

## Chapter One.

I was a bored teenager from a middle-class family. An A-student. Quiet, observant, and artistic. Not queen bee, but popular enough to have a good high school experience. Painfully average. One thing I knew from the get-go was that I wasn't going to mesh well with the jock crowd.

The outliers, the freaks, and the punks, were way more interesting to me. Not only because most of them had artistic streaks, but because they listened to great bands, read books about philosophy, and had ideas. Bad ideas. Good ideas. But ideas that weren't just limited to what to wear for prom or how to style your hair.

Problem was, my high school didn't have freaks. I lived in a small beach town filled with surfers, jocks, and nerds. Those were the only three categories to choose from, and I didn't fit in with any of them.

When I was a sophomore, my life changed. Finally--FINALLY--a punk rock kid moved into my neighborhood.

He was a junior. Everyone knew he was in a band. Not just a band, but a band that once opened up for another band that was pretty big at the time. The rest of the band members were from a neighboring city. Punk Rock Kid had just moved to our beach town. His parents got divorced and he had to descend from the rich suburbia Olympus to my town, which was more concrete jungle than manicured lawns. I was immediately fascinated with him.

He had bad acne, was lanky and pasty, and his eyes were too close together, so I didn't look at him THAT way. But he had a wry sense of humor, wore cool band shirts, and he was a self-proclaimed anarchist.

Now, let me just say, even my fifteen-year-old ass knew that Anarchism, as a concept, sucked. Like, real bad. But there was no denying that an anarchist friend sounded WAY more interesting than the same, cookie-cutter surfer dudebros I grew up with. My entire town smelled of brine, surfboard wax, and sunscreen.

They all listened to Blink182 and Green Day and thought that if you didn't wake up at 5am to catch some waves, you were a loser.

This guy, who wore everything-black, was vegan, and quoted Karl Marx, was like an exotic bird to me.

I had to talk to him. I HAD to. And make him my best friend. Pronto.

Here is something about fifteen-year-old me: I was still very much torn about whether I was a punk rock chick or a normal girl who (tragically?) didn't surf. The commitment to being a part of the freak crowd...well, it freaked me out.

So I wore the expected uniform of pastel mini skirts, fancy sneakers, tattoo chokers, and high-neck stripy shirts. At first, when I approached him, I thought Y (real initial) for sure suspected I wanted to mock or taunt him. I could see his shoulders tense as I approached him. But then I showed him my sketchbook (I had yet to find out I could write, and not just read), and complimented him on his music (which I'd never heard) so he relaxed.

Two months after the school year started, Y and I were practically besties. We talked about his music and veganism and about my sketches and aspirations of becoming a fashion designer (aspirations not even I believed in, mind you, but I needed something, right? I couldn't just be That Chick Who Doesn't Know How To Surf).

I only half-listened when he talked about his bandmates. There was Tom, the vocalist, who sounded like an ego-maniac, Daniel, the guitarist, who was a stoner, Y was the bass player and then there was Alex (real name), who was the drummer. He said very little about Alex, and none of it was good.

About three months after we became good friends, Y asked me if I wanted to hang out over the weekend. He didn't ask if I wanted to watch Daria or MTV2 or hang out at the mall (PARTLY BECAUSE HE REFUSED TO PHYSICALLY ENTER MALLS. TRUE FUCKING STORY GUYS). He asked if I was interested in going to a semi-violent demonstration against force-feeding geese for Foie Gras.

I thought it was the coolest thing in the whole freaking world. I WAS GOING TO MAKE A CHANGE, YA'LL.

By that stage, I was flirting with vegetarianism and wanted to learn more. My mother was horrified, because I'm the most anemic person on planet earth (80% sarcasm, 10% blood, 10% bullshit, she says). But anyway, I said yes, and Y and I agreed that I would come over to his place and we'd take the bus together the evening of.

And that's what happened.

I arrived at his place. I still remember what I wore because I replayed that evening again and again and again in my head. A red kilt, dirty chucks and a cropped top. I said hi to his mom and we went into his room. Y said, "Oh, hey, and by the way, we don't have to take the bus anymore. Alex'll give us a ride. He should be here any minute. He's a bit of an asshole so don't mind him."

"Oh. Okay," I nodded. I mean, Alex DID kind of scare me, just from listening to stories about him, but I'd never seen pictures of him (pre-social media era), so it felt unfair to judge him based on what Y had said about him.

I did know that he was always happy to get into fights, always won, was rude to everyone around him, and was an only child of two, elitist doctors who wished nothing more for him than to become a doctor, too.

I also knew MY non-elitist parents were going to ground me well into the next decade for getting into a car with two 17-year-olds I didn't know, but allowed myself this one, reckless decision.

"I'm going to jump into the shower real quick. Feel free to start that sketch on my wall," Y said.

Ah-ha. THAT sketch.

Earlier that month, while we both listened to Crass and Anti Flag during recess, Y came up with the idea of my painting something elaborate on his wall. It was the first inkling I got that Y might be interested in me. My "normal" friends told me he was for sure crushing on me hard, but I couldn't see it.

He never made a move on me, and I made sure we always kept things super platonic, so I was safe, right?

WRONG. But we'll get to that in a second.

So Y hopped into the shower, and I stood on his bed, barefoot, with my kilt, my back to the door, and started outlining my sketch. I heard the front door open and shut in the distance, and knew that Alex must've made his grand entrance. I forced myself not to turn around or stop. I was cool. Super cool. The coolest chick ever. Cooler than Alex. And I wasn't going to stop what I was doing to acknowledge the almighty Alex.

The door to Y's room flung open. For a few seconds, everything was silent. I wasn't even sure Alex was in the room. I kept working on my sketch, but my fingers quivered and the outline became wobbly, jagged.

Then, "Who the fuck are you?"

That was his opening line.

WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?

Still, I didn't turn around. Y's words reverberated inside me.

Alex is an asshole, don't pay any attention to him.

"I'm Leigh," I said, without turning around, "Who the fuck are YOU?"

Rather than answering me, he flung himself on the bed, shoes on and everything, his head landing on the pillow. I gasped. I ACTUALLY GASPED. Because I was wearing a kilt, and he had a great angle to see my underwear.

Rather than jumping back (I WAS COOL, REMEMBER?) I scurried to the end of the bed and continued my sketch.

It was a mural that was supposed to take over the entire wall, and I knew I cocked up the middle section and half-assed it just so I could scurry away from Alex. Or rather, the shadow of Alex, since I had yet to find the guts to look directly at him. There was a lot of silence. He was weird, I decided. Super weird. And suddenly, I did remember ONE thing about Alex. I remembered Y telling me that Tom had a girlfriend, and that Daniel was fooling around with a few girls from his old school, and that Alex, and this is a quote: NEVER HAD A GIRLFRIEND, NEVER WILL, BET ASSHOLE IS STILL A VIRGIN.

This gave me new confidence. Not that I wasn't a virgin. I was still very much a virgin. But Alex's lack of conquests robbed him of his shine.

Finally, I chanced a look at him.

He was reading a book. Hell if I noticed the title on the cover.

Because Alex. Was. Fucking. Stunning.

In a totally unpredictable way.

I knew he was originally from Russia. That his parents moved when he was eight. Actually, Y also told me that Alex got circumcised when he was a preteen because his parents didn't want him to be different in a place where EVERY man was circumcised. Jewish, Muslim or Christian. They didn't want him to be the odd one out.

Well, that didn't work out for them, because Alex was as far as humanly possible from ANYTHING I'd ever seen.

First of all, he was 6'3. I kid you not. And he was only 17 at the time. Second, he had a shock of white-blond hair, buzzed on the sides, with a bun he obviously wrestled into a mohawk whenever they had a gig. He wasn't thin and lanky. He had broad shoulders, even though he didn't look like he worked out, and huge hands. Huge everything, really. And although he wasn't classically beautiful, everything about his face was sharp and sculpted. Like he was one of my sketches.

Suddenly I knew, I just KNEW, that Alex's lack of conquests had nothing to do with his looks OR his attitude.

He simply wasn't the kiss and tell type.

Alex cocked one eyebrow at me. "What?"

I didn't know what.

I felt...unequipped. And for the first time, I realized what Boy Crazy meant. Because I suspected I could be very, very crazy for that boy.

"Y said you're an asshole," I told him. I didn't know what else to say.

His face remained expressionless. "And?"

"And he's right."

He offered me half a nod, completely unmoved by what people thought of him. He flipped a page in the book. I got back to drawing. Or pretending to draw. A few seconds later, he asked, "You vegan?"

I knew he was vegan.

They were all vegan.

Anarchist-vegan-punk-rockers who wrote for online fanzines and wanted to change the world in ways I frankly thought were insanely naive at best and dangerously delusional at worse. Although, at that point in time, I would forgive Alex had he started World War Three singlehandedly, in that very room.

"Yeah," I heard myself blurt out, rather haughtily. "Actually, I'm vegetarian but I just stopped eating eggs and honey. So. Yeah. Vegan. Totally. That's me."

I'd actually had an omelet that morning and still sneaked McNuggets whenever my dad brought McDonalds home and I knew no one would catch me eating it, but whatever. I could be vegan.

Alex was about to say something when Y pushed the door open. The hatred I felt toward Y at that moment overwhelmed me. In the span of minutes, he became the odd one out, because I wanted nothing more than Alex's approval.

And words.

And thoughts.

I idly wondered, if we had kids, would they have my blue eyes and his blond hair? Or my brown hair and his hazel eyes?

Alex, who looked like a Viking and was rumored to be just as ruthless.

"Hey," Y said. "You met Leigh."

Alex didn't turn to face him. He was still looking at me. But not in the same way I suspected I was looking at him. He was intrigued, not starstruck.

"Yeah," Alex said.

Y began gelling his frizzy hair. "Leave her alone. She is not a groupie."

Even I knew Alex would take that as a challenge. And I didn't know Alex at all.

I could actually feel the moment Alex decided not to leave me alone precisely because Y wanted him to.

That was the day I switched to veganism for a dude.

Not knowing that in the upcoming weeks, months, years, I would look back and think...veganism is not even on the list of top fifty insane things I did for Alex.

## **Chapter Two.**

The three of us gathered our stuff (meaning the boys gathered their stuff and I gathered my tongue back into my mouth, because, as mentioned before, Alex was stunning), and we made our way out to Alex's car.

And then, lo and behold, another surprise.

Alex drove a Volvo.

One of those super suburban, soccer-mom type SUV's you see in Most Safe Rides lists every year. So anti-punk rock, I was surprised the vehicle didn't come with a complimentary #MomLife bumper sticker.

For a few moments, I allowed myself to stare...and, okay, to let out a chuckle too. "Shut up," Alex scowled at me, unlocking the car.

Even the SUV's beep was feminine. I swear.

This, of course, only made me laugh even harder. Alex whipped his head to Y, pointing at him with his index finger. "Tell your friend to shut up."

And Y, who was super into me, but not into me enough to risk finding his body parts scattered along the river downtown, turned to face me, his throat bobbing with a swallow, and said quietly, “hey, knock it off, will you? Alex doesn’t really have much of a sense of humor.”

*No shit.*

Needless to say, the rest of the drive (in the safe, totally uncool Volvo) was awkward as hell.

Alex and Y weaved in and out of safe small talk topics about their mutual friends, from the punk scene and from Y’s old school, and I made myself as invisible as I possibly could, bobbing my head to the music in the background (Crass, if I remember correctly), all while internally coming up with a game plan to make Alex fall in love with me.

The plan, unfortunately, had a few holes in it. Namely:

1. I was super proud and would never show a guy I wanted to date him. Like, ever. I never got to the bottom of what made me so damn frightened of rejection, but my general policy when liking a guy was to ignore him as much as humanly possible, in the hopes this would somehow make him fall madly in love with me. Yes, gang, I know. This is why I’ve never written a dating book.
2. I’d very few opportunities to see Alex again. In fact, this was the first, and as far as I was aware, last time I was going to see this guy. And let’s admit it, there were more romantic settings for meet cutes than yelling in cops’ faces that meat is murder and milk is rape while standing knee-deep in cow shit on a ranch, while holding a sign with a picture of a goose with three chins.

When we got to the entrance of the farm/ranch (never could tell the difference between the two) in which the demonstration took place, I froze.

There were a few things I didn’t take into consideration. Like, oh, I don’t know, the fact that as with most demonstrations, there were people there. Lots and lots of people.

I didn’t do too well with people. I was an introvert by nature, choice, and DNA. The place was not only teeming with a ton of protesters and even more cops, but a lot of these people looked like they were Alex and Y’s crowd.

Even before Alex parked his (sensible. Yes, I will never get over this) Volvo in the small parking lot right next to the duck and geese farm, he rolled down his window and bumped fists with other punk rockers who slowed their steps to greet him.

I am not going to lie—I was impressed.

I mean, I had been impressed with Y for being a person with an entire personality of his own, with views and morals that hadn't been spoon-fed to him by the educational system, but Alex was a whole different ball game. Because, unlike Y, there was something very nonchalant and confident about him.

Like, he fought for the cause, but wasn't hysterical about it.

Or maybe I was just justifying to myself what I was planning to do, if Alex showed a shred of interest in me. Which was, largely speaking, breaking Y's heart and trust by hooking up with his frenemie. Because, as I said—there was no love lost between Y and Alex.

“We're here,” Y unclipped his seatbelt from the passenger seat gleefully. The adrenaline was already pumping in my veins just from seeing the crowded farm, the metal bars by the cages where they kept the geese, and the police officers around. Other than this, the most exciting and dangerous place I'd ever been was our neighbor, Mrs. Lipshitz's basement (there was nothing particularly dangerous about her basement, but she collected porcelain dolls and my auntie, who is also an author, used to tell me stories about how these dolls were actually real, little girls' taxidermy).

“No shit,” Alex said drily, flinging his door open, in response to Y. “Your friend might be a bit slow—she is friends with you, after all—but she is not fucking blind.”

“Thanks, Y,” I said, ignoring Alex completely. I still hadn't figured out how to deal with the giant Viking, but I suspected I was going to taunt him to the bitter end. It was a kneejerk reaction, after all. “Let me just call my parents really quick, tell them that I arrived safely.”

Technically, I'd told my parents I was helping farmers pick organic vegetables today and distribute them to people in need, but at least I gave them the right location. More importantly, I didn't give them something else—a heart attack. Which was exactly what they'd have if they knew why I was really here.

“Rock on,” Alex let out a snort, just when I slid out of the backseat of his car, his back already to me as he advanced toward a crowd of people who waved at him. “You drive a fucking Volvo, dude,” I muttered under my breath.

He stopped.

Turned around to look at me.

Oh, fuck. Getting killed by my crush was such a lame way to go.

“What did you say?” He asked me, seriously and darkly, and...okay, fine, sexily, too.

“I said,” I spat out the words, yanking out my fridge-sized phone (hello, mid 2000’s), “before you taunt me for my lack of coolness, just remember you drive a Fucking. Volvo.”

Welp. I went there. More like galloped there on the back of a pissed off horse. Alex shook his head and turned his back to me. It was only then that I realized Y was standing by my side. I hadn’t even noticed him, and if that wasn’t sucky of me, then hell, I didn’t know what was.

“C’mon,” he tugged me by my cropped shirt. “Let me introduce you to the gang.” The gang was a bunch of gangly, lanky teenagers with pronounced Adam’s apples, all on the acne spectrum, in Black Flag, Subhumans, Minor Threat, and Anti-Flag shirts. I don’t know how to explain it, but they all gave me intense rich kid vibes. There were a few girls, too, and I am ashamed to say the first thing I did was eyeball each of them, trying to assess my competition. I did not believe for one second Alex didn’t get any action with the opposite sex. He was too brilliantly different in the landscape not to stand out. Now it was just a question of who he was doing, not if.

The girls looked vastly different from me. That’s the first thing I noticed. With multi-colored hair, extremely short skirts, and several piercings and tattoos. I looked depressingly tame in comparison, and basically screamed GOOD GIRL and FAKER, all in capital letters. I did have a nose ring and wore ripped leggings every now and again, but that was the extent of it. Tattoos were a step too far for me. I couldn’t commit to a lifetime with the same ink at fifteen. Hell, I couldn’t even commit to the same shampoo. I was constantly overwhelmed by the options whenever I tagged along with my mom at the supermarket.

The only girl who was my style was Tom’s girlfriend, Jadie, who was brilliantly gorgeous, with purple eyes, strawberry blonde hair, and a winning smile. She wore torn jeans and an oversized shirt, and still stood out with her raw beauty.

Tom—the vocalist for Y and Alex’s band—was also the kind of person you couldn’t miss. He was one of those guys who didn’t look good per se, but was still attractive. The sex appeal was in the way he carried himself. Kind of like Adam Driver. Super tall. Super thick voice. If you saw him in a line up, you would never guess you’d want to ride his face, but give him five minutes to charm you, and, well, his ears would be ringing from your thighs through the next weekend. They made an oddly sweet couple, Tom and Jadie, and I immediately liked both of them.

We were just waiting for the demonstration to start (side note: if everyone is there, and the signs are there, and the police is there, and the guy with the megaphone is there, *and* the geese are there, hadn't the demonstration technically already started?).

Jadie asked me where I was from, questioned me about Y to see if there was something between us, and I slammed that idea down pretty quickly and efficiently, grateful that Y scurried with Tom and Alex to the other side of the lot, along with some other guys, where they smoked cigarettes and dutifully looked like they were suffering through the whole thing.

“So, you're single then.” Jadie concluded. There were other girls around us, but I got the feeling they were going to talk to one another exclusively and not let me take part. I got it. I was a newbie. The alpha-female was the one who would welcome me, sniff under my tail, to see if I was fit. And that person was Jadie. Jadie, who was beautiful, accomplished, dated the hottest guy in the punk rock scene they were a part of, and—this I found out during our brief conversation—also came from money. *A lot* of money.

Her dad was the CEO of a company who imported frozen goods and distributed them to supermarkets.

Including meat and poultry.

Yup. Shit doesn't get any better than that, folks.

Before I knew it, the demonstration started.

Gang, I don't even know what to tell you about what happened. I don't remember much of it. I do remember that at some point, things got a little heated and there was shoving involved. I was well and far away from said shoving, but the fact that police officers and demonstrators were going at it made my tummy ache.

Or maybe it was all the salad I shoveled into my mouth.

God, vegetarianism sucked. Veganism was going to suck even harder.

“Okay, time to bail,” Y popped out of nowhere, grabbed me by the hand then ushered me to the VOLVO (this is never going to get old) by the elbow. I followed suit. No. Scratch that. I started RUNNING. Because even though I was all in when it came to stopping animal cruelty (still am), I was so not into getting punched in the face. Especially being anemic and all and eating mainly lettuce and bread all day. There was a real chance I was going to faint and never wake up.

Okay, there wasn't, but I still didn't want to get punched in the face.

Things were getting out of control. One protestor slapped a police officer, and the officer pounced on him. There was shouting everywhere. People pushing others around to see what was going on. Someone stumbled on top of me, and Y shielded me with his body so I wouldn't fall.

"Where's Alex?" Y asked.

"I have no idea," I mumbled, looking for him frantically. And I do mean frantically. Because suddenly, all I wanted was to go home to my bed, MTV2, our fridge that was full of yummy things, my square parents, and even my annoying brother.

Then I spotted him. Alex.

He was perched against a chain-link fence, talking to one of the punk girls who'd ignored me earlier in the evening. She had a Chelsea hairstyle—super thick purple bangs with a bit of hair on the sides and a shaved head—and she wore fishnets and an oversized shirt as a dress. They shared a cigarette and laughed about something.

I wanted to throw up.

I'd been jealous before, of course. Plenty of times. But not like this. Never like this.

My chest burned with anger.

My palms became sweaty.

I honestly would have keyed the hell out of Alex's stupid Volvo if it wasn't for the fact I needed a ride back and also, if my parents had to pay for my little revenge stunt, I would have been grounded into the next millennium.

"Alex!" Y spotted him at the same time I did and waved to him. "We're right here. Let's go."

Alex raised his cigarette in the air. "After I'm done."

By then, a ton of people were filing back to their cars and getting the hell out there before the police started to arrest people. And he was sitting around smoking a cigarette with some...some...gorgeous girl who wasn't me?

Fuck that.

This was the day I discovered that I have the ability to surprise myself. If this day taught me anything, it was that I could never quite predict my own behavior at certain times. Because what I did next shocked Y, and maybe Alex too, but it absolutely floored me.

I marched over to Alex—stomped, more like—and didn't stop until I was right next to him and the girl.

“Alex,” I said, my voice cold and yet shrill at the same time somehow. “We gotta go. Finish your cigarette in your car.”

Alex gave me a slow onceover. “Says who?”

“You might be slow, but surely you are not fucking blind,” I'd used his exact words against him, feeling part-proud, part anxious. “I am the person saying this.”

That was it.

That was how my story ended.

Murdered by a hottie.

I guess there are worse ways to go. Elvis died on the toilet, didn't he?

Yeah, dying in Alex's arms was a fine way to go. Even though I did think I had a few more years in me.

To my surprise, Alex didn't do any of the things I expected him to – like saying something mean, fighting back, taunting me, or stomping on my head.

He flung the cigarette through one of the holes in the fence, even though it was only halfway done.

“Well?” He asked me, scowling. “What the hell are you waiting for, Layla? Go back to the car.”

“It's Leigh,” I ground out.

“Do I look like I fucking care?”

Gang, Alex did not, in fact, look like he cared. He didn't say goodbye to the girl beside him, either. That's how fundamentally he lacked manners. He just up and left, turning his back to her like she wasn't even there.

The drive home was full of the three of us exchanging anecdotes and opinions about what happened at the demonstration. I was breathless, exhilarated, and now that I wasn't in immediate danger of getting punched in the face and/or arrested—also elated.

Y asked what I thought about everyone. I was respectfully indifferent about the guys, polite about the girls, but I did say I thought Jadie was a lady boss bitch.

“She is also incredibly gorgeous,” I added, which was factually true. I have since lived two more decades on this planet, and only rarely come across women as beautiful as Jadie. Some girls were just born with that oomph factor. She was one of them.

“Yeah, she’s stunning,” Y agreed.

“Meh,” Alex spat out the window, perpetually unimpressed by everything the world has to offer. “She’s got the curves of a fucking billiard stick.”

“A billiard stick doesn’t have any curves,” Y said.

Alex knocked on Y’s temple. “Congratulations, dum-dum.”

“Impossible standards, Alex,” I teased. Internally, I mourned the premature death of our non-romance. If Jadie wasn’t good enough for Alex, I was basically toast.

“Got the hots for her?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I hissed. “I just think you’re full of shit. She is beautiful. Admitting it is not a weakness.”

“She’s average,” Alex gruffed. “Don’t get so butthurt for her.”

“Don’t worry about my butt,” I retorted.

There was a beat of silence before Alex said, “I actually have no comeback for that.”

And then, after a minute of silence, he added, “Where’s home, Leigh?”

He called me by my name.

I would have broken out into dance if we weren’t in the car.

“Just drop me off with Y. I’ll take the bus.”

Actually, I was going to call Daddy Dearest to pick me up, but that was even less rock n’ roll than driving a Volvo SUV.

“Just give me your address,” Alex snapped, seemingly grossed out by having to talk to me. Y was oddly quiet. Maybe he was processing what was happening. Alex actually having a conversation with another human. One that wasn’t an argument.

“No, really, I don’t want you to do me any favors.”

I was difficult, I knew, but only because I didn’t want him to know how much I liked him. Which made no sense at all. Yet here we were.

“You are literally in my fucking car. The no favors ship has sailed. Give me your address or I’ll drop both your asses on the side of the road.”

“And they say chivalry is dead,” I sighed dreamingly.

“God, you are such a pain in the ass.”

“You’re winning me over, Alex,” I said warningly, folding my arms over my chest. “A few more lines like that and I’m yours.”

“What’s her address?” He turned to Y, ignoring me.

Y shook his head helplessly. “I don’t know. Why...why do you care? Just drop her off at my place.”

“I’m not letting her take the bus at night. She’s stupid enough to wind up dead somehow.”

“She’s not going to take the bus, Alex. Her parents will pick her up. If not, I’ll drive her.”

Suddenly, I had an epiphany.

Alex was trying to...

Wait for it...

**BE NICE TO ME.**

He just didn’t know how to do it.

This WAS his attempt at chivalry.

It was backwards, and weird, and a total fail—but it was important for him to drop me off at home.

My chest filled with so many butterflies I became slightly nauseous. If this was my reaction to him trying to be nice to him, I was pretty much bound to puke on his lap if he ever tried to kiss me.

“Fine,” I said, before giving him my address. “But when you get to my house, keep going.”

“Uhm, why?” Y asked, confused.

“Because I have a German shepherd that barks through the gate every time a car stops by my house until his throat stops working, so my parents are going to know someone is at the front door, get out, and see me with you guys.”

“Are you not allowed to, like, hang out with guys?” Y asked, and I pinked in the backseat.

I noticed Alex was silent. Did he care? Did he want to know the answer?

“No,” I rushed to say. “It’s just that...he barks really loudly so we wouldn’t be able to even, like, say goodbye.”

This was the honest truth, gang. That German shepherd’s name was named Tuco, after one of the characters in the western *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, with Clint Eastwood. He was an awesome dog, but man, was he loud. Hysterical, too. And even though my parents were cool with my hanging out with guys, I would definitely need to explain what I was doing in the car of a dude they didn’t know, with another dude they didn’t know, way past my bedtime.

Alex stopped a few houses away from mine. I unbuckled, feeling the total loss of him, the mix of pleasure, happiness, and disappointment swirling in my gut.

“Thanks, guys,” I said, pushing my kilt down my legs before swinging the door open.

“Sure thing,” Y said, and I leaned forward to kiss his cheek, because back then, being a teenager meant going through a complex ceremony of kissing everyone’s cheek when you saw them. Double-kiss their cheek if they were your BFFs.

I refrained from even looking at Alex from fear I would explode.

“Thanks for the ride, Alex.”

He nodded once, looking straight ahead.

I got out of the car and ran home, took a hot shower, and had a massive grilled cheese with creamy tomato soup I felt oddly guilty about, because I wasn’t vegetarian anymore. I was supposed to be vegan.

But on the other hand...I mean, come on. CHEESE.

Then again, veganism could wait one day. It was best to start diets and nutritious ways of life on a Monday, right?

The day after, at school, Y acted like the demonstration never happened.

He didn’t mention Alex. Or Tom. Or Jadie.

I was dying to know what Alex thought about me, but of course, couldn’t ask.

The day after, I found a website with a few grainy pictures of their band playing, and I was so happy I thought I was going to cry, because now I could look at Alex

whenever I wanted, even if the picture was taken in a darkened room, and about fifty feet away from him.

Three days after the demonstration, I got a message on software called ICQ.

To those who don't know—ICQ was the early 2000's messenger. Only without all the cool stuff. We used to do emojis with brackets, exclamation points and hyphens, and GIFs were something we didn't even know how to pronounce (side note: I still don't know if it's Gif or Jeef). Each person was assigned a really complex, totally unmemorable number, like a phone number, and you could see who was online or not by the color (green, red, or black).

The message was from an unknown number.

**209898179: Hi**

My initial instinct screamed “predator”.

Wasn't I old enough for pedophiles? ~~I mean, I guessed I was flat chested, but for real.~~ My other guess was someone from a foreign country who would try and convince me he was a billionaire prince who was involved in a car accident and needed me—yes, fifteen year old me—to help manage his bank accounts, and if I'd give him my parents' credit card number, he'd transfer all his funds to us. But after a few deep breaths, I decided there was an unlikely chance it was someone I knew.

Maybe someone from school? Maybe even Jadie?

**Me: Who is this?**

The answer came after a few, excruciating minutes.

**209898179: Alex.**

My heart.

My poor heart.

If this was a prank, I was going to strangle someone. But who would prank me? No one even knew I liked him. Not even Y. Not that Y would ever stoop this low. I told all my other, girl friends all about the demonstration, but mentioned Alex only briefly, and with open disdain, because again: rejection. Hurt feelings. Shattered heart. I didn't want to deal with all of that.

**Me: Alex who?**

**209898179: I need to get drum sticks this week. I'm driving into the city.**

**Me: Thanks for the fun fact?**

**209898179: You coming or what?**

I stood up and went to the kitchen. My knees felt like Jell-O. The rest of me like rice pudding. Grabbed a glass. Poured myself water. Proceeded to spill it all over my shirt trying to gulp it.

He was asking me out, that much was clear.

We were going to get married and have Viking-looking babies. That, too, was a given fact at this point.

Now that I knew where my life was heading, the least I could do was keep my future husband waiting for a few minutes. Play hard to get.

After drinking two glasses of water, then proceeding to pee for a full minute, then looking at myself in the mirror and screaming silently, I went back to my PC. Alex wasn't online anymore. I knew he wouldn't be. Guys like Alex didn't like to be kept waiting.

I wrote him back, anyway.

**Me: I guess. Pick me up Friday at four?**

### **Chapter Three.**

I wore a stripy black and white dress that clung to my curves and killer fake-leather army boots for my non-date with Alex.

My makeup, I thought, was on point. From my thick eyeliner to my nude lip gloss. I blew out my hair several times, straightened, then styled it, and flossed my teeth until my gums wanted to file a restraining order against me.

I *still* looked like a good girl posing as a bad girl at a tame Halloween party, but I told myself Alex already knew who I was and still chose to send me a message, so many good girls were his jam.

We hadn't talked on ICQ since agreeing to meet on Friday.

It was excruciating, watching his name turn green every evening, knowing he was online and not being able to do anything about it. I wondered if he felt the same. If he saw my name, too, and wanted to talk.

I also wondered what he was doing online (but at seventeen, did I really have to wonder? He was most definitely watching porn).

There was only one thing that put a damper on my complete and utter euphoria—Y.

I still hadn't told my good friend Alex had contacted me. That we were going into the city together on Friday, without him.

Even though I hung out with Y every day at school, I never broached the subject of Alex.

There were a few reasons for that:

The first and most obvious one was that it had become pretty apparent that Y liked me, but not apparent enough that I could flat out tell him that I only saw him as a friend.

Secondly, I knew he didn't like Alex. I was afraid to lose Y's friendship, especially if things with Alex didn't pan out, which—let's admit it—was always a possibility when dealing with high-functioning sociopaths.

Third and most bizarrely of all, it almost felt like betraying Alex.

Without knowing him much at all, I already suspected he was a very private person. There was no other reason why Y would think Alex wasn't getting any action. Clearly, Alex hadn't shared with Y that we were seeing each other Friday. Otherwise, Y would have clubbed me with a ten foot pole long ago. Y had mentioned fleetingly that he met up with the band almost every day that week for rehearsals.

If Alex chose not to tell him, maybe there was a reason for it. A reason beyond the fact Alex wasn't big on talking to people (or at all).

It felt like a secret, and I didn't like having secrets.

*Anyway.*

It was four o'clock on Friday, and your girl was buzzing with excitement.

I watched VH1 in the living room, gurgling milk to make my teeth appear whiter before chewing on a piece of mint gum to get rid of the milky residue.

The last thing I needed was to taste like cow milk in case he kissed me.

I did make a fairly honest attempt to go vegan the entire week, and mostly succeeded, save for a dash of cream in my coffee (this was mid 2000's, back when oak milk, almond milk, and soy milk still tasted like sweaty feet).

Four twenty five rolled around, and my excitement morphed into annoyance, dipped in embarrassment. Was he standing me up?

At four thirty five, deflated and furious, my phone buzzed with a message.

**Alex: I'm here.**

I let him wait nine minutes before coming out the gate.

One look at Alex, with his blond bun, massive shoulders, and don't-fuck-with-me expression, waiting behind the wheel, and my ire dissolved into thin air, replaced by heart eyes and the urgent need to browse baby names books to choose what we'd call our children.

Of course, I couldn't let him know that. Outwardly, I was still fuming.

I slid into the passenger seat and buckled up.

"Hi." His voice was flat. Bored. Like he was a cab driver tasked with the job of driving me all the way across the country.

"If you say so," I answered maturely. Which was not the right response for "hi".

He shot me a WTF look.

I briefly thought about how we were so...*dishonest*. Closed off. There was a level of immaturity I strangely liked about how we interacted.

There was something to be said about two people who were desperate not to show each other how much they liked one another in order not to lose face or get hurt, but still wanted to take a chance on love.

Alex started driving. I sent a silent prayer to the universe that my neighbors, some of them girls my age, would see us.

Me, just chilling with this hot, rich guy who looked like Ragnar Lothbrok's psycho brother. No big deal. Nothing to see here.

“You were late,” I pointed out, fighting the urge to twist my fingers together in my lap.

“No shit,” he yawned, flicking the blinker, not bothering to look at me.

“You couldn’t text?”

“I could’ve.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Was on a phone call.”

“You’re being a jerk.”

“I know,” he admitted, sounding sincere for a fraction of a second, his voice still hard, but not rude. “It’s a habit. Bear with me.”

*Why?* I wanted to ask.

*Have you ever gone on a date before?* Another question I couldn’t allow to tumble past my lips.

I wasn’t even sure it was a date to begin with. Maybe he truly needed to get drum sticks and had some sort of crippling social anxiety that prevented him from getting into stores without a companion or something.

“Whatever,” I popped a Mentos into my mouth.

“Didn’t you say you’re vegan?” He scowled, finally awarding me with his attention.

“I *am*,” I hissed, confused. My breath all minty and wintery and inviting, and I wondered if he had some kind of sixth sense or laser-vision that showed him there was still milk coating my teeth.

*Maybe* he’d installed secret cameras in my house.

Or maybe I just read too many thrillers and needed to take a (vegan) chill pill.

“Mentos,” he said slowly, methodically, “has beeswax and carmine, which comes from insects. It is therefore not vegan.”

I practically puked the Mentos back into my hand, rolled the window down and tossed it out and rubbed my tongue with my hand (always a good look).

“Holy hell, I just had a mental image of myself chewing on a cockroach. What kind of gross crap do they put into our food when we aren’t looking?”

“Don’t you ever read the labels?” Alex smirked.

I turned to stare at him like he just fell from a parallel universe straight into the car seat.

“No, Alex, I don’t. First, because life is too short, second, because I don’t really want to know, and third, because I can’t even pronounce seventy-five percent of the ingredients in the stuff I eat.”

“You should read labels. It’s fascinating.”

“What else do you find fascinating?” I wondered.

“People who think they’re vegan, but they’re not.”

He was so lucky he was hot, because I was starting to dislike him. For real.

I decided to change the subject. If I wanted to feel dumb, I would walk straight into chem or math class.

“How was your week?” I asked, opting for a safe topic.

“It was fine. Had back-to-back rehearsals. Which reminds me, Y is a shit bass player. I don’t know why we’re still keeping him. I think Tom feels sorry for him. Especially since he moved to your shitty-ass town.”

He managed to insult me and my friend when I’d simply asked him about his week.

At this point his assholeness was basically a talent. Something to be cherished and developed. Was there an asshole Olympics? He could shine.

“He’s good,” I disagreed on principal. “I’ve heard him myself. Plus, it doesn’t matter, does it?” I crossed my arms over my chest, smirking. As things stood right now, Y was a genuine, real friend of mine, while Alex was a guy who was (maybe) going to do dirty things to me and (definitely) going to break my heart. My loyalties still laid firmly at Y’s feet. “It’s not like you’re doing this for a living.”

“No, but I like to be good at everything I do,” Alex’s tone turned especially frosty.

“Well, you’re not good with punctuality, that’s for damn sure, and your manners could use a few tweaks, too,” I shrugged. “So, maybe start there.”

Something wonderful happened after I said this.

Alex laughed.

Actually laughed.

And that was when I found out he had adorable dimples.

My heart hiccupped in my chest.

I was so screwed.

So, so, *sososo* screwed.

The most screwed virgin on planet earth, possibly.

“So, you heard him play, huh?” He shot a sidelong look my way.

I smiled smugly as the Volvo swooshed by the twinkling, bright blue sea, crowded promenade, and colorful gift shops, heading toward the highway.

“Couple of times,” I kept it coy.

It was one time, exactly. When I’d gone to Y’s house to drop off some homework one of his teachers had sent for him on a day he was “sick”. And by sick I mean playing videogames and smoking weed. He forced me to listen to something he wrote. I still had PTSD, not because it was so bad, but because it lasted twenty minutes, and I really needed to pee.

“You hang out with him a lot?” Alex asked.

“Every day at school,” I said cheerfully, feeling a lot less cheery when I thought about the fact Alex went to school, too, and I had absolutely no idea who he was hanging out with.

In my mind, all the girls in his high school looked like they’d just walked out of Penthouse magazine, bunny ears and lace bras included.

“He wants in your pants,” Alex informed me, flat out.

“How is that different from you?” I asked bravely. “I’m sure you didn’t invite me here because of my extensive knowledge of drum sticks.”

*Or Mentos, for that matter.*

“The difference is you want me in your pants, too,” Alex deadpanned, his eyes still on the road. I choked on my saliva. Dude actually said it. “Our interests are aligned. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here.”

“I hang out with Y, too,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, well, first of all, you do it at school, where your options are limited to teenyboppers or Y, who actually possesses a few gray cells, even if they’re not used in full capacity. Second, Y is not a class A cunt, so hanging out with him doesn’t take endurance. It is surprisingly easy to know where you stand with people when you are a jerk. I always know my options, honeypie.”

*What. The...*

“Honeypie?” I spluttered.

It was the most corny...embarrassing...*bizarre* nickname I’d ever been called by someone in my age bracket.

*Honeypie.* Who even said that outside of corny 80’s movies? My grams, maybe.

“Yeah,” Alex scowled, his eyes darkening. I could practically see his walls rising up. “What’s wrong with honeypie?”

“What’s good about it?” I couldn’t stop laughing.

It was a great ice-breaker. Then I saw his face turn serious and a little flushed, and sobered up quickly. I realized that he called me that because he didn’t understand the context of the word in the language we were speaking.

He was, after all, from Russia. Sure, he came here when he was eight, and his accent was faint, barely there—maybe just a lilt around the vowels every now and then—but he was, for all intents and purposes, still a bilingual person who wasn’t completely well-versed in the local lingo.

His world was different than mine. His brain was a multi-lane highway.

He looked annoyed now, almost shy, and it made my heart pinch.

The look on his face put a dent in his immortal, unshaken confidence. It allowed me to take my guard down a notch.

“No, you’re right. Honeypie is...great,” I breathed through my nose, working hard on making sure I wasn’t laughing anymore. “Please, continue.”

He shot me a look from the corner of his eye. “I don’t even remember what we were talking about.”

“The merits of being an asshole,” I reminded him dutifully.

“I have nothing more to contribute to this subject. What are you, anyway?” He asked, his voice hard and unwavering. He meant where I was from.

“A human.”

“No, really.”

“Okay, a Martian,” I sighed. “But don’t tell anyone. I’ve seen how they treated ET. Appalling, if you ask me.”

“You’re fucking exasperating. Just answer the question, Leigh.”

“*Honeypie*,” I corrected primly. “I demand to be referred to by my new pet name.”

“What’s. Your. Damn. Heritage?” He ground out.

“Half Russian, half Moroccan. The Russian side travelled a lot and my great grandmothers liked to keep their options open, so there’s some Polish and Bulgarian mixed in, too.”

“Speak any Russian?” His eyes lit up with hope.

“Only profanity,” I chewed on my bottom lip.

“Those are the most important words,” he cracked another devastating smile. His smiles were rare and far-between, but I knew I would sell my soul for just a little more of them. I was such a goner for this guy, it was pathetic. “Start talking.”

And so I found myself sitting next to Alex, shooting curses in Russian for a couple minutes, while he laughed at me, because now, I wasn’t the one with the dialect advantage. He was the one fluent in the language we were speaking. And before we knew it, we were at a music shop bang in the middle of the big city.

“Whoa. I did not realize we’ve been driving for an hour,” I muttered when we got out of the car, adjusting my messenger bag on my shoulder.

“Time flies by when you’re on planet earth, little Martian,” he breezed past me, punching the door to the store open. I liked that there was a massive height difference between us. I barely made it to his ribs.

We spent exactly ten minutes in the store. Alex knew the guy who manned the cash register. They talked a little, laughed a lot. The cashier had the drumsticks Alex had come for ready at the register. They cackled about a brawl that started in one of the clubs they were both in a few weeks ago. Alex didn't introduce me. In fact, he downright ignored me, and I pretended to find a row of guitars hanging on the wall completely fascinating.

Alex paid the guy, turned around and tapped my shoulder.

I swiveled in his direction, acting as if I was not hurt and confused as to what I was doing there. Was my first date ever also the suckiest to ever be recorded on planet earth? I couldn't rule that out.

"Ready to roll?" He asked.

"Yeah, sure," I played it cool. Like I didn't come all this way for ten minutes in which I was completely ignored.

We walked out of the store.

We headed for his car.

We got INTO his car.

He still didn't make a move to ask if I wanted to get an ice cream or pizza or whatever. Oh, that's right—everything kids our age did involved eating shit with animal products in it. God, why did I have to go for a vegan anarcho-punk? Why couldn't I date the guy down the street, who listened to Blink 182 and uploaded videos of himself doing dangerous tricks at the skating rink in a supermarket cart to YouTube? Sure, he smelled of socks, but I knew for a fact he could smash three Burgers with a side of cheese fries.

Alex started driving.

I took even, calming breaths and promised myself I wasn't going to kill him.

When he slid onto the highway, he said, "I bought a double bass."

"Okay," I said. The word in itself wasn't venomous, but I said it like what I really meant by 'okay' was burn-in-hell-you-stupid-jerk.

"I'm pumped to check it out," he drummed on his steering wheel. His car smelled nice. I bet his house smelled nice, too. I knew HE smelled nice, because I'd sniffed

him a few times when he wasn't looking. He wasn't a smoker. The cigarette he shared with the beautiful girl at the demonstration must've been a one off.

"Good for you."

"Do you want to..." he let the sentence hang for a second. It was the first time I detected something that wasn't complete and utter poise from him. "Learn how to play the drums?"

*Hell no.*

"Oh, yeah, for a long time now," I talked out of my ass, finally getting what he was trying to do here. Dang, he was emotionally fucked. He was too proud to ask me out for a freaking vegan pizza. Holy shit. I was going to have my hands full with this one. "It's, like, totally on my to-do list."

*Right after dining on broken glass and used condoms at the local dumpster.*

"I can teach you. Or whatever."

"Uh-huh," I said. "Or whatever. Yeah. Sure."

I was going to die a virgin. That much I knew. Too bad, because other than the sex part, I was also curious about motherhood. But at this rate, Alex and I were getting nowhere.

"Doesn't have to be now," he shrugged.

"Totally. Now's not a good time," I agreed.

"But it could be. Unless you have plans. Which...I guess you do?"

This was getting really messy and really awkward and I wasn't going to lie—I loved every single minute of it. Because even though I squirmed, he did, too.

"I cleared my schedule this afternoon, so I think I'm okay."

"Yeah," he shrugged. "Makes sense."

Then something occurred to me.

"We're going to your house, right?" I frowned.

"Yeah. That's where my drum kit is. Actually, that's where the band rehearses. In my basement."

Alex was the rich kid who also happened to be an only child, so his parents let him convert his basement into a rehearsal room slash studio. Meanwhile, there was a literal HOLE IN THE WALL between my brother's room and mine. I mean, it technically used to be a window, from before my parents expanded our house, but a little privacy went a long way when you were on the cusp of turning sixteen and just finding out about your body. And boys. And Leonardo DiCaprio.

“Going into a stranger's basement is definitely not something I do on a regular basis,” I said. Alex was seventeen, and the size of two fully grown men. It was worth making sure we were on the same page. “So I'm just going to put it out there—I'm not gonna sleep with you.”

“Figured,” he shifted in his seat. Then added, after a few seconds, “You're getting a little ahead of yourself. I'm not even going to kiss you. I don't even know if I fucking like you.”

This hit me right in the gut. There was nothing quite like getting rejected by the guy you were crushing on. A pregnant pause filled the air. Then Alex added.

“...*honeypie.*”

We both burst out laughing.

I was genuinely starting not only to enjoy the excitement of being with Alex, but actually Alex himself as a person.

We got to his house. It was an older villa, not as glitzy as I'd imagined in my head, with fountains and statues and a secret garden the size of Paris. Then again, in my mind, he was living in Buckingham Palace and Prince Harry and Prince William were going to fist-bump me in the kitchen.

His parents weren't home. Later on, I'd find out that his parents were *never* home. They owned a dental clinic downtown. And every day, after they were done treating their clients, they'd accept newcomers with no insurance and knock a few hundred bucks off their bills. Their way of giving back to the community. Pro-bono, if you would.

Alex's parents were nice, stern, crammed to the max with morals and principals, and uninvolved in their son's life. And Alex, I would later find out, would become exactly the same type of person.

I, however, had a different upbringing. My parents could tell me what I was feeling and thinking before I even felt or thought those things. My mom still tucked me into bed like I was a toddler and my dad took me on lunch dates every time he thought I was having a bad day, which, at my age, was basically four times a week.

Alex's house was super nice. Nicer than mine. Spacious. With all the staples of a typical Russian home. Lots of books. Lots of oak. Lots of pickled everything on the kitchen windowsill, and a huge piano in the center of the living room.

A collection of matryoshkas lined up on the living room shelf. There were dozens of them, in all shapes and colors, and my fingers itched to grab one and open it, see how many other small matryoshkas were inside its wooden belly.

The TV in the living room was on—it would always be on—and Alex's grandma, Sveta, sat in front of it, knitting a never-ending scarf and watching a Russian game show where everyone, and I do mean EVERYONE, was shouting aggressively at one another, but seemed happy about it.

“Hey, Babushka. This is L. L, this is Babushka.”

“Hi, Babushka!” I said cheerfully, totally ignoring the fact I just referred to her as Grandmother even though I had no ties to her. Other than marrying her grandson, of course, in due time.

“L is Russian,” Alex announced proudly.

Okay. That was...not super true. I mean, heritage wise, sure, there was some Russian in me. For the sake of having *this* Russian in me, I did not correct or contradict him.

His grandmother's eyes lit up, and she immediately started firing things in Russian at me. I answered with a dumb smile. Alex pushed me toward the basement.

“Her dad's Russian. She doesn't speak it.”

“Actually, it's my mom,” I muttered as he all but pushed me down the stairway.

“I really don't give a damn,” he hissed under his breath, so embarrassed, I could just tell—no, KNOW—he didn't bring girls home often. And that made me seriously happy.

“What do you want to drink?” He demanded when we were in his basement.

‘The sweet nectar of your kisses’ sounded creepy, not to mention needy, so I went for, “Hmm, what do you have?”

“Water, coke, coffee, beer, babies’ blood...”

“I’ll take a baby blood. Two sugars. No milk.”

He flicked his eyes toward the overhead clock.

“It’s actually beer o’clock.”

“Is it?” I asked. “Time is a tricky concept. Not to mention philosophical.”

“I’m getting you beer,” he said.

“You still need to drive me home,” I protested.

“I won’t drink,” he gritted out impatiently. Guess it was hard, trying to make an effort not to be a dick.

“You’ll just get *me* drunk?” I grinned, but I wasn’t scared. I couldn’t articulate why, exactly. He was 6’2 of muscles and pure, unabashed male, and I was 5’2 of attitude, insecurities and questionable decisions. Still, I knew with unwavering confidence that whatever damage Alex was going to do to me, it was going to be purely to my heart and mental health. The scars were going to be deep, but concealed.

I was ready.

“As I said before, I’m not going to kiss you today, so why don’t you get your head outta’ the fucking gutter? I’ll wait. Be right back.”

And he was. Back. After a couple minutes, with a bottle of water for us to share and a can of Baltika. The can was already open when he handed it to me, beads of fridge-sweat coating it.

“Is it roofied?” I peered at him from behind the stem of the beer before taking a sip. At this point, I was just messing around. Buying time. I *so* didn’t want to learn how to play the drums. I’d already decided I was going to be horrible. My dad once tried to teach me how to play the guitar. After seven lessons, the only thing I could manage was the first five notes of “Smoke on the Water” by Deep Purple. Then it went downhill from there and basically sounded like I was having a physical fight with the guitar. And losing.

So. Not great.

“I put a few spoons of date honey in it,” Alex frowned, like the idea of him ever doing something so lewd was offensive. And maybe it was. I was fed so many horrific stories about him from Y, I kind of expected the worst.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because it’s fucking good,” he scowled. “What kind of question in that?”

“One you don’t want to answer, apparently,” I muttered.

“I just did.”

Well, then. Now we were arguing over basically nothing. Swell.

Alex, apparently, was dead serious about teaching me how to drum. Which was catastrophic, because I couldn’t possibly concentrate on looking pretty and learning a skill at the same time. One of those things had to go, and that thing was not going to be my pout and extensive hair tossing, so ya’ll know what came next.

“Well,” Alex blew air out after an hour of teaching me how to play the drums.

“Let’s hope you suck dick as good as you suck at playing an instrument.”

He actually said that.

I punched his arm. Hard.

“You’ll never find out,” I narrowed my eyes at him, tossing the drum sticks to the floor dramatically.

“Maybe so, but Y won’t either and why does it make me happy?” He fell to the couch by his drum kit, smiling at me devilishly. He grabbed my beer from a nearby table and took a pull.

I picked up the sticks and clutched them like they were his neck.

“Because you like gloating and are petty?” I offered helpfully.

He lolled his head on the headrest, considering this.

“Hmm. Sounds about right.”

I looked down at my phone. Somehow, I’d been there for three hours.

Three. Entire. Hours.

It was crazy, how fast time flew by when you were pining for an emotionally unavailable dick. The good news was, whatever this thing was, it certainly didn't fail miserably if we spent so much time together.

Or maybe we were both masochists. Either, or.

As if reading my mind, Alex said, "You should probably head home. I'll give you a ride."

"You just drank beer," I pointed at the beer he was holding, for a reason beyond my grasp. What I really wanted to say and couldn't was that I'd like to stay a little longer. Because Friday nights were the time to make delicious, epic mistakes, and I didn't want him to make any of them without me.

"One pull," Alex held a finger up. The middle one, naturally.

"Your point?"

"I drink more for breakfast."

"That can't be true," I scrunched my nose.

"It can, and it is. On weekends, anyway. Weekdays, I try to stay sober."

He wasn't kidding, either. Great. My parents always wanted me to have an underage borderline-alcoholic boyfriend.

We got into his car. The drive back home was easy, nice; we laughed and talked about fun, light things. Like new bands to watch out for and cool vegan recipes and what was the best way to kill yourself if and when you were over this whole living life thing.

Yeah. Okay. Let's dwell on that last one for a second.

Alex said he wanted to die of hydrogen sulfide poisoning, which was apparently all the rage in the suicide scene in Japan.

He started explaining to me the mechanics of such a death, and I'm not going to lie—I was equal parts freaked out and impressed. The detail in which he spoke about what the human body goes through fascinated and grossed me out.

Two things were immediately obvious to me during the car ride:

1. This guy was smart and probably devilishly good at chem and physics and math (which turned out to be more than true).

2. He was batshit crazy and if I had one sensible bone in my body, I'd run for the hills and never see him again (which arguably wasn't true, although he did end up breaking my heart into a trillion pieces).

But as ya'll know by now, toxic men are like cookies. They all taste the same, yet somehow you can't stay away.

We got to my house. I unclipped my seatbelt. It was nighttime. My dog, Tuko, was barking up a storm. I was thinking of what lie I was going to feed my parents about where I was, because somehow I didn't think 'some seventeen year old alcoholic's basement' was going to fly.

Alex still hadn't kissed me. He said he wouldn't and dammit, he wasn't lying.

Out of all the assholes in the universe, I had to go for the one who actually stayed true to his word. Didn't he know principals were so nineties?

"Okay," I sighed.

"Okay," he answered.

"I would say thanks for today, but all you did was drag me to a store, then crush my self-esteem by telling me I could never be a drummer."

Alex poked at his lower lip. "I'm not taking it back. You can never be a drummer. I would honestly never put you in a room with a musical instrument ever again. But if it makes you feel any better, your lack of talent is impressive in itself. So, you know, it's not that I wasn't mesmerized. I was. Just not in a good way."

"Wow. Okay. Kind words."

He shrugged. "I'm a straight shooter."

"No need to aim for the heart, though."

He smiled. He was about to say something, but I didn't want him to be the one to kick me out of his car.

"So. Bye," I got out of his Volvo abruptly, making a beeline to my house.

I wanted him to roll the window down, to call out for me, to stop me.

None of those things happened, though. I walked, opened and closed the gate while feeling his eyes on my back, and wondered for the millionth time why did I have a taste for weird, unattainable guys?

That evening, I stayed the heck away from ICQ. I couldn't run the risk of Alex seeing that I had no life and was waiting for him to message me. You have to understand, this was pre-smart phones. We had Blackberries, but we didn't have any social media on our phones (if you don't count Twitter, which, you really shouldn't, since Twitter was all about politics back then).

If you were online on Friday night, that meant you were home on Friday night, and *that* meant you were friendless and probably crying into your cereal bowl while watching Clueless reruns.

I made myself vegan cocoa, dove under the blankets, and read a Danielle Steel book. ("The Promise", if you must know. Buy it here: <https://amzn.to/3ccjbTZ>).

It was, as with all of Danielle Steel's work, a fantastic book and great escapism.

I was particularly exhilarated by the fact that our main character, Nancy, never gave up on Peter's dick, no matter how hard (insert sexual innuendo here) things had gotten. I ended up reading until the wee hours of the night, bawling into my cocoa mug, and wondering how I could get my hands on all of Steel's books without going bankrupt.

When I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore, I turned off my lamp and patted myself on the back. I may not have been a great musician, but I sure knew how not to come off as desperate.

I didn't check my phone or ICQ messages even once that night after Alex dropped me off.

In the morning, however, I ran to my computer and logged into ICQ first thing, before I even brushed my teeth. I knew that if Alex was going to contact me, it was going to be there.

Sending a text message via phone was way too normal for him.

My heart pounded so hard and fast, it deafened the sounds coming from the breakfast table in the family room. My brother was whining about my finishing the orange juice. My mother was yelling at no one in particular that she was nobody's maid. The dogs were barking. Dad asked where the remote was, but he was probably sitting on it again.

And me? I sent a silent prayer to the universe as my computer coughed its way into life.

*Please, let there be a message waiting.*

*Please.*

*Please.*

*Please.*

Sure enough, Alex's name was in bold when I logged into the messaging software.

The timestamp from the message showed that he sent it to me not twenty minutes after he dropped me off. He must've gone straight to the computer as soon as he'd gotten home.

**Alex: Let's do this again, honeypie.**

Daaaamn. Someone cried into his cereal watching Clueless yesterday. Whatever happened to breaking skulls and performing in seedy underground clubs?

**Okay, I wrote back. But you know the rules. No kissing.**

His message back to me was immediate.

**Alex: No kissing. Girls are fucking gross.**

## **Chapter Four.**

Things were not going great for Alex and me.

And by 'not going great' I mean they were going kind of horribly fantastic, without the good parts.

Let me explain myself.

Since the day Alex had taught me how to drum (or rather, tried), he and I had met two more times, in secret. Clandestine meetings, arranged via ICQ, without telling our friends about it.

Both times were initiated by him, and during both, he was kind of rude to me, but also weirdly sweet. Meaning, he hadn't done anything mean or degrading, but he was eons away from the realms of romantic. Mostly, he treated me like the

annoying, younger sister he never had and couldn't stand but would take a bullet for.

Makes sense? Yeah, I was mighty confused, too.

But the fact that he treated me weirdly, or that we still had awkward conversations, didn't bother me in the least.

Let me tell you what did—he. Did. Not. Kiss. Me.

He didn't even touch me.

He didn't even *try* to touch me.

Not even the accidental stuff guys do. A brush of fingers over your waist.

Touching the small of your back.

I didn't know what to do.

On one hand, I thought we were sharing some intense sexual chemistry every time we were in the same room. The air crackled with tension, and every minute that passed without him kissing me, I was becoming more and more aware of the fact I was going to spend the rest of the night screaming into my pillow.

On the other, I was beginning to suspect maybe I got it all wrong. Maybe he friend-zoned me on purpose. Maybe he wasn't attracted to me. Or maybe the fact that I asked him explicitly not to kiss me twice (nice going, dum dum), had put him off and now he thought *he* was being friend-zoned.

Or maybe he wasted my time just so I wouldn't go out with Y.

Or, I don't know, maybe he was gay.

I simply didn't know.

Blueballed to the extreme, I was forced to examine my seduction skills, which, unfortunately, were nonexistent.

The worst part was that I didn't even have anyone to talk to about all this. Whining to Y was out of the question—he still didn't know that Alex and I were even talking to each other, let alone meeting up. Plus, I doubted he'd muster enough sympathy to spit in my face once he found out I was seeing his arch nemesis.

Pauly, my best friend, would never understand my attraction to someone who excelled at making people cry and making loud music about animal rights and

anarchism. And even though I had a lot of female friends, none of them was really keen on the punk rock world I was drawn to.

After our third hang-out, things started to change between me and Alex.

He and I found ourselves talking on ICQ almost every day. It had come to a point where I thought, okay, time to talk to Y about this. Alex and I are obviously (at the very least) friends. What if Alex beat me to it and told him? The guy had the emotional capacity of a stapler. He was going to tramp all over Y's heart and make him feel extra hurt just for shits and giggles.

I decided I was going to tell Y in the upcoming week, whenever a good opportunity presented itself.

That Wednesday, Alex asked if I wanted to come to a vegan picnic with a bunch of his friends on Saturday. The plan was, you know, to demonstrate a little, get into a few fist fights with the cops, try to free caged animals, then chill and play soccer while eating tofu which had been spiced as if it was something else (pizza tofu. Chicken tofu. Shoestring tofu. You name it, I chewed on it dispassionately).

I knew Y was going to be there, and I couldn't just show up there out of the blue. I told Alex I was going to think about it, and explained that I still hadn't told Y he and I were friends.

The conversation went like this:

**Alex: WTF is the problem? It's not like you guys are dating.**

**Me: Yeah. No. I know. But still, he is a good friend.**

**Alex: A good friend who wants to fuck you.**

**Me: A good friend nonetheless.**

**Alex: I can tell him. It's NBD.**

**Me: DO NOT TELL HIM.**

**Alex: You don't trust me?**

**Me: Not even a little bit.**

**Me: Not even with cotton candy.**

**Me: I'll tell him.**

**Alex: Just as long as you don't deny yourself shit because of him. This picnic is important. We all need to stick together.**

He was talking about vegans, and people who were fighting for the Cause (the cause was anarcho-communism. Honestly, I was so not down with the idea, and totally fell asleep ten pages into *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx when Alex had loaned me the book. I was still hoping he'd grow out of the idea of anarchism. Kind of like popping bubble wrap and blaming your baby brother whenever the ketchup bottle makes a fart noise. Like, Anti Flag and all those bands were great, but, as a joke, right?).

**Me: Yeah. I know.**

**Alex: Tell him tomorrow.**

I logged off. Thursday came and went. I hung out with Y during recess, and then after school, too. We went to Hobby Lobby to buy some painting supplies. I couldn't find a good opportunity to say, *oh, by the way, I'm probably going to lose my virginity to your bitter rival at some point, and by the way, we're all going to hang out on Saturday together.*

I was a coward, and I knew it. What's more, I was a confused coward. I knew Y was going to go to this vegan picnic. Why wasn't he inviting me? He was telling me about his friends, about his band, about his life, day in and day out. Why didn't he want to include me in his plans? Bring me into a community I obviously wanted to be a part of?

On Thursday night, I logged onto ICQ and found a message from Alex.

**Alex: Did you tell him?**

**Me: No.**

**Alex: ?**

**Me: IDK. Maybe we should just...not? I mean, I don't even like the outdoors so much. I think I'll skip on the picnic.**

**Alex: You have to be fucking kidding me.**

**Me: ...**

**Alex: You're a wuss.**

*Well, you still haven't kissed me, asshole, so I think that makes both of us.*

Of course, I didn't have the ovaries to tell him this.

And I couldn't tell him what I was really thinking—that a part of me was still biding my time until I managed to untangle what Alex and I really were. Friends? Soon-to-be a couple? Neither?

**Alex: Tell him.**

**Me: No. And don't you dare tell him yourself.**

Alex was going to stomp all over Y's heart and make a show of it. He might've been mildly nice to me, but he was ruthless with everyone else, and I knew it.

Y wasn't exaggerating.

Alex did not write back to me.

He logged off without saying goodbye.

\*\*\*

The next day, I was in a shitty mood.

Did I lose Alex because I couldn't find it in me to tell Y I was hanging out with him? I didn't owe Y anything. But, as with many girls my age, the idea of letting someone down was frightening, if not downright traumatic.

I wanted to do well by everyone, and to be liked by all.

Aside from sitting too close to me, and looking at me like he wanted to kiss me sometimes, Y had been a really good friend. Emotionally supportive and encouraging.

Thursday afternoon, I got out of school and headed straight to the gym, drinking the vegan protein shake my mother had bought me, that tasted like a stale fart. I froze in my spot the minute I got out of the gates of my high school.

Volvo SUV.

Shiny and suburban and filled with a gorgeous Viking who sat behind the steering wheel, drumming on it with one hand, his signature I-have-no-time-for-this-BS move.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

I took measured steps toward the SUV, straightening my spine, mentally taking inventory of what I looked like, raising my arm to sniff my armpit.

I changed to my gym clothes, so I had on a white tank top and pink shorts. I also had a cute side-braid and a glittery eyeshadow. Not exactly the epitome of punk rock. I began to sweat. It felt like he was going to catch me cheating on him, and we weren't even together.

I looked cute and fun.

The opposite of everything he stood for.

He was going to notice that I was a faker. Just a normal girl, with normal clothes, and aspirations to one day have Britney Spears' abs.

Alex noticed me and rolled the passenger window down. His face was a mask of icy indifference. There was something seriously wrong with me, because I found his staggering stoicism at the sight of me thrilling.

He looked right past me. Through me. Like I didn't even exist.

*Maybe I'm a ghost?*

I stopped in front of his car.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, folding my arms over my chest.

He looked at me like he just realized I was alive, and wasn't thrilled about it.

"What are you doing at my school?" I repeated.

"Picking up Y for rehearsal. What the fuck else would I be doing here?" He stared at me like we'd never hung out. Like he didn't even know me. Like I was some kind of stalker.

I opened my mouth to say something when Y breezed past me, sliding into the passenger seat. He was so excited to get picked up by Alex, he hadn't even noticed me.

“Ready to roll?” Y turned to Alex, raising his hand for a fist-bump. Alex ignored his fist, his eyes on me, his indifference morphing into a smug, evil smile.

Then it dawned on me. He was giving me an in to say something. To come clean. To explain to Y that he and I were hanging out.

This was our chance to tell him.

*My chance to tell him.*

...but I couldn't do it.

“Yo, L. You remember Alex, right?” Y finally noticed me, swinging his gaze from the dashboard to me with an excited grin. He half-adores, half-hates Alex.

“Vaguely,” I drawled, narrowing my eyes.

Alex snorted out loud, shaking his head. My heart pounded in my chest.

There was a beat of loaded silence. Alex was giving me a few more seconds to say something. Y looked between us, wondering why the hell they weren't moving.

“Ah, are we going, or what?” Y frowned at Alex.

Alex spat out the window in response. “You bringing your little friend to the picnic on Saturday?” He was still glaring at me, in a look that was low-key threatening.

*Aaaand I was back to being Y's little friend.*

Y pinked all over, all the way down to his neck. At least he had the good sense to be embarrassed about not inviting me.

“I...I don't even know if I'll go, so it's gonna be weird. Inviting L and then taking it back.”

That was total bullshit.

He was so going.

Why wasn't he inviting me?

*Because he wants you to himself,* I could practically hear Alex's voice answer in my head.

I stifled a groan.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I have plans,” I took a sip of my vegan protein shake, swallowing without tasting it. “See you guys around. Enjoy your rehearsal. It was nice to see you again, Alec.”

I had the pleasure of seeing Alex’s smug smile collapsing as I got his name wrong, before I turned on my heel and went to the gym.

*Check. Mate.*

\*\*\*

That evening, I was the first one to send Alex a message.

**Me: Are you insane? Why did you come to my school today?**

**Me: Answer me!**

**Me: Did you tell him?**

He answered forty minutes later, even though he was online the whole time, probably watching twin porn.

**Alex: You told me not to tell him.**

**Me: Good. This is stupid. I can’t hurt him like this.**

**Alex: He doesn’t want to invite you because he knows you’ll meet someone you’d actually like there, and that’d kill his already nonexistent chances.**

**Me: You’re the meanest person I’ve ever met.**

**Alex: You haven’t even seen half of it.**

**Alex: Tell him.**

**Me: No.**

**Alex: Very well, honeypie. I will :D**

\*\*\*

Friday rolled around.

We only had half days on Fridays, which was good, because my mind was anywhere but on schoolwork.

Y waited for me after chem, and tried to catch up with me. He told me excitedly that he and his band were invited to warm up this big band from Germany in a few months. That it was a huge deal, that would garner a ton of exposure.

I made obligatory cooing sounds, and even pretended to fangirl a little, but I wasn't invested in his story.

What if Alex was right? What if Y didn't necessarily want the best for me? What if he wanted the best for himself? And why couldn't I just tell him I was seeing Alex? We weren't together. This wasn't cheating. This wasn't even breaking his trust.

"Everything okay?" Y asked when we were almost by my next class. He stopped dead in his tracks, slapping his own face and shaking his head.

"Is this about that picnic Alex mentioned? I promise you, L, I was going to tell you. I just couldn't decide if I wanted to go. But I'm definitely going. Should I pick you up at like, 2-ish?"

I smiled tightly. "No, Y, I'm good."

Two hours later, and I was a free woman for the rest of the day and the entire weekend.

I entwined my arm around Paulina's, my best friends from first grade, and skipped toward freedom.

Paulina (Pauly) Nicebottom was talking my ear off about her very normal volleyball player boyfriend, who was going to take her on a very normal date later on tonight, when we strolled leisurely toward the front gates of my high school. We were gushing about Ethan, and rightly so, because he was going to take her to Greece during summer break, along with his family, when a very tall, very blond, *very* threatening figure caught my eye as it made its way to me.

*Alex.*

He was slicing through the crowd, cutting through the mass of students pouring out of the gate, his eyes laser-focused on me. Some turned around to do a double take. Everyone knew everyone in my school, and he was definitely an outsider.

Not only was Alex walking onto my school premises, but he was also heading toward ME.

Paulina's eyes widened and I felt her grip tightening on me.

“L,” she choked, “why is this huge-ass male galloping in your direction like he wants to make meatballs out of you?”

“Uh...” the rest of my answer died in my throat.

Because what the fuck?

I'm going to ask again, for people in the back—WHAT. THE. FUCK?

What was he doing?

Alex didn't stop until he reached me.

When he did, he extended his arm to tug the tip of my ponytail gently, angling my face up so our gazes met. My heart slammed against my ribcage so fast I was pretty sure I was going to throw it up, which was so not a good look.

All I could think of was: *oh my god. I didn't even tell Pauly about him.*

“Cat got your tongue?” He lifted one eyebrow, all nonchalant.

I said nothing. Everyone was looking. Everyone. This was not what I was expecting. Honestly, this wasn't even something I thought could happen in real life.

“Alex?” I heard a voice behind me.

Y.

Y was here.

*Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no.*

Alex didn't even spare him a look. His eyes were fixed on me. They were brown and bottomless and very, very angry. And suddenly, I remembered that despite our easy conversation, and the fact he hadn't kissed me yet, Alex wasn't a kitten. He was a tiger. And I'd be wise to stay on guard around him.

“She’s coming to the picnic, Y,” Alex announced flatly, his voice ice-cold, still staring me down, not giving half a shit about the audience that gathered around him. “And by the way, I have her number. And we’re dating. So,” he let go of my ponytail, and I let out the breath I’d been holding. Alex turned to smirk at Y. “Keep your fucking distance, or I will make sure I rearrange your face and kick you out of the band. You know I have the pull for it.”

Alex threw me another look. A fleeting, bored one this time.

“Pick you up at two thirty, honeypie.”

\*\*\*

**Me: You’re insane.**

**Me: You’re fucking insane.**

**Me: Were you raised by wolves?**

**Me: WE’RE DATING NOW? You didn’t even KISS me.**

**Me: Who told you it’s okay to treat women like that? WHO?**

**Me: My best friend Pauly didn’t even know you were alive. This makes me look like such a bad friend. I don’t even know how I’m going to explain this to her.**

**Me: Is Y mad? He won’t answer my texts. This is such a shit show.**

Alex was online, but my messages were left unanswered.

## **Chapter Five.**

On Saturday, Alex picked me up at two thirty sharp.

We skipped the whole rioting for veganism/anarchism part that came beforehand—thank Jesus and his entire holy crew—and cut straight to the picnic part.

Not that vegan food in the early 2000's was significantly better than getting arrested by the cops, but at least it had some degree of dignity to it, you know?

I was still seething, and by seething I mean disturbingly charmed, by Friday's display of possessiveness, in which Alex went all caveman on my ass and basically informed Y in front of my entire school that we were dating, since I lacked the ovaries to do so myself.

No one had ever done anything so proactive to try and win my heart (read: panties).

In fact, save for the occasional typo-ridden love letters and a few uninspiring flowers/chocolate deliveries, no one had ever done *anything* romantic for me.

So my standards were pretty low to begin with.

But you wouldn't suspect Alex was trying to woo me now. Not while he was sitting behind the wheel, looking like a solemn, sulky Nordic prince, his pink, narrow mouth curled in dissatisfaction, his eyes hard on the road. He wore a black holed shirt, ripped black jeans and pristine white chucks.

God, he was dreamy.

In a this-man-could-kill-me sort of way. I briefly pondered if I was turning into one of these women who were pining for sociopaths. You know, like the ones who wrote to the Richard Ramirez of the world to jail and married mass murderers who were sentenced to life in prison.

You always kind of wondered who these people were. I didn't want to cross the point of no return. To go full Afron Elaine Burton (Google that when you have a minute. Fascinating stuff).

"Did you talk to Y?" I demanded when I secured the seatbelt next to him. I was still worried sick for our mutual friend.

Alex hitched a shoulder up. "Don't talk to him much during rehearsal. Much less voluntarily out of it."

"What if he's mad?" I gnawed on my lower lip nervously.

"He doesn't have any reason to be mad. You don't want him and he knows it. He told Tom and Daniel he knows you're not game. Said every time he goes in for a kiss, you pull away. Are you supposed to sit around and wait until this asshole

grows sex appeal? Because he sure as shit doesn't have any now. He is not going to wake up one day and become fuckable, honeypie. Not to you, at least. Time to move on."

I stopped gnawing on my lip and began drumming on my knee. Everything was backward. Dread settling in the pit of my stomach. I had a feeling things were about to go horribly wrong and I didn't even know why.

Alex and I were dating, yet we'd never even kissed.

How'd that happen? I was the only loser who was capable of dating a guy without having the perks of getting some.

"Why did you never kiss me?" I blurted out. Heat spread across my cheeks, but I still chanced a look at him.

He smiled one of his devastating, lazy smiles. A smile that told me he'd been waiting for this question. Patiently so.

"Simple," he clucked his tongue, "you told me not to."

"Surely, you knew I was just being nervous."

"I'm a literal kind of guy."

"You're a pain in the ass," I countered.

"That, too."

Silence.

He was going to make it hard for me. No surprises here.

"Well, anyway, I changed my mind," I announced weakly, tilting my head up high. He was winning, and I knew it. It was a mind game. A harmless one, sure, but a mind game nonetheless.

I made a mental note not to let him win all of our little games. Because I suspected that with Alex, there were going to be many.

"Duly noted," Alex offered a brief nod. "Hey," he said when we rounded the park, which kissed the woods from the back and the sea from the front, and was actually really beautiful, "Question for you."

I perked up. Alex was looking for a parking space. This was really happening. I was coming as Alex's date. And Y was going to be there. He still hadn't answered any of my calls or text messages.

"What do you wanna do? Like, when you grow up?" Alex asked.

*Marry you*, I thought.

*Have your babies*, my mind elaborated. *Maybe just the one, though. I don't know if I want more than one child.*

This, of course, was an honest, albeit not advisable answer.

I gave it some thought. I wanted to do a bunch of things, ranging from becoming a vet, a doctor-without-borders, and an investigative journalist.

But deep down—and I mean really, incredibly deep—I knew I was going to be a writer.

Not wished, not thought, not suspected, *knew*.

I didn't even write. Not on a regular basis, anyway. Sometimes—not often—I scribbled in the fancy diary Mom had gotten for me. But I never committed to it. I preferred experiencing life, rather than writing about it.

And yet, the realization that I was going to do this for a living was something so absolute, so acute, it was in my bloodstream. In my DNA. I wanted to make people feel how books made me feel. Like the world stopped at a strange, foreign bus station, and it was time to take an adventure. Unearth a new continent, a brand new kingdom that was uniquely mine.

"I think I'm going to become an author," I said. "You?"

"Dentist," Alex surprised me by saying.

It was pragmatic and—please excuse me, all dentists—a little uninspiring for a guy like Alex. I'd imagined him doing anything from being a contributing photographer for the National Geographic, to a mountain climber, or maybe a top editor for the culture section of The Guardian. Something cutting edge and out of the ordinary. Not...look into people's mouths all day and get paid really well for it.

"Really?" I tilted my head sideways. He nodded, his blond Mohawk bun bobbing along with him.

“That’s what my parents want me to do. Got the grades for it, too. It’s a reliable job. People always have cavities, right? Thanks to fucking junk food. Good hours. Nice pay.”

“It’s...” I trailed off, frowning, “not very punk rock.”

“Yeah, well, this shit is not forever,” he chuckled, flashing me his wolfish, white teeth. I knew what he meant. This careful rebellion. The free pass we gave ourselves to color out of the lines. The music. “You’re smart enough to know that. Plus, liberal art degrees translate to bullshit white privilege jobs with shit pay. It’s okay to work to survive.”

“You sound like a grownup,” I shuddered.

He smiled, “It’s okay to know you’re average, and to shoot for an average lifestyle. Not everyone grows up to be a rock star.”

He was sober, intelligent, and more grounded than most people I knew who were older than us. Alex becoming a dentist was also great news, because we were going to get married, and one of us had to make money, and presumably, aspiring to be a writer, that someone sure as hell wasn’t going to be me.

“I got it all planned out,” Alex explained. “My cousin lives in Stockholm. After I graduate, I’ll move to Sweden and room with him while attending uni. After I graduate, I’m going to stay there. This place sucks.”

“You’re going to live in *Sweden*?” I echoed, stunned. This was so not in our wedding plans. Didn’t he know that?

“Yup.”

“W—why?”

“It’s the western country that’s closest in policy and principals to socialism. I told you, L. I’m not down with this,” he waved his hand around, “Capitalistic bullshit. I’m not down with how things are. I hate materialistic shit.”

*You drive a fucking Volvo*, I was tempted to yell in his face, but didn’t.

I was getting pretty sick and tired of all the political mumbo-jumbo. Besides, I had more pressing issues than the alleged decay of post-modern society in the western world. Like the fact that Alex was going to be surrounded by hot, Swedish women nonstop in about two years.

Seriously, who actually *acted* on their principals? Of all the guys in the world, I had to go for the one who held a string of coherent morals I knew very little about and was willing to go far from them. Most guys his age prided themselves in using their armpit to make fart sounds. Just fantastic.

“Right on,” I said, because breaking down in a panic attack was a little premature in our relationship. “Sweden sounds like a great place to live.”

Alex parked. I didn’t even look to see if everyone was already there. I was busy taking deep breaths and telling myself Alex had two years to change his mind. Everything blurred, and I was afraid I was about to cry, but no, maybe it was just my brain shutting down and refusing to accept that he was going to move.

TO ANOTHER MOTHERFUCKING COUNTRY.

“Anyway,” Alex killed the engine, sitting back in seat. “Just to make sure we’re all aligned here—I’m moving to Sweden. No matter what happens. So whatever this is,” he flicked his finger between us, “it’s not a forever thing. We on the same page?”

So many things went through my head in that moment.

I was torn between being devastated, to being confused, to simply being pissed off. As I digested this dumpster-fire of emotions, I realized that Alex was, even by his own admission, just a teenager. He was going to change his mind a thousand times. Last month I was just a vegetarian, not a vegan, and the month before it, I had a McDonald’s hamburger with double patties and extra chicken nuggets. Four months ago, I decided I was going to be an Olympic swimmer, despite barely being able to finish a full lap. We were still kids.

This was not set in stone.

And he was not even a quarter done falling in love with me.

Encouraged, I gave him a quick shrug.

“Dude, you haven’t even kissed me yet. You think I’m expecting an engagement ring or something?”

The answer to that question was *yes*. I was absolutely expecting an engagement ring. Preferably with a square or oval gemstone. I was never really a diamond kind of girl.

Alex looked genuinely relieved, dragging his large palm over his hair. His locks were fine, and so straight. I wanted to touch them, too.

“In that case,” he unbuckled his seatbelt, “We’re all set, honeypie.”

He leaned over and gave me the most perfect kiss I have ever been given.

It was demanding and urgent, yet soft and exploring. Not too aggressive, but a kiss that still let me know that he’d been thinking about it just as much as I had, if not more.

I groaned into his mouth and deepened the kiss, lacing my arms around his neck. Our tongues tangled together. The heat seeping through his body made my bones shiver. The thrill rolling down my spine told me I was in big, big trouble.

I’d kissed boys before, but I always enjoyed the idea of what we were doing, rather than what we were *actually* doing.

My mind had always been focused on “OMG I AM KISSING A BOY” and not on “WHOA, THIS IS HOT AF”.

For the first time, I enjoyed a kiss for what it was. That’s when the idea of casual sex finally clicked for me. Up until now, sex, and kissing, and everything in-between, were just ways and methods to get the boy in my juvenile mind.

Now? Now I wanted all those things, even if I didn’t get to keep the boy.

When we pulled away, my lips were tender and swollen, and his looked like I’d tried to chew them off of his face for hours.

“We should probably go,” I smiled gently.

Alex scowled. “I don’t even like soccer, and I fucking hate vegan food.”

“Well,” I shrugged, “being you sucks.”

He gave me an appreciative look. “I think it’s about to suck a little less.”

\*\*\*

Everybody and their mother was already there and waiting when we arrived. We must’ve made out in his car for at least half an hour.

Someone set up a stereo with Dead Kennedys blowing through the speakers on a chopped tree trunk, making the ground rattle beneath our feet. The guys were gathered together, talking animatedly, probably about how much democracy sucked and how anarchism was super fun, while the girls were perched under a huge oak tree, on picnic blankets and mats, surrounded by food and drinks, gossiping. A quarter of the people looked like they were already halfway intoxicated, in various stages of being drunk, varying from tipsy to having an elaborate, heated argument about Wittgenstein with a tree.

Because of the proximity to the woods and because the park was basically on a cliff overlooking the sea, I made a mental note not to piss anyone off. It seemed like the perfect place to get murdered.

When I saw the setting, I inwardly winced. First of all, this whole girls-doing-their-thing and guys-doing-their-thing started looking a little cult-ish to me. Second, that meant I had to unglue myself from Alex and actually make an effort, when all I really wanted was to grind against him until we sparked a fire.

Was it too much to ask?

“I’m going to say hi to the guys,” Alex gave my hair a playful tug and turned around, walking in the other direction, away from me. My resentment to him peaked. First, he was leaving me for Sweden in two years. Now, he basically left me to introduce myself to the girls.

I spotted Jadie, Tom’s girlfriend, and was immediately washed with a sense of relief. She perked up when she saw me, and waved for me to come to her cluster of colorful-haired girls. I hurried toward her, zig-zagging between couples making out on the grass and a swarm of guys in Hail Seitan shirts arguing about the best way to convert the entire world into veganism (spoiler: all of their ideas sucked).

My eager smile collapsed when I recognized the girl who flirted with Alex the first time I met him, at the demonstration. She was shooting daggers at me, laying on a picnic mat in a short kilt, white cropped shirt and no bra.

Did she see that I came with him? Probably.

“L. So nice to see you. I’m happy you could make it. Have a seat,” Jadie patted the empty spot next to her. She was still the most gorgeous human I’d seen, and she didn’t make a big deal about it, which I liked. I handed her a six pack Alex had

brought and a fruit salad I'd made myself. She arranged everything on one mat overflowing with food and handed me one of the beers.

Jadie began introducing me to all the other girls. The vast majority were nice, but a handful gave me the stink eye, and I got it. I was a new addition to an existing social unit. I had to earn my place.

I snuck a glance at Alex. Y was standing in the same knot of people as he was, looking totally alive and well. Okay. This was good. This was very good. They were ignoring each other, which was far better than killing each other.

“So,” the girl who'd been flirting with Alex during the demonstration last month swung her colorful hair to one side, picking at her split ends with chipped polished fingernails, “Are you and Alex, like, fucking or whatever now?”

I choked on my beer. Fucking! We barely even kissed, and he was going to be the first person on planet earth to touch my boobs. We were still very far from the realms of fucking.

“Or whatever,” I hitched a shoulder up coolly. “We're just hanging out.”

The girl snorted. “Just know it's not serious, okay? We've all been there,” she rolled her eyes.

“Give her a break,” Jadie sighed. “It's not the same. *So* not the same, Ainsley.”

“How's it not the same?” Ainsley stuck her chin out, taking a pull of her beer.

“Well,” a girl named Sarah laughed, “for one thing, you and Alex have been randomly hooking up on and off after gigs for years, and they look like they're actually dating.”

Ainsley's venomous smile vanished.

“Alex and I text,” she said defensively.

Text? Did she just say that in present tense?

“Texted,” Jadie pointed out. I had a feeling she was close to Ainsley, but wasn't afraid to stand up to her. “You texted. You haven't hooked up in, like, almost a month.”

That still put Alex on the timeline of hooking up with Ainsley after he sent me the first message, but I was going to let it slip, since the last hookup occurred before we actually went on our first date (which wasn't actually a date).

"Still. We talked, a lot," she said, her shoulders sagging.

"You asking him where he is or if he is going to come somewhere is not texting," another girl pointed out, snorting out a laugh.

So. This was awkward. I was low-key embarrassed for Ainsley and high-key devastated that Alex was not a virgin. I mean, I knew he was not a virgin, but hearing first-hand confirmation of that was just...I don't know, painful like being stabbed by a thousand swordsmen at the same time.

To make matters worse, I was pretty sure my lips were the size of my entire face, swollen from kissing Ainsley's unrequited love silly just a few minutes before.

I felt no glee nor was I satisfied from knowing Ainsley was nursing a broken heart. I knew heartbreak was like death. Inevitable.

Everybody got theirs. Unfailingly.

"Just forget about what she said," Jadie took my hand, giving it a friendly squeeze.

"Why? It's true. Alex has never had a girlfriend, and I doubt goodie two shoes over here is going to change things for him," Ainsley pressed, licking her lower lip. Her tongue was pierced. I couldn't not-imagine that tongue swirling around Alex's penis.

Jadie snapped her gaze to Ainsley, her eyes widening.

"Will you shut up?"

"Yeah, dude. Alex is going to crucify you for messing with his little Brady Bunch girlfriend," another girl quipped.

I was his girlfriend now? And I was a part of the Brady Bunch? I wasn't even blonde. Nothing made sense anymore.

Twenty minutes later, the guys joined us. Tom almost plopped on top of me and gathered Jadie into his arms, peppering her face with noisy, sloppy kisses. Alex sat next to me, but was still talking to one of his friends, a skinhead I was pretty sure enjoyed meat with a side of racist views. Y sat pretty close to me, too.

I took the opportunity to lean toward Y.

“Hi!” I said, keeping things light and cheerful. “I tried to call you.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sure. I’ve been busy. What’s up? It’s good to see you,” Y smiled back.

“I brought you that book we were talking about,” I flipped my canvas messenger back open, taking out “Our Band Could Be Your Life” by Michael Azerrad. Y read the back sleeve, nodding.

“Damn. Thanks.”

“Sure.”

“Know that book about the mortician I was telling you about? Text me and I’ll bring it for you Monday.”

“Oh. Yeah. Totally. Can’t wait to read it,” I mumbled.

There was nothing quite like reading about death when you were in a constant state of existential anxiety as I had been since about age six.

Since Alex was still busy talking to someone else, and Jadie’s face was currently sucked whole into Tom’s mouth, and Ainsley was busy drooling in Alex’s lap, I dove into a conversation with Y. Things seemed normal between us. A little stiff, sure, but nowhere near the hostility I was expecting.

I felt like I could breathe again.

Y said something that made me laugh, and that’s when I felt it. Alex’s arm. It swung over my shoulder possessively, draping over it, its weight delicious and the intentions it brought with it clear.

I was his now.

“What’s up, Y?” Alex popped a (vegan) gum.

“Good,” Y said, sounding...well, pretty happy. “You?”

“Great,” Alex replied. “Glad you put your big girl panties before coming here today. Nobody likes a sore loser.”

“Nobody,” Y nodded, agreeing. “Words to live by. Just remember that.”

“For when?” Alex smirked, having fun.

“For when she realizes you are a fucking idiot and breaks up with you.”

Alex laughed, enjoying himself thoroughly. “You need help, kiddo. And a good lay. Not in that order.”

Ainsley shrugged, joining the conversation. “Y is right. You’ve never had a girlfriend before, and you’re like, what? Seventeen? You’re bound to fuck it up.”

Alex whipped his head around, his eyes dead and cold as he glowered at Ainsley.

“I know you’re an expert when it comes to fucking, sweetheart, but let’s agree to disagree.”

“Harsh much?” Ainsley screwed her nose in distaste.

“Much,” Alex spat out. “And you’ll be smart to remember that.”

I knew this wasn’t Alex fighting for our true, undying love. It was him proving a point. Still, I liked that he took no bullshit from anyone when it came to our relationship, even if it had nothing to do with...well, *our relationship*.

The next portion of the picnic was relatively pain-free. We ate. We talked about articles I did not read by people I did not know, most of them 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophers and past dictators. Then the conversation turned to music and I really tuned out. Veganism and harboring a soft spot for tyrants and tsars were hard to swallow (literally), but bad music was something I couldn’t tolerate. I still secretly listened to Blink 182, Green Day, The Smiths and The Strokes when no one was around.

After the picnic, the guys went to play soccer, and the girls talked about online stores they liked.

Ah, shopping, the passion of every anarcho-communist.

Some people retired into the woods, presumably to have sex or enjoy the odd satanic ritual. Now that I was paying more attention to things that weren’t Alex, I realized there was a mish-mash of a bunch of people. Yes, there were the “good” kids. The straight-edge bunch. The vegans. The kind that rebelled within the rules and expectations their parents had set for them. But there were also a bunch of skinheads I was totally not down with, and a bunch of people in leather who chain-smoked and looked like they were on something north of alcohol and weed.

I made a few, new friends (Ainsley wasn’t one of them, I know, try to look shocked), and before I knew it, dusk descended on the park. The sky was awash with baby blues and soft pinks, streaked with orange and gold, the sound of the

waves crashing against the shore lulling me into blissful tiredness. I longed to get back into the suburban Volvo, make out with Alex and see what else he could do with his tongue.

And to pee.

I also very much longed to pee.

Like, very very much.

Alex and the rest of the guys finished their soccer game. Tom got back to making out with Jadie. Alex wasn't super into public affection, which I respected. I loved that we kept people guessing. That we showed restraint.

When he sat next to me, I squeezed his hand and whispered in his ear, "If I don't pee right now, my bladder is going to explode and you'll have to take me to the hospital."

Alex frowned. "I hate hospitals, and besides, your bladder is connected to another organ of yours I have an interest in. Come with me."

We stood up and marched toward the woods, followed by catcalls from everyone else, claps and whistles conspiring about we were going to do there.

Alex found me a good, discreet spot behind the bushes.

"Here's good. I'll spot you, hurry."

He craned his neck, looking serious and oddly protective, as he shielded me with his body.

I squatted down, closing my eyes and mouthing a silent prayer to God.

*Dear God,*

*It's L. I know we haven't spoken in a hot minute. This is just me asking you to please grace me with a girly pee. Nothing too loud. And if you can please make sure I don't pee on my shoes or panties or skirt, that would be swell, too.*

*I promise to fast on Yom Kippur.*

*Okay, kidding. I won't.*

*I mean, I will, but I'll drink water, okay? Because not drinking water is really dangerous for me. I'm anemic.*

*Okay, done now.*

*Bye. xo*

Maybe it was the xo that did it, but God was good to me that evening.

My pee sounded like wedding bells.

When I was done, I groaned.

“I don’t have anything to wipe with.”

Alex frowned, still looking ahead, dutifully not peeking.

“What about a leaf or something?”

“Aw. Gross. And what if it’s poisonous? I don’t want to die of...” I wasn’t going to say pussy poisoning. I was never going to utter this combination in his presence.

“...of something.”

“Yeah. Okay. Wipe with your panties and throw them away.”

“I’m wearing a skirt. I can’t go commando.”

“Your hand?”

“Alex!”

“Yeah. Okay. Use my shirt.”

“*What?!*”

“I’m dead serious. Use my shirt. It’s just a few drops, right? Who cares?”

“I do!”

“I don’t.”

That was the grossest, most romantic thing anyone had ever said to me. Which was sweet and sad in equal measures.

“That’s insane. Anyway, it’s drying up because I’m letting it hang.”

This was way too much info, but hey, if he was going to take my virginity, which was something I’d already decided was going to happen before he even sent me that very first ICQ message, he was going to have to take the bad with the good.

And...real talk? There was a whole lotta’ bad.

I peered down between my legs. If I put my panties back on, I was probably good.

I felt a warm whoosh of fabric landing on top of my head. I plucked it out. When I looked up, Alex was shirtless. His back was still to me. He had a glorious back. Not super muscular, but triangle-shaped. Smooth and long. Like he hadn't filled into his tall frame quite yet, but was getting there.

"Wipe." He ordered gruffly.

"I'm good," I laughed, standing up and rearranging my skirt. I took a greedy sniff of his shirt when he wasn't looking.

*Ahhhhh. Heaven.*

His sweat, laundry detergent and singular Alex scent engulfed me. This was better than coke. Not that I'd ever tried coke, but, c'mon, it was Alex—the best-smelling teenager on planet earth. I wanted to steal his shirt and sleep with it.

"I saw that," Alex noted deadpan, smirking smugly, but still squinting to the darkening horizon.

My eyes widened. He grinned in my periphery.

"Am I okay to turn around?" He asked.

"Sure, creeper."

"How am *I* the creeper?" He plucked his shirt from between my fingers, sliding it on the way hot guys put on a shirt. Pushing both his arms into the sleeves at the same time.

"You wanted my pee on your shirt."

"I want your everything on my everything," he informed me, dead serious.

I was pretty sure my physical state was turning into puddle.

"Ainsley's pissed," I bit down on my lower lip.

He shrugged. Darkness had washed over the woods and the cliff, and there was no industrial light or lamppost in sight.

"Ainsley's always pissed," Alex said tersely.

"I didn't know you guys were hooking up."

I wanted desperately to learn more about their relationship, even though I knew it was going to hurt like a mothertrucker.

“We aren’t anymore.”

“When’d you stop?” I swallowed.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged, “A few days before I picked you up that first time? Though, that last time, she showed up unannounced at my house to a rehearsal with Y even though she low-key hates him. Weird.”

“Yeah. Weird,” I mulled the information over, feeling a little seasick.

We were making our way back to the park. Alex did not elaborate, so I continued.

“Does she know that? That you’re no longer hooking up, I mean?”

“If she’s not a complete fucking dumbass,” he said shortly.

Silence.

“Have you hooked up with a lot of girls?” I couldn’t help myself.

Alex frowned, giving the question some genuine thought, then said, “No.”

“Are you...?” I trailed off. I couldn’t ask this. I couldn’t.

I didn’t have to.

He laughed softly, “Uhm, no.”

“Well, I am.”

“Figured,” he said.

“How could you possibly figure that?” I felt somewhat attacked by my own state of virginity, and mighty defensive.

He shrugged. “Just did. Did you have a good time?”

“Yeah.”

“Did Y give you trouble?”

I shook my head, still thinking about what Alex told me. About Y bringing Ainsley over to his house. That was such a weird thing to do. Did he know about us? Did he guess?

“Good.”

“He seems pretty certain it’s not going to last,” I commented. Because, hey, I was a bag of insecurities and iron pills, and he needed to find out sooner or later, right?

Alex didn’t seem fazed by that. “It will.”

*Yes, I thought. Until Sweden.*

*Until you move away and leave me behind.*

Then I smiled to myself as we emerged from the woods and joined the others.

That was not going to happen.

Alex was going to stay.

## **Chapter Six.**

It was official. I had a boyfriend.

Things changed after the picnic.

Yes, Alex and I still talked on ICQ every night, but we also saw each other three to four times a week, and spent time with each other every weekend.

We texted. A lot. All day, every day.

And talked on the phone into the night. Until someone else from our household would pick up the phone and ask “Aw, you guys are still talking? Hang up. I need the phone” (this is a struggle I suspect Gen Z folks will never be able to relate to, since landlines, like our tailbones, aren’t something we use anymore).

I was really, obnoxiously, deliriously happy.

A had month passed since that picnic.

A month in which Y and I cooled our relationship down pretty drastically at school. He was still nice to me, and I was still nice to him, but he no longer sought me out, and vice versa.

To be honest, I was mildly pissed at him for naturally assuming my relationship with Alex was going to detonate. Especially seeing as Alex and I were going from strength to strength.

Which reminds me, Alex really was pretty perfect as a boyfriend, human, and a punk rocker.

One time, I texted him that I was famished between classes, and he happened to skip school, so he went and got me a vegan falafel meal and brought it to my school, along with a glass bottle of Diet Coke.

Another time, my dog had a vet appointment and my mother was running late at work, so Alex volunteered to take me and my stressed-out dog to the vet, which resulted in his Volvo smelling like a very angry dog for two months (and don't get me started about the hair that got stuck to everything).

After his appointment was done, Alex bought us vegan Subway and ice-cold beers. We ate them watching the sunset, with my dog sleeping at my feet, exhausted but happy to be out of the vet.

When I had fights with my parents, he would listen to my whining for hours on end, and offer his input. He always told me the truth, never sugar-coated things, and never got tired when I went around in circles, rehashing the same things over and over.

Alex was attuned to my needs and my wants, and pretty fantastic altogether. Contrary to my initial assumption, he didn't play games. He wasn't mean (not to me, anyway). And he never gave me any reason to suspect he even breathed in another girl's direction.

All in all, he was by far my favorite pleasant surprise.

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A month after the picnic that changed everything, my parents demanded to meet the mysterious guy I'd been spending so much time with.

Actually, they would have done so much earlier if it wasn't for my elaborate, often ridiculous lies about spending half the time I spent with him with Paulina.

It helped that Alex was the son of two respectable dentists one town over, drove a Volvo, played three different musical instruments, and was generally a straight A student, even though he gave exactly two shits about school. They had the general

idea that he was a very good kid. An idea, of course, that was at risk of bursting like a soap bubble the minute they actually met him, the mammoth guy with the Mohawk.

However, I couldn't keep both worlds separate forever. I knew my mom and dad had to meet him at some point.

Because it was my teenage years, nothing about this meet up was organized and constructed. One day, I just told Alex on the phone: "Listen, my dad says if you don't come into my house next time you come over to pick me up, he'll meet you out front with a baseball bat."

"Your dad doesn't have a baseball bat," Alex challenged.

I sighed. "True. But he does have a machete. He works in construction, remember?"

"In that case, I'll wear a suit."

We both laughed.

Alex didn't wear a suit, but he didn't wear his usual might-be-homeless clothes, either. He wore dark jeans without one hole in them (hooray!) and a crisp white shirt.

Alex was...not what my parents had in mind for me.

First of all, you could tell he had an edge. Second, he looked like he could fit me in his pocket, and third, he had this air about him, of someone who wasn't very keen on people, and they must've picked up on it. He wasn't overly nice, or falling over their feet. He spoke to them on eye level, which was disastrous, because they were my *parents*.

Still, Mom and Dad couldn't really fault him for not being their taste, so they kept their mouths shut.

My mom *did* ask me, upon meeting him, if we needed to go to the OB-GYN and get me on the pill. I said, "gross, Mom." Then, after a pause, "But ask me again in three months just in case, okay?"

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I was wondering at what point, exactly, I was going to have my grand debut into society as The Girl Who Screws the Drummer. I'm going to be extra honest here—I'd thought long and hard on which band member was best to date, and came to the conclusion that, when in doubt, always go for the drummer.

Here is why:

1. The vocalist knows he is hot shit and will always come with an attitude the size of Italy. All vocalists have a I'M THE KING OF THE WORLD complex. All lead singers also feel, somewhere deep inside their hearts, that they are the only member that's not disposable in the band. After all, anyone can play the drums, guitar and bass, right?
2. Guitar players are vain, vain people. And they would most likely talk about their craft 24/7.
3. Bass players are anemic. This is not a scientific fact, however, it should be. Do we know any super famous bass players? I sure don't.
4. Drummers have great arms and inherent pent-up rage, which is why they became drummers in the first place.
5. Drummers come from very loving, understanding families, because who else would be okay with their child banging on a set of drums several hours a day, every day?
6. Travis Barker.

Obviously, I could write an entire dissertation about the subject, but you can just take my word for it—drummers are the best.

The answer to my question (when I was going to see Alex play live) came a month and a half after the picnic. At this point, Alex and I were treading second base. We were taking things slow. There was patting and groping, but I still wouldn't get near that thing between his legs. He never pushed for it, but I could tell he was a little frustrated and, after making out for hours, wanting me to go back home so he could take care of business.

One day, Alex and I were on his bed, kissing until our mouths went numb, when he said, "we have a gig next month. Wanna come?"

"I mean, sure," I played it cool, throwing a party from within. This was finally happening. A month and a half ago, during the picnic, I was still somewhat of an outsider. But now we were an actual couple. Things were different.

“Cool,” Alex said.

“Cool.”

“We’re going to warm up that German band,” he said.

“I know. Big deal, right?”

“Kind of.”

“Who knows where it’ll lead? Maybe a scout will discover you and make you big.”

“Fat chance,” Alex said, but he was smiling now.

“Still want to be a dentist?” I elbowed him. That German band, which should not be named, was all the rage, and from what I’d heard, they were making good money, too.

He chuckled. “You’re a rascal.”

“You know it.”

\*\*\*

On the day of their gig, Alex, Tom, Y and Daniel had a huge fight.

Alex wouldn’t tell me what it was about, but Y was in a foul mood at school, and when I cut the last few classes so I could get dolled up for the gig (it’s called priorities, okay?), Y tailed me in his car while I walked home.

Yeah, he started coming to school with his car now. Probably because he had to drive to the town where Alex lived for rehearsals right after school every day.

“Hey,” he called out from behind his partially rolled up window. I continued walking. I really didn’t want him to double park in the middle of the street and start talking to me, blocking everyone’s way. Y didn’t have the best reputation at school. People saw him as a bit of a prickly loner, and a stuck up one at that. He was the kind of guy to make fun of the cheerleaders out loud, and be unnecessarily sarcastic. He had a bad reputation. But I learned many moons ago to make my own mind up about each person I meet. Too much fake news going around.

“What’s up?” I asked, my voice low, my head hanging down. I was still suffering from guilt over dating Alex, even though I had never, ever shown Y a sliver of interest.

“Your boyfriend is an asshole, you know?” He threw the words at me.

I sighed heavily. “Please don’t put me in the middle of this.”

“Why not?” He asked. “He wants to kick me out of the band, and you’re the only person who could probably talk him out of it.”

“Why?” I forced myself to ask, even though it wasn’t my problem. There was nothing I could do about it. This was inner circle shit I was not a part of. Besides, it was a *high school* band. It wasn’t like anyone was planning on making any money out of it. So what if they were going to warm up this German band? Alex wanted to move to the other side of the world to become a dentist, Tom was almost definitely taking over his family’s business, and I had a feeling Daniel was just waiting for everyone to stop asking him to come to rehearsals so he could finally dedicate himself to his true calling—smoking weed twenty one hours a day while watching Family Guy reruns.

“No fucking reason whatsoever,” Y was still following me in his car. “He just...he just flipped on me!”

“That doesn’t sound like Alex,” I scrunched my nose, suspicious.

For all his faults, Alex was a pragmatic person. He wasn’t exactly known for his irrational decisions. Everything about him was calculated and thought-through.

Y snorted. “You would say that. He’s your boyfriend.”

“If you’re not going to tell me what happened, *he* will,” I stopped in front of his car. He killed the engine and groaned, closing his eyes.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I can’t help you,” I said softly. “I don’t have that kind of pull with Alex. Even if I did, you cannot expect me to ask him for shit when I don’t even know the story.”

The truth was, I didn’t know if I had that kind of power with Alex or not, because I’d yet to test my boundaries with him. Whatever I asked for during our relationship was well within the normal things girlfriends asked their boyfriends

for—to choose the movies we’d watched, where I wanted us to eat, the odd favor here and there.

Of course, there was a nagging, tingly itch in my stomach. Something that dared me to see how far Alex would go for me. I knew he loathed Y. He thought he was a stuck up, righteous guy who had his nose stuck in everyone else’s business, and above all, he really disliked him for rooting for us to break up. And—and this was solely my suspicion—for bringing Ainsley along all those months ago to seduce him days before we first met up alone.

Y shook his head. “You’re so brainwashed by him.”

“What?” I lifted an eyebrow up. “How?”

“Never mind,” he said. A line of cars formed behind him. People were honking, dangling their fists out their windows. Most of them went to school with us. I wanted to kill Y for doing this somewhere public.

“You’re an idiot for dating him, and L? You’re about to get yours,” he seethed, and drove away.

\*\*\*

That night, I showed up to the gig armed with fantastically combed hair, perfect makeup, and a leopard mini dress and ripped fishnet leggings (did someone say Peggy Bundy’s spirit animal?).

When Alex picked me up, he perked up as soon as I entered his car. He swung his head back, giving me an appreciative onceover peppered with a smirk.

“Well, fuck.”

“You like?” I batted my eyelashes, pretending like it hadn’t taken me five hours to make this look happen.

“Nope. I fucking *love*.”

It was the first time he said the word in my vicinity, and even though it was the general look he said he loved—not *me*—butterflies still swarmed all over my tummy.

On our way to the venue, I tried to ask him about his fight with Y, but he caged in on me, and basically told me not to worry about it.

When we got to the club, Alex dashed off to start setting up everything with the band. I texted Jadie to find out where she was and we met out front by the black double doors of the place. She looked, as always, like she'd just walked out of a Vogue issue.

And next to Jadie, was the bane of my existence, the woman who reminded me my boyfriend had a sex life before me—*Ainsley*.

Jadie flung her arms over my shoulders and squeezed me to her chest.

“So good to see you.”

“Same,” I smiled warmly at her, before turning to Ainsley. “Hi.”

Ainsley threw me a vicious smile.

“She’s dating Daniel now,” Jadie hurried to say, by way of explanation, throwing her thumb in Ainsley’s direction. “So I expect her to be on her best behavior.”

“Cool,” I said, a little put off by Ainsley being in close proximity with Alex again. Daniel wouldn’t care if Ainsley cheated on him with an entire marching band. I very much doubted he knew her full name. He wasn’t just chill, he was...I don’t know, borderline dead?

“We’re fucking happy together,” Ainsley said, overly aggressive about it. My eyebrows shot up.

“Good for you.”

Watching Alex play in a room full of people was exhilarating. I was so proud. He was so *good*. I mean, I always knew he was good, because we spent hours in his basement, him practicing, me watching him and wondering when I’d have the guts to sleep with him. But their songs were actually really good.

Y looked like he was about to die on that stage. So solemn, so disconnected from the rest of the band, I thought it was pretty obvious he was the odd one out.

Jadie, Ainsley, myself and a few others were standing to the side of the stage, away from the clusters of sweaty people in the mosh pit. There were a *lot* of people in the mosh pit. Including, at one point, Tom himself, who crowd-surfed a-la Iggy Pop.

By the time the German band got up on the stage, I smelled of cigarettes and lukewarm beer and other people's BO. One of the bouncers opened the back door for the "girlfriends" to join the band.

Jadie ran and flung herself into Tom's arms and kissed him hard. A pang of jealousy sliced me. Not because I wanted Tom to myself, no. Or because Jadie was literally prettier than a Victoria's Secret model. But because they had it all figured out. Tom was going to stay here, and Jadie was going to stay here, and there were no obstacles in their future. They wanted the same things. The path was clear for them.

Ainsley swaggered toward Alex, not Daniel, passing by her so-called boyfriend and placing a hand on my boyfriend's chest.

"You looked good out there," she winked.

"Eat a bag of dicks, Ains," Alex greeted politely, shoving her hand away. He turned around, searching for me. When he saw me, he broke into a goofy, boyish smile. I walked over to him. He scooped me up in a hug, kissing my mouth urgently.

"How'd we do?" He asked, putting me back on the floor gently.

"Amazing," I groaned into another kiss. "You just became hotter. And I didn't think it was possible."

"Barf," I heard a voice behind me.

Alex and I both turned around to see Y standing there, arms crossed over his chest, glaring daggers at Alex.

Tom immediately stood up from the couch, ready to dismantle the situation, and Daniel followed.

"Hey," Tom said, "we're going to have to take a deep breath here, okay?"

Alex shook his head, resolute.

"I'm not playing with him again. I said what I fucking said. You either find a new bass player or a new drummer. If it's the latter, find a fucking place to practice, too."

Tom groaned, but to my amazement, he wasn't arguing with Alex on that point.

“I told you, Al, we need to find a replacement first.”

“And I agreed,” Alex said coldly. “No rehearsals until he’s replaced.”

Y made a move toward Alex, and Alex did the same. I slipped between them, raising my hands. “Whoa,” I hissed, the adrenaline coursing through my veins thickly. “Okay, let’s dial it down a notch. Anyone cares to explain what happened here?”

“Yeah,” Y flashed his teeth to Alex, seething, “Wanna explain what happened, *Alex*?”

Alex stilled. His cheekbones turned pink. What the heck?

“No,” Alex said solemnly.

Uh-huh.

Oh, no, no, no, no.

What was he hiding?

What on earth was he hiding?

“Alex,” I turned toward him. My voice sounded stunned and hurt, even to my own ears, and I hated that Ainsley was watching this. Was he cheating on me? How much did I really know about his life at school? I knew where he was every single minute of the day outside of school, but for all I was aware, he could have been having sex with other girls left and right on school grounds.

Alex looked away from me.

“Look at me,” I demanded, stung everywhere.

Oh, shit. I couldn’t believe it. The pain was too much. Too much to breathe. Too much to think. I wanted to...I didn’t even know what I wanted to do.

Run away? Lash out? Cry? All three.

Alex turned around and gave me a look that could freeze the sun.

“I said it’s nothing,” he snapped.

“Are you cheating on me?” I demanded, shouting now.

Everything stopped. Everyone ceased talking. Alex’s face morphed from annoyed and pissed to...what was it? What the hell was it? Shock?

“You are asking if *I’m* cheating on *you*?” He asked slowly, like I was an idiot.

I nodded, mortified and nauseous. From my periphery, I could see Ainsley was having the time of her life. She was leaning against Daniel’s shoulder with a smile, playing with her stupid, colorful, beautiful hair, watching the whole thing.

“No,” Alex said, steely. “Y said you were messing around with someone else.”

“What?!” I spluttered, so taken aback I literally stumbled backward from the impact of this bullshit. “Me? Messing around on you?”

Alex squared his shoulders, looking defensive all of a sudden.

“*Flirting*,” he amended. “Heavily flirting.”

I threw my head back and laughed. Firstly, with relief, because he wasn’t cheating on me after all. Then, with glee, because he looked jealous, but apparently, not jealous enough to confront me about it himself, then finally, with shock, because this was complete and utter horse crap.

“Who am I flirting with?” I shot daggers at Y, who now had the courtesy to look embarrassed. He was beetroot red, staring at his sneakers, wanting to disappear. Good. This was a blatant lie and he knew it. He knew better than anyone else here I was not a flirt, and never had been.

“With...With Adam.”

“Adam?” I echoed. I didn’t even know an Adam.

“Adam Greene.”

“Adam Greene,” I repeated blankly, tasting the name on my tongue.

Oh. Right. Adam Greene was on the basketball team. A junior. Nice guy. Painfully shy. Our mothers took fitness glasses together at the local country club and were good friends, so his dad sometimes picked me up when he taught him how to drive. Mr. Greene took both of us to empty parking lots to practice. This compelled me to talk to Adam at least once a day if I saw him at school. But Adam and I were not flirty with each other, and there was no way Y didn’t know that.

For one thing, I wasn’t a flirty person, full stop. It just wasn’t my thing.

For another, I was ninety-nine percent sure one of the reasons handsome, athletic, brilliant Adam was so shy was because he was struggling with his sexual identity and was unsure how to tell his parents.

So. Yeah. No way.

“You know I’m not flirting with Adam! He is a family friend,” I cried out. “We small talk. Mostly about how much it sucks to have parents who have barely any time to teach us how to drive. How the hell did you reach that conclusion?”

But it was a moot point, and a totally unnecessary question. Y couldn’t have believed the vicious rumor he had started. Y reached that conclusion because he wanted to reach it. He made up a narrative, and I wasn’t going to stand in his way. He was a liar, and if I was being honest, deserved to get kicked out of the band.

“Don’t pretend like a day passes without you giving him attention,” Y muttered.

“He never sits with anyone!” I cried out in frustration, throwing my arms in the air. “You’re such a liar. You know Adam and I are just friends.”

“It’s fine,” Alex said quietly. “I believe you. Which was why I didn’t ask you about it. But I don’t want to work with him anymore,” he tilted his head toward Y. “He’s a snake.”

“Well, tough luck, because I’m staying. You should want me to,” Y laughed. “So I could tell you when Adam finally gets lucky and fu—”

Y did not, in fact, get to finish this sentence.

Alex punched him square in the nose.

Y staggered, hitting the couch and falling on top of it, holding his nose. There was blood. A lot of blood. It was the first time I witnessed someone getting punched like that. Weirdly enough, everyone kind of stood there, almost loitering, staring at the scene quietly, no one making a move either way.

Alex walked over to Y. He was seething, buzzing with energy I had never seen on him before. He wore it like a crown. A formidable, quiet rage.

He stared down at Y.

“You’re out of the band. And you’re out of my life. Spread one more rumor about my girlfriend and I’ll make sure your nose is the least of your worries, asshole.”

## **Chapter Seven.**

I learned a very important lesson after what happened with Y.

It was a good lesson to learn, especially at that age.

You cannot strong-arm people into doing things. Even if those things were something as simple as not spreading lies to make themselves look better.

Was I a perfect friend to Y? No. Absolutely not.

Was I cheater, a flirt, a girl who was out for attention? Also no.

Two weeks after that gig, after it was all done and dealt with, after Y got the royal boot from the band, and had been gone from school for three consecutive days, I walked through the school gates.

Paulina greeted me at the entrance, shoving me back with all her might, her face pale with panic.

“No. You can’t go in there. Come with me,” she grabbed my arm and dragged me to a coffee shop across the street. I stumbled all over my feet, trying to catch her brisk steps—and my breath.

“What’s going on?” I asked sleepily. I tried filing through the different reasons for me to get in trouble, and came up empty handed. For all my need to look rebellious and edgy, I was about as risqué as an extra-soft tissue paper. There was that one time a hottie, senior jock set the gymnasium on fire and I witnessed the whole thing and kept my mouth shut, but that happened when I was a freshman, he no longer went to this school, and besides all that, half the freaking school basically saw him do it. What else could I get in trouble for?

“You’re in deep shit, missy. Like, knee-deep,” Paulina flung her blonde hair to one shoulder. She did not mince words, that one.

Pauly planted my ass on a seat outside the coffee shop, went inside, got us two, iced coffees and shoved one in my hand.

“Drink. You’re going to need liquid courage to get into school after I’m done filling you in.”

“Geez,” I sucked on my straw noisily, fighting my gag reflex. Oat milk always tasted funky to me, but it tasted especially funky on iced coffee. “What’s happening? Why are you so upset? I’m about to be late for econ, FYI.”

Rock n’ roll till death. That’s me, baby.

Paulina took a seat beside me, rubbing my back in circles.

“L?”

“Yeah?”

“You have a problem.”

“Can you be more specific?” I sighed. “Because I kind of have a bunch.”

“This Y dude you’ve been hanging out with a hot minute ago has been telling people you and Adam Greene are sleeping together. He says you’ve been cheating on your boyfriend with him. And, well, that you’re a slut.”

It didn’t hit me like a wrecking ball. No. It trickled into me like poison. Slowly. I digested it in small bites. Every piece of information. Blinking rapidly against the rising, spring sun.

“Why would anyone believe him?” I huffed, low-balling it, finally.

“Because,” Paulina bit her lower lip in worry, “Adam Greene dropped out and disappeared from the face on earth.”

\*\*\*

Later, I would be able to put together the entire picture of what happened that month.

Later—many months later—my mother would casually mention that Adam Greene transferred to another school because a bunch of his basketball teammates found out he was gay and bullied him to a point of deep, suicidal depression, and he couldn’t take it anymore and bailed.

Later, I would find out that Y himself was going through a mental breakdown from hell. Not only was he kicked out of a band he essentially started himself, but his

baby brother was going through a ton of health problems, and his parents were on the brink of a divorce.

*Later, later, later.*

In that moment in time, though, all I knew was this: things looked really bad for me. Adam Greene switched schools mysteriously and unexpectedly and couldn't be found, Y was shouting from the rooftops that I was a cheating slut who got him punched in the face when I had vehemently denied cheating on my boyfriend so *he* wouldn't hit *me*, and suddenly. People jumped on the bandwagon. Some because they were bored. Some because they generally didn't like me. But most just kept their mouths shut and watched as it all unfolded, horrified and fascinated at the same time.

The first day of the shit show consisted of me pretending nothing happened while getting stink eyes from the entire world. The weeks that followed looked much worse.

That first day, I came to visit Alex. I was somber, sure, but not crushed. I knew I was going through something traumatic, but at the same time, it was hard to take something so ridiculous seriously. I couldn't let myself be put down by lies.

Pauly said I should explain the situation, especially to girls who used to hang out with me and were now gulping Y's version of the story thirstily. But I wasn't going to start explaining myself. They didn't deserve my peace of mind. My apologies for something I didn't do.

When I told Alex what happened, he picked up the bass guitar Y had left in his basement and hurled it against the wall. It shattered noisily, falling in two pieces to the floor.

"I'm going to kill him," he said, pacing from side to side.

I didn't actually doubt that. What Y did was beyond shitty. But the truth was, I didn't even hate him for it. It wasn't hard to look at him at school, when he quickly looked the other way, avoiding eye contact. Not because I wasn't mad at him, but because I thought to myself, it must be so lonely, so, unbearable to hate yourself so much, that you had to put someone else through what he was trying to put me through.

"Nah, don't talk to him," I waved Alex off, playing with the buttons of my corseted black ballerina mini dress. "It's what he wants. More attention. A reaction

out of us. More proof that what he did hurt us. Anything we say will be picked apart, twisted, and misconstrued. The only way to win this is to move on and live well.”

“What he did is bullshit!” Alex roared, picking up another random item in his basement and throwing it on the wall. “Total fucking bullshit. He is a pathetic liar! How are you not fuming?”

I could tell Alex was frustrated with how blasé I was about the whole thing, but I couldn’t go down the same slippery slope of rage. After all, *I* was the one who got all the nasty looks in the cafeteria. The invasive questions. The giggles behind my back. It was my duty to put my mental health above all else, and not to get dragged into an emotional spiral.

“I don’t care,” I said primly. “I don’t want you to talk to him. Promise me.”

Alex looked up, frowning at me. “*No.*”

“*Alex,*” I warned.

“This has nothing to do with you. I’m a part of this, too,” he stubbed a finger to his chest, baring his teeth. “It’s not just you he disrespected. It’s me, too. Implying I would lay a finger on you if you cheated on me? That’s fucking libel.”

I darted up from the couch. This was going to be our first fight, our first *real* fight, and I hated that it was happening because of something that was beyond our control.

“Alex!” I pushed his chest. “Stop being such a selfish bastard. I’m the one who is going through something, not you, and you should respect my way of handling it. *Do.*” I pushed him toward the wall, and he let me.

“*Not.*”

Push.

“*Fucking.*”

Push.

“*Contact.*”

Push.

“*Him!*”

His back bumped into the wall behind him.

That sobered Alex up. His face went from outrageously cross to blank in a nanosecond. I could practically see him mentally checking out of the situation. Alex was an only child. One that had become self-sufficient at a very young age. The word *No* wasn't in his vocabulary, and besides, he was used to getting a lot of respect from everyone he met, Y included.

He looked away, sucking in a breath.

“Promise me,” I asked softly, pressing my palm to his cheek. I had to extend my arm all the way up to reach him. He closed his eyes, shaking his head.

“Please,” I said, kissing the tip of his chin. The small dimple in it. “For me.”

He groaned. “We’ll revisit this subject in a few weeks, when you get your head out of your ass,” he informed me.

“That might never happen,” I pointed out.

He rolled his eyes. “Can’t blame you. I’d live in that ass, too, if given the chance.”

\*\*\*

Things did get worse at school.

Y was finally getting attention, even if it was through spreading lies about me and joining a heavy metal band. I didn't tell my parents what was going on and was lucky enough my baby brother was in middle school and therefore didn't attend the same school yet.

By minimizing what was happening to me, I was not letting this thing have room in my life. In a lot of ways, I was glad I went through what I did. Because it taught me extremely valuable lessons about friendship, human nature, and how to deal with a crisis.

I chose not to let this thing mess with my life, and for the most part, it didn't. I hung out with Pauly, who remained an amazing friend, and a few other friends who didn't give half a fuck about what the mob thought. And I had Alex, Jadie, Sarah, and all the other punk-rock chicks who weren't Ainsley.

Besides, it wasn't all bad. In putting me through this bullshit, Y had chosen to oust himself from the punk scene. He knew that door was shut to him. The loss must've been tangible, since he was the one who introduced me to them in the first place.

Still. There were a lot of shitty days at school.

The shittiest day came just before everything stopped.

I walked into school one morning to find the gymnasium had been graffitied.

### *WHY ARE YOU A SLUT, L?*

Everyone knew who L was.

L. Was. Me.

And that was a pretty good question. Why was I a slut, indeed? A slut who still hadn't gone farther than second base with her steady boyfriend. Strange were the ways of the universe, I supposed.

The minute I saw it, I straightened my spine, tilted my chin up, and plastered a smile on my face. Nobody, and I do mean *nobody*, was going to take my happiness from me.

Actually, that wasn't true. Some people did have that power over me. Like Alex, and Pauly, and my family. But the thing those people had in common was, I knew they wouldn't abuse it. I knew I was absolutely in danger of being ripped apart emotionally. But I also knew I had control over who would do this to me. These strangers, these people I didn't know who chose to believe the worst about me—they weren't the people worthy of my tears.

During morning assembly, Pauly sat to my right, holding my hand, while the principal yelled his lungs out trying to figure out who wrote the graffiti.

To my surprise, a hipster dude named Brent decided to sit on the other side of me. He was a senior and pretty hot, and infinitely cool. I was pretty sure he was hooking up with a girl from the volleyball team who moonlighted as a model, so I was inclined to believe he wasn't sitting next to me in hopes he could get some from the new, token school slut.

"Hey," he bumped his shoulder against mine.

I side-eyed him, offering a hesitant smile. True, I didn't think he was coming on to me and he didn't look like a dick, but I didn't really know him.

"I just want you to know I think you're pretty damn cool. Like, the way you're handling all this bullshit? Kinda' gold."

"Thanks," my muscles eased against the bleachers.

"I like that you don't let the clones bring you down."

I wasn't going to thank him every time he said something nice, so I just nodded, silently offering him some gum. He took one, popping it into his mouth. I sat back, elbows on the bleachers behind him, the epitome of confidence, and grinned as we all looked down at Principal Prems.

"I'm Brent."

"I'm L, and I have a boyfriend," I said primly. "One that, according to the rumors, will beat me if I cheat on him."

He laughed. A low, gravelly chuckle.

"We don't want that," he said. "So I suppose we'll just have to be friends."

\*\*\*

I told Alex about the graffiti that day. We were talking on the phone, each of us tucked in their respective bed. The last few weeks—months, even—were so busy with school and punk rock stuff and mustering the emotional strength to be happy, I didn't have time to think about having sex with him.

At some point, I heard background noises.

Noises of Alex getting into his car.

Slamming the door.

Starting it.

Driving.

"Where are you?" I murmured sleepily. It was getting late. One or two in the morning. "Where are you going? Your side piece?"

“Why would I go to my side piece when my girlfriend is such a slut?” He jested. I smiled tiredly. My eyes were fluttering shut.

“Go to sleep, honeypie. I’ll pick you up from school tomorrow. Okay?”

“Okay.”

\*\*\*

I arrived at school the next day to witness the most romantic thing anyone had ever done for me to date. I think I will always hold a precious place in my heart for Alex for this. For what he did in the middle of that night, when he knew I had a day full of BS.

The gymnasium’s wall, which had been painted less than a day before to cover the offensive graffiti, had a brand new graffiti.

*I LOVE YOU, HONEYPIE :D*

*P.S. Y EATS A BAG OF DICKS FOR BREAKFAST*

Alex loved me.

He. Loved. Me.

Me. Who was a pain in the ass.

Me. Who wasn’t ready to even *consider* getting into bed with him.

Me. With my bag of high school drama and side of bad reputation.

He even did the emoji he always sent me when we texted— :D meant a really happy face. He used it sarcastically when we texted. For instance:

**Alex: Imma pluck Y’s eyeballs and make soup with them for dinner. Want some? :D**

I was buzzing. Bubbling with excitement, and pride, and happiness. Alex was in love with me. This was everything I’d ever wished for and more. Suddenly, each

and every one of my problems shrunk to nothing. Everything blurred out of focus and the only thing that mattered was right in front of me. The graffiti.

Morning assembly, however, was a pain in the neck.

“Again?!” Principal Prems bellowed, pacing back and forth on the basketball court, his loafers squeaking against the floor. “What is wrong with you people?”

The answer, naturally, was everything. Everything was wrong with us. We were teenagers, for crying out loud.

Brent sat next to me during that assembly, too.

“Your boyfriend’s really into you, huh?” He seemed amused.

I puffed my chest out, grinning. “Yeah. We’re kind of crazy about each other.”

When I got to my first class for the day, English Lit, one of my classmates was standing in front of the blackboard. She used the chalk to draw :D, and was debating with a few people whether it was an emoji, or the word ID.

“L,” she threw a piece of gum my way as soon as I walked into class. I caught it and shoved the gum into my mouth. “Maybe you could shed some light on the subject—what did your boyfriend, and we all know it’s your boyfriend who did that, mean when he did that?”

I smiled. I wasn’t going to out Alex. I didn’t trust anyone anymore.

“I don’t know who did it,” I said, “but I guess whoever it was meant the emoji.”

“Hmm,” she narrowed her eyes, grinning. “That’s some bold-ass move.”

“Maybe this guy likes his girlfriend,” I hitched a shoulder up.

“Doesn’t sound like a guy who’s been cheated on.”

“No,” I laughed. “I agree.”

The girl smiled and winked. I knew it was the beginning of the end of Y’s campaign. But strangely, that didn’t make me feel happy or elated. The truth was, I found my happiness elsewhere long ago.

I was free.

\*\*\*

Alex picked me up that day from school.

I think he wanted to see the look on my face after he told me he loved me for the first time. Or rather—graffitied it.

He didn't wait for me in his car, like he always did. Instead, he was leaning against a lamppost by the gate, looking all casual. Just another Nordic king waiting for his girlfriend.

He was so beautiful, and I didn't think I would ever get over how fully mesmerizing he was. Not just because of his high cheekbones and straight nose and those chocolate, smart eyes. But also because he was mine, truly mine. A steady constant in my life.

I ran to him, flung myself over him, and kissed him silly, lacing my arms over his shoulders and bringing him close to me. I never wanted to let go.

“I love you, too,” I murmured into our kiss, the words pouring out in a rush of desperation. “I love you so much.”

He chuckled, prying my arms off him after a few seconds of intense making out. He pushed the flyaways from my face, grinning down at me.

“I really love you,” he admitted softly. “It's kind of annoying.”

“I know,” I groaned. “I can no longer form one coherent thought.”

His eyes were still on me, but a different, vicious smirk spread across his face now.

“Hey, don't look, but Y is behind you. He looks like we just kicked a litter of puppies on our way to kill his family,” Alex's jaw stiffened.

I rose on my tiptoe and kissed him again.

“Let. Him. Look.”

## **Chapter Eight.**

My sweet sixteen was approaching at record speed, the days melting together like gummy bears under the sun.

But, before my sweet sixteen there was summer break to think about.

I dreaded summer break, because Pauly was going to Greece with her boyfriend and Alex had made plans with his mysterious cousin from Sweden before we'd met.

Those plans included driving through Europe and chasing behind their favorite anarcho-punk bands at music festivals. They were renting a van and making pit stops in Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, before visiting another cousin of theirs in Belarus. The whole thing was going to take three weeks in total.

Three weeks of them getting smashed, attending shows, and, presumably, having lots of sex with random girls. Something my fifteen—almost sixteen—year old brain just couldn't compute.

"You're not going," I flung myself over his bed, shaking my head.

He laughed, collapsing next to me on the plush mattress, gathering me closer to him. I loved how large he was and how small I was. You know how some lovers would take a bullet for their girlfriends? He would take one for me, even if he didn't mean to, simply because he could cover my body three times over with his. He had managed to fill in even more during the months that passed since we'd started going out.

"I am going," he said, nuzzling his nose in my neck, kissing a path to my collarbone. I pushed him away.

"If you're going, I'm just going to assume you are cheating on me, and then we'll have to break up."

He perked up, sitting straight in his bed now.

"Okay. That's a leap. How did you get to *that*?"

I already hated his mysterious Swedish cousin without even knowing him. In my eyes, he was stealing him from me after Alex graduated high school. I was even contemplating not inviting the bastard to our imaginary wedding. He was *definitely* not going to be the godfather to our imaginary kid.

“Come on, Alex, I’m not dumb. What do you think you’re going to do when you get there?”

“Drink. Watch shows. See friends. Drink again,” he ticked off each item on the list by counting his fingers. “Buy you lots of presents because I’ll miss your ass,” he added, diving in for another kiss. I pushed him away, again.

“You’re going to have sex with other girls.”

“No, I’m not,” he frowned.

“Of course you will!” I shrieked desperately, throwing my arms in the air. “You will, even if you don’t mean to. One night you’re just going to be super drunk after a show, like really, really plastered, and your cousin will be hooking up with someone, because he *doesn’t* have a girlfriend, and that someone will have a friend, and she’ll come on to you, and she’ll seduce you, and you’ll go for it, just like you did with Ainsley before our first date. Then you’ll wake up the next morning and feel shame and disgust but figure what I don’t know can’t hurt me, and then move on with your life. But guess what? The random girl you hooked up with will be pregnant and will hunt you down for child support, so joke’s on you.”

He stared at me like I just grew a tail and some horns.

“Okay, first of all—that was oddly specific,” he raised an eyebrow. “And second, hello. Nice to meet you. I’m Alex. I’m Russian. I can handle my drink like nobody’s business and I’ve been getting smashed religiously—the only religious thing I do, mind you—way before I met you, and after. Never hooked up with another girl without meaning to. Ever. Don’t intend to, either. And as for Ainsley,” he took a deep breath, “she didn’t seduce me. I’m not some a gently bred, innocent lady from a historical romance novel. I just knew you and I were going all the way to Relationshipville and figured I wasn’t going to get some for a long while, because you are worth waiting for. That was my last hurrah. I love you. And maybe I didn’t love you back then, but I sure as shit knew I was in danger of falling.”

*Then why do you want to spend three weeks away from me?*

But ultimately, this is what it came down to: I couldn’t tell Alex what to do. I had no agency to do that. And besides, this year had been challenging enough with everything Y had put us through and Alex stood by me, not once asking me if any of the rumors were true or second-guessing me. He showed me nothing but loyalty

and trust, so I had no reason to doubt him. Any insecurities I had were my own, and mine to deal with.

I closed my eyes, shaking my head. “God. I’m literally going to let you do this.”

He laughed.

“I’m not asking for permission, honeypie.”

“Fine. But you better make it up to me.”

“I promise we’ll spend the other five weeks of summer break attached at the hip, and when it’s your birthday, I’m going to make it special for you.”

This time, I did let him kiss me. Hard. He engulfed me with his body, pressing against me. I bucked my hips forward, groaning into our kiss. He hissed, catching my lower lip between his teeth.

“I love you, honeypie.”

“I love you, asshole.”

\*\*\*

Summer break started, and my parents were thrilled Alex was backpacking through Europe with his cousin. Not because they were excited for the STD they were sure he was going to gift me when he came back to my arms after his trip, but because they’d been trying to hammer it into my head that I needed to spend more time with people who weren’t Alex.

The night before Alex was getting on a flight, he came to see me. We made out in his car on a cliff overlooking the sea. It was a really deserted spot (I would go back to this spot a lot after we broke up, just to torture myself). He flattened the backseat and took off my top and my bra, which we’d never done before. It was really good. The whole attention to my breasts part. Not that there was a lot of said breasts to work with, but he seemed very happy with what mother nature blessed me with. Kissing and nibbling, swirling his tongue. All the good stuff.

I wanted to send him off with something to think about, though. Something to remember me by. So, I did something bold. Something he'd never attempted to do before.

I took his hand and guided it between my thighs. Past my skirt. His head snapped up and his eyes widened. He stared at me, mesmerized and drunk with desire. I loved that look on him. Usually, everything about Alex's expression was sharp and on point. Guarded. Now, he looked almost boyish with desire. Like he wasn't completely in control, just like me.

*"Fuck,"* he whispered.

"Don't you miss it sometimes?" I asked. *"Sex."*

He rubbed his palm lazily over my panties, creating delicious friction.

He shook his head slowly.

"You're not even sixteen. I can wait."

"And when I'm sixteen?" I asked.

The tips of his ears pinked. "I would never ask you to do anything you don't want to do. Or something you want to do but aren't ready to do. And it wouldn't change jack shit between us. Whenever you're ready."

"And in the meantime?" I pressed.

"In the meantime," he sighed, removing his hand from under my skirt, "I'll have my right hand and a spank bank full of mental images of you wearing all types of short skirts."

\*\*\*

How do you fill three weeks without your boyfriend, who is traveling all over Europe, in a world where international calls are still more expensive than the plane tickets?

Here's how:

- You finally take advantage of the fact you live in a beach town and go to the beach every single day. In doing so, you also ignore every single reoccurring

skin cancer ad and turn from a pasty chick to a golden-brown gal. Pauly and I turned from Marilyn Manson to Jessica Alba, and when she went to Greece with her boyfriend's family, she came back with super-cheap, super-tiny bikinis we'd wear everywhere. Even to the mall (with Daisy Dukes).

- You succumb to your mother's pleas to join her at the country club, and take two aerobics and dance classes every evening. You don't take into consideration the fact that you are almost sixteen, and your body reacts super-fast to the new change. By the end of week one, you actually see your quad muscles poking out of your thighs. You start comparing yourself to Jennifer Aniston. Internally, of course. You may be delusional, but you're not a jerk about it.
- You start paying attention to your family, and play family games with them, and even hang out with your brother and his friends a little, and realize that it makes them really happy, and that you should probably give them attention more often.
- You binge-watch every teen movie ever made.
- You allow yourself the odd, spontaneous meltdown, in which you are absolutely sure your boyfriend is currently grinding against another girl named Anja who is going to steal him away from you and marry him herself, because Anja has really bad teeth and she makes the calculation that marrying a dentist is super economical.
- You realize that you can, indeed, survive without love. It just really sucks.

Wasting time became an art I perfected. I was determined to prove to myself—and the world—that I was totally okay. And for the most part, I was.

Two weeks after Alex screwed off to Europe, I met Brent at the mall while hanging out with Pauly. That's right. My anarcho-communist-whatever-something-something principals were becoming looser, now that Alex wasn't around to remind me how shopping was akin to a satanic ritual and that the capitalist pigs at the top wanted us to spend money we didn't have to create the notion of a more fulfilled life blah blah.

Let's just be straight here—I loved shopping. I'd always loved shopping. And if that made me soulless, well, then, I guess I could find a really cute, pink, glittery soul to purchase on Etsy to take care of that problem.

“Girls,” the ever-mysterious, easygoing Brent grinned, stopping to say hi to us. Pauly flipped her blonde hair, as she did often. I gave him an awkward wave.

“Ya’ll going to the beach party tonight?” Brent asked.

“We are now,” Pauly snorted. Her boyfriend was back in volleyball camp, doing some...volleyballing, I suppose you could call it.

“Actually, Alex is supposed to call me tonight,” I smiled apologetically.

“Exactly!” Pauly perked. “And you’re not going to sit around and wait for him, just like he is not sitting around pining for you in Europe.”

Pauly had a point.

Alex called me a few times a week, and we always arranged a time via email/ICQ. We kept it short, because he didn’t want to sell an internal organ to fund our phone calls. Go figure.

“Besides, you’ll have your phone with you,” Brent pointed out.

“Uhm, Brent,” I frowned, “What the hell are you still doing in town, anyway? You’ve already graduated.”

Brent laughed awkwardly, running a hand over his brown hair.

“I’m in-between future plans.”

“Wow, that came out really lame,” Pauly widened her eyes. “But we’ll still be at the beach party.”

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I shouldn’t have gone to the beach party.

That much was clear.

I was standing on the cool sand, the hot wind whipping my hair across my face, clutching my phone as half-naked people in tiny bikinis and trunks were belting all the words to a Sum 41 song. Were Sum 41 even a legit band? I always thought they piggybacked off the pop punk era. Like they needed to pay Blink 182 and Green Day royalties for simply allowing them to co-exist in the same sphere.

My phone rang, and I answered frantically, stomping my way to a secluded spot, behind a wooden lifeguard tower.

“Honeypie?” Alex asked. It was dead quiet where he was. He sounded so far away, I wanted to cry. Then again, maybe I wanted to cry because I had three cocktails in me, and I was a lightweight.

“Alex,” I sighed. “How are you?”

“Great. We just got to Krakow. The drive was a bitch. So much traffic. Where are you? It’s loud as fuck.”

“At a beach party.”

“Beach party?” He boomed, confused.

“Yeah. Why?”

“No reason.” But he sounded slightly pissed, and that pissed me off, because he was in Poland right now, with his cousin, after traveling Europe for two weeks, about to cheat on me with the imaginary Anja.

“No. Spit it out,” I ground out.

“Didn’t realize it was your scene. That’s all.”

“You live, you learn.”

“Okay, prickly.”

“Cheated on me yet?” I asked, bitter.

“Not yet,” he chuckled. “But the night’s still young.”

“You’re not funny,” I deadpanned.

“No. And I’m not cheating on you, either. Lighten up, honeypie. I’m seeing you in a week.”

I let out a small, girly moan. That was true.

“Look, I have to go. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay? Love you. Don’t drink too much. And tell Pauly to keep an eye on you or I’ll kill her.”

He hung up.

Exhausted from missing him, I collapsed on the white sand, burying my face in the grains. It was cool against the unbearable August heat. I closed my eyes and

wondered if I really was going to marry Alex. I didn't know why, but suddenly, and maybe for the first time, I didn't actually like that idea all that much. Marrying the man I was going to lose my virginity to, the man I was going to give all my firsts, the first man I loved, was a terrifying prospect. I had nothing and no one to compare him to. And besides, even though our love was real, we were essentially very different people, and growing to be more different every day.

As much as I hated to admit it, I did care about materialistic things. I liked shopping, and nice clothes, and going into Target without a plan and getting out of there with a hole in my pocket. And even though animal rights were still important to me, I gravitated more toward vegetarianism than veganism.

And... gosh, there was no good way of saying this. I liked mainstream stuff, okay? Pulp fiction and NYT bestsellers. And reality TV. And *eating cheese*, for goodness' sake.

Alex liked reading books by and about social reformers like Robert Owen and Karl Marx and enjoyed getting into random brawls with other punks over the weekend, pissing people off, and building a small life.

I just didn't know anymore. I mean, what if under the same, low, midnight-blue sky, littered with pollution and zero stars, was another man I was destined to live the rest of my life with? What if I chose different? Someone sensible and strait-laced?

"You better not be dead," I heard Brent's voice hovering above me. "Because you're a minor, and tanked, and I'm going to get into a lot of trouble if I call an ambulance and it turns out you passed away."

I lifted one arm weakly, waving a hand as I spoke into the sand.

"Not dead, just chilling."

"Your underwear is showing," he said. I had a flowery, normal dress on. I groaned, but didn't make a move to rearrange myself. I was too drunk and tired. I felt Brent's hand pulling the hem of my dress down. Bless him.

He took a seat next to me, on the sand.

I didn't see it, but I felt it.

"I'm not really fucking around at home," Brent said.

“Okay,” I mumbled into the sand. “Good to know.”

“I just got enlisted. Navy.”

“Hmm,” I answered, settling deeper into the sand. I was so drunk, he could tell me he was going off to audition as an elephant at a travelling circus and it would fly right over my head.

“Next month,” Brent said.

“Wow,” I belched. It was beginning to occur to me I was treading into throwing-up territory. And fast.

“I can’t tell you anything about the training,” Brent continued. “It’s top secret.”

“Well, then, I’m certainly not worth breaking army protocol over. But do you think you can maybe help me get to the nearest trash can so I can puke?”

There was a pause, and then. “Anything for you, milady.”

Brent helped me to a trash can, and I threw up. He held my hair up, and when I was done, he went to get me a bottle of water.

“Thanks,” I plucked the bottle from his hand, gurgling most of the water and drinking the rest. “Sorry, what were we talking about?”

Brent smiled tiredly. “Nothing, L.”

\*\*\*

Alex came back home and drove straight from the airport to see me. He had a backpack full of presents for me and admitted shyly that he had to pay for extra baggage because he couldn’t help but buy me a whole lotta’ shit.

For Alex it was akin to admitting to rape—remember, he was all about the non-consumer lifestyle—so it meant a lot to me.

He bought me everything, from books I wanted, Goth dresses from Berlin, faux leather boots from Poland, cute notebooks, postcards, knickknacks. You name it.

My parents were so happy to see me happy they even skipped the door-must-always-open rule for the hour he was there, allowing us some much needed heavy petting time.

Alex and I spent the rest of the summer together. We went to gigs and rehearsals, ate out, had picnics, read together, watched movies, and made out. A lot.

The last week of summer break, Alex and I grabbed a six pack and went to the beach. Getting drunk in front of the sunset on the beach was one of our favorite pastimes. Fun *and* economical. And if we got too drunk for him to drive, we could always take a nap on the sand until we slept it off.

We were digging our toes in the sand and talking when Brent passed us by. He wasn't alone. His arm was linked with someone else's. A woman whom I assumed was his mother. She had no hair, no eyebrows, and a little scarf wrapped around her smooth head. She looked frail, but beautiful.

I choked on my beer.

"Hey, L," Brent stopped and smiled.

Alex's spine erected. Like a guard dog who just heard a twig cracking in the otherwise deafening silence. I stood up, dusting my skirt of sand.

"Hey, B. What's up? Oh, hi, I'm L," I smiled warmly at his mother, offering her my hand. She introduced herself as Brent's mom. My heart cracked into a million pieces, and guilt slammed into me. Weeks ago, when Brent was trying to have a heart-to-heart with me, to unload, I was so drunk I cared more about making it to the trash can so I could throw up than listening to him.

"This is my boyfriend, Alex," I motioned toward Alex, who was still sitting down, glaring daggers at Brent. He hadn't been jealous when it was Y making up stupid rumors (the first round, anyway), but it was obvious he minded Brent's presence in my life.

"The one who went to Europe for a month," Brent smiled at Alex easily.

Alex shot him a scowl. "Yup. Back now, as you can see."

"She missed you a lot," Brent said conversationally. I didn't know how, or why exactly, but it certainly sounded like taunting. Alex's scowl pulled into an intense glare.

“The feeling was mutual.”

I felt so bad, so guilty about not knowing about Brent’s mom, I squeezed his arm.

“Hey, talk to me when you get the chance, okay? Let’s grab some coffee or something.”

Brent nodded. “Sure. Have fun, you two.”

When I plopped back down, Alex stared at me like I’d slapped him.

“Coffee or something?” He echoed. There was venom in his voice.

I rolled my eyes.

“We’re just friends.”

“Fuck that.”

“Oh, my gosh,” I laughed. “You cannot be for real. You just pranced all over Europe like a total bachelor. Don’t tell me you didn’t have drinks with other girls.”

“I didn’t,” he said, dead serious. “You can ask Mark.”

Mark was his stupid cousin from Sweden.

“Sure,” I clapped cheerfully, taking my phone out of my purse. “Let me just give him a call, since I have his number, and since this is totally something I would do.”

“Why are we fighting?” He furrowed his eyebrows, confused.

“I don’t know,” I yelled, “Maybe because you’re a fucking hypocrite who is moving to Sweden next year and still giving me shit about having guy friends.”

“Not next year,” he shook his head. “The year after. I need to take a stupid pre-med course. I just found out from Mark when we were in Germany.”

“Oh. Great. Thanks for keeping me in the loop.”

He was still leaving.

Still going.

Still turning his back on this love.

No matter how much we ached for each other.

## Chapter Nine.

For my sweet sixteen, Alex got me a...what the hell was it?

“Is that alphabet pasta on your inner forearm?” My eyebrows pulled in concentration, as Alex showed me his brand new tattoo, still wrapped in cling film, all shiny, the ink fresh and prominent.

“It’s honeycomb,” Alex scowled at me. “You know, *honeypie, honeycomb.*”

“Is this a tribute?” I choked on a strangled laugh.

His cheeks flushed, and he looked ready to kill someone.

“It was supposed to be, until you made fun of it.”

“No. No. It’s amazing. I just...oh, wow!” Now that I knew what it meant, I was touched. “I didn’t think...I never imagined...”

“It’s not the only thing I got for you,” he rushed to say, pulling me from the couch in his basement with a tug. I followed him up to his room. I felt bad that I didn’t take his first present seriously. But the tattoo really didn’t look like honeycomb, and even if it did, honeycomb wasn’t the same as honeypie, and honeypie was...well, not the best nickname in the world. I just loved it because it was an Alex and me thing.

“This next gift, you’re really going to like. You’ve been talking about it nonstop,” Alex said. My heart danced against my sternum. I had a feeling I knew what it was. An iPod. I’d been wanting one for months. It was going to be perfect if he got it for me, since I was planning on asking my parents for a new TV.

When we got to his room, he handed me something huge. Much, much bigger than an iPod. Even the prehistoric ones, that were the size of Tupperware. It also had a hella weird shape. Alex smiled at me.

“Happy Birthday, honeypie.”

I tore the wrapping with shaky fingers.

In front of me was a brand new Fender guitar...?

My face must’ve shown what my brain was thinking, which was: *what the fuck?*

“You’ve been talking about wanting to learn how to play the guitar ever since we met. Remember? At the store?” Alex rushed to explain. It was a very expensive present. Much more expensive than an iPod. And I knew I needed to be grateful. But to be honest, I only told Alex I wanted to play the guitar because I wanted to impress him. No part of me wanted to learn the craft. Hell, even parts that *weren’t* me didn’t want to learn how to play a guitar.

“That’s...amazing,” I said slowly, realizing, for the first time, that I was acting like the worst girlfriend in the world. First, I was perplexed about his tattoo, and now, I looked at my brand new guitar like it wanted to sexually assault me.

“Wow, Alex, I’m so touched,” I put a hand to my collarbone, internally thinking, *he better not follow up on that hobby and ask me if I’m actually learning how to play this thing, because the new O.C. season just started and I don’t have time for this.*

“Yeah,” he leaned against his wall, popping an eyebrow skeptically. “It really fucking shows, sweetheart.”

“No, Alex, I mean it. I love the guitar, but I love the tattoo even more!” I perked up, running to him, burying my face in his chest in a hug. He defrosted, running his big palm over my back and patting my ass.

“Okay. Good.”

I took his hand and kissed the plastic on his inner forearm. Where the tattoo was. “Love this.” And then feathered a few more kisses on it. “Love, love, love.”

“Thanks, doll, but you were not supposed to touch it.”

“Oh, sorry,” I laughed. “I love them. Both my presents.”

“There’s also a third,” Alex said.

“A third?” I asked.

*iPod? Someone? Please?*

He grinned. “Yeah. A rite of passage for sixteen-year-old girls.”

“Yeah?” I straightened, getting excited.

*Definitely an iPod.*

“Your first orgasm.”

“Oh.”

*Oh.*

So I guess it was an easy date to remember. The first time I had been on the receiving end of oral sex.

Because it was on my sixteenth birthday.

And. It. Was. Everything.

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There were lessons to be learned during that time period, in the gentle seam between becoming an adult and adolescence. Some of the lessons I would put in my pocket for adulthood. Others, I would leave behind and have to re-learn at a later time.

Things at school had gotten better. The gossip mill kept on turning, of course, but not in my direction. Not because Y ran out of lies to spread about me, but because it became abundantly clear that I did not care.

I did not care if people I didn't know liked me.

I did not care if a wandering, bored soul truly believed I was cheating on my boyfriend and gave him an STD.

I put my energy into painting, and began to write a little, and above all, spent time with the people I loved. The people I truly cared for and cared for me.

My family. Alex. Pauly. And Brent, whenever he came back home.

The Fender Alex had gifted me was collecting dust in the corner of my room. The only time it was picked was when my brother and his friends borrowed it, not to play it, god forbid, but to chase and hit each other with it.

I couldn't touch the dang thing. Not only because I lacked the basic desire to learn how to play, but also because it symbolized something I didn't want to think of. A thread of insincerity between us. The idea that Alex knew so little about me he didn't pick up on the fact that I didn't want to play bothered me, but I shoved it

into a drawer in my head, where I kept all my math knowledge and where I put my sunglasses, and therefore, forgot all about it.

Alex's tattoo healed, and I kissed it all the time. It was my favorite part of him. The inner forearm. I cherished it the most, out of all the gifts he'd given me, because I knew he was going to have to explain this tattoo to future girlfriends, and to the wife he would one day have, and to his kids.

And Alex wasn't a liar. He would tell the truth.

The idea that I wasn't going to be the *only* girlfriend, the *only* wife, and the mother of his kids was something I wasn't eager to explore, but I had to at least acknowledge its existence. Alex no longer spoke of moving to Sweden, but that was also because I did not ask him about it.

Mid-year, Alex's band decided to break up. There wasn't a huge drama behind it. Everyone just wanted to go their separate ways and do different things.

Tom, for instance, wanted to do Jadie. All. Day. Long.

Daniel wanted to smoke himself to death and be with Ainsley.

And Alex? Well, Alex was losing interest in making music and gaining interest in getting into *my* pants.

We were doing most things by now. Grownup things. But we still hadn't gone all the way.

"I have an idea," Alex said one day, in his basement, while I was doing my homework and he was rearranging his drum kit for the millionth time.

"Hit me with it," I popped a bubble gum.

"Why don't we take a trip somewhere? Maybe to another town? Spend the night in a hotel to celebrate our year and a half anniversary."

"What a strange thing to celebrate," I grinned, closing the textbook, but not before creating a dog ear so I didn't lose my place. "Is this code for wanting to bone me?"

"Everything I say is code for wanting to bone you," Alex chuckled, running a hand through his hair. The Mohawk was definitely in need of a trim, and I wondered if he was going to keep it or grow it long. He seemed to have grown out of a lot of things recently. I just hoped I wasn't one of them.

“To your question, no, we don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with. I just want a change of scenery.”

There were cracks in Alex’s theories and principals.

Like how he was all for anarcho-communism-something-something, but didn’t, you know, hold onto a job or anything. Even though he could. This trip, I was guessing, was going to be paid for by his parents.

“I’ll need to ask my parents. I’ve never slept out of my house excluding sleepovers at friends’. I’m going to be honest, I’m not sure they’ll love it.”

“Tell them you’re at Pauly’s,” Alex shrugged.

My eyes widened. “Alex, that’s lying.”

“You lie to them all the time,” he laughed.

That was half-true. I did. I lied about where I was sometimes. But for short periods of time. Like, an hour or two. Definitely not a whole weekend. I didn’t think I had it in me. Then again...an entire weekend with Alex sounded like a dream.

“Let me think about what to tell them,” I amended.

He grinned. “Okay.”

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And so, I told my parents Pauly and a bunch of other girls were going camping. This was my first mistake, of course. Because Mom and Dad wanted specifics. Where, when, how, which friends, how we got there, what snacks we needed, did we have an EpiPen (“people should always have an EpiPen, just in case”- Mom). So I gave them specifics, talking out of my ass. Things that made no sense. The most horrifying part was when my dad volunteered to come with us to help us set up the tents.

I had a mental image of Alex’s tent, and it needed no setting up, and definitely not by my father. I told Dad Pauly’s Mom was going to drive us and even had Pauly text my parents from her mom’s phone.

It was official. I was going to hell.

Finally, I got them off my back. Alex and I were booked to drive up north and spend a weekend in a small town on the coast.

That Friday, Alex picked me up looking like a prince.

Okay. I'll amend. Like a punk-rock prince.

He looked—and smelled—delicious, and I couldn't take my eyes, or hands off of him the entire trip up north. By that time, I had my own driver's license, though I still couldn't drive without an adult present, and only until a certain hour at night.

This, of course, didn't stop Alex from throwing his keys into my hands as we got out of a gas station's Seven Eleven, jerking his chin toward his car.

“Wanna give this baby a ride?”

“This baby is a Volvo SUV,” I pointed out, just because it was never going to stop being funny, “and I don't want to wreck it.”

“You won't wreck it.”

“How do you know?” I huffed. I was a pretty bad driver. Truth be told, I still am. I also have this thing where I can only drive one vehicle at a time, meaning now that I trained myself to drive my own car, I can never drive my husband's. Not that my husband's car is a stick or anything. It's just not the exact same model as my car and therefore undrivable in my eyes.

Anyway. Back to Alex.

“I can't drive your car,” I shook my head.

“You can, and you will. Come on. Don't worry. I'm here. Besides, it's all one, open road. And a highway. Nothing bad can happen.”

“Are you sure I'm not going to wreck your car?” I asked.

“Positive. Let's go.”

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I wrecked his car.

Okay, I didn't wreck it, but I bumped into a lamppost while parking, of all things, when we reached the hotel we were staying in.

I was horrified.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I was crying when I jumped out of the driver's seat to check the damage, with Alex following closely behind me, making sure I didn't get run over on top of giving him a fender bender.

"You're fine, honeypie. Shit happens. Hey. Hey. Look at me," he wiped my tears and my hair away from my face. I wasn't a crier. But I did cry now. Because I was terrified we were both going to get into huge trouble.

His brown eyes held mine in a death grip, refusing to let me look anywhere else. His hands cupped my cheeks. We were standing in the middle of the street.

"Listen carefully now, honeypie. You are fine. Nothing happened. You didn't hit a pedestrian, or get into a car crash, or wreck my car. It's just a fender bender, and I will deal with this when we get back home. I'll take full responsibility. No one will ever know you were driving the car. You hear? Stop this nonsense and try and have fun this weekend. Please."

He sounded so calm, so confident and self-assured, I couldn't not-believe him. It sucked majorly to let Alex take the blame, and yet, it gave me a lot of confidence and a mental hard on to know he had my back.

The first day, we spent walking on the beach and eating at a restaurant.

I browsed through the menu for a total of twenty minutes without making a decision.

"The pasta with the olive oil and oregano is really good for vegans," the waitress suggested helpfully.

"The pasta probably has eggs in it," I scrunched my nose.

Alex watched me from across the table, amused.

"And?" He asked.

"And I'm vegan," I straightened my back, offended.

A slow smile spread across his lips. "No you're not."

"Excuse me?"

“You’re excused. You are also not vegan. Not completely, anyway. Your brother told me you eat some egg products here and there. A little dairy on the weekends.”

“That little sh...”

“Hey,” Alex laughed, “I paid him well for his investigative services. And I don’t care. Like, really don’t give a flying fuck. Not about you eating eggs, or milk, or steak, and not about the guitar you haven’t used once since I’ve given it to you.”

Something passed between us just then.

The truth I’d been craving for months.

I saw him looking at me, and I felt naked, deliciously naked, because I knew he loved me not only for the things he thought I represented, but for who I was, too. Imperfections be damned.

“I’ll take the pasta,” I smiled.

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We didn’t drink a lot that night, but I drank enough that I could call it liquid courage. Two beers. Enough to get tipsy, but not trashed. I also made sure to call my parents—twice and separately—to avoid any missed calls or text messages. Knowing my parents, they were a breath away from sending a search party to find me if I didn’t take their calls.

It was a great setting, with a great boyfriend, at a great age to lose your virginity to someone you trusted. And I think, in a lot of ways, this set the tone for the rest of my romantic life.

What to expect from the person you’re with.

Alex set the bar high.

The night he took my virginity, he was so slow, so soft, so sweet.

The day after, he was the same. Though maybe a little less soft, and a little less sweet.

And when we got back home after that trip, he took the entire blame for the car.

Alex's parents didn't even blink, let alone punish him.

And my parents? Well, they still think I went on a camping trip that weekend.

## **Chapter Ten.**

There was a moment in time in which Alex and I were the golden couple.

It happened a few months after we'd gotten back from our first vacation together.

Jadie and Tom were out, Alex and L were in. Everyone knew that. We were the Brangelina of the scene. Sans....well, all the post-breakup BS.

"What do you mean you broke up?" I stuttered into the phone.

"What part do you not understand?" Jadie yelled at me through the receiver, and for the first time, she didn't sound chill or sweet or completely, utterly and perfectly composed. "Tom and I broke up. Are you coming here or what?"

"I'm coming, I'm coming." I was already shoving my feet into my Chucks.

"Should I bring anything? I don't know, ice cream?"

"Yeah," Jadie growled. "And none of that vegan shit, either. I want it to be full of dairy. For all I care, there could be pieces of the cow in that shit, too."

Ah. Another fallen convert. I had spent the last few months happily vegetarian.

"Got it. Be there in an hour."

My parents didn't give me the car—maybe because I was the worst driver in the entire world, I don't know, this is purely a speculation—so I called Alex and asked him to drive me to Jadie and to buy ice cream on his way.

He did both, but when I tried prying information out of him about Tom's side in this mysterious and sudden breakup, he kept mum.

"I know you and Jadie are friends, but please don't put me in the middle of this bullshit drama. Tom is my friend."

“All I’m saying is that it’s surprising,” I huffed, though I had no reason to be upset or short with Alex. He was a perfect boyfriend, who also acted as my chauffeur and personal assistant right about now.

“Yup,” Alex agreed. “But shit happens. People break up. Even if they love each other.”

I gave him the stink eye.

“I’m not saying those people are going to be us,” he parked in front of Jadie’s house.

“But you’re not saying it’s not going to be us, either.”

“Not sure how Tom fucking up has gotten me into the dog house,” he frowned.

“Tom fucked up?” I felt my eyes widening.

He leaned forward, opening the passenger door for me, kissing my temple.

“Okay. Enough talk. Go see Jadie. Let me know if you need a ride back home. I’ll be around.”

I kissed him hard on the lips and darted straight to Jadie.

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“He cheated on me,” Jadie blew her nose noisily into a pile of damp, tattered tissue.

She was even gorgeous was she cried, which I found absolutely infuriating, and was thinking of telling her so. I would want to know if I looked like Venus rising from the foamy, Mediterranean sea while bowling. I mean, Tom was great (pre the cheating revelation, anyway), but wasn’t so great that he deserved one of the sweetest, most beautiful women to grace this planet.

“He did?” I tried to keep the shock out of my voice. The last thing she needed was my joining her hysteria. She needed someone to lean on. A rock.

Jadie nodded, bursting into another sob.

“It happened at a party. He was drunk, I guess, and it only happened once. But...how, you know? How could he do this to me?”

“I know it sounds like a cliché, but he is an idiot, Jadie. You need to be a special kind of stupid to give up what you have for a one-time spin with a no-name. Who’d he hook up with, anyway?”

I was half-expecting it to be Ainsley, for the same reason I half-expected Ainsley to hold the sole responsibility for everything ugly in the world. As far as I was concerned, we needed to look into her when it came to the kryptos outside the CIA headquarters, world hunger and Jack the Ripper (I’d always been notoriously bad at timelines, so attaching her to crimes that took place in 1888 was not a stretch).

“With this...this trashy girl he goes to school with. Elena.”

“She sounds awful,” I volunteered. And she did. Because the only thing I knew about Elena was enough—she had seduced Tom into cheating on Jadie. I’d say allegedly, but apparently, Tom at least had the good sense to run to Jadie and come clean about it, an hour after he woke up and found his limp dick still in a used condom, with Elena sleeping soundly beside him.

“Alex knows her, too,” Jadie sniffed into her tissue. “She gave him a few blowies back in the day. Don’t worry, before you got together.”

Okay. Yeah. I *really* hated Elena.

I pulled Jadie into an embrace on her bed, its linen checked in white and black, and seethed.

“Who goes and throws away a three year relationship for a random? And to hook up with her at a party? Completely drunk? Wow. What a loser,” I played off my emotions and overstated how lucky Jadie was to dodge that bullet.

“He wants me to forgive him,” Jadie was gnawing on her lower lip. The ice cream I brought over was dutifully sweating itself into the form of a milkshake on her nightstand. The truth was, when your heart was broken, *truly* broken, your appetite usually met the same destiny. Neither of us was in the mood for something sweet.

“Are you going to?” My eyebrows shot up.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I love him. And he did apologize and came clean straight away.”

*Yeah, I gruffed inwardly. He also came inside Elena.*

“You can definitely do that, but I think maybe you should sleep on this decision,” I said carefully.

“I mean, what would you do if Alex did it?” She perked up, sniffing.

Well. That was a good question. I would probably get a few shovels and pray my extensive knowledge of how to get rid of a body, all courtesy of *CIA: Places I’ve Never Visited*, was going to get me out of a first-degree murder charge.

“I don’t know,” I said.

But I did know. I knew I was going to leave Alex and never look back.

“Isn’t he moving to Sweden or something next year?” Jadie cocked her head sideways, looking at me curiously.

“Yeah. Yeah, he is. But let’s talk about you.”

And we did. As my stomach churned in anger and worry.

Our time was ticking.

Alex was leaving.

And I was staying.

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Jadie and Tom didn’t get back together immediately after the cheating scandal.

Instead, Jadie started dating a half-Japanese, half-German millionaire deity who was also the heir to a mochi empire. He was a jock and drove a Range Rover the size of my house and ate his steak—yes, steak—raw.

Let’s call him Lance.

Lance was the bane of Tom’s existence, and I was pretty sure Tom hated every single second he didn’t even remember of being with Elena during that party.

A party Alex wasn’t invited to, thank god, due to my boyfriend having a beef with the vast majority of the western world, including many people from his school.

A few weeks after Jadie's heart was broken—then immediately patched back together by a hottie—Alex and I went on a picnic.

Everything went wrong that day.

He was an hour and a half late because he had a flat tire, and I had a huge fight with my parents. It was hot. Too hot. And I couldn't find anything to wear, because I grew out of my desire to look like Harley Quinn, but wasn't sure Alex was into the new style I was thinking of adopting, of Summer Roberts from *The O.C.*

All I wanted was to prance around with pink miniskirts and cardigans, cradling an overpriced cup of coffee from a hipster bodega I couldn't pronounce.

That was another thing that worried me. Alex and I were changing.

Or, if I were being honest, I was changing, and Alex was staying the same.

Steadfast and unnerving, and terrifyingly focused on his future plans.

He picked me up with a grim scowl and an air of an asshole looking for a fight.

I kissed his lips and ignored the storm brewing inside me.

“Got everything?” He asked without sparing me a look, his eyes hard on the road.

“Food and shit.”

“Not so much shit, but plenty of food.”

That did not earn me a smile. Not even a chuckle.

We talked about the tire. About my parents demanding I start making concrete plans regarding where and what I wanted to study. And about Tom being a sourpuss and basically not leaving his bedroom unless he absolutely had to.

“I just think it's bullshit,” Alex snorted, his eyes still on the road, not me. He oozed dangerous energy. The kind that told me he was looking for a fight. Alex never looked for fights. Not with me. With me, he was all honey and charm. “He literally ran to her the minute he woke up. Dude was unconscious when he porked Elena. Jadie should've let it slide.”

“He slept with someone else,” I gritted my teeth, not wanting to fight, but also not wanting to listen to first-grade BS. “Jadie has every right to ride any dick she wants now.”

“That's a convenient take on things,” he scowled.

I whipped my head around, pinning him with a look.

“I’m sorry, Alex, do you have something to tell me?”

“Like what?” He spat out. I didn’t know why we were fighting. I had no idea how this escalated this far.

“Like, are you hooking up with Elena, too? Or anyone else for that matter?”

“No,” he growled, throwing me a disgusted look. “I’ve never cheated on you. I’m just saying, it’s good to know that if I ever made a mistake…”

“It’s not a mistake if you can predict making it,” I pointed out, cutting into his words.

He let out a humorless laugh.

“All righty, then. And I’m supposed to sit here and pretend you’ve never had an almost oopsie-kiss with Brent, that douche canoe.”

“Never!” I barked out, scandalized. “Brent and I are just friends. He is going through so much with his mom. But obviously, *you* want to see other people.”

“I don’t want to see other people,” he slammed the brakes all of a sudden, in the middle of the street. The road was empty, but I still gasped. We both unbuckled at the same time and got out of the car. I guess we both needed massive hand gestures to communicate what we had to say to each other.

We rounded the car and stood in front of one another, our stances screaming fight-mode.

“What the hell has gotten into you?” I demanded. “It’s like you want to fight me.”

“What the hell has gotten into *you*?” He spat back, each word filled with malice. “I don’t even recognize you anymore. When was the last time you dressed like Old Honeypie, or read a book by our favorite philosophers, or came to a demonstration, or, I don’t fucking know, DIDN’T EAT DAIRY.”

Ah. There it was. My greatest fear. That all my little personality tweaks over the two years we’d been together were going to pile up, until I was no longer recognizable to him, because deep down—deep, *deep* down—I’d gotten into this punk rock world for all the wrong reasons. Namely, for *him*.

“I don’t know what happened to her,” I said softly, taking a step back. “To *me*. I don’t know where this previous L is. I’m sorry. I’m just growing up to

be...someone different than who you thought I am, I guess,” I rubbed at my chin. I had a stubborn pimple, and I scraped it off, leaving a trail of blood behind it.

“Look, we need to talk.”

“No, shit,” he snorted out, turning his back to me and pacing toward the back of the car, raking his hands through his hair, the same Mohawk he had when we’d first met.

Then it occurred to me.

I looked at the front wheel on the driver’s side.

Back at Alex.

At the wheel again...

“You didn’t have a flat tire,” I said, not asked.

He froze in his spot, his back still to me.

I knew Alex’s Volvo inside and out. Every dent and little scratch on it. After all, we spent so much time there. And I happened to know there was a splash of old white paint smeared across the front wheel of his car. The same tire he told me he had to replace.

“Answer me,” my voice hardened, my mind kicking into overdrive.

He lied to me.

He flat out lied to me.

He’d never done that before.

“No,” Alex admitted quietly, still not turning around to look at me. “I didn’t have a flat wheel.”

“Where were you?” My voice shook. “With Elena? With Ainsley?”

He threw his head back and laughed. It was maybe the most painful thing he ever did. Laugh this way. Because it reminded me of all the things I fell in love with. The raw, male beauty of him. The combination of his hard-everything with his soft eyes.

He spun on his heel, pinning me with a look that made every bone in my body freeze. He didn’t scare me, per se. But he showed me the same coldness that made other people so wary of him.

“I was with my parents. We were discussing my plans for Sweden. I don’t have to take pre-med here. I’m moving in four months, right after graduation.”

My heart collapsed, not brick by brick, but in a sheets. Like fallen snow. It felt like he reached into my ribcage, plucked it out, and squeezed it until it bled dry. A red, redundant sponge.

*Four months.*

We only had four months before he was leaving.

And by the way he was speaking, he had absolutely no plans to try and keep this relationship long-distance.

Alex closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were void of emotions. I had to wonder if he was at least a little bit sociopathic. I mean, to go from the kind of obsession he had toward me to nothing was extreme. It was like the minute he knew he was going, he cut his emotions off from the rest of his body.

“So. This is why I was late. It wasn’t a flat tire. It was my parents basically letting me know I needed to start looking into booking a ticket to Sweden.”

“You lied to me,” I whispered.

I didn’t know why I cared about this one piece of information when something so much bigger was looming in front of us.

“Yeah,” Alex looked down. “Sorry.”

I took a deep breath. Looked away. A car passed, going around us, like we were a part of the scenery, and not two people in the middle of a meltdown.

“So,” I said.

“Look,” he scrubbed his cheek with his knuckles. “We can try the long-distance shit. Or, I don’t know, you could come study there, too.”

He seemed reluctant to even offer. And anyway, I didn’t want to move to Sweden.

I shook my head. “We knew it was going to happen.”

“Yeah,” Alex’s voice broke. “Still fucking sucks, though.”

I smiled weakly. We were breaking up. This was really happening. I was so overwhelmed with emotion, it felt like I was suffocating.

We were breaking up, and nothing big or tragic or scandalous had occurred.

After everything—my cheating accusations, the high school mess, Y, Alex’s European trip—this was what got us. Reality just caught up with us and bitch-slapped us across the face. Earlier than it was supposed to.

For a moment, I was so disoriented, I tried to hold onto us with bloodied fingers.

“Maybe I could visit you...when you’re settled.”

Even as I said the words, I knew I wouldn’t. My parents wouldn’t let me, I was still a minor, and besides, I had no money. Even all those things aside—I knew Alex didn’t want that. Didn’t want to go the long-distance route.

Alex smiled. “I don’t know, honeypie. I think maybe it’ll just make things harder. I really do love you, you know.”

I nodded. “You just love Sweden more.”

He laughed. “No. Not Sweden. I love myself more. Is that bad?”

“No,” I made myself smile. “Just honest.”

It hurt, but I did it, anyway.

“Take me home, Alex.”

## **Chapter Eleven.**

How do you avoid running into your ex in the four months you still live one town over from each other? Simple:

- You make your best friend, Pauly, promise you she will never, ever let you call or text your ex, even though he is still sending you random text messages asking if you wanna meet up (translation: have sex).
- You pick a brand new hobby. In my case, reading romance novels. Lots and lots and romance novels, where the asshole ends up doing the right thing, which is presumably not leaving his girlfriend to move to Stockholm.
- You eat all the dairy and egg products in the world, and make sure it’s all cage-free and organic, but still go WILD.

- You get a new, part-time job over the summer at an ice cream parlor and save up, though you are not sure what you're saving up for.
- You convince your mother you are super depressed and make her take you to the mall and buy you a brand new wardrobe, consisting of all the cute, Summer Roberts things you always wanted to wear but never dared to.

Jadie and Tom were back together.

She dumped Lance when she felt Tom had groveled hard enough, and was delighted to find out Tom was so miserable about their breakup, he was seeing a therapist.

I kept in touch with Jadie, but I made sure not to ask her about Alex.

I didn't want to know if he moved on, if he was hooking up with the Elenas and Ainsleys of the world. If he was having the time of his life.

The good thing was, now that I was eating more protein and working under the pounding sun, I was leaner, tanner, and looked better than ever.

Four days before Alex was scheduled to get on a plane to Sweden, I got a call from him. I was at the promenade, jogging. I stopped the minute I saw his name on the screen, causing two other joggers to bump into me and curse me to oblivion and back.

"Hi," I wheezed, breathless.

"Hey," Alex sounded a little sleepy, or maybe just guarded. I hadn't answered the last three times he had called. Not because I was mad—I really wasn't—but because I knew talking to him would mess me up for weeks on end.

"Do you have a minute?" He asked.

"Sure."

"So, I asked Jadie to ask you, but she gave me some long, bullshit explanation why I should do it myself. Basically, I'm throwing a small party in my basement tomorrow before I fuck off to Narnia. Pretty sure you have better shit to do with your Friday night, but I figured I'd give you the option. I mean, still, we were together for a long time, so..."

He trailed off. I smiled despite myself. It was such a classic Alex invitation. Reluctant yet hopeful.

“I mean, would that be okay if I come?” I cleared my throat.

“It’s more than okay when you come, and we both know that.”

I laughed.

He sombered, adding, “I wouldn’t have invited you if I didn’t want to see you, L. Of course I want you there.”

“Do I need to bring a present?” I scrunched my nose, walking around in circles to keep my body temperature high before breaking back in a jog. I couldn’t wait for him to see this new version of me.

“Fuck no. I’m not taking anything to Sweden, anyway. Just my miserable ass and a wallet.”

“All right. I’ll be there.”

“Hey, L?”

“Yeah?” I asked before we hung up.

“I really missed you.”

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It occurred to me on my way to Alex (I insisted on driving there, because that meant I wouldn’t allow myself to get trashed and make a mistake), that I was probably going to see Ainsley, and maybe even Elena, or whoever he was currently bumping uglies with. A pessimist by nature, I was certain he was already sleeping with someone else. And I hardly wanted a meet-and-greet with her.

That was the problem with doing the right thing and cutting all ties with your ex. You could always be blindsided by their brand new, shiny life.

Before I got out of the car, in front of Alex’s house, which brought back so many memories I thought I was going to throw up, I called Jadie. It was pretty much a given she and Tom were going to be late, so I knew she wasn’t already inside.

“Hey!” She answered chirpily.

“I need you to tell me I’m not walking into some ghastly scene of Alex having a threesome with four porn stars and a German shepherd.”

“First of all, that’s not how threesomes work. Know your math, L,” Jadie let out a laugh. “And second, I promise you the coast is clear. Seeing him will be bittersweet. Bitter, more than sweet, if I have to guess. But nothing ghastly is going to happen. This is Alex we are talking about. He was so pussywhipped before you guys broke up.”

Assured, but not completely sold, I got out of my car and knocked on the door. I wore a black mini dress and a hot pink shoulder purse.

Alex swung the door open. He looked a little thinner than I remembered, a little less happy, and he’d shaved his entire head. Which looked...*weird*.

The new haircut—or lack of hair, more like—was like a punch to my gut. A prime example of how he moved on without me.

“You look different,” I blurted out.

“Same goes to you,” he drank me in with his eyes, then added, “Come in.”

I waved hello to his parents and grandmother and descended the stairs to his basement. There, I found Daniel, a few more guys I recognized from demonstrations and punk gigs, two guys from his high school, and a pretty girl who was sitting on one of his high school friends that he was definitely not sleeping with.

No Ainsley. No mysterious Elena. *Phew*.

The music (Black Flag) was loud, and the alcohol was overflowing, but there were no corny signs of a teary goodbye party.

“Tom and Jadie are on their way,” Alex handed me a beer. “Wanna smoke outside?”

“You smoke now?” I felt my eyes widening.

Seeing him was weird. Not bad weird. Not good weird, either. Just...weird.

Alex smiled, tapping an unlit cigarette over his palm. “Here and there.”

“Bad habit in general, but especially for a dentist,” I commented.

He grabbed my hand and squeezed. “Let’s just get out of here for a sec.”

A few minutes later, we were on a bench in his backyard. He lit his cigarette while I checked my messages on my phone. I was kind of eager to check my MySpace account when I got back. I had been talking to a few like-minded people and having a lot of fun talking to one, specifically. A Northern Irish guy living in England who had really good taste in music. And this time I meant it. I was done pretending. This guy and I...we were on the same wavelength about pretty much everything.

“So how’ve you been?” Alex asked.

I put my phone down, smiling. “Good. Are you excited for Sweden?”

He shrugged. “Not really. My stupid cousin moved in with his girlfriend, so I had to find last-minute accommodations. I’m now going to be living with four randoms I don’t even fucking know. Oh, and learning Swedish is going to be a bitch. Probably should’ve thought about that when I planned to move there FUCKING SIX YEARS AGO. But oh, well.”

I cackled. He was good ole’ Alex again, and I finally let myself unwind.

“You always land on your feet, Al.”

Alex jerked his chin toward me. “What about you? What are your college plans?”

I looked at my phone, which was sitting between us on the bench, and thought about Patrick, the guy I was talking to from England.

“I think I want to try and get accepted to a university in London,” I heard myself say out loud. It was only when I said it when I realized I meant it with my entire heart. I wanted to move there. I’d been to London plenty of times and loved it dearly.

Alex whistled low. “Expensive plan. Mommy and Daddy know ‘bout it?”

“They’re about to,” I laughed.

“And what about Brent?” Alex asked brashly, the sharp edge in his voice telling me he had planned to ask me this question before I set foot in his house. “Still in the picture?”

“We’re just friends,” I cemented.

I refrained from asking if he was seeing someone. I couldn't handle the pain. Maybe I was a coward, but I just couldn't.

But of course, Alex went ahead and updated me, anyway.

"I haven't been seeing anyone. I don't know if Jadie mentioned that, but anyway," he took a drag of his cigarette, shrugging.

"Oh," I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding until right that moment.

"Yeah. Me neither."

"I was a little—okay, a whole fucking lot—shell shocked when we broke up," Alex admitted. "Everything just became very real, very suddenly, and I didn't want to not-follow up on my Sweden plans, so I needed a clean cut. But then I had time to digest everything, and, well, it kind of freaking sucks. We've lost four months together."

"We did," I took his hand, stroking it gently. It felt good to hear that, even if I knew we were not going back together under any circumstances. Maybe we didn't come full circle, but our bruised souls did, and that was enough. To know how deeply we cared for one another after all. That it wasn't only in our heads.

"I'm not going to get over you anytime soon, honeypie. In Sweden, or anywhere else in the world," he smiled a sad smile that broke my heart to pieces.

"Yeah, me either."

He leaned down and kissed me. I ran my hand through the buzz cut on his head. It felt like kissing someone completely different. Someone who smelled of cigarettes and didn't have long-ish hair and wasn't my loving, devoted boyfriend anymore.

It gave me a thrill.

When we pulled away, he brushed his thumb over my cheek.

"Maybe in another life, honeypie?"

"Definitely in another life."

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Alex flew to Sweden, and, true to his promise from two and half years ago, he didn't cave, and didn't open a MySpace account. Which, in my opinion, was a crying shame, because MySpace was the place to be.

I talked to Patrick almost every night, about anything from music to books and pop culture, and we had a lot of fun.

That following June, I graduated from high school, and got a phone call from Alex, telling me Stockholm was really beautiful and really expensive and that Swedish wasn't totally impossible to learn. He congratulated me. I told him I missed him.

The week after, I booked a ticket for a week in London. A childhood friend who'd moved to Scotland a few years earlier with her family was coming down from Glasgow to meet me. I was going to celebrate my eighteenth birthday in style, getting drunk all over London. I still didn't commit to a college, but I promised my parents that I would as soon as I came back from the English capital.

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A few words about post-Alex L:

I was into grunge, alternative, and indie music. Amy Winehouse-type beehive up do, and smoking, and starving myself.

Yes, I was starving myself to reach an impossible, Kate Moss thigh gap.

There were a few issues with my thigh gap plan (I mean, other than the fact that I was gleefully developing an eating disorder in the name of aesthetics and fashion). The pressing issue was the fact that genetically, my body just rejected the idea of a thigh gap. I was all thighs and ass. Even at my skinniest, I always had what you'd call a full trunk.

But London Me was definitely the thinnest I'd ever been. At 113 lbs, I was flirting with medically malnourished. My ribs poked out of my cropped shirts, and my army boots were so heavy, every time I walked in them for a long period of time, it felt like I'd just gotten back from a leg workout.

London Me also completely excluded the whole punk rock scene from my life. I was still friends with Jadie (who broke up with Tom, again, just because she

wanted to play the field), but I really didn't want to hear about how bad I was for eating eggs and taking my coffee with milk. I also owned up to my shopping habit and got rid of my Summer Roberts wardrobe (RIP, the me who wanted to be wholesome and cute. That was a short phase).

One thing was for sure—I was starting to resemble the person I'd imagined when I was a kid and thought of my grownup self.

Only much, much hungrier.

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I landed at Heathrow on a bright, summer day. And by “bright, summer day” I mean, it was raining like hell. I was supposed to meet my Scottish friend, Dory, at the airport, since she was getting in from a Glasgow flight.

I burned the time by getting myself a latte at Costa and calling it my lunch. If nothing else, starving yourself in the hopes of one day waking up looking like Kate Moss snorting lines of coke with Pete Doherty was fiscally smart. I knew I would spend barely anything on food.

I should probably point out that my reason for coming to London—the official one, anyway—was so I could check out schools. So, let me get this out of the way right now: I did not, in fact, check out any schools.

Dory arrived from her flight, looking like a million bucks. She had the best smile (side note: we are still super close. She lives in London now, and has two beautiful children and a banker husband. But back then, we were both hellions).

“Hey, asshole!” I hugged her tight.

“Hey, slut!” She greeted cheerfully.

We strode together to a bus. She did the talking throughout our journey to Piccadilly Backpackers hostel. Mainly because I was too tongue-tied to do more than drink in the view and fantasize about my new, exciting life in London without worrying about the technicalities, like the fact I couldn't afford it.

Dory and I got a room with two bunk beds the size of my parents' half bathroom. The restrooms and showers were communal, and we shared them with more backpackers from all over Europe.

I didn't even have time to unpack when Dory slapped my bony back.

"Hey, let's go eat in Chinatown."

"Dory," I gasped. "I don't eat after six. Certainly not carbs. Can't we just drink some gin and chew on ice cubes like civilized people?"

Dory looked horrified.

"L, carbs are good for you. They make you happy. And strong. They are energy. Not to mention, they are fucking *tasty*. You are not going to be on a diet when we're in London. Come, now!"

And so, we went to a Vietnamese restaurant in China Town. Trouble was, I'd never been to a real Vietnamese restaurant before. Only the industrialized, fast food chains that served western food with a side of fortune cookies. So I had no idea how to eat Mi Xao Gion. Basically, I ate the crunchy noodles without adding the main dish to them like an idiot.

"A little stale, isn't it?" I commented to Dory, who poured her elaborate, juicy dish into her noodles.

"Yeah, if you are a world class idiot," she laughed and showed me how to do it.

Once I let myself eat the noodles, I decided to go balls out and also bought a dodgy hot dog from a street vendor. I say it was dodgy not because of the hot dog, god forbid, which did nothing to me (other than remind me that my vegetarianism was nonexistent at this point. This would be the third time since I went vegetarian years ago that I ate any type of meat). I call it dodgy because the vendor wasn't licensed and midway into making my hot dog, he spotted a police car, took his cart and bailed.

But I'd already paid him for the hot dog. So what did I do? - Damn right I began chasing after him like a rabid animal, demanding he give me my hot dog.

In hindsight, I definitely agree it was not my most demure moment, when I ran after the poor man, shouting "give me that hot dog. I want that hot dog".

However, it was a moment of pure, unabashed freedom, and I will always cherish it.

After stuffing my face with noodles and a hot dog, I wobbled back to Piccadilly Backpackers with Dory. There, we bought the internet package, which cost me approximately an arm and a leg, and I powered up my laptop and got onto MySpace, where I had one message waiting.

**Patrick: You here yet?**

**Me: Yes! Just landed. Phew, pretty rainy here, huh?**

**Me: Where can I see you?**

**Patrick: Dublin Castle. The day after the next. Camden Town.**

It was a date.