



Always You

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance

Description: In the frostbitten heart of Chicago, a scarred and solitary soldier finds a second chance at love with the man who broke his heart.

Twenty years at war have left Sergeant Jasper “Jazz” Brookes battered, scarred, and haunted. His marriage is wrecked, his daughter barely speaks to him, and the world he fought for has moved on without him. Homeless by choice, Jazz manages until the brutal Chicago winter forces him to seek help from a shelter he doesn’t want to need.

The weathered building in Humboldt Park offers veterans a place to rebuild, but Jazz doesn’t expect to find Alex Richardson there—his first love, the boy who chose money over him, the one he left behind. Seeing Alex again cracks open old wounds and stirs feelings Jazz buried long ago.

For Alex, the sight of Jazz reminds him of everything he’s tried to forget. But neither man has moved on. As they grapple with their past and confront the scars they’ve carried for years, they’re forced to decide if the connection between them is strong enough to survive the pain.

This time, it’s all or nothing.

Total Pages (Source): 63

Chapter One

JAZZ

Standing across the street, I held the coffee cup close, its warmth providing a brief reprieve from the biting Chicago wind. The old building in Humboldt Park loomed ahead—a weary, weathered structure. Its brickwork was faded and chipped, with windows gleaming on the first floor, but above that, grimy and dark, the windowsills and surrounds needed repairs everywhere. Around the house, the neighborhood stretched out in a patchwork of neglect and survival. Graffiti-covered walls displayed various tags, while trash blew and collected on the snowy sidewalks.

Someone bumped into me, jolting me from my reverie. “Sorry,” I muttered, but the girl glanced back, her nose wrinkling in disdain, before she hurried away, disappearing into the flurry of thickening snow that swirled around streetlamps and piled up in dirty mounds. She might’ve been reacting to the way I looked—homeless, piles of rags, unwanted, and scary. Or maybe the way I smelled—given I hadn’t washed in days—not since leaving the hospital where the cops had dropped me off. My appearance must have been unsettling—hands cracked from the cold, hair unkempt, clothes a mismatched ensemble from some thrift shop clinging to my skinny body, a backpack with all I owned slung over my shoulder. She and other people—the ordinary people of this world—were why I didn’t stay inside the café. I knew no one would want to sit next to me, so I used loose change, ignored the comments, and hurried outside to take my position as a ghost, haunting the fringes of a world that had moved on without me.

Cars inched along the road, their tires crunching over the fresh layer of snow, and I

watched them and their drivers, so worried they'd slip and knock their vehicles as if a few scratches mattered. What were they all doing out here, anyway? Didn't they all have homes to go to, with people who cared about them?

I sipped the dark coffee, its bitterness awful compared to the sugar-laden or salty drinks I'd grown used to in the desert. That arid, endless expanse of sand and heat felt a world away. Here, the air was heavy with the smell of cold—that crisp, almost metallic scent that comes with snow. It mingled with distant whiffs of exhaust fumes and an urban winter's faint, underlying decay.

The desert was silent and had vast open spaces until it was torn apart by explosions and drenched in screams, but here, the city was a constant hum of life, even in its most rundown corners. The sound of distant traffic, the muffled conversations of passersby, the occasional siren in the distance—it was all so alien and tight and close—too much.

I took another sip—my hand shaking, the coffee scalding my tongue—and stared at the building that was supposed to be my refuge. Fear gripped me—not just of the four walls waiting to enclose me, but of what lay beyond them.

I wanted to return to the heat, friends, and having a reason and purpose every day. So, I should head south to Texas, the tip of Florida, the islands, or the ocean. It may not be the desert, but the heat in my bones would be enough to thaw me out, right?

But then, I wouldn't be near Harper, and whatever my ex-wife, Ava, thought of me now, I deserved to be near my daughter. If only to check in on her from a distance.

She was in Chicago, living her normal teenage life.

I was in Chicago, trying to stay alive any way I knew how.

And maybe one day, I'd talk to her.

One day, when my head wasn't so messed up and I didn't smell like five-day-old garbage.

I drew in a lungful of icy air and stepped off the curb, intent on closing the distance between me and the building as the world seemed to slow down. A silver Toyota lost its battle with the slick, snow-covered street, fishtailing wildly. It skidded past me, missing me by mere inches. My heart didn't race. No adrenaline-fueled shock coursed through me. Instead, there was an eerie calm, a detachment, and I heard music blaring although the car windows were closed. The driver, face twisted in frustration, shot me an angry gesture before steering the car back on track and disappearing around the next corner.

I stood on the road, the cold seeping through my worn shoes, watching the taillights fade into the distance. The lack of fear, the absence of reaction, was unsettling. Once, a moment like that would have sparked a surge of adrenaline, a rush of instincts perfected in far more dangerous situations. But now, there was nothing—just a hollow emptiness, a numbness that had become a constant companion since returning stateside.

“Hey, you're in the middle of the road, man. You okay?” someone asked, snapping me out of the fugue state I had going on.

I waved a hand as if I were telling him it was okay, then, with one glance left and right, I crossed to the sidewalk and ended up outside the door of Guardian Hall, Private Residence. There was a discreet plate with a button to push, and I stared at it.

Guardian Hall?

I needed to press the buzzer.

I reached for it.

But I didn't press it.

I couldn't.

I stared some more, my feet unmoving, my backpack digging into my shoulders, the snow swirling harder around me.

Then, the door opened.

I couldn't see into the shadows, and until the person stepped into the light, I wasn't sure it would be him, but I recognized those dark eyes, that ruffled dark hair, and how he dressed was a throwback to twenty years ago. He looked older, wiser, maybe, but, like me he was only a few weeks from his thirty-eighth birthday, so he would never again be the boy I remembered. He was silent and watchful in the way he stared at me.

"Do you want to come in?" he said with a kind, understanding smile.

He didn't sneer, wrinkle his nose, or judge me; instead, he invited me inside.

"Alex," I murmured.

He grinned. "That's me, for my sins." Then, he held out a hand. "Alex Richardson, manager of Guardian Hall."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“I know,” I said, and his smile faltered a little, and he seemed puzzled for a moment, probably imagining that I was familiar somehow.

“It’s okay to come in. We don’t ask for names or?—”

“Jazz,” I blurted and coughed, remnants of the freaking viral shit that had landed me in the hospital.

He looked confused; then, his hand dropped, his eyes widened, and his mouth fell open. Was he still going to welcome me in after sending me away twenty years ago? Was this the moment he slammed the door in my face again after telling me I was nothing to him? After a moment’s pause, he reached for me, gripped my wet-through coat, and dragged me into the house, closing the door behind me, then setting me back so he could check me out.

He was lost for words.

And I didn’t have a single damn thing to say.

Chapter Two

Alex

Jazz was almost unrecognizable.

His steps were hesitant, his shoulders hunched. He gazed at something beyond me. Broken. Lost. The shock of realizing it was him—my Jazz—jolted me as I stared, but

my training kicked in, pushing past the initial shock. I'd seen many veterans come through those doors, each with their own ghosts, but this was Jazz—it was personal. When they emerged from the pockets of his worn jacket, his hands trembled—not only from the cold, but from a deeper, more pervasive chill that seemed to cling to him. When they finally met mine, his eyes were like windows to a soul that had seen too much, a deep well of pain and fear.

My heart broke.

I didn't mean to send you away. I loved you.

Get your head straight, idiot, before he runs.

I cataloged what needed to be done. His cough rattled in his chest. Existing? New? Dangerous? Had he seen a doctor? Should I be taking him straight to a hospital? He wasn't going to go anywhere with me.

First, a warm, welcoming space, a smile, no need for names—although he'd told me his—and now a hot drink, a meal, something to ease the chill that wasn't only from the snow. Then, a quiet conversation about immediate needs: clothing, a shower, medical attention perhaps.

His appearance spoke volumes—the unwashed hair, the layer upon layer of clothes to keep out the cold, and a familiar distant look I'd seen in so many eyes. His beard hid most of his face—bushy, long, unkempt—but I knew him, and the lines etched by both time and trauma spoke of sleepless nights and unspoken fears. These were signs I'd become all too familiar with in my work here. I knew the routine, the steps to take, but with Jazz, it felt different, more urgent.

I had to tread carefully, respecting his pride while offering help, and it was a delicate balance, ensuring each person didn't feel as if they were nothing more than a case, or

another number. Every person who came here for help had their own story of service and sacrifice. But Jazz wasn't just any individual—he was a part of my past, a part I thought I'd moved on from, the very reason Guardian Hall existed, and here he was, standing in front of me.

Okay. I can do this.

A door slammed somewhere in the building, startling Jazz. He stumbled a couple of steps until his back hit the front door, already searching for a way out. His posture was a study in wariness. His gaze darted around the hall like a cornered animal's..

He unpeeled his fingers from the door handle, and I waited; then he stepped forward, another bout of coughing catching him between steps.

Note one, get Marcus here.

Every action he took was measured and cautious. The heavy burden of experiences too harrowing to articulate weighed him down as if the simple act of walking into an unfamiliar space was laced with potential danger.

He was startled again, but I hadn't heard a noise—even in this sanctuary, a place designed to offer comfort, safety, and as much hope as we could give., Jazz was edgy, battles raging inside him that he'd never left behind, where conflict extended far beyond the battlefield.

"The kitchen..." I murmured, and he winced and stopped walking. I took a couple of steps back from him, toward the open kitchen door, inviting Jazz further into the building. "We can help," I encouraged gently, leading the way to the heart of Guardian Hall—the kitchen. At last, he followed me, then waited in the doorway. I noted the way he scanned the room, a soldier's instinct to assess his surroundings.

“It’s big,” he whispered.

I smiled. The wide, welcoming garden room extended from the back of the building. Big skylights showed the snowy sky but let in sunshine when possible. The old but well-maintained stove radiated warmth, soft and gentle—nothing too hot for a person who’d become hardened to the cold. The scent of fresh-brewed coffee lingered in the air.

“It’s my favorite place,” I said with another smile, gesturing at the collection of mismatched sofas in one corner, clustered around a coffee table, with a large bookcase crammed full of books to one side. “I sit there and read when I can.”

“You like it when it rains,” he blurted.

At first, it didn’t make sense, but then I realized what he meant. He remembered that I loved to sit and listen to rain on the windows, tucked up on a sofa reading. He’d sit next to me, back then, playing with my hair, stealing kisses, trying to drag me away from my books, but never trying too hard, content to curl up with me and fall asleep on my shoulder.

Grief flooded me.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

What did I do?

“I love the rain,” I said, then cleared my throat. “Can I get you something to eat or drink?”

After a moment, Jazz followed, and every step was a decision. He walked past the small wooden tables and chairs, each bearing the marks of countless conversations and just as many quiet moments for the men and women who stayed here. His gaze lingered on the large bulletin board adorned with notes and pictures, a tapestry of stories from those who’d moved on from us, and a list of events and weekly meetings. We had regular therapy sessions, AA, NA, or whatever was needed. Financial experts visited, representatives of veteran organizations, and even the local dog and cat shelters had us on their calendars for animal therapy. It was all there in black and white.

I watched him take it all in, the lines of tension in his face easing the merest fraction in the kitchen's warmth. It was a start, a small step.

“What would you like?” I asked with caution. “We have cocoa, coffee, tea...”

His eyes dimmed. “Coffee. Strong. Black.” Then, he blinked at me. “Please.”

“You can sit if you like,” I said, but he glanced at himself, shook his head, and tightened his grip on his backpack.

“I’m not staying,” he announced.

My heart fell and a wave of disappointment and concern washed over me. His swift rejection of anything I could offer him felt like a repeat of the last time I'd seen him, but I couldn't think like that. He was no different to many who'd ended up here, and I understood his resistance when the walls of Guardian Hall were more like a cage than a refuge to some. They hated us, they cursed us, they wanted to see what do-gooders like me thought they could fix. They took the drink, the food, and then, some of them never came back. Any push from my side to get anyone to stay could drive them further away, I refused to let that happen with Jazz.

"Okay," I said, calm, focused, then carried on with the coffee, acutely aware of the weight of his stare. I poured him a cup of the black stuff, then pulled down a container of cupcakes, lifting a couple onto a plate. Maybe the bright colors and the temptation of empty calories as a treat might make him take one? He didn't. In fact, he ignored them and the coffee until I placed both on the table. Only then did he pick up the drink, still avoiding the cake, shaking. He had to let go of it when he was coughing more, but I waited until he held the coffee again, sipping it cautiously.

"Have you seen a doctor for the cough?" I asked.

His bloodshot eyes focused on me, his dark brown eyes intense, and his lashes as long and sweeping as I remembered. "I'm not fucking stupid," he snarled, slamming the coffee on the table.

I took an instinctive step back, startled, and it was the wrong thing to do because his temper vanished, and instead, he was lost again. He thought he'd scared me.

"You didn't scare me," I said, unthinking, losing all my training and control instantly.

"I'm not scared."

He showed me his shaky hand and closed it into a fist. "You should be."

Then, he turned on his heel and I heard him talking, more to himself than me. “I shouldn’t have come. This is wrong.”

I darted after him, fucking it up yet again, but slowing when I reached the kitchen door, expecting him to be at the front already. Then, I nearly walked straight into him. He was still as stone in the hallway, staring at the exit. Shaking. Terrified.

He shuffled to face me, and he was crying. Softly at first, but then huge rattling sobs that made him cough.

“Help me.”

Chapter Three

JAZZ

I don’t understand why I’m crying.

I need to leave. I have to leave.

Only I couldn’t. I stared at the freaking door, and I couldn’t move.

“Jazz, I’m sorry,” Alex murmured.

I didn’t want him saying that to me. I didn’t want sympathy or pity. I needed something else, something that would ground me, stop me from dying inside...

“Please,” I whispered.

Silence, then, “Soldier,” Alex ordered. “With me.”

I stood there momentarily, caught off guard by Alex's firm, commanding tone, something I hadn't expected from him. A note in his voice resonated with the part of me still anchored in the discipline and structure of military life. It cut through the fog in my head, a clear, direct order I responded to on instinct.

I followed him down the wide corridor, my footsteps echoing on the polished floor. We passed the warm, inviting glow of the kitchen, but I didn't let myself get distracted by the scent of coffee or the lure of food. My focus was on Alex's back, his confident stride contrasting with the turmoil churning inside me.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

Alex didn't turn back to check if I was still there. He kept walking as if he were sure I would follow. And despite everything, I found myself drawn in by the simple act of following someone who seemed to know where they were going. It was a relief, in a way, not having to decide to move one foot in front of the other.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd let someone lead. Not since I'd served. But now, in this unfamiliar place, with the weight of the past and the uncertainty of the future pressing down on me, it felt okay to follow.

As I approached the door that Alex opened, a sudden wave of fear washed over me, cold and paralyzing. It wasn't only the unknown of what lay beyond that threshold, but a deeper, more primal fear of confinement, of being trapped in a space I couldn't escape, both physically and mentally. The open door, plain and unassuming, seemed to loom larger with each step I took.

I stopped a few feet away from him and that barrier. My heart pounded, and the sense of dread was all-consuming, a thick presence that filled my throat and made it hard to breathe. Somehow, the corridor, with its muted light, felt as if it was the last safe place before stepping into something entirely foreign. I'd done this before. I'd walked into towns destroyed by bombs, where danger lurked around every corner, where terrified kids held weapons, and where every step might end on an IED. I should have been able to handle one fucking room.

"What..." My voice barely rose above a whisper, strained with the effort to keep my composure. "What's... what's in there?"

I could feel the weight of his gaze as he turned to look at me, his eyes searching mine.

I wasn't only asking about the physical space behind the door; I was asking a hundred questions all wrapped up in anxiety and fear.

Alex's voice was calm and reassuring as he explained. "It's a welcome room. A place for you to rest and feel safe." He gestured toward the door, his movements slow and deliberate. "This door locks, but only from the inside. You're in control of the space. And there's another door at the back of the room that leads to an open space. It's like a small courtyard, with a table and chairs under an awning. You can get fresh air whenever you need it but be safe. Do you want to look?"

I shook my head, but I didn't step back. I stayed still. "I don't know. I... don't know."

He paused, giving me a moment, then continued. "Inside, there's a bed, with clean bedding, some pajamas, blankets, and a heating control, if you like it cold, or hot. It's safe. There's a closet with some clothes, and a cabinet with snacks and drinks—coffee, teas, herbal things. It's all set up for you. It's safe. This space is yours until you feel like you're done with it." Alex's eyes met mine, repeating that safe word repeatedly, as if that was what he wanted me to focus on.

"When I leave."

He paused. "Or when you move to your own room."

I still hesitated. The way he described it, the room didn't sound like a trap, but more like a haven, a place where I could have some semblance of control. The mention of another door leading to an open space eased some tension in my chest. The idea that I wasn't completely enclosed, that there was an escape route to the outside, made the prospect of stepping through the first door less daunting.

I looked at the door again, trying to envision the space beyond it as Alex had

described. A bed, clothes, snacks—simple things, but what I needed. The fact that the door locked from the inside was significant. It meant I could have a space where I wasn't vulnerable, where I could let my guard down, if only a little.

I took a deep breath. The fear was still present, but it mingled with a faint glimmer of hope. This room, this welcome room, might be what I needed to start putting myself back together, to find a moment of peace in a world that had become unrecognizable.

“I need you to trust me on this,” he said, his voice firm yet devoid of any harshness. “Go inside where it's safe.” His words were direct, clear, carrying that same authority—an order that cut through my fear and hesitation.

I could trust orders.

Predictable.

I responded instinctively, and my feet moved of their own accord, carrying me toward the door. The fear was still there, but it was now overshadowed by the need to follow that directive, to step into the unknown because I'd been asked to. I peered into the small room. A single bed was tucked into one corner, and a small table with a couple of chairs was in another. There were skylights the same as in the kitchen, with blinds that could keep out the light, and I noticed a small stack of books on the bedside table.

The walls were painted blue, and a few framed pictures of landscapes hung on them—fields of flowers... peaceful. It felt as though someone had taken the time to make this space not only functional but comforting, a place where I could let my guard down.

I turned to Alex, who'd stayed at the door—to one side, not blocking me—watching quietly, giving me space to take it all in. “One night?” My voice sounded foreign,

rough with unspoken emotions.

“The first night, maybe more if you want,” Alex replied gently. “Everything here is for you. Take your time, and settle in. The door locks from the inside, and this is a key.” He handed me a small key on a chain. “You’re safe here.”

I nodded, my eyes lingering on the details of the room. Safe. That word hadn’t truly applied to me in a long time. I walked over to the bed, running my hand over the smooth fabric of the sheets. It felt real, soft.

I could be warm here.

Turning back to Alex, I found my voice again, albeit shaky. “I... I... don’t...” I started, the words barely above a whisper, but what was I even trying to say?

Alex offered a small smile. “We have an on-call doctor. I’m going to get him to come check on you if that’s okay. Maybe an hour or so?”

I blinked at him, fight or flight kicking in and having me ready to shove him away and run. “No hospital.”

“No hospital. If you need anything, I’m just down the hall in the kitchen, come find me when you’re ready, okay?”

The moment Alex left; my instincts took over. I locked the door behind him, the click of the bolt reassuring. Then, I began to inspect the room. Years of being in unpredictable situations had ingrained in me the habit of always knowing my surroundings, of being prepared for anything.

I checked under the bed first, finding nothing but clear space. The closet came next. I opened it with caution, half-expecting something to jump out. There were some

clothes hanging inside, and I reached out to touch a soft fleece, catching sight of the grimy gloves on my hands and pulling back. I wasn't going to sully the treasures inside. There were boots in there, worn, different sizes, and some backpacks. The drawers of the small dresser were next, each slide and reveal confirming the safety and privacy of the room, and then, I checked the snacks, the small coffee machine, the pods, bags of teas, until there was nothing left to check.

My attention turned to the back door. I unlocked and opened it, peering out into a small area with grass and some empty planters covered in the snow that had found its way under the awning. I checked the lock on this door too, making sure it was secure before closing it again and twisting the lock.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

Checking one last time.

Another door led to a shower room. I opened it, scanning the interior. Skylights revealed the grey, snow-laden sky above and, somehow, that barrier between me and the cold made the room feel safe.

I tried to unbutton my coat, but my fine motor skills were next to useless, so I took the small knife I had on me at all times, flicked it open, staring at the blade, then pulling myself out of the shitty headspace I was sinking into, slid it through the cotton until the buttons fell off and the whole thing was open. There was a coat in the closet, something better, so I took off my backpack, then my old coat, and shoved the coat, scarf, hat, and gloves, out into the small yard, with my boots, before closing the door and checking it was locked again. Only then did I drop my bag to a chair with a thud, the strap of the backpack fraying and worn, barely holding together.

“Now what,” I muttered to the empty room. Layer by layer, I removed my clothes, laying them out on the tiled floor, wondering what to keep and what to discard, checking in the closet to see what layers were in there. There was blood on some things, other bits stuck to my skin, and I gritted my teeth to pull them away. I could leave but still have new clothes from that closet—T-shirts, fleeces, a new scarf, leather gloves without holes or wear.

They’d let me take them.

That was the point of me giving in and accepting charity. Right?

There was underwear, so I stripped bare, opened that damn back door again, shoved

out everything that was mine, and shut it.

Locked it.

Then, I checked it, just in case.

Next, I secured the main door to the corridor by pressing a chair against it, under the handle. This way, no one could come in while I was in the shower.

I need to be clean.

I stared at the huge shower room, with the shelf, a seat, and an array of soap and shampoo dispensers screwed to the wall. I hesitated momentarily, wondering if it was okay to leave my stuff outside, but then picked up my bag and took it into the bathroom with me, unwilling to let my personal possessions out of my sight. It was an old habit, one that had kept me safe. I even took my knife in, and all of the clothes from the closet that would fit me, including some boots, and underwear. Everything went in there with me, piled on the other chair that I'd dragged inside, but when the bathroom door shut behind me with a soft click, I panicked I'd forgotten something.

Had I thrown something out that was important?

I yanked open my backpack and rummaged through, but everything I owned was in there.

I checked again, just in case.

Nothing missing.

Then, I turned the shower on.

And I stared at my reflection in the mirror until the fog of heat had stolen it.

All I could see was bent and broken, scarred and twisted, hurt... so badly hurt.

I won't cry.

I crept into the shower, inching closer to the warm water, the initial touch of it a shock. It had been days since I'd been anywhere near a shower, accumulating more dirt and grime. The hospital had tried to clean me and threatened to cut my beard and my hair, but I hadn't let them, walking out before they could finish when their touch was impersonal and forceful. They weren't really threatening me, and I didn't blame them for thinking they knew what I needed, but I couldn't let them touch me.

The water was hot—almost too hot—but I didn't turn it down, lifting my face to the jets and yelping at the pain. The heat stung my neglected skin, turning it red, but it was also burning away the ingrained dirt and something deeper that had settled on me over the past weeks—despair.

I watched the murky water at my feet swirl down with filth from the streets, from sleeping rough, and from having things thrown at me. Some of the dirt didn't lift, and I scratched at it, wondering at the flare-up of pain whether I'd uncovered bruises or sores. Then, I tipped handfuls of gel over me and stood away from the water, letting my skin soak.

When shampooing my hair, I had to scrub hard to get through the knots and grease. The water only ran clean after the sixth or seventh rinse. My cracked, rough hands felt clumsy and unfamiliar as they worked through the strands. It hurt a lot, but it was a good kind of hurt.

By the time I turned off the water, I was exhausted. My skin was sensitive to the touch, almost raw from the scrubbing. But stepping out of the shower, I felt a small

sense of accomplishment. I was clean, probably for the first time since I left the Army, and at that moment, it felt like a small victory, a tiny step in some direction that wasn't backward.

The bathroom was filled with the scent of lemon, but the stink of my backpack was obvious, so I emptied my precious life onto the bed, each part wrapped in plastic, then tossed the bag out to join my clothes, the pile of my life pathetically small in the snow. I pulled out new bags, which I'd seen by the boots—a sports bag of sorts, plus a new backpack—and I tidied each of my precious items into the new spaces. Then, I guessed I should get dressed and glanced at the sweats and T-shirt on the bed, but that was too much, too normal.

So, I got dressed in all my layers and sat on the bed, tied my boots, grabbed my bags, and hugged them tight to my chest.

Now what?

Chapter Four

Alex

Page 6

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“Who do we have?” Marcus didn’t hesitate to get right to the core of his visit as soon as he walked through the door and started unwrapping his outdoor clothes to hang on hooks. He was exhausted, and his smudged eyeliner and a hickey on his neck hinted at another wild night out for my friend and colleague, Dr. Marcus Stirling.

“Soldier.” Marcus sighed along with me. “Lingering chest infection, and his skin...” I rubbed one of my hands over the other, “infected. “Infected, I think. I’ve seen nothing else.”

“Okay,” Marcus straightened his sleeves—as if that was going to help him look any more put-together. He stopped in front of a mirror, used his sweater to wipe the eyeliner away, fluffed his shoulder-length hair before tying it back with a band, then popped the collar of his shirt to hide the hickey. Gone was club-Marcus, and in his place was competent-as-shit Doctor Marcus. “Hit me with the deets.”

“His name is Jasper Brookes—Jazz.”

“He gave you his name?” Marcus smiled. Handing over a name meant something.

“No, he didn’t tell me; I know him from before.”

“You mean before you got fucked over by your family, like when you were young?” Marcus stared at me—challenged me. I had two very distinct parts of my life, but to hear it put so simply was unnerving. There was the before, when I’d tried to fit in with my family, and the after, when my family had abandoned me. Or I’d abandoned them.

True, but hard to hear.

“Before.”

“Well shit,” he said and went into the medical room, which was a few doors down the corridor from Jazz, and when I followed him in as he flicked on lights, he was clearly waiting for me to expand on everything. Marcus had this way of seeing right through me, and over the last ten years, he’d listened and learned and, as my best friend, I guess he thought he knew me.

But he couldn’t know the things I hadn’t told him.

“We grew up together. He was a friend,” I murmured. A friend until the moment I rejected Jazz and sent him running. A friend until I broke his heart. “I think he’s going to leave, and somehow, we have to make him stay.”

Marcus didn’t answer at first, as he took his stethoscope out of his bag and laid it around his neck—one more layer of respectability. “That’s not how this works, Alex.”

I pushed the medical room door shut. “It’s my fault he left, and now he’s back, and it’s been twenty years, but... I was the one who...” I slumped back to the wall.

Marcus steadied me, gripping my arms. “Breathe. Come on, babe. With me, breathe...”

“I sent him away and he... fuck...” I shook Marcus off and bent at the waist. “It’s my fault.”

Marcus went to a crouch so he could look up at me. “Are you breathing?”

I nodded, then slid down the wall, boneless, until my ass was on the floor, and I could pull my knees up and hide my head in my hands. It was a panic attack, clawing its way up from the depths of my anxiety. Breathing was hard, my chest constricted, and Marcus tugged at me, and kept talking, asking me to breathe, telling me it was going to be okay. But as the panic threatened to overwhelm me, a part of my mind clung desperately to the need to control myself.

I couldn't let Jazz see me like this because he was the one in need of support, not me. I had to be the anchor, the steady presence he could rely on, even if I was crumbling inside. I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. Inhale. Exhale. Focus on the here and now, not on the what-ifs and the maybes. I fell back on the techniques I'd learned, the coping mechanisms for moments like this, forced down the shields to keep the panic at bay.

With a final deep breath, I dropped my hands, forcing a smile, hoping Marcus didn't notice it was as strained as it felt.

"Okay?" he asked with gentle care.

"Sure." I was confident. "I'm okay."

"So, I'm guessing he's the one you told me about? Does he know what you did here?" Marcus waved a hand at the room, the building, at what Marcus and I had built.

"No, and he can't know. If he thought... if he..." My chest was tight again. "Please, tell him he has to stay, make something up, anything."

Marcus stood, then offered me a hand to help me up. "No, babe, you know the rules." He wasn't saying that to argue. He was sticking to the guidelines the two of us had ironed out when we first began Guardian Hall.

Anyone could stay.

Anyone could go.

No questions asked.

He pulled me into a brief hug, and when we eased apart, he brushed his hand over my shoulder and smiled. “Let me see him and be the doctor he needs, okay? I’ll do what I can.”

I gave a weak nod. “I’ll tell him you’re in here.” I had almost made it out of the door when he spoke.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“Trust it will work out,” he murmured.

“I’ll try,” I whispered, then steeled myself and headed to the welcome room, knocking on the door, not wanting to startle Jazz. For a moment, there was silence, and then, the sound of shuffling feet approached from the other side. The door opened, and a wave of citrus scent wafted out, the smell of the soap or shampoo he must have used.

This adult Jazz was so different from the boy I’d known. Twenty years had passed, and his dark eyes revealed an old soul. He wore clothes from the closet, but he’d put on so many layers that he resembled a Michelin man.

My heart clenched at the sight. The excessive clothing was a clear sign—he’d selected as much as he could, and it was apparent he wasn’t planning on staying. He was gearing up to go out into the cold, back to the streets. It made me want to grab him and make him stay. After everything he’d been through, that he still felt more at home on the streets than here broke my already fractured heart into tiny pieces.

“Hey, Jazz,” I forced out, trying to keep my voice steady and my expression neutral. “Ready?” I attempted a small smile, but it was hard to muster. Seeing him like this, on the threshold between the safety of these walls and the icy hell of a Chicago winter, I felt helpless.

He shrugged, not meeting my eyes. “I’m leaving,” he said.

He was clearly preparing to go, his bags held tight to his chest, all his possessions in them. I wondered if he’d taken any toiletries—I hoped he had. I wanted to say

anything that could convince him to stay, to give Guardian Hall a chance. But the words stuck in my throat, tangled up in the realization that maybe, just like the other veterans who'd been here, the freedom of the streets was still more comforting than the confines of any shelter.

I couldn't stop him.

"Will you see the doctor first? He's here for you now."

I gestured down the hall, and he glanced that way, his breathing raspy, a cough breaking the silence. "No. I'm leaving."

"Because of me?" I wished I could take back the words as soon as they left my mouth. Fuck. Why did I say that? His leaving was a choice he was free to make, clear of any connection he might have to me. Why was I making this personal? I knew better than this. Less than half of the people who walked through these doors actually stayed, the rest left searching for something else in their lives. "I get you hate me, but don't walk away. You're ill. Please, just let the doc look at you before you go."

He stared at me then, and his eyes were bright. "I don't hate you," he grumbled.

Hope swelled inside me. "You don't?"

He studied me for a moment, coughed, and then, in a soft voice he delivered a twisted version of the line I'd thrown at him all those years ago. "I don't feel anything for you."

Chapter Five

JAZZ

As soon as they left my mouth, I immediately regretted the words, a raw slice of vulnerability I hadn't intended to expose. It felt as if I'd opened a door I couldn't close again, revealing too much when I was already struggling to keep it together. And there was Alex, standing between me and the door, making me feel cornered, although he wasn't trying to.

I put out a hand, feeling suddenly dizzy. It was as if all the exhaustion I'd been ignoring hit me at once, along with a wave of panic. "I just..." I couldn't finish, couldn't find the words to explain the mix of fear and fatigue washing over me.

Seeing the worry on Alex's face didn't help. Physically, he hadn't changed, not in twenty years, but his dark eyes were filled with pity.

Pity, for fuck's sake.

I was a grown man. I'd fought for my country. I'd killed people to keep him safe—what right did he have to pity me? I blinked. Was it pity or compassion? Fuck. Seeing him made everything more real, more immediate, and I was terrified, but not of him. I was scared of breaking down, of losing whatever control I had left over myself.

Everything felt too intense, too much. The panic I thought I had managed to bury deep down began to surface, fast and unforgiving. With a shaky hand extended, trying to get him to move, I was ill and close to collapse. I held up my palm toward Alex, a silent plea for space, for a moment to collect myself, and the pity or compassion became concern. I needed to catch my breath.

I wasn't able to articulate the maelstrom of fear, exhaustion, and terror threatening to engulf me. I was terrified, not of Alex, but of what was happening inside me, of all the broken pieces of my heart that scraped and tore and left me bleeding out.

The dizziness intensified, a disorienting spin that made the room tilt. I was aware of how close I was to crumbling, to falling apart right in front of him. It was a vulnerability I had never allowed myself to show, a crack in the armor I had taken care to construct around myself.

“I need to go,” I think I said, and hugging the wall, I made my way past Alex.

He stepped back and held up his hands to tell me he wasn’t stopping me from leaving. Only he was talking to me. I couldn’t hear what he was saying over the rushing in my head. Then another man was there, smaller, in a white coat. A doctor? I focused on the way light hit the stethoscope around his neck, and I inched closer to the door.

“... Jazz...” He was talking as well.

It was too much; it was chaos.

“Leave me alone.”

“... breathe... in... out...”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

The light glinted on the metal again, a flash of brightness I stared at. I closed my eyes and listened to the doctor.

“... breathe...”

The doctor touched my arm.

The door was right there.

I clutched my bag.

“... can I just help you before you leave...”

I stopped shuffling, shook off his hand, and breathed.

I was breathing. In. Out. In. Out. Slow, measured breaths. Silence.

“Okay, Jazz, can I just check you over? Help you? Get you some meds if you need them, yeah? And your hands, they’re bleeding. Will you let me help you?” He stepped back from me. I couldn’t see Alex, and with each step he took further into Guardian Hall, I was drawn to follow him, as easy as if he’d tied a rope to my hand and was tugging me along.

As we reached what I assumed was a medical room, my gaze flickered over various elements, each piece distracting me from the tight knot of anxiety in my chest. The room was bright and airy, not like the sterile, clinical environments I’d come to associate with medical facilities.

To one side, a sleek, modern examination table sat under a large, adjustable lamp, its light dimmed to a soft glow. Nearby, a rolling stool and a small workstation held medical supplies—bandages, gloves, a blood pressure cuff—this was a real doctor, and maybe that was what I needed.

Or I could run.

The room also featured a comfortable-looking recliner beside a low table stacked with health magazines and a small, vibrant plant, adding a touch of life and color. This unexpected hominess in a medical setting eased the tension in my shoulders.

Also, open space was just steps away, contrasting with the enclosed feeling tightening around me.

Knowing there was an immediate path back to that open air, seeing those doors helped stabilize the dizziness and fear. The courtyard, with my clothes still out there, somehow represented a thread of something real.

“Do you want me to open the outside door, Jazz?” Doc asked, standing away from me as I leaned against the wall.

No. It’s freezing out there. It’s snowing. Why would you open a door?

“It’s okay,” I think I said. I reached blindly for the door I’d come in through, closing it shut against the world.

Against Alex.

The doc leaned back against the table.

“My name is Dr. Marcus Stirling,” he began. “Please call me Marcus, or Doc, or

whatever you feel comfortable with.”

I wasn't comfortable about any of this, but Doc's voice was steady, a calm anchor to the here and now.

“Doc,” I murmured and glanced at the door, flicking the lock, then worrying I'd crossed a line—maybe the doctor didn't want to be locked in here with some stranger off the street. He straightened and smiled at me—a sweet, unassuming smile.

“Can you maybe take off some of your layers so I can listen to your heart?” he asked, his tone professional yet infused with a gentle concern that made the request seem less daunting.

I hesitated for a moment. I was taking clothes with me, and as I removed the first layer of my defenses—my coat—I shoved it under my backpack and turned the chair so no one could take it without my noticing. Then, I stuffed each subsequent layer into my bag.

I needed these things to stop me from dying.

In this medical room, the request didn't seem as invasive as it was when I'd been asked to strip in the hospital, with only a thin curtain separating me from the ER's chaos. If anything, all the physical barriers against the cold outside felt suffocating as heat prickled my skin.

The room was warm, starkly contrasting the chill that had seeped into my bones over the past weeks. With each item of clothing removed, I felt more exposed, but it gave me the time and space I needed to comply with his request. Once I was in a simple T-shirt on top of thermal underwear, still in the jeans I'd taken, and with my boots tied in case I needed to leave, Doc gestured for me to sit on the edge of the examination table.

“Okay?” he asked, and showed me the stethoscope, probably trying to reassure me he was here to help.

I knew that.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

It was my fight-or-flight impulse that didn't understand, and I struggled to control both of my demons. I nodded, and the doctor moved in with a brief touch of the instrument against my T-shirt as he listened to my heart.

The doc listened, a frown on his face. After a moment, he straightened and removed the earpieces. "I hear some crackles, but they're not too awful," he said, offering a small, reassuring smile. "I was told you were in the hospital. Jazz? I need to know why."

I stared at him, my focus slipping.

"Jazz? Jazz?"

I needed to answer, but I couldn't find the words.

"Soldier! Why?"

"Virus. Coughing. Sir," I snapped, alert.

The doctor squeezed my shoulder. "Good. What I hear is probably a residual effect of your viral infection. Your lungs are still clearing up. So, I'm going to..."

I went somewhere else when he did his checks, my heart, my lungs, frowning at me, feeling for reflexes, checking my hands—I went to a safe place in my head, before war, before running from Alex, way back to when I was a kid, and my life was Ninja turtles.

Leonardo. Michelangelo. Donatello. Raphael.

“Can you turn for me?”

Splinter. Shredder. April. Bebop. Rocksteady.

“Can I see your hands? Are you okay with me touching you?”

Casey. My favorite. I loved Casey. I wanted to be Casey.

“Okay, we’ll need to bandage these. I have...”

Karai. Krang.

“Jazz? Can you tell me your date of birth?”

I think I told him. I knew I’d be forty soon. I knew I was half done with this life, or maybe more than halfway through. Some nights, I was ready to be done with it altogether.

“... advocate for you. Do you have anyone...”

Leonardo. Michelangelo. Donatello. Raphael.

He helped me put my layers back on with so much kindness I could’ve wept and then patted my shoulder before he stood back.

He scribbled something on a notepad, then glanced up. “I’m going to give you an expectorant to help clear any mucus from your lungs and make breathing easier. Also, some ibuprofen should help with any inflammation and discomfort you might be feeling.” He added those to a small bag.

“I think I have money. I can’t... nothing makes sense... how will I pay for those?—?”—”

“It’s covered,” Doc interrupted. “Now, as for your hand.” His attention shifted to my right hand, which I hadn’t realized looked as bad as it felt until I was staring down at it. “There’s redness and slight swelling around some cuts that haven’t healed properly. How did you do this?”

Shame flooded me, and I shook my head—how could I tell him I’d been searching for food and had been cut by a piece of glass?

“Okay, it’s okay,” he reassured. “This looks like it’s becoming infected. It’s important to keep this clean to avoid any further complications. If you leave, can you do that for me?”

“Yeah,” I said with a hacking cough.

He walked over to a cabinet and pulled out a small bottle. “This is an antiseptic wash. Use it twice a day on the affected area and cover it with a clean dressing after each wash,” he instructed, handing me the bottle. “Keeping the wound clean is crucial to prevent infection from spreading.”

I nodded, taking the bottle from him. The idea of having to take care of a wound properly was daunting, considering the state I’d let myself get into, but the doc wasn’t asking me to try, he was telling me I had no choice.

“You will look after it, soldier.”

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“Yes, sir.”

“If you notice any increase in redness, swelling, or if it starts to produce pus, come back immediately. We might need to prescribe antibiotics if it gets worse. Are you listening to me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You have a room here,” he finished. “I want that cough gone. As your doctor, I want you to be safe and heal. Will you stay here with us and heal before you leave again?”

I stared at him. How could I stay? I didn’t fit in this space.

Anyway, Alex was here, and he wouldn’t want me to stay.

“Soldier? I need you to tell me.”

“Sir—”

“I’ll help you.”

“Not Alex.”

He paused, and I couldn’t read his expression until he nodded and smiled again.

“I’ll help you. You can trust me.”

“I don’t need...” What was I saying? I wasn’t making sense. I needed help, but could

I imagine staying here? “I want...”

“Let me help you,” Doc murmured.

And somehow, we were back in the room I’d been given, my discarded clothes and backpack still outside the door. I locked Doc out, checked the other door, pulled the drapes, and, still dressed in everything but my coat, I curled on my side on the bed.

I slept.

But the lie I’d told Alex—that I didn’t feel a thing for him—followed me into my nightmares.

Chapter Six

Alex

I had to tread carefully. Patient confidentiality was a cornerstone of trust at Guardian Hall, but my concern for Jazz’s well-being nudged at those boundaries, and that was why, as soon as the door shut, I headed for the medical room.

“Marcus?” I asked from the door.

He paused, gave me a guarded look. “I can’t talk to you,” he said.

My heart sank. I knew he couldn’t talk to me about specifics, but to tell me Jazz was okay. Or at least as okay as he could be?

“Come on,” I pleaded, trying to keep my voice even. “Give me something.”

Marcus’s expression softened, but he hesitated, then slipped off the white jacket and

placed it on a hanger, smoothing it out. With his back to me, I couldn't watch his expression, and I hated that. "Master Sergeant Brookes has requested that I be his primary point of contact."

I felt a sting at that revelation, a mix of concern and personal hurt. "I understand that, and I respect his wishes," I said softly. "How about... I mean... is there anything non-specific you can share with me to help him?"

Marcus finally faced me, and I hated that I'd even asked because my best friend's expression was so damn sad. He studied me for a moment, then sighed. "He's been through a lot, Alex. More than we initially realized. He needs space and time, as much as others who've come through our doors."

I couldn't help the pain that coiled inside me and made my throat tight.

"Did... Did he say why he doesn't want my help?" I asked, although I knew the answer.

Marcus's eyebrows knitted together, his compassion flaring, but his lips were set in a thin line. "He didn't go into details. Just made it clear he feels more comfortable talking to me right now."

I slumped against the doorjamb—I bet it wasn't put in such a polite way after what I'd done to him. It had been twenty years, but the heart never heals from hatred being thrown at it.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

Mine never had.

“What did you do to him?” Marcus’s blunt question caught me off guard.

I stepped back as if the words had physically pushed me. “I didn’t...”

Marcus held up a hand. “I won’t judge, you know that. But something happened between you, and you know I’m here to listen, If you need me.”

I knew he’d listen, and he wouldn’t judge me. After all, he’d seen me at my worst. Still, confusion and worry twisted tighter inside me. “I fucked up. I told you that.”

“So maybe you want to get it all off your chest,” Marcus suggested and leaned back on his desk. He was the same man who’d found me in the gutter and picked me up, my best friend now, the only one who saw me for who I was. I could sit down and talk to him, explain what I’d done to Jazz, and why, and hell, he would hug me, and it would be okay. But fuck, everything was so raw.

“I can’t.”

“Maybe it’s not what you did, whatever that was, but what he perceives you did,” Marcus suggested gently. “Trauma can twist our views, make us see threats where there are none?—”

“No, what he feels about me is completely justified.” I glanced over my shoulder down the hall to the closed door where Jazz was. I wasn’t ready to shut myself in this office to talk privately about things I’d done, not when Jazz might slip out past me

without me having the chance to talk him into staying.

Still, I moved a little further into the room, standing in front of Marcus, and lowered my voice. “They made me,” I said, but closed my eyes.

“Oh, babe,” he whispered. “I’m sorry.”

Then, it hit me, how much I was lying, and Marcus deserved more than convenient lies. “That’s not totally true. They didn’t make me, They told me what I had to do, and I just let it happen because I was weak.”

He reached out to me, tugging my sweater until I stood between his legs. Then he cradled my face. “Are you okay?” he asked. Do you need to call your sponsor? Do you need her? I can call Abbie for you?”

I opened my eyes and met his steady gaze—the very last thing I needed was to speak to my sponsor. I mean, I should talk to her because I recognized the trigger that would normally have sent me to a street corner. I could handle it. “No, I’m okay. I’ll see her tomorrow at group, anyway.”

“Babe?” he murmured, asking a hundred questions in that single use of his nickname for me, begging me to think about myself, and telling me in no uncertain terms that he understood my triggers as well as he knew his own. He slid his thumb over my cheekbone and waited.

“I promise you, I’m okay,” I lied. “But maybe I should take myself out of the equation somewhere else for a while. So, he stays and gets well.”

“You think that will help?” Marcus asked.

“It might be better for him.”

“You know I agree every person through those doors is important, but he’s one man, and what about everyone else who relies on you? Will you just throw all the team's good work to one side?”

Horror filled me. “No. Of course not.”

“But that’s what you’d be doing if you left. Yeah?”

“I know.”

“Can you tell me what happened, Alex. Or maybe how I can help?”

That was Marcus, always ready to help, always there for me to rely on. “It’s him I need to tell,” I said and buried my face in his neck as he hugged me.

He stood me back, patted my shoulder, and brushed himself down. “Don’t crease the shirt, babe, I have a hot date with a cute lawyer.” Then, he waggled his phone. “Here, if you need anyone, Louisa is the doc on call tonight, but call me if... y’know... okay?” That was Marcus, giving up just as much of his life as I did mine, and thankful for every moment we were still alive to do so. I knew if there was any issue, on a date or not, he’d be back as fast as he could if I needed him.

“I will.” I followed him out to the coat rack where he bundled up against the cold. “A cute lawyer this time, eh?”

He rolled his eyes at that. “Brad. Only twenty-three. But, in my head, he’s a lawyer earning six figures with a future in ruling the world and taking me with him,” he deadpanned, then brightened. “Still, I’ve seen his dick, and that was plenty cute.”

“Stay safe, yeah?”

He tapped my nose. "I'll message you." Then, he pulled up his scarf, and with a sketched wave, he left, and I shut the door behind him. I locked up and checked the security cameras were all working. Then, I headed for the office right next to the front door. Someone manned this office twenty-four-seven for anyone who might need us, but I wasn't on the roster for tonight, and I wanted to be. With a quick call upstairs, I took the space in the office, swapping with our off-and-on accountant-administrator-everything-else guy, Carl, who was now making dinner for our eight residents and our small team in my stead. He called it a win, given he'd get to sleep tonight.

I called it a win because I got to watch over the front door, and despite all the training and experience and all the rules I would break, I would try everything and anything to stop Jazz from leaving.

Even if I had to drop to my knees and beg.

Chapter Seven

JAZZ

The moisturizer Docgave me made my fingers slippery, so I sat on my bed, cross-legged with my hands turned palms upright on my knees, ensuring the sticky stuff dried on my skin and didn't get wiped on my pants.

I'd slept last night—fitfully, not quite relaxed even though I'd shoved the chair back under the door handle and dragged a cabinet against the doors to the small yard.

Sleeping rough in Chicago, I'd found myself in places I never imagined I'd end up. Some nights, it was an alleyway off Lower Wacker Drive, where the city noise was a constant hum, and the chill from the river seemed to seep into my bones. Other nights, I tucked myself into the shadows of an abandoned building in Englewood, where the silence was more unsettling than the cacophony of downtown.

On the rare occasions I got a bed in a shelter, like the one on the outskirts of the Loop, it didn't provide the respite I'd hoped for. Surrounded by dozens of others, each of us wrapped in our own stories of despair, the air was thick with the weight of shared misfortune. The constant coughing, the restless shuffling, and the occasional outburst from someone lost in their own nightmares, made sleep elusive. The proximity to so many others, all of us in various stages of coping or not coping, was a stark reminder of how far I had fallen.

I remember one night at a shelter near Halsted Street, lying on a thin mattress that did little to cushion the hard floor beneath. I'd found myself wedged between two strangers, and the air was heavy with the smell of unwashed bodies and cheap disinfectant. Someone nearby had been muttering in their sleep, a low, continuous drone that filled the room, and I couldn't sleep. The irony didn't escape me. Out there, I was alone, but I was unseen, unjudged, a ghost drifting through the night. In the shelters, I faced the reality of my situation through the eyes of others, a reality I wasn't ready to accept.

Doc hadn't stared at me in judgment.

Neither had Alex.

I pressed my fingers together—the tackiness of the ointment had eased—and as my belly rumbled, I wondered if maybe it was okay to venture out and see if there was food.

How many other people would be out there?

Would Alex be with them?

I moved the chair from the door, hoisted my backpack over my shoulder, then put it back down on my neat, corners-tight bed.

Then, I picked it up.

And put it down.

Why am I taking it with me? I have a key to the door.

Who else had a key to the door? Did Alex say it was just me? Why can't I remember?

A knock at the door jolted me from my thoughts, and I hesitated. “Hello?”

“Morning, Jazz! It’s Doc,” came a voice from the other side. “Breakfast is out here if you feel up to it. Or I could bring you something if you’d rather eat alone?”

The offer caught me off guard. It wasn’t just the mention of food, but the underlying gesture, the implication of care I hadn’t felt in a long time. I stood there, frozen, unsure how to respond. The idea of stepping out, of facing others over a meal, seemed daunting. Yet the thought of Doc bringing breakfast to me, acknowledging my isolation, felt equally hard.

I cleared my throat, my voice sounding rough to my ears. “I’ll come out,” I said, a compromise between my desire for solitude and the pressing need to not alienate those trying to help me—even if one of them was Alex.

I unlocked the door and opened it a crack. “No one else has a key to my room, right?” I asked, and Doc smiled at me.

“There’s an emergency key for me.” He thumbed in the direction of the medical room. “It’s locked away.”

I glanced back at the bed, the bag sat there, torn for a moment. Then, I stepped out through the smallest crack I could manage before locking the door. Doc waited and walked with me to the kitchen, a couple of people inside, but not the heaving mass I’d expected.

“Elena,” Doc said, gesturing to a woman in her late forties with a calm, motherly demeanor that seemed to fill the room. She was at the stove, flipping pancakes, a stack already piled high on a plate beside her. Her smile was warm, inviting, and she offered a gentle nod in my direction, her eyes crinkling in a way that made me feel seen, yet not pressured. “She’s one of our amazing support team, comes in for

breakfast. Elena, meet Jazz.”

“Hi, Jazz,” Elena said and waved the spatula.

“Hi, Elena,” I replied after a pause.

“That’s Tom,” Doc said. Tom was a young man with a shock of unruly hair and an easygoing grin. He was at the table with a bowl of cereal and a mug of coffee.

“Hey, Jazz,” he said.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“Hey,” I said back. Doc said nothing about Tom working here, so I assumed Tom was one of us.

“And that’s Raj,” Doc finished, gesturing at a tall man at the kitchen island nursing a cup of coffee. Raj was older, perhaps in his early sixties, with a thoughtful expression and a gaze that seemed to take in everything with a quiet intensity. He lifted his cup in a silent salute when Doc mentioned his name, his acknowledgment more reserved but no less welcoming. I nodded in return and didn’t have to see the scars knotting the back of his left hand to know he’d served. I could see it in his eyes.

“Coffee?” Tom asked as he rinsed his bowl and placed it in the dishwasher, and I nodded. “Black?”

“Please.”

He poured coffee into a mug that announced Liquid Wisdom Inside and placed it within my reach, but didn’t get closer himself.

“Peacekeeping Afghanistan, Sergeant, Army.” he said and crutched out from behind the counter, my gaze drawn to his legs, where one was missing from the knee down.

“Master Sergeant, Army,” I blurted.

Tom sketched a cocky salute with his free hand.

I shrunk in on myself. “Please, no,” I said, and he seemed to get it, offering me a fist to bump instead. No reminders of rank, or what we’d done or seen. Just no.

“Pancakes? Cereal?” he asked instead. “We have muffins, or we do unless Raj got there first.”

“Sorry,” Raj said. “I just ate the last one.”

Tom winced. “No muffins then.”

“Cereal is good.” I edged to the main table, keeping my eye on everyone, then awkwardly poured sugary cereal into a bowl and splashed it with milk. Spoons were in a jug to one side. Then, I settled at the table where Tom had placed my mug.

“Morning,” Alex said from the door, moving past me to get coffee and take a plate of pancakes from Elena. Did he still pour syrup all over them? Why did I even care? And why was there a buzzing in my ears?

He took a seat down from me. “Hi, Jazz,” he murmured.

I nodded and went back to my cereal. If he’d asked me how I slept or whether I needed anything, I might have just left, but he said nothing.

“Want me to show you around?” Doc asked.

I grabbed my mug and headed straight over to him—anything to get away from Alex. I glanced back and caught my old friend staring at me. His expression was... sad, maybe, or confused? He offered me a smile, but I hurried out after Doc, nearly spilling the contents of my mug and stopping in horror at the thought of messing things up.

“Shit.”

“Okay?” Doc asked.

“I never asked—is it okay if I take this with me?”

“Sure, it’s your home for as long as you want, so coffee can go everywhere,” he said and grinned.

I almost smiled back, but the comment about the staying here part sounded almost pointed. Or preachy? Or was that me overreacting?

He stopped at a board way past the medical room and gestured at bulletin photos, each image part of a larger circle. “So, this is the team. The other doc, Louisa.” He thumbed back at the kitchen. “You met Elena; she’s a therapist here, also your best contact for all things legal; and this is Lucas, therapist, web expert, all-around good guy. Plus, Carl, accountant.” Doc chuckled. “Then, of course, Alex, who runs the place with me.”

Alex.

Alex was smiling in his photo. Welcoming. Non-threatening. Normal. I could almost see the boy I’d once known—only grown up, bigger, stronger—and my heart skipped a beat.

Doc guided me through the entire building with a sensitivity that nearly brought me to tears. He didn’t require me to interact with anyone; he simply showed me where everything was, from a small gym and therapy room to the attic, which housed a yoga space, and then we made our way back downstairs.

When we’d completed a full loop and were back outside the medical room, he asked, “If you have a few minutes, can I check you over?”

“Sure,” I said. He did some basic checks, then told me the rest of the day was mine. He didn’t ask me to stay another night, suggest I talk to a therapist, or say I should get

advice on what to do next for myself. He let me be, and with a wave, he relocked the medical room door and headed away from me.

Outside of my room, alone, I froze. Now what?

Page 14

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“Jazz,” Alex said from behind, but I didn’t jump because I knew he’d be there. I turned to face him, my back hard against the door. “Hey,” he murmured.

“Hey,” I managed, noting how tired he seemed, with dark smudges under his eyes and his hair a tangled mess. Instinct made me want to say something, to ask if he was all right, and if there was anything I could do. It would have been the right thing to do, the human thing, if I had any of that human side left in me. But the words seemed to stick in my throat, held back by a wall of pride and stubbornness.

“I’m glad you stayed,” he said, but didn’t move toward me, or expand on that comment with reasons about how I needed to stay longer.

I still wasn’t sure I was staying another night.

What else would I do?

As I fumbled behind me for the door handle, I remembered it was locked, and I had the key in my pocket. As if Alex sensed I needed to get away, he took a few steps back as he smiled encouragingly.

“I have to go...” He excused himself. “... things need doing.” Then, he went in the opposite direction to where Doc had gone, heading into an office space near the front entrance. I’d noticed the computers in there and wondered if I could get online to message Harper, missing my daughter more than anything right now. Maybe before I left. Maybe today? Or if I stayed, perhaps tomorrow.

I unlocked my door, slipped inside, and locked it again.

Checked it just in case.

The room felt too quiet. If I were outside, I'd be walking to keep warm, searching for a new place to sleep, or trying to find work. In here, everything was so damn nice, but prickles of unease made me shudder at the silence.

I switched on the TV, more for the noise than anything. I heard the gentle buzz of a home renovation show, and I sat down on my bed.

Should I stay one more night? My chest was already looser from being out of the cold, and my hands were softer, the cracks not bleeding.

Just one more night.

I didn't have to see or speak to Alex.

Doc said so.

Chapter Eight

Alex

I woke up when Marcus tapped my shoulder, and his voice broke through my sleepiness. "Wake up, sunshine." My head snapped up from the keyboard. A string of nonsensical characters glowed on the computer screen.

Rubbing my eyes, I tried to focus on Marcus, who was staring at me with concern and amusement.

"Carl tells me you've been covering his night shift for the last three nights. What's up with that?" His tone was casual, but his eyes searched mine for a deeper answer.

“No reason,” I mumbled, straightening in my chair and stretching my spine. I was monitoring the front door just in case Jazz needed something or left. But then, it had morphed into something else, a habit fueled by my restlessness and inability to sleep. Today marked day four of Jazz staying with us, and each night felt longer than the last. Mostly because I was trying to stay awake in the day as well.

Idiot.

Marcus raised an eyebrow, not buying my half-hearted dismissal. “No reason, huh? Nothing to do with a certain soldier in the room down the hall?”

“No,” I lied. “Yes,” I amended when he quirked an eyebrow.

“Maybe try sleeping in an actual bed tonight?” he suggested, amusement lacing his voice. “It works wonders, I hear.”

“I can’t,” I snapped. “Sorry, I didn’t mean...”

Marcus raised his hands in mock surrender. “It’s okay, but you need rest. We can’t have our fearless leader falling apart on us.”

“Yeah.”

“You know, you could have asked Carl to wake you up if anything happened.”.

“It could be too late.” I knew he was right, but I couldn’t shake the feeling of responsibility that had settled over me. “I know, I just...” I was unsure how to explain the mix of concern and duty, keeping me tethered to the desk night after night.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

Marcus leaned against the desk, folding his arms as he looked at me. I swear he could read my mind. “You’re still worried Jazz will bolt.”

I nodded, the admission feeling like a weight off my chest. “Yeah. I want to be here, just in case. But it’s not only that. I can’t sleep anyway, so I might as well be useful.”

“It’s not all on you...”

I knew he was right, and part of me felt foolish thinking I had to be some kind of lone guardian through the night. But it was hard to let go of the feeling that I needed to be available.

“I know,” I said, offering a tired smile as my stomach rumbled.

Marcus clapped me on the shoulder, his smile widening. “Breakfast. Then, how about you try getting some actual sleep?”

I placed a hand over his. “How is he? Is he okay?”

Marcus tilted his head to remind me he couldn’t tell me anything. But he was calm, and his demeanor told me everything I needed to know. Jazz was okay for the moment, healing physically, with no awful blood test results back and no danger.

Safe.

As Marcus walked away, I took a moment to power down the computer, the screen’s glow fading to black. Then, yawning, I dragged myself across the hall to the kitchen,

scratching at my disheveled hair. My face felt grimy, a reminder of the night spent dozing off in an uncomfortable chair. All I could think about was coffee, which promised at least a semblance of alertness.

Exhausted, I shuffled to the coffeemaker, setting it up with practiced motions. As it gurgled to life, the aroma of coffee filled the room. Spotting a lone pancake left on a plate, I grabbed it, not even bothering to heat it up. I clattered a plate onto the counter, poured excessive syrup over the cold pancake, and yawned so wide I thought my jaw might lock open.

Coffee ready, I poured it into a mug, my hand so unsteady I nearly missed. “Fuck my life,” I muttered as a few drops splashed onto my hand, only just avoiding a full-on spill.

I glanced out of the window, managing a half-hearted glare at the sunshine pouring in, blinking as I took a cautious sip of the scalding coffee. “Hurry up,” I muttered at the caffeine, the heat of it doing little to thaw my sleep-deprived brain, feeling a bit more human with each gulp of caffeine. The day was already shaping up to be a long one, but at least I wasn’t facing it alone.

I turned to lean on the counter, thinking through everything I needed to do today, then stopped.

Jazz was sitting at the breakfast table in the corner, nursing a coffee of his own, and staring right at me.

Shit. He’d seen me dragging my tired self in, observed my clumsy dance with the coffee and pancakes, and now, I was stuck, frozen under his gaze. While he looked nothing like the Jazz I remembered from twenty years ago, he still had that unnerving intensity in his eyes as he focused on me. It used to be accompanied by smiles, but now, his expression was closed off. He was thin, wary, his beard was still unkempt,

his hair longer than I'd ever seen it, but he was clean, and the bandages on his hand had gone and in their place was pink and healing skin. Do I say anything? Do I wish him a good morning? Do I just sidle out and pretend I haven't noticed him staring?

After some internal debate, I decided on the most direct approach. Clearing my throat, I mustered as much cheerfulness as I could and said, "Good morning, Jazz." Shit. Should I call him that? Or his full name? Or his rank? Why hadn't I even asked that—it was politeness 101 to know what people wanted to be called.

He watched me for a beat longer, his expression unreadable, then nodded slightly. "Morning," he replied, his voice rough.

I took a cautious step toward him, then another, until I was close enough to see the details of his face, the lines life had etched into his skin since we'd last seen each other. "You, uh, you doing okay this morning?" I ventured, not sure what ground stood firm between us.

Jazz shrugged. "As okay as can be, I guess," he said, then stared back at his coffee.

I nodded, feeling the distance of years and experiences stretching between us. "If you need anything, you know, more pancakes or someone to talk to..." I let the offer hang, hoping he'd see it for the olive branch it was. All I wanted to do was talk to him and explain.

He glanced up again, meeting my eyes. There was a flicker of something there, maybe surprise or the first glimmer of acknowledgment. "Thanks," he said, and though it was only one word, it felt like a tiny step forward.

I smiled, the tension easing a fraction. "No problem. Just, you know, holler if you need anything."

Turning to go, I felt his eyes on me again.

“Did you make Harper give me the card?” Jazz’s question stopped me in my tracks.

“The what now?” Harper was Jazz’s daughter, someone I followed from afar, anything to get a glimpse into Jazz’s life. Not that Harper ever mentioned her dad on social media, nor her mother, to be fair.

“My daughter gave me a card for here,” Jazz explained and gestured at the kitchen, by which I assume he meant Guardian Hall. “Did you ask her to do that?”

“I don’t know her.” My heart hurt because I’d lost all chance of being part of Jazz’s life through my stupidity, including knowing his daughter.

“So why did she give me a card for this shelter?” he asked. Unspoken was the accusation—where you are!

“I don’t know.” I was as confused as him.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

Jazz stared up at me, his gaze holding a clarity I hadn't seen before. "She knows who you are." The words felt as if they carried the weight of years between them. "I used to tell her about the Alex Richardson I was friends with."

"You told her about me?" I couldn't hide the surprise in my voice. "Why? After everything I did, why did you do that?"

His confusion was obvious, almost as if he couldn't comprehend why I would ask such a question. "You were my best friend. My entire life before enlisting was stories of you and me," he stated, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. He coughed and pressed a hand over his mouth, his chest still rattling. I almost reached for him but stopped myself.

"Did you tell Harper the bad parts?" I asked with caution, the words slipping out before I could weigh them. What the fuck, Alex?

Jazz's gaze drifted to a point somewhere beyond the room, somewhere in the past. "I told her you were my best friend," he repeated, his gaze returning to mine. "She probably thought you'd care about seeing me again."

The room seemed to stand still around us, the bright morning light casting long shadows on the walls.

"Jazz, of course I?—"

"Please stop," Jazz interrupted. His dark brown eyes brightened with emotion, and he pushed to stand upright, wavering a little. His fingers gripped the table, his knuckles

white.

“Maybe it was a happy kind of luck that the card brought you here,” I said, not wanting to end this talk.

He huffed. “Bad luck,” he muttered and walked past me. “You don’t want to pull me back into your life, Alex.”

“Jazz, please.”

He left, and I couldn’t move. Grief hit me so hard that it was difficult to breathe. I knew I’d messed up—he was here at Guardian Hall for help. He needed some time to heal and find a new purpose. He’d already made it clear he wanted to talk to Marcus, not me, and there I was, trying to connect with him when he wasn’t interested.

I brought another coffee to the office, sat in the uncomfortable chair, and shuffled through the mail without caring.

At least he hadn’t left.

Yet.

Chapter Nine

JAZZ

The light filtering through the window of the medical room felt too bright, too real. Marcus had suggested that I move out of the welcome room—a space meant for newcomers to Guardian Hall, not for people who’d been here four days now. Or was it five? Or six? I forgot.

The room he said I would have would be mine. Smaller, but still with its own bathroom. Saying yes to the new room meant more than just a change of sleeping quarters. It meant I was committing to staying and everything that entailed.

“The room we have in mind for you... it’s part of accepting the program we offer here,” Marcus explained, his voice steady, trying to gauge my reaction. “Ground floor, with another door out to the yard, so you’d have space to get outside. Like I said, a bathroom with shower, TV, a decent bed, closet, desk.”

He was rambling, but I focused on the word "program." As he spoke, the word grew heavier, with implications of therapy sessions, group meetings, and a structured day that seemed too much. I’d lived on the streets for a while, and there’d been freedom away from the military.

Freedom.

That’s what I’d called it, but was it really freedom when it came at the price of wintry nights, constant vigilance, or dying?

“I don’t know,” My tone sounded dead. Why was I staying here? I’d just meant to be here to live through one more night, not get pulled into something bigger. Like talking about myself. Would they make me admit what I’d done? Or ask me to explain what I’d seen?

My hands trembled, and I laced my fingers in my lap to stop the obvious reaction, focusing on not shaking and instead on the layers of purple in Marcus’s hair. There was bruising on his neck—but not from violence, maybe enthusiastic sex? A hickey? Something that had happened as he lost control.

I don’t lose control.

I can't.

Marcus leaned back, giving me space to process. "It's tailored to each individual, Jazz. Yes, therapy is a part of it—that's a big component. But it's more than that. We have vocational training, education programs, physical rehabilitation, and community service projects. It's about rebuilding your life, not just surviving."

Rebuilding. The word resonated with a part of me I thought I'd lost. The idea of contributing again, learning, and finding an alternative path, was terrifying, but... maybe I could take a step that way? After all, I wouldn't want Harper to see me again unless I'd taken steps to fix all the parts of me that were broken.

My daughter had given me that card for a reason.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

Whether she meant for me to see Alex again, or if it was fate or something, I couldn't tell, but she'd wanted me here so I could figure things out.

"Vocational training?" I latched onto the concept, a flicker of interest igniting despite my attempts to remain detached.

"Uh huh," Marcus continued with more enthusiasm, as if he'd sensed the shift in my demeanor. "We have partnerships with local businesses, trade schools, even online courses, if there's something specific you're interested in. And the community projects... they're a way to begin feeling connected again, to make a difference not just to the people you help, but to yourself."

Making a difference. It had been a long time since I believed I could do that. "And the therapy?" I asked, but the word was still a hurdle I wasn't sure I could clear.

"It's a cornerstone of the program," Marcus admitted. "But it's not what you might be picturing. We work with professionals who understand where you're coming from. It's about healing at your own pace, finding coping strategies, and moving forward."

Move forward. Another concept that seemed foreign after years of doing what I was told, killing, hurting... Marcus's description of the program painted a picture of a future I hadn't allowed myself to envision. Accepting the room and the program felt like stepping onto a path I wasn't sure I was ready to follow. Yet, the alternative was a return to the streets, to the so-called freedom from my past life that had cost me everything.

"Is this what Harper wanted for me?" The question slipped out, a whisper of doubt

seeking reassurance.

Marcus tilted his head. “Harper?”

I swallowed. “My daughter. She...” I reached into my pocket, digging for the tattered wallet that only held two things. One was a picture of me holding Harper when she’d been three, her blonde hair in pigtails. And the other was the card she’d given me with the Guardian Hall details. I pulled out the latter and held it out to him, and he took it, turning it over to see the four words Harper had written on the back.

I love you, Dad.

Four words that had kept me from giving in.

Marcus met my gaze, his expression softening. “Do you see her?”

I shook my head. “Her mom won’t allow it now.”

Marcus’s eyes narrowed. “You know she has no right to stop you from seeing your daughter. Unless there’s a legal reason you shouldn’t?”

“No, there’s nothing legal, but my ex is right. Harper doesn’t deserve to have to deal with my bad parts.” Like my night terrors, and the bits left of me after being shattered into a million pieces through war. Marcus didn’t say anything trite about how I deserved my daughter in my life, probably because he knew I’d argue.

Harper was my life, and I would protect her or die trying.

“Harper gave it to me and said she wanted me to find peace. She’s sixteen now, and I haven’t... I didn’t... I’m not good enough...”

Marcus tried not to react, but I saw his jaw tighten. I was sure he had an entire load of things he could say to me when I was being hard on myself, and hell, I bet he wanted to defend me, but I didn't need all of that.

My exwasright.

I wasn't good enough to be in Harper's life.

At least not right now.

I needed to find my way back to the kid I'd been—the one who loved to read, saved up to buy Lego sets and books, and sat for hours in a tree house with my old friend.

I needed to take a step.

One.

A step toward peace and the man I used to be. The thought was overwhelming, the possibilities too vast to comprehend. But, as I sat in the medical room with Marcus, the decision seemed to make itself.

"Okay," I said, the word barely audible. "Okay, I'll... I'll try it."

Marcus's smile was gentle and encouraging. "That's all we ask, Jazz."

As he discussed what came next, the logistics of moving rooms, and what my days might look like, I felt a tremor of something unfamiliar—perhaps hope or the first stirrings of belief that there might be a way out of the darkness.

Accepting the room and the program was more than a commitment to stay at Guardian Hall. It was a promise to me. To the potential for change and healing. It was

a daunting prospect, but as I left the medical room to embark on this new chapter, I realized it was also the first decision I had made in a long time that genuinely felt like my own.

When I went toward the kitchen, lost in thought, I glimpsed someone sitting at a computer with their back to me—Alex.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

I want to email Harper and tell her what I'd done.

I could do this.

I rapped my knuckles on the jamb, and Alex half fell off his chair in shock. Then, he scrambled to his feet, a mix of embarrassment and surprise painting his face as he steadied himself against the desk. Alex, recovering, ran a hand through his hair, smoothing it back. "Jazz, you just... I didn't hear you come in," he stammered, then cleared his throat, trying to regain some of his usual composure.

I leaned against the doorframe, feeling the weight of my decision. "I can find Marcus to help," I began, but he dismissed that notion with a wave of his hand.

"What do you need?"

"If it's okay with you," I began, my gaze drifting past him to the computer screen that now displayed a Guardian Hall screensaver. "I need to email my daughter. Tell her what I've decided." I stopped.

Alex's eyes widened. "Are you leaving?" His hand went to his chest and pressed over his heart.

"No, I'm going to give this a chance."

Alex's expression shifted from surprise to something softer, more understanding. "Then, you should tell her," he said, moving aside. "Do you have an email account?"

“Yeah.”

He leaned over and logged out of the office system, then rebooted the computer, going into a new profile with my name.

“I set your password as Tuesday—the day you arrived, but please go in and change it so you have something private. Okay? It should prompt you.”

I settled into the chair Alex had vacated, my fingers hovering over the keyboard.

Alex hovered for a moment, unsure whether to leave me alone or stay. “If you need anything...” he offered.

I glanced up, meeting his gaze. “I think I’m okay for now.”

With a nod, Alex left me to it, the softclickof the door signaling that I was alone with my thoughts, my decision, and the email to Harper that felt like the first step to somewhere.

How did I start?Dear Harper, Today, I chose a different path.It seemed too grandiose, too unlike me. Yet, as I typed, the words came easier than I expected. Even though it wasn’t a long email, by the time I signed off withLove Dad, I’d said enough to let her know where I was and that I was safe.

I typed in her email address, and my mouse pointer hovered over the send option. One click of the mouse, and it would be gone.

I froze.

I closed my eyes as if that would make it easier, but all I saw then were those awful, terrible things I’d tried to forget—the things that had cut away at my soul.

For a moment, I considered deleting what I'd written.

For a moment, I wanted to cry.

"Coffee and cake," Marcus shouted through the door. "In the kitchen, when you're ready."

His voice jerked me out of my funk.

And with a deep breath, I pressed send.

Chapter Ten

Alex

Ten days.

Jazz had been at Guardian Hall for ten days, and each day felt as if it were a delicate balance between me giving him his space but being there if he needed support. He'd used the computer twice when I was in the office, but of course, I didn't stay because he needed his privacy. I caught him smiling yesterday as he read a long email, and I assumed it was from his daughter. The smile didn't last all day, but he seemed lighter. I wished we were brave enough to at least look at each other, but he still wouldn't meet my gaze. I wasn't sure whether it was Jazz avoiding connecting with me, or if I was the one avoiding him.

You don't want to pull me back into your life, Alex.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

What had he meant by that, and why couldn't I shake the confusion over what he'd meant?

It sounded like he wasn't rejecting a place in my life. Instead, it seemed he was cautioning me, suggesting that it was his life I should steer clear of. Was that right? Or had I misunderstood?

I couldn't even ask him.

But today, though, today was different. I was running a group session, something I did regularly, but the stakes were high. Marcus had spoken to Jazz, asked if he'd be interested in attending a session I led. He hadn't said no. That was all Marcus could tell me, and I clung to that non-rejection like a lifeline.

Setting out chairs in a circle to foster a sense of equality and openness, I prepared the room with my nerves shot. Would Jazz show up? What would it mean if he did? Would I get to ask him what he'd meant about his life?

Four other residents had already committed to today's session, each with a story about how they ended up needing Guardian Hall. With Jazz, that made five.

As the session time approached, I saw them file in, each carrying their own invisible burdens. Tom came in with Raj, Daniel a little after, and finally Emily arrived, and they got coffee and sat down. Tom was talking Raj's ear off about movies, and Raj listened to him, offering him a small smile. There was a profound connection between them, and I knew Tom had been considering moving on with him when Raj left at the end of the month. He had a place on his brother's ranch in Wyoming, an

apartment over a barn, and we'd worked with Raj to get him to a place where he felt strong enough to leave. Raj's PTSD was manageable; Tom was way off yet, but together they were stronger. Relationships sometimes formed here, and it wasn't our place to get involved.

I'd seen that before, and I'm sure I'd see it again—deep friendships, and sometimes more, as our veterans supported each other with shared trauma few people could imagine.

Sgt. Daniel Rivera, a Marine corpsman, was another newbie, the same as Jazz, only just coming up to three weeks here, but he now at least had a PTSD diagnosis and support. Last was Lt. Emily Watson, Navy, a former medic, now in her third month with us, five months pregnant, and someone who'd fought herdemons alone for way too long. Marcus and I wanted her to stay through the birth, even opened up a second room next to hers for a small nursery, had a midwife who visited. I got the sense she was close to leaving as well after her ex-husband made contact. They were working on a reunion, and although it was slow, Marcus was hopeful.

We exchanged hellos as everyone else took their seats, and I hovered by the coffee pot. However, with a few minutes until the official start, my focus kept drifting to the door, watching for Jazz. It seemed as if he wasn't coming.

"You okay standing up there?" Tom deadpanned.

I winced and took my seat. I may as well get this started.

Only the door opened, and Jazz stepped in.

"Group stuff?" he asked in his growly deep voice.

"Sure, come in!" I said, far too bright.

He closed the door behind him and our eyes met, and in his gaze, I saw so much emotion I recognized—the apprehension he’d had when I told him to dive into the pool from the highest board. The determination from when he’d taken steps closer to the edge and stared over. And the trust I recognized from the moment he’d jumped, after I’d told him he was going to be okay.

My heart hurt.

As he took a seat, completing our circle, I felt a shift in the room as everyone straightened, ready to do this. It was subtle, but it was there—a sense of coming together and sharing vulnerabilities with strengths. I cleared my throat, nodding to Jazz before focusing on the group.

“Thank you, everyone, for being here today,” I began, my voice steady despite the storm of emotions inside me. First off, the usual stuff, just so I could ground myself. “This is a closed room, and the things we discuss, and share go no further. Is that okay with everyone?”

Everyone said yes, from Tom’s brightness to Jazz’s more hesitant reaction.

“Okay, as usual, let’s start by sharing what brought us here and where we hope to go.”

“I’ll go first,” Tom said when no one else made a start. “So, I was just part of the peacekeeping force, wasn’t even supposed to be out there, but...”

As the stories unfolded, I kept a careful watch on Jazz, who grew stiffer with each mention of a foreign theater of war, or an injury, or substance abuse, or PTSD.

I didn’t know his story.

Would he tell us today?

Finally, it was his turn, and he swallowed, and for the first time in days, he met my gaze.

“You’re a counselor?” he asked, which threw me for a moment. “Registered, licensed, whatever?”

I nodded. “Master’s degree in Psychology from UC, interned with Rush Medical Center for several years.”

His eyes widened, and I could see the questions he didn’t ask. What about business, finance, and what my family had demanded of me? When he’d left—when I’d made him leave—I’d had a place at Harvard. What Jazz didn’t know was that I’d lasted one semester before everything had gone to shit, but this wasn’t about my story.

Now was all about him.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“And you’ve never served,” he said, the words carrying an accusation that landed as heavy as a brick to the back of my head.

“No,” I admitted. The gap in our experiences was vast, a chasm that empathy alone couldn’t bridge. “I haven’t worn the uniform, and I won’t pretend to understand everything you’ve been through,” I began, my voice steady despite the turmoil inside.

“So, how do you get to sit there?” he asked. There was no anger, but I heard Tom’s sharp inhalation.

“Hang on,” Tom began.

I held up a hand to stop him. “He has a point,” I said to placate Tom, who was all narrow-eyed and feisty. “So, I’ve dedicated my life to understanding, to learning how I can support those who have served, and I’ve listened—really listened—to countless stories from those who’ve served.”

Tom folded his arms over his chest, and as for Jazz, he tilted his head as if he were really listening to me. I paused, ensuring my sincerity was as clear as the conviction I felt. “This isn’t about me claiming a shared experience that isn’t mine. It’s about giving you a space where you can share, heal, and connect with others who truly understand your journey. I’m here to support that process, to offer tools and insights from a place of compassion and respect for what you’ve sacrificed and endured.” I let out a breath. The rehearsed explanation seemed way too long, particularly as Jazz stared at me.

“What he said,” Tom snapped and glanced at Jazz, who was still staring at me.

“My expertise isn’t in having served. It’s in recognizing the value of each person’s experience and helping navigate the path forward. You and everyone here deserve a place to be heard, understood, and supported. That’s what I’m here for.”

Jazz was silent, and that was okay. Not everyone shared their experiences out loud in the first session, the second, or the tenth. Some kept everything for one-on-one counseling, and hell, this might be the only session with me that Jazz attended.

But at least he was here.

“I wish I could tell a different story,” Jazz began, his voice broken. He cleared his throat. “I wish I could sit here and say I didn’t feel everything that the rest of you felt, and that I didn’t need to be here.” He picked at a loose thread on his jeans, talking to the floor more than to us.

Then, he leaned back, his gaze drifting to the middle distance, and it was obvious he was lost in memories. “I was in for a good stretch. Saw a lot. Middle East, parts of Africa... places where the soil knows more about blood than growth. You do what you’re told, you protect your own, and you try to make the right calls.”

“Yeah,” Daniel murmured.

Jazz paused, a shadow crossing his face. “But it’s the things you can’t control that stick with you—civilians caught in the crossfire, decisions that haunt me, and the faces of those I couldn’t save even when I tried. I’ve lost friends, so I stopped making friends. I’ve killed adults, and kids, people I knew, people I didn’t know. I’m cold and hard and broken. But somehow, when I was out there, it was my life, and I knew it was just something I had to do, and then, I’d get home. I could tell you about each part of me that was snapped away, but what would be the point of that? You all know what I’ve seen and done because it’s no different from what you’ve all been through. We’ve all drunk the poison, just in different flavors.”

He glanced around him, and the other four nodded, tears rolling down Emily's face as she pressed her hands to her swollen belly.

He clenched his fists in his lap. "I'm divorced. I don't blame my ex for any of what went down, because I was the one who lied my way into marrying her and destroyed it all. Me."

"No one stays with us," Tom said.

Raj took his hand and laced their fingers tight.

"Coming back home, I thought I'd feel safe, right? But I don't fit anymore, like the world has moved on without me." He stared back at the floor, his knuckles white as he gripped the chair. "It's the ghosts that follow me, same as all of you. Loud noises, crowds, even silence—it can all bring it back. We all have PTSD because we were military and supposed to be brave and hard and trained for it all..." His voice hitched, and Daniel leaned in as if he would knock elbows. Although he didn't touch Jazz, he was there in support. "I should've gotten help sooner," he murmured. "The grocery store job I came back to felt meaningless. I couldn't imagine working security or holding a gun again, and that was all that was open to me. Bagging groceries and clearing up spills on aisle eight." He laughed, but no one else joined in, everyone watching silently.

"I couldn't relate to the media or people or find peace in the things that used to matter. So, I spiraled. I lost my job and packed all my belongings into a single box, and my ex became afraid of me. She said I shouldn't see my daughter, and she was right because I have a messed-up head."

I was desperate to hug Jazz and tell him he'd be okay, but kept my seat, even as emotion threatened to spill over into tears.

“Pride kept me from asking for help,” Jazz whispered, “then shame buried me deeper.” He stared directly at me, his dark brown eyes bright with pain. “I ended up on the streets, not because I wanted freedom, but because I felt there was no place left for me. No community, no purpose. Just memories and a battle I was losing.”

He went silent, and I waited in case he had something else to say, but his breathing was hard, and he hunched over in the chair. Everyone who’d ever sat in this room and talked had at one point cried, shouted, thrown things, or gone deathly quiet.

One by one, the others left the room. Tom pressed a hand to Jazz’s shoulder, and then, it was just me, Jazz, and the scent of stale coffee.

“Jazz?”

His eyes were swimming with tears. “Don’t do that,” he murmured. Then, he stood, using the chair to steady himself. “Don’t give me sympathy like I need it from you.”

“I’m sorry?—”

“I don’t need you. And you don’t need me.”

When he left, he shut the door, and I sat for the longest time staring at the empty room.

He was wrong.

I needed him like I needed to breathe.

Chapter Eleven

JAZZ

I don't need you. And you don't need me.

What a freaking liar! I needed Alex in ways I couldn't begin to explain. I was desperate to return to that last summer when we still loved each other before money became more important to him than me. Before he told me he felt nothing for me.

And needing him fucking sucked because I'd always love him, and I couldn't do anything with that.

I couldn't believe I'd laid myself bare like that in the group meeting. The words had tumbled out, a tidal wave of confessions and memories I hadn't admitted to myself until that moment. Each revelation felt like shedding a layer of skin, leaving me raw and exposed, and through all of it, I was facing Alex, and he'd seen what I'd become.

So, I'd told him I didn't need him.

I'd lied.

I wanted to be friends again. But if I did that, then I would drag the man he'd become down to my level, and I would destroy him. How could I let him be anything more when I didn't sleep because of nightmares, and those same nightmares chased me into

the daylight?

I'm doing the right thing when I tell him I need him to stay away from what I am now.

Right?

Only he'd stared at me as if I'd stabbed him in the chest, with his guilty expression and his bright eyes.

When I returned to my room, the aftermath of my openness hit me hard. I felt lightheaded as if speaking my truth had physically drained me, and exhaustion enveloped me like a thick blanket. Glancing at the clock, I realized I was running out of time, with less than an hour before Marcus expected me in the medical room. The thought alone was enough to make my head spin.

Then, there was the skills session this afternoon with the careers advisor, a lady called Greta. The idea of sitting down, discussing prospects and deciding about a life I was still trying to piece back together felt premature. How was I supposed to plot a course forward when I was still navigating the past?

To top it all off, I was scheduled for dinner duty in the kitchen. The last thing I needed was to face others and function in a team when I felt I was barely holding myself together.

It was all too much.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I tried to take deep breaths, to steady the spinning room and quell the rising panic. "One thing at a time," I whispered to myself, a mantra I wasn't sure I believed. First, Marcus and the medical room. I could handle that. Marcus had always been straightforward, quiet, and undemanding, and he was

just checking my skin and the chest infection.

“I can do that.”

But the careers session, the decisions about a future I couldn’t imagine, and the kitchen duty with its demands on my already depleted reserves of energy and sociability were something else.

I dreaded them.

I stood up, pacing the small space of my room, trying to shake off the fatigue and gather my thoughts. I had to focus on the immediate, to navigate this day step-by-step, even if the prospect of what lay beyond was enough to send me spiraling.

As the minutes ticked by, bringing me closer to my appointment with Marcus, I had to be strong.

With a deep, steadying breath, I set my shoulders and counted down the time left, and the knock on the door jolted me, gave my thoughts a hard shove, when I was trying to center myself.

“Who is it?” I called out.

“Me. I mean, Alex.”

Fuck. Fuck.

“Go away,” I called back, harsher than I intended. Underneath the command, there was a plea for space, for a moment to gather myself.

There was a pause, and then, Alex was persistent and gentle again. “I was hoping we

could talk?”

Talk. That word seemed simple, yet it held so much significance. Did I have the energy or courage for this?

“No,” I replied.

“I just... I miss my friend.” His sadness was audible through the door.

I stood there, a hand pressed to the wood separating us, feeling a lifetime of memories press back. Alex had been my confidant, my partner in crime, the one who knew me best—until it all fell apart.

“You don’t need a friend,” I mumbled.

“Did you say something?” he asked. “Jazz?”

“You don’t need a friend,” I repeated a little louder.

“Can I... look, can I just step inside? I wanted to... I need...”

“It’s not about what you need, Alex. None of this is.”

There was the longest pause, and I slid down the door to rest my back against it.

“I know,” he said at last, and I heard movement. “I need to get some posters up on the community wall. There’s a new placement with an animal shelter if you are interested. I mean, I know you had Ben when you were little, and thought you might like first shot?”

Ben. God, that took me back. A black lab, gray-muzzled by the time he passed at fourteen, a fiend for finding food everywhere, gentle, round, and an enormous teddy

bear.

“I missed Ben when he went,” I blurted, wishing I could recall the words when I heard another sigh.

“I missed him, too. I loved that old softie.”

Silence, and then, more movement and a scuffle as something got pushed under the door. I moved as though Alex had shoved in a hand grenade, but it was a flyer with a picture of a sleeping puppy and two tiny kittens, and the words Guardian Animal Shelter. Was this something to do with Guardian Hall, or was that name a coincidence?

“It’s a good place, offers vocational skills, is friendly, and has so many animals. I love it there,” Alex said, then he cleared his throat. “I’ll be at the community board if you have questions, but I know you’re seeing Greta later, and you could mention this to her when she talks about work placements. No pressure. None at all.”

Words failed me, and I heard him walking away. I picked up the flyer and read the brief details: four hours a day, volunteering, with scope for more hours, and working toward a recognized qualification.

Animals.

I could do that.

I folded the flyer and put it into my pocket, then headed out to see Marcus, only somehow unbidden, I took a left and ended up by the community board, seeing Alex on a stepstool reaching the top of the board and moving labels around. He hadn’t heard me approach, and when I cleared my throat, he stumbled and nearly fell. I gripped his arm, but he’d already stabilized himself, so I released my hold. He stared

at me.

I stared back.

Then, I checked the board under placements and scanned what else was there. Nothing spoke to me like the animal sanctuary. After all this time, he'd remembered that about me. Then, I scanned a little further and saw the ad for a visiting barber, with a note that all I had to do was head to the kitchen on Tuesday at ten and I could get a haircut and maybe...

I tugged my beard, which was still unruly despite me hacking at it. Harper had mentioned visiting soon, and maybe I needed to get the beard and hair fixed before seeing my daughter. I didn't want to scare her—I was determined to bedadagain.

"I like the beard," Alex murmured.

I side-eyed him. Alex had stubble, but it didn't look styled and deliberate, a little patchy. I guess I'd gotten all the beard-growing mojo.

"Thank you." What else could I say? He'd complimented me, and in polite society, a man says thank you in return.

"How are the hands?" he asked.

I turned my palm up so he could see. There were faint pink patches now, but no infection, and my skin had become soft from the shower products. I felt soft. As if being here was scraping away my hard layers. That was a scary thought—what if everything got stripped and left my heart exposed?

"They're good," I said.

“You’re wrong, you know,” he said after another long pause.

“About what?”

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“The friend thing. I need friends. I’m sorry?—”

“Jazz! Hey, you ready?” Marcus interrupted, staring at Alex, me, and back again.

“Yeah, yeah, sure.”

I followed Marcus into the medical room, and when the door shut on Alex outside, I felt the restriction in my breathing ease.

I miss him being my friend, but it was selfish to want him back.

I miss Alex.

Chapter Twelve

Alex

Marcus found me in the yard, a place I often retreated to when the walls of Guardian Hall felt too close. The cold air meant wrapping up, but at least I could breathe out here. He approached quietly, a cup of coffee in hand, and settled on the bench in the far corner under our cherry tree's stark, empty branches. Come spring, it would be white with blossom, but it was icy with snow right now.

“Jazz’s hands are doing well, his chest too,” he said but didn’t expand. I smiled at him in gratitude for that little piece of information. “You’ve been dangerously quiet,” he observed as he handed me the coffee. His voice was soft and cautious, as if he were navigating a minefield, which he was. We’d met in rehab, me just about to

leave, him just about to start, my poison drink and drugs, his... well, everything really. He'd been wilder than I was, which was saying something.

And now look at us, a registered counselor and a fully-fledged doctor.

I accepted the cup, the warmth seeping into my hands and easing the chill that had settled in my heart since the group meeting and then, the flyer incident, when I'd started to say how sorry I was.

"I guess I am quiet, but not dangerously. I went to a meeting a couple of nights ago, and I called Abbie, and we talked. I'm good." I finally glanced up. "You?"

"Good," he said and tapped his temple, same as he always did when he recalled his early twenties. He'd never shared things with me, and hell, things had happened to me I'd never shared with him.

Maybe that was stupid because he was my best friend, and after what we'd been through together, he wouldn't judge me.

Or maybe he would, and then, I'd lose the only person I had in my life.

Well, the only person who knew the real me, anyway.

"You ready to talk to me? Tell me what happened with Jazz?" he asked, his tone gentle, giving me the out if I needed it.

I winced. I knew that was why he was out here, but part of me thought maybe he'd just sit quietly, and I could drink my coffee in silence. The stupid part, probably, was the part that refused to see how I was closing down on him.

"I'm asking as a friend, and someone who cares about you, and worries about Jazz."

“I told you; it’s his story to tell.”

“No. You see, I want to know your story first. Because you need a friend, and I’m your best friend, and... jeez... I want to help.”

The words hung in the air between us, and I stared into the dark liquid in my cup, thinking about the past I’d tried to outrun, the decisions that haunted me, a love lost in greed, and the crossfire of familial expectations and all the shit that came with it.

Taking a deep breath, I realized the silence wasn’t doing any good, that perhaps sharing the burden might lighten it. “I get caught up in Jazz,” I began, the words feeling foreign, yet necessary. “And...everything that happened before. My dad, the inheritance, the decisions I made.”

“A before-and-after thing,” Marcus summarized.

I nodded, and he kept his gaze steady, encouraging me to continue.

Reflecting on the dividing line in my life, the before and after, always came down to the day my father discovered I was gay and planning not just to forgo college, but to elope with the scholarship boy from school I’d fallen in love with—Jasper.

Jazz.

“Jazz always had dreams of becoming a soldier.” Wait. Was it right to tell Marcus that? I’d said it was Jazz’s story to tell, and then, I’d blurted out crap about Jazz’s dreams. I bit the inside of my lip. “I mean...”

“It’s part of your story,” Marcus encouraged.

“You think?”

“I know.”

I paused for a moment. “There was no way teenage me was letting him do that. And jeez, listen to me say that, as if I had a right to tell him what to do with his life. I was in love with him; therefore, I told myself I could decide for him.” I huffed a self-deprecating laugh. “I was so fucked up, self-righteous, and hell, I thought I’d dissuaded him, promising him a shared future funded by the enormous inheritance I was due when I turned twenty-one.”

“A lot of money,” Marcus murmured, and yeah, it had been. Millions. More than enough to buy this property, set up Guardian Hall, plus five more places like it in other cities. Back then, though, I only wanted a mansion, foreign travel, flashy cars, and a world of excess.

“I had these plans for Jazz and me to rule the world together, but what I was really doing was squashing his dreams and deciding his life for him. I never saw that.”

“How old were you?”

“Eighteen.”

“We all have the worst dreams at that age. I wanted to be a pop star.”

I snorted a laugh. “I’ve heard you sing, and no offense, but you make caterwauling

cats sound good.”

“Ouch,” he faked shock, and we smiled at each other—somehow, he was making this easy for me. “So, what happened next?”

“I fucked up. I made all these plans, told my dad in one petulant shouting match that not only was I skipping college, because I had a ton of money and needed no more school, but also that I was gay and marrying Jazz, and I told him there was nothing he could do. Out of nowhere, my father started throwing papers at me, and I was completely caught off guard when I realized they were legal documents being prepared that could change my inheritance age to thirty. Not only that, but my monthly allowance was almost eliminated. The condition for him not to file was that I ended my involvement with Jazz and focused on heading to college.”.

“Okay?”

“That was my money, and I was pissed, but when faced with this ultimatum, I made a decision I’m so fucking ashamed of. You have to understand that, at eighteen, forever seemed an expanse, stretching out eighty years or more. Going to college until my money came in and choosing to pretend my love for Jazz didn’t exist, felt like a solution, but I couldn’t tell Jazz because Dad threatened to get him thrown out of the school, block all college applications. He even implied that he’d get Jazz hurt and told me how easy it was to claim a hate crime killed someone.”

Marcus inhaled sharply. “Your dad threatened Jazz?”

“You know my dad.”

“Unfortunately.” Most of the US knew the asshole who’d, five years ago, murdered a young co-ed in a sex game gone wrong, complete with heroin and two other guys in the same room. His downfall had been the biggest firework—unexpected,

explosive—destroying his life and his precious family name, and bankrupting him almost overnight. But he'd hurt people in the past, a hateful, bigoted man who deserved what karma threw at him.

“He said he had people who would change Jazz's life, and by change, I didn't know what he meant, but it was paralyzing.” I sipped some coffee just to give myself time to think—it wasn't so hot anymore—still, it was caffeine, and I needed it.

“So, he threatens Jazz, threatens your inheritance, you send Jazz away, and you end up in college.”

“I barely lasted a semester.” The pain of those days was still fresh. “Jazz wouldn't speak to me. I assumed he was just being an asshole, but it wasn't like I could tell him to wait, or sneak shit past my dad or my security team.” I paused because that was a lie, and Marcus didn't deserve me lying to him. “I could have done those things, but I didn't, because my seventy--million--dollar trust fund was out of reach, and I wanted that money so bad. I fucked up. I got into drugs, drinking. I messed up college. I nearly OD'd, ending up in rehab three times. The last time was when I met you.”

We exchanged glances—a lot of time had passed since the two of us had first met. So much time, trauma, and life experience. I reached over and gripped his hand, squeezing it through his gloves.

He smiled at me and leaned in, his question gentle, but probing. “And Jazz joined the Army?”

“Yeah,” I sighed, the word heavy with regret. “He did. And I saw photos of him with another guy. He had someone new, and I didn't even question the image. I just... believed the intel because it was easier than to face what I'd done.”

“And these photos came from your dad’s security team, right?” Marcus asked, piecing together the story I’d seldom shared.

I nodded, bitterness creeping into my tone. “Took me too long to realize they’d been lying to me all along because I’d lost my ability to think so deep in using narcotics and booze.”

Marcus’s gaze was sympathetic, understanding. “So, when you got your head straight after that last rehab, did you still think you had time to fix things?”

“I did,” I admitted, feeling naïve. “I thought I’d have forever to fix everything, but the two letters I sent, and the emails, he just replied with brief messages asking me to leave him alone. And by the time I realized my mistakes, everything had changed. I was twenty-one, my grandparents’ money was mine, and it was too late for Jazz and me.”

Marcus was silent for a moment, digesting the story.

“I can’t find the words, and now isn’t the right time to tell him this—he’s in a terrible place, and even if there has been a miracle at work for him to end up here, it’s not my place to wreck his world.”

“As his doctor, hold off. As your friend... If he carried anything for you, long-lost love or whatever, then hell, you both lost a lot because of it.”

I breathed in frozen air and coughed. “I made him leave. If it wasn’t for me sending him away, telling him I didn’t love him, all for money, then he might not have enlisted, and then...”

Page 25

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“You said he wanted to enlist. Also, what you did wasn’t all for money, my friend,” Marcus said sadly. “There were the threats, as well. So yeah, you fucked up, but you’ve owned up to your fuck-ups in the past, and you know that dwelling on guilt changes nothing.”

“I know.”

“Still, as Jazz’s doctor, don’t dump this on him now. Yeah?”

“Okay.”

“One thing though, Alex?”

“Yeah?”

“Start smiling again, yeah? You’re scaring the staff.”

Chapter Thirteen

JAZZ

I could feel the knots of apprehension tying themselves tighter in my stomach. It had been too long since I’d last had a proper haircut or beard trim, and the thought of shedding the physical markers of the hardest years of my life felt more intimate than I’d expected.

It scared me.

That's so fucking stupid.

Alex came in, all enthusiasm and smiles, and greeted the barber with a friendly nod before turning to all of us. I was a ball of nerves, sitting at the end of the table waiting my turn, worse now that Alex was here as well. He looked good—smart jeans, a jersey for some team I didn't know, and his hair wasn't quite as neat as usual, as if he'd been wearing a hat and shoved his hands through it. He was still beautiful.

He always would be.

"Wha'dya think?" Daniel asked and struck a pose, pointing at his new hairstyle. "Sexy-ass or what!"

Alex snorted a laugh. "Looking good, Dan."

"Coulda been a model." Daniel had decided to lose the beard, go for a short haircut, and preened. It made me smile, and thenerves slipped a little. It was the kind of banter that used to be the soundtrack of my days in the Army, back before life had become a solo mission.

As I waited my turn, I watched others get snipped and shaved, their faces emerging from beneath overgrown hair like sculptures from stone. Daniel laughed along with Alex as he made coffees and piled cookies onto plates. I stayed silent. Every so often, I would check out what Alex was doing, and a couple of times, I caught him watching me.

I wonder what he thinks when he looks at me?

Probably, that he was lucky he hadn't tied himself to me, given the shell of a man that remained.

The second time, he smiled at me cautiously; I smiled back, but it was one of those fake you-caught-me-looking smiles, and I knew the moment he realized because his joy dimmed.

Great. Now I'm fucking this up as well.

Then, it was my turn, and I didn't know if I wanted anyone to see. A couple of the guys had already left. Alex and Daniel lingered, chatting about baseball of all things, while Daniel pointed to Alex's jersey. When the barber—a volunteer named Dave—draped a cape over my shoulders, I felt edgy and off-center. As his comb ran through my hair, the sensation was so foreign that my muscles tensed.

"I'm Dave," he introduced himself the same way he had to each of the others, waiting for me to reply.

I cleared my throat, swallowing the rank and last name on the tip of my tongue. "Jazz."

"Cool name."

Should I say thank you? Instead, I closed my eyes because I didn't want to see myself in the mirror, and if my eyes were closed, then I might be able to ignore Alex.

"Just a tidy-up?"

"Please."

"How long's it been since you had a cut?" Dave asked, his scissors working in a rhythm that was soothing in its own right.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“Too long,” I murmured, opening my eyes briefly and catching sight of myself in the large mirror propped up in front of me. The man staring back was halfway between a stranger and the person I remembered from before. I felt relief and anxiety as Dave tidied my beard, shaping it rather than taking it off. The beard was a part of me, a part of my identity I wasn’t ready to let go of just yet.

It gave me somewhere to hide.

“Do you want me to take the beard off completely?” Dave’s question was casual, but it struck a chord deep within me.

“No,” I said firmer than I intended, then deflated. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap.”Fucking idiot.

“It’s all good, man,” Dave said with a smile. “One step at a time.”

“Can you just make it less... yeah... just less.”

He nodded without judgment and went back to work. I could feel the weight of my hair, the length of my beard, being lifted away, and glancing in the mirror—with my hair now short and my beard neater, but still full—I saw the ghost of the man I used to be. The transformation wasn’t complete—I was still very much a work in progress—but in that moment, with the sight of my dark brown hair in curls on the cape, I felt lighter.

As Dave dusted off my shoulders and removed the cape, I offered him a genuine, if shaky, “Thank you.”

“You look good, Jazz,” Alex murmured as he had to Daniel. Then, he gestured to the coffee and cookies. For a moment, I wanted to smile, to hear him banter with me, but after something as simple as a haircut, I felt raw, as though the shears had stripped away more than just hair. I knew I was different, and I wasn’t sure I was ready for Alex to see me this way and analyze the man I’d become.

When he’d walked in, all energy and easy chatting, my stomach had knotted, and it was still so tight I felt nauseous. I could feel his eyes on me, and I wanted nothing more than to disappear into the shadows. It wasn’t only the haircut; it was the fear of what he might see when hereallylooked at me. Would he find traces of the boy he’d fallen out of love with?

Would his expression fill with regret?

Or would there be relief that he was free of me?

I grabbed a couple of cookies and left.

I didn’t want Alex looking at me at all, not yet.

The financial meetinghad been a necessary evil, one of those things Marcus insisted I attend. Carl, the veterans’ benefits liaison, sat across from me in a small office that felt too warm, too enclosed.

I didn’t want to be there. I didn’t need anyone’s charity.

“So, all you need to do is sign, and we can apply for?—”

“I enlisted of my own free will,” I interrupted. “No one owes me anything for doing my job,” I said, steady but firm.

Carl had nodded, understanding but insistent. “It’s not about owing you, Jazz. It’s about what you’re entitled to, benefits that are there to support you,” he explained, laying out the documents covering the entire desk.

We reviewed it all—pensions, disability, health benefits, and educational opportunities. Numbers and legal jargon swirled around me like a foreign language, but I nodded along, signing where he told me to sign, just to get him to stop talking, and still feeling as if I were grasping at straws.

When it was over, I was assured that I’d have some financial stability, a thought that should’ve comforted me, but instead, just added to the weight on my shoulders. I nodded, and left the documents folded in an envelope I didn’t want to open.

Next up was the therapist. Her office was a sharp contrast to Carl’s mess of computers and paperwork—it was open, with a large window and a soothing view of the garden. We’d had a few sessions, and even though her name was Dr. Whitman, she insisted on just “Elena.”

When I sat down, without thinking, I slipped off my jacket.

“That’s the first time you’ve taken off your jacket in one of our chats,” Elena observed, her tone soft, inviting me to examine the action.

Her observation caught me off guard. I gave a half-shrug because analyzing why I was losing all the layers I’d dressed in on my first day wasn’t something I’d considered. “I’m hot.”

She didn’t push but made a note, her pen scratching on her pad. Her eyes, kind and probing, suggested she saw more than I was willing to admit. It’s probably some observation about me removing layers of safety.

Therapy was like dancing on the knife's edge—a careful balancing act between saying too much and not saying enough. We talked about my time in service, about the reasons I'd ended up on the streets. Each word felt like it was being pulled from deep within, and I wondered if I was progressing or just circling the drain.

“... and then Carl said I'd have enough money to give me a fresh start, maybe student loans.” I scrubbed at my eyes.

“And that made you feel...?”

“All I wanted to do was leave the room.”

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

She nodded. “Why?”

“I don’t know. No, I do. I don’t want handouts.”

“Do you feel as if you’re not owed anything?” she said. “You fought for your country, Jazz.”

Not this shit again. “I wanted to be a soldier. It’s what my dad was, my grandad. It was my choice.”

“I understand that, but don’t you think you owe it to yourself to accept help now?”

That question lodged itself deep in my chest, a bitter pill I wasn’t ready to swallow. Owe it to myself? I wasn’t even sure what I deserved anymore, let alone what I was owed. I’d gone to be a hero but had become evil and twisted. That was on me. I’d grown to care about friends and the local families too much, left myself open to being vulnerable. I’d done this damage to myself.

Not that Elena would agree with that.

But she wasn’t me.

As the session wound down, I was exhausted and drained in a way that was all too familiar. I left her office feeling as if I’d left something important behind, some piece of the wall I’d built around myself.

Was that the point?

Back in my room, with money worries hurting, the therapy session weighing on my mind, and my first visit to the animal sanctuary looming, it was too much again. I lay back on my bed, the envelope with my financial documents resting unopened on the nightstand, and closed my eyes, everything wrong as I rested—my hair flatter, my beard softer, not long on my neck. In the quiet, I could almost hear my heart beating, a steady rhythm reminding me I was alive, that I had survived. My skin prickled with anxiety as I pushed through this one minute at a time.

Do I deserve for life to get easier?

When I joined a couple of the others in the foyer by the front door, Alex was there, checking something off on a clipboard, and my heart sunk. Not because Alex was there, but because it wasn't just me going for this internship with the animals. Why would the shelter choose me over Raj and Daniel who seemed further down the path to being themselves than I was?

Raj and Daniel were chatting, and I hovered. Then, Alex led the three of us out of the front door and to the left. I stopped dead in my tracks. The air outside hit differently, carrying with it the scents and sounds of a city that hadn't stopped moving even when I had. My heart hammered, and for a moment, I was lost.

I could remember the last time I stood across the street, watching this place from a distance, trying to muster the courage to step inside. How long ago was that? Days? Weeks? Time had become a blur, and the world outside seemed larger and more intimidating. I felt dizzy.

Someone touched my arm.

Alex.

The familiar touch, the way he curled his fingers into my jacket, his eyes bright with

emotion, made me want to bury my face in his neck and hide. Would he smell the same? Would he taste the same? Would he hold me when I cried and never judge me? I should go back. I should run. It wasn't safe here.

There was too much hope, and I didn't want to hope.

"The coffee over there is the best outside of our fancy-ass machine," Alex interrupted my spiraling thoughts. Then, he rambled about coffee and beans and God knows what else. His hand was still on my arm, and I leaned into the touch, aware that Raj and Daniel had stopped walking and were talking as if it didn't matter that I'd turned into a statue in the middle of the sidewalk.

I remembered how, standing on that street, Guardian Hall had seemed an impossible place, but now, I wanted to go back inside.

Where it was safe.

"... so, then Marcus was telling me it was a good investment, and I wasn't going to argue with him. I mean, have you ever tried arguing with him? He's a stubborn ass."

I took a deep breath. I felt the cool air fill my lungs, steadying the tremor in my hands and the flutter in my chest. If I didn't pull myself together, there was no way I'd get to work with the animals.

I wanted that.

Alex released his hold on me, and we continued walking, the city unfolding around us with its myriad paths and destinations. Raj peeled away first, ducking into an electronics store buzzing with neon signs and the latest gadgets.

"Raj works part-time here," Alex explained, and then, Daniel made a beeline for a

squat gray building. “And Daniel started at the library last week.”

“So, wait... they’re not with the animals?” I asked with caution.

“Nope, that’s you,” he said with a smile. Then, it was only us walking side by side in a silence that wasn’t quite comfortable, but not entirely awkward either.

Our steps led us to a gate hidden down a side alley that was adorned with a sign reading Guardian Animal Shelter.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“Fuck,” Alex muttered under his breath and went to a crouch. There, tied to the post outside, was a dog—a mutt that looked as if it had run through a patchwork of breeds and landed on scruffy, brown, and skinny. Alex exhaled a sigh that seemed to carry a mix of resignation and compassion before he held out a hand for the dog to sniff and unhitched the leash. The mutt wagged its tail hesitantly, as if unsure of its fate, but hopeful all the same.

I know the feeling.

“Is this one of the dogs from inside?” I asked, but Alex shook his head.

“Abandoned,” he murmured, “left somewhere safe for us to find. We’re a no-kill shelter, and when people know that...” He didn’t have to finish.

There was a note in his hands, pulled from where it had been stapled to the dog’s collar. The message was simple: the dog had been left for the shelter to take in. I watched as Alex scanned the words.

“His name is Buggy,” he whispered, and the dog’s ears pricked. “Hey, Buggy.” Then, he offered the leash to me, and I took it, taking some time to scratch Buggy’s ears and coo at him. I might have lost communication skills over the past few months, but even I knew how to ask a dog if he was a good boy.

Buggy wagged his tail, then pressed himself against me—the same as Alex had done.

It felt nice.

Together, Buggy and I stepped inside the gate. As soon as the door opened, a cacophony of barks enveloped us. The shelter was alive with noise, and the unmistakable smell of animals filled the air.

A slim woman with a riot of red hair scurried over to us, ignoring Alex and me and crouching instantly, the same as Alex had done before.

“Who is this sweetie?” she asked us.

I waited for Alex to answer, but he didn’t, so I went to a crouch, my muscles aching. “This is Buggy. Someone left him.”

She kissed his head and scratched his ears. “Oh baby,” she murmured, and when Buggy laid down and offered his belly, she petted him until he fell in love with her one rub at a time.

“This is my friend, Abbie,” Alex introduced. “She’s my... friend.”

I caught the hesitation and the repeat of the word friend, which seemed weighed down with other meanings. Was Abbie his partner? Alex had always said he was gay, but maybe he’d found his space as bi. Good for him.

I wasn’t bitter.

“More like I’m his caregiver,” Abbie deadpanned, and Alex fake-growled at her. Then, she stood, wiping her hands on her jeans and offering me a hand to shake. “Hi,” she said with a smile.

“I’m Jazz,” I answered and shook her hand.

Her eyes widened a little, and she glanced at Alex, but then smiled.

“You like dogs, Jazz?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Sure. I mean, yes, I love dogs. I used to have a dog, and... you don’t need to know that.” I tripped over the words.

“You’re hired,” she said with a snap of her fingers.

Hired? Just like that? I glanced at Alex, but he was petting Bugsy. “Thank you.”

“Four hours a day, five days a week, longer if you want it, as and when it fits in with the Guardian program. There’s an hourly wage, it’s not much, but Carl can explain all that as to how it fits in with benefits.”

“I want to earn my own money,” I blurted, catching Alex staring at me and feeling ashamed at the anger. “Thank you,” I said again.

“Welcome to Guardian Shelter,” Abbie said and grinned. “You want to help me get Bugsy settled?”

“Yes, please,” I said, and this spark of joy lit inside me. It was a tiny thing, but it was there.

Chapter Fourteen

Alex

The shelter received most of its funding from the Guardian coffers—what remained of my inheritance—but after the whole my-family-hates-me legal mess cost me nearly everything I had left; I didn’t have an endless amount of money anymore. So, we raised the rest for this satellite to Guardian Hall through fundraising. The shelter was my baby and, although it was rare for me to step away from the administrative side of

Guardian Hall, to immerse myself in the hands-on work at the shelter, when I did, it was the best kind of day.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

Something about being with the animals brought me peace. Each dog, cat, bird, or occasional rabbit that came through the doors carried a story. Those animals had faced abandonment, hardship, and, sometimes, abuse. They were survivors—much like the veterans we tried to help at Guardian Hall.

“... we’ve had so many success stories, seeing an animal go from scared and skittish, to loving and loved in their new forever home,” Abbie explained as she led Buggy over to what we called the welcome room. Like the one Jazz had started in at GuardianHall, this welcome room was a safe place for a new arrival, although this one came with worn blankets, squeaky toys, tennis balls, and dark corners for the animals to hide in. Buggy wasn’t happy about going inside, but Jazz went past him, then sat on the floor next to the blankets and held out a hand.

“Come on, Buggy, come say hi,” he murmured.

My heart expanded at the sound of his soft but deep voice. He’d always been a gentle soul, great with animals, and not a typical soldier type, despite the weight of parental expectations. I wanted to see my gentle former friend move back into the world unharmed.

I was desperate to see him safe.

Buggy whined, all nervous energy, a small, wiry mutt with a gaze that darted around as if expecting the world to collapse at any moment. His coat was a patchwork of browns and blacks, scruffy but clean, suggesting a life that had had the comforts of a loving home. But trust was not a concept he was familiar with as he tugged against the leash. The welcome room might as well have been a minefield in his eyes.

Jazz seemed to understand Bugsy's hesitance, not making any sudden movements that might spook the already terrified dog,. Abbie cursed under her breath and pulled out a vibrating cell, and Bugsy cowered.

"I need to take this call," she whispered, and I waved her away. Fuck—Abbie would leave me in the shit here. She knew all about Jazz and what he meant to me and how I'd fucked everything up—hell; she was my freaking sponsor, and she knew all my deep dark secrets alongside saving my life.

"No worries, I've got this." I haven't got this at all.

Jazz spoke in low, soothing tones, words that were more about the calm they conveyed than any actual meaning. Bugsy, for his part, stayed just out of reach, his body language torn between curiosity and fear.

I watched as Jazz extended his hand a little further, palm up and open, an offering of peace and friendship to the little dog. Bugsy eyed it warily, inching closer before retreating again—a dance of uncertainty. Finally, he took a tentative step forward, then another, until he was close enough for Jazz to stroke his head again. It was a minor victory, but a significant one. Jazz's face lit up with a smile, a genuine expression of joy that I'd missed, and the ghost of the young man I'd known and loved was sitting in front of me.

So strong, his skin soft, healthy, his hair neat, his expression calmer for the first time since he'd arrived.

And the smile? That was everything.

"What happens to Bugsy now?" Jazz asked me.

I cleared my throat. "First, we'll try to track down who left him. Sometimes, we get

lucky, if he's chipped; and sometimes, we could put some money in place for the family if they left him with us because they were struggling somehow. Then, if that fails, we'll find him a new home."

He nodded, then crooned, "Come on, Bugsy, let's be friends." One moment at a time, he coaxed Bugsy into the welcome room, encouraging him with soft words and gentle gestures until the dog crossed the threshold. Once inside, Bugsy's transformation was remarkable. Though still nervous, he explored a little, sniffing at the edge of the blankets and nosing at toys scattered around the room, but it wasn't long before he curled up next to Jazz, his head finding a resting place in Jazz's lap.

"Everything okay?" I asked Abbie as she came back to my side, not liking the frown she was wearing.

Jazz glanced up at us, his gaze flicking to me, but then focusing on Abbie.

"Normally, I'd do the orientation," Abbie said, then sighed with great drama as she wagged her phone, "but I can't today."

Jazz's smile vanished, and he quickly stared down at Bugsy, his shoulders dropping a little.

"What's up?" I asked for clarification.

"I've finally pinned down Joseph's son, Levi, to visit String Bean and the pups, and he's reluctantly agreed to be here in thirty." She rolled her eyes. "Probably too busy being a concierge veterinarian, fixing designer dogs and bowing to their rich owners too much to actually care about volunteer work." Then, she pressed a hand to my arm and looked stricken. "I wouldn't ask, but..." She inclined her head at Jazz. "Can you do the orientation while I charm this asshole into not charging us the earth?" I understood why she was asking. After all, we'd lost Joseph when he retired and, so

far, his son was reluctant to get involved. Abbie's "charm" was a tactful way of saying we needed to secure the best for our animals without straining our always-tight budget. She glanced at Jazz, then back at me and bit her lip. "Or we could do another day."

"Sure," Jazz said immediately, but when he tried to stand, Bugsy burrowed deeper and whined.

"I can't," I blurted. "I mean, Jazz might not want me to do it."

"I'm okay," Jazz said after a pause.

"Are you sure?" I tried to gauge his reaction, giving him an out. After all, he'd insisted Marcus be his contact back at the Hall. He avoided talking to me and told me outright that he didn't want to be friends.

He paused, a trace of indecision in him. He only met my eyes again after a moment that stretched out longer than I'd expected.

"I'm sure," he said, and it seemed as if he was giving more than just his assent for me leading the orientation. There was a hint of connection there, a silent agreement he would be okay with me in his space.

"Thanks, Alex. I appreciate it," Abbie said. "So Jazz, you'll be in expert hands with Alex, and I'll be back as soon as I can."

I met her gaze, and we had a silent conversation that ended with me sighing and her throwing me a half-smile.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“We’ll talk later,” I said. At the AA meeting, six at the church down the street, where I’ll face the end of yet another day as a recovering addict.

“After work,” she agreed. I’ll be there to listen.

As she moved away to do what she was good at, negotiating and networking with the vet, I couldn’t help but steal a glance back at Jazz. He was still petting Buggy, but this time when he looked up, he met my gaze.

“Where to start?” I began. “Uhm... so that is the front office.” I pointed back at the first room we’d come into, and realized I was blocking his view and, also, acting like an idiot hovering in the hallway. I went into the room, sitting cross-legged on the edge of the blankets, my back to the wall. Buggy lifted his snout and sniffed the air, flopped to his side for water, still mostly resting on Jazz, then he stretched and turned twice on the blankets, curling into a tight ball, pressed up to Jazz’s side. “We run adoption drives, work on finances, organize... everything. It all happens in there.”

He peered past me at the small room with its desk and two chairs. The one at Guardian Hall was better. This space was the bare minimum, but it worked for Abbie and the crew of volunteers she ran.

“Okay.”

What next? I’d sat through a ton of these orientations, yet somehow, everything escaped me.

“So, I said we’re a no-kill shelter, and we will only euthanize on the advice of an

expert, and only when we've tried everything we can, and only if the animal is suffering. We re-home puppies right through to senior dogs who may only have a few weeks left. We have cats, kittens, rabbits, and even had a box full of hamsters left outside last summer."

"A menagerie," Jazz murmured, as he stroked Bugsy.

"We don't turn away any animal in need, and this place is a vital part of the Guardian Hall rehab program for as long as we can fund it."

He raised his eyebrows at that. "Seems like someone as rich as you could throw their own money at it, or are you still buying cars and drinking it all away?" He winced as the sarcasm spilled out, and some dark part of me twisted in self-hatred. I deserved that. "Shit," Jazz said, then cleared his throat. "Sorry, I didn't mean... what you do with your life is nothing to do with me."

He was so wrong, sitting there, stoic, shoulders back. I wanted to cradle his beautiful face, press a kiss to his lips, and tell him everything I did had a connection to him, but I didn't have the right to do that.

"Every dollar I have is in this program," I said, remaining calm, focused, and not wanting to cry. Not at all. "I, uhm... I was in rehab... for some time when you were first out there... yeah." Fuck. Words evaded me.

Jazz stared down at Bugsy. For a moment, I thought we would have to call an end to this as soon as it had started. Only, he sighed again and shifted so he leaned on the opposite wall next to a cat climbing tree.

"I'm glad you did that," he offered. "Rehab, I mean." I caught his serious expression when he glanced up. "I'm happy you're alive."

We stared at each other.

“I’m happy you’re alive,” I whispered.

And somewhere deep in my chest, the knot of anxiety eased.

Just a little.

Chapter Fifteen

JAZZ

It had been a month since I’d first walked through the doors of Guardian Hall. The days, sometimes long and filled with hurt, other times filled with small victories like getting Buggy to trust me, blended into one. I hadn’t made any friends here, not like people usually do in life. There was camaraderie, yes, but it was the kind that came with shared spaces and shared silences, not from deep connection.

I felt weird when Raj moved on, with Tom following, but other than that, I was happy in my head, with my emails to Harper, medical chats with Marcus, counseling sessions with Dr. Whitman—Elena—and the odd, stilted conversation with Alex.

Alex and I had circled back into each other’s orbit, but we hadn’t chatted about our past. Instead, we had chosen safer topics like the animals at the sanctuary. It was easier that way, less fraught with the weight of history and the jagged edges of old wounds.

Talking about the animals brought peace, a neutral ground where we could stand without the past looming over us. I looked forward to those conversations, to hearing about the stray dog that had found a forever home or the new litter of kittens just opening their eyes. It was comforting, and it made being around Alex easier.

Or rather it was making it easier for him to be around me.

I saw glimpses of the old Alex in his smile when he talked about a successful adoption or his eyes lighting up when he recounted the recovery of a sick animal.

Yet, despite this tentative ease, I remained guarded, steeling myself against the possibility of slipping back into old patterns. Though our conversations were frequent, they still avoided anything too deep.

I often wondered if I was making any progress at all until Tyler arrived at Guardian Hall.

He'd turned up ten or so days ago. Another soldier, burn scars on his neck and face, so damn young, broken, a shell of a man who, like me, had been trained to survive the worst of human conflicts and who'd lost everything.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

Though he was only twenty-four, the exhaustion and acceptance in his eyes made him seem decades older. Corporal Tyler Mason was how he introduced himself when Alex coaxed him to talk in the group, his voice a hoarse whisper that barely carried across the room. All he added was that Marcus had found him sleeping rough and from his tone, it was clear Tyler hadn't intended to seek help. I guess he'd been out of options, out of strength.

A bit like all of us here.

Tyler remained silent for the most part, walking the hall with a haunted expression as if he was still trying to figure out if he was safe or trapped on another kind of battlefield. I felt drawn to him—like a protective older brother or something. On his second day, he'd emerged from his room—gaunt, his movements measured and slow, as if every step took a concerted effort. He joined us at breakfast, sitting at the far end of the table, his eyes darting around, taking in everyone and everything with a trained alertness that didn't quite ease.

The next morning, he didn't come out of his room.

In fact, it was a week before I saw him again.

I watched him, recognizing the raw edges of survival mode. I understood that feeling, the overwhelming mix of fear and defiance, the internal struggle between wanting to fade into the shadows and the desperate need for human contact, even if it meant sitting in silence in the same room with others. He had dressings on his neck, covering the worst of the burns that had looked so raw when he arrived, but he wasn't well.

He was worn out.

Destroyed.

Seeing Tyler struggle, I felt a pang of empathy mixed with helpless frustration. I wanted to help, to reach out and tell him it would get better, that he wasn't alone. But words weren't enough, and sometimes, they were too much. Even though I wasn't sure I believed everything would ever be okay for any of us.

But if it helped someone else...

So, I glanced at him occasionally, and when our eyes met, I offered a slight nod, an unspoken gesture of solidarity. He nodded back, a flicker of understanding passing between us. Although it wasn't much, it served as a start, a moment of connection.

"You with the dogs today?" Alex asked.

I slipped sideways on my chair and almost fell on my ass. Immediately, he backed off, hands up, as if he'd hurt me, and for the first time since I got here, when I saw the horror at what he'd done in his expression, it didn't hurt. I smiled.

I found it funny.

"I slipped on the chair," I said.

"Shit," Alex muttered.

"You surprised me, is all, and the seat is slippery." I slid my ass to one side to show him before he hyperventilated. We locked eyes, and for a suspended moment, the world seemed to shrink down to only the two of us.

“My bad,” he murmured.

Then, his lips twitched upward in a small, knowing smile that transformed his entire face. It wasn’t the broad, open grins he offered to Abbie when amused by the antics of our four-legged friends; this was more reserved, more intimate—just for me.

In that smile, I glimpsed the Alex I remembered from before everything had gone wrong—reckless, determined to live life to the full, sweet to me, confident with everyone, and free of any shadows. It eased some of the tension that always seemed to coil inside me when I thought about how much we had to navigate to find our footing again. For the first time, I thought perhaps we could rebuild something valuable, not all-consuming teenage love, but something new and adapted to the people we’d become.

If only I could be sure that I wouldn’t self-destruct or hurt him.

“Do you want another coffee?” he asked as he hovered near the chair opposite me. Was he asking to sit with me? Did I want that?

Do you really want to sit with the someone I’ve become? Are you sure? I’m all the broken bits still. How can you want to sit with me? What will I say?

I took a deep breath, willed my heart to stay in my chest, and nodded.

“There’s bagels left if you want one?”

“Okay.”

I was distracted by Tyler leaving the room, head down, hood up. Then, I glanced back at Alex, who’d also tracked Tyler’s departure. His expression was one of concern. Then, Alex looked back at me, and the concern slipped into something like a

smile as he carried over the coffee and the bagel and gestured to the seat. “Can I sit?”

“Sure.”

Now what?

Chapter Sixteen

Alex

I don't know why I asked to sit down. Until that moment, I'd been so good at maintaining my distance, holding myself back from bombarding Jazz with the hundreds of questions swirling in my mind. Where he'd been, what he'd gone through... how he'd survived on the streets.

And as for apologies, I had a list of them stored up, each one crafted over countless sleepless nights. But I knew laying them out between us, hoping for absolution, when none of this was about me, would be futile. No words could ever be enough to bridge the chasm of hurt and betrayal my actions had caused, so I'd tried so hard to be patient and respectful for his space. That was my job.

So, when I asked if I could sit with him, it was with a cautious hope he might be ready to share a little more with me. Despite how desperate I was to get back to the days of being friends, any chance of getting back there wasn't about making grand gestures or declarations. Keeping my eyes on my bagel, I was aware of the space between us—both the physical gap and the emotional one.

Fuck, I hope that one day he needs me to make him smile. I used to make him smile in the most stupid of ways.

"Nice bagel," he said after a pregnant pause, but he hadn't tasted his yet and was slicing it into pieces.

"Fresh," I added, because, yep, that was the level of my conversation.

“I need?—”

“I wanted?—”

We spoke over each other, and I waved for him to go first. Please go first because I don't know what to say.

“I need to talk to you about Harper visiting. I mean, I assume that's okay?”

Oh wow, that was a step. I knew he'd been emailing his daughter, but to have her visiting was something new, and my heart filled with the warm fuzzies. The vulnerability in his eyes suggested he had the usual worries I'd seen from veterans before. Would his family want to see him? With Harper, what would she think of seeing him face to face? How would he handle things? Would they hug?

“Of course, it's okay. We have the family room, and procedures are in place to ensure she's safe.” The safe part wasn't only for Harper but for our struggling veterans who wouldn't like strangers in the middle of things. It was why the family room ran on a booking system and had a separate front door from the main building.

Jazz stood abruptly, rigid with an anger that seemed to electrify the air between us. “I would never hurt her.” His eyes flashed with a mix of defiance and pain. Clearly, he thought I was accusing him of being a threat to his daughter, which couldn't be further from the truth.

“No, Jazz, that's not—” I started, my words tripping over themselves in my haste to correct the misunderstanding.

He cut me off, his voice low and fierce. “You think I'm so fucked up and out of control that I would hurt my daughter?” His accusation stung, a sharp reminder of how delicate our newfound rapport was, how easily it could fracture under the weight

of past grievances and misunderstood intentions.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady the tremor in my voice and find the right words to bridge the gap widening between us. “No, Jazz, that’s not what I meant. I’m sorry if it came across that way. I just wanted to ensure you were aware of the procedures we have in place. It’s standard for everyone.” The tension in Jazz’s posture didn’t ease, but he didn’t walk away either, which I took as a sign to continue. “We have safety protocols to protect everyone involved, and no one on the team believes you pose a threat to Harper.”

He deflated. “Your team? You mean, you, the docs, you think I’d hurt her.”

“No! Jesus, it’s protocol, as much for you as any visiting family and friends.”

He winced, and I regretted my reaction; what the hell was I doing?

“I wouldn’t hurt her,” he repeated, his tone more controlled now, the edge of anger dulled as he sought reassurance. “You know that. You know me.” He collapsed back onto the chair, white-knuckling the table.

“Of course, I know,” I said to reassure him. Despite everything life had thrown at him, I still knew him in my heart. “Not one person on the team is worried that a visitor wouldn’t be safe in the family room with you. It’s just that we manage the zone carefully and with respect for our veterans and their families.”

Jazz nodded, and I kept quiet until he released his grip on the table and, at last, lifted a piece of the bagel to his mouth. He chewed, his earlier anger receding into a quiet contemplation.

While watching him, I couldn’t help but think that the fear of reuniting with his daughter must have been overwhelming.

“I overreacted,” he murmured after swallowing, his gaze locking with mine.

“No, I just didn’t explain.”

He grimaced. “I’m an idiot.”

“Same.”

He cautiously smiled at me, then focused on his plate and cut the bagel into even tinier pieces, making his plate a mess of cubes and curves.

“So, what did you want to say?” he asked me after the pause, but he didn’t look up at me.

“When?”

“Just now, when you let me go first.”

“Oh, I wanted to check in with you, is all,” I said.

He frowned, then shrugged. “I’m good, just the Harper thing is intense.”

“I get that.”

Jazz’s voice cracked a little as he continued, the words spilling out with an urgency that was hard to witness. “I worry about her, about whether she will forgive me for not being here. Her mom explained Harper was better off without me, without the toxic behavior—hers and mine—and I agreed Harper needed stability, so I stayed away. I mean... whenever I was stateside, I stayed near them. I tried to be part of Harper’s life, but I missed so much, and I can’t get that time back. I can’t undo me not being there.”

“You have to remember it was Harper who gave you the details for Guardian Hall.”

“Yeah, she did.”

“Then, she must have wanted you to have help and found the right place for you.”

“She’s the best daughter,” he said, his voice soft, pride and affection clear in every word.

“I bet,” I replied, trying to match his tone.

He let out a huff that sounded almost like a laugh. “When I told her I was bi, way back when I talked about you, she just accepted it.”

“You told her about me?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah,” he said with a shrug, his eyes flicking up to meet mine briefly before dropping again. “You were part of my past, and she knows all of me—well, everything apart from the Army stuff now.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. Instead, I focused on the emails, the safer topic that wouldn’t expose the ache I couldn’t fully understand. “See?” I said, forcing a lightness into my voice. “You’ve been emailing, and now she wants to visit. It’s all good.”

He gave me a small, tired smile, but I couldn’t tell if he believed it, then he took a deep, shuddering breath. “I’m trying to piece myself back together to be someone she can be proud of. I want to show her I’m more than what the military made me, that I’m more than the nights I spent away from her.”

I nodded. “You’re doing the work, Jazz. That’s all anyone can ask for. You’re here, you’re fighting, and that means she gets her dad back.”

He glanced up, his eyes meeting mine. “I need her to see that I can be the best dad, and that her mom wasn’t completely right about me.”

“I know,” I reassured him, and for some inexplicable reason, I reached over and placed my hand on his.

Jazz appeared lost in his thoughts, making me uncertain whether he noticed the

comforting touch until his hand tensed beneath mine. For a moment, neither of us moved. The only sound in the room was the distant hum of the refrigerator. Then, gradually, I felt him relax a little, the stiffness giving way to a cautious acceptance of the gesture.

We sat there in silence, with the tiny act of connection hanging between us, and I felt weighed down by all the things I hadn't said to him over the years. When he withdrew his hand, severing the connection, I felt the loss.

The link between brain and mouth disintegrated as I stared into his beautiful eyes, and the desperate apology I'd been holding back fell out of me; it should never have left my thoughts. "I should have put you above everything, not decided things for us, and you wouldn't have left. It's my fault all this happened to you."

Sitting upright in his chair, horrified, he shoved his chair back. "What?"

Fuck, I'd dug the hole and now I kept on digging. "If I'd been more honest with you, told you how I felt, cut myself off from my family and chosen you instead, we could have been together, and you would have stayed with me and?—"

"I was always going to enlist."

"I could have stopped you."

"What? No." His words hung in the air between us and forced me to look up and meet his gaze.

"But I wanted..." I started, my voice faltering as I tried to reconcile his assertion with the narrative that had played over and over in my head for years.

Jazz shook his head, a rueful smile touching his lips. "You thought you could stop me

from making my own choices, from living my life? Jesus, Alex, I loved you with everything a teenager could, but I had a path I was following, and I grew up.”

And unspoken?

I loved you.

But I don't love you anymore.

Chapter Seventeen

JAZZ

I loved you with everything a teenager could, but I had a path I was following, and I grew up.

The words were out before I grasped their weight. It wasn't his fault I'd enlisted. Nothing he could have done would have stopped me from pursuing the soldier's life, a legacy my father and grandfather handed down. It was what I'd always wanted, and for the most part, I'd felt right in that life. That was until I stayed too long, until my mind had become too crowded... until I'd seen too much.

"We both grew up," I added, gesturing around to emphasize his achievements. "I mean, look at what you've accomplished! I always thought you'd end up working for your dad but look at this—how you're helping people!"

Alex winced and dropped his gaze, tapping one finger on the counter. His discomfort was obvious, and I realized I might have been too enthusiastic in my praise. I didn't remember him being so averse to attention, but then again, twenty years is a long time.

"A lot of this is thanks to Marcus," he admitted, his voice quieter. "He found his

purpose quicker than I did when we were in college. I lost my way for a while, but Marcus helped me find it again. He dragged me to my first AA meeting.” He rummaged in his pocket and placed an embossed chip between us, turning it so I could read the engraved message: One day at a time. “I’ve had my relapses, messed up more than once, but now... I’m thirteen years sober.”

Addiction was something I’d seen too often in veterans, and in the people on the streets who either protected me or just needed to forget. I had immense respect for anyone who could battle their demons.

“Congratulations,” I said, feeling proud of him. I recalled the few times I’d visited his place back in school, seeing firsthand the intense expectations laid on him by a family obsessed with wealth. “I’m glad you connected with Marcus. He’s a good man.”

That could have been me. I could have been there for him. I should have been there for him, for my wife, for Harper. I shouldn’t have lost my way.

He laughed—a sound tinged with irony—and flipped the coin over his fingers before gripping it. “Marcus was the boyfriend who helped me see what I could do with all that money I didn’t want.”

Boyfriend? That was news to me.

“Boyfriend?”

“Well, yes and no.” He,” he smiled. “We had a few dates, some kissing, but only that. It didn’t stick, and now, he’s more family than my own parents and siblings. That’s easy, though, considering I don’t see any of them anymore.”

“You don’t?” Part of me felt a twisted satisfaction knowing he’d distanced himself from his toxic family.

“They weren’t interested in a son who didn’t want to be part of the family business. But I had my degree, my trust fund, and I wanted to be useful, to be there for people.”

“You must be proud of yourself,” I murmured, unsure of what else to say.

“Sometimes,” he answered with a snort of laughter. “And other times? Not so much.” When he smiled, it reminded me so much of the Alex I had fallen in love with so long ago, free of worries and burdens. It was dangerous to think about those times, considering we’d both moved on, had both grown up. Still, I smiled back at him.

“I get that,” I admitted. My addiction had been to self-sacrifice and duty and look where that had led me.

“I got your letters,” he blurted out, and I blinked, surprised by the shift in conversation. “I’m sorry I never wrote back, but I was... I was a mess, and then, it felt too late, and we weren’t friends anymore. I’d like us to be friends again.”

I stared at him, stunned. Friendship? After everything? Any friend of mine now would have to deal with my mental health issues, my unemployment, my nightmares—all while I tried to rebuild my broken relationships. No one needed that burden. I realized I’d been silent too long when he stood up, pocketing his chip.

“Anyway, I should go. I know you have sessions today.”

“Wait, Alex?—”

He shook his head, cutting me off. “It’s okay, Jazz. I have a meeting at ten.”

I hurried after him as he walked to the office and sat at the computer I’d used. He was offering me friendship, and I’d just stared at him like an idiot.

I rubbed at my chest, feeling a tight knot of regret. “You okay?” Marcus asked, pausing beside me and glancing over his shoulder at Alex.

“Yeah, just... therapy,” I managed, and hurried up to the second floor for the next part of my day before Marcus could ask any more questions.

In therapy, I wasn’t sure if it was the chip, the words, or the offer of friendship from Alex, but for the first time in one of our sessions, words came easier than I thought. We went through the usual questions about how I’d been feeling lately—okay. How I was eating—enough. Whether I was sleeping—some. And whether the nightmares still woke me. That was a harder question to answer.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“Every night,” I confessed, “do they ever stop?”

“Sometimes,” the therapist replied honestly, but I already knew the answer. The room stayed quiet, except for the clock ticking on the wall, marking the time until I could leave. “Have you done some thinking about your choices?”

During the last session, she asked me to examine my major decisions since leaving the Army and consider whether I would make the same ones again. She wanted me to think how I ended up on the street. Maybe it had been her plan all along, but I got lost in my earlier choices and regrets.

“I went back a little further than after leaving the Army. Is that okay?”

“Of course. This is your time.”

I paused, unsure how to begin. “My choices mean I have a lot of regrets,” I admitted. “I let my military career come between me and my wife, Olivia, and with Harper, our daughter. I wasn’t there when they needed me, not really. It cost me my marriage and time with my daughter.”

The therapist leaned forward, her expression one of understanding. “How long were you married?”

“Isn’t that in my notes?” I joked, but she smiled in encouragement. “Olivia and I got married young,” I explained. The marriage didn’t survive my career, nor did having our daughter keep it together. Loving her was the simple part. Being there for her, consistently and fully, was where I faltered. I missed everything, and each time I

returned home, I found Harper a little taller and Olivia more distant. “We divorced when Harper was eight.”

“Do you still have feelings for your ex-wife?”

I considered the question. “We were friends once and happy before everything fell apart. I respect Olivia immensely, but the love we had... it changed. I was absent too often, and when I was home, part of me was still away. It created a distance I couldn’t bridge when I finally came back for good. She wanted me to stay away from Harper, and she was right to do that because I was so messed up.”

The therapist’s lips thinned, perhaps disagreeing with my harsh self-assessment, but she hadn’t lived my life; she couldn’t know the stress I’d brought to Olivia’s door.

“It sounds like you’re grappling with a lot of what-ifs about your past,” she observed.

I nodded, the what-ifs a constant ache. “Yeah, and it’s not just about my family,” I said, thinking of Alex again.

“Go on,” she encouraged.

“I’ve, um... reconnected with an old friend, someone important from my past, and it’s bringing up a lot of old feelings. Makes me wonder how things could have been if life had been different.”

If Alex and I had stayed friends.

If he’d written back to me.

If being a soldier hadn’t consumed me.

The therapist's gaze was keen. "It's natural to wonder about the roads not taken, especially when you're facing regrets."

I thought about Alex's recent words, how he'd said he wanted to be friends. "I want to be better. For my daughter, for my ex-wife, even for my friend. I want them to see that I'm trying to fight the nightmares, to settle back into real life."

"That's a valuable goal," she replied, jotting something down in her notes. We talked longer about regrets and nightmares until our time was up.

"Can I ask you something before we finish?"

"Of course."

"With my...friend...I was always the strong one out of us, and I can't be that for him this time," I admitted.

"Okay, so do they expect you to be the strong one? Do they know what you've been through?" she asked.

"Some of it. They know I'm broken," I said, and she frowned—I knew she hated when I described myself that way.

"Are they kind to you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Do they reinforce your self-doubt? Do they use the word broken?"

"No, but..." I struggled to explain. "It's complicated."

Page 36

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

“Okay, well, I want you to remember to be kind to yourself in all things.”

“I try.” I really am trying.

As the session ended, I felt a mix of exhaustion and a glimmer of hope. Harper was coming to visit soon, and Alex was right here in the building.

I needed to find Alex.

Resolved, I left the room and headed to track him down. As I walked toward where I last saw him, I was determined. We had a lot to talk about.

Starting with friendship.

Chapter Eighteen

Alex

As I walked into the family space, carrying a basket filled with freshly baked goods, I noticed Jazz standing alone in the middle of the living room, gazing out the window. The family space comprised three distinct areas: a cozy bedroom with soft linens and warm lighting, a small kitchen stocked with snacks and essentials for a comfortable visit, and a spacious seating area where families could relax. The sofas were plush and inviting, arranged around a low coffee table that held a few magazines and books. It felt welcoming, appearing less like a facility and more like a home.

“Carl let me in when we were done with the finance thing I had with him,” Jazz said

as he noticed my surprise at finding him there. His tone was defensive, his posture stiff, as if bracing for a reprimand. “He said it was okay.”

“Of course it’s okay. The room is yours today.”

He slightly relaxed, and I took a moment to observe him. He had presented a neat appearance by trimming his beard shorter than before and tidying up his hair, which gave him amore polished look than I had noticed since his arrival. He wore black pants and a loose pale blue shirt that he kept tugging at. The layers he usually hid under were absent; without them, he appeared younger and more vulnerable.

Yet there was a glimmer of hope in his brown eyes, and somehow, despite the scars and his tense posture, he was more like the boy I’d fallen in love with all those years ago.

The large windows allowed sunlight to stream in, casting long beams across the floor and illuminating Jazz’s face. There was hope in his expression, a cautious smile playing on his lips as he turned to face me.

“I, uh, got this for Harper,” Jazz said, his voice uncertain. He pulled out a small box from his pocket and opened it to reveal a pendant with a bronze-colored sun embedded in it. The craftsmanship was delicate, and the sun motif was cheerful.

“It’s beautiful, Jazz.” I was honest as I admired the gift. “She’ll love it.”

He frowned slightly, and the worry lines returned. “You think? I mean, she’s sixteen now, and maybe it’s too childish. She could hate it. What do I know from letters and emails?”

I stepped closer, placing the basket on the kitchen counter before turning to face him again. “Harper is still your daughter, Jazz. It’s a thoughtful gift, and it shows you

care. That's what matters."

He nodded, though the doubt wasn't completely gone from his face. "I just want today to go well," he murmured, glancing toward the window. The sunlight highlighted the silver threads in his trimmed beard. I had matching gray at my temples, the first sign that forty was closing in fast, but standing here with all the years between us since we were kids, I felt young again.

"You've done everything you can to make sure it does," I reassured him, moving to stand beside him, looking out at the view.

"Yeah." His gaze lingered on the pendant momentarily before he closed the box with a decisive snap. "I hope I don't mess this up."

"You won't," I said with confidence. Turning to him, I saw the man who had faced countless challenges yet still held onto the hope of reconnecting with his daughter. "And whatever happens, we're here for you."

Jazz met my eyes, and for a moment, there was a spark of the old connection, a reminder of all the reasons he had been important to me once, and why he still was. "Thanks, Alex. Really."

God, I wanted to step closer, hug him, and tell him everything would be okay.

I wanted to kiss the fear from his expression.

I wanted to tell him I loved him always and that I wished I'd never given up on us, but I cleared my throat instead.

"Did Marcus give you the full tour?" I asked.

Jazz shrugged and gestured at the space. “Bedroom, kitchen, lounge,” he summarized. “I didn’t need a tour.”

I gestured to the kitchen. “Come with me.”

After a pause, he followed me inside, and I opened drawers and cupboards, showing him snacks and other food items and how the grill sometimes got stuck and needed a push. Then, I mentioned that there were all kinds of toiletries in the bathroom and that the baked goods were fresh, and that was all I could do.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

The room was all set, and Jazz was anxious. I wanted to make him feel better. A memory flickered at the edges of my thoughts, a fragment from a simpler time that seemed both a lifetime ago and just yesterday.

“Hey, Jazz,” I started, catching his attention. He stopped pacing and glanced over, an eyebrow raised in silent question, his hands in fists at his side. “Do you remember that time back inschool when we were fifteen, and we camped out in the forest to watch the meteor shower?”

He blinked at me as if thinking was way too hard right now, but then a slight smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, a spark of nostalgia lighting his eyes. “Yeah, I remember.”

“We were so determined to stay up all night, but we both fell asleep around midnight.”

“Yeah.”

I laughed, the sound bouncing around the bright room. “We did. But not before you scared me half to death, pretending you heard something moving in the bushes.”

Jazz chuckled. “That’s right. You jumped so high I thought you’d levitate.” He paused, his smile widening. “You always were the jumpy one.”

“It’s your fault for telling all those ghost stories as we sat out there,” I shot back, shaking my head in mock disapproval.

“Hey, you were the one who wanted to make it an authentic camping experience, so I was just contributing to the ambiance.”

We both laughed, the tension easing as the shared memory bridged the gap the years had widened. It felt good to remember those moments of uncomplicated friendship, to recall a time when the biggest worry was whether we’d see a shooting star or get spooked by a raccoon. I needed Jazz to remember gentler times, to take away the stress. I missed simpler times.

I missed him.

“You always had a way of making any situation memorable,” I said, the truth of the words more poignant than I’d intended.

Jazz’s expression softened, his earlier apprehension smoothing out into something gentler. “And you were always there, making sure we had everything we needed. Even brought out that old telescope your dad had in the garage, although neither of us could figure out how to set it up properly.”

“I think we spent more time fighting with that telescope than watching the sky,” I admitted with a grin. “Good times, huh?”

“Definitely good times,” Jazz agreed, his gaze drifting back to the window before returning to me. “Makes you remember, doesn’t it? How simple things were back then?”

“It does.” I nodded. “But we’re here now, and that’s what matters. Making fresh memories, right?”

“Right,” Jazz said, cautious hope returning to his features as he glanced at the small box containing the pendant for Harper.

“Speaking of making memories,” I continued, gesturing toward the gift he’d brought, “she’s going to love that. You’re doing great, Jazz.”

He nodded, a determined look crossing his face as he clutched the box tighter. “Thanks, Alex. It means a lot to hear that from you.” He chuckled. “Do you remember the poison ivy the next time we camped, though?”

I scratched my arm at the phantom memory. “Oh god, yeah.”

And that was how it went, and Jazz’s hand unclenched as the conversation took us to a few minutes before Harper arrived.

“What if she doesn’t come?” Jazz asked, and before he could tense up, I gripped his hands and held tight.

“She’ll be here.”

“Will you...” Hehe inhaled. “Could you...”

“Jazz?” I prompted him.

“Will you stay with me until she does? You could meet her if you like?”

That was an easy ask.

“Of course.”

Chapter Nineteen

JAZZ

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:35 am

I fidgeted with my sleeve, tugging it down, then pushing it up, my eyes darting to the clock... Two minutes to go...

“She’ll be here,” Alex reassured me, and I sent him a smile, but my nerves rattled inside me like marbles in a tin can. I wiggled my fingers to stop myself from clenching them into fists and shoving them into my pockets.

Alex noticed my restlessness, the way I couldn’t seem to stand still, and his expression softened. “It’s going to be okay,” he said, his voice gentle, pulling me back from the edge of my worries.

I glanced at him, finding a strange comfort in his familiar presence. “I don’t know how to do this, Alex. What if she doesn’t... What if she’s just coming here to say goodbye or...?”

“What did her emails say?” Alex asked, trying to ground me in reality.

I blinked at him, my mind scrambling before the words from her last email filtered through. “She’s excited to see me. She has a boyfriend. She’s happy I’m here.”

“There you go then.” He stepped closer, his gaze holding mine. “You’re here, Jazz. You’re trying. That’s what matters. Harper knows that. Just allow her to see the dad who loves her so much he’s here, shaking, because he wants everything to be perfect for her.”

His sincere and encouraging words eased some of the tightness in my chest. “I just wish I had your confidence,” I admitted.

Alex chuckled, a sound that echoed around the room. “I have enough for both of us,” he assured me. He bumped my arm gently and leaned in close. “It’s okay,” he murmured so only I could hear. “Breathe, Jazz. You’ve got this.”

“Can I...” My voice trailed off, the request lingering on the tip of my tongue.

“What?” Alex looked at me, ready to help however he could.

“This is stupid, but can I get a hug?” I asked, feeling like a child desperate for reassurance.

He stepped forward confidently, pulling me into his arms. I hesitated for a moment before hugging him back. As my forehead rested against his shoulder, a wave of calm washed over me. I found a sense of home in Alex's arms—a reminder of a past filled with shared dreams and secrets.

We stood there, savoring the peace. My heart beat a steady rhythm, and for those few seconds, I permitted myself to be supported by the person who had known me at my best and worst.

As we pulled back, our eyes met, and there was a pause, a breath where the world seemed to be still. I could see the concern, the care in Alex’s eyes, and something deeper, something neither of us had dared to voice. We were close enough that I could feel his breath, see the slight parting of his lips.

I want to kiss him.

The moment stretched out. We leaned in closer, but the sound of the door handle turning snapped us back to reality. We separated as Harper entered. Her appearance was a jolt, reminding us of where we were and why. The potential moment faded, replaced by the reality of my daughter’s tentative smile as she stepped into the room.

“Hi, Dad,” Harper said, her voice carrying a nervous excitement.

I turned toward her, every ounce of my attention focusing on her, the most important person in my life.

Alex gave me an encouraging nod, a silent promise of support, as I began rebuilding the bridge between my daughter and me. The almost-kiss lingered in the back of my mind, a whisper of what might have been—or might yet be—but for now, all that mattered was the young woman’s hopeful eyes as she waited for her father to make the next move.

Stepping back to allow her space to come in, I managed a small smile, hoping it looked more confident than I felt. “Hi, Harper,” I said, my voice rough with emotion.

She entered, her gaze scanning the room, then landing on me. There was a moment, a heartbeat, where everything seemed to hang in the balance.

Harper stood as tall as me now, slim, with her long blonde hair cascading around her shoulders. The last time I’d seen her, she was fourteen, but now, something magical had happened—she’d grown up. I felt pride, but with that pride was a sharp sting of regret—for all the missed moments and the growing up I hadn’t seen.

It wasn’t too late, I reminded myself. Sixteen wasn’t grown-up. There was still time, still so many moments ahead where I could be there for her, share in her life. Harper was the one who’d suggested this meeting, who’d said she wanted to see me. This was my chance, perhaps my best chance, to correct the years of absence when I’d never fought her mom’s fears, and when I’d thought it was safer to stay away.

I took a deep breath, steadying my nerves. “You’ve grown so much,” I said, my voice thick with emotion. I wanted to hug her, but I didn’t deserve that, and it would be on her. “I’m?—”

Before I could get a word out, she flung herself into my arms so hard that I stumbled back, and only with Alex supporting me did I stay upright. Maybe her reaction meant I wasn't too late? Perhaps she still loved me. She was crying; I know I was crying, and Alex stepped back as if he was leaving.

Something compelled me to ask him to stay, but tucked into my arms, Harper beat me to it.

"I'm Harper Brookes," she said, extending a hand, which Alex shook.

Wait, she'd kept my name? Olivia always threatened that she was changing it, and I never fought that, but somehow, this small thing was huge.

"Alex Richardson. It's nice to meet you," Alex murmured.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“And you two really were friends?” she asked Alex as if that was a shock. “The probably spoiled son of a multi-millionaire and the poor kid from way outside the burbs?”

“We were. We are. Still friends, I mean,” Alex said before I could answer.

She raised her eyebrows. “So, I saw.”

“We were just hugging,” I defended, even though the burst of emotion made me want to admit that I wanted to kiss Alex. She chuckled, and Alex blushed as he smiled.

“I’ll leave you to talk, and if anyone needs me, just press the button on the wall and I’ll come in. Otherwise, the room is yours.” Then, before I could stop him, he’d left. I wanted to call him back, but I wasn’t a coward. Harper took the conversational baton and chatted on about school and her boyfriend—Luke-the-basketball-player—and prom and Christmas and did I remember her cat, Fluffy, from when she was three, and that he was still alive and as grumpy as he was as a kitten.

I went with the flow—inserted words where I needed to, and we made drinks, raided the snack supplies, and then, curled up in opposite corners of the two-person sofa. Only then did she grow silent and watchful, and I could see her studying me, maybe for evidence of injuries or scars, and for how different I must look.

“I missed you, Dad.” Her voice was soft, but each word carried a weight that settled on my shoulders. It was a simple statement, but it resonated with years of distance and all the unspoken things between us. I should have tried harder to be present, to be home, to make my marriage to her mom work.

My mouth went dry, unable to form any words, as I grappled with the overwhelming emotions conveyed by her words and her raw expression. It was the first time I'd heard her call me Dad in a while. I swallowed hard, feeling a lump form in my throat.

"I missed you too, so much," I whispered.

She hesitated before she continued, as if gathering courage. "So, you should know that Mom has a boyfriend."

"Okay."

"So, she's not ready to see you, or... y'know... available."

I blinked at her, not sure what she meant until, suddenly, I did.

"Your mom and I are no longer married. I'll always love her for giving me you, but not in a way that means she has to come see me."

I love someone else.

I need someone else.

"Anyway, Robbie is a good guy, even if he's not you. He doesn't try to be my replacement dad or anything." Her words were careful and measured, as if she was trying not to hurt me, but needed me to understand her world—the world I had missed—had changed. She didn't need to tell me.

I didn't fit into anyone's world now.

I nodded, taking in what she said. "I'm glad your mom found someone nice," I said, and I meant it. Olivia deserved happiness, even if it wasn't with me. But Harper's

distinction—that he wasn’t me—stirred a mixture of regret and hope inside me. I regret not being there, for all the moments and everyday experiences I’d missed with Harper, and I hoped that maybe, just maybe, there was still a place for me in her life, a role I could fill that no one else could. Like her real dad, without taking away from her relationship with her mom’s new partner. She was still talking, and I focused back on her.

“Robbie’s different, you know? He’s kind, and he makes her smile, but there are things... I guess there are just things that make me wish you were there instead. Like when we watch old movies you used to talk about, or when I have school events...” Her voice trailed off, her gaze meeting mine again, searching.

My heart ached with her words, each one a reminder of what I had lost and what I still hoped to reclaim. “I’m here now, Harper. And I’m not going anywhere, I promise,” I said and reached out a hand, which she took. “We’ve lost a lot of time, but I want to be part of your life however you want me to be.”

Harper nodded, a small smile breaking through her earlier solemnity. “I’d like that, Dad. I really would.”

The room felt warmer. She was part of a future I wanted, a chance to be the father she deserved, to be present in all the ways I hadn’t been before.

“I’ve missed a lot, and I’m sorry for that. But I’m here now and so proud of you—more than I can say.”

We grinned at each other, and then, she tugged her hand away, and her smile became a smirk.

“So, Dad, exactly how close were you to kissing Alex McHottie?”

Chapter Twenty

Alex

I sat at a table in the garden, under a tree that had already shed its burden of snow, so it was safe to sit there. The air was crisp and cold, but I'd brought a thermos filled with coffee to keep me warm. Part of me lingered outside because I wanted to see Harper leave. I was the one who'd let Jazz's ex-wife through the gate to park in our small parking lot, so I had a heads-up, and hell, Jazz might need me.

Right?

Nothing to do with the almost-kiss.

The wrong, inappropriate, almost-kiss.

If only I could forget what it was like to kiss Jazz. We were so young, but no hookup or wannabe partner ever matched the same energy, excitement, and sheer possibility of what we experienced before I decided what was best and pushed him away.

I was still processing the fact that I'd leaned into him, sipping my coffee for warmth, when I noticed the door open. Jazz, Harper, and her mom exchanged what seemed like a lastgoodbye. They hugged, even Jazz and his ex, and I saw Jazz's smile and hope flared in my chest. Yet, disappointment took over as our eyes met. Instead of signaling me to come over and talk, he turned and went inside without uttering a single word.

Why would he want to talk to me, anyway?

Moments later, to my surprise, Jazz reappeared. He came out carrying his own thermos of coffee, bundled up against the cold. There was a settled, contented aura about him as he approached, and he was different from how I'd seen in him earlier. His smile relaxed as he hovered opposite me.

"Hey," he greeted, his voice carrying a lightness that hadn't been there before. "Okay if I join you?"

"Of course," I replied, patting the spare seat—Marcus's seat—showing there was room for him at the small table. The garden was quiet, a peaceful setting that seemed

a world away from the emotional intensity of the family room inside. “How did it go?”

Jazz blew on his coffee before taking a sip, his eyes reflecting a serene happiness. “It went... well, better than I expected, honestly. We talked—a lot. And Harper, she...” He paused, searching for the right words. “She’s amazing. She’s grown into such an incredible person, and she still wants me in her life, even after I fucked up.”

“You didn’t fuck up.”

“I stayed away.”

“You were a soldier.”

“I had time off?—”

“You were fighting a war that hooked you and wouldn’t let your mind leave.”

He considered me and gave me a small shrug, barely discernible under the puffiness of his big winter jacket. “I still take blame where it’s due. I could have done more, and I shouldn’t have ended up on the streets.”

“Did you ever feel you had a choice?”

He waited some more, then shook his head, and we fell silent.

“It was a good day,” he said with a smile.

I felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the coffee. “I’m glad, Jazz. I am. You deserved a good day.”

He chuckled, looking around at the snow-dusted garden. “I did, didn’t I? And it was—thanks to you too. Having you here, knowing you were nearby, it helped. More than you might realize.”

The admission stirred something in me: a mix of happiness and a poignant gratitude that we were here, in this moment together. Forget the almost kiss. This was what I was here for... to help.

“I’m just glad I could be here for you.”

We fell into a comfortable silence again, the kind you could only share with someone who understood you. In this same silence, I remembered long, lazy afternoons spent together, my head in his lap, and him reading a book—always reading—which made me feel warm inside.

Jazz filled a plastic cup from his thermos, tendrils of steam rising from it, and he sipped, his gaze lingering on the tree above us. “You know, sitting here after seeing Harper, it feels like I can breathe again.” He met my eyes, his eyes holding a depth of emotion that resonated with my own feelings. “Thanks, Alex. For everything.”

“It’s what friends are for,” I said, the phrase feeling a little too casual for that almost-kiss and all the days that lay between us.

Jazz nodded, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth as he raised his tatty cup in a toast. “Here’s to friends, then,” he said.

“To friends,” I echoed, clinking my cup against his.

Another break of silence settled between us, and all I could think about was that damn near-kiss, and maybe I somehow telegraphed my thoughts, or perhaps I knew Jazz was thinking the same thing, but it wasn’t long before with a determined

expression, he cleared his throat. I shifted, sensing the conversation would delve into territories we'd avoided.

“We, uhm... should talk about before,” Jazz said, his voice hesitant.

I played dumb because I wasn't sure I was ready to confront whatever was lingering beneath the surface of our recent reconnections. “‘Before’?” I echoed, feigning confusion but knowing what he meant.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

Jazz fixed me with a look that told me he wasn't buying my act. "I wanted to kiss you, Alex." His voice was soft but clear. He reached out, his gloved hand touching mine across the table, the contact enough to recall holding his hand and tracing the lines on his palm during the summer days long gone. "I wanted to kiss you," he repeated, his eyes never leaving mine. "I thought that part of me, the part that craves connection outside of being a dad, had died. But I never stopped thinking about you. In all my dark moments, there was always you."

The sincerity in his words and the raw emotion in his gaze left me breathless. In that fleeting moment, words escaped me, leaving me in shock and my heart thumping loudly. It was a revelation, a baring of his soul I hadn't expected, even though part of me had sensed the undercurrents during our almost kiss.

"Jazz..." I started, unsure of what to say. My mind raced with a thousand thoughts, a thousand responses. I'd felt it too, that pull, that desire to bridge the gap between us with a kiss.

"You don't have to say anything right now," Jazz interrupted, his hand retracting, but the intensity in his eyes never wavering. "I just... I needed you to know. Because for so long, I've been hiding from everything, from everyone, including myself. But you, Alex... I couldn't pretend you didn't exist."

I took a deep breath, my gaze drifting to where his hand had touched mine, still feeling the warmth of his touch. "Jazz, I..." I paused, collecting my thoughts. "I felt it too. But maybe it was just the intensity of the moment."

"It wasn't just the moment," Jazz said, a hopeful undertone in his voice. "At least, not

for me.”

The admission hung between us, a truth neither of us could ignore.

I nodded. “Then, let’s not ignore it,” I said, meeting his gaze again. “When you leave the program, maybe we explore this, and see where it goes, with no pressure or expectations. Just get back to being friends outside of this.” I waved at Guardian Hall.

A smile, tentative but real, spread across Jazz’s face. “I’d like that,” he said, his voice warm. “Why?”

“You mean, why do we need to wait?” I asked, already armed with many reasons we needed to both be on solid ground, how he was still recovering, how I was in a position of authority, how he was still working our program, but he shook his head to stop me.

“No, you always said as soon as you inherited your trust fund that you would tour the world, see everything, taste and touch it all. So, why did you stay in Chicago and use your trust fund to create Guardian Hall?”

Because of you. Because I needed to be there for you.

I couldn’t be that honest. The memories flooded back as vividly as if they happened yesterday.

“I was in college, at one of my first AA meetings, newly sober, filled with passion and focus,” I began, the scene unfolding in my mind. “There was this guy, Lonny Dalgleish, a former Army guy. He would come in off the streets for the meeting and sit at the back, observing everyone. He didn’t speak at first, but after a few weeks, he became part of the furniture and shared a little about himself. He’d been sober for six months but had no support since he’d come home; his family was gone, and he had

no siblings.” I cleared my throat, understanding that honesty was important. “It made me think, made me wonder, what would happen if you came home and didn’t have help. If what happened to Lonny happened to you. I knew you were married by then, with a small baby, that you’d built a family, but...” I rubbed my eyes. “You were always in my thoughts. It was always you.”

He said nothing as I echoed the words he’d used, and I paused, the weight of those days pressing down on me.

“I tried hard to help Lonny. Pulled in Marcus too. I wish I could say it was a success story, but maybe we went about it the wrong way. He disappeared one day, and we never tracked him down. But that... that whole situation, it made us realize there was a need, and I had all this money sitting there, and I wanted it to make a difference.” I rolled my eyes at myself. “So, I ditched the family firm and did something else. I was young and idealistic.”

“Strong and brave to go against your family,” he said, and I felt warm.

“It didn’t feel brave. Dad disowned me. Mom called it petty rebellion and claimed she could handle me being gay, but turning my back on my birthright was an embarrassment, and I was so unlike Lance and Clarke, who were ‘a credit to the family’.” I air-quoted that last part.

“What about them? Your brothers, I mean?”

“Married with kids, and I haven’t seen them or my parents since I chose to do my thing.”

“Huh?” His surprise showed. “None of them?”

“Nope.”

“Well, fuck.”

I shrugged. “Whatever. That was years ago, and it’s their loss.”

“True.”

“So, with Lonny, being in AA working on my sobriety, my family disowning me, coming into my inheritance, it was all a wake-up call. I switched my major from business to psychology. Marcus was already training to be a doctor, and the idea of Guardian Hall became a thing between us,” I continued, a mix of pride and reflection in my voice. “It wasn’t just about offering a place to stay. It was about providing a support system, which Lonny and many others lacked. It’s about helping people transition back to civilian life, giving them the necessary tools and support.”

Looking out at the grounds of Guardian Hall, I could see more than just the physical structure; I saw what it represented. “Every day here, I think about what could have been for Lonny. And I work to ensure that others might have a different story to tell, a chance at a better ending.”

This time, he reached over and held my hand as tightly as he could, even though we both wore gloves.

What I wouldn’t give to feel my fingers laced with his.

Skin on skin.

Chapter Twenty-One

JAZZ

We sat outside under the skeletal branches of the old tree, our breaths forming tiny clouds in the icy air. It was a typical Chicago winter day—bitterly cold, with a sharp wind cutting through the layers. After a while, the chill became too much, even with our heavy coats, and we decided to head back indoors through the visitors' space, silently agreeing, underscored by shivers.

As soon as the door shut behind us, sealing out the cold, we began shedding our winter armor. Coats were placed on a chair with a thud, gloves stuffed into pockets. Alex pulled off his beanie, his hair standing in static-charged rebellion. We laughed, a warm sound in the cozy space.

“Man, Chicago winters, huh?” I said, shaking my head as I unwound my scarf. “They never get easier.”

Alex nodded, trying to pat down his hair, his hands making a mess of it. “Every year, I tell myself I’ll get used to it, and it’s a lie every year.”

I reached over, my fingers smoothing down a wayward wisp of his hair. His eyes widened at the contact, a blush creeping up his neck. “There, better,” I said, trying to make light of the moment.

“Thanks,” he murmured, his voice a little unsteady. We stood there for a moment, lost in each other’s eyes, the air charged with an unspoken connection.

Breaking the silence, I admitted, "I wouldn't have survived this winter on the streets, even with the places I used to find beds." The confession hung heavy in the air.

Alex paled, his expression tightening with concern. "Don't even say that, Jazz." He turned away momentarily, then stared back at me, his eyes intense. "Thank God, you found us. I couldn't live in a world without Jasper Brookes."

His words sent a shiver through me that had nothing to do with the cold. It was a stark reminder of how different things could have been, how close I'd come to a much darker path. We went to the kitchen, a haven of warmth after the frosty outside. I noticed a bright pink hair band on the counter, obviously Harper's. I picked it up, rolling the soft elastic between my fingers, a small connection to my daughter, who wanted me in her life.

"It's good to have you here. Really here," Alex said, watching me with the hair band. He pulled two mugs from a cabinet and set them on the counter. "More coffee?"

"Please," I said. The room's warmth enveloped us, and my skin prickled as it adjusted from the biting cold outside. The rich and inviting smell of coffee filled the air.

As Alex busied himself with the coffee maker, I glanced around. Guardian Hall wasn't only a building; it was a lifeline, a place where second chances were born. I thought about the future, Harper, and whatever I had going on with Alex. My heart was full, buoyed by a surge of hope and possibilities stretching before me.

"Here we go," Alex said, handing me a steaming mug. Our fingers brushed briefly, and that same electric charge zipped through me.

"To new beginnings," I said, raising my mug in salute.

"To new beginnings," he echoed, clinking his mug against mine.

We sat at a small table near the window, where the frost had painted delicate patterns on the glass. It was beautiful in a stark, wintry way. I watched Alex sipping his coffee, the steam curling up around his face. He caught me looking and smiled, a real, genuine smile that reached his eyes.

“You know, I'm really glad you're here, Jazz. Not just at Guardian Hall, but here, now, with me.” He sounded sincere.

“Me too, Alex. More than you know,” I replied, feeling a warmth that the chilliest Chicago winter couldn't touch.

We talked longer about everything and nothing—plans for the hall, memories of past winters, the way the city lights looked against the snow. It was easy and comfortable, but I wanted to reach out and pat down that wayward flick of hair again.

As we lingered over the last sips of coffee, Alex glanced at his watch and a shadow crossed his face. “I need to go,” he said, reluctance woven into his voice.

I felt a sudden tug in my chest because I didn't want him to leave. “Can I get another hug before you go?” I asked, trying to keep my tone light.

“Of course.” Alex smiled, standing and opening his arms.

The hug started light and friendly, a comforting gesture. I rested my chin on his shoulder, breathing in his familiar scent. Then, unexpectedly, a rush of warmth surged through me, my body reacting in a way it hadn't in forever. I stiffened, realizing what was happening as Alex began to pull away.

“I'm sorry,” I stammered, embarrassment heating my face.

But instead of stepping back, Alex cradled my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing

my cheeks. “Don’t be,” he whispered, then his lips were on mine.

It was a kiss we had said we’d wait for, a breach of the careful boundaries we’d set. But it was as if all the pent-up emotions, the years of connection, and moments of shared vulnerability poured into that kiss. It was full of love, recognition, and familiarity that made my heart ache with the need for more.

Alex’s kiss deepened, and I responded eagerly, my hands finding their way to his waist, pulling him near. There was no hesitation now, just the overwhelming desire to be as close as possible. When we broke apart, both of us breathless, there was no awkwardness—only a mutual recognition of something undeniable between us.

“This is wrong,” I murmured against his lips. “We said we’d wait.”

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“I know,” Alex breathed, his forehead resting against mine. “But it feels right. It feels like us.”

And it did. The kiss had unlocked something within us, a floodgate of emotions we’d both been guarding. I wanted more, wanted everything this connection promised. The warmth of his body against mine felt like a balm after all the years of coldness and isolation.

“Stay a little longer?” I asked, unwilling to let go.

Alex nodded, a small smile playing on his lips as he took my hand. “For a little while longer.”

As we sat back down, the weight of the world outside seemed less daunting, and I think we could have sat there for the longest time, but a sharp knock was enough to have me shuffling away from him.

Alex rose to answer it, and I followed, curious but still a little dazed from the kiss.

It was Marcus at the door, holding a phone to his ear, his expression serious. “Alarm said you were in here, and I’m sorry to interrupt,” he said, hanging up as we approached. “But Abby’s asking for help at the rescue center. A box has been left there.”

Without hesitation, Alex nodded. “Let’s go,” he said, looking at me and asking if I was coming along.

Together, we pulled on coats and headed to the shelter, walking briskly through the chilly air, the urgency giving us little time to dwell on what had just happened between us. As we arrived at the shelter, Abby greeted us with a grimace, pointing to a small cardboard box under a heat lamp in the corner.

“They were just left here,” she said, her voice tinged with frustration and sadness.

Peering into the box, I saw three kittens nestled among tattered blankets. They were so small, their fur matted, and their eyes barely open. They couldn’t have been more than a month old, their tiny bodies trembling under the artificial warmth of the lamp.

“How can anyone just leave them?” I murmured, the sight tugging at my heartstrings.

Abby shook her head, her eyes sad as she adjusted the lamp to give more warmth. “Some people find that animals just don’t fit into their lives,” she said. Her voice was low, her statement carrying a weight that resonated deeper than just the plight of abandoned pets. “They discard them, thinking it’s easier than making room or changing their lives.”

Her words hit close to home. I knew how it felt to be discarded, like an inconvenient piece of someone else’s life puzzle. But then, Alex’s hand found mine, his grip firm and reassuring. I looked up to meet his eyes, finding sympathy and understanding.

“It’s not the same with you, Jazz,” Alex said as if he’d read my thoughts. “You’re not alone, not anymore. These little ones won’t be either. We’re here for them, and I’m here for you.”

I nodded, squeezing his hand back, grateful for his presence and its silent promise. Together, we helped Abby set up a more permanent spot for the kittens, arranging food and water and discussing their immediate care needs.

And when Alex said he had to return to Guardian Hall, I stayed with the kittens, and he smiled as he left.

And he squeezed my hand.

It was everything.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Alex

When I returned to Guardian Hall, my thoughts were heavy and conflicted. I couldn't help but wish I had stayed longer at the shelter with Jazz. The image of him wrapping the tiny, shivering kittens against his chest, tucking them beneath his shirt nestled in a soft blanket, lingered—a moment of pure tenderness.

Despite the warmth of that memory, I knew it wasn't my role to hover and smother him with my presence. Jazz needed space to grow and thrive on his own terms, not just under my watchful, often overly concerned gaze. So, I walked straight to the office, determined to refocus on my responsibilities.

Marcus was already at work, engrossed in listing supplies needed for the upcoming weeks. He didn't acknowledge me as I entered, allowing me a moment to collect my thoughts and school my features into something resembling professional neutrality.

However, deep down, I knew what I felt was far from professional or neutral. The same love I'd discovered for Jazz in our teenage years still burned bright within me, undimmed by time or distance. It had never truly gone away; it had merely been waiting, patient, and persistent. I daydreamed, envisioning a life where Jazz worked at Guardian Hall, perhaps even alongside me or at the shelter full-time.

But I had to shake those dangerous thoughts from my head. It was Jazz's life, and he needed to be the master of his destiny, not tethered to my silent hopes and unspoken dreams.

Marcus's sharp eyes caught the tail end of my wistful expression. "What's with that look on your face? All sappy and stupid," he teased, but there was a keen edge of insight behind his light words.

Caught off guard, I tried to deflect with humor. "Just thinking about kittens left at the shelter and their chances," I replied, attempting to steer the conversation away from more personal revelations.

"Kittens? Well, shit. Are they doing okay?"

I grinned, thinking of Jazz holding them. "They will be." I sat at the desk and shuffled some papers, but Marcus wasn't easily put off. He leaned back in his chair, pen tapping against the desk, and gave me a knowing look.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“Something is different about you, and I know it's more than just the kittens.”

“There's nothing,” I lied.

Marcus raised a single eyebrow, and he didn't have to call me on my shit because that was enough. We'd worked together for over fifteen years, and he knew me.

Heknewme.

I sighed, realizing there was no hiding the truth, at least not from Marcus. Glancing behind me at the open door, I lowered my tone. “Yeah, it's more,” I admitted, the weight of my feelings making my voice a little heavier. “It's Jazz. I... have all these feelings that never really went away. They just... evolved. All that time lost when I could have...” I scrubbed at my eyes. “I know what you're going to say, that I shouldn't?—”

“About time,” Marcus interrupted.” Then his expression turned thoughtful. “And finally admitting this isn't a bad thing, Alex. But remember...”

“I know. Jazz is healing, and I'm the owner here, and he has to navigate his own path.”

“That. So, make sure you're not building castles in the air, my friend,” Marcus added, a slight smile softening his words.

I nodded, grateful for his advice and concern. “No castles in the air,” I echoed, feeling a mix of resolve and anticipation. Whatever the future held, I knew it was

essential to stay grounded in reality, even as I hoped, perhaps against my better judgment, for a chance to explore the depth of connection Jazz and I seemed destined to revisit.

Like how badly I wanted to kiss him again.

“We have other things to worry about,” Marcus interjected, pulling me back from my tangled thoughts about Jazz.

“Go on,” I said, steeling myself for bad news—stress, concerns over funding, or operational hurdles that were too common in our line of work.

“It's Tyler—Corporal Tyler Mason,” Marcus began, his brows knitting together in concern. “He didn't say a word to anyone yesterday, and straight after breakfast, he returned to his room. There's something off about him that...” His voice trailed off as he searched for the right words, his frown deepening.

“Is this a welfare issue? You think we should intervene?” I asked, already dreading the answer. A welfare check like this meant we could enter someone's room under our duty of care—something we'd only had to resort to a handful of times. It meant we were more than only concerned someone had reached a breaking point and might not come out of it alone.

Marcus sighed, the weight of his role as director apparent in his exhausted demeanor. “Yes, no, I don't know,” he admitted, passing me the intake form. I flicked through the papers. Although I was already familiar with Tyler's case, I made it a point to know everyone and everything at Guardian Hall. I scanned the latest entries for any details I might have missed. The last entry before Marcus's concerns was in my handwriting, stating Tyler had attended group therapy a few days ago, but had remained his usual reserved self. I hadn't noticed anything too out of the ordinary—if silence and anxiety and sadness could be considered ordinary.

“And your medical opinion?” I knew he couldn’t be specific, but the fear in his eyes spoke volumes, worse when he shook his head.

“I tried,” Marcus replied, his voice tinged with frustration. “He wouldn’t let me in, so I talked through the door. He says he’s okay. That’s all he said. He was okay.” Marcus mimicked the flatness of Tyler’s tone. “And I just got this feeling...”

His voice trailed off, but the implication hung in the air. Marcus’s instincts were sharp, honed by years of dealing with similar cases, and our gut feelings had seldom led us astray. There wasn’t enough on paper for me to justify using the master key on Tyler’s door without further cause, but the unease in Marcus’s voice was hard to ignore.

“Maybe I should try talking to him,” I suggested, already standing. “A fresh face, different approach.”

Marcus’s expression was grateful and worried at the same time. “Keep me posted. If he still won’t open up, we might have to consider more direct intervention.”

“Understood,” I affirmed, feeling the responsibility settle on my shoulders. As I headed toward Tyler’s room, my mind raced with possible strategies to reach him, to pierce the isolation he had cocooned himself in. It was delicate, balancing respect for an individual’s privacy with the imperative to ensure their safety. Each step felt heavy, each breath filled with the cold air of apprehension, but I was determined to do whatever I could to help. Tyler, like every individual under our care, wasn’t just a case file to me; he was a person, potentially standing at a precipice. And if I could offer a hand to hold, to pull him back from the edge, then that was what I intended to do.

Only his door was wide open, and immediately, alarm bells rang in my head. As I stepped over the threshold, I paused, taking in the scene before me.

The room was neat, and everything was in precise order. Tyler's bed was made with hospital corners on his sheets, and the blanket was pulled tight enough that it looked like you could bounce a coin off it. There wasn't a single item out of place. On top of it, personal items—probably all he had from his previous life—were arranged in meticulous rows: a photo in a simple frame, a closed book with a bookmark peeking out, and a digital clock displaying the time in bright, unblinking numbers.

But three envelopes, lined up with almost ceremonial precision, were on the bed. One was addressed to Mom and Dad, another to Jessica, and the third to Guardian Hall.

A cold shiver ran down my spine as I processed the implications. Where was Tyler, if not in his room?

Heart pounding, I reached for the envelope addressed to Guardian Hall, hesitating only momentarily before tearing it open. Inside was a short note, the handwriting shaky: I'm sorry. Thank you for trying. The simplicity of the words belied the depth of despair they hinted at, and a wave of shock crashed over me. Had he left? Planned to leave? Was he thinking of...?

I spun on my heel and dashed out of the room, my mind racing with possibilities, all dark. I nearly collided with Marcus in the hallway, who took one look at my face and didn't even need to ask what was wrong.

"He's left a note," I managed to say, thrusting the envelope into his hands. "I think he might be planning to leave, but?—"

"There's no sign on security of him leaving the building. He's here somewhere," Marcus interjected quickly, his voice tense as he scanned the note. Mutual realization dawned. We had to find him, and fast.

We split up, Marcus heading toward the back of the building while I took the front,

each step fueled by urgency. My mind replayed every interaction with Tyler, searching for missed signs or words that could have hinted at his plans. The facility wasn't large, but it felt like a labyrinth as I checked every possible hiding spot.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“Check the roof!” Marcus’s voice crackled over the walkie-talkie, and I changed direction, taking the stairs two at a time up to the rooftop access. The door, which had long been locked and closed off, was hanging from its hinges.

When I stepped onto the roof, the cold hit me like a physical blow, but the sight of Tyler standing dangerously close to the edge made me stop in my tracks. “Tyler!” I shouted, my voice steady despite the pounding of my heart.

He didn't turn. “Just stay there, Alex,” his quiet voice carried in the silence. “Let me think.”

“Okay.”

Tyler was bundled in a heavy coat—would someone wanting to end their life wear something designed to keep out the cold?

“It wouldn't be fair to do this,” Tyler said at last, his voice low and emotionless. “It's not far enough...” He peered over the edge. “And Jesus, what if one of the others sees me fall, and they're triggered?” He groaned. “I'm fucking this up.”

A particularly harsh gust of wind shoved at us, and he wobbled. My heart stopped.

“I'm not here to stop you,” I lied, taking slow, measured steps toward him, “I just want to talk. You left us a note, and we're worried.”

Despair seemed to envelop him like a shroud. We were literally and figuratively on the precipice, and every word and movement counted.

“Maybe I should have done something quieter. A pill for every person I hurt?” He huffed a noise of despair and pressed gloved hands to his temples. “Would that be enough to stop this?”

I moved closer... a step at a time.

“I can help,” I murmured, just loud enough for him to hear.

Tyler turned to face me, sure and steady, without stumbling. His bright blue eyes were bloodshot, tears streaming down his face, tracing lines over his scars, his breathing harsh and ragged.

“You can't take away what I did,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

I stopped a few feet away from him, respecting his space while keeping close enough to react if needed. “I know I can't, Tyler,” I responded, my heart heavy with the pain in his words.

He shook his head, his gaze drifting back toward the skyline, seemingly lost in his own turmoil. “I can't forget their faces. They're with me all the time.”

His raw confession hung between us. I took a deep breath, searching for the right words. “I can't pretend to understand what you've been through, Tyler. But this—this pain and guilt you're carrying—it's a part of you, but it's not all of you. You're here with us because you want to find a way to live. And we're here to help you with that, not judge you or erase your past.”

Tyler's eyes met mine again, the torment clear. “It would be easier if I just stopped,” he whispered with a desperate edge.

“No,” I said, taking a step closer, my voice soft but insistent. “There's still hope,

Tyler. There's still life to be lived. Your mom and dad would be heartbroken, and Jessica..." I assumed this was someone important, a sister, or a girlfriend maybe. I hope I was playing this right.

He stiffened then. "My little sister can't even look at me." His shoulders slumped, the fight seeming to go out of him, his voice breaking.

"Maybe she doesn't know what to say?—"

"She doesn't! And I don't know what to say to her..."

I paused for a moment. "You're not alone," I reassured him, reaching out to place a hand on his shoulder. I felt him tense under my touch before relaxing. I couldn't grab him. He was taller than me, weighed more, and was military-trained, but he was just a kid, and I would try if I had to. "Let's go back inside. We can sit down, talk more, and get you the support you need."

Tyler didn't move for a long time, his gaze fixed on the horizon. Then, he nodded, not looking back at me as he spoke. "I'm sorry."

I tensed. Was he saying sorry to me? Or was it to the ghosts of the people on his conscience, or maybe his family?

Then, he collapsed into my hold, and with relief flooding me, with so much pain in my heart for him, I guided him back to the door. We went inside, where Marcus waited with his medical kit, two steaming hot drinks, and my coat.

"You can't take away what I did," Tyler blurted at Marcus.

"But we can try to help you live with what you saw," Marcus whispered.

I released my hold of Tyler, and he immediately leaned against Marcus, who passed me the coffee cups and his bag. He dropped the coat and hugged Tyler close, and we exchanged glances. I got this, Marcus was telegraphing, and from how Tyler gripped hard, it looked like he did.

So, I forced the door shut, shoved a chair under it, and left them hugging. On my way down, I called the security company who said they'd be with us in ten. We needed an alarm on the door, stat.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

Jazz was coming in the front door when I reached the final step. His jacket pockets were bulging suspiciously, and one furry face peeked over the top of one of them. He held up both hands. “Before you say anything?—”

Consumed with relief that he was still here; I kissed him hard. “Please fight, please don't ever leave.”

“Alex?”

I stumbled back in horror, staring at his confused and then, concerned expression. Before I could second-guess what he was thinking or why I'd kissed him where anyone could see, I went into my office, shut the door, and hoped to hell I hadn't messed up everything.

Chapter Twenty-Three

JAZZ

I stood outside Alex's office, staring at the closed door and gathering my thoughts. The image of Alex's distress lingered in my mind, urging me to act. After a brief moment of staring like an idiot, I pushed the door open with a quick knock, not waiting for permission to enter.

Alex was at his desk, his head buried in his hands. As I entered, he straightened up, trying to mask his emotions. He rubbed his eyes, trying to clear away any sign of distress, but I could still see the remnants of tears sparkling in his eyes.

“The kittens are staying for a while,” I announced, trying to keep my voice steady and give Alex a moment to compose himself further. “I need your help with them.”

I lifted the bag to indicate I had some of what I needed, but not everything. “I’ve got milk and stuff, but I need a box and some blankets to make them a proper bed in my room. Can you help me out?”

Alex nodded; his expression professional as he focused on the task. “Of course,” he replied, “one minute.” He picked up the radio and his phone from his desk and pocketed them both before he ushered me back and locked the door.

His quick acceptance and shift to action eased the tension a little, but I knew we weren’t done talking about whatever had upset him so deeply. Once the kittens were settled, I planned to come back to that. For now, though, getting the kittens comfortable was enough to keep us both occupied.

“Is it okay if I keep them in my room?” I asked, unsure whether this would be allowed.

“Sure, just keep them in the room? I’ll find a box.” He headed to the kitchen. I went to my room and waited until Alex arrived. I closed the door behind him, then placed the sturdy box he’d found on the floor.

“That should be okay,” he murmured, dropping a blanket next to it, which he curled into a temporary nest.

I fished out the three kittens, tiny little things, and placed them in the nest. Then, we used the other blanket to start making their temporary home and set up the litter box. Each day, they would return to the shelter, but each night, they would stay with me so I could feed them, love them, and be their hero—Abby’s words, not mine.

I'm no hero.

“Is it wrong that I named them?”

“No,” Alex said as I picked up the nearest tabby, trying to climb the blanket wall.

“That's Scout.” I gently placed the first, most adventurous kitten into the nest. “Always scouting ahead, you know? Then, there's Mischief,” I continued, pointing to another who was pawing at his brother as soon as his toe beans hit the blanket. “True to his name, always causing trouble.”

“And the third?” Alex asked.

“Rascal,” I chuckled, placing the last kitten next to its siblings. “Seems like he's always up to something sly.”

Alex smiled, watching the kittens settle into the soft blanket. The warmth enveloped them, and they began to calm down. “Good names,” he said.

Together, we arranged the box in a quiet corner of my room, ensuring it was away from any drafts and secluded enough to give them a sense of security. Alex fetched an extra towel and draped it over the side of the box to add more insulation.

As we worked, Alex's desperate emotions seemed to melt away.

“It's strange how something so small can need so much.”

“Yeah,” Alex agreed. “It's a big world out there for such little ones.”

I nodded. “Makes me want to protect them.”

The room was quiet for a moment, and the only sound was soft, steady purring as they explored their new temporary home, then huddled into a kitten pile, Scout yawning.

“Thanks for helping me with this, Alex,” I said, breaking the silence.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

He shrugged, a small smile playing on his lips. “What are friends for, right? Let me know if you need anything else,” Alex offered as he started to head back to the door.

I didn't want him to leave, and I scrambled to stand, my back sore and my leg aching, but desperate to stop him from going.

“Alex, what happened?” I asked, catching him as his hand reached for the door handle.

His shoulders slumped.

He paused and turned to face me, and his eyes were bright with emotion. For a moment, he seemed to struggle with his words, a rarity for someone who always seemed so composed. “I can't really say,” he admitted, his voice thick with emotion. “Some days are just harder than others.”

Before he could object, I stepped closer and hugged him. Initially surprised, he tensed momentarily but then relaxed into the embrace. I could feel his unsteady and uneven breath as he exhaled slowly. We stood in silence, the world narrowing to just the two of us in that small, enclosed space.

As the moment lingered, a new impulse seized me. Pulling back, I looked into his eyes, noticing the vulnerability and weariness. Without thinking, I cradled his face, my thumbs gently stroking his cheeks. Then, almost instinctively, we drew closer and kissed. A surge of unexpected intensity washed over me; everything funneled into this one kiss.

The kiss deepened, and his hands rested on my waist, tugging me closer, anchoring me to him as if he were afraid I might slip away.

The sensations overwhelmed me—the softness of his lips, the faint stubble of his jaw grazing my skin, and the way his sigh mingled with mine. This was coming home—a raw need and a connection neither of us could deny any longer.

Emotions swirled between us, and beneath that, a simmering tide of affection and care rose to the surface.

The world around us seemed to dissolve, leaving nothing but the space we occupied. The hallway sounds, distant voices, and mundane noises of daily life at Guardian Hall faded into a hazy background hum. It was just us, here and now, the urgency of our kiss forging something new and undeniable.

A sense of rightness filled the hollow spaces within me. After all the paths we'd taken, we were meant to find our way to this point and to each other.

The crackle of the radio in Alex's pocket shattered the moment. Marcus's voice, checking in, jolted us back to reality.

Alex stepped back, his eyes wide. The earlier vulnerability was replaced by a look of sudden realization and perhaps regret. "I—I have to go," he stammered, fumbling for the radio. "I need to talk to Marcus."

I nodded, unable to find suitable words for the moment. "I know," I said, watching as he quickly composed himself and hurried out of the room.

I expected him to leave then, but he grasped my hand, and I laced our fingers. Something snapped inside me as all the broken pieces of my heart began to shift and touch as if they wanted to close and heal.

“Can I come back... after...?” he asked.

I glanced back at the kittens in their box. “We'll be waiting.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Alex

I knew Marcus wouldn't have left Tyler, and now it was my job as the resident psychologist to talk to Tyler about what had happened. Finding them both was easy. They were in Tyler's room, sitting on the floor, their backs resting against the side of the bed, and they were close, not touching, but the proximity of Marcus's little finger to Tyler's spoke volumes about the silent support being offered. Marcus glanced up as I entered, his eyes bright with emotion. He got to his feet and nodded at me with a strained smile.

“He might open up more with you,” he whispered before leaving the room. The door clicked behind him, leaving Tyler and me in a bubble of silence.

I took a deep breath and careful steps to sit where Marcus had been, maintaining a respectful distance to give Tyler space, yet close enough to engage.

“Hey,” I began, keeping my voice even and gentle. “Are you okay if I sit here?”

Tyler side-eyed me, then scrubbed at his eyes. “Shit,” he muttered.

“I'm not here to push you, just to understand and help if I can.”

Tyler's gaze flickered toward me, guarded and uncertain. After a long pause, he finally spoke, his voice barely above a whisper. “Was I really going to jump? I... I don't know. It felt like the only way to stop the noise.”

“What kind of noise?” I probed, encouraging him to elaborate while showing that I was there to listen, not to judge.

“It's like... like memories, constant and loud. Every sound, every movement takes me back there,” Tyler explained, his eyes distant as if reliving the moments he described. “I was in a market there, and suddenly there was chaos—screaming, and then, silence. So much silence.”

“The market,” I echoed, piecing his words with what I knew about his service history.

“That was your last deployment before you came home?”

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

Tyler nodded, his hands fidgeting in his lap. “Yeah, and I can't get it out of my head. It's always there as if it just happened. I thought I was managing it, but sometimes... sometimes it just becomes too much.”

“Do you have an idea what triggered you today?”

He shrugged and looked helpless. “A smell, a...” He went quiet, staring forward, unblinking, shutting down.

Dissociating.

“Tyler?” I waited. “Can you come back, Tyler?”

He stiffened, then hunched and clenched his hands into fists.

“Tyler? Are you with me now? Can you tell me five things you can see?”

“You, my bed... my...” He shook his head and tilted his chin. The closet, my jacket. Four things... I can smell... I can hear...” He scrubbed his eyes again. “I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” I said, my voice soft, waiting for him to fully come back to the room, helping him count down what he could see and hear. “Would you want to talk to me?”

He shook his head.

“It doesn't have to be me? I could ask someone else?”

Tyler hesitated. “Can it be Marcus?”

“Sure.”

Tyler considered this, silent for a moment before letting out a shaky sigh. “Can you... can you get him back? I think... I need him here.”

Without hesitation, I pulled out the walkie-talkie and connected to Marcus.

“Can you come up?” I asked my friend, who opened the door after a few seconds as if he had been close by and waiting for any sign he was needed. “He’s asking for you,” I said.

We exchanged a silent nod. Everything we needed to think about was in that quiet exchange.

We needed to call what we classified as a code red: an observation protocol to ensure Tyler's safety. It required a close watch, a decision not made lightly, but necessary given the circumstances. Tyler wouldn't be left alone, and staff members would take shifts to monitor him, ensuring that someone was always present to offer support or intervene, if necessary. From the way Tyler leaned into Marcus when he sat cross-legged next to him, I sensed Marcus was going to be our point of contact. The immediate relief washing over Tyler's face when Marcus was there was evident, and it felt right to give them this space—to let Marcus be the support Tyler clearly needed.

I glanced around the room, checking for any items that might cause Tyler to harm himself, and Marcus nodded again. He would check the other places I couldn't see, but he would keep everything calm and soothing.

“I got this,” he mouthed to me, and I held up a single finger.

Another staff member would check on Tyler and Marcus every hour to ensure their physical safety. Additionally, if Tyler didn't want Marcus present, or needed to talk, the protocols would evaluate his mental state and offer reassurance and companionship. We would increase the frequency of his therapy sessions with strategies to manage his PTSD symptoms more effectively. However, as the doctor at Guardian Hall, Marcus would be responsible for reviewing Tyler's medication and adjusting it if necessary to manage his symptoms for the time being better.

Marcus would be staying at Guardian Hall for the foreseeable future.

This was serious.

Not only that, but Tyler's family would need to know, if that was what Tyler had indicated on his intake form.

My heart shattered for him.

"I'll leave you two," I murmured, feeling a complex mix of relief and sorrow as I exited the room. Tyler needed someone, and that person seemed to be Marcus.

As I closed the door behind me, the last sight I caught was Tyler curled against my friend, vulnerable but trusting.

I headed back to the office, pulled out the notes, advised his parents and sister, reassured them we were helping him, and then, sat in silence. Tyler's vague description of a market—the way he seemed to lose himself in the recounting—made me think he'd dissociated during our conversation. His gaze had become distant, and his voice faded as he spoke about the market, detaching from the present, the trauma front and center.

I wish I could say it was my first time seeing this.

It wasn't.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“Boss?” Carl said from the office door in a low tone, his hands full of financial statements and budget printouts that he placed on the desk. “I got back from the bank—heard you called a red.”

“Tyler,” I said. “Marcus is with him. Can you take the first check?”

“Sure.”

“I have the security protocols in place. Can you cover the office for thirty?”

“Of course.”

I squeezed his shoulder as he passed, then waved the walkie-talkie. “I’ll be on back.”

He didn’t ask me why I was heading somewhere or what I was doing. No one knew how desperate I was to see Jazz, and no one knew we’d kissed.

No one other than me knew how much I still loved Jazz and always would.

“No worries,” he said instead of asking questions, and then, I headed to find Jazz and the kittens.

I needed Jazz and the kittens.

As I entered the room, I found Jazz sprawled on the floor, on his belly, watching over two kittens, asleep between his hands, with the third one stirring in the box.

“Scout and Rascal decided on an escape,” Jazz murmured, his voice soft, to avoid disturbing the sleeping kittens. “Everything okay?” he asked, concern in his eyes.

“It will be,” I replied, trying to muster a reassuring smile as I lay next to him and lifted the stirring kitten from the box. The tiny furball, a bundle of soft tabby stripes, mewled, nestling into the warmth of my hand. “Then, this must be Mischief,” I commented, letting the kitten crawl along my arm.

“Yeah, that’s him.” Jazz chuckled, his gaze softening as he watched Mischief.

We shared a comfortable silence, the presence of the kittens creating a peaceful bubble around us. After a moment, I turned to Jazz. “The kiss was everything,” I started, my voice barely above a whisper.

Jazz nodded, his eyes not leaving Mischief. “The kiss was perfect.”

“We shouldn’t have,” I added, feeling a twinge of guilt mixed with an undeniable longing.

“But we did,” Jazz replied, finally meeting my gaze, his expression unreadable.

I took a deep breath, the weight of my next words pressing down on me. “You know, I’ve never stopped loving you,” I admitted, the truth spilling out easier than I expected.

The room fell into silence, the only sound being the soft purring of the kittens. Jazz didn’t respond at first, and I wondered if I’d crossed a line. But then, he reached out and adjusted Mischief in my hand, his fingers brushing mine.

“I know,” Jazz said at last, his voice thick with emotion.

I know.

Chapter Twenty-Five

JAZZ

Two weeks had passed since the I-still-love-you day.

Alex hadn't repeated those important words of love, but things between us had shifted. He smiled at me often now, a smile that didn't carry the usual concern or weight of responsibility. Instead, it was a secretive, knowing smile that seemed reserved only for me.

And amazingly, I wanted to smile back.

I felt hope and affection; somehow, his smiles were soothing and comfortable and...

... they were everything.

I was moving the kittens into a larger box—the last one was way too small, and I'd lost Rascal behind the desk. They weren't happy with me right now, so I was having a one-sided conversation with them so they could hear my voice and be reassured.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“All right, you little escape artists,” I murmured, lifting Scout into the box, followed by Mischief and Rascal. “You’ve been giving me quite the workout with your antics, haven’t you?” They mewled back, their tiny voices high and curious, as if replying.

I adjusted the blanket at the bottom of the box, making sure it was snug and comfortable for them. “You know, my old unit would laugh if they saw how easily you three have me wrapped around your little murder mittens,” I continued, my voice soft as I watched them settle in.

I chuckled when Scout looked up at me with wide, innocent eyes. “Yeah, I thought you might agree,” I said as if the kitten had offered profound agreement. “You have me whipped.” I paused, adding a selection of small toys for them to play with. “I might have to keep all three of you.”

Rascal batted at the toy while I leaned back on my heels, watching them. “There again, I guess I need to find somewhere to live first, right?” Anxiety gripped me at the thought of leaving Guardian Hall, and I forced it down. “But that’s adult life, huh? A lot of guessing and very few answers,” I mused aloud.

A loud knock interrupted my one-sided conversation, and I scrambled to stand and opened it to find Marcus standing there. Tyler was with him, eyes still shadowed with the dark circles of recovery, standing a little too close to Marcus, as if his proximity could somehow ward off the ghosts that haunted him.

“We’re the babysitters,” Marcus announced, gesturing toward the box.

“You’re the what now?” I asked with a frown.

“We need to take them for a bit, and you need to head over to room seventeen. Alex is waiting for you.” Marcus’s voice was neutral, staying outside the room, respectful of my space. This room had become my sanctuary, a place they knew to treat with a gentle kind of reverence.

“Is something wrong?” A million different worst-case scenarios spun into confusion, and Marcus touched my arm.

“No. I promise. For real. Pass me the kittens and go find Alex.”

“Okay.” I hesitated, then exchanged a confused glance with Tyler, who shrugged. “I’ll head over there,” I responded, collecting the box and handing it to them. Tyler took responsibility, his gaze lingering on the bundles of fluff.

“I’ve put their food and some toys in there, and they’re used to the blanket at the bottom,” I instructed, handing over the kittens’ care to Tyler and Marcus. “The cat litter tray?”

“I got this,” Tyler murmured, his voice soft, but firmer than I had heard in a while. A small smile played on his lips as he stared at the kittens, and then they walked away.

With the fluffballs in good hands, I locked my door and headed to room seventeen, pushing away the lingering worries about what I was heading toward. As I walked, the corridor seemed unusually long, and the walls were lined with the muted colors and soft lighting that characterized Guardian Hall. I realized I was heading to a part of the large building I’d not seen before. When I reached the door, I paused, taking a deep breath before knocking.

The door swung open almost immediately, and there stood Alex. His presence alone stirred a mixture of anticipation and nervousness within me. His eyes met mine, and for a moment, all the unspoken things between us hung in the air, palpable and

pressing.

“Hey,” Alex greeted. “Thanks for coming.”

I hesitated at the threshold, pausing to ask, “Is everything okay?”

He stepped back and gave me a reassuring nod, allowing me space to enter and get my first glance at his room in Guardian Hall.

The space was no more than ten by ten—smaller than my room on the floor under this—and dominated by a double bed pressed to the wall, neatly made with crisp linens and several pillows. Against one wall, a shelf groaned under the weight of numerous books, personal photos, and clutter, making the space feel lived-in and warm. Long drapes framed the window, offering a view of the backyard and the same old trees I could see from my room.

In the center of the room, Alex had opened a small camping table laden with takeout boxes and plates. He wore a smart button-down shirt and dark jeans—a different look from his typical Guardian Hall T-shirts and sweatshirts. He'd tidied his soft hair until it lay flat instead of with its usual flicks.

“I wanted us just to sit and eat together,” he said, a hint of nerves in his voice.

I frowned. “We already do that, Alex,” I said, reminding him of our regular meals in the communal dining area.

“Yeah, but that's in the dining space,” he added. “I was hoping you'd be happy for it just to be us here.” His voice held an earnest plea.

Now, it was my turn to feel nervous. I backed up against the door, taking in the details of the room. The distinctive packaging from Momma's down the road caught

my eye, and the subtle fragrance of garlic, cheese, and Italian herbs wafted through the air.

Alex gestured at the food. “I know Italian is your favorite. Or it used to be. Did I get it wrong? Is this wrong?” Alex's questions filled the small space between us.

For a moment, I was overwhelmed by the gesture, the intimacy of the setting, the effort he had made. I closed the distance and hugged him hard. “It's not wrong,” I assured him, my voice muffled against his shoulder.

“I know I've already jumped the shark, and you might not even be interested, and we're not supposed to be kissing, but... I mean, I tried not to think about kissing you, and then, I wondered if I was pushing this on you, and you're not in the right place to... shit... am I fucking this up? Marcus thought it was a good idea and said we were grown men, and he said you're?—”

“Let's eat.” I stopped his nervous rambling—way too many questions and comments in there I didn't want to think about.

The tension seemed to dissolve with those words, and Alex relaxed in my embrace. We separated and set out the food, each movement feeling more natural than the last. As we settled down to our private dinner, him on the bed and me on a rolling chair, I didn't know what to say at first and focused on a carbonara to die for, but after a few moments of silence, I couldn't help the question that had been dancing on the tip of my tongue since I walked in.

“Is this a date?” I ventured, watching Alex for his reaction.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

He paused, a fork halfway to his mouth, then set it down. “Do you want it to be?” His tone was cautious, tinged with hope.

“Yes,” I replied without hesitation, excited and nervous at the admission.

Alex sighed deeply, the tension leaving his body. A broad smile spread across his face. “Good, me too.”

After a few more bites, Alex's energy shifted to something more playful, more reminiscent of our younger days. “Hey,” he said, setting his plate aside and sliding off the bed. He moved to the shelf and pulled out an old photo album. The cover was faded and worn, and the word *Memories* was embossed across the front in script.

“Look at this!” he exclaimed, flipping through the pages, his tongue poking out the side of his mouth as he focused. Then, he turned the album to face me, revealing a school photo from our senior year in AP English. Mr. Everett-Thompson stood at the back, a figure of authority amidst a sea of youthful faces.

There I was, in the school uniform of Lomax-Barton Prep, buttoned up and tidy—the perpetual good boy on a scholarship. Beside me, Alex, ever the contrast, hung off my shoulder, his tie loose, his hair scruffy. His grin was wide, and he held his fingers in rabbit ears behind us. The image captured a moment of pure youthful joy and camaraderie, a snapshot of simpler times, and I waited for grief at recalling the person I'd once been to hit me.

Only there was nothing.

Seeing us like that, captured in the frozen moment, brought back a flood of memories—afternoons spent debating literature, sneaking out to the back of the school to share secrets with the boy who'd stolen my heart, the promise of a future we hadn't yet imagined might pull us apart.

I reached out to trace the figures in the photograph, a smile creeping onto my face. “We look like we were having the time of our lives,” I said, my voice a blend of amusement and wistfulness.

Alex leaned closer, his shoulder brushing mine as we peered at the photo. “We were,” he agreed softly. “And maybe... you know, Jazz, I was hoping we could have this date, and then another one, and then, maybe another one after that?”

I glanced up at him and waited again for panic and grief.

I deserved grief.

Where were those feelings now?

I waited to talk for so long that the silence became awkward, and his smile dipped a little. I was fucking this up.

Instead of grief, pain, and loss, I felt a quiet peace in my head. I placed my plate on the camping table and tugged him close between my spread legs.

“Alex?”

“Yeah?” He sounded so unsure.

“What were you hoping?”

“I don't know.” He,” he paused. “Maybe more. But I don't want to mess this up, and I know that?—”

“You make me feel so much hope,” I whispered, then pressed my head to his soft belly and sighed. I couldn't say the words yet, but they were there in my heart.

I love you too.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Alex

Over the month, Jazz and I had fallen into a comfortable routine of sharing meals in my tiny room, often ending with us lying side by side on my bed, chatting. With the kittens growing quickly, Scout and Mischief had already been adopted, leaving just Rascal, who seemed as much a part of our setup as the bed and the worn-out blankets, and always came with me to my room.

The kitten was curled in a tiny ball, looking innocent and cute, but my hands still bore the pinpricks of practice swipes and bites.

“He’s a fierce kitten,” Jazz whispered, stroking Rascal’s tiny head.

“Why are you whispering?” I was also whispering.

“I don’t want to wake him,” Jazz murmured.

I snorted a laugh—I couldn’t help it—and it was loud enough that Rascal snapped awake, yawned wide, then curled up to sleep again.

Right between us.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“He seems to think he owns the place, right?” I joked, watching him claim his territory.

Jazz laughed, scratching behind Rascal’s ears. “Yeah, he’s taken over. It’ll be tough seeing him go when the time comes.”

I nodded, feeling a pang at the thought. “He’s been a good little companion, hasn’t he?”

“Do you think Guardian Hall needs a cat?” Jazz asked as if the question had only occurred to him in that moment.

Where would he stay? Would it be here with me? Or generally around the place? Outside? What did my cramped room have to offer a kitten?

“I’ve been thinking about knocking through the wall to the storeroom next to me just to create a bigger, more functional space in here,” I blurted, pulling Jazz’s attention from Rascal to me. “One side could be an office and the other a small living area with a bed, kitchenette and maybe a sofa.”

Jazz picked up Rascal and tucked him onto my chest before curling around me and resting his head on my shoulder. I pulled him closer, stroking Rascal and thinking how right it was to have Jazz in my arms.

“It would make things less cramped in here,” he said.

I tried to be nonchalant. “I’m just thinking ahead. We’re not kids anymore, and more

room might make you want to stick around longer.”

He propped himself up on his arms, staring down at me. “I’d want to stick around even if we had to lie on the floor, but...” He paused and bit his lower lip, looking vulnerable, his eyes bright with emotion. “I’m not here forever.”

I swallowed hard, feeling a lump rise in my throat. The urge to ask him to stay, work at the shelter, help run Guardian Hall and be my partner in every way possible, surged through me, but I knew it wasn’t my place to dictate. Jazz needed to find his own path.

“Jazz,” I started, my voice soft, but firm. “I know that, and I understand. I guess I’m just pretending.”

“Whatever I do, you’ll always be you, and you can pretend all you like.” He snuggled into me.

“I wish I could solve it all, make some magical proposition that fixes everything.”

He sighed. “Yeah.”

He had his journey to work out. And as much as I’d love to have him here, with me, running this place alongside Marcus and the team, it wasn’t right for me to ask that of him.

“Alex, I love what you’ve built here. It’s incredible, and being a part of it has meant so much to me, even for a little while, but I need to figure out what comes next for me so I can be the best person for you and what my place in the world looks like.”

I held back from saying that he was the right person for me. He needed to be happy and whole before I burdened him with my feelings. Still, his honesty did little to ease

the ache in my heart, but I nodded, understanding his need for independence and self-discovery.

“I just want you to know, whatever you decide, wherever you go, you’ll always have a place here,” I said. “Not just at Guardian Hall, but in my life.”

Jazz squeezed my hand, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I know, and that means everything to me.”

In other words, let’s enjoy what we have together while we have it. I’d waited twenty years to be back in Jazz’s life; I could handle a few more, and I would help in any way I could to heal his heart.

I glanced at the clock. It was nearing midnight, and Guardian Hall was quiet. Marcus was on duty, and with nothing to do but lie there and hold Jazz, I was settled and happy. He didn’t usually stay to sleep, but when his breathing deepened, it was all too easy to close my eyes.

I was jolted awake by a sudden, violent shift in the bed. In the dim early morning light that filtered through the curtains, I could barely make out Jazz’s form, but I felt the full weight of his body pinning me down, his fingers digging into my shoulders. The panic in him was real. His breath came in sharp, ragged gasps, and his eyes—wide and unseeing—burned with a mix of hatred and fear that wasn’t meant for me.

A sharp, distressed yowl erupted from beneath us, and I realized with fear that Rascal was trapped under my arm. I tried to shift my weight, but Jazz gripped my throat and pressed hard.

“Jazz, it’s me, Alex!” I managed to say, my voice strained under his weight. “You’re safe, you’re okay!”

He didn't seem to hear me, lost in the throes of his nightmare. His hold tightened, and for a moment, I feared for our safety—his mind was somewhere else, battling demons I couldn't see. His face was twisted in pain, every muscle taut as if preparing to confront an immediate danger.

I struggled beneath him, trying to leverage him off me without hurting him—or the kitten. “Jazz, wake up!” I pleaded, my voice edged with panic.

He snapped out of a deep trance, and his expression shifted. The hatred and fear melted away, replaced by confusion, then horror as he realized where he was—and whom he was pinning down. He released me and rolled off, scrambling to the edge of the bed, his breathing heavy and uneven.

“Alex, I—” he stammered, his voice breaking, hands shaking as he ran them through his hair. “God, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean—I thought?—”

“It’s okay,” I said quickly, sitting up and checking on Rascal, who, though scared, seemed unharmed. I scooped him up and held him close, trying to soothe the kitten who was making frightened noises. My heart still pounded fiercely, adrenaline coursing through my veins. The fear lingered, but concern for Jazz took precedence as I watched him fight to regain his composure. He nodded, unable to meet my eyes, his face pale.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“It’s not okay,” he said, his voice husky.

I wriggled closer to him, setting Rascal down on the bed now that he was calmer. “I’m here, Jazz. It’s over; you’re here with me,” I reassured him with a light touch on his arm.

Jazz finally looked at me, his eyes haunted. “I hurt you.”

“No harm done. We’re both okay,” I confirmed, trying to offer a comforting smile. “Let’s try to get some sleep, okay? I’m here. You’re safe.”

He rolled out of bed, stumbling as he grabbed onto the bookcase for support, which wobbled dangerously under his weight

“No,” he said to himself, then louder. “No.”

And before I could stop him, he was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

JAZZ

I staggered out of Alex’s room, my breath ragged, my heart hammering as the chill of the hallway seeped through my thin shirt. Panic clawed at me, fierce and unrelenting. I couldn’t shake the vivid images from the nightmare, nor the horrifying reality of how I had nearly hurt Alex—really hurt him.

My feet led me to my room, where I struggled to unlock the door before finally slipping inside to safety. Without hesitation, I headed straight for the closet, grabbing the duffel bag tucked away on the shelf. My hands shook as I tossed it onto the bed, the sound of clinking zippers breaking the silence.

I started to pack, but my movements became slower and more hesitant. Each piece of clothing felt heavy in my hands. I wasn't just packing fabric. I was packing up a life that might have been. The empty cardboard box in the corner, which had once been a cozy nest for Rascal and his siblings, stood as a stark reminder of things left behind, a warmth that had filled my days for a short time.

The fight drained out of me as I slumped to the bed. My head was a mess, thoughts swirling with images of Alex's face contorted with pain—pain that I had caused. Was I kidding myself by thinking I could stay here? Stay with him? The fear of causing him more harm gnawed at me, a constant ache.

At least out there in numbing cold, I couldn't hurt anyone.

Harper would be so disappointed I gave up.

I felt lost in the silence of my room. The weight of what could happen if my nightmares bled further into reality was crushing. How could I justify staying when I might one day not wake up in time? When my confusion might not clear before I did real damage?

The thought of leaving felt like tearing a part of myself away. Alex and Guardian Hall had become more than just a place to stay; they were a chance at redemption, at a life worth living, and Harper had revisited, saying she was proud of me.

Could I walk away from that because I was scared? Let my daughter down? Let Alex down? All because ghosts of my past wouldn't let me go.

No decisions felt right, each heavy with regret. I buried my face in my hands, the bedspread fabric rough against my skin, and tried to imagine a future where fear didn't dictate my choices. But the only clear thought that cut through the turmoil was Alex's steadying and kind voice: "You're safe; you're here with me."

At that moment, I didn't move. I couldn't. The thought of leaving was abandoning hope itself, and despite the fear of what might happen, the idea of not trying to overcome it, of not attempting to build something with Alex, seemed like a greater loss. I needed to find a way to stay, to fight through the nightmares, and to ensure they never again spilled over into the waking world. I needed to believe I could be better for Harper. For Alex. For me.

But I ran from Alex.

I left him.

He'll hate me for running.

I scrambled for my phone, reading the last message Harper had sent me—a link to a video with the latest Marley and Pumpkin video—two cats that were so vocal it never failed to make me smile.

Jazz:I love you, Harper

I didn't expect an answer, but instead, my phone vibrated with a call, and Harper's name flashed up.

"Dad?" she asked, and I hated to hear the fear in her voice.

"Hey, you're up early," I said after a pause.

“Are you okay?”

“I loved the new cat video you sent,” I exclaimed.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“I knew you would. Hang on...” she said, and I got a notification. “I sent you another link to this other cat I follow. His name is Charlie, and he’s so stinking cute!”

We chatted for a few minutes about cats, school, and the fact she was going on a movie date the next day. Her boyfriend’s name was Alex, and she’d been seeing him for a couple of months. Also, she said it was cool that we both liked guys named Alex. Also, would it be okay if this kid, Alex, came with her next week to visit me?

“You’d want him to meet me?” I couldn’t quite believe it.

“Of course, I need you to do the dad thing where you intimidate him.” She,” she laughed.

“But I’m not...” Whole? Fixed? Right?

“Not what?”

“Fixed,” I offered.

“You’re my hero, and I want him to meet you.”

I tilted my chin and pushed my shoulders back. I was her hero? “I love you, Harper.”

“I love you more, Dad.” Someone called her name, and her voice was muffled as she covered the phone and then returned. “I have to go, Dad. Breakfast!”

“Go, I’ll see you and this Alex kid next week.”

“We’ll be there.”

“We could go out and get pizza.”

“We’d like that. You could bring your Alex.”

I lied, “I will,” and we ended the call. After what I’d just done, Alex wouldn’t want to come to any double-date pizza thing.

I owed Alex an apology.

I wasn’t going to run.

We needed to talk.

I counted back from a hundred, desperate to calm the storm inside me, but restlessness seized me around seventy-three. Pushing off the bed, I went to the door and yanked it open. Alex toppled from where he’d been sitting right outside, against it.

He scrambled to his feet, his eyes wide, filled with a panicked urgency. “I can’t let you leave,” he shouted, steadying himself and lowering his voice. “I mean, you can leave. I can’t stop you, but please, Jazz, don’t give up. Please stay.”

Without a word, I tugged him inside and shut the door behind us. My heart was thumping in my ears, drowning out the eerie silence of the hallway we’d left behind. “Where’s Rascal?” I asked, sudden fear of the kitten’s well-being piercing through the fog of my troubles.

“Marcus has him,” Alex replied, his voice steadier now, but thick with emotion. “He’s fine, I promise.”

I reached for him, gripping his arms as I searched his face for any sign he might retract his words and leave me to my spiraling thoughts. “Please don’t stop loving me,” I pleaded, my words spilling out raw and honest.

Alex’s expression softened, and he tugged me close, wrapping his arms around me. “I couldn’t even if I tried, Jazz. I’m not going anywhere,” he murmured into my hair. The warmth of his body and the sincerity in his voice anchored me, pulling back the tide of panic and despair that had threatened to drag me under.

Alex’s arms tightened around me, drawing me even closer, and for a moment, everything else faded away. It was just the two of us, the weight of my sleeping fears lessening in the safety of his embrace. He leaned back, his eyes searching mine for a moment.

Then, he kissed me. It was soft and hesitant at first, but as I responded, the kiss deepened, driven by all the unspent emotions and the relief of having him so close. My hands carded his hair, and I lost myself in the familiarity of his lips on mine.

The kiss meant everything. It was an affirmation, a promise, and a relief all rolled into one.

Breathless and dazed, Alex rested his forehead against mine. “I’m here,” he whispered, his breath warm against my lips. “We’re here.”

In that moment, the past and the future seemed to merge into the present, where all that mattered was this connection, this incredible feeling of being understood and loved despite everything. My brain might send me back to the horrors of what I’d seen and done, but Alex would always be there to bring me back, and he didn’t hate me for doing it.

“What if the nightmares never go away, and I hurt you?”

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“You heard my voice, and you stopped,” he whispered into another kiss. Then, he walked me back to the bed, and we lay down, wrapped in each other’s arms.

And love and support began to turn into something else.

Need.

Want.

Now.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Alex

The kisses deepened, each more urgent than the last. Long ago, I might have taken these moments with Jazz for granted, but now, each one was precious. I savored every contact, determined never to overlook these seconds we shared.

“Wait!” Jazz broke the connection. As he moved off me, he left me off-balance, and I scrambled to get off the bed.

“Fuck, I didn't mean to push,” I said, my voice laden with guilt at how I was messing up. I respected Jazz's boundaries and would never overstep, and I'd promised myself I would take everything slow and get back to being best friends before I even imagined a next step.

“No, wait,” Jazz responded. He walked over to the bedroom door and clicked the lock. Then, he checked the patio door, ensuring it was also locked, before pulling the drapes shut. As the room grew dark, he flicked on a lamp, filling it with light.

Then, he turned to face me, and in that gentle illumination, he was beautiful. Gone was the boy I'd loved. This was a grown man, and I wanted every inch of him. His hair was tousled, falling onto his forehead, and his shirt outlined the more muscular lines of his body since he'd been eating well and using the basement gym. His beard was bushy and soft; I couldn't imagine him without it now.

“I didn't ask you to go,” he said, his voice soft, yet firm.

I closed the distance between us, drawn by the certainty in his voice. “I know. I just... I don't want to assume, to push for more than you're ready for.”

“I want this,” he assured me, his eyes holding mine with a clear invitation.

Jazz reached out, his hands finding mine, and pulled me toward him. Our bodies met, aligning effortlessly, and he was still hard, and my body reacted. “You're not taking anything,” he said, “please.”

The room's soft lighting enveloped us, causing everything outside to fade away. He kissed me again, and the world vanished. I allowed myself to become lost in the moment as he pulled me back to the bed and laid me down. This was where I belonged.

He settled between my legs, propped himself up on his elbows, cradling my face, and he smiled.

“Do you remember the first time we made love?” he asked.

I couldn't help but smile back, the memory vivid. "After school at my house, we were racing against the clock with my parents due home any minute."

Jazz chuckled, his hand squeezing mine. "We were so daring back then. I remember sneaking into your room, both of us listening for the sound of a car in the driveway."

"Your idea, as I recall," I teased, nudging him with my elbow. "You were always the brave one."

"It seemed like a good plan at the time," Jazz admitted. "We barely got through the door before you pulled me in for a kiss."

The thrill of that afternoon rushed back to me. We had thrown our school bags down anywhere, our teenage nerves on edge, buzzing with excitement and fear. The house was quiet, without a sign of either housekeeper or parents, making every sound we made louder and every touch more intense.

"And then, there was the mad dash to hide when we heard the garage door," I said, shaking my head in disbelief at how bold we had been.

Jazz laughed, the sound warm and resonant. "I've never fixed my shirt that fast in my life. You shoved me into your closet when you heard your mom say she'd forgotten her purse."

"We thought we were so busted."

"It was terrifying. Exhilarating all at the same time," Jazz said. "After she left again, I remember how you looked at me with this wild grin and knew we had to keep going."

The risk of getting caught had somehow intensified the whole experience. We were clumsy and inexperienced, but it was everything we wanted.

“Even if we had to hide you in my closet, it was worth every second. That afternoon might have been reckless, but it was also when I knew I was completely in love with you,” I said, my voice soft with the weight of the memory.

Page 56

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

His smile slipped a little, but it wasn't denial or shock; it was all seriousness and focus. "Alex..."

"I will always love you, Jazz."

Jazz smiled, then, and rested between my legs, as hard as me, close, his breath warm against my cheek. "I felt it then," he murmured before kissing me. "And I still love you now. I never stopped. I just thought I'd never have the chance to?—"

I kissed him. Neither of us had thought we'd have a chance to be together again, but dwelling on the what-ifs and maybes would end up being too much and sour anything good we were trying to create.

He kissed me then, rocking his hips, and the slide of him against me was too much.

"Clothes," he murmured.

Between us we somehow managed to take our shirts off, and for a moment, we were lost in kisses before something changed.

Was it me who backed away? Was it him? Either way, we stopped, and he stared down at me.

"I have scars," he whispered.

I leaned up to trace a line across his skin. "You're beautiful," I reassured him. I reached out, my hand covering his, feeling his memories' rough and smooth textures

under my fingers.

“Scars inside as well. In my heart.” He dropped to rest his forehead to mine.

“I haven't seen war, but I'm not a teenager anymore, Jazz. We've both changed.” I needed to lighten the mood. “I have a soft belly,” I admitted with a chuckle. “Nothing like the scars of war, but I'm not?—”

Jazz pressed a finger to my lips, and his gaze was steady. “I haven't done this in forever,” he confessed.

“Neither have I,” I responded, my voice steady despite the rapid beating of my heart.

“We're so much older.”

“I know.” I traced a path to the tie of his sweatpants and loosened it until I could slide inside and cup his erection. He arched into my touch and whimpered. “We'll have to relearn each other, find all the soft bits, mend the broken parts.”

We pressed together, and Jazz's weight on top of me was intoxicating, his warmth surrounding me, grounding me in the moment. I touched instinctively, trailing down his back, feeling his muscles ripple as he moved above me.

Alex stripped his pants, and our hips aligned naturally, and the slide of our erections against each other sent a sharp jolt of pleasure through me. The friction was exquisite, each shiftsparking heat low in my belly. Jazz's ragged breaths spilled against my neck, mingling with the sound of my own as we found a rhythm, rocking together in perfect sync.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him impossibly closer, needing more of him and Jazz braced himself on his forearms, his gaze locked onto mine.

“God, I missed you,” he murmured, his voice hoarse, every word a caress. His hips rolled in a steady, deliberate rhythm, each movement sending shocks of pleasure through me.

I arched up to meet him, desperate for more, my hands roaming his sweat-slicked back, memorizing the contours of his body. I moaned into the kiss, the sound swallowed by his hunger.

The pressure between us built, rising with every frantic motion, every desperate grind. I could feel every ridge and vein of his cock against mine, the sensation almost too much to bear. Our pre-come mingled, easing the friction and making every touch smoother and more intense.

Jazz’s movements became erratic, his breathing shallow and uneven. “I’m close,” he panted against my neck, his words a plea and a warning.

“Me too,” I gasped, tightening my legs around him, pulling him into me as if I could fuse us together.

With a low groan, Jazz buried his face in my neck, his hips jerking uncontrollably. I felt the hot spill of his release between us, the heat and wetness adding to the mess of our bodies. The pulse of his cock against mine was my undoing. Pleasure surged through me in overwhelming waves, and I clung to him as my release took me, my cry muffled against his shoulder.

We stayed entwined and panting, the room silent but for our slowing breaths. Jazz’s touch softened, his lips brushing over my neck and jaw. I slid my fingers through his damp hair, savoring the weight of him pressing me into the bed, unwilling to let the moment go.

After a long pause, Jazz lifted his head to look at me. His eyes searched mine, a

flicker of something more than satisfaction there. “That was...”

“Yeah,” I whispered, a smile curving my lips as I met his gaze.

In the quiet aftermath, Jazz exhaled a soft, almost awestruck, “Wow.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, feeling a mix of contentment and disbelief at the intensity of it all.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

I lay there wrapped in Jazz's arms, the rush of the orgasm leaving me breathless and tingling. My breathing was still erratic; every exhalation was a sigh. Jazz's hold on me was secure and gentle, a firm presence grounding me as I relaxed.

The warmth of his skin against mine felt like the only real thing in the world at that moment, a reminder that our connection went beyond the physical. As my heart gradually found its rhythm again, and I nestled closer into his embrace, a sense of peace washed over me. It was as if all the noise of life, the challenges, and the uncertainties were muffled, pushed outside the boundaries of our shared space.

I brushed my lips over Jazz's chest, feeling his breaths rise and fall.

He gently kissed my head, and I closed my eyes, savoring the affectionate touch. Jazz's fingers traced lazy patterns along my arm, sending shivers across my skin that had nothing to do with cold and everything to do with what we'd done.

We didn't need words.

Jazz was the other half of me, not just as a lover but deep in my soul, and I wanted to cry that, after all these years, we were together.

We were meant to be.

"It was always you," I said.

We both chuckled, the sound echoing in the room. A comfortable silence settled over us. It was a perfect, unguarded moment when everything seemed to stand still, and I

was so desperately in love with Jazz and needed him so much I could have cried.

We had to clean ourselves off. Would Jazz want to talk? Did he regret any of this?

“I want to do that again,” Jazz joked, his voice still breathless as he smiled and stretched.

I groaned. “I’m not a teenager anymore.” I propped myself up on one elbow to look at him better. “You’ll need to give me a minute.”

“A minute?” Jazz raised an eyebrow, his smile turning playful. “Should I take that as a promise for round two?”

“Only if you’re up for it,” I teased back, feeling a warmth that had little to do with the physical and everything to do with the man beside me.

“With you? Always.”

Jazz’s hand found mine, and his tone grew cautious. “We should probably have the condoms, lube, tests chat, right? Not that you need me to tell you about my tests; I guess you know all about me.” He sounded defensive, and I didn’t want him to think I knew things he never wanted me to know.

“Marcus might know because he’s the doc here, but your test results aren’t public knowledge to all the staff, not even me.”

“Okay.”

“It’s probably a good idea to talk to Marcus anyway, so he knows...we’re...y’know...”

“You’re okay with me telling him?”

“Always.”

He nodded then. “We need to get lube and... “ He stopped, then shimmied off me to one side. “I don’t want to hurt you, and you need to know I don’t have nightmares every night, but we should...”

“It’s okay. We’ll talk,” I finished, and at last, he relaxed. “For now, I just want to hold you.” This was where I wanted to be: scars, soft bellies, and all.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you,” I answered.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

JAZZ

Yesterday had been an intense moment that shifted something deep inside, but we hadn’t had a chance to talk since. Alex had been called away shortly after, and the space left by his sudden departure hung between us, filled with my stupid-ass nerves.

Why would he want to be with me?

Is twenty years too long?

Am I too broken?

Before he left, I asked him to go on this thing with Harper and her boyfriend. I hadn't mentioned that she'd said it could be a double date, but I wanted it to be.

A knock on my door pulled me from my thoughts.

"Jazz, it's me," Alex called.

I opened the door. He seemed uncertain and hovered, but then, with a tilt of his chin and not a single word, he stepped inside, closed the door behind him, and hugged me. The closeness was immediate and grounding.

"Are we okay?" he murmured into my hair. "Is this a thing? Are we... an 'us'?"

"Do you want it to be?" I asked, feeling so freaking vulnerable I thought I might crack.

"Yes. Do you?"

"Yes," I managed to say, the word feeling like a key turning in a lock. "And you're okay with people knowing?"

He nodded. "I've talked it over with Marcus and the team, and we're..." he paused, "... putting things in place so that your welfare is considered and so that I..."

"What?"

“So that I don’t fuck up.”

“You’re mine, I’m yours, there’s nothing to fuck up.” I was adamant.

A sigh of relief escaped him. Then, he pulled back just enough to look at me, a smile beginning to curve his lips. “Then, let’s go get pizza,” he said, his voice steady now, imbued with a lightness that felt like a promise. “And check out Harper’s boyfriend.”

The weight that had settled on my shoulders began to lift. We were done, and that was what mattered. The rest would work its way out.

With a nod, I grabbed my jacket, my heart lighter. As we left my room, the hallway seemed less daunting, the outside world less intimidating. Alex’s presence by my side felt right.

We walked to the pizzeria, and as we arrived for what Harper called our double Alex date, the place was buzzing with the casual din of a Saturday afternoon. Harper spotted us first, her face lighting up as she sprang from her seat and rushed over to hug me.

“Dad!” she exclaimed, her infectious enthusiasm filling the room.

Her boyfriend, Alex, rose from his seat as we approached. He was a tall—lanky—teenager with curly hair falling over his forehead, a tentative smile, and shoulders back as he extended a hand toward me. “Sir, it’s nice to meet you,” he said, his handshake firm. He met my stare with his own, and I could see his nerves and how Harper held his hand in reassurance.

“Nice to meet you, too, Alex,” I replied, evaluating him as fathers often do. He looked sharp in a button-down shirt and dark pants, with a straight posture but relaxed enough not to appear stiff. I appreciated the respect and earnestness in his

eyes.

As we sat down, I leaned in a little, my voice low, but friendly. “You treat my daughter right, you hear?” It was the standard warning, half-joking, but entirely serious.

“Yes, sir,” he replied, his voice steady, and I nodded, satisfied with his response.

As I settled into the booth, I felt a spontaneous urge to connect with my own Alex, whose presence next to me was a grounding force. Without thinking, I took his hand, intertwining our fingers.

Harper caught the motion, her eyes flickering to our joined hands and her mouth dropped open.

“Dad?”

I could bluster and tell her I needed emotional support, which is why I was grasping Alex’s hand, but she deserved me to be honest with her.

“I’m with my Alex,” I said, smiling at her.

At first, she was confused, but then she returned the smile.

“I knew it!”

The waiter came by to take our order, and the conversation turned to lighter topics—school, Harper’s upcoming projects, and general small talk.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

Throughout that bit, I kept a half-eye on her boyfriend, impressed by his polite attentiveness and how he seemed genuinely interested in what Harper had to say. They were sweet together.

Young love.

It turned out that Alex, or AJ, short for Alex Jason McGuire, was a good kid who smiled a lot. As we waited for our pizzas, the conversation drifted naturally to the future, something that always seemed to come up with teenagers around. Alex and I, almost in sync, began pressuring AJ about his plans after high school.

“So, AJ, what do you see yourself doing in the future?” I asked, curious about the boy who had captured my daughter’s attention.

Harper, ever protective, chimed in with a laugh. “He’s sixteen, Dad. Did you even know what you wanted to do when you were his age?”

I smiled at her, a rush of old memories flooding back. “I wanted to be a soldier.” My tone softened as I reached across the table, taking her hand in mine. “I’m sorry, Harper, for all the times that took me away from you.”

Her eyes met mine, filled with a warmth that squeezed my heart. “I love you, Dad,” she said, her grip tightening.

AJ broke the moment after everything was so emotional. “Uhm... I want to be a veterinarian, like my mom.”

“You like animals?” I asked.

AJ nodded with enthusiasm. “Yeah, I’ve grown up around them. Helping out at her clinic has always felt right.”

Alex, catching on to the interest, leaned forward with a grin. “You know, we should take you to the animal shelter we work with. They could always use more hands, and it’s a great experience if you’re going into veterinary work.”

AJ and Harper loved the idea, so we made it our plan for after dinner. As we finished our meal and went to the shelter, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of rightness about the evening. It wasn’t just about getting to know AJ better or reconnecting with Harper—it was about these small moments of connection and understanding that brought our lives closer.

It was family.

We entered the shelter, greeted by excited barks and immediate demand for affection from a dozen guests with their wagging tails. The atmosphere was perfect for ending our double date. Harper and AJ laughed and played with the dogs, and Alex stood beside me, his hand finding mine and squeezing as we watched the young couple.

“Everything is perfect when you add puppies,” I whispered to him, watching Harper throw a ball for a particularly enthusiastic spaniel.

Alex chuckled, his eyes crinkling at the edges as we sat cross-legged with the oldest dog here. Still looking for a home, Barnaby-Blue was a cross of probably a hundred breeds, fresh from the care of his elderly owner who’d passed away. The gorgeous bundle of fur and licks was desperate for affection. If I had my way, with Alex by my side and Harper only a few feet away laughing and smiling, I could sit in this corner for the rest of the night.

And for the first time in forever, I felt peace.

Chapter Thirty

Alex

Jazz sat cross-legged on my bed; a bowl of popcorn balanced precariously between us. The soft glow of the laptop screen cast shadows across his face, highlighting the relaxed curve of his mouth as he crunched popcorn. He shifted so his knee brushed mine and the casual contact sent a warm ripple through me, one I tried to ignore as I focused on the movie. Or at least pretended to.

The plan was simple: a low-key night with a movie and snacks, but sitting this close to him, his presence filling the small space of my room, made my heart race in a way that had nothing to do with the action playing out on the screen.

Jazz stretched his arm along the back of the bed, his fingers lightly brushing my shoulder. It wasn't intentional—or maybe it was—but the touch made it even harder to focus.

“Are you even watching this?” he asked, his voice laced with amusement.

“Of course,” I lied, avoiding his gaze.

“Oh yeah? What just happened?”

I opened my mouth to respond but faltered. “Uh, they... you know, the thing with the car chase...”

Jazz's laughter was warm and rich, filling the room. “Nice try.”

I groaned; his voice softened, and his smile became almost shy. “I really enjoy this—being here with you.”

“Me too,” I admitted, my cheeks warming.

We sat in silence for a moment, the movie forgotten. Jazz’s hand slid from the back of the bed to rest on my shoulder, his thumb brushing my collarbone. The small, tender gesture made my chest tighten.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“You know,” he said after a pause, “we’ve got all night for movies.”

My breath caught at the implication, but how he looked at me—patient, waiting—put me at ease. I turned toward him, our knees bumping awkwardly, and let myself lean into the warmth of his touch.

“Popcorn might get cold,” I reminded him, my lips quirking in a nervous smile.

“Then, we’ll eat it later,” he replied, his voice barely above a whisper. And when he leaned in, closing the space between us, I didn’t hesitate to meet him halfway.

The kiss made my head spin. Jazz’s hand slid up to cup my jaw, his touch grounding me even as my heart raced. The movie droned on in the background, forgotten, as we sank deeper into the moment.

Popcorn and movies were great, but being here with Jazz—this close and this connected—was everything.

“Will you make love to me,” I whispered, my voice husky with need. “I need you inside me.”

Jazz’s eyes darkened with lust. He cupped my face in his hands, his thumbs caressing my cheeks. “Are you sure?” he asked.

I nodded, unable to form words. My whole body was on fire. Jazz leaned down and captured my lips in a searing kiss. I melted against him, parting my lips to deepen the kiss.

His touch roamed down my body, and I shivered as he slipped his fingers under the hem of my shirt.

“God, Alex,” he breathed against my neck. “You have no idea how long I've wanted this.”

I tilted my head back, offering more access as he trailed hot kisses down my throat. “Show me,” I gasped.

Jazz's fingers trembled as he began unbuttoning my shirt. He took his time, and I shuddered as the cool air hit my chest, my nipples hardening instantly. Jazz's eyes raked over me hungrily.

“You're so beautiful,” he murmured, bending to kiss my collarbone.

I reached for him, tugging at the hem of his T-shirt. “Your turn,” I said breathlessly.

Jazz obliged, pulling the shirt over his head in one fluid motion. I drank in the sight of him, my fingers itching to explore, and our lips met again as Jazz's hands moved to my belt. I gasped as he undid my buckle. Jazz paused at the waistband of my jeans, and I lifted my hips to help as he slid the denim down my legs.

My breath hitched as Jazz's gaze roamed over my nearly naked form. I felt exposed and vulnerable, but the hunger in his eyes made me feel wanted. Jazz's hands skimmed up my thighs, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

“You're sure about this?” Jazz asked again, his voice rough with desire. “What if I mess this up, what if?—”

“Yes,” I breathed out. “I want you, Jazz. All of you.”

That seemed to counter the last of Jazz's fears, and I arched into him, desperate for more contact.

Jazz's lips trailed down my neck, nipping and sucking at the sensitive skin. I moaned, tangling my fingers in his hair. His mouth continued its journey south, pausing to lavish attention on my chest. When his tongue flicked across my nipple, I gasped and tugged at his hair.

"Jazz, please," I whimpered. "I need you."

He looked up at me, his eyes dark with desire. "I love you," he murmured.

"I love you!" I wanted to cry, but he kissed from my lips to my chest, and I writhed beneath him as he continued his torturously slow exploration of my body. By the time he reached the waistband of my boxers, I was trembling with need, and I carded my fingers through his hair.

He grasped my wrists, gently but firmly guiding them above my head, and I craved more. His erection pressing against my thigh was a hot brand, and I rocked against him, desperate for relief.

Jazz's teeth grazed my collarbone as he teased his way down my chest. He reached my nipple and flicked it with his tongue, sending shivers of pleasure coursing through me. The slight sting of pain was followed by white-hot arousal as he sucked the sensitive peak into his mouth. I gasped as pleasure pooled between my legs. He trailed kisses back to my lips.

"Jazz," I panted, my voice thick with need. "Please."

A groan escaped Jazz as he pressed his forehead to mine. "What if I can't... what if..."

“Please,” I begged, and he closed his eyes.

“God, Alex, you have no idea what you do to me,” he murmured.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“Only what you do to me,” I reassured.

His hands slid down my sides, hooking into the waistband of my boxers. I lifted my hips, allowing him to slide them off. The cool air on my exposed skin made me shiver, but Jazz's warm hands chased away the chill as he trailed up my inner thighs, teasing and exploring. I spread my legs wider, inviting him closer as he stripped. When his hand wrapped around my cock, I let out a strangled moan.

“Is this what you want?” Jazz murmured, stroking me slowly.

“More,” I gasped. “I need more.”

Jazz released me, reaching for the bedside drawer. I whimpered at the loss of contact but felt a thrill of anticipation as I heard the snap of a bottle cap. Moments later, I felt Jazz's slick finger circling my entrance.

“Relax for me, Alex,” he whispered, placing soft kisses on my inner thigh.

I took a deep breath, willing my body to relax, as Jazz pressed a finger inside me and worked me open. I gasped as he added a second finger, stretching me further. The slight burn mixed with waves of pleasure as he curled his fingers, searching for that spot inside me. When he found it, I cried out, my hips bucking off the bed.

“There,” I panted. “Right there, Jazz.”

He continued to stroke that spot, sending sparks of ecstasy through my body. I writhed beneath him, lost in sensation, and I knew I wouldn't last much longer.

“Jazz, please,” I begged. “I’m ready. I need you now.”

Jazz withdrew his fingers, leaving me feeling empty. I heard the crinkle of a condom wrapper.

“Are you sure?” he asked one last time.

“Yes,” I breathed. “I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

Jazz nodded, his eyes dark with desire. But instead of pushing forward, he surprised me by rolling us over so that I was straddling his hips. My breath caught as I realized what he wanted.

“Like this,” Jazz murmured, his hands settling on my waist. “I’m not strong enough to... Jesus, Alex... I want to see you, Alex. I want you to take what you need.”

My heart raced at his words. I braced my hands on his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart beneath my palms. Slowly, I lifted my hips, positioning myself over him. Jazz steadied me as I began to sink onto his length.

I gasped at the stretch, the fullness and Jazz's fingers tightened on my hips. Inch by inch, I took him in until I was fully seated on his lap. I paused, adjusting to the sensation of being so filled. Jazz's gaze locked on mine, his expression a mix of awe and desire.

“You feel incredible,” he said on a breath, his thumbs tracing circles on my skin.

I rolled my hips experimentally, drawing a low groan from Jazz. The movement sent sparks of pleasure through me, and I did it again, more deliberately this time. Jazz's hands guided me as I moved, lifting myself before sinking back onto him.

I established a steady rhythm at first, savoring every sensation, and Jazz met my movements with shallow thrusts, hitting that spot inside me that made me see stars.

“So beautiful,” Jazz encouraged, his voice rough.

I shuddered at his touch, increasing my pace. The friction was exquisite, sending waves of pleasure coursing through me with each movement. Jazz's hips rose to meet mine, driving himself deeper.

“Jazz,” I gasped, my fingers digging into his chest. “Oh god, Jazz...”

He sat up, wrapping an arm around my waist to pull me flush against him. The change in angle had me crying out, my head falling back. Jazz's lips found my throat, sucking and nipping at the sensitive skin.

“That's it, baby,” he murmured against my neck. “Let me hear you.”

I was beyond words at this point, only able to produce desperate moans and gasps as Jazz and I moved together. The new position allowed him to thrust even deeper, hitting that sweet spot with every stroke. I clung to his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin as the pleasure built to an almost unbearable intensity.

Jazz's hand slipped between our bodies, wrapping around my neglected cock. I cried out at the dual stimulation, my hips jerking as I chased my release.

“Come for me, Alex,” Jazz growled, his voice rough with desire. “I want to feel you come apart.”

His words pushed me over the edge. My back arched as ecstasy crashed over me in waves, my vision whiting out as I cried Jazz's name. I clenched around him, drawing a deep groan from his throat as he followed me over the edge. Jazz's hips jerked

upward as he came, his face buried in my neck as he pulsed inside me.

We clung to each other as the aftershocks rolled through us, trembling and slick with sweat and our breathing began to even out. Jazz peppered soft kisses along my shoulder and neck, his arms tightening around me.

Source Creation Date: May 19, 2025, 10:36 am

“That was...” I trailed off, unable to find words to describe what we'd just shared.

“Incredible,” Jazz finished for me, pulling back to meet my eyes. His expression was tender, full of affection.

I nodded, feeling shy.

Jazz cupped my face in his hands, drawing me in for a sweet, lingering kiss. “You're amazing, Alex,” he murmured against my lips. “I love you.”

My heart swelled at his words. “I love you too,” I whispered, resting my forehead against his.

Eventually, Jazz lifted me off him, both of us wincing at the separation. He disposed of the condom, then pulled me back into his arms, arranging us so that I was nestled against his chest.

His fingers traced lazy patterns on my back as we lay in comfortable silence. I felt boneless, sated, and more content than I could remember.

“Was that... okay?” Jazz asked softly, a hint of vulnerability in his voice.

Surprised by the question, I propped myself up on one elbow to look at him. “It was perfect,” I assured him with a kiss. “It was more than perfect,” I added, my voice filled with sincerity. “It was everything I've always wanted.”

Jazz's eyes softened, a smile tugging at his lips. “I've missed you all this time.”

“Likewise,” I said.

“Likewise?” Jazz chuckled. “Who even says that.”

“People who’ve just had their brains destroyed by an orgasm.”

He laughed, and we lay wrapped in each other’s arms as I traced patterns on his thigh, over scars and smooth skin.

“That one was shrapnel,” he murmured.

I stopped touching. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to?—”

“No. I want to tell you what I can, and that one was from my second tour,” Jazz said softly. “It’s okay to touch them. They’re a part of me now.”

I hesitated before running my fingers over the scar again. Jazz shivered, but didn’t pull away.

“What happened?” I whispered.

Jazz was quiet for a long moment, and I worried I’d pushed too far.

“An IED killed two of my friends.” His arms tightened around me as if anchoring himself in the present. “I was the lucky one.”

I pressed a soft kiss right over his heart. “I’m so sorry,” I murmured.

Jazz inhaled deeply, his chest rising and falling under my cheek. “Sometimes, it feels like yesterday,” he said softly, and he stroked my hair. “I want to share everything with you, Alex. The good and the bad.”

We lay in silence for a while, the weight of his words settling between us. I traced my fingers over his skin, mapping the contours of his body, both smooth planes and raised scars. Each mark told a story, and I wanted to know them all.

But today, I was happy to lie in his arms and think about a future with the man I loved.

One that I never thought I would have.

Epilogue

JAZZ

It was Christmas Eve, a night draped in the soft glow of fairy lights lining the windows of Guardian Hall. The gentle fall of snow muffled the world outside, and Alex and I sat together.

We were spending time together before Alex headed down to cover the night shift. We were subdued because while our Christmas Eve was warm and settled, many veterans were out there in the frigid Chicago night, unable to take that first step toward Guardian Hall. We'd been out all day, handing out flyers, cards, donations where we could, food bundles, heavy coats, and blankets.