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Prologue

Present Day

New York and Singapore – two cities where taxi drivers had way too much power.

I flung my arm out yet again, hoping that flashing my underarm sweat would gain a pity stop. The old bastard drove right past without so much as a glance, only to come to a stop at a traffic light ten feet in front of me. I knew an act of fate when I saw one. I rushed forward and grabbed at the handle – once, twice, three times. It didn't budge. The passenger side window whizzed down.

"No, lady. No taxi." An old Asian man shifted in his seat to stare at the crazy blonde woman pawing at his cab.

"Come on. Please? Your light is green – you're supposed to take passengers."

He looked up to where I was pointing, as though he could see the sign from inside the vehicle. Then he reached over with a scraggly old finger and switched the sign off.

"Now red."

The traffic light turned green and he put the taxi into gear.

"I'll pay you twice the fare!"

He skidded to a stop, forcing the cars behind him to step on their emergency brakes. The locks popped open and I barreled in, head first.

"Where you go?"

"Uh..." Where was I going? How was I supposed to get to Alex if I didn't know where she'd gone? I looked down at my phone on instinct.

"Lady!" the old man's voice was sharp. Grating. "Where you go?"

Pressed, I rattled off the name of the college. Maybe I could look up her address?

The driver mumbled under his breath and signaled for a U-turn. I put my head in my hands and tried to take a big, calming gulp of air. But all I could smell was *her* on my skin.

#

Chapter 1

Two Years Earlier

"Miss Summers, you have a student here to see you. Please proceed to the General Office."

The bleep of the intercom on my desk sent a spark of excitement – or was it relief? – through me. It was the third day of the open house for Junior Colleges, and this was the *first* time that I'd been beeped to meet with a student. It was a depressing fact, especially when the other teachers seated around me couldn't get back to their seats for ten minutes before they were paged to be met with again. *Finally*, I thought. *Someone who cared enough about the English language to want to speak with me.*

Making sure the oppressive heat hadn't deflated my topknot hair bun, I quickly descended the stairs from the Staff Room that led directly to the General Office. The five-inch heels on my feet clicked loudly as I flung the glass doors open with way too much flair for a drab day in school.

"Peggy," I said, slightly breathlessly to the receptionist. "You paged?"

"Yes. Someone wants to speak to you," Peggy returned in her sharp, Chinese accent. I followed her nod to a lean figure casually leaning against the notice boards, her hands shoved deep in the pockets of her jeans. The fitted denim was faded and bore holes at the knees. A black slogan tee and a one-shouldered plaid backpack completed the decidedly hipster look.

I cleared my throat. She turned and the first thing I noticed was her eyebrow ring, something I hadn't seen on anyone in a very long time. Any type of alternative lifestyle wasn't particularly encouraged in Singapore and she'd be severely punished in college if she ever dared to pair an eyebrow ring with her uniform. Still, the glint of silver looked absolutely stunning against her dark, sepia-toned skin, which I assumed, was indicative of her Indian heritage.

I extended my hand. "I'm Cady Summers, English Lit and Creative Writing lecturer."

Her hand was warm in mine. The handshake was strong and confident, not like most people's, who shook my hand as though they were afraid that they'd break the petite little blonde expat teacher.

"Hey, it's nice to meet you. I'm Alex."

Her first words confirmed my niggling suspicion that she wasn't the average student. Believe me when I say that not many students in Singapore use 'Hey' as part of their daily

vocabulary – many didn't even employ the rules of grammar. They were usually more interested in how they could use English to excel at Math and Science rather than learn the intricacies of the language itself. Instead of 'it's nice to meet you', here, most students stuck to 'Hello', 'Hi' or simply, 'Wassup, 'cher.'

"I'm actually," she continued, reaching into her backpack for her notebook, "interested in the Creative Writing course that the school offers."

"Of course, sure. Let's take a seat and we can discuss it." I smiled, thinking that this girl in my class would be a godsend. Good grammar? Check. The ability to string a sentence together? Check. A Sylvia Plath slogan tee? Check. What more could a teacher ask for? Only I knew how grumpy the students could get when they were posted to a Literature class because they hadn't done well enough to get into their beloved Science and Math classes. Having one student who was actually interested in the subject would be a really nice change.

We sat. She flipped open an exceedingly worn black notebook and started asking me questions pertaining to the course. I answered each one of them as carefully as possible, my eyes flickering to the eyebrow piercing every one in a while when she raised her brow at something I said. It was oddly mesmerizing.

After she was all out of questions, I decided to ask *her* some, just to pick at her brain a little. I wanted to know if she was as good as seemed to be, or if it was just a front she put on.

I un-crossed my legs as she leaned forward to listen to me. As she did so, a slight whiff of her perfume drifted to me... wait, was that perfume or cologne? I shook my head clear of those thoughts.

"As you know, we're going to re-visit various styles of writing and literary periods, just as a class exercise. Which is your favorite literary period?" I asked, trying to sound as formal as the informal thoughts running through my head. It wouldn't do me any good to admire a student in *that* way!

"That's tough," she said with a smile. Well, it wasn't really a smile. Just a tilt of a corner of her shapely lips.

"...I suppose Modernism would be my pick."

"What?" Her brows furrowed. I'd lost track of the conversation. I tried to reel it back in. "Oh, of course. That's great! Any favorite authors?"

She leaned back a little and waved a hand in front of her tee. "Well, there's Plath."

I smiled. "I noticed that. It's a great shirt. Unusual."

"Thanks. A friend made it for me at her printing shop. A birthday gift."

"That's very cool."

"But I do love Beckett as well. *Huge* Beckett fan. I love how his settings and characters are always minimal but the overarching message is bleak and profound."

It had been *so* long since I heard a student speak passionately about literature. I was still smiling and I didn't think my face would stop doing that anytime soon. The girl held so much potential that if she got into my class, I knew I'd be squeezing every last drop of creativity and imagination from her. I mean, after years of teaching kids who didn't want to learn, won't any teacher get excited when she managed to catch someone who actually did want to excel in the subject?

"That's an excellent analysis of Beckett. I think his work speaks to different people in different ways. Some see it as a warning; others as a sign to just give up."

"Exactly." She tucked a lock of dark hair behind her ears and I couldn't look away.

"Can I ask you something?" she said as she put away her notebook.

"Sure." I watched the way her jeans hugged her thighs as she reached over for her backpack. They were nice thighs; I could tell that they were well-muscled. My mind was definitely in the gutter today.

"Where do you call home? It sounds like an American accent but I can't place it and it's killing me," she said, then licked her lips. I had to force myself to look away.

"Home's New York," I replied, perusing the notice boards behind her as casually as I could. "It's just that I've been in Singapore for a while and I studied in the UK. It's kind of mangled my accent."

"Oh. Yeah, figures," she nodded, rising to her feet. I followed suit, adjusting my skirt as I did so. When I turned to her, I came to realize that even in my heels, she still had a couple of inches on me. Granted, I was only five foot two without the extra height, but she was *really* tall. Where most Asian women were usually my height, she was definitely at least five foot nine.

"I've got to get going," she said, looking at her watch, "I've got a couple more schools to check out before the day's out."

"Yes, of course," I said, holding out my hand again. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Alex." I meant it; it truly had

been a pleasure for me. It wasn't every day that I found someone genuinely interested in language and literature. Not in this part of the world.

"It most definitely was," she said, holding the glass door open for me.

"Do you need help finding the bus stop?" I asked when we exited the General Office. I knew how confusing the school compound could be on a first visit, but I hadn't expected Alex to take me up in my offer for directions. She seemed like the macho I-don't-need-any-help-from-you kind of person. Obviously, I was wrong in that aspect.

"Yeah. That'll be nice. I think I walked in that way? " She pointed to the right.

I started to draw a mental map out for her, but decided against the confusing thing. "Oh, hell. Come on. I'll show you."

I walked a couple of steps ahead of her, leading her away from the main building. A wind was picking up, and I looked back at her as it blew against us.

I commanded my salivary glands to stop working on overdrive, but it was no use. The sight of Alex's black shirt plastered to her flat tummy was too sexy for me not to ogle

for a few seconds. God, she looked like one of the guys on Baywatch. With boobs. Nice boobs.

Midway through my ogle-fest, I misjudged a step and lost my footing. Being the klutz that I was, coupled with the heels, would've sent me sprawling down the excitingly long flight of stairs. But you-know-who just had to step in at the last minute and grab me by the arm.

"Whoa," she said, a little more loudly than what I now assumed was her usual drawl. "Careful there. Those heels weren't meant for brisk walking."

I gave her a tight smile; her hand on my shoulder was unnerving. If I'd been absolutely truthful to myself, I would've said her touch had made me hot.

But I wasn't being truthful.

"Yeah. I'd have to agree with that. Thank you. Well, um, the main road's just a hundred meters that way. You can find the bus stop on your left." I pointed in to the right, feeling my heart rate accelerating for some *unknown* reason. OK, I *knew* the reason. It was because she was standing so close to me again. I got a whiff of something masculine – cologne? Hair wax? I took a step back. Was it just me, or was that the second time I'd had to do that?

"All right, then. Thank you, Miss Summers," she replied with a twinkle in her eye. I narrowed my eyes at her retreating back. There had been something wrong with the way she had said my name, like she was trying to hit on me, or as though we were in a role-play session. *Weird*. I kinda liked it.

The little voice in my head chose that moment to come alive.

She thinks you're cute.

Yeah, but I'm also her teacher, and probably at least five years older than her.

So?

What do you mean, 'so'?

So, what difference does it make?

It's not appropriate!

Sure it is. Why are you denying this? You always knew you were attracted to females. You're just too chickenshit to do anything about it.

No, I'm not.

Yes, you are!

Oh, just shut up.

#

Chapter 2

She didn't sign up for the course.

That was the first thing that hit me as I scanned the attendance sheet on the first day of college. No matter how many times I looked through it, the names didn't change - I clearly didn't see an 'Alex' on the Junior College 1 attendance sheet. To say that I was disappointed didn't cut it. Over the past three weeks, I'd looked forward to having her in my class. Not for the fact that I thought she'd hit on me (by now, I'd convinced myself that she had), but for the fact that I knew she was good in English. I'd already begun looking forward to reading her creative exploits. I'd thought about her frequently, especially when the students in my Junior College 2 classes bored the hell out of me with their calculated, pre-packaged answers from their English text or guidebooks. Somehow, I knew that Alex would have answers of her own, one I didn't have to teach her.

So, when I didn't see her on the attendance sheet, I marched into my new class like a cranky old witch, hiding the frown on my face with a plastic smile. The students stood as I came in, looking identical in their uniforms. They sat, one by one, as I ticked off their names for attendance. Then, when I came to the final name on my fifteen-name list, someone interrupted me just as I began reading it.

"You can call me Alex, Miss Summers."

I started. Damn it! That voice! I didn't know if I was happy to hear it or not. On one hand, it made my gut tie up into funny knots. But on the other, it meant that I would be having her in my class for the next two years! I decided to look on the positive side. I'd at least have one student who was devoted to the class.

"Alex," I announced, "I see you made it."

"Yes, ma'am." There was just something about the way she said it... was she mocking me?

If anyone should be mocked, I thought, it should be her. The compulsory uniform she wore looked pretty ridiculous on her, after the jeans and T-shirt I'd seen her in. The red skirt almost made her look girly. It was laughable, especially since she looked darned uncomfortable in her attire.

"All right," I said, turning away from the class and picking up a marker. It was time to get down to business. "My name is Miss Cady Summers..."

The rest of the class flew right by, especially when I realized that some of the pupils in the class were also genuinely interested in the art of writing creatively. I answered as many questions as possible before the bell rang, noticing that Alex never did raise her hand to ask me a thing.

But, I was curious about my students' abilities, and so, before they left, I handed out an assignment: 800 words on a modernist author of their choice by next week. A few of them groaned at this, but some of them looked intrigued.

They came forward to grab the instruction sheet as they left, and as I guessed, Alex was the last one. I smiled when I noticed that one side of her skirt was higher than the other, and that her shirt was hanging out partially. She could've gotten in trouble for that, but I doubted that she cared, and I wasn't about to start nagging. I tried to keep the laugh to myself, but as she passed my table, I could've sworn she murmured, "It's not funny."

But that just made it a hell of a lot funnier.

*

As I'd predicted, Alex turned out to be one of my best students. No, she still didn't ask many questions in class – probably playing up to her 'cool' image – but the assignments she handed in were better than most of the short stories that *published* authors churned out. The first story I read by her was one entitled, 'Stranger'. She talked about a man whom she'd just met, and how they were having a very normal conversation about life, the weather, sea lions. But in the end, there was a twist in the story, and the man she'd been talking to was actually her father. That was the start of a very long list of interesting stories she sent my way. I mean,

the other students in class were pretty good as well, but she was outstanding. The eloquent way she used her vocabulary really drew the reader in and played with their minds. That, and the fact that she was the only student who cussed in her assignments. Cussing was all right with me, as long as it furthered the plot. And with her, it definitely did.

I saw her around school almost everyday, hanging out with a group of girls who looked like they had really bad-ass attitudes. There was also this petite, fragile-looking Chinese girl who hung around Alex a lot. And more than once, I'd seen Alex put her arms around the girl. I'd raised my eyebrows at that, but didn't say anything.

I was so not affected.

It was late one evening, about six months into the school year, when I had some sort of confirmation that Alex was indeed gay. I'd just finished meeting with the Arts faculty in the school, and it was really late – later than I usually cared to stay. I was usually home by six every day so I could wind down and have a gabfest with my mom before her workday started at Macy's. Anyway, the meeting room had been unreasonably cold that day and it had kicked my bladder into overdrive.

Briefcase already in hand, I glanced up the winding stairs that led from the ground floor to the teachers' room and staff toilets. Call me lazy but I just didn't want to

climb two flights of stairs in my heels at the end of a workday just to use the ladies'. So I made my way to the nearest student toilet on the first floor instead. Teachers didn't normally use student toilets (I didn't think it was forbidden, though), but I was willing to bet that there weren't any students in school anymore, so what harm could it do?

At first, I didn't hear anything, and I thought the whole place was empty since it was nearly six. I ducked into a stall and unzipped my pleated black skirt – it was while I was handling business when I heard the ruffling. With a frown, I listened closely to the noise. It was coming from the last stall. Faint rustling of clothes, then a giggle. I rolled my eyes, sighing. College kids. They knew that sexual activities on campus weren't allowed, but they had to break the rules. Well, I thought – been there, done that, burnt the t-shirt.

As I pushed my way out of the stall, the door to the last stall opened and out came the little China-doll that hung around Alex all the time. Her face was flushed and her eyes held a just-fucked twinkle that I really didn't want to see... especially when I noticed the person who was standing behind her.

"Alex," I said, giving her a once-over. There was nothing amiss about her except for locks of her hair puffed up like a bouffant on her head. I could just imagine *how* her normally flaccid curls had become bouffant-like.

"Miss Summers," she replied, giving me that lazy smile. She obviously knew that I knew what they'd been doing. And it brought a lick of flame to my cheeks. Her eyes met mine and I couldn't look away.

"Who's your friend?" My voice sounded weird, even to myself.

"Oh, this is Mindy, my girlfriend." It was said without the slightest hesitation, as though she was proud of the little porcelain doll. As though being gay wasn't frowned upon – or was it illegal? – in Singapore.

I gritted my teeth.

"Mindy, hello," I said, grabbing a paper towel to dry my wet hands. "Well, it was very nice to meet you, but I'm afraid that I have to leave now. I'll see you in class tomorrow, Alex." I hesitated before adding, "Please be careful, you two. Anyone could've walked in." Then I turned on my heels and walked out the swinging toilet doors, clenching my fists when I heard the giggling in the toilet start again.

Okay, I was pissed, but I didn't know why. Alex was just a student, and it shouldn't matter to me if she was fucking *anyone*. That was her business! As long as she produced results and gave me no trouble, I shouldn't find any fault with her. But the problem was, I had felt this searing pain when

dollface had stepped out of the stall in front of Alex. I couldn't really explain it; I couldn't really place what I felt, either. It was a feeling of something between anger, pain and jealousy. And why either feeling should rise in me... it didn't make any sense at all.

I drove home in a pretty shitty mood, honking at drivers that I normally wouldn't honk at. Every radio station seemed to hate me, and even the traffic lights had plotted against me. But after the third honk at some poor soul, I managed to convince myself that I was merely PMSing and wasn't angry at what I'd seen back in school. It took me a whole ten minutes of drive time to tell myself that, and even after that, I didn't feel a whole lot better.

That night, I did nothing but indulge in a tub of Cookies and Cream ice cream, neglecting the scripts I had to look through for my Lit class. That was a first for me. I'd never neglected work before.

As I stared at another episode of a Friends re-run, my mind couldn't resist wandering back to the episode this evening. The look on Alex's face - like a contented, well-satisfied woman - pissed me off something fierce. I realized that I wanted to put that look there - which was absurd, since *I wasn't even gay!* I shoved a large spoonful of ice cream into my mouth. No, I definitely wasn't a lesbian, and I needed to stop thinking of my student as a sex toy. I needed to be professional.

I suppose what irked me the most was that I was mourning something I could never have. Even with Peter, the real estate agent I'd dated for a few months when I first arrived in Singapore, I'd never mourned. Sure, I was a little sad when I realized it would never go anywhere and I'd felt guilty for not having the courage to end it sooner (and using him to get a condo under market value, but that was another issue), but I'd never mourned him on the couch with ice cream.

And, I recalled, it had been the same for Connor, my boyfriend at Sheffield. I mean, my visa ran out. The practical thing was to move on. Connor had been upset when I told him that I'd gotten a job in Singapore, but really, all I'd felt was relief. No mourning needed. On to new horizons and all that jazz.

So why the hell was I having a pity party on the couch now?

I sifted through the sixty channels I had, thinking about the way Alex's dark eyes could look at me as though they were reading my soul and the way her smile made my heart jump just a little.

I became lost in a dream-plagued sleep after that, filled with the smell of melted ice cream and visions of beautiful, haunting onyx eyes.

*

I kept clear of her radar for the next few months. I'd see her in class, yes, but that was it. Whenever I spotted her hanging out in the canteen or near the basketball courts, I'd walk in the opposite direction, knowing exactly how much one appreciative look from her could cause my student-crush to exacerbate.

That's what I'd decided to call it - a student-crush. I'd done some research about it, and realized that it was pretty common amongst teachers to have a crush on a student, especially when he or she was a class-topper. The crushes usually came and faded quickly, an anonymous teacher had said, and I took courage in that. Maybe one day, I'd wake up and find that I hadn't had a dream about her.

It was one of those nights - those hot, stuffy September nights - when I couldn't sleep, that I decided to log on to Skype to see who was available for a chat. It was about two in the morning and I couldn't resist a yawn as I waited for the little whoosh to say that I was online. It would be two in the afternoon back home and I hoped Charm would be online to chat with. It had been a while since I talked to anyone close, and I'd begun to miss having family close-by, although I'd rather pull my own teeth out than tell my mom that.

A notification popped up just as I clicked on the first unread e-mail in my inbox. The contact's screen name was Alex0809, and my mind went from sleep-hazy to electrifyingly alert in two seconds. I vaguely remembered that I'd passed my e-mail address out to my students so that they could e-mail a soft copy of their assignments to me. So, this had to be...

I clicked 'accept' and the first message said: *'Couldn't sleep?'*

My brows furrowed at the message. It sounded way too personal.

Yes, I replied. Why are you up so late?

Alex: Oh, I'm working on an e-novel right now, and I need to submit the second chapter of it by tomorrow night, so... deadlines suck.

Me: Wow. A novel. Really? What is it about?

I was intrigued. None of my students had ever worked on a novel before. Or at least, I didn't know if they had.

Alex: It's not much yet. Quite generic supernatural crap. I write for a website that churns out romance novels – terrible stuff.

Me: *Ah, I see. Still, that's a good way to make some cash as a student. I can imagine you writing a supernatural novel. You have a natural flair for it.*

Alex: *Really?*

Me: *Absolutely.*

Alex: *That a really nice compliment... especially coming from you.*

Oh, dear. Was she hitting on me again? My gut twisted into an anxious knot of desire at the thought.

Me: *No problem. I was only being truthful.*

Alex: *Thanks.*

There was a pause, then she said: *Hey, Miss S?*

Cady: *Yes?*

Alex: *Why are you online if you can't sleep?*

A flush stole across my cheeks as I stared down at the words in front of me. I knew what she was thinking; I could envision the smirk on her face as she thought it. But I wasn't going to shy away from her taunts any longer.

Me: *I wanted to reply to some e-mails since I have the time.*

Alex: *Of course.*

My face was definitely on fire.

Me: *It's getting late, isn't it? I should probably get to sleep. Long day tomorrow! I'll see you in school.*

Alex: *Yeah, of course. Sleep tight.*

Me: *Goodnight to you, too.*

I sighed in relief as I shut my laptop down, feeling as though I'd just fought a battle. My palms were slick and I was pretty sure I'd gotten a great start on some serious boob sweat. I had no idea why Alex made me so nervous. It's not like I hadn't had crushes before. There'd been Rob in third grade, Haden in seventh, and the first guy I'd slept with – Vince in the tenth grade. They'd all been really nice – except for Rob, he hated me – but they sure as hell hadn't made me nervous. I didn't know why just talking to Alex made me feel like there my insides were on fire. It was weird.

I rolled over in bed, staring up at the ceiling. Speaking to Alex had gotten the adrenaline running through my veins, and now, I couldn't sleep. Groaning, I stumbled out of bed and headed for the bathroom. Maybe a nice, cold bath would help

soothe the heat in my body, or perhaps the detachable showerhead could be put to better use..

*

Intimate encounters with Alex were few and spread out through the two school years that I had with her. The first was the toilet debacle and the last was when she had buzzed the teacher's lounge looking for me. A meeting had just let out when I'd been extremely surprised to hear that she had been waiting for me for the past half hour.

She stood as I walked over to her, balancing a stack of assignments in one hand and my briefcase in another. Without my asking, she hefted the papers out of my hands and set it on the park-style bench she'd been sitting on. I was impressed by her manners, and quickly lapsed into small talk. She replied appropriately, but the look on her face was unreadable as I sank down onto the bench, asking her what she needed.

"So...what did you want to see me about, Alex?" Thank god my voice didn't betray the suddenly eccentric thump of my heart.

She just looked so sexy when she frowned. Damn it! No, I didn't just think that. It wasn't me.

"I just, um..well, I was wondering if you could..." I nodded slowly to encourage her as she seemed to have some trouble in

getting the words out of her throat. Her fingers began fiddling with the little 'I Miss You' keychain that hung on the briefcase I'd set by my side.

"Present from a boyfriend?"

I was pretty thrown from the change of topic, and normally, if anyone else had asked me that question, I'd have laughed at them and told them Grandma Ellie had sent me that two years ago as part of a care package. But with Alex... the question seemed pretty loaded, somehow. I mean, I should know. I was the one who was analyzing her monthly assignments. The girl was pretty deep.

"Does that have anything to do with why you're here?" I said a little too sharply after a moment of awkward silence. She let the keychain clink back into place.

"No, Miss Summers. I just... I wanted to ask you something..." she trailed off and rose from the chair. As I watched, she bit her lip, probably debating how to say what she had to say.

"Miss S, I'm having a little trouble."

Now, of all things I'd expected to hear, that was surely not one of them. I'd never thought that Alex would be the one who would come to her *teacher* to ask for assistance. It just wasn't very... Alex.

"What kind of trouble?" I asked slowly, knowing that this might very well be a delicate subject. She turned around and stared intently at a spot above my before murmuring:

"I've hit a rut."

Again, I gave her that slow nod. A rut? What exactly did she mean? Financially, emotionally... what? When she didn't expound on her statement, I extended a question of my own.

"What kind of rut? Can I help?"

With a sigh, she looked back at me. I crossed my legs and stared up at her, a little worried by her countenance. She was looking more unkempt than usual, with her hair sticking out in odd directions and her uniform in total disarray.

Something was up and it was serious. I could feel it now. The air around her was humming with what seemed to be dread.

"What's wrong, Alex?" I asked again, quietly. I knew that if I showed her how worried and concerned I was about her, she might shut me out, like most teens tended to do when someone cared too much about them. Hell, I used to do the same thing. But I was her teacher and couldn't help but worry.

"I have this thing, see. And I can't..."

"You can't?" I prompted.

She sighed heavily, looking down at her fingers – what lean fingers they were.

"I can't seem to write anymore," she said in something that resembled a whisper. Her eyes flickered to mine hesitantly before she looked away. "It's like.. whenever I think of the topic I'm supposed to be working on, nothing comes up. It's blank. And it freaks me out. A lot."

At that moment in time, she looked so much like the insecure teenager that she was, that I ached to take her into my arms and coddle her. I knew what she had was writer's block, something that all writers stumbled upon one time or another, but I wanted to wipe the worried frown off her face with more than just words.

"Miss S, I've considered everything. This isn't writer's block. Writer's block can't possibly feel like that. Like I can't string a plausible sentence together. Nothing seems right."

And then, there was the fighter in her again. I knew the writer in her was fighting for an explanation to cling onto, to dispel the notion that it was not a long-term thing. And that spirit made me want to pull her close and give her a reassuring hug.

"Have you thought about other explanations? Do you have something on your mind that you're supposed to do, but aren't doing? Something important? Maybe some personal issues? All these things can explain a temporary block." I proposed.

"I don't know," she said, sounding rather pissed off and annoyed at something. I stood, gathering my things.

"Do you need an extension for the next assignment?"

"Yes. I thought I could get a draft done by today or something, but I couldn't. Can I have another week or so? I hope something comes to me by then."

I assessed the honesty in her eyes, half-knowing I could trust her. The other half was the deviant inside me that wanted to back her up against the wall and kiss the crap out of her.

I cleared my throat.

"I trust you," I told her frankly, "and if you need an extension, you have until the end of the month. That gives you ten days to hand in whatever you can for your Prelim score. Let's just hope that this block of yours doesn't extend into the A Levels. I'd hate to see you get anything but an A for Creative."

Her smile was infectious, and I found myself smiling back. Her lips were perfectly proportionate and infinitely inviting, with the lower lip slightly thicker than the upper.

"Yeah. You and me both, Miss S," she said on a sigh.

"Thank you."

"No problem. I was a student once, too, you know."

Another smile, this one brighter than the previous, and it reached her eyes. She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her school skirt.

"So, I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yep. In class tomorrow."

She turned away from me with a little wave, then looked back after she took two steps. "Thanks again, Miss S. You have no idea how much this means to me."

"Anytime, Alex."

I walked straight into Staff Room, past the several empty desks and dropped myself onto the swivel chair in my little cubicle. I cleared the papers off my desk and rested my head on the table, rapping it on the table once, twice, thrice, trying to dispel the terrible thoughts from my head. But it was no use. The only thing *that* did was give me a botchy red

patch on my head that made my colleagues ask if I'd had an accident.

#

Chapter 3

At the end of three years in Singapore, I found myself gazing at the cityscape from the window of my condo, trying to memorize every detail of the place I'd be leaving in a month. It had been a hectic few years and all that remained were fine memories of a fine time spent in a fine city.

If I had regrets about the time that I spent here, I buried it, because I knew that I only regretted doing – or should I say, not doing – one thing. In about a month, I would be out of here, far, far away from her and she wouldn't bother me anymore.

I still remembered the moment when she'd come up to me after her final paper, which happened to be Creative Writing, wearing the smile that I'd come to dream about through fitful nights.

She'd told me that the paper had been easy, and the topic to write on had been do-able. There had been something in her eyes, a sadness that I could identify with, that made my heart clench, and I knew that she was trying to come around to saying goodbye. She took her time about it, too, talking about everything and anything until one of her badass friends came up to her and pulled her away. And even then, she'd looked back at me with a smile that mirrored more than the

gratefulness a student shows her teacher... or maybe I'd finally cracked.

I sighed heavily and turned away from the window, mentally calculating that it had been exactly two months and ten days since the time I had seen her last. I hated to admit that I was yearning to see her again, but I knew that that was the truth.

There were big, cardboard boxes strewn all over the condo, and some of them were already filled and scotch-taped to be shipped over to my grandmother's (and mother's) place in NY. The place looked very bare now, and lacked the character that my pretty throw cushions gave it. I sighed again as I flopped onto the bare couch and reached out for the stack of mail on the coffee table.

"Bills, bills, bills..." I muttered under my breath just as the phone started to ring.

Okay, I knew it was pathetic, but phone calls always got me excited, because it usually meant that someone was calling from home. And over the past few days, I'd become so homesick that I'd actually called Mom twice in a day. Being away from family for years kinda had that effect on most people.

"Hello?" I said cheerily into the phone as I flicked lint off my black tank top.

"Hey."

I think my heart stopped for a moment, and my fingers stilled on my stomach. That voice. I knew that voice. But it couldn't be. She didn't know my number. How could she?

"Um, hi. Do I know you?" I asked quizzically into the phone, hesitance in my voice.

"Yeah, you do, Miss S."

I swallowed thickly. I never really got over that drawl.

"Alex."

"Yeah. How are you?"

"I'm good. Alex, is something up?"

It was a bad habit of mine to start pacing when I got worked up about something. My feet were already making tracks through the thick carpet in the living room. Why was she calling? *God!* Now I'd be thinking about this conversation for the next few weeks.

You're a sad little shit, you know, the little voice in my head said.

Yeah, I know.

"Nothing's up, Miss S. Just wanted to talk to you."

I raised an arched brow in response.

"Really?" I said in the most sarcastic voice possible. "You call your teacher, whom you haven't seen in two months, in the middle of the afternoon to tell her that you 'just wanted to talk to her'?"

She laughed, the husky vibrations of it emanating from the phone and sluicing down my body. I bit my lip. Damn her.

"Well, yeah. And besides, you aren't my teacher anymore."

That last comment took me by surprise. I wouldn't say that the thought hadn't crossed my mind – that she had, indeed, graduated from school already and that I was not her teacher anymore – but hearing her say it had a profound effect on me. Mostly, my tummy just coiled in tighter knots.

Had she lain in bed thinking what I'd been thinking? That there was nothing stopping us now if we wanted something more? Somehow, the fact that I wasn't even gay didn't stop me from thinking of going out with her.

I decided to be forward with Alex.

"Alex, did you want something?"

There was a long pause. Then I heard her breath rasp over the phone.

"Yeah, I do, Miss S. I want you." For a moment, my world stilled and every muscle in my body went limp. I leaned against the wall, wondering what the hell was wrong with the world, when she continued with her sentence. "...to go out with me next Friday."

A gush of air rushed past my lips as I started breathing again. Did she know that she was killing me? Was she doing this on purpose?

I shouldn't go out with her, should I? It would be like a date, wouldn't it? Oh, hell.

"What? Like a date?" my voice was high and a little squeaky. I hadn't been this nervous in... forever.

"Well, now that you mention it, I think a date would be nice, don't you think?"

Whoa. Wait. What?

"Wait. You weren't gonna ask me out on a date?" I asked with a very confused frown.

"I was about to, but since you already asked *me...*" she trailed off as I tried to come up with a proper rebuff. I could see her shrugging in my mind's eye. "I'll pick you up at seven, Miss S."

The line went dead. I stared at the plastic in my hand as though it had taken a bite out of me. What had just happened?

I moved forward on shaky legs and daintily seated myself on the couch, the phone call replaying itself in my head. I was going on a date. With Alex. The very Alex that had been off-limits for two years.

"Oh my god," I said aloud as I felt the blood starting to pulse faster through my veins. This was *huge*.

Teachers dating students – correction, ex-students – wasn't very uncommon, was it? I knew of a few teachers who were married to their ex-students. But this was different. I was in a different country, and hell if I knew if they had a law against dating students. I could get into trouble..

For what? The nagging voice returned. *For going on one date with an ex-student?*

I needed advice. Lesbian advice. Lesbivice? I FaceTimed Charm, my oldest and gayest friend. She answered on the 20th ring.

"Hey, Charm. I need your help with something."

"Cee? What the...? Fuck, it's two thirty in the morning!" I winced as I heard the gruffness in Charm's voice; I could barely see her face in the dark.

"Yeah, I know. But I needed to talk to you. I have a problem. Like a *huge* problem. And I'm so confused, I don't know what to do..."

"Wait up, hun. Slowly, okay? I'm still kinda half-asleep." There was another voice in the background, sounding suspiciously like a mewl. "Hey, baby. No, nothing. Get back to sleep. I'll be back."

Charm slowly slid out of bed, leaving her partner behind. I told her the whole story, starting from the very beginning, and watched her pop M&Ms in her mouth to wake herself up. I knew that if anyone could give me good advice about girls, it would be Charm. Aside from the fact that she's known me for most of my life, she'd also exclusively dated women all her life. She'd be able to unravel the significance behind the odd yet exciting conversation I'd had with Alex.

"You're saying that you've been hung up on this girl for *two years*?" Charm's voice was incredulous. I was instantly defensive.

"No! Of course not..." Then I stopped, realizing it was foolish. Charm could see through every fib that slipped past my lips. "Please tell me what I'm supposed to do about Alex! Decode her or something."

"Okay, okay. Hmm. What does she look like?"

"Tall, dark, lean muscles. Gorgeous, short hair. Eyebrow piercing." Charm's bark of laughter had me grinning.

"I know that look, babe. You're totally sunk. I need to meet this girl. Damn," she said.

"Oh god, Charm. She's my student, you know, and I can get in trouble."

"Cady, you're such an idiot. You should go! There's nothing wrong with dating your ex-student. Unless it's the fact that she's a girl..."

"I don't know. Maybe. It's just that I can barely think whenever I'm near her. Do you know how hard I've tried to avoid her over the past two years? I *run* when I hear her voice. It's that bad. Stop laughing! You're such an ass," I hissed.

"Sorry," Charm sobered. "You should hear what you sound like. Jesus, Cee, just go for the damn date! You won't forgive yourself if you don't explore this attraction. I know you well

enough to say that. *I want you to go for this date, okay? And whatever happens, you'll know you gave it a shot.*"

I nodded. Charm had a point there. She always had a point. That was why I'd called her.

"So... when's the big night?" she asked, shoveling another handful of M&Ms into her mouth.

"Next Friday," I said absently, my mind awirl with discomfoting thoughts.

"Quick words of advice. Don't wear anything with starch. Maybe that skinny black jeans of yours with the see-through pink top. Or the thin strappy yellow dress we bought at Macy's..."

"You really have a mental list of my wardrobe, don't you?"

"Yeah – I'm not ashamed. Anyway, just don't wear something teacher-y. If you want the relationship to develop, you need to treat her like a friend, not her superior. Got that?"

"Wow. You make it sound like I'm 50. But I get it, thanks, Charm. Do you have to get off so soon?" I could tell she was going to say goodbye already.

"Yeah, I have an early meeting in the morning. But I'm excited for you, Cee. Have fun, okay? Wish I were there with you."

She dragged her lean fingers through her short, dark hair.

"I know. Me, too. I miss you."

"Miss you, too, babe. Oh, and um, if you sleep with her, we'll have a tell-all session once you get back."

"Ha! No way!"

"Fine, fine. Twenty questions?"

"Make it ten."

"Deal."

"All right. I'll see you on the 1st?"

"Yeah. You're picking me up from the airport, right?"

There was a pause. "Cee, does Alex know that you're leaving at the end of the month?"

Uh-oh. "I don't think so."

"You might want to speak with her about that... and think about what you want from your date."

"Okay." My voice was small and squeaky. I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I will. Thanks, babe."

"No problem. Take care. I'll hang up now. Oh wait."

"Yeah?"

"Trim your nails, okay?"

"What? Why?" I glanced down at the long nails I'd painstakingly grown over the past few months. I'd spent two hours last night trying to paint them the perfect shade of pink while binge watching *Seinfeld*.

"You don't want to tear her shit up," she said, matter-of-fact. I took two seconds for me to understand what she meant. I winced. "Gotta go! Love ya."

"Wait, wait!"

Charm yawned. "Yeah?"

"Charm, I – I just wanted to say I'm sorry." I swallowed thickly as images from the past caught up with me... things that I'd wanted to block out because they'd been just plain awkward.

"For what?"

"For... this." I didn't want to say it out loud.

There was a lengthy pause before she laughed. "Cee, we're cool. So I thought I loved you one summer over ten years ago. We were teenagers. I was a walking hormone. And you were always so sexy trying to fight my battles for me."

"I just... I never thought..."

Charm sighed loudly. "Cee, relax, okay? No, I don't feel betrayed by this. Things happen. I'm happy for you. Maybe we just weren't written in the stars or some shit."

"Or some shit."

I knew she was trying to make light of it. Although she tried to pull off the 'give no fucks' vibe, Charm was a really sentimental person at heart. But it wouldn't have felt right keeping this from her.

"I'm going back to bed now but I'll call you over the weekend, okay? I promise."

I nodded. That was the first time she'd ever hung up without saying she loved me.

*

I fussed through the whole week. The only excuse I had was nerves. There was nothing to do at home because I was officially off work. The teaching contract was done and over with, and the only reason I was staying till the end of the month was to wait for the A level results to be released. I wanted to know how my students had done.

The date had me tied up in knots. I wanted it, I soon came to realize. I wanted the date with Alex but I was scared. Going out with a girl was a big leap for me, especially a girl who was my ex-student. If you were a teacher, you'd understand how difficult it was to cross the line between a student and yourself because there was always a professional line between the both of you. All these thoughts were confusing the hell out of me, and I'd called Charm a few more times before she started warning me not to. Every time I called, I'd asked her the same questions – 'what if it doesn't go well?' or 'what if I'm not what she expected?' Yeah, she got tired of hearing that as well.

On the afternoon of the big day, I raided my closet for the black jeans and slinky button-down top that Charm had told me to wear. I'd bought them on my last visit home almost a year ago, but they still looked as good as new. I tried them on, just in case, and was pretty satisfied with the way the jeans hugged my hips. I'd always been a girl with too much ass, and the black denim hid the extra pounds efficiently. The

blouse was just transparent enough to provide an enticing glimpse of skin. I bit my lip and considered my reflection... the whole outfit looked like something an off-duty teacher would wear. I sighed and pulled the clothes off, tossing them to a corner of the room.

My other option was a strappy yellow dress that Charm had picked out last year. It had a cute but modest sweetheart neckline and a scallop-edged hem that stopped just above my knee. I threw it on and struggled with the zipper for a few minutes.

Finally, panting and hair undone, I took in my reflection. I looked... flirty. The skirt kept its shape when I moved, and it actually covered my ass. Well, win-win, I suppose.

I carefully took the dress off and ironed it, placing it flat on the bed before heading for a shower. I'd promised myself I wouldn't panic, and that's exactly what I was doing. *Not* panicking. I was going to take a nice, hour-long shower, do my hair and get all dolled up before seven.

I was *not* going to panic.

Keeping true to my word, I got out of the tub just shy of five in the evening. I toweled myself off and stared at the mirror for a couple of minutes before deciding to blow my hair out so that it hung in over my shoulders. That done, I

carefully slipped into the dress and applied a thin layer of foundation to cover up the light sprinkle of freckles on my nose. A slick line of winged eyeliner, a tinge of pink blush and a 10-minute YouTube video tutorial on 'How to Highlight Your Lips' later, I was ready with little less than an hour to spare.

By six thirty, I was ready as ever to leave. I sat on the couch impatiently, flicking through TV channels and trying my hardest not to worry my lips. My eyes landed on the pile of moving boxes in the corner of the room and I kicked them into the small storage closet with the owners' stuff. It definitely felt like I was hiding a crime.

At six forty five, I switched the TV off and decided to go down to the lobby to wait for her.

*

I heard a thunderous roar the moment I stepped into the lobby. The security guard, a heavysset middle-aged man, looked startled by it as well. He looked through the glass doors inquisitively just as I walked past him. Our eyes focused instantly on the black bike parked on the street.

I swallowed audibly.

Alex pulled the helmet from her head and threw her leg over the monstrous machine, looking sexy as hell in her tight-

fitting black blazer and skinny jeans. Under the blazer, she wore a white tee that veed sharply between her small breasts. A long black chain and Oxfords punctuated the look.

It felt like a punch to the gut after seeing her in uniform for two years.

I still stood in front of the lobby, apprehensive about the bike but unable to stop myself from ogling her. Those dark jeans really made her legs look incredibly, impossibly long. The plunging V-neck of her shirt revealed two prominent collarbones with an enticing hollow in between. I watched the black chain slap against her chest as she jogged over. I wondered – not so briefly – if she was wearing a bra.

"Hi," she said, coming to a stop in front of me. My gaze was still fixated on her chest. I couldn't seem to look away. My face was heating, and I was also sure that my chest would soon be red, too. *How do men surreptitiously check out women's boobs all the time? I need to Google that skill. It seems like a useful skill to have right now.*

"You look beautiful," she continued when I didn't respond. Finally, after a few awkward seconds, my eyes managed to receive the message my brain had been fast tracking. I looked up and saw that her eyes glinted with humor, as though she was trying her best not to laugh at my expense.

*Say words! Put a sentence together. A phrase, a greeting
- anything!*

"So do you," I managed to croak out. "I-I like that chain."

I think I said that as an excuse just to conduct more research on my hypothesis regarding her bra(less) state.

"Thanks. I really couldn't decide what to wear tonight," she confessed a little sheepishly. That statement snapped me out of my daze.

"You couldn't decide? Imagine my ordeal!" I gestured to my outfit. "What does one wear to a kinda sorta date with an ex student?"

"Well," she said as she held out her arm. I hesitated only a second before I curled my fingers over her bicep lightly. *Jeez*, she felt much more solid than I'd expected. "For the record, this isn't a kinda sorta date. It's a date. I'm taking you out and we're going to have a great time – two people enjoying each other's company."

We walked in silence as I processed what she'd said. When we reached her bike, she turned towards me. "Are you okay with that?"

One perfectly manicured brow was arched; the missing eyebrow ring had left a sexy indent in the wing of her brow. I wondered what it would feel like to trace that arch with my fingers... and then my lips.

I looked into her eyes. Like the first time we'd met, we'd kind of gravitated towards each other where we stood and there was barely a few inches of space between us. A dark, earthy scent filled my nose. I really wanted to lean forward and bury my face in her neck. I couldn't help but wonder *why*, though. Why Alex? Why a woman? Why did I have such an intense reaction to her? Why did my heartbeat feel so irregular? Why was that scent driving me crazy? Why did I not want to care about anything and just take her upstairs and figure out what it truly meant to be with a woman, especially a woman like Alex? Why did I only want to do it with *her*?

I inhaled deeply, trying to craft a response to her question, but her hands suddenly bracketed my hips.

"Hop," she instructed, and she placed me on her bike, side saddle-style. "Now, if you're too uncomfortable with this, we can just call this off-."

"No!" I interjected, probably a little too quickly. I placed a hand on her arm to punctuate my words.

"No, I don't want to call this off," I clarified. "I want this date, Alex. I've obsessed over the pros and cons for the

past few days and the truth is, if I don't do this, I'll regret it."

"Why?"

I exhaled, long and hard. "Because I find you devastatingly attractive." *There. I said it. It's out there now.* In the worst-case scenario, I'll leave in two weeks and never have to see her again.

I watched as a small, ridiculously sexy smile twisted her lips.

"Cady." Her voice was low. That was the first time she'd ever said my name. "I've been fighting my attraction to you for two years. *Every single person* in my life told me how stupid I was to be pining after my *ang moh* teacher. But I still had to try."

I swallowed thickly. Her eyes were so sincere; I didn't doubt her words. "But Alex,

I don't want to disappoint you... I'll level with you. I've never been on a date with a girl before. And, I mean, you're exceedingly attractive but what if I-."

I felt her finger under my chin, tilting it up. It was hard to meet her eyes, but when I did, I only saw understanding and probably a little mischief. She leaned towards me, the single finger on my chin slowly following the

curve of my throat down to the sweetheart neckline of my dress. Our noses were almost touching. My breath hitched and goosebumps spread on my bare arms. It felt like she was trying to coax the insecurity out of me.

I felt a sigh – of relief? – escape.

“By the way, I’m not wearing a bra. Just in case you’re still wondering.”

My eyes widened. I flushed guiltily and she chuckled, leaning away. She took the tiny bit of contact with her and I felt it keenly.

“Your pupils are dilated,” she observed, looking rather pleased with herself. “I don’t think I’ll be disappointed with this date. Now, strap in.”

She handed me a helmet.

#

Chapter 4

We pulled up in front of a row of beautifully decorated shophouses. As Alex helped me off the bike – I mostly just paid attention to keeping my skirt closed – and paid for parking, I looked up at the mint green and cream building we were standing in front of. The white lattice design over the mint paint reminded me of 3-D lace. Most of the traditional buildings had obviously been revamped to suit the rapid developments in Singapore but this neighborhood still seemed to have a relaxed old-school vibe to it. In front of several shophouses on the street, patrons were sitting in the shade, sipping their rapidly cooling beers and feeding their nicotine habits.

Alex led us to a tiny restaurant on the corner of the street. It literally looked like a hole in a wall, albeit a chic one. As she ducked slightly through the entrance, I heard a sharp scream before a body brushed past me to envelop Alex in a hug.

Alex smiled widely and hugged the woman back, patting her fondly on her shoulder. "Auntie Lin," she said, when she could extricate herself. "This is Cady, my date."

"Of course! Ai, so rude. Hello, hello!" A plump Chinese woman in her 40s, face pink with excitement, Lin offered me

her hand. "Alex use to work here every weekend when she seventeen. Now I don't see her anymore. I just excited!"

I shook her hand warmly. "Don't worry about it. You have a lovely place. Feels more like home than a restaurant."

Auntie Lin looked at Alex and then back at me. "That's what I always want it to be. More of a home than anything else."

The décor was very inviting – warm browns and beige you would use for a nook in your favorite part of the house rather than a small restaurant. Handmade artwork, each of them unique, only accentuated the home-y vibe. The few patrons were already seated and looked like regulars. One of them waved at Alex.

I smiled. "You've done a very good job."

Lin beamed at Alex. "I like her already. You should come more often. Look at you – so skinny. Have you been eating or not?"

Alex winced when Lin pinched her arm. "Yes, Auntie, I have. You've known me for a long time – have you ever seen me look differently?"

Lin made a dismissive sound at the back of her throat. "I just need to try my best to fatten you up. So skinny." She tutted. "Anyway, your table ready."

She turned to Alex and gave her a deliberate, conspiring wink.

My brows furrowed when we exited the main room and entered a dark walkway, which was lit only by a small, electric lamp that hung from the ceiling. There was a flight of steep stairs, and Lin panted as she ascended them. I felt Alex's hand on my waist, steadying me as I carefully climbed the wooden death-trap in my heels. On the very top step, I felt a knuckle brush against the back of my thigh and jerked forward – on level ground, thankfully – and heard Alex chuckle behind me.

There was a small table set up in the middle of the none-too-wide balcony. It was covered in a burgundy tablecloth and on top of it sat an array of flowers, a bottle of wine, and a single lit candle. I smiled when I saw it; it had been so long since anyone had done anything romantic for me. I couldn't even remember the last date I'd been on. But this, the effort she'd so obviously put into making things special, started a little glow in my already aflutter tummy.

Lin stood to one side, watching my reaction.

Alex pulled herself up the steep steps, her silhouette lean and tall against the cityscape in the setting sun. When her eyes met mine, the longing in them called to me in deep, emotive way.

See, here's the thing. Guys have given me that look before – the 'I want you so bad it hurts' look. And it had made me feel great. Sexy, powerful. In charge. But, looking at Alex, all I felt was a reactive pull, a need to soothe her desires with my fingers against her skin, my lips against hers.

She looked away, her hands shoved deep in her pockets. I hadn't said anything and she now looked apprehensive, as though she wasn't sure if I would like the place she had chosen. I reached up and stroked her arm.

"It's beautiful, Alex," I murmured, and jolted a little when her hand reached up to cover mine. She gave my hand a little squeeze, led me to the table and made sure I was seated first.

"Look at you two," Lin commented. "So sweet."

Alex looked a little sheepish. "Thanks, Auntie Lin. What do you have on the menu today?"

"Anything you want, I cook for you."

She turned to me. "How are you with spice?"

"Um..." *Wussy. Terrible.* Several negative words came to mind. "I can't take too much of it."

Lin nodded. "Okay, I bring you two something delicious but no spicy."

She carefully made her way back down the rickety steps.

"So." Alex palmed the bottle of wine and began the corkscrew process – which was good because her next question made my mouth completely dry. "How's work going?"

My conversation with Charm reared its ugly head. *Does Alex know that you're leaving at the end of the month? You might want to speak with her about that... and think about what you want from your relationship.* I tried not to wince outwardly. But this wasn't the time or place. I didn't want to ruin a lovely evening by being too forthcoming – or was I just avoiding hard decisions again?

"It's good," I said instead. "Same old, though. What about you? What have you been doing after JC?"

She handed me a glass of wine. "I'm taking a gap year to think about what I really want to study. I always assumed it would be English but it's not a marketable degree. Sorry," she added when she remembered I had an English degree.

I took a sip of my wine and waved her apology away. "Don't apologize. You're absolutely right. I remember being in such a panic in my final year at Sheffield. At the time, things with my mom hadn't been great and I was desperate to get a job to extend my visa... so I wouldn't have to go home and deal with that crap. As it turns out, though, English is not a niche skill that the UK job market looks out for." I shrugged.

"So how did you end up here?" she asked, leaning back in her chair casually. My eyes were again drawn to her prominent collarbones and how startlingly sexy they looked in the glow of the candlelight. I forced my eyes to flick back up to her face again.

"Well, there was a job fair thing at Sheffield. The reps from Singapore liked that I had a degree from the UK, plus they paid for teacher training. It seemed like a pretty good deal at the time for a fresh grad in complete panic."

She swirled the wine in her glass around. "But you don't think it's a good deal anymore?"

"Well," I edged, "It certainly is a good deal tonight. Here." I raised my glass, hoping to steer the conversation away from a precarious topic. "Here's to a lovely evening."

I noticed that she only took a light sip of her wine but I didn't comment. I assumed she was trying to stick to a two-drink limit and it was still early.

I sat back in my chair and sipped my wine, swirling the flavor around my tongue and feeling the slight burn of the alcohol in my throat. Alex watched me. Her eyes were intense, almost hungry. She held my gaze long enough for me to feel a flush creeping up my face and a spark of pleasure spiraling in my core. I bit my lip, trying in vain not to smudge the pink lipstick I'd so painstakingly applied. Her gaze dropped to my lips and then back up to my eyes. Her smile was... rakish.

I set my wineglass down, realizing a little too late that it was already half empty. I was a real lightweight with alcohol – always have been. Mom had once told me it was genetic but to be honest, she's a bit of a questionable source. I don't think she remembers most of her twenties.

I rose from the table, going over to stand by the concrete railing overlooking the neighborhood of colorful shophouses. I heard Alex's chair scrape backwards and then she was next to me, resting her elbows on the railing. Soft waves of her dark hair curled around her jawline and I had the urge to reach up and comb my hair through the tendrils.

I'd read somewhere that the principle behind attraction is mystery. The more mystery that surrounds the object of your desire, the more you want them. But chasing the mystery, that

slow churn of desire, the unhurried ascent to fulfillment, is usually far more satisfying than taking something apart and ruining its magic. But as I cast a sidelong glance at Alex, despite my musings, I couldn't take my mind off the idea of unwrapping her mysteries. Or her unwrapping me. Or we could always unwrap each other. Quickly. Up here on this balcony..

Alex cleared her throat and I swallowed thickly, wondering if I should surreptitiously check the corners of my mouth for drool.

"You know," she said, her voice low. "You really shouldn't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

She leaned in close and her lips brushed against the shell of my ear. "You shouldn't look at me like all you want to do is push me back against this railing and slide your fingers down my jeans. Because," she pulled away again, "you're not gay, right?"

My breath had caught in my chest the moment she'd come so close. Although I felt a burst of heat of my cheeks, I couldn't breathe as I stared into her eyes. The smile on her lips was cheeky, playful, but her gaze fairly smoldered. My core answered with a delicious tightening.

Two years, I thought. Two years of fantasizing about this girl.

I reached out and grabbed a fistful of her blazer, pulling her towards me. She placed her hands lightly on my arms - to steady herself at first but then her hands curled around my flesh, holding me in place, her torso pressed up against mine. I swear I could feel how thin her tee was as I ran my fingers along the edges of her blazer, over her enticing collarbones and into the softness of her hair, slowly fingering the tendrils.

Her eyes were hooded as she watched me and I wondered briefly if she thought I was brazen for touching her so boldly - did anyone really use the word 'brazen' anymore? But I just couldn't help it. I didn't want to help it anymore. I loved the way her skin felt under my fingers and the delicious contrast between our skins stirred the already bubbling desire that threatened to overwhelm my senses. *Kiss me*, I thought desperately. *Now, now, now.*

She leaned in, her lips an inch away from mine. My breath caught again and I froze, kind of like bracing for impact. Her hands tightened on my arm as she hesitated, paused seconds away from pleasure. I could almost taste it.

"Alex..." I whispered.

"The table so nice and you two want to stand over there?" Auntie Lin's voice cut through the fog of desire that bogged us down. I stepped back, away from Alex's grasp, and felt air whoosh back into my body. Alex spoke to Lin as she deposited various dishes on the table but I heard nothing, fighting hard to get my body under control. *Controlled, deep breaths. Controlled, deep breaths.*

I wanted to fucking scream! But I plastered a smile on my face and turned instead.

"The food looks amazing," I said, and even to me, my voice sounded wooden and weird.

"I hope you like," Lin said, stepping back from the table to count off the dishes. "It's no so spicy."

"Thank you. I can't wait."

As Lin left, Alex turned to me again, "If you smile like that some more, your face might break."

I crossed my hands in front of my chest. I saw no reason to lie. "Well, I'm frustrated!"

She chuckled. She *actually* chuckled. I glared at her.

"Here." She topped up my glass. "Relax. We have all the time in the world, don't we?"

The glass paused halfway to my lips.

"Yeah, you're right," I croaked, and took a big swig.

#

Chapter 5

She was, without a doubt, the sexiest and most entertaining date I'd ever had. Gentlemanly, too, I added in my mind, remembering how she'd climbed down the stairs before I did so that she could offer me a hand down the steep, rickety deathtrap. Then, on the last step, she'd grasped my waist and lifted me down. That really got my heart racing.

I protested when she insisted on paying for both of us, but it was no use. She paid up anyway, making me mumble beneath my breath about stubborn females. We strolled to her bike, saying nothing, just reveling in the comfortable silence between us, taking in the raucous laughter of drunk patrons and the cacophony of different genres of music escaping the doors of various pubs.

Half an hour later, I found myself in a crowded new age pub, staring up at a trio on stage that looked odd and mismatched.

"Who are they?" I shouted over the music to Alex, who was in the process of trying to get the attention of the bartender for two beers.

She handed me a cold bottle of Tiger before answering. "They're rappers, and very good ones at that. They're on in a few. You'll see."

Alex leaned back against the bartop, resting her elbows on the wood. I was seated on a high stool, which put me almost at eye-level with her. My eyes roamed over the slender column of her neck to the small swells of her breasts, stopping at the point where her hipbones were visible through her thin tee. My throat was suddenly dry and I tilted the beer to my lips.

I looked up and blushed fiercely when I realized that Alex had been watching me the whole time. That rakish grin appeared on her face again and I felt my insides become goo in response. I didn't pull away when she leaned over.

"The view from up here ain't that bad neither, honey," she drawled in my ear with a distinct New Yorker accent - a pretty darn accurate one!

"Well, well. If it isn't my favorite girl," a distinctly Australian accent pierced through the thumping music.

We turned to find an older Indian man smiling down at us. A broad smile split Alex's lips before she threw her arms around him in a long bear hug. Even though he was caught in Alex's hug, the man's eyes never left me. He wagged his eyebrows and I gave him a mini-wave.

"Cady, this is Jack. He's a friend. And the best mentor I could ever ask for."

Jack shook my hand. "That's a very nice boost to my ego. It's nice to meet you, Cady. How do you like *Echoes*?"

Echoes was the name of the lounge / club we were in. "It's lovely, Jack. Is this your place?"

He nodded. "Yeah, it's my baby. I owned a bar in Sydney for years, but when my son moved here, I decided to be the tagalong dad." He shrugged. "It keeps me occupied at least."

Before he could say anymore, the lights lowered and the trio took center stage. Jack mouthed the word 'enjoy' before sliding behind the bar and handing me another beer.

The concert was a blur. Alex hadn't been wrong – the trio was good. They rapped, mostly, and the female singers in the background filled in the rhythm part. The concert lasted a little over an hour, and mid-way through it, people who'd been lounging before started dancing.

Needless to say, I joined Alex on the dance floor as well, and we became a part of the body of wriggling limbs. I wasn't a great dancer, but I could hold my own on the dance floor, especially when heels helped my posture. When I draped my arms over Alex's shoulder and moved against her, I could

see the surprise in her eyes. But that didn't stop her from placing her hands on my hips and dancing with me. We attracted quite a lot of attention – not all good, but those who frowned did nothing about our public display of intimacy.

I was on my third bottle of beer and tipsy by the time Alex pulled me out the door of the club. She had stopped with only one, being the responsible driver. She put her arms around my shoulders as we walked to her bike.

"Is the night over?" I asked as we reached her bike. Looking around, I saw a trash can and disposed of the half-empty bottle of beer.

"Do you want it to be over?" Alex asked, withdrawing my helmet from the in-built storage unit. She'd stored hers behind the counter at the bar.

"Not really," I confessed as I took my helmet from her. She smiled.

"Right, then. Hop on. Let me take you somewhere."

I pressed myself to her tightly as she drove through the city. I recognized a couple of places we passed, but when she turned onto an unknown road, the mental map I had become useless. We zipped past an empty park, resorts and a row of houses before she stopped the bike around a corner. In front of us was a short walk that led to a long stretch of sand.

"The beach," I stated, somewhat surprised. Alex didn't seem like the type who'd bring a girl to the beach on the first date.

"Yeah. It's special," she said, getting off the bike after I did. "Come on. I'll show you my favorite spot."

She took my hand and led me across a quiet beach. I'd taken my heels off before I stepped on the sand, and tiny little pebbles of it squidged between my toes. When the wind blew, I stepped closer to Alex, pressing myself against her body heat.

And just like that, I felt the last of my reservation of being with her fade away. This rightness had never been present in my life before, and I wanted more of it, more of her. I lifted her hand and placed it over my shoulder, burrowing into the familiar smell of her cologne. I could swear that she smiled, even though I didn't look up to see it.

We came to a small clump of trees at one end of the beach, and she led me through it, up a slope, and to a cliff-like boulder. Below us, the water lapped at the rocks, and in front of us was the skyline of Malaysia. Alex seated herself with her legs hanging over the edge, and I followed suit. We sat in silence for a while, listening to the waves and the occasional coo of an owl. It was peaceful, so damn comfortable

to sit with her, not talking, not doing anything but basking in each other's presence. I smiled to myself.

"I used to come here a lot when I was younger," Alex said, still staring out at the waves. I looked over at her, and her eyes had a far-away look in them, as though she was remembering a time that had passed. I scooted closer.

"I can see why you did," I remarked, just as softly as she'd spoken. "It's very peaceful."

"I made some very important decisions in my life here."

"Really? Like what?" I asked, looking down at where my bare feet were dangling about ten feet above the rocks.

"Like, what to do when your parents are dicks."

"Everyone's parents are dicks at some point, Alex. I happened to think my mom didn't come with a setting other than 'shrew'." I laughed to myself but her smile was sad.

"What?" I asked, nudging her with an elbow. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Just lost in thought, I suppose."

I saw the pain in her eyes before she turned away to watch the waves swoosh onto the shore. I lifted a hand to her

chin and turned her around to face me. "No matter what it is, Alex, you can talk to me about it. But not before you're good and ready."

"Thank you," she said. I smiled.

We sat in silence for a little while, enjoying the quiet and the feel of each other.

"I have a question," I piped up after a while.

"Anything," she responded with a shrug.

"Why *me*? I know you have your pick of girls. Don't deny it," I added when I felt her start to protest. "So why *me*?"

She looked into my eyes for an intense few seconds. "You know, the first time I looked at you, I saw this dolled-up, amazingly attractive woman who was so out of my league. My brilliant teacher, no less." I bumped shoulders with her. "I was so attracted to you, Cady. Then we talked, and there was something that pulled me to you, and I couldn't explain it, but it felt right. I knew you wouldn't date me if I'd asked you out while I was still in school, so I waited."

She shook her head. "All my friends took every opportunity to tell me how ridiculously stupid I was to pursue whatever I felt for you. But you know what? I had nothing to lose... except maybe a little bit of my ego."

I had to smile.

"Do you know what you want from this, Alex?" I asked, moving closer to rest my head on her shoulder again.

Pause. Then, "Yeah."

"Me, too."

"And what is that?" she asked, her breath ruffling my hair.

"You. I just want to be with you, and figure out what all this means." I couldn't have been more honest if my heart was being ripped open and checked for its contents.

Alex sighed, and I looked up at her, wondering if I'd been too honest. But she turned to me with a silly smile on her face.

"I must be dreaming," she said.

I rapped on her chest with a curled finger. "You're not."

"This is way too good to be real," she muttered, leaning close again. My fingers rose to her hair, brushing back the curly strands that fell on her forehead.

"Good things happen sometimes," I reminded her. She stared at me for a long while.

"Not to me."

It was one of those moments when time was suspended, and you could do nothing else but stare into someone else's eyes and queue the cheesy music.

"I've been waiting for this moment for so long," she murmured, her breath grazing my lips.

Her kiss was light. Unusual. Sensual. There was something about yearning for a firmer press of her lips on mine that seemed to sensitize every inch of skin of my body. Then she slanted her lips over mine and blocked all thought. I think I trembled. My hands found her cheek, cupping it as her tongue traced the soft curve of my lower lip. I sighed, trickles of pleasure running through my body as her fingers tangled in my hair, caressing my scalp.

I've been waiting for this moment for so long..

Her words echoed through my mind, and I pressed myself harder against her, my other hand coming up to rest lightly over her heart. She jerked at the touch, but didn't break the kiss. Her teeth nipped at my lip, and I felt her smile against me before her tongue dipped into my mouth.

To say that the friction was electric would be an understatement. I melted into a pool of incoherent thought as she tangled her tongue with mine, muddling my mind. Lick, retreat, lick, retreat. That was exactly how she drove me mad. And when she pulled back, I was breathless, needy, already edging towards her again.

She laughed softly at the look on my face.

"I still think I'm dreaming," she murmured. I lowered her head and pressed another kiss on her dreamy lips.

"You're not dreaming, Alex."

This time, it was she who trembled, and I basked in her pleasure.

She rested her forehead against mine when I pulled away. As we caught our breaths, head to head, nose to nose, she made little circles at the sides of my breasts, where her fingers had ended up. It was *really* distracting me from getting my breath back. In fact, it was driving the air *out* of my lungs. She pulled me closer to her side and I tucked my head in the crook of her neck. Her hand rested on my hip.

A gust of wind blew, and I shivered.

"It gets cold around here after midnight," Alex admitted. "We should go."

We indulged in one more kiss before rising from the ledge and trudging back to her bike. This time, when my hands went around her waist, I felt a spurt of possessiveness rush through me when she slid an arm around my neck.

I'm with Alex.

Alex!

#

Chapter 6

"So, um... thanks for tonight," I said, swinging down from the bike, undoing the helmet.

"Anytime," she replied, unstrapping her own.

The silence followed that was just a bit awkward. I didn't want this night to end. But... would she think I was too forward if I asked her to come up for coffee?

"I, um, I... Hmm." She grinned at my loss for words.

"I'll call you" was what she said, her voice still low and husky. I nodded and walked toward the lobby of the condo. Mid-way there, I turned back and walked briskly to her bike. Without stopping, I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her startled lips, unable to hold back the longing that I felt upon separation.

"Do you, um, want to come up for, um, coffee?" I asked when we pulled apart. The look in her eyes told me that if we went up, she'd be having a little more than coffee. I didn't care.

She nodded, pulling the keys out of the ignition and we made our way towards the lobby.

It started out as little nuzzles, with her burying her nose against my shoulder. The elevator was taking long, longer than usual to get to my floor, and I supposed Alex, like me, was impatient.

When my hand rose to her shoulder, and I turned toward her, her tongue flicked out and licked my neck. I shivered, fingers digging into her, and she backed me up against the side of the elevator. Her seeking fingers traveled over my stomach to settle above my navel, stroking the sensitive area there through my dress. I gasped, my fingers moving down from her shoulders to clutch her biceps, turned on as hell.

I knew I should've been the adult, knew I should've told her to wait till we got to the condo, but damn if I could form the words on my tongue. My body felt like it was on fire, claiming all my attention, and I couldn't spare any to stop her. She bit down on my exposed shoulder, little nips that sent prickles of excitement through me. Her thumbs moved to massage the tops of my breasts, making me ache for her to pull the dress down and touch the aching nubs.

But she didn't. She kept teasing me with those gentle, feminine flicks and I couldn't bear it any longer. Groaning, I reached up and pulled her hands down to the mounds of my breasts, just as she ducked her head to kiss me. The pressure

of her mouth and hands was a sweet heaven that teetered on the brink of an orgasmic high. However, when her forefinger found the end of my nipples through the dress and flicked it, I felt a spasm run through my body. And the spasm only got rawer when she pushed one of her thighs against my core.

The words of caution that had been on the tip of my tongue became a rush of breath when she moved against me. Distantly, I heard a ding, but I couldn't concentrate on anything but Alex and the intense pleasure rioting in my body.

She leaned close, placing a kiss on my forehead, inhaling the scent of my hair, grinding against me with such a feral rhythm that every thought in my being was only of her, of the high that was just out of reach. In a heartbeat, I felt the change in her, moving from gentle to rough passion. Her thigh angled downward now, instead of the horizontal it was before. It flicked downward, across my clit, and her thumb and forefinger pinched my right breast a little too sharply. I felt something in my body misfire. I arched sharply as my cry echoed through the elevator, clinging to her for support as the pleasure shot through me, sharper and quicker than ever before. All I could do was let her take care of me as I throbbed.

"Cady?"

I stirred, feeling deliciously satisfied. My limbs were languid. For a moment, everything was a blur.

"Alex?"

"Good to see you're awake," Alex said. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to the couch, my copy of Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* propped open in her lap. It was then that I realized that I was *lying* on the couch. I struggled to get up, trying to remember what had happened after the elevator... but came up with nothing. How did I get in here?

"What happened?" I asked, raising a hand to my mussed hair, trying to shake some order into it.

"You passed out," Alex said with a self-indulgent smile. She was so pleased with herself.

"Yeah, I got that part." I couldn't keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

Alex's hand rose to my face, caressing one slightly freckled cheek. "Not used to having orgasms, huh?" she teased.

I narrowed my eyes at her, daring her to take the joke further. She was smart enough not to.

"You all right?" There was concern in her eyes.

"Fine, fine. Can't believe I passed out."

"I can't decide if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

She rose from the floor and sat on the space my legs had vacated.

"Uh, do you want that coffee now?" I asked, filling in the silence that followed.

She shook her head with a smile. "I didn't *really* come up for the coffee, nice as that offer is. I need to talk to you."

"Okay." I crossed my legs and sat up. "What's up?"

"Do you feel like we're rushing into this? I don't want you to feel like I'm pushing you into something. I really should have waited to... you know. We should've talked about things first and instead..."

She wasn't looking at me as she said that. Instead, her eyes were fixed unseeingly on the TV opposite her. I contemplated her words and thought well about my response before it left my lips.

"You didn't do anything I didn't want you to – trust me, Alex. I want this, and I've dreamed about this for two years."

She turned toward me. "But you don't know anything *about* me. I wanted us to feel connected before we became intimate..."

I raised my brow in a challenge. "You're wrong. I know a fair bit about you."

"Really?"

"Really."

"What's my favorite color?"

"Blue."

The look on her face was priceless.

"How'd you know?" Alex asked incredulously. I shrugged.

"Elements in your work are always blue. Blue shirts, blue cars, blue walls... inference, sweetheart."

She nodded. "Okay... Okay, that's reasonable. Uh, birthday?"

"5th of June."

I could tell that she was starting to freak. "What? I'm your teacher! I know these things."

"Fine. Favorite food?"

She got me with that one. I shook my head.

"Thai. I love Thai food," she said, slipping her shoes off so that she could curl her legs onto the couch. "You?"

"Japanese. I'd take miso soup over a cheeseburger any day."

I scooted closer to her so that our shoulders touched.

"You know, I can barely think when you do that," she confessed, leaning away just a tiny bit. I laughed.

"It's good to know, cause I go totally insane when you do."

She raised her eyes to the ceiling, as though she were pleading a divine intervention. "What's happening to me?"

I put my arms around her waist, wondering about the new kind of ache in my heart. I'd never felt it before. There it was again... squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. It felt so good to have my arm around her, like a safe haven that smelt wonderful. I could live with that smell, I realized. And I wanted that smell on me, too.

"Alex?"

"Hmm?"

"I want you to take me to bed."

She pulled away slightly.

"I *really* don't want you to regret this. I can wait..."

"Shh," I placed my finger over her lips. "I want this. Really. The only thing I'll regret about tonight will be the fact that you didn't make love to me, if you don't go about it soon."

She took my hand and kissed it. "If you're sure..."

I silenced her with a kiss, staring into her eyes as I did so. I always knew that there was something different about Alex's kisses, but in that moment, I figured out what it was. Alex kissed me without a demand for authority. With every guy who'd dated me, a kiss had meant a devouring of one person's lips – mine. But with Alex... there was a give and a take that I could *feel*. And that feeling was marvelous, glorious, especially when she curled her lips around my tongue and sucked on it.

I moaned against her lips, bringing forth a shiver from her. Her fingers entangled themselves in my hair, tugging at the blonde strands as she slanted her lips over mine once more, taking my upper lip between hers and biting lightly.

Wanting her was killing me, slowly fucking with my self-control. She kissed me like that for a long time, seducing me with nothing but her lips on mine and her fingers in my hair. I did nothing but lay my hands on her shoulders and accepted what she was giving me... and giving what I could feel she was taking.

When her mouth finally lifted from mine, I was shaking uncontrollably, fingers ready to unzip my dress. But she stalled me, whispering: "Bedroom?"

We stumbled into the darkened bedroom, not bothering to turn the lights on before we collapsed onto the bed, a tangle of limbs and clothing. Alex ended up on top, kissing me again, drugging me with her taste.

Her fingers roved over my stomach, moving upwards, stroking their way to the ultimate goal, but never really getting there. She leaned back and chuckled when I groaned from the pure hell of it, moving against her fingers restlessly.

"Please," I whispered in her ear when her fingers traced the underside of my breasts through the dress, making goosebumps cover the pale skin of my stomach.

She kissed my cheek before moving back to pull the zipper of my dress down. I was wearing a lacy black bra underneath – I'd prepared for the what-if situation, so what! – and it was

Alex's turn to groan when she took in the delicious contrast between the bra and my skin. Ducking, she trailed kisses over the tops of my breasts, working her way to the valley between.

Her fingers undid the front clasp and she placed a chaste kiss on the small patch of exposed skin, feeling me move beneath her.

Her blazer was gone, and she reached down, pulling her tee over her head. Her breasts were small mounds covered with dark, chocolate-brown nipples. I was only allowed a second to ogle her before she lowered her body to mine, pressing our heated skin together, and we gasped.

"Jesus," was what came out of my mouth.

"It's never felt like this," she whispered against my ear, her voice hoarse and deep. I couldn't suppress the involuntary shiver that ran through me.

"Never for me either," I whispered in reply as I felt her breath scorch the tops of my breasts again. Gently, she lowered her head and licked at one swollen bud, making me buck in surprised intensity of the touch. She held me down, swirling her tongue around one nipple while playing with another using her thumb and forefinger.

She paid equal attention to both my nipples. She was still suckling on the second one when I felt her fingers

slipping past the hem of my dress and into my lacy underwear. It was an excruciating pleasure to feel her fingers delve through the layers of clothing to find the one sweet place that was pulsing just for her.

I made a strangled sound at the back of my throat when her fingers sifted through the thatch of pale hair at the top of my core. Pleased with my reaction, she repeated it, making me lift my hips in silent pleas for her to move her fingers lower.

And she did move lower. One finger moved down to massage the tip of my aching sex, making me buck and writhe wildly.

"Please." It was a chant that I couldn't rid my mind of.

"Wrap your legs around me." It was a command, and I felt it stir my already dripping wetness.

I wrapped both legs around her lean waist just as she leaned down to kiss me, her tongue moving into my mouth with the pent up ardor in her body. At the same time, her finger moved down, pressing between my nether lips, coating it with my copious juices. Slowly, she pushed into me, and I felt myself embracing the thrust of her curved fingers, whimpering as I did so.

She whispered something against my neck but I couldn't hear it over the roar of pleasure in my body. She began moving

in and out of me, gradually making me accept more of her lean fingers. The pleasure was sinful, making me lift my hips for more of it each time she withdrew.

One of her palms was braced on the bed, holding her weight up, the other in my pussy. But that didn't deter her from leaning down and capturing a pouting nipple between her lips. Her thumb flicked over my clit as she bit down on one pink crown, making a spiraling sensation unfurl between my legs. It grew as she sucked none-too-gently on my sensitized nipple, drawing it away from my body before letting it bounce back.

By this time, my vocabulary had whittled down to 'oh my god', and as her thumb pressed down onto my clit, I felt myself tense for that final, exquisite release.

I whimpered – something I never did, as I came. She kept her finger inside me, moving it as I thrashed, wave after wave of an orgasm trickling through my body. It was bliss, pure bliss that overwhelmed me and I basked in every second of it.

It was quite a while before I got my breathing under control. Alex had collapsed on top of me, her breathing raw against my neck. I was luxuriously satisfied and felt sleep creep up on me. Then I remembered.

"Alex?"

The sound that came out of her throat wasn't even a growl. There wasn't a category to put it under.

"I should return the favor, shouldn't I?" Okay, I couldn't help the yawn that I said that around.

She chuckled. "Tomorrow. We'll have Lesbian Sex 101."

"Mmm." I could feel sleep creeping up on me again, my body still rolling with the aftershocks.

I watched her through half-closed eyelids as she shucked her jeans and pulled the comforter around us. The smell of sex and Alex surrounded me and I smiled.

"Alex?" I whispered just before I was dragged down by sleep.

"Yeah?"

"Wear your eyebrow ring."

I could hear her soft laughter. "Why?"

"'S Sexy," I heard myself say... but then again, I couldn't be sure.

#

Chapter 7

I awoke hours later, burning up under the covers despite the air conditioning. I flipped the lightweight sheets off me but it caught on something. I turned over groggily, unprepared for the sight of Alex in my bed.

It was... surreal.

How many times had I dreamt of a moment like this? There was a faint glow from between the partially drawn curtains, casting a soft pre-dawn light on her exposed torso. My breath hitched as I took in her lithe, toned frame. I hadn't had the time to appreciate her body last night before she'd drugged me with her kisses.

I let my eyes roam across her breasts. On her back, they lay flat against her body, the dark nipples enticingly thick. My fingers reached out and touched one, tracing the bunching areola. Alex made a noise at the back of her throat but didn't seem close to waking up.

I let my fingers explore her, following the glow that the rising sun had cast on her body – from the dip in her stomach to the cradle of her belly button to the soft curve of her mound. She was flawless, every inch of her silky and smooth.

I scooted lower on the bed and let my hands trail over her thigh, letting my lips follow the sensual trail. Desire blossomed in the pit of my stomach and uncurled between my thighs. I shivered, pausing at the curve of her knee.

The doubt of inexperience made me hesitate but I knew that there was no better way to learn than trial and error. After all, I'd read up as much as I could on lesbian lifestyles and even braved a few seasons of *The L Word* online.. that was as much drama as I could handle.

I can do this. My body almost vibrated with how much I wanted to do this.

I kissed her knees apart and wiggled into the gap in between. I glanced back down at the clean-shaven mound in front of me – her lips that were beautifully curved and plump. Curious, I ducked my head and inhaled deeply. Her natural scent was magnified here – a mixture of herbal soap and skin. Using my thumbs, I slowly spread her lips apart and breathed deep.

I wasn't prepared for it. The heady scent wafted over me and overwhelmed my senses. I stroked her lips with my thumb as I absorbed it, getting used to it, memorizing it. I placed a kiss on the top of her slit, using the tip of my tongue to get a taste of her skin.

I'm not sure what I expected – my research had said to expect 'musk' but what is musk anyway? Certainly not the rich, slightly salty flavor that erupted on my tongue. I took a bigger swipe of her pussy with the flat of my tongue and savored the taste and texture. It was probably an acquired taste but definitely one of mine.

I tried to control the moan that rose in my throat as my tongue explored further. The truth was, I had a feeling that this sexy seduction was affecting me more than it did Alex. She still remained asleep. Her breathing pattern had changed but otherwise, she hadn't moved.

I took my time to learn every curve of her sex intimately with my tongue. My hands were now hooked around her thighs, spreading them open for my ministrations. Then, nose pressed against the top of her mound, I dragged my tongue over her clit slowly, punctuating it with a suckle. Her hips bucked but I held her down and continued, feeling an odd kind of power wash over me. I wanted to watch her come apart, to see that look in her eyes as pleasure washed over her, pleasure that I'd licked into overwhelming existence.

I alternated between suckling her clit and teasing her opening but what she was really responding to was the pressure on her clit. So I stayed on it, varying the suction and pattern experimentally as her hips thrust beneath me.

I gasped when I felt fingers in my hair.

"Fuck, Cady," I heard, her voice rough from sleep. "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

The need in her voice shot straight to my core and I doubled my efforts, now teasing her entrance with my thumb. She repositioned the angle of her hips nominally until her back bowed off the bed and a short, sharp gasp reached my ears. I watched her features contort in surprised ecstasy and reveled in the tight tug of her fingers in my hair.

She took her pleasure quietly – only a sharp intake of air was an indication that she was coming. Seconds later, she fell back on the bed, her widened eyes blinking dramatically, as though she were trying to get her bearings.

"Fuck," she breathed, noticeably out of breath. I watched the rise and fall of her chest, fascinated. "What was that?"

She propped her head up slightly to look at me. I knew I was a mess. Her juices had flowed everywhere – my cheeks, my fingers, my hair. I was sure I was covered in *her*. It only made me feel so dirty and so *good*. The satisfied, dazed look on her face only added to my triumph.

A wide smile split my lips. "Good morning."

She laughed, still trying to catch her breath. Then in two surprise moves, she rolled me over the foot of the bed and tackled me to the ground.

We landed with a thump on the small patch of carpet with her palm cupping the back of my head and her frame covering mine completely.

I was giggling until she pulled me snugly towards her with her hands under my thighs. I stared up at her with my thighs spread open as wide as they could possibly go. She was watching me, her eyes intense in the light morning sun as she sat back and ran her hands over the soft parts of my thigh and grazed over the softer parts of my pelvis. I bit my lip and watched the movement of her hands. The movement of those knowing fingers, more than the sensations they caused, seemed to fan the already burgeoning fire inside me.

I moaned as she combed her fingers through the thatch of hair at my core, the sensation a little like a drug. She was taking too long. I'd been turned on since I'd woken up to find her naked in my bed. My body seemed to be screaming for a release.

She covered me again, leaning her weight on her forearm, putting us stomach to stomach, chest to chest. She took my lips fiercely, her kiss tinged with need and longing. I ran my hands over the skin of her back, running my short nails up and down until she shivered.

"Touch me, please, Alex." I hadn't even realized the words had left my lips until she made a noise of assent at the back of her throat and bit down lightly on my neck. But her fingers still lingered everywhere except where I needed it most. I tried – I really did – to be patient, but with each bite, each suckle, each sigh that left my lips, my pussy just felt more and more empty, more needy. I tugged on her hair, hoping she'd understand the kind of pain she was putting me through.

She just chuckled against my breast before flicking the distended tip of my nipple with her tongue. I think I was pretty incoherent by that point. Was this her version of revenge? I writhed under her, my body vibrating with need.

She grasped my wrist and brought it down to her sex. "Rub my clit. Hard." I could barely think. I just obeyed. She shuddered on top of me as her own fingers snaked down to my pussy. I gasped sharply when her fingers brushed over my swollen, needy clit.

"Don't stop," she murmured, her breath hot against my ear. I hadn't even realized I'd stopped.

Then I felt two fingers enter me and it was all I could do to remember to keep going. Our moans mingled, echoing in the room. As her fingers curled inside me, my back arched and

I felt release coiling inside me. I was *so close*. *Please, please, please...*

I felt my eyes drift closed as the first wave of pleasure shot through me. I heard Alex's voice from a distance, her fingers pushing my hair out of my eyes as she shifted her weight to her forearm. "Don't, don't, don't. Don't close your eyes. Watch me. Watch us."

Her eyes were so dark, so intense, they pinned me to the floor as another wave of pleasure washed over me. I flicked her clit with my thumb, harder this time, and she cursed, throwing her head back, shuddering violently. I watched in utter lust as she came apart in my hands, her juices trickling down my fingers.

But her fingers didn't stop. They curled, harder this time, inside me, and the pressure on my clit increased. The pleasure was so close that I could taste it. *God, so close...*

Alex buried her teeth in my shoulder and my body seized, trying to make sense of the pain and pleasure. Yes, my eyes closed, but I held on tightly to her, my only anchor in a world I was so unfamiliar with. The roiling pleasure made me clench down on her fingers once, twice, three times... and I lost count.

For the first time in my life, as I stared into her sated onyx eyes, let her wipe the sweat off my forehead and listened to her sweet words, I knew what it meant to feel at peace.

We stayed on the carpet, on our sides, talking and touching until the rumbling of my stomach made conversation impossible. Alex helped me up and promised to have breakfast ready by the time I'd cleaned up. I wanted to tell her not to but I gathered that she liked the idea of taking care of me. Truthfully, it didn't sound half bad to me, either.

After a long, searing kiss and loving pinch to my ass, she threw her boyshorts and tee on – watching her do this really made me question the need for breakfast – and went off to the kitchen.

I was so smitten. There was no denying it. I'd never fallen so quickly or so hard before. It wasn't the sex – though, god knows, it was a nice perk – but it was the way she treated me. It was the way *I* was when I was with her. We seemed to work, to mesh, without even trying.

As I brushed my teeth, I wondered if this was a lesbian thing or an Alex thing. Maybe women were just more in tune with each other? Maybe it was a natural thing? I would've to ask Charm; I had no clue.

As I slid my robe around my shoulders, I realized I hadn't stopped smiling. My body was singing and I hadn't felt so truly sated... ever. In every way. I stretched languidly, watching the way the robe glided over my body in the mirror.

The silly smile was still on my face when I popped open the bathroom door... and ran right into Alex. Surprised, I placed a hand over my suddenly racing heart.

"Jeez, you scared me." My eyes ran over her. "Why are you dressed?"

Her face was blank. A nagging sense of foreboding settled in my stomach.

"What's wrong?" I asked when she didn't reply.

She held a slip of paper right in front of my face. I had to lean back to read it.

Shit.

It was the flight ticket I'd booked for the end of the month – the one I'd stuck on the refrigerator.

Oh god.

What was she thinking? I started to shake my head.

"When were you going to tell me?" Her voice was low, angry.

I stared blankly at the piece of paper, dread creeping into my veins, trying to explain myself. My mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out.

"Were you even going to tell me?" she repeated, her words bitter and hard. I don't think a slap could've hurt worse. My brain scrambled for an explanation.

"Alex, listen, I booked this a couple of weeks back..."

I couldn't find the words to answer her after that - I didn't know how to, especially when she asked me in that tone. I'd really wanted to tell her but I also wanted to see how the date would go first. There had just been too many things up in the air last night. My lips parted for me to say just that, but she moved away and placed the ticket on the edge of the bed.

"I believed you, you know. When you said you wanted something with me, I believed you," she said quietly. "I didn't know why I did."

A bitter laugh. It pained me to hear it. She shook her head. I wanted so badly to say something, but my throat felt tight and I couldn't bring myself to utter even a word.

"It's a fucking one-way ticket. Fuck this. I'll just... go."

My eyes followed her movement towards the door; I remained unmoving. It felt like I was outside my body, watching all this shit unfold after such a magical night. But when I saw her frame move past my doorway, my legs and my voice box jerked into action.

"Alex, wait!" I called out as I grabbed the first article of clothing I could find. Somehow, I knew that running after Alex clad only in a short silky robe wouldn't fly in my building. I kept calling for Alex to wait, but when I raced out to the hall, she wasn't there. I opened the front door, hoping that she'd be waiting for the lift, but she wasn't there either. I heard a distant rumble and ran across the small corridor in bare feet, towards the windows that overlooked the carpark. I was just in time to see Alex pulling away from the lot without her helmet on. Something painful twisted in me as I watched her go, and the further she went, the worst the pain became.

I didn't know how long I stood there, staring at the route she'd taken. I was crying, too, silent tears that I'd never cried before. What the hell had I done? *How could I have fucked this up so quickly?*

I went back into the condo, looking at the couch where we'd made out last night. She had it all wrong. I wanted a

relationship with her, and I didn't care if I had to miss flights to make it work. I'd even stay in this eternally hot country if it meant I could spend my days with her.

I swiped the tears from my cheeks and grabbed my phone. If she could find me, I would sure as hell find her.

#

Chapter 8

The taxi came to a stop in front of a quaint little one-storey house in pseudo-suburbia adjacent to a highway. I thought it odd that there were no children playing in the street until I remembered that it was probably around 9AM on a Saturday.

"This is the house," the driver said, his fingers tapping impatiently on the steering wheel. I leaned forward, noting the BMW in the driveway and the framed picture of a Hindu deity hanging over the front door – a front door that was open. This really didn't seem like the kind of place Alex would be living in. I couldn't even imagine her being any kind of religious. But this was the address – the post-it I'd taken from the school confirmed it.

I handed the driver a couple of notes and mumbled a thank-you before braving the heat again.

As the taxi pulled away, I scoured the entrance for a doorbell. Couldn't find one. So I yelled out, "Hello!"

A middle-aged man came to the door, dressed in a polo T-shirt and a traditional Indian wrap-around men's garment. He

stopped when he saw me, looked me up and down and pointed to the picture of the deity above his head.

"You see this?" he asked.

"Yes, I--"

"So you know we are Hindu?"

I blinked. "Yes, I do."

"So why do you always come here talking about your Jesus stuff, huh? We don't believe in Christianity. We are Hindu. Don't come here again. Okay?" He had a rather deep, resonant voice. I was a little scared. The salt and pepper handlebar moustache didn't help.

"I'm not from the church," I corrected. "I'm here to see Alex."

"Who? Who is this Alex? We don't have any Alex here."

A young girl, probably thirteen or so, came up behind him and said something I couldn't hear. But the effect on him was profound. His chest puffed up and out like an exotic bird and his expression grew grave.

"We do not know anyone by that name."

I shifted restlessly in the heat. "Look, I don't want to cause any trouble but I know you're somehow related to her. I got this address from the JC I work for."

There was a quick exchange of words between him and the girl.

"Are you her teacher?"

Uh, ethical conundrum? "Yes. And she was my best student. I'd like to speak with her regarding something important before I leave."

Another quick exchange of words and the girl turned away with a huff, clearly upset. "If she's not here —" I began, but Handlebar cut me off.

"If you are her teacher, you should know that that *girl* is dead to us. She disgraced this family." He spat on the ground. "We do not want anything to do with her."

The elaborate white curtains framing the front window parted and the girl's face appeared in the middle, forlorn. I looked back towards Handlebar, his chest still puffed and indignant.

"Do you know how I could contact her?" I ventured. Hey, I'd already taxi-ed this far; I might as well try.

"You should go before I call the police." He shut the door and I heard several locks click in place.

The girl in the window raised her hand, almost as though she were about to wave, when she was jerked backwards. The curtains fell back into place. I heard a lot of yelling, propelling me backward, away from the house.

I'd wanted to say so many things - anything, really - to stick up for Alex. But was it my place?

*

The sign in front of the club said 'Closed - Come Again Please'. Still, I got out of the cab and rapped sharply on the ornately carved wooden door. No response. I tried the handle and the door pushed inwards. I peeked around it, calling out as I went in.

"In the back," a voice called out. I followed it to a loading bay where a goods van was parked. Jack stood with his t-shirt tied around his waist, unloading crates of beer. He was in pretty good shape for a guy pushing sixty. A similarly muscular girl with a buzz cut worked alongside him.

"Just leave the flyers there," he instructed, and I looked around, hoping he wasn't speaking to me. What was it with people today mistaking me for someone else?

"Uh, Jack?" I ventured. He looked up, surprised, and set down a heavy crate on one of those wheely transport things. It took a moment but he soon smiled and shouted out a greeting.

"It's Candy, isn't it? You were here last night?" As he walked over, he untied his shirt and slipped it across his head.

His hand in mine was warm.

"It's Cady, actually. I'm surprised that you remember. There were quite a few people in here last night."

"Yeah, but I remember all the important names," he said with a wink. "Now, what can I do for you? Did you leave something at the bar?"

"Oh, no. No. Not that. I, uh, I was wondering if you could tell me where Alex lives."

His smile faltered a little.

"Why? Did somethin' happen between you two?"

His assistant had stopped stacking boxes and was listening to our conversation without hiding the fact. My eyes darted towards her uncomfortably.

"Right," he said. "How about some morning tequila, huh?" He rubbed his hands together as my gag reflex activated at the thought of alcohol this early in the day. "Ai Tee, keep stacking and I'll be back soon."

He brought me to his office where, thankfully, he made me a cup of tea. I sipped it as he poured himself coffee, chatting about the terrible weather back in Sydney. I made the appropriate sounds, gratefully hydrating after running around like a lunatic all morning.

As he sat behind his desk, I tried to direct the conversation back to my main concern. "Alex said she used to work here?"

He nodded.

"Yeah, she used to do what Ai Tee's doing today. They're all under 18 and can only work on the premises during the day when the courtyard is transformed into a bistro. Would you like something from the kitchen? I can call for some breakfast."

"You're very sweet, Jack, but I can't right now. I really need to see Alex and I thought you might know where she lives."

He sighed, leaning back in his chair.

"You've yet to tell me why."

"It's a little personal..." I edged. "Just a misunderstanding that I really need to fix."

He seemed to think about it for a long minute.

"You know, when I first met Alex, it was just after her grandmother had passed away. I run a shelter out of my home for at risk teenagers and she came to me for help."

A lump rose in my throat as a picture of Alex, alone and grieving, entered my mind. I set the mug down.

"She was different... like someone who knew exactly who she was and was living her truth. It's hard to see that in these parts. Most people keep it on the DL." He shrugged. "So I helped her. She stayed at the house for a while, mentored a few younger kids. But she's had her share of bumps."

"What happened?"

He shook his head. "You should ask her that."

"Where is she now?"

"You have a one-track mind, Cady. Look, I know there's something going on between you and her but I can't in good conscience tell you that."

I shut my eyes and took a deep breath. "I just need to see her for a few minutes. I need to set something straight." He started to shake his head. "You don't understand, she thinks I'm leaving her. And judging from what you've said and the "family" I met today, I have a feeling that she may have... abandonment issues. I just... I can't let her think that of me. Do you understand, Jack?"

He dragged a hand through his greying hair, assessing me closely. Finally, he rose and said, "Fine. But only because I have a good feeling about you." Plucking a piece of paper from his desk, he wrote down the street name and a block number.

"She's on the second floor balcony flat, the one with the red door. I can't remember the door number, I'm sorry."

"Thank you, Jack." I went around the table and hugged him tightly, so thankful that I was almost in tears.

"Don't make me regret it," he grunted.

*

Jack had said it would be a quick walk and he hadn't been wrong. Fifteen minutes later – 8 blocks past the club and behind a market – was block 149. I didn't even have to look for her flat because there she was, leaning against the second

floor balcony railing with a cigarette dangling from her fingers.

I stood, watching her for longer than was appropriate, even for a lover. Her shoulders were tense and she lifted her fingers every few minutes to tuck her curls behind her ear. The muscles in her arms bunched and moved, her warm, brown skin cast gold in the sunlight.

"Alex," I called out. She froze, the cigarette halfway to her lips.

Then, gathering her cool, she flicked the ash away and turned toward me, a frown creasing her forehead.

"Are you done harassing everyone I know?"

I crossed my arms. "What do you mean?"

"I got a text from my cousin earlier today, saying my "white teacher" had come looking for me. Then half an hour ago, a friend texted to say that she saw you at the club, asking for me."

I licked my lips. When she put it that way, it sounded a tiny bit stalker-ish. "Well, you weren't answering any of my calls and I really needed to talk to you!"

She took a final drag of her cigarette and put it out. "About what? Look, Cady. If you're leaving, just leave. You don't owe me anything, including an explanation. We'll pretend like last night never happened."

"No!" I yelled as she turned away. "No, I don't want that."

"Then what do you want?"

I took a deep breath and yelled, "I want you, Alex."

A Chinese lady passing by let out a disgusted 'tsk' and ushered her kids along quickly.

Alex shook her head, clearly unimpressed by my Romeo-style admission of affection.

"Can I come up?"

She made an off-hand gesture. I took it to mean 'yes'.

*

Smokey air hit me in the face when she opened the door.

"You stink," I chastised, wrinkling my nose. She rolled her eyes. A voice called out from behind her.

"I know, right? She crawled home this morning smelling like sex."

I felt the color rush to my face. A Chinese girl with a PlayStation controller glued to her fingers looked up briefly at me before her eyes swiveled back to the TV. From her short buzz cut to the arms that looked like they could dead lift a tonka truck, she was what my friend Charm would call a 'stone butch'.

"Shut up, Heng," Alex called over her shoulder.

"Ya, she's been pouting all morning, too." Heng was undeterred.

"Seriously? Can't you go somewhere else?"

"No, no," I stepped in, trying to defuse the situation. Teacher training put to good use! "Look, can we just talk? I'm sorry about this morning."

"Why? What happened?" Heng again, from the couch. The sounds from the TV could only mean an apocalypse. "Did you go down on her and get a nosebleed?"

"What?!" The color had *just* started to recede from my cheeks but I could feel it crawling its way back up again.

"Sometimes it happens." Heng shrugged, her eyes still glued to the TV.

"What?" I whispered again to Alex but she just shook her head and waved me into the flat. It was a small, very cluttered space that seemed rather mismatched. On the small balcony was a home gym set-up consisting of a treadmill and some weights. Little knick-knacks like feminine throws and scented candles brightened up the otherwise masculine furniture.

"Do we have an extra person for lunch?" another voice called out from the kitchen. It was distinctly male.

"Uh... it's Cady," Alex called out.

We heard a bunch of pots and pans clatter to the floor.

"Seriously? *The Cady*? She's here? Oh, my god!" As his voice rose in pitch, we heard a lot more clattering before a tall, tan male body exited the kitchen, wiping his hands on the bikini bum apron he wore with the word 'Bali' written in gold. He extended a hand.

"It's so nice to finally meet you. Alex has said *so much* about you."

I shook his hand. "Really?" I looked at Alex, who shrugged.

"Oh yes," he continued. "The last year it's been like, 'Oh, she's so inspiring, you should hear her speak' or 'you should see those high heels, Daniel, they kill me every time'."

"Ya." It was Heng's turn to contribute. Her game was paused. She leaned over the back of the couch, the controls dangling from her fingers. "Or 'you should see her ass, its'-'".

"Okay!" Alex interrupted in a near shout. "All of you need to shut the fuck up."

Daniel raised his arms, indicating surrender. "I'm just excited, Alex."

"Go be excited in the kitchen."

"Fine." With a huff, he turned on his heel and left.

Alex turned and shot a warning look at Heng, who slowly lapsed back onto the couch, looking somewhat chastised.

"My room," she said, ushering me to the nearest door.

Her room was sparsely decorated. A single bed with a wooden frame was pushed against one wall, leaving quite a bit

of room for the large, plain Ikea-style bookcase and matching desk. An old HP laptop sat amidst badly fraying notebooks.

"I don't get what you want to talk to me about," she said, locking the door. "I know you intend to leave Singapore for good – you could have just told me that last night. *Or* when I asked you out. *Or* when I asked how work was. Why didn't you?"

"Alex, I – yes, I did book a ticket home and I should have told you that. I'm sorry." I took a step towards her. "My contract's over. And I was getting a little bored of this place and I wanted to go home."

She looked away, averting her eyes. "I understand."

I reached up and cupped her cheek. "No, I don't think you do." I took another step forward but she pulled away.

"When I first met you, I was stunned. You were different... and I felt drawn to you."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, I've given up a lot to be 'different'. Might as well make it work."

"I really did think it was a crush at first. I even Googled it. I convinced myself that I was having some kind of quarter life crisis."

A small smile quirked her lips, although she tried to suppress it.

"I really was - and am - attracted to you. I think you should know that. I think last night should prove that."

She'd backed herself into a wall trying to avoid my advances - literally. I tip-toed and placed a kiss on her neck, just under her right ear. Her hands curled into fists at her sides.

"I don't want you to stay just for me, especially if you're tired of Singapore." This was said between clenched teeth. I slowly lifted up the light cotton tank top she wore, running my fingers along the lean muscles, feeling them jerk under my gentle caress.

"But I'm not tired of you, Alex." Her collarbones led to a sexy little dimple at the base of her neck; I licked it, savoring her hiss of breath. "I've been dreaming about you for two years. And I'll be damned if I let you get away from me now."

I tipped her head down with my fingers in her hair. With my lips close to hers, I said, "Being able to do this, touch you like this, is my every fantasy come true. I'm so sorry about this morning. It was so perfect, so beautiful, and I had to mess it up."

I gently laid my lips against hers and for a moment. She didn't respond. Her lips were pliant beneath mine, her body tense. I grazed my teeth over her lush lower lip, slowly pulling it between my teeth, suckling. I could hear a low growl rising in her, reverberating under my palms. I released her lip, now gleaming.

"You shouldn't do that, you know," she said, her voice low. I shivered.

"Do what?" I asked, still nuzzled close.

Her hands caught my wrists, pulling them behind me in one quick motion. She flipped us around so that I was caught between her and the wall. I barely had time to gasp when she said, "You should never try to top a Top."

She turned my head and kissed me – one of those slanty, sensual kisses I'd grown so addicted to the night before. But this felt different. Heated. Needy. Desperate. She held my wrists behind my back with one hand as the other partially unbuttoned my blouse, sliding in to cup my right breast. *Rough*. A burst of pleasure spread through me so unexpectedly I pushed back against her, whimpering in a voice I didn't even recognize.

"I like that sound," she said, running her thumbnail ever so slightly around an already painfully hard nipple. My wrists were suddenly free but before I could bury them in her hair

like I wanted to, she turned me back around to face her, catching my wrists again and holding them above my head. The position made my chest thrust up and out.

“Very nice,” she said, undoing the rest of my buttons. The fabric parted, baring the lace bra from last night. One cup still covered me modestly enough but the other was bunched under my breast. She watched how the pale mounds quivered against the lace as she ran a finger down the valley of my breasts. Her fingers slowly moved to trace an outline of my areolas. Once, twice, three times. Her hands still held my wrists in place. I squirmed, needing more than just light touches.

She pressed her lips to mine again and I savored it, craning my neck to get more of her. She took that moment to flick her thumb roughly across my hardened, aching nipple, and I moaned in surprise and pleasure against her lips. She pulled back and I licked my lips; our mingled flavor was highly addictive.

“Alex,” I pleaded. My voice was beginning to sound breathy, needy. Aroused.

Her eyes met mine as she undid the snap on my jeans, letting them fall to the floor. I hadn't worn any underwear – simply couldn't find them – and I was bare to her gaze. But she didn't look down. Instead, her eyes remained on mine,

unwavering, filled with desire. Her palm slowly slid across my hipbone, blazing a sensitive trail that led down to my pussy.

I gasped as her fingers brushed through the light curls, her eyes still holding mine captive. She leaned close, so close that my chin was nestled on her angular shoulder. Her voice was low in my ear. "Open," she said. And I did.

There was no preparation this time. This was no easy lovemaking that we'd indulged in just this morning. This was different, fierce. Two fingers thrust into me, pulling back out to rub the moisture onto my clit. My legs quivered as she hit a delicious spot above my clitoral hood. Dear god, I wanted to hold onto her so badly, to have some kind of anchor while I was awash with pleasure. That was my last coherent thought before she started fucking me in earnest.

Before that moment, I'd assumed lesbian sex was sweet and tentative – more of a ride than an explosion – despite what shows like *The L Word* seemed to be based on. But as Alex's fingers pistoned in and out of me, her thumb rubbing circling over my clit, my body just along for the ride, I couldn't think of a better word. *Fucking*. That sounded about right.

She released my wrists and cupped her palm around the back of my head, changing our positions slightly. Her fingers curled inside me, and in this new position, I felt her hit a spot that stole my breath. My arms locked around her shoulders

as she rocked against it, again and again, my pants getting louder each time.

I was on the edge, my body poised for release, quivering. Alex nipped my neck, her breathing harsh against my skin. I knew she wanted me to come.

She flicked my clit harder than before, her fingers still pumping inside me.

I felt release shudder through me, my hips bucking against her hand uncontrollably. In that moment, I couldn't remember what it was to breathe as bolts of pleasure shot upwards from her seeking fingers to my already muddled mind. My ears were deaf to anything but my mewls and her harsh breathing.

I didn't want to come back down.

Basking in the aftershocks of residual pleasure, my fingers delved into the lovely curls at the nape of her neck, pulling her in for a kiss. She smiled against my lips and allowed my shaking fingers to pull her tank top up, breaking our kiss briefly to toss it away.

She wasn't wearing a bra and I cupped her small breasts in my hands, thumbing her nipples, mirroring what she'd done to me earlier. She smiled against my lips and took control again, pulling me towards the bed in the corner.

When she deposited me on it and fell on top of me, I pulled back, shaking my head. "It's your turn," I breathed, flipping her over and straddling her, running my nails down her long torso. Her skin glinted beautifully in the late morning sun and I pressed a kiss to the center of her belly. Her fingers sifted through my hair, her touch a loving caress as I explored.

I stood, placing my feet on the floor, and tugged at her shorts. She balanced herself on her elbows and lifted her hips, giving me a stunning view of her prominent hipbones and shaved sex. Her pussy lips were already glistening and, to my surprise, my mouth watered in response. I swallowed thickly.

She patiently allowed me to look my fill of her and watched my every move as I knelt on the floor, between her thighs, her feet balanced on the edge of the bed. I rested my head on the inside of her left thigh and met her gaze, pressing a kiss to the sensitive skin there.

The smell of *her* wafted up to me, something I'd come to love overnight. I trailed kisses down her inner thigh and stopped at her outer lips. I inhaled deeply. "You smell amazing," I breathed. I received a chuckle in response.

The nerves from this morning were almost completely gone as I leaned close, parting her nether lips with my fingers.

Her hips twitched at the light contact and I smiled up at her, placing an open-mouthed kiss to the top of her mound.

A moan played around the back of my throat as I laved the wetness that clung to her lips, savoring the unique taste. At the back of my mind, I knew I was being a tease by going so slowly but I wanted to draw it out and make it last. I wanted to know her body as intimately as she seemed to know mine.

I licked again, this time, stopping to blow a breath of hot air on the exposed flesh. Her toes curled into the mattress and her stomach muscles jumped but she remained on her elbows, watching as I explored.

When I parted her lips and dove in, she uttered an expletive, her fingers suddenly gripping my hair and holding me there. I licked continuously, my fingers still massaging her outer lips, but she controlled her pleasure, tilting her hips so that I hit the right spots. She groaned when I did, the sound going directly to my pussy.

I wanted to take her where she'd taken me, maybe tease her a little by holding her at the precipice for a little too long, but she seemed a little too impatient to let me. As my finger slipped into her – and by god, was it a tight squeeze – her hand in my hair tightened.

I followed her example and thrust in and out, my lips suckling on her clit. Her back arched off the bed, suspended

for moments before I felt a burst of wetness coat my fingers. I continued suckling, her thighs now clasping my head, quaking in pleasure.

She fell back onto the bed, her fingers releasing my hair. Her chest heaved with exertion and her dark skin had red undertones.

I pulled my index finger out of her, feeling her quiver as I did so. Just as I did when I started, I laid my head on her left thigh, watching her attempt to catch her breath. When she finally opened her eyes, I slipped the wet finger into my mouth and sucked it clean, punctuating my effort with a little pop at the end.

She laughed, putting in considerable effort to sit up and kiss me, pulling me off the floor and onto the small bed.

We lay in a contented tangle of limbs. Her eyes were closed and a smile played around her lips. I trailed a finger up and down her arms, admiring the contrast of our skin. It was beautiful and so very... natural.

"Alex," I whispered.

She made a noise, her eyelids fluttering open just a little.

"What's a Top?"

She laughed, a surprised burst of laughter. Then she cuddled me even closer – if that were possible – kissed my forehead, and explained.

#

Chapter 9

I was surprised to learn that Heng was a police officer. The idea of someone entrusted with the responsibility of saving people's lives cursing at a zombie on a game console wasn't necessarily comforting. She sat across from us, dishing out rice as Daniel ladled the curry.

Alex rose to wash her hands and I gave her a quizzical look. We'd both just taken a shower after a walk of shame I won't soon forget.

"I eat with my hands," she explained.

"Really?" The word left my lips before I could stop it. To say I was surprised would've been an understatement. Alex was just so... different... in so many ways that I didn't think she would have any traditional habits. But I hadn't meant to sound insulting.

Alex raised an eyebrow at me as she toweled her hands dry. "Yeah, really. I'm Indian, what the fuck?"

"I eat with my hands, too, usually," Daniel added, taking his seat on the rickety stool next to Heng. "But I just got my nails polished so I'm fork and spooning it today."

The food smelled absolutely delicious. Along with the chicken curry, Daniel had stir fried some vegetables with shallots and chilies. I wasn't too good with spice but everything looked too tempting not to try.

"Don't worry, hun," Daniel said, as though he could read my thoughts. "In deference to your whiteness, I put in a little extra coconut milk in the curry. And the chilies in the *kang kong* don't have seeds in them. You'll live." He placed a serving of veg on my plate. I wondered if I should take offense to the 'in deference to your whiteness' comment but shrugged it off. It wasn't far from the truth.

"I'm starving," Alex said, sliding onto her stool.

"We know," Heng and Daniel chorused, prompting a burst of color on my face. Alex only laughed – *shameless!*

I watched as she dug into her food with relish, dividing her meat and veg into bite sized pieces and rolling them into misshapen balls before raising it to her mouth. Her adeptness at doing so awed me – there was no way I'd be able to do any of that without dropping a bunch of food on myself, the table, maybe even the floor. And she did it so casually, with her free elbow resting on the round dinner table and conversing with her friends. She barely paid attention to coordinating her hand to mouth actions.

I couldn't stop staring. She finally turned to me with an eyebrow raised.

"Are you going to eat?" she asked, gesturing to my plate.

"Oh yeah. Yeah," I tried to shake myself out of it by picking up my utensils.

"Here," she said, raising a mouthful of food to my lips. I accepted it with as much grace as I could. A burst of flavor spread across my tongue as I chewed – the spices in the curry coupled with the sharp taste of the veg, was incredible.

"This is amazing," I said to Daniel. "You're an excellent cook."

"Thank you, Cady. My mother taught me."

"This is really good," I repeated as I took a bite off my own plate.

"Heng, I'm sorry, but I forgot to gas up the bike this morning. I'll get it done after lunch, okay?" Alex said.

Heng shrugged. "I only have to be at work at 6. Take your time." She'd only taken two bites but half of her meal was already gone. "So, are any of you going to Red Dot this year?"

She looked expectantly around the table.

"I go every year," Alex said, taking a sip of her water.
"I'll be there."

"What's that?" I asked, too busy chewing to care about decorum.

"It's our version of gay pride," Daniel explained. "LGBTQ people and supporters gather at a park in solidarity."

"So it's like a protest?"

Alex laughed. "Are you forgetting where you are? No one protests in Singapore."

"So it's just a gathering?"

Heng nodded. "I think there were over 10,000 people there last year."

"That's a big gathering."

Alex turned to me. "You can come if you like. See what it's all about."

"Yeah," Daniel chimed in. "Lots of expats go to show their support for queer rights."

"Uh..." I looked back at Alex. "Are you sure that's okay with you?"

She nodded. "It'll be fun. We could have a picnic or something if you like. Pack some sandwiches and a bright red blanket."

"Look at you two," Heng interjected. "So cute."

"Yeah," Daniel continued. "Keep it up and I may need to get a shot of insulin."

"Go get your insulin, Daniel," Alex challenged and kissed me squarely on the mouth.

A burst of warmth spread through me at the contact.

"I don't remember the last time Carol looked at me like that," Heng said, taking the last bite of her food and pushing her stool back.

"Carol is Heng's partner," Alex explained. "She's at work."

"And!" Daniel picked up. "She loves your ugly ass more than anything so don't say things like that. Speaking of Carol, let her know I set some food aside for her in the fridge, okay?"

I leaned close to Alex. "How many flatmates do you have?"

"Just three." She took a last bite of her food. "Finish your food, baby. I gotta go do battle."

"What?"

As I watched, Alex washed her hands and engaged in a rock-paper-scissors battle with Heng; the winner didn't have to do the dishes. Alex lost. As I watched the three friends banter back and forth, needling each other like children, a realization dawned on me: these guys had created a little microcosm where they were allowed to be themselves. Like a giant proverbial closet. While the world outside demonized their sexuality and condemned their choices, this little world they'd created in their flat was free from judgment, giving a new meaning to the word 'home'.

Daniel and I, slow eaters that we were, sat at the table and chatted for a bit. I found out that he was a lot older than he looked and was a charity worker who helped teenagers in need. He knew Jack, too, and had worked with him for a decade.

When Alex ducked into the bathroom, he reached out to cover my hand with his.

"I'm glad she found you," he said earnestly. "She's had a lot of shit in her life. She needs someone who'll ground her."

He patted my hand reassuringly and smiled before he, too, rose and deposited his plate in the sink.

I set my utensils down and pretended to take a sip of the rapidly warming water, feeling suddenly unsettled. *Could I ground Alex?*

#

Chapter 10

My mother hadn't been at all happy when I broke the news; she'd *really* been looking forward to me coming home for good. She'd wanted to know why – demanded, actually. Why was I staying in Singapore when just the month before I'd been so over the place?

I couldn't tell her the truth. I just wasn't ready to have *that* talk with my mum. Especially not over FaceTime. So I made up some bullshit excuse about career progression and pay rises to appease her.

But all that went down the drain one evening when Alex walked into the apartment after the gym with her headphones on, took off her sweaty clothes for the laundry, and walked back into the living room completely naked. Unlike me, Alex was *very* comfortable with her body – god knows, she worked really hard for it – but I don't think my mother was quite ready to see my new girlfriend naked yet.

The silence over FaceTime was deafening.

"Um," she said after several minutes of blinking. "Who was that?"

There was no way out now. The Perpetual Avoider had to engage. I sighed. "That's Alex. My girlfriend."

"Your..." Gray eyes, the mirror image of mine, blinked rapidly. "Really?"

I nodded. "Yes, Mom. And I'm happy, before you ask."

She laughed. What started as a chuckle turned into a full-blown belly laugh that caused me more than a little worry. As I watched her struggle for breath over FaceTime, I realized that this would be my coming out story. I told my mom and she laughed. That would be it. My whole story.

I frowned.

"I'm sorry, honey. Really. I just —." She could barely catch her breath. Her face had reddened completely. "Now I owe your Nana fifty bucks."

"What?!"

She managed to get her amusement under some kind of control. "Your Nana bet me that you'd be a lesbian."

"What?!" If she thought *that* was an explanation...

"I'm sorry, honey. You know Nana and I talk about everything. There's nothing else to do with just the two of us

in this drafty old place." I rolled my eyes. My mother never missed an opportunity to send me on a guilt trip. "Anyway, I think it was a couple years ago. You'd just broken up with that real estate guy but you seemed so okay with everything. And Nana just turned to me and said, 'I bet she's like that girl she hangs out with'. She was talking about Charmaine, of course. And that's how it started. I didn't actually *believe* Nana would be right!"

"You guys bet on me being gay? Seriously?" A part of me felt like I should be outraged but I also felt laughter building inside me.

"Well, honey, don't take it personally." She waved a hand in front of the camera, dismissing my concerns. "I trust you know what you're doing, Cady. Take it from me – don't waste your twenties."

"Mom!" I was offended. "You had me when you were twenty-two."

"And I still don't know how I feel about that," she teased.

"Great, Mom. Thanks." She always made me feel so special.

Alex appeared in the doorway of the bedroom, a towel thrown over her shoulder and her headphones around her neck.

"I'm going for a shower. Care to join?"

I bit my lip as a shrill stream of words sounded from my headphones. Alex's brows shot up. "Who's that?"

"Her mother." The answer was crystal clear.

Alex looked terrified. "But I just..." She slid the towel around her torso. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Did she see everything?"

"Kinda," I said at the same time my mom interjected with, "Totally."

Alex looked like she was starting to panic. I set the headphones down and moved out of camera range, pushing Alex into the bedroom.

"Don't panic," I said.

"How can I not panic? My girlfriend's mother just saw me naked!" She threw off the towel and ruffled through her drawer – yes, she had a whole drawer here now – for shorts and a tee.

"Alex." My voice was as calm as it could be. "I told you my mom's a hippie. I'm sure she's seen everything in her day."

"But it's still weird." She tugged on her shorts.

I held out a hand. "Come with me."

"But I don't want to."

"Well, you could either come meet her now or be embarrassed for the next few weeks. It's up to you."

She very reluctantly let me drag her back to my desk. Mom was still there, sipping her morning coffee, waiting for me. I pushed Alex down onto the overstuffed desk chair and perched on her thighs. Her arm rested lightly on my waist.

I reached out and unplugged the headphone jack.

"Mom, this is Alex."

Mom set her coffee cup down – it was the really cute mug that said 'Don't be fooled, this may be wine' that I'd gotten her when she received her 1 year chip at AA – and gave Alex a little wave.

"How are you, Alex?"

"I'm fine, Ms. Summers. And you?"

"Good, thank you. Please call me Maggie. I need to get to work soon but I wanted to meet you. Since we're so well acquainted already." And she winked into the camera. My *mother* winked at my *girlfriend*. I felt my face heat.

"Mom!"

"I'm sorry about that," Alex said sheepishly. "I didn't realize you were there."

"Well, for what it's worth, you have a beautiful body."

"Mom!" My cheeks were now bright red. This was starting to feel like another embarrassing junior high moment.

"Thanks, Maggie." Alex laughed a little uncomfortably.

"So." Mom set down her coffee mug and was suddenly all business. "How did you two meet? What do you do? Is this why you suddenly decided to stay in Singapore?"

"Well," Alex started. "Cady was my teacher in Junior College. I'm doing an internship with a magazine. And yes, I'm the reason why she's here. Sorry."

Mom looked taken aback. "Wait. Cady, you were her teacher? Oh, my god. Have I raised some kind of pervert?"

I gasped in outrage and Alex just laughed. There was a wicked twinkle in her eye. "You have no idea. She basically stalked me for two years and blackmailed me with terrible grades if I didn't go out with her."

"Cady!" My mother looked horrified.

"Alex!" I slapped her on the shoulder, shocked by her bold-faced lie. I struggled to get off her lap but she pulled me even closer and placed a kiss on my cheek.

"I'm just kidding. Really. We didn't date until after I graduated."

"Oh, thank god! Cady, why didn't you just tell me all of this before?"

"Well," I squirmed. "It was really new and special and I wanted to see where it went first."

"Oh, honey. I really should be upset with you for keeping all of this from me. But I'm just happy to see you so happy. Alex, keep my baby safe, okay? It's hard when she's so far away."

"I'll try my very best."

Mom checked her watch. "Well, I've gotta run. My dream job awaits." She rolled her eyes. After she'd gotten her one-year chip at AA, she'd taken a retail job at Macy's. She hated it but hadn't found any place better that would hire her. It's been three years. Plus, it wasn't like she had to worry about bills or anything. Nana's alimony checks took care of that.

"It was nice to meet you," Alex said as I waved goodbye.

Both of us leaned back in the chair and sighed as the FaceTime screen disappeared.

"So, what did you think?" I interlaced my fingers with hers and stroked the little veins on the back of her hand.

"Your mother's lovely, Cay. You two look so much alike."

I winced. "It's always weird when people say that. But then again, I'd rather look like her than a stranger I've never met."

She brushed her lips against mine. "I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "Don't be. I've made my peace with it." I paused, broaching a subject we'd avoided for the last month or so. "What about you? Do you look like..."

She stood and set me on my feet. "How about that shower now?"

She pressed a quick kiss to my lips before disappearing into the bedroom. I watched her go, feeling like I'd somehow overstepped a line and she'd – literally – put me in my place.

After what Jack had told me and what Daniel had alluded to a month ago, I'd tried – without actually prying – to get

Alex to open up about her past. All she'd ever said about her family was that her parents were dicks. And that was on our first date. Since then, every time I brought up the subject, she'd find an excuse to avoid it altogether.

Yes, I was concerned. Cliché as it sounded, her past was the final piece of the puzzle.

*

Those first few months with Alex were an experience. I'd never been so comfortable sharing my space and my body with anyone before. Charm had advised that a relationship with a woman had its good and bad sides. So far, I'd only seen the good.

I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being taken care of. We were just so innately in tune with each other that it was uncanny and a little jarring for someone who'd never felt anything like it before. But it didn't take long to get used to.

We were making love one weekend when Alex slid up my body and cuddled me close. I was still reeling with the aftershocks when she kissed my neck and murmured, "Your period is due."

"Is that *really* your idea of dirty talk?" I asked, panting. "How would you even know that?"

She kissed me deeply and I tasted myself on her – something I never thought I'd get used to.

"You taste different, baby." That was all she said.

True enough, there it was the next day. And Alex came home from work with a pint of Ben and Jerry's and a six-pack of Snickers.

I think I may have fallen in love with her (again) that day.

But it was also the little things. Sharing a space with her, watching her do mundane things like shave or cook or hunch over her laptop with a frown – all of it seemed to be a part of my life now.

"You're merging," Charm said over FaceTime the next day.

"We are not!" I insisted. "What does that mean anyway? It doesn't sound good."

Charm rolled her eyes. "It's when you basically become the same person."

"That's gross. No, Charm, we're not 'becoming the same person'. I just like that we work so well together."

"Merging," Charm said in a singsong voice.

"Stop it. You never, ever told me it could feel so good to be with a girl, babe. I feel like you held out on me for fifteen years."

Charm raised an eyebrow, turning over in bed. It was just after 7AM back home. Her short hair was mussed and the navy blue sheets barely covered her as she moved around the bed, stark naked. "I recall that I offered first-hand instruction but you turned me down."

"Really? You want to go there *now*?"

She shrugged. "Just sayin'. You know what, though? You look majorly happy, Cee. Like the kind of happy that makes me want to punch you in the face."

I laughed. "You always were a jealous bitch."

"Perhaps. But I also think you held out for the one woman who truly makes you happy."

"So all this is not a normal lesbian thing? I've wondered, you know."

Charm laughed and reached for the cigarettes on her bedside table. "Not *my* relationships, anyway. Mostly, it's just a lot bickering and 'why don't you have time for me' and

'why can't I keep some stuff here' and 'you came twice so you do me now'. It's not the best."

I rolled my eyes. "I feel like that's a pretty negative view of relationships in general. I wonder why you're still single."

Charm lit up her Marlboro Reds; she'd been smoking them since high school. Correction – she used to smoke Marlboro Blacks but when they were discontinued, she'd grouched for months and settled for Reds instead. I wasn't a big fan of either.

Alex smoked a menthol brand sometimes but she wasn't a heavy smoker. She especially wasn't a heavy smoker when I hid her pack and slapped a nicotine patch on her. She usually grumbled for a bit but I had distractions of my own to keep her occupied.

"You know your sheets are going to stink," I commented, watching her take another deep drag.

Charm shrugged. "Anyway, are you even going to come back for a visit this year?"

I bit my lip. "I don't know. Don't get me wrong – I want to. I just don't think we can afford it right now."

"Jesus – *we can't afford it?* What did I say about merging?"

I tsked. "It's not merging. It's called being respectful of what your other half can afford. I'd offer to pay for it but knowing Alex, she won't take a cent."

"See – there's your first problem. Money. You make way more than she does."

I raised a brow. "Are you just trying to start trouble between Alex and I because your love life is shit?"

Charm fell back on the bed. "Maybe," she muttered.

"Well, it's not going to work. We'll just visit next year or something. You can still feel my love over FaceTime, can't you?"

I blew her a kiss with dramatically puckered lips. I may even have batted my lashes.

"And... that's all the action I'll be getting today," she said, stubbing out her cigarette with a mock sigh.

"Well, I don't think I can say the same."

"Bye, bitch," she growled into the camera.

*

As it turned out, the initial fib I'd told my mother wasn't totally wrong. After teaching in the Singapore public school system for three years, my skills seemed to be in high demand in the International School sector. A few weeks after sending out my resume, I received a call back from a school that had the reputation of being rather hoity-toity. Which meant big bucks... hopefully!

Everything seemed to be falling into place. Alex had eventually decided not to apply for University just yet, although her A Level scores had been good enough for it. Instead, she'd gotten an internship as a Staff Writer for a start up magazine in London – she worked for them three days a week on the UK's national minimum wage and had gotten a part-time job at Starbucks for the other three. Despite the crazy hours, she seemed happy doing something she loved.

It was the height of summer – well, it was summer all year round in Singapore, but June was always especially hot – and I stretched out by the pool at the condo, flipping through a local magazine. It always surprised me how many ads there were about skin lightening. All my life, I'd been chasing the sun with a bottle of Hawaiian Tropic to *avoid* having pasty skin.

I turned over on the lounge chair and unclasped the bikini top, letting the sun scorch my skin with nothing in the

way. The sun was unrelenting and the humidity got to my head pretty quickly.

I awoke a couple of hours later when a cool-ish breeze blew across my back. The sun was just beginning to set. I groggily checked my phone. Several missed FaceTimes from my mum, worried that I hadn't called her before she started work. I winced as I dropped her a quick message to let her know I hadn't been murdered.

A message from Alex, asking what I wanted for dinner. And a message from Charm, asking how I was.

I re-clasped the top, grabbed my stuff and headed for the elevator. Sleeping in the sun usually made me quite dazed and this time was no different. I tried to collect myself as I headed up to the apartment but a yawn caught me as I lifted the keys to the door. I was already looking forward to a quiet evening in with Alex and a movie. It was her turn to pick tonight and I *really* hoped she picked one of those ridiculous Tamil movies that had heroes flying about in action scenes. Those were always unbelievably entertaining. Plus, I was beginning to pick up on some of the language.

"Miss Summers, I presume?"

I jerked around, startled by the sharp voice, and dropped my keys. They fell with a clatter on the tile. An older Indian

lady stood at the other end of the hallway, her eyes obscured by cat-eye designer shades.

I reached down for the keys and pushed a few strands of hair out of my face. "Uh, yes?"

She took a few steps forward, towering over me in her wedged heels. She raised her shades, her eyes taking me in from head to toe. I tugged at the halter strap of my bikini and hugged the towel closer to my chest.

"I'm here to see my daughter. Is she here?"

The confusion must've shown on my face. "I'm sorry, who are you?"

"I'm Amala's mother. I need to see her."

*

The little metal feet of my unexpected guest's Prada bag clanged loudly as she set it down on the coffee table.

"Would you like something to drink?" I asked as she took a seat on the couch.

"No, thank you. You Americans don't know how to make tea," she replied, casually slipping off her sunglasses and

placing them in her purse, as though she hadn't just insulted a whole continent.

"Right," I said. "I'll be right back."

I ducked into the bedroom and dialed Alex's mobile. Straight to voicemail. I tried again. When that didn't work, I dropped her several panicked messages. *Oh god. Oh god, oh god, oh god.*

I slipped a t-shirt over my head and tried to calm down. *She's just a person. You've been through this. She's just like any other aggressive parent at a parent-teacher conference. Breathe.* I laid a hand on my stomach and tried to get my breathing under control.

When I felt somewhat collected, I quickly tied my hair into top knot and secured it with a clip. *This is my place. She's my guest. I'm in control.*

The thought calmed me down a little.

When I exited the bedroom, she was not where I'd left her. Instead, she was standing by the mantle with a picture frame in her hand. I knew what she was looking at — it was Alex and I at the Red Dot gathering. Daniel had taken a candid shot of us with Alex's lips pressed to my forehead. I had a stupidly happy smile of my face.

She was staring at it so intently that she didn't even notice I was in the room. I cleared my throat. She hastily put the picture back and turned away, raising her fingers to her face as though she were wiping tears from her eyes.

"Uh, ma'am. Like I said, Alex is at work today but she'll be home soon. Would you like to come by another time? I can ask her when she has a day off and..."

"No," she said, sitting back down on the couch. "I'll wait."

So much for me being in control!

"On second thought, I will have a cup of tea. Two teabags, please. Milk and sugar."

I was grateful not to be in the same room with her — my mind was a bubbling cauldron of worry, anxiety and pain. *Nothing* could possibly go right if Alex walked in the front door and saw her mother. She *never* spoke about her family, and after what Jack had told me, I was sure there was a really good reason for it.

I took as long as I could to make the tea, checking my phone constantly to see if Alex had replied. Nothing.

"Here you go," I said, setting a small tray in front of.. "I didn't get your name."

"Mrs Shankar." Right. So it looked like I wouldn't be on a first name basis with *her* mom.

"Enjoy your tea."

We sat in silence for what seemed like forever. Mrs Shankar stirred her tea, tapping the spoon against the mug repeatedly. She finally took a sip and rested the saucer on her lap. I studied her as she sipped but I couldn't find an ounce of similarity between her and her daughter. From her lighter skin tone, snobbish behavior and the small gold cross around her neck, she was every bit the polar opposite of Alex.

"So, what do you do?" she asked after eons.

"I'm a teacher."

"I see. And what do you teach?"

"English and Creative Writing."

"Very good," she said, as though she were mulling the information over.

I checked my phone yet again. Still nothing from Alex. It was almost seven thirty; she should've been home by now.

"I was a teacher once," Mrs Shankar said, cutting into my panicked thoughts.

That surprised me. "Really? What did you teach?"

"I taught English as well." She looked down at her cup.

"Why did you quit?"

A sad smile played around her lips. "It was the 80s, my dear. When I had my first son, my husband's family expected me to stay at home and look after him. So I did."

"And you never went back to teaching?"

She shook her head. "There are certain things expected of us and these things, we should do without question. I see that there are only women in your family."

The change of topic threw me. She indicated a picture on my corner table. It was a picture of my Nana, mom and I on the front steps of the townhouse Nana had acquired in her second divorce. I loved that picture. Everyone always commented that the three of us looked like sisters but we'd never looked more so than in that shot. We'd gotten a passer-by to take it for us after a day of shopping. Nana sat between my knees and I was hugging her from behind. Mom had her head on Nana's lap. The trees were just starting to turn for autumn. It was the summer before I'd left for University in Sheffield.

"Yes, it's just the three of us," I murmured, trying to get past the lump in my throat.

"What about your father?" she asked pointedly.

What could I say? That my mother's a hippie who got knocked up after a wild night at a MJ concert? That I didn't even know who my father was? Unlikely.

"He's not in my life," I said instead.

She seemed to consider my response. "Do you think the lack of men in your life is the cause of your affliction?"

I'd just taken a great gulp of air to set her straight about what she claimed to be an 'affliction' when I heard keys in the door seconds before Alex's voice came across.

"Hi, baby. Sorry I'm late. My phone..."

Mrs Shankar set her saucer down and stood. The shock on Alex's face was abundantly evident. I walked over to her and took the grocery bags and backpack from her.

"I'll leave you two alone."

"No," Alex said, her gaze hardening. "Stay."

I looked at her and then back at her mother.

Mrs Shankar said something in Tamil but Alex shook her head.

"You're not going to shut her out. Cady's my girlfriend. Say whatever you want but she's staying right here."

A look of disgust crept across her mother's face at the word 'girlfriend'. But she took a deep breath and seemed to collect herself.

"I need you to come with me."

"Why?" Alex crossed her arms, her stance rather aggressive. "I have papers to prove that I don't belong in your family anymore. Why should I go anywhere with you?"

I placed my hand on her bicep in what I hoped was a calming move. Mrs Shankar looked away almost guiltily. But Alex wasn't done.

"Haven't you done enough? You threw me out when you disagreed with my life choices. When all your therapists and prayers and money couldn't change who I am. I was *sixteen!*" Her voice cracked. "You were ashamed of me. You still are — look at you! You come into my partner's home and knowing you, probably intimidated her, and now what? What do you want?"

Alex was breathing heavily.

Still looking away, Mrs Shankar said, "Your father's in hospital. He wants to see you."

Alex shook her head, a sad smile twisting her lips. Then she shrugged. "What father? I don't have a father now, do I?"

I heartily disagreed with what Alex said but I could also never understand what she'd gone through. As she walked away, I set her stuff down and opened the door for Mrs Shankar.

"I don't know you," she said quietly, "but my husband is not doing well. He should see her."

"I can't force her, Mrs Shankar." *And I really don't want to do you any favors.*

"I know," she said bitterly. "I know. But please try."

She slid her sunglasses back on her nose even though it was way past sundown. Her hands were trembling visibly.

"Try – that's all I ask," she repeated when I didn't say anything.

I nodded slightly.

"It's not an affliction," I said and shut the door.

#

Chapter 11

I made a pot of jasmine tea and sat in the kitchen. Alex had retreated to the bathroom after her mother had left. She hadn't said a word. The shower had been running for almost half an hour.

I swirled the untouched tea, sloshing it over the sides so I would've something to do to keep myself occupied. All my sensitivity training told me to leave Alex alone – someone who'd just experienced conflict needed time to heal. But my heart was telling me otherwise.

I wasted some time cleaning up the tea, doing some dishes, putting the groceries away and piling Alex's work clothes in the laundry. Forty-five minutes had passed. Still, I heard nothing but running water.

The 'what if' demons in my mind had taken over. I tapped lightly on the bathroom door but heard nothing. I opened it a crack.

"Alex?"

She was standing in the shower, one hand braced on the wall, fully clothed. Her face was obscured by wet, matted hair. I slid the shower door open. She didn't move.

"Alex?" I said again, laying a hand on her arm as I had before. It was ice cold.

"I'm turning the water off." I reached through the icy water pouring down on her and turned the valve. Still, she stood there, unresponsive. I began panicking in earnest.

"Come here," I said, turning her around and pulling her to me. "I'm here, baby. It'll be okay. I'm here."

I pushed the hair out of her eyes, trying to get her to look at me. I had a feeling she was going into some kind of shock. Her eyes were clouded over, glazed. She'd checked out.

"Alex!" I yelled, tapping her cheek a couple of times. She blinked and seemed to have trouble focusing. "Baby, come back. You're okay. Everything's fine."

I tried to sound as reassuring as I could. I knew very little about Alex's family but what I'd personally seen, I didn't like. I couldn't begin to imagine what was going through her head.

"Let's get out of the shower," I suggested, determined to get her into some dry clothes and warm her up.

Her arms came around me in a fierce, desperate hug, squeezing the breath out of my lungs in a surprised exhale. She began shivering in earnest, but I felt hot tears on my shoulder.

"Baby..." I started and a sob burst out of her in a heart-rending moment. She leaned her weight on me and I was forced back towards the tiled wall of the shower. She buried her head in my shoulder, her body shivering from physical and mental exertion. I slid down to the floor and she curled herself around me, still holding on to me as though I were the only thing in the world that would keep her from drowning.

Each sob felt like it was tearing me up inside. I slipped my t-shirt over my head and wiped her cheeks and nose, tossing it aside. Although she eventually quieted, the hollow echo in the bathroom and intermittent hiccups served as a sufficient reminder of her pain.

Her eyes, reddened and swollen, finally closed, and she murmured, "I love you" just as she began to drift.

I shut my eyes just as the tears threatened to spill. I kissed the top of her head and leaned my head back against the wall.

That night, for the first time since we'd started dating, I spooned Alex to sleep.

*

She had already left for work when I woke up the next day. I hadn't been able to sleep half the night. Every time Alex stirred and clasped the arm I'd draped around her waist, I jerked awake and soothed her back to sleep. I couldn't recall the number of times this happened before I drifted off completely.

I texted her immediately, trying to catch her before she started her shift, but received no response. I stared at the screen for what seemed like hours, waiting for the little grey dots to pop up. I just needed to know she was okay. It was very unlike her to leave without a word. We'd usually have some breakfast together – and sometimes, a little more than breakfast – before she left for work.

I rolled over to her side of the bed and buried my nose in her pillow. The smell of the herbal soap she used calmed me immediately. I hugged it close and shut my eyes.

*

"What are you doing home so early?"

I'd just sat down with an e-book on managing family crises later that day when Alex walked in the door. She looked terrible. Despite the fact that she'd slept through the night, there were dark bags under her eyes that spoke volumes.

"I took a half day," she said, dropping her bag by the door and heading to the kitchen. I set my Kindle on the coffee table and followed her.

She retrieved a mug from the cupboard and filled it with water from the sink.

"Would you like something to eat?" I asked. The food from last night was still in the fridge. I hadn't had the appetite to touch any of it.

She shook her head as she drank and rinsed the mug.

"I have to go," she said, instead, turning away.

I frowned. She hadn't once looked me in the eye since she'd walked through the door. She pushed past me and made for the bedroom.

Everything in me told me not to let her leave. Not like this.

She was ruffling through her drawer when I came up behind her and put my arms around waist. Laying my cheek against her back, I murmured, "I miss you."

She'd frozen the moment I'd touched her. I could feel her heart rate speeding up.

"Look at me, Alex. Turn around."

She did but looked away, unable to meet my eyes. I put my hand on her cheek. She closed her eyes and leaned into my caress.

"I'm sorry," she said, one hand coming up to cup mine. She placed a kiss on the center of my palm.

"For what?" I asked, genuinely confused.

"For last night," she clarified, finally meeting my gaze. "I'm sorry I broke down like that."

My heart ached for her. "Don't insult me by apologizing. I'll probably never understand what you're going through but I'm here for you. You have to know that."

"Okay," she said but her voice was barely a whisper.

"Talk to me, baby. What's going through your mind?"

She pulled away from me and sat on the edge of the bed. I kicked off my flip-flops and knelt on the bed, facing her.

"I need to see him," she confessed, unable to meet my eyes again. I noted that she said 'him' and not 'dad'. I took her hand in mine.

"But I thought you said..."

"I know I did!" She pulled her hand away and stood, stalking across the room. "You don't understand. I was forced to leave. I had no choice. I never *wanted* to leave."

I watched her fight to find the words to express how she felt. She looked broken, confused.

"Come here, baby. Tell me what happened."

Her gaze pinned me to the spot for a full minute before she said, "I never wanted to think about that time ever again."

Discomfort lodged painfully in my belly. Alex's past was the final piece of the puzzle. Although I knew she didn't *want* to keep it from me, it still unnerved the hell out of me that she held that part of herself away from my reach. I mean, there was nothing about me she didn't know – even some of the embarrassing stuff! But when it came to family, whenever I'd even so much as bring up the subject, she'd change it or simply shake her head.

I knew it had to be painful but I also knew I could help. As a teacher, you're trained for situations like this. As a lover, you know that touch can heal all manner of things. If

only she'd talk to me, I knew I could help, even in some small way. A hug, a kiss, an 'I'm sorry'.

"Come here." I patted the spot on the bed next to me. She sat on the edge again, her head in her hands.

"Alex, they're your family. Sometimes families make mistakes. Sometimes you just have to be the bigger person. If there were ever a time to forgive your father for whatever he did, this would be it."

I tucked a strand of hair behind her ears. "Are you listening?"

She nodded, her eyes fixed on the carpet.

"Good. That's all I have to say. We don't have to talk about it now. I'll get us some chamomile tea or something, okay?"

I slid off the bed but she caught my arm, pulling me back to her. She pillowed her head against my chest and took a deep, steadying breath. My fingers found their way into her hair again.

"It's just easier to forget." Her voice was muffled against my skin.

I said nothing because, really, what could I say that would be better than just being there with her? For her?

She pulled away to stare at me for a few seconds before she scooted back on the bed and pulled me across her lap. Her head rested on the grey headboard. I could see her throat working as she tried to form the words.

"I, uh, knew I wasn't... normal... when I was very young. Maybe 5. My mum's best friend at the time had a daughter who was a year older than me. Maya." Her smile was sad. "She was a weird kid. But we were close. Very close. Close enough to play 'Mommy and Daddy' even though we were both girls. Neither of us saw a problem with it. It seemed completely natural."

She drifted off for a little bit, lost in thought.

"Anyway, we had our own little house where she would bake these cupcakes and I would go to work everyday with my dad's old briefcase."

I raised an eyebrow. "Like life in the 50s?"

Alex chuckled. "Yeah, I suppose it was. Maya and I were really good friends for years. We never actually spoke about anything deep and meaningful, although both of us pretty much knew what we were. And then I went to an all-girls school and... those were the best years of my life. I learned a lot." The twinkle in her eye told me just what she learned there. "But

it was different for Maya. Her parents sent her to an International school. She didn't fit in; she was suffocating in that place.

"One day, she came over to the house with her mom after school. I think I was fifteen then. We were in my room, just chatting about nothing in particular. And out of the blue, she asked me if I had a girlfriend. We'd never talked about stuff like that before. It startled me but I wasn't about to hide anything. I said no. And then she started unbuttoning her uniform and... things happened.

"It was *weird*. It felt... it felt like obligatory sex with someone I really cared for. Because I knew she was struggling and just needed *something*. And that's how they found us."

She paused, taking a breath and intertwining her fingers with mine.

"That's how our moms found us. With my head between her legs. I was *terrified*. I remember this absolute silence when we realized we were being watched. And it still haunts me.

"I got a really good thrashing. Several, actually. From my mom, my dad. They sent me to a priest everyday after school. I put up with it for a while. But a few months later, my mother found some flirty texts from my girlfriend at the time. So she sent me to a psychologist. I went for about a year. Said the right things. Played him, really. He tried to

convince me that it's a choice, something in your head that you can control."

She shrugged. "Even at that age, I knew it wasn't. I knew what I was, who I was. I never even tried to fight it. Maya, on the other hand, became a born again Christian. Her family started attending another church and I never saw her again."

My heart ached for a girl I'd never even met, someone I couldn't help.

"It was hard, living in that house. I was policed every second of every day. I wasn't allowed to shut my bedroom door, I wasn't allowed to cut my hair and I definitely wasn't allowed to go out with friends. So one day, I lied about having extra classes and went over to my girlfriend's place. We weren't even really doing anything. We just hung out by her pool, talking. And suddenly, my dad's car stops right in front of Lisa's front gate.

"It was *bad*. He'd tracked my phone. He dragged me home by the scruff of my neck, and just threw everything I owned onto the street. I stood there, in my front garden, still in my borrowed swimsuit and he's yelling, throwing stuff at me. The neighbors are all watching and I grab my school bag, a handful of clothes and run out the front gate."

She took a deep breath. "I walked two hours to my grandmother's house. She took me in. Didn't even ask questions. My *paati* was a great woman."

"Was?" I interrupted.

"Yeah. She died last year." Her grip on me tightened. "Then her house went to her oldest son – the uncle you met. And he kicked me out, too. Right before Prelims."

Despite the matter-of-fact way she was presenting her life, a single tear slid down my cheek. She brushed it away. "I'm okay, Cady. Really. My *paati* left me some money. I stayed in a shelter for a while before Jack hooked me up with Heng and the rest."

Her brows furrowed. "I suppose the worst part was that none of them even cared enough to contact me. To see how I was. I mean, I'm their blood. Surely, they would've wondered if I was dead or alive. I have two older brothers and neither did anything to help."

She leaned her head back against the headboard and shut her eyes. Her breathing was deep and even – deliberately so, I expected.

I placed my palm on her cheek and turned her head toward me. I took her lips, slowly, trying to tell her without words that it'll be okay.

When I finally pulled away, she murmured 'thank you' against my lips.

I shook my head. "I can't imagine how painful this must be for you, baby. I really can't. But I think you should go see your father today. Look at you. You're a strong, independent, kind, generous and very lovable woman. As much as it kills me that you had to go through all that crap to become who you are, the fact that you've moved past the anger and insecurity and rejection shows me that you're a bigger person than your family will ever be... collectively. You need to show them how well you're doing. You need to make them regret ever treating you that way by trying to make amends. Do you understand?"

She sighed.

"And then maybe, just maybe, they'll see you the way I see you."

She smiled but it was sad. "Not totally the way you see me, I hope." Her fingers ran down the side of my breasts.

I slapped her hand away. "Be serious!"

She pulled me closer and I rested my head in the crook of her neck, my fingers playing with her hair.

"I meant what I said last night, you know," she whispered. My head popped up.

"What?" I teased, feigning ignorance.

She caught my hand and pressed a kiss to it. "I love you. I think I always have."

I leaned forward and kissed her, catching her bottom lip between my teeth. This was wildly different from the one we shared before. Her teeth grazed my bottom lip and tugged.

She pushed me down on the bed so that I lay under her with my legs around her waist.

"And?" she prodded, kissing a trail down my neck.

"And what?" I asked, already breathless as she nibbled on a soft spot on my shoulder.

She looked up at me with an eyebrow raised. I reached down to trace the sexy arc.

"You have to know I love you, too."

Her hand crept up my shirt as her lips met mine again. "Now I do," she whispered.

#

Chapter 12

We pulled up in front of the behemoth of a hospital around 6PM that evening. Traffic had been absolutely brutal, more so because Alex hadn't said a word since we'd left the house.

She'd asked to borrow a blouse and the white chiffon top I'd loaned her hung loosely on her lean frame. The top of her sports bra peeked out at her shoulders.

She'd taken off her eyebrow piercing.

"I'll wait for you. Give me a text when you're ready." I watched as passengers exited the car behind me. The driver stared at me, expecting me to pull away and not hold up traffic. I waved him past.

"I've never been so unsure of anything in my life." She bit her lip, looking out the window. "I never wanted to see them again. They're horrible people."

I slapped her thigh sharply. "Stop! You made your decision. I'm sorry to say this, but what if your dad passes away tonight? Huh? You're sitting here in the car with me, wasting time, and he just... goes? What will you do then? How would you feel not knowing what could've happened?"

She flinched at my words. "I... I don't know, Cay."

"Look," I unbuckled the seatbelt and turned towards her. Another car honked behind me and I waved them past. "You told me you wanted to do this, right? You want to see your dad?"

She nodded, exhaling deeply. "He hates me. He'd never want me there. My mother has always been the nice one."

That statement surprised a laugh out of me. "*Your mother? Nice?*"

Her lips quirked in a small smile. "Yes. Believe it or not."

She took a deep breath – several, actually – checked her face in the mirror and closed her eyes for a few seconds. I just kept waving cars on as she did that.

"Okay. I'm going in." She placed a quick kiss on my cheek and reached for the door.

I shouted "Good luck!" after her and signaled to pull away from the curb. But a cursory glance in my rearview mirror revealed a guy who was staring at Alex intensely. Too intensely. I turned off my signal just as he stubbed his cigarette out on a trashcan and hastily picked his briefcase off the floor.

He made a blind dash for Alex and my heart constricted.

In a panic, I shouted her name through the open window. As she turned around, he slammed into her side so sharply I heard Alex grunt. I scrambled to get out of the car, climbing over the gearshift and hitting my head in the process.

Hissing, I popped open the passenger door, only to see that the guy was now hugging Alex – a giant, big, bear hug cuddle. Alex just stood there, looking down at the man, before she tentatively put her arms around him.

As I stood rubbing the sore spot, the man spoke rapidly in Tamil. I could tell he was throwing questions at her but gave her no time at all to respond. Then he pushed away from her as though he was checking to see if she was in one piece.

"Are you okay?" Alex asked me instead.

The guy looked over his shoulder and pulled away from her.

"I'm fine," I said, waving her away. I wondered how red my forehead was. "I'll see you later."

"Wait, Cay." Alex's voice was hesitant. "This is my brother, Arvin. Arvin, this is Cady."

My eyes widened at the mention of 'brother'. I looked uncertainly from Alex to Arvin and back. Yet again, I found no similarities between the two. Arvin took after his mother.

I extended my hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Arvin shook my hand warmly and spoke to Alex in Tamil again. Alex simply nodded.

He turned back to me. "I would say welcome to the family but that isn't going to happen while the old folks are still around."

"Oh," I laughed awkwardly. "Great."

"Still," he continued, "It's nice to meet you. You're very beautiful."

Alex elbowed him in the ribs as I stammered out a thank you. He looked back at Alex again, his expression somber.

"I've missed you. I tried to call you... so many times. You disappeared." He seemed genuinely distraught.

I stood there, wondering if they'd mind if I got into the car and drove off. This seemed like something Alex had to deal with herself. But I stayed. I wanted to be there if Alex needed me.

"What did you expect, 'na? I didn't see any of you sticking up for me!" she exploded, drawing concerned looks from passers by.

Arvin's face was pained. "What could I do? I..."

I watched as the siblings tried to push the blame around. It was a whole lot of coulda, woulda, shouldas. They were starting to attract a small crowd. A Malay family stood in the background, the kids sucking on candy as they watched the fight.

I held up my hand. "Guys. Now is *not* the time. You're both here to see your dad. Visiting hours end soon. You need to get your butts in there." I turned to Alex. "You – you are just buying time so you don't have to go in there and face your fears."

They looked at each other and back at me. Alex looked frustrated and guilty at the same time. Arvin looked away as though he were ashamed of himself.

"You're right," she said finally, coming forward to press a kiss on my cheek. "We'll go."

"I'm sorry," Arvin said suddenly, still unable to look his sister in the eye.

I got back in the car and watched as the pair entered the building. Arvin seemed to be chattering away again but Alex had her arms crossed.

I sighed, turning the key in the ignition. There were certain battles I wouldn't be able to fight for her.

#

Chapter 13

I was wasting time at a food court when I got a text from Alex an hour later. Shopping bags littered my feet but anxiety still churned my stomach. I tapped my foot nervously on the tiled floor as I read the text.

Where are you? My oldest brother wants to have a chat over dinner. I'd like you to be there.

I bit my lip. The last thing I wanted to do was upset people with my presence.

Are you sure? I don't want it to be a problem.

The response was instantaneous.

It won't. It's 23 Sin Ming Avenue. How long will you be?

I begrudgingly picked up the slew of bags around me, mentally girding my loins for a confrontational evening.

20 minutes, I think. Shouldn't be much traffic. I'll text you if I get lost.

Her response made me smile. I hadn't gotten used to us exchanging those three little words yet.

Okay, babe. I love you.

*

I sat outside the veritable mansion and gawked at the three-story structure. It was a beautiful home nestled in the corner of a quiet street. A curved driveway with lush bougainvillea lined on one side greeted me as the electric iron gates buzzed open. I glanced down woefully at my cut-off jeans shorts and the Cotton On tee that had seen better days.

Good luck, Cady.

A heavily pregnant yet extremely petite lady waited on the end of the driveway, waving at me with one hand placed lovingly on her belly. She was pale – paler than I was after my rigorous tanning schedule – and had very striking features. Her eyes were a lovely amber that I noticed even 10 feet away. I waved back hesitantly as I parked the car behind a swanky Mercedes.

As I turned the ignition off, she rushed forward and popped open the car door. My mind immediately screamed a warning: *Too Friendly!* I fought the urge to recoil and instead focused on putting one foot after the other and getting out of the car.

"You must be Cady," she smiled widely, extending her hand. "I'm Mira, Alex's sister-in-law. Arjun's wife."

I shook her hand, wondering where in the world Alex was.

"Nice to meet you. You have a beautiful home."

"Thank you. I loved it at first. But you know what? Now there's too many stairs!" We'd just started up the porch steps. She clung to the railing for support and I grasped her upper arms to help her up.

She released a long breath at the top of the short flight of stairs. "Thank you. The doctor says any day now." She patted her belly. "We are hopeful."

She spoke with a very thick Indian accent, much unlike the locals here.

"Where in the States are you from?" she asked as an older lady, presumably the maid, came forward with two iced drinks. "Alex told me you are a teacher."

I accepted the cool drink and took a sip. "I'm from New York, born and raised. I studied in Sheffield for a bit before I moved to Singapore."

"Ah, that's nice." She lowered herself into plush chair and gestured for me to do the same. "A friend of the family is doing her Masters at Columbia next year."

"Cool," I said noncommittally, looking around at the elaborate Indian deco and rich carpeting and the giant TV that could easily double as a movie theatre screen. I felt the first spark of anger in my belly when I realized that these people – these selfish, ignorant bigots – had thrown Alex out of the house with *nothing* when they had all this!

The cloying scent of joss sticks didn't really help my mood.

Mira followed my gaze. "The men are in the office."

My eyes snapped back to her. She quickly clarified. "Not to say that Alex is a man in any way. It's just... something I am used to saying." She looked back down at her drink.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. "Maybe I should see her. I think she asked me to come here for a reason."

"Oh, of course." She set her drink on a corner table and tried to rise from her chair. Despite my reservations, I helped her up. Karma and all that.

She led us down a hallway of colorful cloth paintings to a closed door. We could hear raised voices behind it. One of which was unmistakably Alex.

When no one responded to Mira's knock, she pushed the door in. Alex stood across from her oldest brother, I assumed. Her second brother, Arvin, had curled himself into a couch in the corner, obscured by the mahogany shelves that lined the walls, floor to ceiling. The look on his face indicated he didn't want to be anywhere near the situation.

The resemblance between Alex and her oldest brother was striking. Both stood at 5'9 with similar builds. Their profiles, with their slightly too-long noses and thick bottom lips, were uncannily similar. Unlike their mother and brother, both of them had darker, russet skin.

Neither of them had noticed Mira and I walking in.

"Why is it so hard for you to be normal? You always have to do things *your way*. You're so selfish! Have you ever thought about your family? Our image?"

Alex ran a hand through her hair. "I don't know why I bother talking to you when you don't listen, 'na. This is who I am! I can't change that. Tie me up in a sari and send me to church every goddamn day and I'll still be this person."

"Why can't you just pretend, huh? Until Appa goes. You know he has very little time left. Make him happy! That's all we ask, Amala."

"You're not listening to me..."

"...because all I hear is the sound of a child trying to justify her stupid decisions! Would it kill you to pretend for a few days? I'm not asking you to change yourself – God forbid!"

Alex looked like she was on the verge of frustrated tears. I felt my blood boil.

"Look," I interjected, and three very surprised heads turned towards me. "Alex has had to give up *everything* to be who she is. Why should she 'pretend'," I spat the word at him, "for even a second so all of you can feel comfortable in your hetero world? If you can't see what a loyal, kind, sweet and loving person she really is because she's gay, that's *your goddamn problem!*"

I really hadn't meant to yell. It went against every conflict resolution seminar I'd attended. But years of defending Charm against pricks in high school (this was before she'd had her growth spurt) were hard to shake. The words just seemed to tumble out of me.

Arjun crossed his arms and looked at me. "And who are you to poke your nose into our family business?"

"She's my girlfriend." Alex hadn't even hesitated. Arjun muttered a string of words in Tamil and look upwards as though he were praying for patience.

Mira appeared from behind me and bustled into the room. "We are all a little tense right now. Arjun, sit down before you give yourself a stroke – I'm not raising this baby alone. Let's all talk about this like adults."

Heavily pregnant and barely over five feet, Mira seemed to command everyone's attention without even raising her voice.

Alex spoke first. "*Anni*, you need to sit down. You shouldn't be walking around so much."

Arjun moved from his desk chair and Mira lowered herself into it carefully. Alex and I sat on a plush tub chair that faced the desk. Arvin didn't move from his hideaway corner.

"Now," Mira said, leaning back in her seat. "No more shouting. It's bad for the baby."

We were duly chastised.

"I don't know what my husband has said to upset you but I wanted you here for a reason, Alex."

"You wanted me here?"

Mira nodded. "We don't know each other. Actually, I didn't even know Arjun had a sister until we got married." She looked pointedly at her husband. "After which he learned a lesson about keeping secrets from his wife."

"Anyway," she continued. "When I heard what they'd done to you, I was so upset. I refused to believe that people could be so heartless. You were a child." She placed her palm on her baby bump, caressing it lovingly. "I refuse to believe that if my child were a little different, this family would shun it, too."

Arjun started to reassure her but she held up a hand. "No more, Arjun. You've done enough here."

"Anni, I'm fine. I survived. I'm doing well now." Alex grasped my hand in both of hers.

Mira eyes drifted down to our joined hands. She smiled. "I know. But this family has to right a wrong. Whether you forgive these fools for their behavior... I don't care. But your..." she said a string of words in Tamil, "shouldn't be what my child is born into."

Alex leaned in and whispered, "It's like bad karma."

Arjun retrieved a folder from his desk and carelessly slapped it onto the mahogany table. The look he received from his wife was withering.

Mira picked up the folder and flipped through it. "Your legal name is still Amala?"

Alex frowned. "Yes, but..."

Mira set the folder down on the desk with the open pages facing up. "Arjun is buying you out."

She picked up a fountain pen and placed it on top of the papers.

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Out of what?"

"Your inheritance, *ponnu*. You were born into this family and you have every right to it."

Alex laughed. "Legally, I don't."

Mira eyed her husband again. "Yes, well, there shouldn't be legality between family. This man here doesn't seem to know that. Always so fast with the lawyer talk."

Arjun remained silent – I assumed this was uncharacteristic of him.

“So, here. This is yours. It’s non-negotiable. You take it or we put it in an account and let it gather dust until you claim it. This is your birthright, Alex. Take it. Use it. Go to University. Buy a house. Whatever you want.”

Alex didn’t move. Instead, she said, “I don’t want it.”

Mira sat back in her chair again and placed her interlaced fingers over her belly. I felt like I was in a very warped, very ethnic version of Godfather.

“Then what do you want?” Mira asked.

Alex’s hands tightened around mine. Her voice almost broke as she said, “I want my family.”

I felt tears threatening as I swallowed the lump in my throat. Mira rose from her chair, chastising her husband in what sounded like, ‘look what you’ve done’. She waddled over and took Alex’s face in her hands.

“You have me,” she said. “And you’ll have this baby. We’re your family.”

“So am I, Amala.” Arvin finally chirped up from his corner. “I know there’s nothing I can say to make up for

everything. I should've protected you... I'm your older brother. But I let them chase you out. I'm so sorry."

He came forward and knelt in front of her, placing his head in her lap. I moved away to let them have their moment. A small smile tugged at my lips but it quickly faded as Arjun walked out of the study.

Alex watched her brother leave but Mira told her to ignore her husband. "You still have family, Alex. Believe that. People like my husband and your parents may never understand your... leanings. I'm not even sure if I do. But you have a right to be in this family. So here."

She plucked the folder from the desk and thrust it Alex's hand. "Take it. It's yours. It's been signed. We want to do this for you."

I followed Arjun out of the study. I'm not even sure what compelled me to. He was in the kitchen, leaning against a counter, sipping a glass of water.

"What is your problem?" I snapped. He almost dropped the glass in surprise.

"What?"

"What is your problem? Why can't you accept Alex for who she is? Why is it *so wrong* for her to live her life as an openly lesbian woman?"

He cringed. "Don't use that word. I hate it."

"What word?" I prodded. "Lesbian?"

"Yes."

I snorted. "That's just one part of her, Arjun. Even if you disagree with *one facet* of who she is, there's so much more to love. Why can't you look past the one thing you disagree with?"

He said nothing.

"We're just people, Arjun," I said softly, hoping beyond hope that I could get through to him in some small way.

He turned away from me and poured the excess water down the sink. "You know," he said with his back still turned, "When my mother told me about you after she visited your apartment, I did a background check on you. You've got a clean record. Good schools, privileged life, boyfriends of good social standing. You've never done anything even remotely wrong. It would be a real pity if that should change."

"What?" I asked, genuinely baffled by the change in direction of the conversation.

"'Sapphic teacher seduces student' – sounds like a good headline, doesn't it?"

It took a few seconds for me to properly understand what he was saying. "You're disgusting!" I gasped when it finally dawned on me.

"Make Amala take the money and leave us alone. My wife will finally be happy and leave me in peace."

Before words of outrage could tumble out of me, a voice behind me said, "If you say another word, your wife will kill you."

I turned to find Mira standing in the doorway, a look of murderous rage across her face. She looked directly at me.

"Alex is in the office with Arvin. Please don't repeat what my husband just said. I truly want her to be happy." She took a deep breath. "I will deal with him. You deal with her."

With a withering backward glance, I left the kitchen.

*

Half an hour later, parked at a McDonald's drive-thru, I still pondered if I should tell Alex about what had happened in the kitchen. I nibbled the end of the plastic McFlurry spoon as Alex tucked into her McSpicy.

"It's just *so good*," she moaned. A splotch of mayo clung to her nose.

"Here," I said, wiping the mayo away with a napkin. "I don't have to ask if you're enjoying that."

She dropped the half-eaten burger into the box and wiped her hands. "Yeah, I just really felt like I needed it. It's been a day and a half. And then some."

"So... what are you going to do?"

"About what?"

"Your dad, the money... any of it."

She sighed and took a sip of her milkshake. "I'm still going to see my dad, no matter what my brother thinks. I waited for over an hour today but *Pa* was completely out of it. As for the money, I haven't decided yet."

"How much is it?" I asked hesitantly.

She shrugged. "I haven't looked. Does it matter?"

"May I?" I asked, indicating the folder on top of the dashboard.

She nodded. I flipped through it quickly. The amount the family offered her wasn't a surprise. But there was a lot of legal jargon.

"It's a lot of money, Alex. You should have a lawyer look through it."

She shrugged again. "I don't really care. If you want to take it to a lawyer, you can."

She hesitated before saying, "But... it was kind of nice today, wasn't it? Mira's so sweet. They were only dating when I left home... I hadn't even met her before... I didn't realize she cared so much. It's really all I ever wanted."

I ran my knuckles over her cheek. "You have me, too."

"I know," she said. "And believe it or not, at least you're part of the family in some small way now."

I frowned. "What?! That's the last thing I would get from that little shouting fest today. Why would you say that?"

"They were all shouting in English, weren't they?"

"Oh."

#

Chapter 14

My gut clenched the next day when Alex told me she'd like me to be in the hospital with her. I wanted to be there, truly, but I knew the kind of problems my presence would cause. I'd hoped that today would be the day that she'd reconcile things with her dad. But it looked less and less likely as we walked through the stark white halls.

She was wearing yet another one of my tops – a navy blue one this time. Her short hair was tied back into the tiniest bun imaginable and she wore a pair of stud earrings. I hadn't even known she had her ears pierced until this morning.

I think she was intentionally de-gaying in the hopes that this meeting would be as painless as possible. I didn't blame her for it, but I highly doubted a pretty top and a pair of earrings was going to cut it. It was the way she carried herself – the swagger, the way she spoke – all of it was going to be hard to mask.

When we reached the floor where her dad's ward was, we found the family gathered outside. The floor was quiet, save for the whir of the air conditioning and the cacophony of several phones ringing simultaneously.

Her mother was the first to spot us. Mrs Shankar's gaze passed over me – I was dressed in a black pleated skirt, a lightweight white tee and black strappy heels – and a look of resignation settled over her face. She looked exhausted, as though she hadn't slept for days. Stray strands of hair had fallen away from the severe knot at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were red-rimmed.

"How is he?" Alex asked her mother.

"How do you think, Amala? He's dying. The doctors are in there with him now. They kicked us out. Why he needs five doctors, I'll never know." She swiped the back of her hand over her forehead. "He wants to see you."

"Okay. We'll wait."

I saw Mira waving a few seats down and walked towards her. If possible, she looked even bigger today. Her face was red and puffy.

"Are you okay?" I asked, taking a seat next to her, crossing my legs. The two brothers lounged against the wall opposite us.

"Fine, thank you," she said with a tilt of her chin. I followed her gaze and saw Alex standing rigidly with her hands behind her back as her mother did up the buttons of her blouse so that her sports bra didn't show. Her facial muscles

twitched as Mrs Shankar withdrew a pin from her bun and twisted Alex's fringe into a little poofy puff of hair. I would've laughed if we were anywhere but in a hospital waiting to see my girlfriend's dying father.

Mrs Shankar said something too low for Mira or I to hear, but Alex nodded, her face stoic. She reached back and unclasped the gold cross that hung around her neck, slipping it under the soft collar of Alex's top and letting it fall against her chest.

More words we couldn't hear. Mira and I exchanged bewildered glances before Alex took a seat next to me.

"You all right?" I asked her. She only nodded.

"You look nice, Amala." This, surprisingly, came from Arjun, who offered her a small smile. Alex stared at her brother, a mixture of shock and apprehension on her face. Then she sat back in the plastic waiting chair and propped an Oxford-clad foot on her knee.

Arjun glared at her. I hid a smile behind my hand.

"They have been in there for almost an hour. The doctors," Mira informed us.

"That's... concerning," I murmured under my breath.

Mira's face was red again and she seemed to be breathing heavily. I frowned. "What's wrong?"

She waved my question away. "It's fine. Just a cramp."

It sure didn't look like "just a cramp".

The door to the ward opened and the doctors filed out. Arjun took his place next to his mom. The rest of us hung back. Alex took my hand in hers and I gave her a quick squeeze.

Whatever the doctors said, it wasn't good. I watched as Mrs Shankar squared her shoulders and nodded. Arjun put his arm around his mother, repeating 'it will be okay'. The look on the doctors' faces assured the rest of us that it wouldn't be.

"You can see him now but not too many people at once. He needs his rest."

Mrs Shankar nodded and swiped tears off her face. She gestured toward Alex. "Come. He's waiting."

"I'll be right here," I promised Alex. She nodded, her face just a mask of stoicism. As the family filed in, she looked back at me. I hoped the smile on my face was reassuring.

I exhaled deeply when the door closed.

"It must be difficult being caught in the middle of someone else's family drama."

Mira's voice caught me by surprise. I'd assumed she'd gone in with the others but she was still seated behind me.

"Why aren't you in there?" I asked.

"Oh, I told Arjun I'll stay out here. Too many people make me claustrophobic."

I raised an eyebrow. "Mira, you've been flushing on and off for the past twenty minutes. Are you okay?"

"Yes," she insisted, her fingers digging into the armrest of the plastic chair.

I placed my hand on hers. "Mira, is the baby coming?"

She didn't respond – I think she couldn't respond. She simply breathed in and out with one hand clasped over her tummy.

Then she nodded.

"My water broke a couple of hours ago in the bathroom," she said through clenched teeth. "But I wanted to be here for

Alex. I wanted to know everything was okay before the baby comes."

I glanced briefly at the door to the ward. So far, I heard no yelling. That seemed like a good sign.

"Mira, I need to get you to a delivery room. Or a nurse. Can you just stay put?" I asked, pushing the hair out of her eyes. "You'll be okay if I leave you for two minutes?"

She nodded. "Don't tell Arjun yet. Just let him deal with all that first. Okay?"

"I promise," I said, turning on my strappy heels and running as quickly as could to the nearest nurses' station.

A lone nurse stood behind the desk, manning two phone lines. She looked up briefly and held up a finger.

"No, I don't have a second. Please, someone's having a baby. You have to get her to a maternity ward or something. Her water broke a while ago."

"Please hold," the nurse chirped into the two headsets. "When the water break?"

My mind raced. "A couple of hours ago. Her contractions seem to be getting closer together, though. I know she's had at least three in the past twenty minutes."

"Okay." The nurse hit a few buttons and hung up. "I just call for replacement. Go back to your friend and make sure she breathe evenly. Like this." She demonstrated Lamaze breathing. "I get the wheelchair."

I nodded and raced back, almost tripping on the stupid heels I just *had* to pair with the outfit. Mira was bent over, her face pale now.

I dropped to my knees again. "Mira, how far apart are the contractions?"

"A few minutes."

"Okay. You're okay; you'll be fine. A nurse is coming to get you. I need you to breathe, okay? In and out. Deeply. Like this." I simulated what the nurse had done. But Mira shook her head.

"It hurts. It really hurts!"

I grabbed her hand and winced as she gripped me tightly. "Mira, look at me. Focus on me."

Her head shot up, her eyes glazed over with pain. At the back of my mind, I had to admit that even in the midst of labor, with the threat of a human being crawling out of her at any moment, Mira was still stunning.

"Now, breathe with me. Just focus on me."

I managed to get her to do the Lamaze breathing. She lasted four rounds.

"My gyno's information is in my purse. Call her."

"Uh..." I wasn't an expert in this area but I was pretty sure the doctor wouldn't be getting here before the kid. Still, I said, 'sure' and ruffled through her bag.

The nurse finally came around the corner with a wheelchair and a doctor in tow. Relief trickled through me.

"Ma'am, we need to take you to the theatre to do a quick initial assessment. Let me help you into the chair, okay?"

It took two of us to get Mira into the wheelchair. She landed with a heavy thump, her hand still grasping mine as she gave the doctor her details. I handed him the card and the little booklet I'd found in Mira's bag.

The nurse cooed encouragements to Mira as she wheeled her to the theatre. With a backward glance at the door to the ward, I followed the trio, my hand still tightly clasped in Mira's.

It took us almost fifteen minutes to get to the theatre. By the time Mira was wheeled in, she was screaming. A couple more nurses helped her out of her maternity dress and into a hospital gown. A pinkish substance I wished I hadn't seen trickled down her thigh.

I took her hand again as she lay on the table. Several contraptions were already hooked up to her. The doctor was explaining the various devices but I doubted she could hear him over all the screaming she was doing.

The doctor – by now, he'd introduced himself as the on-call doctor, Dr. Lim – slid on gloves and examined Mira. His brows rose.

"What!" I yelled over the screams, panicked.

"She's very close to delivering the baby. We have to prepare for delivery soon. Don't worry, the baby is in a good position."

A nurse sidled up to me, Mira's baby booklet in her hand. She pointed at Arjun's name. "The husband where?" she asked.

"Get him, get him, get him," Mira panted before another scream tore through her.

"I..." I really didn't want to leave her. She seemed to know that. She put on her bravest face and even attempted a smile.

"I'm fine, Cady. Just get him quickly. Please."

I nodded and backed away quickly, nearly tripping over the stupid heels again. Frustrated, I jerked them off and broke off in a run through the maze of white walls. Getting to the theatre had taken us fifteen minutes. I made it back to the ward in under three, cursing myself for not taking Alex up on her offer to train at the gym. More than one staff member had yelled at me along the way for running like a lunatic.

On hindsight, I could've probably gotten a nurse at reception to buzz the ward, but I'd never been the best 'think on your feet' kind of person.

I barreled through the door of the ward without knocking, red-faced and bare-footed. I probably looked a sight. I tried to catch my breath but wheezed instead, clutching my side. It was all very attractive.

Everyone had frozen the moment I barged in. Alex was standing next to her father's hospital bed, her mother's gold cross necklace dangling from her fingers. I shot her a quizzical look before turning to Arjun.

"Mira's having the baby. You have to hurry. Seriously," I reiterated when he didn't move. "You need to move *now*. The doctor said she needs to start pushing soon. I'm sure you'll want to be there for that. Theatre 4C in building B."

That seemed to snap Arjun out of his daze. He pushed past me, Arvin on his tail. Mrs Shankar grabbed her purse and patted her husband's calf before following her sons. Then it was just Alex, her father and I in the ward.

I needed to sit down. There was a stitch kicking off in my side and my thighs were screaming. Also, throwing up seemed like a viable option.

Alex turned away from me and let the gold necklace coil on the beige bedside table. Her father simply stared at me. His fingers were trembling. He looked frail but his gaze was piercing.

Alex reached out and pulled me towards her.

"Pa, this is Cady."

"It's nice to meet you, sir," I said, perhaps a little hesitantly. He hadn't blinked in well over a minute.

Then he turned to Alex. "So all of it was really a lie?"

She didn't meet his gaze. "Yes. I'm sorry. I just didn't want to disappoint you... again."

When he didn't say anything, she continued. "Pa, I'm doing a writing internship – you always said I'd make a good writer, remember? I work for a London magazine – can you imagine that? It's like a dream come true. And I've found love, Pa. Real love, like you and Ma have." Her arm tightened around my shoulder. "This is Cady. She's a teacher."

My breath caught as I stared up at her. She meant every word she said – that much was obvious. A burst of warmth – nothing to do with the stitches this time – spread through me. I reached up and interlaced my fingers with hers. I knew there was a stupid smile on my face.

Her father looked between us as though we were aliens. Then he said, "Thank you for helping Mira."

My smile faltered. Alex's arm dropped from my shoulder. She ran a hand through her hair, her mother's hairpin flying across the room. Tears of frustration were already welling in her eyes.

"That's it?!" she asked her father.

"I don't know what you expect me to say, Amala. None of this is normal. I tried to help you but you're beyond help. I see that now."

"I don't need help, *Pa!*" she yelled. "I just need..."

She didn't finish her sentence. Instead, she shook her head and walked out of the room.

She'd already crossed half the hallway when I caught up with her. She was struggling with the buttons on the shirt that her mother had done up to her neck.

"Let me help," I said, but she backed away. The hurt must've shown in my eyes because she apologized immediately.

"I - I just need some time, Cay. Please."

She barely stopped to get the words out.

I stood there in my bare feet, in the middle of an empty hallway, watching the elevator doors close on her, those infernal fucking phones at reception ringing off the hook.

#

Chapter 15

Mira's baby girl weighed in at 3.1 kilograms and measured 49 centimeters. And she was perfect in every way, just like her mother. I saw the newborn only briefly as she was being wheeled out for observation but there was no denying that she would soon look exactly like her mother.

My heart was heavy as I entered the theatre to retrieve my shoes, trying my very best not to be noticed by anyone. The family was crowded around the new mother, and I thought – I really did! – that I would get away with crouching down, extending my arm into the room, retrieving my shoes, and getting home to sort my feelings out. But when is life ever so kind?

My shoes were nowhere near where I'd left them by the door. Trust me, I felt around enough to know. Instead, a quick peep into the room showed that someone had stacked the heels neatly next to a chair... all the way across the room.

I sighed and stood, girding my loins to face the family again.

As soon as I stepped into the room, Mira called me over to her.

"I don't mean to interrupt. I just needed to get my shoes," I said, still edging towards them.

"Come here. I need to thank you."

I reluctantly walked over to her side and slid in between the wall and Mrs Shankar. Mira grasped my hand.

"Did you see her?" she asked, her throat raw from all the screaming. "They didn't let me hold her for more than a few minutes."

"I saw her," I said. "She's beautiful, Mira, just like you. And she's all pink and healthy. She's got a good set of lungs on her, too."

"Thank you for being here today. I don't know what I would have done otherwise."

"I'm sure you would've been fine. I'm very happy for you, Mira. You, too, Arjun." I glanced at him briefly but he was staring down at his wife with such a look of adoration that it was hard for me to remember why I should heartily dislike him.

"I was reading about your people last night," Mira said, her cheeks suddenly ruddy. "I wanted to know more about the... lifestyle. Do you think you and Alex will have a baby? I know you can do that now."

I choked on my own spit and I'm sure Mrs Shankar took great pleasure in slapping me on the back. Hard. All eyes on the room were on me by that point as I tried to collect myself.

"Um..." I stammered awkwardly. "We've only been together for a few months. And Alex is barely 19. I don't even know if Singapore allows things like that. But maybe we'll think about it in the future."

It seemed like the safest answer. And it made Mira smile.

"Where is Alex?"

"She wasn't feeling too good," I lied. This was a woman who put off going to the delivery room so that Alex could have some time with her family. I wasn't about to tell her about the shitshow and upset her. "She went home. But she'll be back to see you and the baby. Don't you worry about that. You just get your strength back."

I don't think she bought it but she laid her head back on her pillow. A nurse came into the room to let us know it was time to move Mira to the recovery room.

Gratefully, I moved away from the family and slipped my heels back on. My thighs protested in agony.

"I'll walk with you," Arvin offered. I wanted to turn him down – I really needed time in my own head – but he seemed like he needed to talk. So I waved goodbye to Mira and let him walk me to the carpark.

"I'm sorry it didn't work out. I really wanted Alex and Pa to... reconcile in some way after all this time."

"You know what?" I said as I jabbed the button for the elevator. "I really did, too. So did Mira. But I guess it's just not in the cards for her."

"Do you think there's anything I can do to help?"

We stepped into the elevator. "Honestly? I don't know. Maybe give her a call tomorrow?"

He nodded. "I'll give you my number, too. Please call if you ever need anything."

Despite everything, I was touched. "Thank you, Arvin. That's very nice of you."

"I have a lot to make up for," he murmured under his breath but I heard it anyway.

We said goodbye in the parking lot. I walked around in a bit of a daze, having forgotten exactly where I'd parked. My last moments with Alex replayed on a loop in my head. The

sheer pain in her eyes would likely haunt me for a long, long time. But it was the way she'd backed away from me that truly scarred me.

I finally found my little Nissan and slid into it, letting my aching head rest against the steering wheel. Then, and only then, did I let the tears out.

*

I worried my nails to stubs in the apartment, replaying the moment she'd walked away in my mind. *I need some time*, she'd said. My head understood it but my heart said different. It had been almost 8 hours, well past midnight, and she hadn't even texted to say she was okay.

I checked my phone again and threw it across the couch when the home screen remained blank. *This was torture.*

Heart in my throat, I grabbed my keys and headed for the door. There was only so much passivity I could endure before I began to choke on it.

She'd told me on our first date that she went to "her spot" at the beach to think. It seemed only natural to check it out before bothering Daniel and the others.

Twenty minutes later, as I saw her lean form spread across the ledge where we'd had our first kiss, my heart rate seemed to go back to normal.

She's okay. I needed to repeat it before I believed it.

Her eyes were closed as I walked over and knelt beside her. My navy blouse sat in a neat pile at her feet. She laid there in only her grey sports bra and jeans.

"Hey." I tried to come up with words that could encapsulate how worried I'd been over the past few hours. Nothing seemed to truly fit. "I thought you might be here," I said instead.

Her eyes flickered open but they stared past me at the stars. "I needed some time to think. I'm sorry I didn't call."

"I understand." *Did I?*

She didn't say anything for minutes, so I pushed forward. "Mira had a baby girl. She's all pink and perfect."

"Is she?" Alex smiled, finally looking at me.

"Yeah. Mira asked where you were. I said we'd visit soon."

"Okay."

"Hey, you want to hear something funny?" I asked as I took the pressure off my knees and sat down cross-legged next to her.

"Sure."

"Apparently, Mira's been reading up about lesbian lifestyles. She said she wanted to know more about it. And just as she was thanking me for helping her today, in front of your whole family, she asked if we'd ever have a baby."

I thought Alex would laugh with me. I really did. But instead, she stared at me, her gaze intense and unwavering.

"What did you say?"

"I, uh, I said that we've only been going out a few months and that you're way too young for all that and that Singapore doesn't allow same-sex adoption or—"

"Come here," she interrupted, unfolding her hands from behind her head. I set my purse down and slid into the warm little nook her body makes for me.

I felt her fingers in my hair and at the side of my temple. It was ages before she said: "Look at the stars, Cay. They're so beautiful here. You don't get to see them this way in the city."

The sky was pitch dark with tiny hints of silver glinting behind passing clouds. Alex was quiet and I was content just to be near her, feeling her arms around me. We lay there in silence for a while. After the day we'd both had, the simple comfort of lying in each other's arms under the stars seemed like the best kind of therapy.

"I think I'm like one of those stars," she said a while later.

"What do you mean?"

"You can't really see how brightly they shine until you leave the city." She turned to me, her face barely an inch from mine. "I think I need to leave this city, Cay."

My eyes widened. "Are you sure?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

She nodded, her forehead brushing mine. "It's too painful. They're never going to accept me. I gave up on that hope years ago but I thought the process of dying might have changed the old man."

"Where are you going to go?"

"We," she corrected. "We can go wherever you think is best."

I smiled and pressed a kiss to her lips. "I'd love to show you New York."

"I'd like that. What about work?"

"I haven't signed the contract yet. It shouldn't be too hard to get out of it."

She trailed her knuckles down my bare arm.

"New York gives us more options than we have now," she said, her eyes searching mine.

She placed a palm on the small of my back and pulled me closer to her. Slowly, deliberately, she took my lips in a kiss meant to heal, to promise. Her fingers trailed over the exposed skin between my top and shorts. I trembled slightly as she deepened the kiss, sliding her tongue against mine. Every cell in my body stood at attention, waiting for the next surge of pleasure from her touch.

She pulled away slowly and pressed her forehead against mine. "One day, baby," she whispered, and I understood the promise that it was.

We lay in the darkness, basking in the promise of tomorrow.

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