

She's always been so strong.

I was in high school when I first met Vala.

Well, saw. Stole a look, more like.

My boyfriend was with me. The boyfriend I had never kissed.

The boyfriend I had told so many times, "Not yet," and never known why.

He was talking about cake, or video games, panties, something like that. Whatever was glued to his mind that afternoon. He wasn't much of a thinker.

Vala was walking quietly down the hall, books hugged to her chest.

Her hair was short, back fanned out to one side. She wore a plaid button- up,

short- sleeve, and a knee- high tan skirt, canvas. Both ears pierced

five times over. Rainbow bracelets stacked six or seven high.

Weird. Modest. Authentic.

Any other girl would have seemed... small, scared. Like they were trying to

prove something to the world.

But she was just... Vala.

Indifferent.

Unconcerned.

As if she were simply separate from the rest of the world.

As if she knew exactly who and what she was, and knew just as well

that the rest of us were lying to ourselves.

My eyes met hers. She paused.

Smiled.

I looked down at my shoes.

My cheeks burned.

My boyfriend pointed at her, nudged me in the shoulder.

"Dude, Bekkah. That dyke is totally into you."

I didn’t look at him. I’d never hated anyone more in my life.

Chapter Four

Today

West Palm, Florida – Winter

REBEKKAH’S FEET FELT like lead and air. The floor beneath them was long forgotten, her chocolate eyes scanning her cupboards for the perfect spice, the perfect side. It had been hours since she’d left the kitchen, but there was so much more to do.

She shivered, cinnamon skin covered in goose bumps. The window was open; odd as it was, she had never cared for how the kitchen smelled after so much use. The frigid humidity had frozen her to the bone, but the fresh air was invigorating, stinging her lungs as she breathed in deep. As she fiddled with her heavy jacket, she quietly worried that this was the right thing to do. Would she rather go out? Would she rather order in? Would she be too tired to bother? Would she feel obligated?

So much was riding on tonight.

Vala hadn’t been home since Christmas. It had been almost as long since they’d found the mutual time for a video chat. Phone calls were weekly, but the only place they’d been able to share so much as an “I love you” was online. Words on a screen.

Simulated emotion.

Last night, Vala had celebrated her victory with her best friend. Now, she was coming home.

Rebekkah was nervous. Terrified.

Overjoyed.

The evening had to be perfect, of course.

The perfect food, the perfect gift.

And maybe, if she was lucky, the perfect beginning.

Rebekkah closed her eyes for a moment, head feeling light. Setting down her favorite blade, she put dinner on hold, thinking about her day thus far. Laundry, incense, dishes: check. Incense burning, catbox scooping, and grocery shopping: check. Scrubbing every room of the house: check. Rearranging the furniture for optimal surprise factor and improved comfort: check.

She had thought briefly about stringing congratulatory banners across the ceiling, but the last time she’d done that for a birthday, Vala had made fun of her for a month.

Nervously, she picked up the knife, again, eyeing the setting sun through the tiny window above the sink. She was sure she was forgetting something. Maybe it was —

Her cellphone blared salsa. She jumped, nearly removing the tip of her finger, the cold steel of the blade’s side brushing against her skin. Her heart skipped a beat, fingers trembling with excitement as she snatched her phone from the countertop.

Holding her breath, she peeked at the face. “<3 Vala <3” danced across, confirming her delight.

It rang a second time. She pursed her lips, waiting, taking deep breaths.

On the third ring, she flipped it open, answering as calmly as she could manage. “Hello? Rebekkah Villa Castellanos speaking.” Her voice had crackled. *Goddamnit.*

“Hey, Rebutter. Guess where I am.”

“Vala!” she finally squealed. “Oh my god, tell me, tell me!”

“I —”

“It better not be far! Dinner is almost done!!”

There was a brief pause.

Rebekkah fidgeted.

“... Well, not *too* far, or I wouldn’t have called to tell you, dummy.”

She smiled to herself, glancing back out the window, as if Vala were just around the corner. “*Pbbtthh*, fine. You win. Where?”

“I’m skirting around Orlando. So, couple of hours. You mentioned dinner?”

Rebekkah fought a cringe, silently reminding herself that two hours paled in comparison with four months. “*That’s* a surprise. And you better hurry up. I might eat it all, myself.”

The voice on the phone chuckled. “No, you won’t.”

“Will too!”

“Then how will you validate your culinary expertise? I know you. You’re waiting with bated breath, staring at your beautiful work and doubting if it’s any better than a microwave dinner.”

Rebekkah wrinkled her nose, giving the phone a face. “You know *what*? You’re right. I’ll give some to Mr. Sprinkles. He’ll tell me all about how great it is.”

“Pfffft. What’s he know? Stupid puss wouldn’t even eat my pizza. I made it from scratch!”

“Because Mr. Sprinkles is a man of *class*. He has taste. Unlike your pizza.”

This time, Vala cackled. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Look, traffic is heavy, I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Kay. Drive safe. I love —”

*Click*. The line was dead.

“... you.”

With a deep sigh, Rebekkah’s arms dropped to her sides. She eyed her knife — a *honyaki*, made by hand in the same manner as a katana. Eyes watering, she picked it up, and sat down at the table.

Setting her phone down, she touched the side of the knife. Her fingertips ran down the engraving, Japanese characters pristinely etched by hand into the high- carbon steel.

She smiled softly. It had been the perfect gift, a meeting of fine dining and history. Vala had surprised her with it the Christmas after her father, Fidel Villa Fernandez, had passed away unexpectedly. Sitting down at the table, Rebekkah thought about that night.