistant is—”

“She’s a little awkward,” Alex says. “I know. But she’s great at her job. I think she’s just nervous about tonight. It’s her first event. Speaking of, I’ll be even happier once that’s finished. I’m exhausted.”

“Well, the fact that you and Charlee have been sobbing over each other every five minutes for the last few months probably hasn’t helped matters.” Vinny catches the stress ball when Alex tosses it back her way and then throws it back. “Dehydration is a bitch.”

Alex purses her lips. “Yes.” She pins Vinny with a hard stare. “And so are you.”

She doesn’t give Vinny the chance to react before she chucks the stress ball at her as hard as she can. It smacks into Vinny’s forehead with a whacking sound and results in an echoing shout of “motherfucker!”

Vinny’s expression is so dumbfounded as she cups her forehead and gapes at her that Alex has to clap a hand over her mouth to keep from erupting with laughter. When it shifts into a glare and Vinny poises herself on the edge of her seat as though she is preparing to launch, Alex braces her hands on her desk.

“Vinaya,” she says, still choking down laughter. “We’re in the office. I want you to consider this carefully before you make any rash decisions. There’s no need to make a scene.”

“Oh, I’ll make a scene!” Vinny jets out of her seat and around Alex’s desk.

Alex is barely out of her chair before Vinny latches onto her and tackles her to the floor. They grapple for a few moments before Vinny manages to get Alex on her stomach. Alex grunts as her face squishes into the carpet, her arms jerk behind her back, and her sister’s knee digs in between her shoulder blades.

“Give?” Vinny asks, a bit breathless.

Alex huffs. “Give.”

“Good.” Vinny smacks a kiss to the back of Alex’s head and ruffles her hair with her hand. She releases her a moment later and sits on the floor with her back against Alex’s desk.

Alex grumbles as she sits up, smooths down her mussed clothing, and settles across from Vinny, back to the opposite wall. “I almost had you.”

“You never had me.”

“Almost,” Alex says, and Vinny smiles.

“All right, kid.” Vinny sticks her legs out and rests her feet against Alex’s. “Almost.”

They sit on the floor in silence for a while, their shoes pressed together, then Alex says, “Thank you for bringing me breakfast.”

“Welcome.” Vinny taps Alex’s toes. “Everything ready for tonight?”

“I have final checks to do later this morning, and then I want to run over to the venue to make sure everything’s in place. Other than that, yeah. It’s just a matter of everyone being where they’re supposed to be when they’re supposed to be there, including me.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Yeah. It’ll be nice to be able to focus on other things once this is done.”

“On Charlee, you mean?”

Alex taps her foot against her sister’s. “Again, mind your own business.”

“You *are* my business.”

“Well, then the business is doing just fine, so you can stop meddling.”

Vinny chuckles and nudges her feet up so both their legs are suspended in the air. She pumps her feet, creating the rhythm of peddling a bicycle, and Alex grins. They haven’t done this in years.

“It’s good to see you like this again,” Vinny says.

“Like what?”

“Like you.”

The words sink in, comforting, and Alex nods. “I think I’m starting to feel like myself again.” She leans her head back against the wall. “You were right.”

“About what?”

Alex closes her eyes, sees Charlee’s smile in the dim bedroom light, feels her hands on her skin. She takes a deep breath and lets it out in a slow, easy stream. “I finally got to the air.”



“What do you think about this piece?”

As she looked the painting over, Alex tilted her head. “I’m not sure.”

“You don’t like it.” Charlee led her along to the next piece on display.

They’d been at the indie art show for a little under an hour, and Charlee had loved every minute of it. Everything from the poetry readings to the dances to the various sculptures on display thrilled her, despite not all having been to her taste. She could tell that Alex had enjoyed herself as well, even though most of the paintings hadn’t been her style either.

“I said I wasn’t sure, not that I didn’t like it.”

“You say you aren’t sure when you don’t like something but don’t want to admit it,” Charlee said, looking over another piece by the same artist.

The large room was mostly empty thanks to the interpretive dance performance taking place in the front room, so she didn’t feel rushed from piece to piece. She could linger at each one, properly absorb everything.

“Fine.” Alex shrugged. “I didn’t like it.”

Charlee steered her across the room to a wall of watercolors. “Oh,” she said, reaching up toward a large canvas painting. “This is beautiful. You see the way they did this? It’s actually really hard to—”

She brushed her hand across the apparently unstable canvas and gasped so hard she choked as it wobbled and crashed to the floor at their feet. Charlee froze in place. The piece didn’t look damaged, from what she could see, but her heart still plummeted.

She glanced around the room. They hadn’t drawn any attention to themselves, thankfully. The music playing over the speakers had masked the sound of the crash. Her face snapped to Alex’s. She gaped at her, unsure of what to do.

Alex shrugged again. “Run,” she said.

A second later, she grabbed Charlee’s hand and took off through the gallery. People startled around them as the two of them raced into the nearest room with a crowd, Alex shouting, “Sorry! Someone knocked over a painting. I think they went this way. I’ll catch them!”

Unable to help herself, Charlee laughed out loud. Their hands were still entwined, and she let Alex pull her along. They shot out the nearest exit into the warm summer night air and bolted down the street, feet slapping against the pavement. When they reached their parked car, Alex used their momentum to spin Charlee around and pin her against the driver’s side door.

Charlee giggled between gasps for air. Those bursts of silly spontaneity dizzied her in the best way, because Alex didn’t just give those pieces of herself away. She gave them only to the people who managed to wriggle their way into her heart. She gave them to Charlee because she loved her. Alex loved her. And it was a wild kind of love. A raw kind of love. Tender and vulnerable and strong.

And *so* fucking free.

As she calmed, she realized Alex wasn’t laughing at all but was simply looking at her, lips stretching around a wide smile. Her eyes shone bright in the moonlight.

“What?” Charlee reached up to tuck an errant hair behind Alex’s ear. “What is it?”

“Your laugh.”

“What about it?”

“It makes me feel good.” She leaned into Charlee. Her warm breath and the look in her eyes made Charlee’s stomach swoop and stir. “It makes everything feel *so* good.”

Alex leaned in farther, touched her lips to Charlee’s. It was a gentle kiss, soft and barely there, but Charlee felt it everywhere.

“This.” She breathed against Alex’s lips, the heat of the night licking at their flesh and Charlee’s body thrumming. “This makes *me* feel good.”

She kissed Alex soundly, deeply.

“You make me feel so alive.”



A gust of cold wind blows in, and Charlee is tired, but her heart jumps at the sight of Alex closing the gallery door behind her, cheeks reddened from the bitter wind, and hair wild around her face. She suddenly feels wide awake.

“Hey,” she says as Alex stomps her shoes on the doormat, clumps of snow falling from the soles.

Alex smiles at her, simple and small, and Charlee’s heart leaps again. “Hi.”

“It’s late.” Charlee checks her watch. “*Really* late. Wow. How was the banquet?”

“Mm.” Alex nods. “It went well. One of the servers cut her hand open and had to go to the emergency room, but other than that, it went smoothly.” With a yawn, she crosses the room. “I went by the loft, but you weren’t there. Thought I might find you here.”

They hover in front of one another as if they aren’t quite sure what to do, and Charlee feels like a teenager again, following the cute girl with the temper into a private study room. There’s a grin on her face. Her stomach is in knots. She feels like they’re brand new again.

“I’ve been packing all day.” Charlee leans her back against an empty half wall. “Several pieces are going out tomorrow, so I’ve been getting those ready for shipment and trying to figure out which pieces to put up in their places. Once I get all *that* out of the way, each new piece will need a title card, and then, of course, some pieces will need special assists, so I’ll have to get Cam in to look at —”

She stops when she realizes Alex’s small smile has grown into something nearly unrestrained. She laughs and swipes her hand through her messy hair. “What?”

Alex shoves her hands into her coat pockets. She gives a little shake of her head. “I’ve really missed this.”

“What? Me talking about packaging and placement?”

“Just you,” Alex says. “Talking about your day. Your art.” Her gaze tracks the floor before flitting back up to Charlee’s face. “You used to lay your head on my chest.” Reaching up, she rests her hand over her heart. “Just here.” An easy sigh rolls across her lips. “Even when you hadn’t been painting, your hair always smelled like paint and whatever your shampoo of the month was.”

Charlee grabs Alex’s arm to bring her closer.

“And you’d tell me about your day,” Alex says, pulling her hand from her pocket to tuck a loose strand of hair behind Charlee’s ear. She slides her hand down Charlee’s arm and threads their fingers together. “About your classes and your projects, some new brand of pencils or paints you wanted to try. And I’d sit there, feeling the vibrations of your voice on my chest, and I’d think it couldn’t possibly get any better than that.” She clutches Charlee’s hand. “It was everything I always wanted and everything I never imagined I’d have.”

“Alex.” The name is a breathy whisper. “You have me.” A soft hum vibrates in her throat as Alex curls a hand around the back of her neck, thumb rubbing along the side, and kisses her temple. She

then eases back and smiles.

“I was hoping you’d show me around your gallery,” she says. “The last time I was here—” The buttons of her coat snap loudly in the open space as she begins undoing them. “I’d just like to experience it in a new way, if that’s all right with you.” She hesitates, fingers poised over her remaining buttons. “And if you aren’t too tired.”

“Of course I will.” Charlee’s stomach flips pleasantly when Alex smiles and removes her coat. When she holds out her hand, Charlee laces their fingers together and leads her to the nearest display.

They wind their way through the gallery together, hands loosely linked, and Charlee talks about her various pieces and about the space. She tells Alex about the different ways Cam managed to transform the place for Charlee’s shows and how much time and effort had gone into making each one unique. She tells her about the pieces she struggled with, the ones that refused to come with any measure of ease, and about the ones that sprang from her fingertips like they were desperate to be released. She tells her about earlier years, about how she would sometimes go weeks without making any sales and would wonder if she was really cut out for this. Alex simply listens, taking in all of it in reverent silence but for bits of laughter here and there evoked by stories of Charlee and Cam’s more comical mishaps.

When they pass by the centerpiece, Alex stops. She glances up at the empty glass case and says, “My ass is gone.”

“It is.”

“It must have been hard for you to part with it.”

Charlee shakes her head at Alex’s teasing grin and leans into her. “It was, actually. That piece was special to me.”

“That was a hard night,” Alex says, and Charlee agrees.

“The woman who bought it paid a thousand dollars over the asking price, though, so I couldn’t bring myself to say no.”

“My ass is apparently worth a lot of money.”

“Eleven grand.”

“Wow.”

“I know. I told her the piece was only priced at ten thousand, but she insisted on paying eleven.”

“I should take out an insurance policy.”

Charlee bumps Alex’s shoulder. “On your ass?”

“Well, if it’s *that* valuable.”

“You could probably hunt the woman down,” Charlee says. “Rachel, I think her name was. Who knows? She might pay even more for the real deal.”

“Or I could just let you paint it again and earn money for us that way.”

“Good plan,” Charlee says. “Better plan, definitely. I say we go with that.”

“It’s decided, then.”

The buoyant sounds of their laughter meld into one familiar melody that fills up the room like light

flooding through shadows. Charlee feels dizzy with it. Alex's unrestrained smile sends a ripple down her spine, a knot of tension forming at the base when fingers brush under her hair and across her neck. She bites her lip as Alex nuzzles her nose against the space behind Charlee's ear, and Charlee can't help the small sound that escapes her.

It's only a bubble of noise in her throat, but it somehow manages to spike the temperature in the room, and suddenly Charlee's boiling beneath her clothes. She steps out from under Alex's arm, hand sliding down the limb, and grasps at her fingers. She tries not to think about how sweaty her palms are, how tense and tight her body suddenly feels. "Let me show you this piece over here."

They only manage a few steps, hovering near another blank half wall, when Alex tugs on Charlee's hand to turn her around. She focuses intently on Charlee's face, her lips slightly parted. Her gaze flits from Charlee's eyes to her mouth and back, and it is enough to make the heat on Charlee's skin sink between her legs. The sensation only intensifies when Alex lowers her voice to a whisper. "Can I kiss you?"

Charlee licks her lips, caught in Alex's gaze and her quiet request. She buries her hand in the front of Alex's shirt and pulls her in. "Please."

The first touch is light, almost hesitant, and Charlee's eyes flutter closed as she feels Alex's fingertips at the line of her jaw, tracing over the skin of her neck. The second touch is harder. Fuller and deeper. It's the kind of kiss that requires a breath, sharp and fast, as her head dips back and her arms brace around the body melting against hers. It's the kind of kiss that knows only one direction—in, in, in. The kind that knows only one demand—more.

Charlee's back hits the wall with the third kiss, and her hands find their way from Alex's hair to the hem of her shirt, to the warm skin underneath. It's the kind of kiss that is more body than breath. More ache than pleasure. More need than want. It's the kind of kiss that draws sound from Alex's throat and motion from her hips, the kind that makes Charlee think the universe might crumble around them if they ever, ever stop.

"Take this off," Charlee says, breathless and tugging at Alex's shirt. "Take this off."

The words seem to jolt Alex from the moment. She steps back with kiss-swollen lips and eyes heavy with desire. She blinks rapidly. "I, I didn't mean for that kiss to turn into, well, anything more than a kiss," she says. Charlee smiles.

"I don't mind."

Alex brushes her hair out of her face and reaches for Charlee once more. Her hands tremble everywhere they touch. "But you must be exhausted."

Charlee closes her eyes at every slight bit of pressure, at every drag of Alex's fingertips over the thin material of her shirt, at Alex's apparent inability to stop touching her. "I am."

"Do you want to go home?"

Charlee opens her eyes again and looks at Alex. "Are you coming with me?"

"Only if that's what you want."

"Is that what *you* want?"

“I want to be wherever you are.”



The air in the back of the cab feels thick and offers no relief. Every shaky drag through her lips sticks in Alex’s throat as Charlee’s hand toys with the hem of her shirt under her coat. Fingertips graze over the warm flesh of her stomach, and Alex shudders.

“Charlee,” she says, but Charlee keeps her gaze fixed ahead. She draws lazy circles around Alex’s belly button. A finger dips briefly in and then drags down to the top of Alex’s pants.

Alex has to bite her tongue to keep from audibly groaning. She grabs Charlee’s wrist and pulls her hand away, unable to endure the teasing touches any longer. Every inch of her feels wired and hot, so tense she could break with the slightest pressure.

Charlee knots their fingers together and leans into Alex’s chest. Her face is warm against Alex’s neck as she leaves a whisper of a kiss there. “I’m ready for bed,” she says, and Alex grips the seat so hard she is surprised it doesn’t tear.

The cab drops them at their old building, and they make their way inside. They step into the elevator, and when the doors close, the tension from the cab ride returns. Alex’s stomach coils tighter and tighter as she and Charlee stand side by side. They watch the floor numbers tick by while Charlee runs her middle finger up and down the length of Alex’s palm. A barely-there touch, it tickles and tingles, but Alex feels it everywhere.

“Alex.” Charlee stops her ministrations to grip Alex’s hand. “Breathe.”

Alex takes one long, deep breath in through her nose. She forgets to let it out again as the doors open and Charlee steps out, leading her along behind. The door unlocks with a click, and Alex’s heart feels like it is going to pound its way out of her chest.

Inside, Charlee shrugs off her coat, kicks her shoes to the side, and reaches for Alex’s buttons. One by one, she pops them open, kissing Alex’s chest over her shirt as the coat comes undone. She slides the garment from Alex’s shoulders and hangs it on a hook by the door.

“Shoes?”

Alex blinks, then quickly toes off her shoes. When Charlee grabs her hand and starts to lead her toward the bedroom, her stomach coils up again and her throat goes painfully dry. She slips her hand from Charlee’s before she even realizes what she’s doing and half walks, half stumbles toward the kitchen.

“Alex?”

“Um, c-coffee.” Alex puts her back to Charlee and runs a hand over her hair. “Do you want—”

“Alex,” Charlee says again, and Alex stops. She braces her hands on the counter, lets her head fall between her shoulders, and takes another deep breath. It shakes back through her lips in a wet laugh, and Alex says, “We’ve done this so many times. We’ve—” She laughs at herself again. “I don’t know why I’m suddenly so nervous.”

“I’m nervous too.”

She doesn’t turn to face Charlee, but she lifts her head at the words. “You are?”

“It’s been a long time. And we’ve—well, *I’ve* dreamed about it so many times. I’ve thought about being with you, about what it would be like to touch you again. To be touched by you again.”

Alex closes her eyes, tears building and stinging behind her lids. “Me too.”

“I played memories over and over in my head, because I thought I’d never have that with you again. I thought we’d never... So to think I *could*, that *we* could, that we *can*—it’s a little terrifying.” A breathy laugh shakes free. “Not in a bad way. Just in that roller-coaster kind of way.”

“Yeah,” Alex says, knowing exactly what Charlee means. It’s the kind of terrifying that happens when something is too thrilling, when you’re right on the edge of a rush and every inch of your body is drawn tight. Every nerve is sparking, and you don’t know why, but you want to cry as much as you want to laugh.

“Alex.”

Alex turns her head just enough to look at her. Her hands clutch the counter with crushing force when their eyes lock, when Charlee looks at her like she can see through every inch. She can. She always has.

With her voice quiet and raspy, Charlee says, “Sleep with me.”

The room seems to quake around Alex as the words vibrate against her ears, beneath her ribs, between her thighs. The floor falls away, her stomach bottoms out, and for just a moment, she’s in free fall. Charlee’s eyes are so earnest, and Alex feels like they are tipping over, cresting a peak they’ve been rocking on the edge of for so achingly long. Down, down, down they go.

She takes one shallow breath, swipes through a track of tears on her cheek, and pushes off the counter. She crosses the room in two long strides and grabs Charlee in a heated kiss.

It’s a hard, heavy press that ends with Alex sucking at her full bottom lip. A guttural sound rips up from Charlee’s throat, vibrates between Alex’s teeth, and *oh*. This is the best kind of falling.

Charlee’s tongue teases at her, just a timid, testing touch to the seam of her lips. When Alex opens for her, Charlee licks into her mouth, sliding along the length of her tongue, and Alex feels it between her legs. Tension builds at the base of her spine, coiled so tightly that it hurts, and Alex can’t help the way she bows and bends against Charlee.

Hands claw at clothing, Charlee tugs at the front of Alex’s pants, and Alex is yanking Charlee’s sweater over her head. It hits the floor a breath before Charlee pops open the button on Alex’s black skinny jeans. They stumble backward as they strip, Charlee pulling and Alex pushing. Alex is down to her bra and halfway out of her jeans when Charlee backs them into the coffee table by accident and sends them crashing to the floor.

Charlee’s bare back hits the ground with a hard thud, and Alex tumbles after. Catching herself with her hands, one on each side of Charlee’s head, she hovers over her as Charlee groans and covers her face with one arm.

“Charlee.” Alex pulls the arm away. “Are you okay?”

When Charlee pouts at her, obviously fine but for a hint of embarrassment, laughter soars up Alex’s throat. It spills out of her, rich and echoing, before she can stop it, and Charlee rolls her eyes and

yanks her down with her. She swallows Alex's laugh with a kiss, and the sound fills them both up from the inside.

Alex kisses her way down from Charlee's lips to her neck, from her neck to her naked chest. The tip of her nose slides down the valley between Charlee's breasts, and Alex takes in the familiar scent of her. "God, I missed this."

She plants wet, openmouthed kisses to the swells of Charlee's breasts, tasting the salt on her skin before drawing one taut nipple into her mouth. Charlee cries out with the hard pull, and Alex's hips jerk involuntarily at the sound, driving her into the heat between Charlee's thighs.

Her jeans nearly topple her off Charlee's body as she kicks them the rest of the way off, then leans back on her knees. The cold floor shocks against the heat of her skin. She locks eyes with Charlee and hooks her fingers on the waistband of Charlee's pants, drags them down her legs. One leg is freed and then the other, and then the tart scent of Charlee's arousal strikes Alex dizzy.

Charlee parts her legs, and Alex slides between them again, closing her eyes at the feeling of being tucked into that tight, warm space again after so long. Sliding her hands up Charlee's arms, she locks their fingers together and sucks at Charlee's other nipple. Her hips rock forward with every breathy gasp from beneath her until she has sparked up a steady rhythm—thrusting against the soaked material of Charlee's underwear while Charlee rocks up to meet her.

"Alex."

It's a plea. The breathless quality of Charlee's voice makes Alex's stomach clench and her clit throb. Charlee lets go of her hands to latch on to Alex's hips. She jerks them forward, harder and faster, and Alex knows Charlee is close to getting off on the friction alone.

Charlee trembles like she's about to fall apart, and Alex lets her. She kisses her through every tremor, hips still rocking steadily forward, and when Charlee collapses, loose and liquid, Alex feels like all her pieces are falling into place. She smiles against Charlee's lips.

"I told you it's been a while," Charlee says, breathless and groaning.

"You're beautiful."

Charlee tangles a hand in Alex's hair, gives it a gentle tug. "Take me to bed."

Alex feels sticky between her thighs as she stands, her legs a little wobbly, and helps Charlee to her feet. Their fingers lock together as they walk side by side to the bedroom and crawl onto their old mattress. Alex's back barely hits the sheets before Charlee's mouth is on her.

Breath catching, Alex grips the sheets, intent on shredding them, when Charlee presses the tip of her nose to the heat between her legs. She rubs up and down Alex's slit, then kisses her, closemouthed, over her underwear.

"*Fuck*, Alex," Charlee says, the words hot against her sex, and Alex's entire body shudders.

Her back bows upward, straining with the tension in her lower back and stomach. She clamps her thighs around Charlee's ears, unable to stop herself, and Charlee's response is a raspy laugh that vibrates into Alex's cunt and nearly makes her scream.

"Please, Charlee," she says, hands twisting further in the sheets. "Please."

Charlee has her bare in seconds, bra and soaked underwear tossed to the side, then she's back between Alex's legs. Wrapping an arm around a thigh to brace her. Charlee uses her fingers to part Alex's lips and blows slowly over her slit.

"Oh *God*." Alex jerks under Charlee's tight hold.

When Charlee licks up the length of her a second later, that knot of tension at the base of her spine explodes, and Alex cries out. Charlee teases her gently at first: Small flicks of her tongue at her entrance. More openmouthed kisses over every drenched inch of her. Then she sucks Alex's clit fully into her mouth. One hard, pressured pull and Alex's vision blurs, becomes spotted.

It's overwhelming. Alex wants to wriggle away from Charlee's mouth at the same time that she wants to press more fully into it. She threads one hand through Charlee's hair and braces the other on her shoulder as she thrusts against Charlee's tongue. When Charlee sucks her in again, Alex flies over the edge. She thrusts herself hard against Charlee's mouth, holding her firmly in place, and clamps her thighs around her ears again. Everything goes hazy and dark for a moment as she quakes with her orgasm, then slowly, slowly, she comes trembling back down.

Charlee kisses her way up Alex's stomach, stops to nuzzle each taut nipple, then sucks at her neck. Using one hand to brace herself, she pushes at her own underwear until it is low enough that she can use her legs to kick it off. She plants another kiss on Alex's chin. "Still with me?"

Still breathless, Alex nods. Her hands shake as she slides them up Charlee's sweat-slicked back, and when Charlee straddles Alex's thigh and touches her soaked slit to the flesh there, they both moan.

Their heads dip forward, foreheads resting together, and Charlee rocks herself back and forth along Alex's thigh. Once. Twice. Then she reaches for Alex's hand. Lifting herself up, she guides Alex's hand into the slim space between their bodies, then settles down again, trapping Alex's hand between her throbbing sex and Alex's own thigh.

Alex cups her fully. She closes her eyes at the feeling, more aroused than she can recall being in years. The sensation only amplifies when she feels Charlee's fingers glide between her still-soaking lips a moment later.

"Together," Charlee says, and Alex feels her eyes begin to sting behind her eyelids again, so overwhelmed she doesn't know whether to cry or laugh or scream.

She runs her fingers up and down, collecting all that Charlee has to offer, and when she enters her, two fingers buried deep in one swift thrust, it's like coming home. Charlee's breath slams from her lungs and she follows, slipping inside Alex with ease. They rock against one another, slow at first, then faster. Harder. Desperate. Charlee presses her thigh to the back of her hand as she drives into Alex, and the pressure makes Alex's head spin.

The air feels hot, too hot, and the world shrinks around them until there is nothing but the ragged gasps of their shallow breathing, the wet sounds of their fingers pumping in and out of one another.

Charlee catches her off guard with a gentle kiss, and tears flood behind Alex's eyelids. "Look at me," Charlee says, and Alex does.

Like something out of a dream, Charlee hovers above her, torn right from Alex's memory but better,

so much better, because this is real. This is here. This is *now*, and Alex is shaken by how much she wants it, how much she wants to freeze this one moment in time, this one moment of precious rediscovery. This one look that Alex knows is saying so much.

It's *hello*, the kind they were always meant to have but got lost somewhere along the way. The hello they promised each other, finally finding its way back to them. It's *I missed you* and *I'm sorry* and *I love you* and *stay* and *don't leave me* and *never, never again*. It's everything wrapped into one heady moment, tied up in their tangled limbs and quivering in their parted lips.

With her hand buried in the pillow under Alex's head, Charlee holds herself up, but she also manages to rub her thumb over Alex's cheek. That's all it takes for the first of Alex's tears to fall. They break free just as Charlee's muscles begin to clench around her fingers, and tension curls low in Alex's stomach. They pump themselves hard against one another. Once, twice, then Charlee peaks, freezing hard in place. A strangled moan rumbles in her throat as she digs her nails into Alex's hips and clamps down around her fingers.

Only just behind her, Alex's eyes slam closed as the waves wash through her. Charlee buries her face in her neck, and they tremble against one another until every last tremor has rippled through and away. They collapse, boneless.

For what feels like hours, they lie sweaty and exhausted and still inside each other. Then Charlee slowly pulls out of Alex and braces a hand on each side of her head. She hovers over her, eyes somehow bright in the dark room, and all Alex's worries seep out and away.

Because this is right.

This is *right*.

And they are going to be okay.

Alex runs a finger through a wet streak on Charlee's cheek. "Hello."

Charlee kisses Alex's finger, then leans into her hand, shakes her head against Alex's palm, and lets out a quiet sob. She falls against Alex's lips, plants hot, fast kisses over every inch of her face. With every kiss, the tears come faster and harder, and Alex just holds onto her. She holds onto her and closes her eyes and promises she will never let go.

Never, never again.



A quiet groan escapes Alex as her face scrunches and her body jerks, a strange tickling sensation drawing her up from the haze of sleep. Eyes still closed, she rubs her hands over her face and smells the lingering scent of Charlee on her fingers. Her stomach flips and drops, and her mouth quirks up at one corner.

"What are you smiling about, sleepyhead?"

She registers the words before she registers the music playing, music that has apparently been playing for a while. Blinking her eyes open, Alex finds the room flooded with light and Charlee kneeling by her legs with a paintbrush in one hand and a small plastic palette in the other. Her hair is secured in a messy ponytail, loose strands falling around her face. Paint smudges her nose and chin,

and she wears Alex's navy button-up shirt from the night before. It's tight around her chest, the two buttons she has clasped both straining. Gray panties peek out from the bottom of the shirt. The rest of her is bare.

The orange light of late day spills in from the open door and haloes around Charlee from behind. Her blue eyes lock onto Alex, and all the moisture in Alex's body floods to the space between her thighs.

"God," she says, "what is there *not* to smile about?"

Charlee releases a quiet laugh and bends to kiss the exposed flesh of Alex's hip where the sheet has been tossed aside. Hopping to her feet, she steps over to the supplies table in the corner. Her hips sway in time with the music as she replenishes the paint on her palette, and Alex can't take her eyes off her. Her breath feels caught somewhere between her ribs, sharp and wonderful.

When Charlee returns to the bed, she drops back onto her knees, dips her paintbrush into a bright dollop of green paint, and then goes back to what she was doing. The tickling sensation returns and makes Alex frown as she shifts up onto her elbow and looks down. Her leg has been partially transformed into a sprawling forest. The deep browns of tree trunks crawling up her calf blend into the rich greens of pine needles and broad leaves, and Alex feels her chest stretch and stretch. She thinks her heart will burst with the swelling.

"Charlee."

At the whisper of her name, she grins but doesn't look up. Her focus remains firmly on Alex's leg. "I love trees."

"Charlee."

"And I love your legs."

"Charlee."

"And I love y—"

Alex launches across the bed, grabs her by her arm, and yanks her down into a kiss. The paint palette squishes between them, smearing color across the sheets and across their bodies, but Alex doesn't care. She kisses Charlee breathless, kisses her colorful like the sprawling trees. When they part, she runs her thumb through the smudged paint on Charlee's chin, laughs, then kisses her again.

They roll in the sheets, hands pulling at the barriers between them, and Alex feels the thick smear of color across her fingertips and palms, across her forearms and stomach. She feels it on Charlee's fingers as they slide up her neck and into her hair. She flips Charlee onto her back and cups her cheeks.

"Look at the mess you've made," she says, rubbing a line of color over Charlee's bottom lip.

"It's a beautiful mess, though." Charlee looks up at her like Alex is just as much a piece of art as anything Charlee has ever created. She kisses Alex's thumb as it slides across her lip again. "Did you not want me to paint on you?"

"Paint on me," Alex says, swirling her index finger through the colors on Charlee's cheek. "Turn me into forests and galaxies and whatever else. I don't care."

“You don’t?”

Alex shakes her head. Kisses Charlee again and again. “As long as you’ll do it for the rest of my life.”

CHAPTER 15

“I’M WITH ALEX!”

Alex bumped her shoulder against Charlee’s, and Charlee merely rolled her eyes. “Way to be predictable, Dad.”

A piece of popcorn smacked into the side of Drew’s head and rolled to the floor. “Thanks for abandoning your wife.”

“What?” Drew shrugged a shoulder and grinned at Gabby. “Alex is the best at trivia.”

“Alex is just competitive,” Vinny said, patting the empty space beside her on the couch. “You can be with me, Gabby.”

“Thank you, Vinny.” Gabby reached for Vinny’s wrist just as she was about to eat a mouthful of popcorn. “Should you be eating that? How’s your tooth? You didn’t cancel the appointment I made for you, did you?”

Vinny swatted at Gabby’s hand. “Stop mom-ing me, woman. I’m fine.”

“That’s what you said last time, and then you got that absc—”

The words died in a cluster of flying popcorn as Alex, Charlee, and Drew all tossed pieces from the other large bowl at Gabby and shouted their now months-old rule. “No mom-ing on game night!”

“*Anyway*,” Vinny said, laughing as Gabby poked her knee in retaliation, “I was going to say that Alex is competitive, but we all know Cam’s the smartest person here.” At Gabby’s narrowed eyes, she added, “I mean, after the engineer dad and doctor mom, of course.”

“Damn right.” Cam made her way in from the kitchen with a collection of drinks held protectively against her chest. After handing them off one by one, she settled onto the floor beside Charlee. “There’s nothing like being a genius, guys, honestly.”

“Okay, fine,” Drew said. “I’ll switch to Cam, then.”

Alex gasped, offended, which made Charlee burst into laughter.

“If you make my girlfriend cry, I’ll be forced to hurt you, Dad.” She threw a few pieces of popcorn at him and watched as he caught all but one in his mouth and crunched them obnoxiously. “And, sorry, but you made your choice. Cam’s with me, and you’re with Alex.”

“And I’m excellent!” Alex pinched his shoulder, eliciting a laugh. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head.

“Okay, okay,” Gabby said, drawing everyone’s attention. “Let’s get this going. Who’s up first?”

When Cam and Charlee won by a small margin, Alex blamed it on Drew, Drew blamed it on Alex, and Vinny dumped the entire bowl of remaining cold popcorn over their heads.

“This family is ridiculous!”



“Are you nervous?” Charlee’s voice strains. It dips in and out of sound, shredded to nearly nothing after a week-long cold. At the first signs of congestion, Charlee had tried to warn her away, but Alex hadn’t cared. She’d simply crawled into bed with her, kissed the feverish skin of her neck, and asked what kind of soup she wanted.

“A bit.” Alex places the last of the dishes into the drainer. She turns to Charlee, leaning her back against the kitchen counter. A spot of water seeps through the back of her shirt and makes her squirm. “Are you?”

“I think I’m more excited than nervous.” Motioning for Alex to follow, Charlee leads them to the bedroom to change. “I just don’t want it to be weird. You know? It’s our first game night in years. Literally. And a lot’s changed.”

“It won’t be.” Alex strips off her shirt and grabs one of the few oversized sweaters she brought from Gabby’s, where most of her belongings live. Dark gray leggings come after, then black fuzzy socks to keep her toes warm on the concrete floor. “They’re still our family, no matter how much has changed.”

Charlee shuffles over in her own fuzzy socks, blue, and loops her arms around Alex’s waist. “You’re right.”

A loud knock echoes through the loft, and Alex glances down at her watch. “They’re early.”

“Of course they are.”

Vinny barges in a second later, tossing her leather jacket to the side with one hand and carrying a huge container of buffalo wings in the other.

“Okay, so I haven’t seen either of you in almost two weeks,” she says. “And I’m guessing that’s because you’ve been too busy A) sucking each other’s faces; B) *fucking* each other’s faces; C) crying all over each other like big sappy babies; or D) all of the above. So, which is it?”

She slides the wings onto the counter and turns to face them, a shit-eating grin plastered across her lips. “Quick, before Gabby gets up here. She’s helping Cam with the games downstairs, and based on the drive over here, she’s all keyed up about ‘her girls’ finally being back together.”

“Sounds like her,” Charlee says.

Vinny leans against the counter and crosses her arms over her chest. “Time is running out here, kids.”

“How are you the *older* sister?” Alex asks, hanging Vinny’s jacket on the rack by the door.

Ignoring her, Vinny looks to Charlee, expectant.

“D,” Charlee says with a casual roll of her shoulder. “With extra crying and a side of body painting.”

“Body painting?” Vinny waggles her eyebrows. “Very nice. Watercolor, I’m guessing, given all the blubbering.”

Charlee lets out a loud laugh, or as loud as she can manage, and punches Vinny’s shoulder as she passes into the kitchen to grab the drinking glasses.

“What’s with the voice, Croaky?” Vinny follows to help. “Cry that away too? Or better, did you

scream it gone?”

A dish towel smacks into the side of her head from across the kitchen, and Vinny laughs, tossing it back at Alex.

“Been fighting off a cold.” Charlee passes a few glasses to her. “I’m better now, but my voice is still shit.”

“Yeah, I know,” Vinny says. “Your mom actually told me last week. I just like to make my sister squirm.”

“Knock, knock.” Gabby wheels Cam in through the open door, board games stacked in Cam’s lap.

Cam claps her hands over the top of them and says, “I’m ready to kick some serious ass at trivia.” She points at the waiting bowl of buffalo wings on the kitchen counter. “And after smelling those in the car the entire ride here, I’m also *really* freakin’ ready to stuff my face.”

As they settle into the familiar rhythm of being together again, it’s almost as if no time has passed at all. It makes Alex feel warm and full—heavy and light at the same time—and she tries not to think about all the nights she spent alone, halfway across the country and aching for home. She tries not to think about the nights she cried herself to sleep, wishing for Charlee. For Vinny, for Gabby, for Cam, for Drew. She tries not to think about all the time they lost.

She feels Charlee’s fingers inch over her thigh under the table they’d set up for games. It draws her focus to the blue eyes searching her face. Alex lets an easy sigh slither across her lips. The past leaks away in that knowing gaze. All their screwups. All their lost time. All that remains is the feeling of Charlee’s hand on her, Charlee’s thumb rubbing over her thigh. All that remains is the good, the *now*, and what Alex hopes will be their future.

“That is not what it says!” Cam snatches at the answer card Gabby holds out of her reach. “There’s no way in hell I got that wrong.”

“Sorry, honey.” Gabby reaches across the board to move Cam’s piece for her. “I swear on Vinny’s nipple rings.”

“Oh my God!” Vinny pumps her arms into the air, cackling. “My life has been made.” She grabs her beer and holds it up. “Wait, wait. I’m toasting to that. Come on.”

Gabby rolls her eyes but holds up her own drink, and the others follow suit.

“To Gabby swearing on my nipple rings.” They all repeat the ridiculous toast, tap their drinks together, and take a sip. Vinny then motions to Gabby. “Toast something. Let’s go around the circle.”

“Okay, let’s see.” Gabby looks around the circle before settling her gaze on Charlee and Alex. “To being together again.”

A smile tugs at Alex’s lips when Charlee leans into her side and buries her cold nose against Alex’s neck.

“Sappy, but okay,” Vinny says as they repeat the toast, tap, and drink.

They continue around the circle, Cam toasting to “nubby rubs and chicken wings,” with her mouth full of the latter, and Alex toasting to family.

Charlee is the last to raise her drink, and she hesitates for a long moment, her gaze darting around the circle. When she finally croaks out her toast, Alex feels it like a fist around her heart.

“To Dad.”

A hush falls over the others, and Charlee shrugs a shoulder. “Sorry,” she says, but Alex is quick to reach for her hand.

“Don’t be sorry.” Alex holds up her glass and, with her voice nearly as strained as Charlee’s, says, “To Dad.”

It’s a chorus that echoes through the Drew-sized gap in their small family circle, and for just a moment, it feels full again.



Charlee rocked in her chair, tilting it back onto its hind legs and then letting it drop back to the floor before repeating the process. Alex was late, as she sometimes was for their Thursday study sessions due to her job at the student center, and Charlee wished she’d just arrive already. She was certain she was going to vomit or explode or possibly both if she didn’t get this question out soon.

It had been swirling in her mind for weeks, dancing on the back of her tongue for days, and Charlee didn’t have a clue how Alex was going to react, but she knew she had to ask. She glanced to the floor where she and Alex had had sex for the first time, and her heart jumped and swooped. All that came before and all that followed spilled through her mind and warmed her cheeks. She definitely had to ask.

The door opened suddenly, catching Charlee off guard, and she tilted just a touch too far. Crashing backward, the chair smacked roughly into the wall and then tumbled to the floor, taking Charlee with it. A strangled sound, somewhere between a squeak and a shout, escaped her as she went down, legs and arms flying wildly through the air. And then she stilled. Cursed. Groaned.

Alex was at her side in an instant, helping her off the floor and brushing her hair out of her face. “Are you okay?” Though her voice sounded properly concerned, Charlee could see the restrained laughter forcing her lips into a tight smile.

“You want to laugh, don’t you?” The sound burst out of Alex a second later, and Charlee punched her shoulder.

“I’m sorry.” Alex wrapped both arms around her. “But how many times have I told you not to lean your chair back?”

“You’re awful,” Charlee said, shuffling closer and burying her face against Alex’s neck. Loose, thick curls fell over her like a curtain, and Charlee breathed in the familiar scent of Alex’s coconut shampoo. “Took you forever to get here.”

“I know.” Alex ran her hands up and down Charlee’s back. “That guy that just started was late for his shift.”

“Ugh.” Charlee scoffed. “Move in with me?”

Alex didn’t seem to register the words for a moment, so Charlee held her breath. A moment later, she was pushed from the safe haven of her Alex-hair cave and pinned with a confused stare.

“Did you just scoff and then ask me to move in with you?”

“Possibly, yes, but the scoffing was at the thing *you* said, not at the thing I said.”

“Charlee.”

“I know!” Charlee tried to wriggle her way back into Alex’s arms, but Alex wouldn’t let her. She groaned. “I know, okay? We haven’t even been together six full months, so it’s seriously insane that I’m asking you to get a place with me this summer, but I guess I’m just insane, because it’s all I’ve been able to think about, and more than anything in the world right now, *that’s* what I want.”

Alex softened. “It is?”

“It is.” Charlee shifted up to kiss Alex’s forehead, then her nose. She nodded as she placed a final, simple kiss on Alex’s lips. “We sneak into each other’s dorms every night anyway.”

“True.”

“Alex?”

“Charlee?”

Charlee rested her forehead against Alex’s and closed her eyes. She whispered her next words like a prayer. “Say yes.”

“Yes.”



Charlee and Alex make their way up the stone steps of the university library, hands linked and swinging lightly between them. “You think they’ll let us in?”

“It’s a library, Charlee.”

Her voice has mostly returned, but Charlee still feels the need to clear her throat after every few sentences. “We don’t have student passes anymore.”

“No, but we’re alumni. They’ll let us in. Stop worrying.”

“I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“It’s our anniversary; well, it’s one of our anniversaries.”

“One of our many, many anniversaries.”

“Why did we decide to have an anniversary for every important thing that ever happened in our relationship?”

Charlee shrugs. “More sex in the library?”

Alex smiles and holds the door open for Charlee. They walk right in without a hitch. Alex releases a quiet laugh when Charlee glances anxiously around as if they will be tackled by security any minute. Charlee smacks her shoulder for it.

The third floor is as empty as ever. Weaving through the aisles to their old study room makes Charlee feel as if she has stepped back in time. Her heart thumps madly, a thrill courses through her, and she releases Alex’s hand to cross into the next aisle over. They walk parallel to one another, separated by shelves and untouched books, and when they make it to the end of their aisles, Charlee swings around to stand in front of Alex.

She plants a hand on her hip and grins like a giddy child. “Well, well, if it isn’t the cute asshole who insulted me on my first day here.”

“Oh, the rude blonde who stole my spot.”

Charlee reaches for her hands. “This is where we began,” she says as she opens the door and leads them inside. It barely clicks back into place before she is yanking Alex against her and kissing her full on the mouth.

Hard and fast, it goes deep, deep, and Charlee feels like she could drown in it, as if she might never come up for air and doesn’t want to. Her fingers tangle in Alex’s hair and scratch gently at her scalp, evoking a quiet groan. Charlee licks at the swell of Alex’s bottom lip before sucking it hard into her mouth and runs her hands down to the open ends of Alex’s coat. The material lands in a heap on the floor, followed by Charlee’s own coat.

“Are we really going to do this?” Alex closes her eyes at the scrape of Charlee’s teeth across her pulse point. “We’re almost thirty.”

Charlee holds her index finger up to her lips. “Quiet,” she says. “You don’t want to draw attention.” She nips at Alex’s throat again. “The door doesn’t lock, remember?”

When they later collapse on the floor, boneless and spent, Charlee struggles to catch her breath. She swears she’s floating. Alex’s hand is still buried in her pants, and Charlee’s sweat-slicked forehead squeaks against Alex’s cheek. They press lazy, tired kisses to each other’s cheeks and ears, whatever flesh is within reach, and Charlee says, “Move in with me.”

Alex shifts up onto her elbow and looks down at her. She makes lazy circles around Charlee’s still-sensitive clit with her fingers and tilts her head to the side. “I’m already with you.”

“But your things aren’t,” Charlee says with a gentle gasp, hips bucking. She grabs Alex’s wrist to still her ministrations and pulls her hand up and out. “I mean it, Alex. All your things. Everything you own. Everything you have. Everything you *are*.” She kisses Alex’s slick fingers. “I want you home. For real. For good.”

Alex closes her eyes like she’s fighting back tears, and Charlee reaches up to brush her unruly hair out of her face. She runs her index finger down Alex’s nose and playfully taps the tip of it.

“Just tap me once for yes or twice for no.”

A wet laugh escapes Alex. It melts into an easy sigh as she stares down at Charlee. That watery gaze is her entire universe until she feels Alex’s fingers move over her heart.

One small tap.



The old mug’s warm ceramic is soothing against Alex’s fingers as she stands against a cold concrete wall. She watches the movers unload her things from a small truck—every little thing she owns and the few pieces of furniture she’d opted to keep. Her index finger rubs absentmindedly over the worn lightbulb, and she feels content to simply stand here and be.

She holds the mug just over her heart, its heat pairing with the warmth that has already washed through her chest and settled there sometime between the whisper of Charlee’s breath on her lips and the tickle of a paintbrush against her leg. Her body feels light and loose, floating. Every inch buzzes with pleasure and possibility. The taste of Charlee still lingers on her lips, and Alex has never felt this healthy before. This *alive*.

“Hey.”

Alex blinks, focuses on Charlee, making her way over. “Hi,” she says, opening her arms as Charlee curls in around her and kisses the line of her jaw.

“You still have the mug,” she says, resting her head against Alex’s collarbone.

“I do.”

“Can I get a watt watt?” Charlee’s breath forms a cloud of fog that drifts and drifts and then dissipates.

Alex squeezes around her, careful not to spill her coffee. “Never gets old.”

“Where would you like this, ma’am?”

Near the front door of the building, the movers stop, a large, rectangular piece held between two of them. Its packaging is pristine, its label still boldly printed across the front.

CPC—Charlee Parker Creations

Charlee gasps at the sight of it.

“Anywhere you can find space,” Alex says, waving a hand. “Just be very careful with it, please.” When she looks back to Charlee, she grins. “I hope they prop it up against the probing alien.”

“Alex.” It’s a breathless utterance, partially lost to the sudden strain in Charlee’s voice, and Alex’s smile only widens.

“Charlee?”

“How did y—”

Alex runs a hand over Charlee’s hair and tugs at her small ponytail. “The woman you sold it to? Rachel?”

Charlee nods.

“She’s my assistant,” Alex says. “She bought the piece on my behalf.”

Charlee stares at her for one long moment, then turns in Alex’s arms. She leans her back into Alex’s chest and pulls Alex’s free arm around her, watching the movers, the cars, and the people bustling around the freezing city. She doesn’t say a word, and Alex knows she’s overwhelmed.

“I knew it was special when I first saw it.” Alex kisses the back of Charlee’s head. “Because I saw you in it, Charlee. *You*. Not me. All the things you weren’t saying out loud. I could read them in the lines. In every stroke. Every shade. Everything you’d been holding in for years. I knew because I was holding it all in too.”

Still silent, Charlee wipes at her cheeks and clutches Alex’s arm.

“I saw *us*,” Alex says after a deep breath. “All the things we were supposed to let go of and never could. All the things we were still meant to be together.” She rubs her thumb back and forth over the sleeve of Charlee’s coat. “*Home is a Lover in Low Light*.” She whispers the words, the title of the painting like a song looping in her head—something she never could let go of. “I heard that title, and I knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That you made your home in me too.”

Charlee doesn't say anything for the longest time, doesn't seem able to put her feelings to words, and Alex is okay with that. They've always been able to find each other as well in the silence as in the sound. So Alex simply breathes in the morning air, holds Charlee as tight as she can with one arm, and commits the moment to memory—one of so many that have come before and one of so many still waiting to be made.

When Charlee turns in her arms again, after what feels like hours, presses her freezing nose to Alex's neck, and says, “It's cold,” Alex feels like she is nineteen years old again. Winding through the frozen city. Lying in the dewy grass. Loving and being loved by the girl who finally gave her a family, a home.

They're growing together again. Up from the ground. Up toward the stars.

Alex closes her eyes and lets the sounds of the city filter in. Her heart beats against Charlee's, and she *knows*. This is what forever feels like.

She kisses Charlee's temple, a soft touch, gentle.

“It's beautiful.”

ABOUT KL HUGHES

KL Hughes is an American author and screenwriter. Growing up in a small town, she spent much of her time inventing various ways to entertain herself and others. Whether through vocal performances or theatrical reenactments of books, movies, and actual events, Hughes showcased her extensive imagination and creativity at an early age.

Hughes later pursued and earned a bachelor of liberal arts degree in theatre arts and English literature. Her collegiate studies allowed her to develop and hone her skills in both creative writing and editing.

Working as a writer full-time, Hughes lives in California with her wife and Dalmatian. When not writing, she enjoys theatre and film, travel, visits to old cemeteries and haunted houses, putting on one-woman musicals for her wife, long walks and hikes, family time, and, of course, a good book.

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POPCORN LOVE

KL Hughes

ISBN: 978-3-95533-266-2 (mobi), 978-3-95533-267-9 (epub)

Length: 113,000 words (347 pages)

A prominent figure amongst New York City's fashion elite, Elena Vega is a successful businesswoman and single mother to an adorable three-year-old son, Lucas. Her love life, however, is lacking, as those closest to her keep pointing out.

At the persistent urging of her closest friend, Elena reluctantly agrees to a string of blind dates if she can find a suitable babysitter for Lucas.

Enter Allison Sawyer, a free-spirited senior at New York University.

Elena is intrigued by Allison's ability to push her out of her element, and the young woman's instant and easy connection with a normally shy Lucas quickly earns Allison the job.

After each blind date, Elena returns home to complain to Allison about her lacking suitors. As they bond, Elena begins to realize that the person possessing all the qualities she most desires might just be the woman who has been in front of her the entire time.

The vast difference between the two women's social statuses, however, may be an obstacle not easily overcome.

PIECES

G Benson

ISBN: 978-3-95533-806-0 (mobi), 978-3-95533-807-7 (epub)

Length: 104,000 words (292 pages)

Orphaned Carmen is sixteen, newly homeless and will do almost anything to survive and keep her and her kid brother safe, together, and out of foster care. Ollie, also sixteen, has a life that's all about parents, school pressure, friends and dreams of summer. The two fall into each other's orbit, and one kiss changes everything. Ollie is captivated ... but then Carmen vanishes. When they cross paths months later, everything is different.

A young adult queer romance that looks at what we're prepared to sacrifice for those we care about.

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L.T. Smith

ISBN: 978-3-95533-180-1 (mobi), 978-3-95533-181-8 (epub)

Length: 71,000 words (291 pages)

A visitor from her past jolts Laura Stewart into memories—some funny, some heart-wrenching. Thirteen years ago, Laura buried those memories so deeply she never believed they would resurface. Still, the pain of first love mars Laura’s present life and might even destroy her chance of happiness with the beautiful, yet seemingly unobtainable Emma Jenkins.

Can Laura let go of the past, or will she make the same mistakes all over again?

Hearts and Flowers Border is a simple tale of the uncertainty of youth and the first flush of love—love that may have a chance after all.

HOLD MY HAND

AC Oswald

ISBN: 978-3-95533-686-8

Length: 66,000 words (187 pages)

Bethany is heartbroken when her girlfriend, Savannah, dumps her with no explanation. Slowly, she rebuilds her life, meets Amber and begins to heal.

A year later they meet again and their feelings are as strong as ever. So why did Savannah leave her?

Bethany is devastated by the answer and realises she will lose Savannah again – to cancer.

In a world where time is fleeting but love lasts forever, Savannah and Bethany can only hold onto each other and live every dream they ever shared.

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Roslyn Sinclair

Ariana “Ari” Geiker lives an isolated life on an imperial space station commanded by her father. The skilled, young botanist rarely leaves her living quarters, where she maintains an elaborate garden. When an imperious older woman is captured from a pirate ship and given to her as a slave, Ariana’s perfectly ordered life is thrown into chaos. Her nameless slave is watchful, intelligent, dangerous, and sexy, and seems to know an awful lot about tactics, star charts, and the dread, marauding pirate queen, Mir. What happens when the slave also reveals an expertise in seduction to her innocent mistress?

The Lily and the Crown is a lesbian romance about daring to risk your heart with someone you shouldn’t.

THE MUSIC AND THE MIRROR

Lola Keeley

Anna is the newest member of an elite ballet company. Her first class with her mysterious idol, Victoria, almost ruins her career before it starts. When she shows she might be a potential star, Victoria chooses Anna to launch a new season around.

Now Anna must face down jealousy, sabotage and injury, not to mention navigate the circus of friends and lovers within the company. The pressure builds as she knows she must pour everything she has into opening night and prove to her rivals and herself that Victoria's faith in her is not misplaced.

In the process, Anna discovers that she and the daring, beautiful Victoria have a lot more than a talent for ballet in common, and that not every thrilling dance can be found on stage.

The Art of Us

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