

THE ART OF US

KL HUGHES



CHAPTER 1

“You look beautiful.”

“You should be sleeping.”

“You’re crying.”

“I’m leaving.”

“I know.”

“Are we sure this is what we want to do?”

“I think it’s what we have to do. It makes the most sense, doesn’t it?”

“Nothing ever made sense until you.”

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

“I’m trying to express my feelings.”

“I’m trying not to fall apart.”

* * *

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

He’s still asleep.

She breathes a sigh of relief before slipping quietly out of bed. Grabbing her robe from the hook on the bathroom door, she pulls it on over her pajama pants and T-shirt and then makes her way through the loft to the kitchen. A soft moan crawls up her throat as she brews a pot of coffee and

the aroma washes over her. She drops in a few teaspoons of sugar and carries the coffee with her to the far side of the loft. She won't be getting any more sleep tonight.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“No, it's okay.” He yawns into a kiss he plants on the side of her head. His dark hair has finally grown long enough for him to wear in a small ponytail, and the hanging strands tickle at her cheek as he leans against her. Charlee does her best not to squirm away from the feeling—from him—but the image still flooding her mind makes her stomach lurch, and nothing

about this moment feels right. “I just wanted to check. I’m gonna sleep a bit more before I have to get up for work.”

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

“Night, babe.”

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

They come anyway.

* * *

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

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

“Five years, right?”

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

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

“It’s cold.”

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

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

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

“Pappy’s.”

“What?”

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

“Have you been?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Alex?”

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

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

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

“Pappy’s?”

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

“Oh, really? It smells great.”

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

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

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

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

* * *

“Christ, this is heavy.” Grunting, Cam loads the final covered canvas onto the dolly. A few bubbles of the protective wrap encasing the painting pop beneath her fingers. Once it’s settled, she wipes her sweaty hands on

her grease-stained cargo khakis and uses the bottom of her maroon tank top to wipe her forehead. Her sweatshirt had been abandoned ten minutes into packing and loading. “This has got to be the biggest piece you’ve done in at least a year.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re ridiculous.”

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

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

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

“It’s the centerpiece.”

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

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

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

When Cam’s arm wraps around her back, Charlee sinks into it and rests

her head on a bony shoulder. It's somehow still comforting, despite being uncomfortable.

"It's been a while since you painted her."

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

"Has Chris seen it?"

"No. Would it matter if he did?"

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

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

"True." Cam tucks her arm under Charlee's neck and rests the sides of their heads together.

"Maybe I should go back to landscapes."

"Or naked dudes."

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

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

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

"Yes, you can."

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

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

* * *

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

“There’s graffiti on the wall.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What else would it be?”

“Literally anything other than that.”

“What if that *is* what it is?”

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

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

“That’s a good lesson.”

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

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

“It needs work.”

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

“Are you sure?”

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

“You didn’t live on campus?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alex closes her eyes as the memory bombards her. Exposed piping and ductwork. Sealed concrete flooring. Cheap plywood cabinetry all dressed

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

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

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

“I’m sure it was great.”

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

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

“Yikes. That would’ve had to go.”

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

* * *

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

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

“It’s staring at me.”

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

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

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

“It is a painting. It doesn’t have feelings.”

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

“Fuck.” Her lover grunted. “Less talking, more probing.”

Alex laughed against her lips. “I love you.”

* * *

“There isn’t a title card for this piece, Charlee.”

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

“I’m sure I grabbed all the cards,” he says, thumbing through them. He’d asked to help set up for the weekend show, so Charlee had given him a few simple tasks. He wasn’t familiar with the layout of the gallery, which changed every time Charlee had a new show coming up. It was one of the reasons she’d bought the space—easy to transform. “It’s marked as number fourteen, but there isn’t a matching card. Did you make one?”

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

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

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

“Um.”

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

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

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

“You sure?”

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

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

“Okay.” Charlee nods. “Be safe.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The silence seeps in again, and it’s like the past has suddenly drifted

in through the cracks under the doors, invading every inch of the here and now.

“It’s kind of haunting.”

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

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

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

“Like what?”

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

“Until what?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Okay.”

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

“Cam.”

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

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

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

“You need to sleep.”

“I know.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're killing my buzz, babe."

"I'm very excited, Charlee."

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

A large chunk of the money left to Charlee in her father's will bought the small space, with a little left over for fixing it up and replenishing her art supplies. Alex had been with her every step of the way, from the moment they saw the For Sale sign in the window to the moment Charlee's

mother curled her lip at it because there was rat poop in the corner and one of the windows was cracked. She stood by as Charlee signed her loopy signature atop a dotted line, and she was with her now, holding her as they stared at the sign that they knew meant, even if in only the smallest of ways, that Charlee Parker had arrived.

“It will be perfect.” Alex tightened her hold. “It will.”

“Cam’s going to freak.”

“Cam’s going to groan when she sees all the work that needs to be done.”

“True, but she’ll freak first.”

“Perhaps she’ll vomit.”

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

“I’m vomiting in spirit.”

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

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

“You really think so?”

“I really do.”

* * *

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

Closing her eyes, she tries to imagine the paintings on the walls; the laughter of a girl on top of her as they lay on a pallet on the floor, paint-

covered and exhausted; the smiles on their faces when the first piece sold and how they never wanted to hang another in its place.

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

She's gone.

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

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

"I'll be there shortly," she says when she answers.

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

"Don't be dramatic, Vinaya."

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

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

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

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

Alex releases a light laugh, the sound strained by the force of Vinny's

embrace. Her arms are stiff at her sides, trapped by her sister's. "Since when are you such a fan of physical affection?"

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

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

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

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

"I purchased a plane ticket."

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

* * *

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

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

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

"You're afraid."

"I'm not afraid."

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

"Fear is the best motivator."

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

“I still say that’s faulty logic.” Alex scrunched her eyes closed and rubbed her fingers over the space above her heart. Her chest was tight, clenching harder every second she spent inside the godforsaken airport. She glanced up at the large letter and number hanging over her gate. C16. Fucking Gate C. Of course.

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

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

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

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

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

“Not being with her.”

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

Alex shakes her head.

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

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

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

“You had a crush on her.”

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

She dodges the direct hit, but the spray of cold water still grazes the edge of her ear. Groaning, she wipes at the wetness. “You’re a child, Vinaya.”

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

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

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

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

“To Pappy’s, you idiot.”

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

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

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

“What is?”

Alex sucks in a cold breath through her nose. She hadn’t meant to say

that, hadn't meant to start this conversation at all, but the door is already open, so she doesn't stop herself from going through.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not *against her*. I just know she isn't the one for you."

Alex crosses her arms over her chest. "You've never even met her. So you can't possibly know that."

"I disagree." She slides on her helmet and snaps the visor up so she can still be clearly heard. "But if it'll make you happy, let's do it. Text me a time and place, and I'll do my best to be there, but let's avoid early mornings, deal? I know you like to get up with the sun, but some of us bartend and don't get home until three in the morning."

"Deal."

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

"And you'll be nice?"

Vinny smirks inside her helmet. "No promises." Her Harley roars to life a moment later, and Vinny yells over the rumble, reaching out to briefly touch her sister's forearm again. "This is your home, Alex. I get that this

place is nothing but memories for you, but you have to let yourself live. Go to Pappy's. Get some pizza. Make new memories."

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

* * *

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

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

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

"I thought I might grow it out."

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

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

"About tonight?"

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

"What do you mean?"

The shrug of her shoulder causes Chris's chin to bounce a bit, but he stays put. "I see someone looking at something I've painted. I hear them talking about the colors and the blending and the subject, and all I can think is that that's the painting I did when I was half-drunk and on my period, still sobbing over some dumb, sad movie I shouldn't have watched while I was hormonal. Or that's the one I had to start over halfway through

because I knocked over the easel and then the table *next* to the easel and spilled my Cheerios all over it. Or I'm remembering exactly how lonely or angry or sad or good I felt when I made each one. Every piece has a part of me in it, you know? People are taking home little pieces of me when they buy my work. It's weird."

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I could give those up."

"You would sacrifice all your faves?"

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

“Warm weather is the greater good?”

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

“A good rub should warm you right up.”

“You’re going to rub my ass?”

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

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

“Your ass appeals to me at all temperatures, babe.”

“Good.”

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

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

Charlee bit Alex’s shoulder through her coat. “Just admit you love the city in winter.”

“It’s cold.”

“It’s beautiful.”

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

“Just off Newbury. Not much farther.”

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

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

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

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

“Coined by an artist, no doubt.”

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

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

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

“Horrendous either way.”

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

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

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

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

“It’s beautiful.”

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

* * *

“You made the dinner reservations, right?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“True.”

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

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

“Hey, we have winter in Sacramento.”

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

“We do!”

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

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

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

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

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

When Kari suddenly stumbles to a stop, Alex jolts and blinks away the memories making a foggy cloud of her mind. Kari smiles at her, pointing

toward the door of a beautifully lit building with large glass windows that peer into a massive space. It is adorned in art and packed with people. “This is it.”

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

The flow of traffic in the gallery seems to be moving counterclockwise, so she and Kari move to the right and take in the first piece they encounter—a pen drawing of a woman’s body in profile. She’s bare and holding a swollen, pregnant belly with one hand while the other dusts across her neck. It is simple yet elegant, and Alex finds it lovely. Kari, though, scans it quickly, shrugs a shoulder, and pulls Alex along to the next piece.

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

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

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

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

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

They duck their heads and glance quickly around.

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

“I’m not complaining.”

“Of course you’re not.”

* * *

“I have no arm candy.”

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

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

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

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

They both crack up, and Charlee says, “Because *that* wouldn’t be creepy.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

Alex's voice comes out strained. She's surprised it comes out at all. "You don't really want it."

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

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

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

“Thank you,” says a voice from behind them, and Alex’s entire body goes cold. Her stomach drops like it is trying to push down into her legs, and her heart jumps up into her throat as if it intends to escape through her lips. She is going to tear apart with the stretching.

That voice.

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

Once, that voice was *everything*.

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The other woman’s back is still facing her, and she hasn’t moved since Charlee approached, hasn’t murmured a word. Something about her, even

from the back, seems familiar: the long length of her exposed neck, the bit of her strong jawline that Charlee can just make out from the side. Her hair is up in an elegant bun, and her slender body is long and lovely in its sharp angles—dressed in a pair of dark classic flares and a green top to match her girlfriend's dress. Charlee can't help but stare.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fuck."

CHAPTER 3

“So maybe we shouldn’t say goodbye.”

“What do we say, then?”

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

“And then what?”

“Then I’ll go.”

“You’re just going to turn and go?”

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

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“So I love you.”

“I love you.”

“Alex, wait!”

“Charlee, that was supposed to be our goodbye.”

“I know. I know. I just... This is hard.”

“I know, but this isn’t the end. We’ll say hello again. I promise.”

“When?”

“Soon, I hope.”

“Okay. Soon.”

* * *

THE ROOM IS SPINNING EVERY second Alex stands unmoving under a painting of herself, unable to breathe, while both Kari and Charlee try to

gain her attention. When she finally turns around, it's as if the entire place slams to a sudden, jarring stop.

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

"Fuck."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Alex?"

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

Her knees are shaking.

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

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

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

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

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

Hello.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

"So, you three obviously know each other."

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

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

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

The gallery crowd has mostly gone back to their browsing, and Charlee’s thankful to not have any additional eyes on her. She glances at Cam, still standing next to Alex. They both face Kari now as well, their expressions nearly identical—wide-eyed and silently screaming for an escape.

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

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

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

Kari shakes Cam’s hand before turning toward Charlee expectantly. “And you said it was Charlee, right?”

With a nod, Charlee takes Kari’s hand. “Charlee Parker, yes.”

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

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

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

Kari’s grip is firm, her small hand soft and smooth. Charlee does her

best not to think of how effortlessly those hands must glide over Alex's body, how often, how intimately. The thoughts come anyway, stabbing with each new arrival.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Charlee sighs and nods. "Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

"Um, cool, yeah. So, it's nice to meet everyone," Cam says. "And, Alex,

it's great to see you again, really. We should make a plan to get together soon and catch up, but right now really isn't the best time for a chat. Charlee has to, you know, mingle with people, try to sell those paintings and all of that, and we're all sort of blocking the flow of traffic, so..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wait.”

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

“You always have to go,” Charlee said. “You realize that practically

every call we've had in the last eight months has ended with you telling me you have to go, right? You always have to go, Alex."

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

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

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

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

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

Silence.

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

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

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

"Don't say that. You know it isn't true."

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

“You never asked.”

“I never *knew* to ask.”

“Why would I talk to you about my ex?” Alex turns to face her. “Is it normal to gush about past lovers with current lovers? Because to me, that seems like something to be avoided.”

Kari’s brow ticks up. “Gush?”

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

“I don’t ask about the past, Alex, because it’s obvious the past is painful for you,” Kari says. “I thought it was because of your time in the foster

system, and maybe it mostly is, but it's clear now that some of it is due to this relationship I knew nothing about. What did she do to you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“First love?”

“Yes.”

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

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

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

“Yeah.”

“You said the breakup was your fault?”

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

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

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

“What did you do?”

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

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

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

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

Nodding, Alex picks at the quilt with her fingers and keeps her gaze fixed

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

“But you *did* get the position?”

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

“Oh, that’s cool.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's okay," Kari says, and Alex feels a flash of pain between her ribs.

It's not, she thinks. It's not okay.

* * *

"Charlee, you have to get out of bed."

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

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

Charlee closed her eyes under the covers and tried to block out the world. "I don't care."

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

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

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

“You still have to live,” Gabby said.

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

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

* * *

“I want to die.”

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

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

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

“She did not.”

“Did too.”

“God, she’s beautiful.”

“You have a boyfriend.”

“I know.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I know.”

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

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THE ART OF US

BY KL HUGHES

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