



Styx & Stones

Author: *Carmen Jenner*

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Description: Cancer sucks ... and then you die. Alaska Stone is a walking wet dream. My wet dream. For years, I've watched her in the halls, wanted her, but she never knew I existed. Not until she walked into my chemo session. For me, it was love at first sight. For her? It might take a little longer. But hey, it's not like we're on a deadline or anything.

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PROLOGUE

STYX

Cancer sucks.

And then you die.

At least that's how it's supposed to go.

Only sometimes, fate likes to screw with you. It makes you hold on just long enough to lure you into thinking that you're gonna make it, that you won't lose the most important things to you—like your epic collection of Rolling Stonemagazines dating back thirty years. Like family, your youth, or your sense of self. Like the girl who walked into my chemo session and stole my heart.

Stones was unlike any teen I'd ever met.

We thought we had forever.

We were wrong.

Sounds like some fucked up Romeo and Julietshit, right?

Only it wasn't the Capulets and Montagues trying to keep us apart.

It was life. It was cancer.

This isn't one of those poor-me-I've-got-cancer books. It's a race against the Grim Reaper. It's a fucked-up fairytale—if Prince Charming was a cynical, bratty eighteen-year-old ... who dies.

Oops! Spoiler alert.

You might not want to get too attached. But don't feel bad, because despite making my grand exit at the tender age of eighteen, I lived.

If nothing else.

I lived.

CHAPTER ONE

STYX

Page 2

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Balls.

This is balls. I sit in the front seat and stare at the hospital entrance.

Fucking balls.

I'm a kid. We're supposed to do stupid shit, cut school, drink, do drugs, go to parties, have sex, get felt up in a theater, maybe feel up someone else in a theater, and make thoughtless, spur-of-the-moment decisions.

We're supposed to outlive our parents.

We don't die at seventeen. Cancer doesn't kill us; middle age does. At least, that's how it's supposed to go.

Reality is different.

Reality is sitting in a fucking chemo center while a frumpy nurse jabs a tube in your port and pumps your body full of poison to kill the cancer currently eating away at your insides.

Reality is watching your mom and dad argue over money when they think you're asleep because they can't afford the roof over your head and the medication that's supposed to keep you alive.

Reality is walking into school and everyone knowing, everyone staring at you like you're a pariah, or worse—believing cancer's contagious.

Reality is puking up your guts for two days straight after a chemical cocktail.

Reality. Is. Fucking. Balls.

Luckily for me, I don't dwell much on reality. Not when I was given the all clear at twelve, not when I just had time to grow my hair out again into kickass, flowing locks that I refused to brush no matter how my mom begged. And I definitely didn't dwell when cancer came back again.

"You ready?" Mom switches off the engine and grabs her oversized purse. These days, it's full of pills, contraptions, paperwork, and a defibrillator. Okay, she's not really carrying a defibrillator, but she may as well be.

I glance at the entrance again, wishing I didn't have to go in there, and silently cursing the cancer for not killing me the last time around. "Why don't you go surprise Dad at work?"

"What?"

"This isn't my first time. You'll be fidgeting like you always do and it will drive me nuts. I'll snap, and you'll cry, and think you can fix me by grabbing snacks from the vending machine. Let's just skip all that. Go see Dad at work, hang out like you used to when I was a normal kid."

"Your dad and I are separated, Styx, and you are a nor—"

I hold up my hand to halt her words. "We both know I'm not normal. I'm dying."

"Don't say that," Mom hisses. "Don't you ever say that."

"We're all dying. Some of us just quicker than others."

Mom's almost gray hair is pulled back in a bun so severe it looks like it hurts. The lines on her face deepen as she frowns. She's too thin, has permanent bags under her eyes, and a pinched look about her that she never used to have. She's only forty-two, but my cancer has ravaged her body almost as much as mine.

She shakes her head. "I'm not leaving you in there by yourself."

"Yes, you are." I grab her face and kiss her cheek. I can't remember the last time I did that. Her wide-eyed expression tells me she can't remember either. I climb out of the car and grab my messenger bag full of Rolling Stone and snacks that I know I won't eat. "I got a stack of magazines, and Carissa will take good care of me."

"No."

"It's not open for debate. I can't fucking stand you hovering. I can't"—I inhale and exhale slowly so I won't lose it and say something I'll regret—"you can't be there. Go see Dad, and the two of you can cry it out or screw or whatever it is old people do when they're alone, but I'm doing chemo on my own from now on."

"You're seventeen years old, Styx."

"Yeah, and you gotta let me live sometime." I shake my head and tap my hands on the car. "Don't make this harder than it is."

"Fine. But I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to sit right here until you're done, and if you need anything at all, you call me."

"I won't."

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Her jaw tics, and I can't hear it, but I know she's grinding her teeth. "Call me or need me?"

"Both." It's a shitty thing to say to your mom. I know that, especially given my situation, but I'm not lying. I need space. I need to feel like she's not always there, holding my hand. Or, more importantly, I need her to know my hand won't always be there to hold. It's better this way.

When I walk into the oncology ward, Carissa is leaning against the nurses' station. She's a badass black woman with a wicked sense of humor. She's also overworked and underpaid. I know because she constantly tells me she doesn't get nearly enough money for putting up with me.

I like Carissa. She's probably the only adult in the world—scratch that—the only human in the world who doesn't treat me like I'm going to blow away with a strong breeze because I have cancer.

She looks up from the patient's file in her hand and purses her lips. "You can't be in here without your parents."

"Pfft." I tuck my hair under my knit cap and screw my mouth up to show my disbelief. "No one else here has their parents with them. Did you tell Jan that same thing?"

Her brow arches and a humorless laugh escapes her lips. "Honey, Jan is almost a

hundred years old. I doubt she'd hear me even if I did say it."

"I can hear you assholes just fine," Jan mutters from her open cubicle, flipping us the bird.

"Of course you can, Jan. Good for you!" I shout, though I know she can hear everything just fine. It's what we do. Give each other shit to avoid the reality of what we're doing here. "God, Carissa, you're such an insensitive bitch."

Carissa snaps her file closed, throws it on the counter behind her, and crosses her arms over her chest. I grin like a madman.

"I'm the bitch who's pumping you full of drugs for the next six hours so if I were you, junior, I'd be real nice to Carissa." She pushes me toward the cubicles. I always get the very last one ... so I don't annoy all the old people in the room. "Now go sit your ass in the booth."

"Nope."

"What do you mean nope?"

"I mean today"—I throw my arms wide—"I'm sitting in the middle."

"In the middle?" Carissa asks in disbelief. "The middle of what?"

"Let me ask you something. We have all these cubicles sectioned off by thin little curtains to give the illusion of privacy, but no one really has any privacy. We all have a disease that's trying to kill us. We come in here to get pumped full of shit, but we gotta do that in private? It's not like we can't hear everything anyway. I know Jan has mucinous carcinoma of the breast, Garry—two rooms from the end—has pancreatic cancer, Shaniqua has that thing with her eye, and Wan has shitty lungs. Oh, and they

all know I have ARMS.”

“What, are you goin’ around reading everybody’s bags?”

I twist my lips up in a half smile. “Pretty much. Wait,” I say, as a man with long hair like mine and the kind of looks you only see on an Abercrombie & Fitch commercial enters the oncology ward. He walks up to Carissa and I, one hand in the pocket of his jeans, the other clenched at his side. “Fresh meat. Who the hell are you?”

The guy raises a brow and glares at me. “I’m Harley Hamilton”—he glances at Carissa—“The new patient. Who the hell is this kid?”

“I’m Styx.” I grin. “I’ll be your chemo buddy.”

Harley grimaces. “No one told me there’d be children present.”

Carissa rolls her eyes. “Styx is also known as our resident pain in the ass. Don’t worry; you’ll get used to him. It’s nice to meet you, Harley. Why don’t you go take a seat in cubicle five, and I’ll be with you in just a moment?”

“Thanks,” Harley says, and walks down the line of curtained off cubicles as if he’s slowly trudging toward death.

Carissa turns her angry gaze on me. “Look, kid, you sit wherever the hell you wanna sit, just be sure you and your pole are happy to be there for the next good long while, ’cause I ain’t moving you when you’re puking up your guts.”

“Then hook me up, sugar mama, ’cause I’m staying right here.”

“Call me that again, and I might just whoop your ass into an early grave before your cancer does.”

I chuckle. “Oh, Carissa, you say the sweetest things.”

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CHAPTER TWO

ALASKA

This blows. I stare at the closed doors to the oncology ward while my mom fishes in her purse for her insurance, or Tic Tacs, or ... God knows what.

Cancer.

That's what I've been reduced to.

Cancer.

That's what I have become.

A cancer on my family, on their emotions, on their time, and on their bank account.

Cancer sucks.

I grow tired of waiting for Mom to fish through her purse, and I walk through the doors. I don't know what I expected from chemotherapy: puke everywhere, patients strapped to beds writhing in pain, their loved ones drowning in a puddle of tears?

I hadn't expected everyone to be sitting in a circle, laughing like they were front and center at Cobb's Comedy Club. I hadn't expected amusement and conversation, and I hadn't expected to recognize the kid who stared back at me with wide, horror-struck eyes.

Loner boy.

He goes to my school, sits by himself at lunch, never talks to anyone, and worms his way out of handing in assignments by playing the cancer card. It's odd that when the doctor told me I had a brain tumor, this Styx kid was the first person who popped into my mind. Not my parents, or my friends, or that I might die, lose all my hair, or that they'd cut open my skull and fish out the thing growing inside my head, but that I had cancer ... just. Like. Styx.

I don't know why my first thought was of him, a boy I'd never so much as uttered a word to, but I think I hate him on principle now. I hate him because he reminds me of the thing that's trying to kill us both. I hate him because he represents a fight I'm not sure I'm ready for. I hate him because despite being a weird loner, who's never so much as looked in my direction, I wanted to question him about all this cancer stuff the second I found out. Which, I guess, just makes me an asshole. Why would he want to talk to some rando girl about her newly diagnosed cancer?

Teens are so fucking entitled. Myself included.

All six patients watch me, but it's the weight of one stare in particular that puts my teeth on edge.

Styx Hendricks.

What the hell is he looking at? Hasn't he ever seen a teenage girl with cancer before?

"You must be Alaska Stone?" A sweet-faced black woman blocks my view of loner boy.

"Yeah," I reply on autopilot, wishing I could be anywhere else in the world right now but in this room. Why did he look at me like that? And why doesn't he have a parent

here with him?

“I’m Carissa. I’m going to be taking care of you today.”

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“Carissa, I’m Joanie Stone,” my mom says. “We spoke on the phone yesterday.”

“Hi, Joanie. Good to meet you.” Carissa opens the file in her hand and peruses it. “Okay, Alaska, we’re trying a new open-treatment situation, and you’re welcome to join the others if you like, but let’s set you up in a booth while we get your weight and run some tests to make sure we have the right dosage.”

She leads the way to a sectioned off cubicle. My Mom follows, but I dare a glance at that Styx kid. His gaze is still wide, panicked even. He opens his mouth, and closes it again, and I walk away before he can tell me how sorry he is.

CHAPTER THREE

STYX

What the fuck is shedoing here?

I watch Alaska be led away by Carissa, and I lean forward in my seat, afraid I might be sick.

Or ... Sicker.

She has cancer.

She has fucking cancer.

This can’t be happening. I rake my hands through my hair. I want to go over there

and demand they tell me what's wrong with her. I want to know what drugs they're giving her, and how they plan to eradicate her illness.

But I can't.

I can't demand answers, or ask to see her file. I can't do any of those things because while I know her, she doesn't know me. We've never even spoken beyond a conversation we had two years ago about the note she'd dropped under her desk. A note that I read over and over for two days, just to memorize the whirls and loops of her handwriting before returning it to her.

The girl I've watched from afar for seven years has cancer. The girl I've loved since the fifth grade just walked into my chemo session, and I feel as if my whole world just fucking imploded.

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CHAPTER FOUR

ALASKA

Three hours into my first chemo session, and I'm bored out of my brain. Mom leaves to stretch her legs and grab a coffee. I'd go too, if it weren't for the damn IV in my arm and the giant pole that's attached to it. It might garner a few strange looks.

"All I ever see is you," the hero says from the TV as he sweeps the heroine off her feet and lays one on her.

Fucking rom-coms.

"Bullshit," I whisper-yell at the TV and make a gagging sound. "You were totally chatting up some other chick a minute ago."

"Hey."

I flinch, glancing in alarm at loner boy standing inside my curtained cubicle. His head is covered in a knit cap, his shirt is too big, his jeans are slim but baggy in the right places, and his flannel shirt is tied around his waist. He looks like an emo Jughead Jones. If Jughead carried a chemo pole.

"Hey," I say flicking off the TV.

"Bad time?"

“Just cursing Hollywood for their unrealistic viewpoints on romance. You?”

He shrugs and shoves a hand in the pocket of his jeans. “Just tryin’ not to die.”

I laugh so loudly, and so unexpectedly, that I snort. I raise my PICC line in the air and say, “Cheers to that.”

“I didn’t know you were—”

“Don’t.” I shake my head. “Don’t tell me you’re sorry. I swear to God if one more person says, ‘I’m sorry’, I’m going to slap them.”

“Actually, I was gonna go with, ‘I didn’t know you were such a heartless bitch.’” He tilts his chin toward the TV. “But sure, we can go with sorry if you want to make it all about you.”

I gape at him. I don’t know whether he’s being serious or not. I don’t think any guy has ever talked to me like that.

“Styx Hendricks, you leave that girl be, you hear?” Carissa comes marching down the hall and slides my curtain back. “We don’t need you scaring her off on her first day.”

“Just initiating the welcome wagon, Carissa. Don’t worry, though; she’s not the neighborly type.”

“Go sit your butt down, boy. I’ll deal with you in a minute.”

“See ya, ’round, Stones.”

“It’s Stone. Singular,” I say with a bored expression. “Alaska Stone.”

He grins and mock-bows, almost toppling his pole in the process. “I know.”

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The day after my chemosession, I can barely move. For a treatment which is supposed to save my life, it sure feels like it's killing me. I lie in bed and watch the turning leaves of the Ficus through the window. I've felt nauseous off and on, but the real killer is the splitting migraines. Nothing new there; that was what led to my diagnosis in the first place. I slide my phone off the nightstand and pull up IG. I'd told my followers I wanted to document my whole experience, but I feel like shit, so no way am I appearing on camera today without a filter.

“Hey, Aerosol Addicts. Alaska here. No, chemo didn't make me grow giant puppy-dog ears; they come to you courtesy of the fact that my face will totally break the internet if I film without some type of filter right now. And not at all in a Kim K way. So, here's the deal ... chemo sucks. Cancer sucks.”

I sit up and wince when every muscle in my body screams for me to stop.

“Yesterday, I went for my first treatment. It was terrifying, but still not as scary as I expected. Kinda weird though. When I walked in, the other patients were laughing and practically singing Kumbaya. It was a bit shocking at first; I think I expected everyone to be strapped to beds and screaming in pain while some mad scientist blasted our bodies with X-rays.” I laugh at my own ignorance. “Pretty stupid, right?”

I shake my head and clear my throat. “Anyway, I watched a couple of tragic rom-coms with my mom, took a nap, and stalked Noah Centineo's Insta, and Snapchat. A lot. Overall, it wasn't as bad as I expected.

“Today though? Today sucks. I can barely move. Everything hurts—even my eyelashes have all the negative vibes. I'm sure it gets easier as time goes on. Or, at

least, that's what I hope, but for now I'm going to take advantage of the fact that I don't have to be in school, and this bitch is going to take a goddamn nap. Later, Addicts."

I sign off, barely having time to put my phone down before the lethargy wins and drags me under.

Chemo, cancer, and the tumor taking up residence in my brain might suck, but naps?

Naps are king.

CHAPTER FIVE

ALASKA

The first three days after chemo are hell. My life is an endless cycle of pain and puke and feeling halfway dead. By day four, Grace and Eleanor come to visit. I've seen my two best friends exactly three times since my diagnosis, and our texts have been awkward AF. I need them right now, but they've been ghosting me.

"So what have you guys been up to?" I blurt out while Grace is telling me all about how her latest crush gave her a pencil—and his number—when she dropped hers during their Chemistry pop quiz.

Grace frowns, and Eleanor looks down at her shoes.

"Coach is pushing us really hard for Cheer," Grace says.

"Yeah, we're practicing all the time now." El nods. "We barely made an appearance last night at Cole's, and I have no idea how we're going to get away for Grace's party."

“You went to Cole’s?”

“Yeah,” Grace says, shrugging off my question. “He had a thing last night, but it was just a small group of friends.”

El scoffs. “Um ... the whole school was there.”

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“Except those with cancer, right?”

“Oh.” El shakes her head and her cheeks turn pink. “I mean, it was just a handful of people really, but you know when Cole Meyers and his friends are in a room, it feels like a lot of people.”

“You guys don’t have to lie to me. It’s not like I didn’t see the evidence of it on Snapchat. By the way, Grace, nice work making out with my ex. Of course, I found kissing Cole was like the equivalent of making out with a wet log, but you looked like you were really getting into it, you know?”

“It just happened; it wasn’t intentional. And we would have invited you, but we didn’t think you’d want to come.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to come to a party with my best friends?”

“Because you’re sick,” she snaps. “How do we know if you’re up for partying? Doesn’t chemo like ... make you puke twenty-four-seven?”

“No,” I lie. Technically, I have spent the last few days puking my guts up, but I hear it’s supposed to get better. “And you could have asked.”

“Sorry,” she says, sounding not sorry at all.

“Grace,” El chides.

Grace stands, grabs her backpack, and slings it over her shoulder. “I have to go. I’ve

gotta help my mom with her event tonight.”

“But you said we were going to hang at Cole’s after this?” Eleanor grabs her bag too.

“Change of plans, El.” Grace shoots her a glare that says, “You’re too dumb to live.”

“You guys should definitely go.” I sigh and shake my head. “I’m tired anyway.”

“For the record, Al,” Grace says. “I was going to invite you to my birthday party.”

I cock my head to the side. “Was?”

“Am. I am going to invite you. I just wasn’t sure if you’d be okay.”

“Why? Because I have a brain tumor, or is it because you don’t want me puking on the cake? You know, since I do it so often?”

“Whatever,” she says, and storms toward the door. “Come or don’t come. I don’t care.”

“Great,” I say sarcastically. “See you there.”

Eleanor grimaces. “Bye, Al.”

“See you, El.”

She walks to the door and stops, turning to me with a sad smile. “I really am sorry.”

I shake my head, fighting back the tears that sting my eyes. “Don’t worry about it.”

El leaves and closes my bedroom door behind her. A beat later, they’re whispering

outside in the hall. Their footsteps retreat to the stairs and Grace says, “God, it’s like the chemo killed her personality.”

My tears spring free, thick droplets that splatter against my duvet. I flop back on the bed and wish for the cancer in my brain to disappear.

Oh, and for better friends.

CHAPTER SIX

ALASKA

Thirty minutes into my second chemotherapy session and we're all seated in a circle. Mostly, it's just a bunch of old people, one really hot guy who looks like a freaking supermodel, me, and ... Styx Hendricks.

I look up from my phone to find him watching me.

"So ..." Styx leans forward in the chair opposite mine. "What are you in for?"

"Excuse me?"

"Cancer?" He squints, staring at the bag with my medicine. I grab my pole and turn it away from him. "What kind of cancer?"

"Oh, um ... diffuse astrocytoma." I shake my head and explain in English. "Brain tumor."

"Told ya. Pay up, Jan." He makes the one-handed, universal sign for bring it—which I guess also doubles for give me my fucking money.

Harley—the cute older guy—glances between me and Styx, chuckles, and goes back to reading his *Better Gardens* magazine.

"You bet on what type of cancer I have?"

Styx's gaze slides back to mine. "Yeah. So?"

My hands ball into fists. "So what kind of people are you? Who does that?"

"Bored chemo patients," he says with a level glare. "They do that."

"You're sick."

He laughs. "I'm sick, you're sick, we're all sick here."

I clench my jaw together. These people are crazy. Heartless and cold. Tears sting the backs of my eyes, but I will not let him see me cry. No matter how callous he is. No matter how much I don't like him. "Well then, since you're all so open about discussing my cancer, what the hell do you have?"

"ARMS."

"Arms? You have cancer of the arms?"

Styx rolls his eyes and shuts his magazine, no doubt preparing to school me on all of the things I don't know about this stupid disease. "Alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma—ARMS for short."

"Never heard of it." I tilt my chin.

"I don't suppose you would have. I'm one in a million, baby." He pats his abdomen, stroking the worn fabric of his T-shirt. "Peritoneum. Don't bother trying to make them out—my little tumor friends are invisible unless you have X-ray vision. Though you're welcome to slip your hand under my shirt and feel my abs, just to make sure."

"You're a pig."

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“And you need to lighten up. It’s only death, Stones.”

“Fine then. You wanna talk death and be all flippant about it? What’s your survival rate?”

“Four years.”

I swallow hard, regretting the question. Four years.Four years?That can’t be right.

“The first time.”

First time? Oh my God. He’s been through all of this before. Does that make it worse this time around? I dart out my tongue and wet dry lips. Nausea rolls through my belly, and I wonder if it’s the chemicals pumping through my system or the fact that Styx is so blasé about his life expectancy that makes me want to puke. I don’t want to ask, but the question is hanging in the air between us, and it would be weird if I didn’t.

“And now?” My voice cracks over the words.

He shrugs, glancing down at his magazine. His hands grip the spine until his knuckles turn white, the only sign he’s no longer feeling as confident as he was just a second ago when we were discussing my sickness. “Who the fuck knows?”

“They didn’t give you an estimation?”

“They didn’t have to.”

“What does that—”

“It means, Stones ...” He grins and leans forward. “... that patients my age who have metastatic ARMS positive with PAX3-FOXO1 fusion are pretty much fucked.”

I glance between him, Harley, and the other patients all staring at us. “So if the chemo doesn’t work, then why the hell are we here?”

“Chemo, radiation, surgery. They’re all just steps we take to make our loved ones feel better.”

Jan nods. “Amen.”

The others remain quiet, staring down at their phones, tablets, books, or magazines, no doubt wishing they were somewhere else. I wish I was too. “So you don’t believe any of this helps?”

“Honestly? No.”

“Then why come to chemo at all?”

“Because it beats the shit out of Chem pop quizzes, and dodging jocks like Cole Meyers in the hall who’re too stupid to realize what they have.” He holds his magazine almost reverently, and tucks it inside his messenger bag. “Besides, it’s a good place to pick up chicks.”

“Cute.” I raise a brow and lean back against the headrest. “But I’ll hold out for a guy who has a little more time up his sleeve.”

Styx laughs, obnoxiously loud. His eyes sparkle with mirth. He’s quite possibly the strangest kid I’ve ever met. This conversation is morbid, odd, and a part of me can’t

believe I just said that to a boy who's terminally ill, and yet, I can't stop smiling.

“Ah, Stones. You're hilarious, but I was talking about Jan.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

STYX

Isit at my desk, mycomputer on, the cursor flashing. I have some stupid English lit paper due next week, and I'm pretty sure both my teacher and I know it's not getting done, but sometimes going through the motions fools me into thinking that school is something I need to further my life goals. My parents, my teacher, and I all know it's bullshit. I go because it's just one less thing my mom has to worry about. Besides, it's where Alaska is, so where the hell else would I be?

I close my laptop, grab my phone, and pull up her Instagram account. Her story is a video from twenty-two hours ago. She's lying in bed, holding the phone out at arm's length. I turn the volume up and flop down on my mattress. My stomach churns and revolts, and I squeeze my eyes tightly closed as the pain shoots through my abdomen.

“Another not-so-fun fact about cancer, Addicts, is that food tastes weird now. My mom's shoving all of these green juices down my throat—and I couldn't stand that shit at the best of times, but now, I get cravings for it. Maybe the radioactivity in my body is just begging for more green stuff so I can become like Mr. Burns in that episode ofThe Simpsons.” She laughs and nearly drops the phone. “Anyway, I'm gonna take a nap, because another fun cancer fact—all I want to do is sleep. Between the thunderclap migraines and the chemo, it's a wonder my parents haven't pulled me out of school, but Dad's super Korean, so he's all ‘you must get a formal education.’ Good grades, good college equals good job. I don't know if anyone's told him I might not make it long enough to graduate.”

Her smile vanishes. My heart is ripped right out of my chest. I think about dying a lot, but I don't think about Stones dying. I just thought she'd be one of the lucky ones; she's a fighter, a fucking warrior. Maybe she'll live long enough to earn that coveted titled of survivor. Maybe she won't. But I never thought of a world without her in it.

"See you soon, Aerosol Addicts." She blows a kiss to the camera, but it lacks her usual 'tude.

I start typing a message.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: My dad is a serial wheatgrass juicer. WTF is wrong with parents TD?

Shit. I just slid into her DMs with the stupidest handle ever. God. Now I can never let her know it's me. I stare at the screen for way too long and then throw it on the bed with a huge exhalation.

A beat later, it chimes.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Hey, nice handle. I know, right? Parents are weird.

I read the message several times, trying to see more in it than is actually there, hoping for her to take just a hint of interest. I'm a total girl right now.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Thanks. I've been meaning to change it for years, but it's a real lady-killer.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: I bet. ??

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: You're really talented. And hey, my parents were freaking out the first time too. It's natural. They calm down after a while. Mine were

super tense all the time. My cancer cleared up, but their marriage didn't.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Holy shit! You have cancer too?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Yep. Stage three.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: OMG. I'm so sorry.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: TY. It's pretty fucked. How's chemo? You start losing your hair yet?

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Only a handful here and there in the shower. U?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: I got some patches going. Think I might try out a new look. I hear the combover is popular. YOLO, right?

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: LOL. Some of us don't live at all. You have to DM me that shit.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Oh, I'll DM it.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Cool. I gotta go. Parents are taking me to some bullshit group therapy thing.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Oh God, I hated group therapy. Church, hospital, or youth center?

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Worse. Hospital chapel. Like I really want to go back there after spending hours in chemo

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@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Yeah. I hear you. I decided to skip it this time around. Met an OK kid once. We hung out a lot. It kind of helped having someone to talk to about cancer stuff.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Really? Do you still stay in touch?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: No. He died.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Oh. ?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Yeah.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Soz.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: It's cool.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: So, see you 'round?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Sure. SYS.

I close the app and smile like a dick. Then I check the time on my phone and launch myself off the bed. "Mom?"

She bursts through the door in a robe with a towel over her head. There are suds on her face, like she was just washing it. "What? What's wrong?"

"Can you drive me to the hospital?"

“What’s the matter?” She races toward me and places her hand on my forehead.
“You’re not burning up.”

“I’m not sick, Mom.” I shove her hand away and roll my eyes, throwing on my hoodie and chucks. “I have group.”

“Oh my God.” She lets out an exasperated sigh and holds her hand to her chest. “You gave me a heart attack. I thought there was an emergency.”

“There is. I gotta get to group.”

Mom shakes her head. “I thought you weren’t going this time?”

I shrug, ignoring the way she studies me. “I am.”

“Okay, just give me five minutes.”

“We’re gonna be late.”

“Styx, I can’t go in my bathrobe. I have cleanser on my face, and a casserole in the oven.”

“Fine. I’ll drive myself.”

“No. Not on your life. I’ve seen the way you drive.”

“Dad lets me drive.”

“Your dad is just as bad a driver as you are. Why do you think he rides everywhere in the city?”

I shake my head and brush past. “I’ll wait in the car.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALASKA

After group, I wait in the restroom and scroll through my messages on IG so I won't have to endure another interrogation from Styx. When ten minutes have passed, I exit the ladies' and nod to the security guard by the entrance as I leave the hospital. I glance at the packed lot, surprised that outside it's blissfully quiet while inside, nurses and doctors bustle about, trying to save lives.

The breeze caresses my face, and I pull my coat tighter around my body to ward away the bitter SF chill already in the air.

"Hey."

I jump, startled. I thought I was alone out here, and I have no desire to talk to some creepy, homeless dude.

Slowly, I turn and find loner boy leaning against the wall, phone in hand, earbuds in. I hadn't known he'd be in support group. Though we do chemo at the same hospital, so I guess it shouldn't have been a huge surprise. Still, he sat through the whole thing like he was too good for it, too bored, and like his time was too precious to entertain a bunch of other dying kids.

"Hey," I say, glancing at the parked cars in the lot, praying my mom will hurry up and save me from having to speak to Mr. We're All Gonna Die Anyway for long.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you.” He pushes off the wall and stands beside me. “So, group therapy. That’s some kind of bullshit, right?”

I laugh, despite myself. “Yeah, it really is.”

He pulls the buds from his ears, opens his satchel, and tosses them inside. “I was gonna skip this time ’round, but my mom insisted.”

I frown and study his face under the unflattering fluorescent light. To look at him, you’d never know he was sick. “You’re not the first person to say that to me today.”

He clears his throat. “Really? So, you have other cancer friends?”

“Is that what we are? Cancerfriends?”

“It’s an exclusive club. Invite only.” He shrugs. “And it requires all members exchange phone numbers.”

“Really?” I laugh and fold my arms across my chest. “And how many members are in this club?”

“Right now? Just you and me. I’m the club president, so I guess that makes you treasurer and VP.”

“What if I want to be the president?”

“Can’t. Sorry. The president has to be impeached or die for you to get promoted, but hey, less than four short years and you’ll be running the joint.”

My smile vanishes. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make out like death is some big joke?”

“Isn’t it?”

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“You know, there are plenty of other people in your position, who are just trying to live, and who aren’t making light of their illness.” I button my coat, because my hands need something to do other than punch him in his pretty face.

“Like you?” He raises a brow. The cool autumn breeze stirs his hair from his shoulders. The kid isn’t even wearing a coat. It’s like he wants to die. “Tell me, Stones, how should I treat my diagnosis? How should I behave so that you’re comfortable?”

“Like you actually give a shit. Like you actually want to live,” I snap. My words hang heavy between us. What is it about this guy that drives me so fucking crazy?

A humorless laugh escapes him, and he steps closer. His eyes bore into mine, but they’re not angry. No. His brow is furrowed, his mouth turned down at the corners, and his eyes? His eyes don’t just look sad—they are sad. My heart pangs, my stomach twists, and he takes another step closer. So close his breath skims my face. So close we could kiss. “I want a lot of things that I’m likely never going to get.”

I inhale. He exhales. His warm breath brushes my cheek, and then he pushes past and walks to the car waiting at the curb. A car I hadn’t even noticed. He doesn’t look at me as the vehicle peels away, but the woman driving does—his mom, I guess. She smiles and waves, but Styx just looks straight ahead, as if he’s done with me. Dismissed. I’ve been dismissed by loner boy.

Oh, hell no.

I pick up my phone and open the Gram. Bypassing my feed and notifications, I open up my earlier message to @zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: You were right. Group therapy is the worst. Why didn't you warn me?

I stare at the message, waiting for a reply. When it doesn't come, I click on his profile and check out his page. His bio states: Music journo wannabe, will never grow up, kicked cancer's ass once ... the bastard came back.

Black and white pics of concerts and rock stars litter his feed. There are also a lot of pictures of Zed Atwood from the band Taint in the throes of rock-god-dom. I guess it makes sense, given his handle, but there is some next-level hero worship going on here.

I scroll for far too long, hoping for just a glimpse of my mystery messenger, but if he's one of the guys in the bands pictured, I wouldn't know. There's not a single photo of one man on his own other than Zed Atwood, and I'm pretty sure I'm not talking to him.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: I'm pretty sure I did.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Nope. No, you didn't.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Yeah, I did.

God. Is every guy going through man-o-pause right now? Why are boys so argumentative today?

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: No. You said only that you were sitting it out this time. By the way, this other guy at group said he wanted to sit it out too, but his mom

wouldn't let him. Anyway, thanks for the heads up. Not.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: So you're making friends already, huh?

I remember the awkward conversation with Styx and groan out loud, and then cover my mouth so my parents won't beat down my door asking if they can get me anything. I love them both dearly, but sometimes I hate all the hovering they've done since my diagnosis.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Urgh. Don't even get me started on that guy.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: What did he do? Hit on you at group? That seems kind of desperate.

I frown, wondering exactly what it was that set me off with Styx tonight. Sure, he's blasé and abrasive, and if he wants to joke about his illness then what do I care? Only ... Idocare. I don't know him at all, yet I want to strangle the life out of him for being so flippant about his own, well ... life.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: No, he didn't hit on me.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Then he's an idiot, because I've seen you. You're hot.

I laugh.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Thanks. Wait, are you hitting on me?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: No. That would be totally inappropriate. I mean, I could be a seventy-year-old pedophile for all you know.

Oh God, he's right. I don't know if this guy is thirteen or thirty. My stomach knots. I

don't know him at all, but the idea of not speaking to him sends a pang of disappointment through me. It's not like I have anyone else to talk to about the cancer stuff.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: OMG! Are you a seventy-year-old pedophile?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: LOL. No, but you should be careful who you talk to on the internet. Didn't your parents ever teach you stranger danger? And does it count that every inch of me feels like a seventy-year-old?

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@alaskasaerosoladdiction: But not the pedophile part, right?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Right.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: I like having you to talk to about this stuff. It makes it ... easier ... you know?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Yeah, I know.

CHAPTER NINE

ALASKA

At school, I sit at our lunch table. I search the cafeteria for Grace, and Eleanor, who are usually already here with fries and shakes, but they're absent. Again.

I haven't talked to Grace since our fight last week, and El texted a few times, but it's clear she's still avoiding me. Maybe I'm a cancer on my friends too.

I sip my strawberry shake. I love strawberry shakes, but today it makes me want to puke. I glance at my phone, send a text to my friends, and when I glance up, Styx is standing in front of me. I shove a few fries in my mouth to avoid having to speak to him.

He sits opposite me.

I glare, finish my fries, and swallow. "What the hell are you doing?"

He looks around and then back at me, pointing to himself and mouthing, “Me?”

“Why are you sitting here?” I take a pull from my straw, trying to dislodge the stuck fry in my throat.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is this not the cancer table?”

I spit milkshake all over his face. A beat passes. I cover my mouth, trying to hide my laughter as strawberry milk drips off his hair.

“Guess not.” He picks up his tray and stands. I throw a French fry at him.

“Stay.” I bite my lip to keep from smiling. He sits, and stares down at the fat, pink drops that splatter his lunch with a pat, pat, pat. “Here. I have some wet wipes in my bag.”

“You carry wet wipes? Wow. I thought you were so much cooler than that.”

I shrug. “Never know when you’re going to have a makeup emergency. Or in this case, a funny-bastard emergency.” I hand him the wet wipes and he glances at the pack.

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“Coco Betty?”

“They’re good for your skin, cruelty free, and expensive as fuck, and I’m poor now that I have cancer, go easy.”

He chuckles. “So, you think I’m a funny bastard, huh?”

“Well, bastard is true enough.”

“How come you didn’t sit with the rest of us in chemo for your first session? Afraid it’s catching?”

I throw another fry, which he plucks from mid-air. “Why would I want to sit with a bunch of old people and talk about how I’m going to die?”

“I’m not old people.”

“No, but you’re ...” I wave a hand over him and screw up my nose. “... you.”

“You wanna get out of here?”

“What? Cut class? With you?”

“Why the hell not?” He shrugs. “What are they gonna do? Ground us for life? Way I see it, with a tumor that size, you’ve got two years—three, tops.”

My smile fades. A frown crinkles my forehead and I grit my teeth. “Excuse me?”

“Cancer humor. You can only say shit like that to another cancer patient.”

“You’re an ass.”

“And you, Alaska darling, are lovely when you’re incited.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Your future boyfriend.”

I burst out laughing. I laugh so damn hard that my stomach aches. Everyone in the cafeteria turns to watch us, but I don’t care.

“I’m gonna try not to be offended by that soul-crushing laughter.”

I laugh harder. When I finally stop, I glance at him through my tears. Styx is grinning at me. “Okay.”

“Okay you’ll be my girlfriend?”

“No, dumbass. Okay I’ll cut school with you. But you better make this good.”

“Oh, it’ll be good.”

CHAPTER TEN

STYX

Shit.

I finally have the girl of my dreams willing to spend time with me, and I have no idea where the hell to take her.

I could take her home to Mom's, but if she's there we'll likely get the third degree for cutting class. We could go to my dad's, but there's fuck all to do there besides drink. Not that I've ever been opposed to that, but chemo seems to be poison enough for now.

She closes the passenger door of my dad's beat-up truck and grins. "So, where are we going?"

I swallow and draw a blank, choosing to start the engine so I don't have to answer.

"You don't have any idea, do you?" She laughs and opens the door. "You promised it would be good."

"And it will," I say. "I'm just getting a plan together."

"You're so full of it."

"I'm not full of it." I throw the truck in reverse and pull out of the lot. "This will be

an afternoon like no other.”

“Uh-huh.” She grins. “I can’t wait to see how truly miraculous this afternoon is.”

Ten minutes later, we’re staring up at a blackened-out storefront in The Mission, and I’ll admit, if I didn’t know the owner and chef, I’d be glancing up at the restaurant with a grimace on my face too.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Alaska says.

“Nope.”

“I am not going in there.” She folds her arms in front of her chest. “For all we know this place is run by an axe murderer, and we’ll end up on the news. A cautionary tale for other kids wanting to cut school.”

“He’s not an axe murderer.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he’s like my uncle.”

Stones blanches. “Oh shit. I didn’t mean ...”

“Yes, you did. But he’s not really my uncle. Not by blood anyway.”

“So, he’s a creepy, touchy-feely uncle then?”

“Come on, Stones. Live a little.”

She scowls but steps across the threshold. With a grin, I follow her into the darkness.

I've never been here without my parents, so I'm just praying I'm not wrong about Uncle Carlos.

"Hey, little Hendricks!" Carlos booms so loudly that all of the patrons turn their heads to give us a once-over.

"Hey, Uncle Carlos. How's it going?"

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“Can’t complain,ese. What about you? How you doin’ with the health stuff?”

“Er ...” I pull the collar of my T-shirt aside and show him the bandage covering a tube that feeds meds right to my vena cava. “Not so great.”

“Ah shit, that’s fucked up, bro.”

“Yeah.”

“Who’s your friend?”

“This is Alaska.” I say. “She’s not my friend though.”

Carlos’ brows shoot skyward. “Yourmamacita?”

“She wishes.”

Carlos laughs and shakes his head, while Alaska just glares at me. “Bueno, parece que tu mujer quiere matarte, hombre.”

Stones smiles sweetly and says, “I may kill him, but not until I’ve eaten.”

Carlos laughs, but I can only stare at her in shock. “You speak Spanish?”

“Fluently, duh! I did grow up five minutes from The Mission.”

Touché.

After the best burritos in San Francisco, we walk down Capp Street and head to Clarion Alley. Stones' face lights up when we see all the murals. "This is my favorite street in SF."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I don't know if you've noticed, but street art is kinda my jam."

"I noticed. You did the mural at the back of school, right?"

"Yeah, I had some help though. It was a class effort." She smiles. "Mostly I just do the sides of buildings or shopfronts here in The Mission. Or my bedroom walls and ceiling, though that usually freaks my mom out. I think she's worried I'll start taking over the rest of the house. She did let me paint the back fence though."

"That's awesome. I'd love to see it."

"You will."

Holy shit. Did she just give me an open invitation to her house?

Alaska stares up at a mural, completely oblivious to the effect her words have on me. I know I should be studying the surrounding colors and linework too, but she's the only art I see.

"What I'd really love is to paint this alley," she says.

"Yeah?"

"Of course. It's iconic."

I shrug. “I guess. My mom knows the people who run it. She takes the pictures for their website, so I was down here every other week as a kid.”

“Your mom’s a photographer?” She stops, grabbing my arm in a vise grip. “Holy shit, your mom is Viv Hendricks?”

I frown, though this is usually the response I get when people figure out my mom is the Viv Hendricks. “You know her?”

“Are you kidding? Her work is amazing. That series she did on SF’s homeless epidemic? Wow! Do you know how lucky you are?”

I laugh. “Yeah. She’s alright, as far as parents go.”

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“I would die to meet her.” Her eyes are wide as saucers. “You have to take me now.”

I thought you’d never ask.

I smirk. “You don’t waste any time do you, Stones? One date and already you’re inviting yourself back to my house.”

“This isn’t a date.”

“Sure it is.”

She rolls her eyes, but her cheeks pink up, and I know I’ve riled her. Alaska turns back the way we came and exits the alley. I follow with a grin stretched from ear to ear.

This is definitely a date.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ALASKA

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Remind me again how poisoning my body is going to cure it?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Rough day?

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: The worst. Why is it that I finally start feeling better after

chemo and then—BAM!—I'm hit with a migraine so severe I start praying for death?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: That bad, huh?

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Yep. Every now and then, the little dude renting a room in my skull likes to throw a dance party. But hey, at least he's sticking around ... unlike my other friends.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: You need new friends. Does he at least play any good music?

I laugh, but even that makes my head ache. The glare from my screen doesn't help with that either, but I'm so tired of sitting in this dark room for hours on end, unable to do anything but sleep.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Not unless you like house from the 90s.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Nooooo! Not house. Anything but that. You should evict him.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: You sound like my mother. I think she's threatened every surgeon in the Bay Area to move up my surgery. I wish she wouldn't.

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@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: You don't wanna remove UR tumor?

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: No, it's not that. More like I'm worried when they remove it, they'll remove a part of me too. I know it sounds dumb.

I swallow the lump in my throat, wishing I could say this to my mom, but she freaks and bursts into tears every time I mention not having the surgery.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Don't get me wrong, as soon as I found out there was a tumor on my brain, I wanted it out of me. It's like I thought my body had betrayed me by allowing the little dude to grow.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Little dude?

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: That's what I call my least-favorite tenant.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: That's weird, but also kind of cool. And I get it. I only had surgery on my abdomen, but I was convinced I was going to wake up a different person. Of course, I was ten at the time.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Is that you calling me chicken?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Never. You're way too beautiful to be a chicken.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Wait. I didn't know you had stomach cancer?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Yep. Gotta go.

CHAPTER TWELVE

STYX

“Fuck!” Joe, my neighbor, tosses the Xbox controller on the couch beside him and rakes his hands through his hair. “You just killed us, man.”

“Sorry,” I mutter, swiping my thumb over my iPhone. “Chemo brain.”

“Bullshit. When are you gonna stop using that as an excuse?”

“When I’m no longer in chemo, I guess.” I pull up Instagram and see Alaska has a new story. I click on it, and her face comes up, covered by another cheesy filter. She still looks fucking cute though.

“Hey, Aerosol Addicts. Alaska here. So yesterday was tests, tests, and more tests—”

“Seriously?” Joe says. “We lost our lives and everything we’ve worked for because of a girl on Instagram?”

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“Dude! Shut up. She might say something about me.”

Joe rolls his eyes. “She’s not gonna talk about you. Chicks like that don’t know we exist.”

“Maybe not you, but she knows I exist.” I focus on the screen. We were friends now, right? I mean, she did hang out at my house after our lunch date, and we didn’t fight or kill one another ... so there’s that.

He shakes his head. “You’re delusional. How long have you gone to school with this girl?”

“Since junior high.”

“And has she ever spoken to you?”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah—”

Joe narrows his. “Other than in your dreams?”

“Fuck you, dude. We hung out just the other day. I took her to lunch and then we came here.”

“Really?” He rests his head on his palm and tilts his head to the side, a mocking smile on his face. “This I would love to hear. Is she fucked in the head?”

“Kinda, yeah. She’s got a brain tumor.”

“Oh, shit. Dude, I didn’t mean—”

“Yeah, you did. But you’re an asshole so we’ll make an exception. You can’t help that your mom dropped you on your head as a baby.”

“She really has cancer?” He screws up his nose. “I mean, she’s smokin’.”

“So what? Pretty people can’t get cancer? Then what the hell am I, dumbass?”

“Oh, yeah. For sure you’d be considered pretty in some ... circles, but even you must know this girl is way, WAY out of your league.”

“Whatever.” And just to prove him wrong, I DM her.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Hey. Sorry you’re going through it right now. That sucks about the migraines.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Thanks.

I angle the phone toward him so he can see. Joe screws up his face. “Pfft. That proves nothing. She probably talks to all of her followers.”

I type again.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: You know, I’m always here if you want to talk.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Do you mean that?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Of course.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Then what’s your number?

“Dude, no fucking way.” Joe crows like the maniac he is.

“I told you,” I say, and then remember that I haven’t exactly been honest with Alaska. All this time I’ve known who she is, but she doesn’t know it’s me she’s been talking to. Icy dread eats away at my gut. Fuck. What if she thinks I’ve been catfishing her? What if she shows up on my doorstep with Nev and a camera crew, and I become just like all those other assholes who’ve pretended to be someone they’re not on the internet?

“Don’t leave her hanging, man.” Joe smacks the back of my head. “Give her your number.”

“Ow!” I rub the tender spot. It was a pussy slap, but fucking chemo makes everything hurt ten times more than it normally would. “I can’t.”

“What? Why?”

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“Because I’m not who she thinks I am.”

Joe glares at me like I need to elaborate right-the-fuck now. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means, she doesn’t know it’s me she’s been talking to online.”

“So you were lying about the two of you hanging out?”

“No, I ... it’s complicated.”

My phone buzzes and I glance down at the screen.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Hello?

Shit. I’m an asshole. She’s just lost her only friends

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: So clearly you didn’t mean you wanted to actually talk—that’s just something people say, right? I don’t know why the hell I’m surprised though. I don’t even know your name.

Fuck. I have two choices here. One, I can ignore her and she’ll never speak to me again. Or two, I tell her who I am right now, and she’ll also never speak to me again because she’ll think I’m a catfishing asshole.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: I do want to talk to you. It’s all I’ve wanted for weeks, but I have people over.

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: Of course you do.

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: It's 415-509-6205

@alaskasaerosoladdiction: You're in San Francisco?

@zedatwoodsbellybuttonlint: Yep. Born and bred. Just call, okay?

I glance down at my phone, waiting for it to ring. I close my eyes and silently will her to call me.

She doesn't.

"Dude!" Joe says, flopping back on the couch beside me. "What the hell just happened?"

"I don't know."

My phone rings and I hit answer, but I chicken out at the last minute and thrust it at Joe. He waves his hand dramatically and mouths, "No!"

I'm so fucking nervous, I toss it in his lap. A beat passes where we both make wild gestures to the phone and to each other, and then I glare at him. He picks it up and clears his throat.

"Hello," he says in a deep voice that definitely doesn't belong to him. I gesture and mouth, "Speaker. Put her on speaker."

He finally takes the hint and Alaska's voice fills the den. "You sound different than what I thought you would."

“What did you think I would sound like?”

“I don’t know. This is weird, isn’t it?”

“Totally weird,” Joe agrees. “So, listen, why don’t we skip the phone convo and just meet in person?”

“What? No! What are you doing?” I whisper.

“Um. I don’t even know your name. So I’m going to go with no.”

“It’s Styx,” he says, jumping off the couch and bolting for the stairs. “Styx Hendricks, and I live at 431 Alvarado St Dolores Heights.”

“What the hell are you doing, man?” I shout.

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“Styx?” Alaska says.

“Okay, gotta go. Bye,” Joe continues as I stalk toward him and rip the phone out of his hand.

I put it to my ear. “Alaska, listen to me.” The disconnect tone mocks me from the speaker. I glare at Joe. “You have no idea what you just did.”

“Hey, I did you a favor. You’ve been pining over this girl for years.”

“That doesn’t mean I was ready for her to know.”

“Why the hell not? You’re not getting any older. Left to your own devices, you’d be dead before you made a move.”

I glare at my best friend. The kid I’ve known since I was five years old. “Get the fuck out.”

Outside, a car screeches to a halt in front of my house and a few seconds later, someone pounds on my door.

“Shit.” Joe rakes his hand through his hair. “I didn’t mean that. I just ... I want you to be happy, dude.”

I shake my head. “Just go.”

The pounding comes again, and I trudge up the stairs toward the front door. I open it.

Alaska's fist is raised in the air, as if she was getting ready to bang her fist against it for a third time. Instead, she pounds her fist into my face.

I see stars. My head spins and I stagger back, holding my hand to my jaw. "Ow."

For a little thing ravaged by cancer, Alaska has a mean right hook.

"Ouch," Joe says, slinking by the two of us. He gives a wave and wanders across the drive to his house next door. "I'm just gonna head home now. Leave you guys to it. Nice to meet—"

"Fuck off, or you're next," Stones says, and Joe disappears inside his front door, leaving me alone with one hell of an angry teenage girl.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ALASKA

"Was I just a joke to you?" I demand, shaking out my hand. Now that the adrenalin has subsided a little, I see how crazy I must look.

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I flew over here in my mom's car. A drive that would normally take me two minutes, I conquered in thirty seconds flat. I wonder if chemo gave me some kind of angry superpower, like I'm the She-Hulk? Or maybe it's just teen angst and the fact that the boy in front of me is a complete fucking liar that has me so wound up.

"I can explain."

"Then start." I fold my arms over my chest and glare at him.

"Do you want to come in?"

"No. I wanna hit you again, but my hand really hurts." I flex my fingers. Pain shoots through them. I try not to wince. He reaches out to grab my hand, but I yank it back.

"What are you doing?"

"Let me see." His tone is soft, too soft, as if he's playing the part of the caring boyfriend. Slowly, I hold out my shaking hand and he takes it, massaging my knuckles.

"Ow, ow, ow."

"I don't think it's broken, but you need ice." He flexes his jaw. Guilt sluices through me. "And so does my face. You wanna come in and I can explain while you ice your hand?"

"Fine, but only because it hurts too much to drive right now."

He glances at my car parked across his and the neighbor's drive, the door wide open and the car chiming its annoyance at me for having left the lights on. "Gimme your keys. My mom will pitch a fit if she comes home."

I frown, a little embarrassed by my She-Hulk impersonation, and I press my keys into his waiting palm. "I was really angry."

"Was?"

"Am," I rectify with a scowl.

Styx moves past me and jumps in the driver's side, adjusting the seat before reversing out of the drive and parking on the street. He climbs out and uses the fob to lock the door as he walks into the house. I follow, taking in the pictures of Styx that I didn't get to look closely at the last time I was here. There are some where he looks happy and others where he's frowning at the person snapping the pic. There's even a photograph of him flipping the bird—which is odd, but it makes me laugh, and it's so perfectly Styx that I can't help but smile. I guess his mom felt the same because they gave it prime position on the mantel.

The photos are like a timeline of his life: baby, toddler, and tween, Styx with short hair, Styx with long hair, and then Styx with no hair at all. I look closely at those photos, picking one up to study it further. With his shiny, bald head and dark circles under the eyes, he looked so sick, but his cheeks had taken on that chipmunk, chemo appearance that mine have right now.

"Hey, you wanna stare at the embarrassing evidence of my childhood all day?" Styx leans against the wall, watching me as if I might attack him again. "Or do you want to come ice your hand?"

I straighten and glance at him. "They're not embarrassing."

“Yeah, they are, but that’s what happens when your mom’s a semi-famous photographer.” He pushes off the wall and turns toward the kitchen. I follow, opening and clenching my fist. It still hurts.

Styx opens the freezer and pulls out a container of ice, then he grabs a kitchen towel from the holder over the oven and forms a tightly packed cold compress. He gestures for me to place my hand in his, and I hesitate.

“Give me your hand, Stones.”

“I’m still mad at you.”

“I know. Give me your hand anyway,” he says softly. The way his lips turn up in the corners makes my insides tighten, and butterflies swarm my belly. It’s just chemo nausea. It has to be. I place my hand in his, wincing when he turns it over and gently places the ice pack against it. “Is this the first punch you’ve ever thrown?”

“No,” I say defiantly.

He levels me with a disbelieving glance.

“Yes.”

“Well, lucky for both of us, you hit like a girl.”

I scowl, and a grin spreads across his face. “I could always try again.”

“Hold this.” He tilts his chin toward the icepack. I take it from his hands, ignoring the brush of our fingers and the way my heart skips. What the hell is wrong with me?

Styx puts together another makeshift icepack and presses it to his face.

“I thought I hit like a girl?” I ask.

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“Yeah, well. I have a very low pain threshold. You want something to drink?” He turns to the fridge, fishes out two sodas, and places them on the counter before us. He pulls a bag of Cheese Puffs from the pantry and dumps them in a nearby bowl from the dishrack.

“I want to know why you lied to me, loner boy.”

He chuckles and heaves a sigh. “I didn’t think you’d talk to me if you knew who I was, and I figured you’d need someone.” His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “Because I needed someone.”

The breath gets caught in my lungs, burning, stalling. I gasp and blink back tears as a lump forms in my throat. “I did need someone.” I shake my head. “I do—I need someone. I don’t know how to do this without my friends and ... I just ... I don’t know why you didn’t tell me.”

“Come on, Stones. We both know you never would have spoken to me at all if we didn’t end up in the same chemo group.”

“That’s not true.” I shake my head, trying to tell him that he’s wrong, that I would have spoken to him eventually, given time. He was the one person I wanted to talk to after my diagnosis, only my stupid pride stopped me. But deep down, I know he’s right. If I didn’t get cancer, I would’ve never uttered a word to him.

My chest squeezes. The tears that I’ve been fighting since I arrived spring free and slide down my face. I don’t even know why. Because he’s right, and I’m a self-absorbed bitch? Or is it because this kid—who I barely knew just a few short weeks

ago—cared enough to reach out, even though he knew I’d likely shut him down?

“Hey, I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

I laugh and sniff back my tears. “You think I’m crying over you? Pfft. As if. I’m only tearing up because my hand hurts, and your jaw is an asshole.”

He laughs. “Oh, so this is my jaw’s fault, huh?”

“Duh!”

His lips twist with a crooked grin. “So, you wanna hug it out?”

“Why, so you can cop a feel?” I throw a Cheese Puff at him. “Thanks, perv, but I’ll pass.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ALASKA

“Does chemo ever not feel like you’re dying?” I ask Styx, as I stare at the mural on my ceiling. I should probably be staring at my phone, since we’re Facetiming, but we’ve done this at least a hundred times since his neighbor outed him last week, and my arms are so tired from yesterday’s chemo that I can’t be bothered to make sure I’m in the frame.

“Nope. It’s kind of ironic, huh? The drugs that are supposed to save you make you feel dead.”

“Yeah, I’ve thought about that too.” I scratch at the edges of the waterproof bandage surrounding my PICC, as if that will help alleviate the itch. The plastic clamps and

access caps clack together, and I cringe. “And what is up with this damn PICC line itching so much? It’s like I can feel it tickling the inside of my arm all the way to my pit.”

“Oh man, I remember that itch. PICC lines suck. You need to get yourself an upgrade.”

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I scoff. “An upgrade? Really?”

“Yep, the port is the way of the future, Stones. It’s the Bugatti of the CVC world.”

A lazy chuckle escapes me. “Can the way of the future just not involve cancer at all?”

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “That would be nice.”

I let my eyes cross and the twinkle lights and colors above form a psychedelic swirl. My brain hurts. My body too. And despite the cooling cap I’ve been using every chemo session to save my hair from falling out, there are long strands decorating my pillow and sheets.

“I should have a funeral for my hair,” I blurt, before I can stop myself. Chemo brain is a real thing. Who knew?

“You’re losing it? I thought the cooling cap was supposed to prevent that.”

“It doesn’t always work. Of course I had to be in the thirty-five percent of patients it doesn’t work for. It’s kind of stupid really ... here I am fighting for my life, and the biggest fear I have right now is going bald.” I pick up the phone and look at him.

Styx chuckles. “I hear ya. I’ve been wearing the same beanie for weeks because I officially have zero hair left on my crown, but the back and sides are still going strong. I’m workin’ on that combover we talked about.”

I laugh so hard I choke. My whole body spasms and cries uncle. “Oh my God, don’t

make me laugh.”

“Sorry, I can’t make any promises,” he says. My laughter dies down and Styx’s face softens. “I like hearing you laugh.”

“You’re such a dork.” I sit up, reach for my water and sip from the straw. “You have to send me pictures.”

He grins. “For the last time. I’m not sending you dick pics.”

I laugh, only I still have water in my mouth, and it sprays all over my phone, my bed, and me.

“Jesus, Stones. I never would have taken you for a spitter.” His lips twist in a crooked grin.

“Oh my god!” I squeal and grab a tissue from the box beside me, attempting to mop up the mess. Even this hurts, so I toss the sodden wad on the floor and lie down again. “You’re so gross.”

“Ow,” he complains, wincing and holding his stomach as he tries to contain his own laughter and fails. It quickly turns into a loud, phlegm-filled cough. I hold my breath, waiting for it to pass, praying he won’t keel over on me.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” He clears his throat. “You thought I was going to croak for a minute there, didn’t you?”

I nod. “Little bit, yeah.”

“Nah, takes more than a little cancer to kill me.”

“I see that.” I shake my head, wondering how this joker, this loner boy became my, well ... I don’t know what the hell he is, but right now, Styx is the only thing keeping me from spiraling into fear, grief, and a large pack of Double Stuf Oreos.

“So, it’s homecoming tomorrow.”

“Uh-huh,” I say. “And?”

“You wanna go?”

“And puke on everyone? No thanks. Although it might be kind of tempting to puke all over my ex-best friends. Can you imagine their faces?”

“I really can. You sure you want to pass that up?”

“Well, considering I’m still having trouble standing for more than ten minutes right now, I don’t think dancing is really in the cards for me.”

“Yeah, me either. Hey, maybe we could get wheelchairs and just bump them together every few seconds in a slow dance.”

I laugh. “That would be something.” I yawn and run my hand through my hair. Several more strands fall away. “Hey Styx?”

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“Yeah?”

“I’m really glad you catfished me into being your friend.”

His answering smile is slow, but man, does it pack a punch. My stomach dips like it’s on a Tilt-A-Whirl. “Right, that’s it. I’m coming over.”

“What?” I frown at my screen. “No. I want to sleep.”

“Fine, set your alarm for two hours. We’ll nap, and then we’re gonna take care of our hair.”

“You’re sounding an awful lot like Jonathan from the Fab Five. Should we get manis and pedis too?”

“I’m sensing judgement from you, Stones.”

“Um ... Johnathon is my hero, and I never say no to a pedi. Promise you won’t skimp on the foot rub?”

My heart pounds as Styx’s warm breath skates across the back of my neck. “You ready?”

I let out a shaky exhalation, fighting back tears. “Yeah.”

“You’re sure?”

“Oh my God, just get it over with.”

“Okay, okay. I’m gonna do it.”

The cool slide of the plastic guard grazes my scalp, and I bat his hand away and take the clippers from him. “You’re taking too long.”

I flick the switch on the device and swipe it along the side of my head. My mouth widens in horror as my hair falls away from the clippers. The buzz in my ear is deafening. It’s too intense, too much. It’s only hair, my brain supplies. And now everyone will know I have cancer.

“You look badass,” Styx says appreciatively eyeing my side-shave. I sob and set down the clippers, fat tears falling from my cheeks and wetting my toes. “Hey, come here.”

He wraps me in his arms, and I sob into his chest. “I’m such an idiot. It’s just hair.”

“It’s not just hair,” he says, the words rumbling through his ribcage as my ear is pressed tight to his chest. “It’s your hair. You’re allowed to be attached to it. Besides, we can’t all be expecting to rock our chemo cut.”

He reaches up and takes the knit cap off his head, revealing one hell of a combover. It’s made even more ridiculous by his long locks. I burst out laughing and cover my mouth.

“Told ya it was really something.”

“Oh my God.” With one hand still hovering in front of my mouth to hide my

laughter—albeit not successfully—I reach up and finger his strands.

“Feel better about your new ‘do?”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. “I hate to say it, but I really do.”

He grins. “Wanna shave my head for me? You know, so I don’t look like an eighty-year-old, even though I may feel it.”

“Fucking cancer.”

Styx picks up the clippers and places them in my hand, his eyes bright with challenge. “Fuck cancer.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ALASKA

I glance in the mirror at my new locks. I hadn't been able to bring myself to shave off the rest of my hair, but Styx is right; I look totally badass with a side shave. I decided to have a hairdresser cut off the majority of my length, but I'll keep it long and wispy on one side—at least until that falls out too. The stylist carefully carved out two little lines into my side shave, and I asked him to dye the whole thing blue. I could tell my mom wanted to pitch a fit, and the stylist refused to use bleach because it would melt off my remaining hair, but I still left the salon with my head high while I rocked my gorgeous navy-blue strands.

The doorbell rings. I check my makeup one last time in the mirror before smoothing my dress, and then I head downstairs. Styx is standing at the door in a navy suit, his head and stubble freshly shaved, his tie off-kilter and a pair of bright cornflower-blue Converse on his feet.

His gaze rolls over me from head to toe, taking in my hair, my pastel-blue skater dress, and finally resting on my pink Hello Kitty Chuck Taylors. His grip tightens on the corsage box in his hand and the plastic crinkles in protest. "You look like cotton candy."

"Screw you, asshole."

"Hey, I didn't say I didn't like it. I've just never seen you in so much pastel."

“That’s it. I’m going upstairs to change.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me toward him, so close his breath grazes my cheek. “You look fucking edible, Stones.”

I blush and bite my lip. My stomach unleashes a swarm of suicidal butterflies, dipping, and whirling towards death.

“Thanks,” I say, because I have no other words for the warmth spreading through my chest. “You don’t look like cotton candy, but you look ... good too.”

“I got you this.” His brow furrows as he holds out the box. “Mom said it was like ... a thing.”

“Oh, thanks.” I take it from him and remove the corsage from the plastic carton. It’s some kind of blush rose—a peony, maybe—with pale sage-green leaves, surrounded by tiny white flowers. “It’s really beautiful.”

“Here, let me help you.” He takes the box and sets it on the small table in the entryway. Then he grabs my wrist and gently ties the ribbon, his fingers lingering against my flesh for a beat longer than necessary.

My stomach flips, and my heart beats double time as his eyes meet mine. I swallow hard and walk toward the kitchen, not sure what to do now that things have taken a turn for the AWKWARD. “Popcorn, let’s do that. And soda. Soda’s good too, right?”

“Honey, what are you doing?” Mom says, coming into the kitchen. She takes a bottle from the wine fridge and sets it on the counter. “You’re going to be late for homecoming.”

I scowl at her. “We’re not going to the dance, Mom.”

“You’re not?”

“Not with these chemo bodies. We only had treatment two days ago. I can barely stand long enough to shower.”

“I did ask her, Mrs. Stone,” Styx-and-his-big-mouth says. “She turned me down.”

“Good thing too, because it looks like you didn’t bring the wheelchairs you promised me.”

“Wheelchairs?” Mom frowns and then shakes her head. “Never mind. Thank God I got pictures before you ...” Mom turns her attention to the food I’m preparing. “What is it you two are going to do tonight?”

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“Junk food, and binge-watch *Riverdale*. Styx has never seen it.”

“Hard to imagine, I know.” Styx leans against the counter and grins at my mother.

“You’re watching Netflix instead of going to homecoming?”

“This is our homecoming.” I shrug. “We’re officially coming home, or staying home ... I guess? Ooh, M&M’s.” I grab the family packet from the pantry and dump them into a bowl.

“Are you sure you kids should be eating this junk? Why don’t you let me make you some sushi?”

“Mom, we’ve got it covered. Uber Eats will be here in twenty.”

“Oh, alright then. If you have everything you need, I’ll just make myself scarce.” Mom picks up her wine and gulps down the remainder. She grabs the bottle, uncorks it, and pours herself a double helping. “Well, your dad’s working late, so I’m going to go take a bath to get out of your hair.”

“Okay.” I roll my eyes so only Styx can see. “Thank you.”

“Just call out if you need me,” she says.

“We will,” I sing-song and pull the popcorn from the microwave. I open the bag and pour it into a bowl. Then I get the sodas and M&M’s, shooting a look at Styx that says he should get the popcorn.

He follows me to the den and sits super close. I don't really mind, but it is kind of weird given how huge our sectional sofa is.

"Sitting kinda close there, huh, loner boy?" I ask.

"Yep."

"Do you want to move over at all?"

"Nope."

"Ookay then."

His leg is pressed against mine, and his heat radiates through his pants and scorches my bare thigh. My dress rides up a little more than I'm comfortable with, but I leave it because I don't want to add to the awkward.

I turn on the TV and start the first episode of *Riverdale*. Styx sinks lower into the couch, but doesn't move over any, and the food and soda go untouched. I take my phone off the coffee table and bring up IG. After posting a few boomerangs of Jughead Jones, I turn the camera on Styx.

"What are you doing?" He frowns, but it's quickly chased away by a grin when I shove my phone in his face for an extreme close up.

"Making you Instafamous."

"You really think your fans want to see all this ugly?"

"Oh please." I roll my eyes. "You're so damn pretty, it hurts."

A sly smile spreads across his face as he leans forward and grabs the popcorn. “Especially with my bald head, right?”

“Especially.” I nod resolutely.

“You’re right. Who wouldn’t want to see this?” He shovels the popcorn in his mouth like the Cookie Monster.

“Oh yeah, this is gonna go viral.” I laugh and upload the video, and then I post several more of us making derp expressions.

My notifications go crazy, so I switch to live and film.

“What’s up, Aerosol Addicts? It’s been a few days since I checked in ... there’s been a lot going on. But, you may have noticed that I’m looking extra fancy this evening,” I say in my best impersonation of a British person. It’s truly tragic.

Styx laughs and shakes his head. I ignore him and focus on my screen. “That’s because tonight is homecoming, but instead of dancing in a sweaty school gym, I’m kicking back on my couch with Mr. Hendricks here. Say hello, Mr. Hendricks.”

Styx leans into the frame. “Hello, Mr. Hendricks.”

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I scoff. “You’re such a dick.”

“You may have noticed that some of us are trying to watch this totally shit show you’ve put on.”

“Hey,” I complain. “Riverdale is not a shit show.”

“Come on, this Jughead guy is homeless, and yet he somehow mysteriously owns a perfectly tailored suit?” Styx leans forward and grabs the bowl of popcorn, resting it in his lap. He shoves a meaty fist into it and tosses several pieces in his mouth.

“You leave Jughead out of this.” I turn my gaze back to the camera and say, “What do you think, guys? Tell me I’m not alone here and that you get the Jughead love. Are you a Bughead?”

“Oh God, do I even want to know what that is?”

“Just keep watching, loner boy. All will be revealed.” I smile at the camera. “Let me know in the comments if you’re siding with Styx or with me on this one. Heads up, though—Styx is wrong.” I end the live feed and glance at Styx. His eyes are glued to me. I frown and shove his shoulder. “What?”

“Nothing,” he whispers, but he doesn’t take his gaze from my face.

“What?” I grab a handful of popcorn and toss it at him. “What are you staring at?”

“I’m staring at my fucking future, Stones.”

And just like that, he goes back to looking at the TV while I melt into a puddle.

The couch beneath me shifts as Styx gets up, and I moan my disapproval. His fingers trace the racing stripes shaved into my hair and I smile. I'm sure I look like a goddamn goober, but I can't help it. I'm sleep drunk, and for once, my body isn't weighed down with pain and screaming at me. It's floating.

"I can't thank you enough for being there for her," Mom says. I'd roll my eyes if I wasn't so tired.

"You don't need to thank me; she's helping me just as much. Maybe more."

"True dat," I mumble, unable to open my heavy lids. Mom and Styx both laugh quietly.

"Babe, I gotta go. My mom's here."

"No. Don't leave." I pout. "We still have more episodes of season one to watch."

"No, they finished an hour ago."

"Pfft. As if. What the hell were you doing then?"

"Watching you sleep."

I crack a lid and glare at him. "Like a creeper?"

He chuckles and presses a kiss to my cheek. "Thanks for a great date."

I suck up the drool trying to escape my mouth. “Wasn’t a date.”

“Yeah, it was,” he says and opens the front door. “Bye, Mrs. Stone.”

“Bye Styx. Tell your mother I said she’s welcome to drop by for a drink any time.”

“Thanks, I will.” Styx chews his bottom lip and says, “Stones?”

“Mmm?”

“Best date I ever had.”

“Whatever, loner boy. It was the only date you’ve ever had.”

“Alaska,” Mom chides.

“But it won’t be the last.” He winks. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“I shall wait with bated breath.” I wave my arm as if I’m some tragic thespian.

“Cute, Stones. Real cute.”

“Go home, dork.”

“Good night.” Mom waves him off and closes the door with a dramatic sigh. “You two are adorable.” She frowns at me as I shake my head. “I’m serious. He likes you. A lot.”

“We’re just friends, Mom.” I stare at the now crushed corsage on my wrist and wonder if that’s entirely true. I was pretty sure how he felt about me, and if I hadn’t known before tonight, I definitely know now.

In a truly tragic turn of events, I think I might be falling for loner boy.

Wonderful.

Let’s see if we can stave off the Grim Reaper long enough to get to first base.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

STYX

Three days after homecoming and Stones is blowing me off. I've tried Facetiming a billion times, tried calling two billion times, and I'm finally at the last straw: showing up on her doorstep. I set my skateboard against the wall and knock.

Mrs. Stone answers and moves aside to let me in. "Styx, hi. Alaska didn't tell me you were popping by."

"She's been avoiding my calls."

"Oh," she says, sipping her wine. It's just after eleven on a weekday. "Well, yesterday and the previous one were hard on her. She had a migraine and a mild seizure."

"Holy shit, is she okay?" I head for the stairs and take them two at a time as Alaska's mom tries to keep up.

"Yes, she's fine. We took her to the hospital, and they monitored her overnight. They released her early this morning."

I yank open her bedroom door, not bothering to knock, and then I feel bad when she lifts her head from the pillow and glares at me with her sleepy eyes. "Hey, are you okay?"

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“Yes, darling,” Mrs. Stone says. “How are you?”

“Styx?” Stones sits up, glances between us, and rubs her temples. “What are you doing here?”

“You were dodging my calls.”

“Do you need anything, Alaska?” her mom asks, sipping from her glass. I kind of wish she’d stop hovering and let me talk to her daughter.

“I’m fine, Mom.” Alaska runs her hands through her hair. Several deep blue strands come away. “I wasn’t ghosting you. I had a seizure, dumbass.”

“I know that now.”

“If you kids need anything—snacks, a wheatgrass juice, herbal tea—let me know.”

“Mom,” Alaska snaps. “Can you go already?”

Her mother’s face is blank as she looks between us and then her throat bobs, her eyes glisten with unshed tears, and she nods. “Okay, well, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks, Mrs. S.”

Stones’ mom leaves the room, closing the door behind her, and Alaska flops back on the bed and puts her pillow over her head.

“Does she always drink at eleven a.m.?” I ask.

“It’s a new thing she’s doing since my diagnosis.”

“You should go easy on her.”

“I know. I just can’t stand the way she hovers now.”

“I get it, but this disease is terrifying for parents too. Sometimes they don’t get that we’re forced to become adults, and we have to make some very adult decisions about our bodies, and our futures. Sometimes we’re more ready for those decisions than they are.”

She slides the pillow off her head and frowns. Her eyes are rheumy with unshed tears.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

“What isn’t wrong?” Tears leak out of the corners of her eyes and seep into her hairline. “The scan yesterday showed that the tumors have grown.”

“Shit. How bad?”

“Grade two, but there are a lot more undefined clusters now. Seems little dude threw a rave at his new home and his friends never left.” She presses the heels of her hands against her eyes. “They’re consulting with some specialist from London because they don’t know how to operate.”

“Scoot over,” I say. She does and I lie down beside her, pulling her into my arms.

“Do you know why I call you Stones?”

“Because you thought it was a clever play on my last name?”

“No, because you’re a badass who takes no fucking prisoners. Freshman year, you poured your pink milkshake over Chad Hoover because he fat shamed Alison Park in the cafeteria.”

“Well, he was a douche, and all she had was a fucking salad on her plate.”

“All true, but in a cafeteria with three hundred kids—myself included—you were the only one to do something about it. That takes stones, babe.”

“Anyone else would have done the same.”

“No, they wouldn’t. They didn’t.” I slide my fingertips up and down her arm in lazy strokes. “Even I did nothing but look on because I didn’t want to draw any more attention to myself. You’re not afraid to be seen, you’re not afraid to do the hard things—the moral things. You’re a fucking rock star, Alaska, and you’re going to kick the shit out of cancer’s ass.”

“I’m not sure anymore.”

“Come on.” I slide out of bed and tug her hand. “Get up. Get dressed.”

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Stones shakes her head. “I don’t want to go anywhere.”

“I get it, believe me I do. But you need to get out of this room, and I have a surprise for you.”

“No.” She pulls her hand free from mine and sits up. “Dammit. I don’t feel like being your project today, Styx.”

“My project?” My brows crease in confusion. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“You know what it means.”

“No, I really don’t, but feel free to enlighten me.”

“You make me a distraction. If you’re focused on me, you don’t have to think about the disease that’s trying to kill you.”

She’s kidding, right? “Jesus, Stones. That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Is it?”

“You don’t distract me from my cancer. If anything, you make me more aware there’s a chance I might die without ever getting to touch you the way I want.”

She sucks in a sharp breath. Her eyes are stormy with anguish and I close mine because this is not the reaction I’d hoped for when I told her how I feel. Fuck. I hadn’t

even meant to tell her. It just slipped out. Though I guess, if she didn't already know, she's not as smart as I thought she was. I wasn't exactly subtle on homecoming night.

"That came out wrong," I say, and then I shake my head because fuck it. We don't have time for anything else. "No. It didn't. I like you, Stones. This shouldn't be a shock to you. If it is then you haven't been paying attention."

"Styx ..."

I walk to the door, pulling back the handle. I lean my forehead against the wood, unable to look at her and see more tears in her eyes. "I got you a spot in Clarion Alley. Had to ring in a few favors—actually, my mom had to ring in a fuck-load of favors—but it's yours. Whether you want it or not."

I wasn't sure if I was still talking about the alley or my heart.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ALASKA

"You know, you're really brilliant." Dean folds his arms across his chest, appraising my work.

"Thanks." I pick up the hot pink can and spray in long arcs surrounding the boy. "I owe a really brilliant apology."

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“Pretty sure you’ve managed to succeed.”

I smile. Despite the pain in my head, the lethargy in my body. Despite how my arms are aching, and my fingers are covered in paint regardless of the gloves. I pull off the mask and step back to look at my work.

“So cancer, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Is it treatable?”

“Is it ever?” I reply, and Dean looks confused. “It’s only curable if I let them cut my head open and remove the tumor, assuming they can shrink it first.”

“Shit. That’s heavy, dude.”

“Yeah.”

“You gonna do it?”

“I don’t know.” I glance between him and the mural, wondering if it needs anything else. Wondering if I have the strength to lift my arm again and keep going. “How much do you know about Styx?”

“Not much. He seems like a cool kid.”

“He has it too, you know? Cancer, I mean.”

“Damn, that’s rough. I’m sorry, man.”

“Will you do me a favor, Dean?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Will you keep this up for Styx, but also for me? See, if I let them take my tumor, I may lose my ability to paint. I don’t know if he’ll get a chance to see it before you change the artwork in the alley again.”

“I’ll keep it up. No matter what. No one gets this part of the wall.”

“Thanks.”

Now I just have to convince Styx to forgive me.

My phone chimes and I glance down at the notification from my Insta account. I tap the screen and open it, close the door with my foot, and throw my keys on the table in the hall. “Mom, Dad? I’m home.”

“Oh, honey. We’ve been calling and calling. Where have you been?”

“Out with Styx.” I lie, because I seriously doubt my mom would be okay with me kicking it with some random adult male in a dark alley. No matter how cool Dean is.

“I called his mother. She hadn’t seen you.”

“You have his mother’s number?” I shake my head, deciding I definitely don’t want to know how that came about. She likely called every Hendricks listed in the Bay Area. “And she hadn’t seen us because we were at his dad’s.”

“They’re divorced?”

“Yes, Mom. His parents are divorced. Maybe you and Dad should try it sometime. It might save me having to listen to you argue about how much my cancer is costing you.”

“That’s enough,” Dad bellows from his favorite armchair before finally joining us in the hall. “Apologize to your mother.”

“Sorry, Mother.”

Mom looks at Dad and smiles. Her eyes are bright with excitement as she grabs my wrist and squeezes. “Honey, we have a surgery date.”

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My blood turns to ice. No. No, no, no. I don't want them cutting out a piece of my skull. I don't want them digging through my head, turning me to mush. "What?"

My mother's eyes widen. "You're shaking."

"She's in shock, Joanie."

"But good shock, right? Alaska, honey, this is a good thing."

I nod, but it doesn't feel good. There's still a very real risk that I'll wind up braindead or they'll take out a piece of me that I can never get back. Sure, it might be life-saving surgery, but what if it's not a life worth saving? What if this Alaska Stone ceases to exist? What if I don't even make it out of the operating room?

"Honey, where are you going?"

"Headache."

"I thought she'd be happier," Mom says to Dad.

"Give her some time," he reassures her with whispered words. "It's a lot to take in."

I want to scream. Their whispers fill my head, making everything too loud, too harsh, making me see the betrayal, the deceit in not wanting to live. It's a betrayal of their legacy.

I'm supposed to go on.

To continue the bloodline. That's my job here—to carry on the gene pool, carry my father's name until I'm old enough to surrender it to another man and take his name instead. This is what they've wanted since the day I was born, but the urgency to make that happen now, to see that I survive at all costs, seems to have replaced their obsession with me growing up, getting a solid job, and marrying a man who can provide for me and our offspring.

I can't tell them I don't want this surgery. I can't tell them I'm terrified, because it's a betrayal. Not wanting the surgery makes me crazy. Anyone in their right mind would seize this opportunity. Everyone wants to live, right?

I'm no different. I want to live. I want to be a normal teenage girl obsessing over the perfect prom dress, but the reality is ... I'm not normal. I have cancer—not a little cancer. Not an easily treatable cancer. I have cancer on my fucking brain. A cluster of lumps, no bigger than a book of matches, but plenty big enough to fuck shit up. The surgeons want to carve open my skull and sever the tumor growing on my brain, and I'm just supposed to let it happen? Lie down on their table, take their anesthetic, and hope like hell they don't scramble the contents of my head like I'm a zombie extra on *The Walking Dead*?

I don't want this.

I don't want to be a teenage girl with cancer, but I am. That's reality. And not having the surgery will kill my parents just as surely as the surgery will kill a part of me.

I told my mom I had one of my migraines so that they'd leave me alone. I couldn't deal with her hovering, with Dad's casual way of ignoring the subject. I sometimes wondered if he knew I was sick at all. I mean, obviously he knows, because he's pulling overtime at the office now, and his insurance is covering 'most everything,

but I still hear them arguing about money all the time.

I'm tired. My heart hurts. My head hurts, and I've spent too many hours alone in my room. My fear is crippling, and instead of sleeping, I've been staring at the ceiling.

I've written countless texts to Styx and deleted them all. I've paced and scribbled on my walls in the dark, and I can't deal with the weight of this knowledge anymore. Earlier, I regretted saying those things to Styx, but now I really feel guilty because the truth is that while he may be using me as a distraction, I understand why. I know what he meant when he said I made him more aware of his cancer, because being with him reminds me to live while I have the chance.

With that in mind, I get up and change out of my pj's into jeans, a tee, and an oversized grandpa cardigan. I throw on a light jacket because I don't want to get my coat from the hall closet and risk waking my parents, and then I write a note for my mom and tell her I'm staying at El's house. El lives two blocks from me, and we've done this since we were kids. We may not be talking anymore, but Mom doesn't know that. Mom's too invested in her wine to notice much of anything these days.

I pocket my phone and climb out my window, then close it quietly behind me. I almost fall off the portico roof, because the fog is so thick, I can barely see my hand in front of me. After sliding down the pillar, I hurry down the stairs and bend double on the street, trying to catch my breath. When my head stops spinning, I walk a block away from my house and call a Lyft.

Outside Styx's dad's apartment, I contemplate throwing rocks, but this is San Francisco, so there are none. Instead, I pick up an abandoned aluminum can, tip out the liquid inside, pray like hell it wasn't pee, and hurl it at his window. It clatters to the ground without so much as grazing the glass, so I crush it underfoot and throw it again.

This time it does connect. The light comes on, and Mr. Hendricks opens the window.

“Can I help you?”

“Oh ... um. I’m really sorry, Mr. Hendricks.”

“Let me guess—you’re looking for Styx?”

“Yeah.”

The window to the second room slides up and a shadowy figure leans out into the pool of light from the streetlamp. “Damn, Stones. I knew you were ballsy, but I didn’t expect you to try hitting on my dad in the middle of the night.”

“Very funny, jackass.”

“Do your parents know you’re here?” Mr. Hendricks asks, pinching the bridge of his nose.

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I grimace. “If I say no will you make me leave?”

“That depends on what your intentions are with my son.”

“Well, for a start, I wanted to tell him they booked my surgery.”

“Holy shit,” Styx says.

Styx’s dad scrubs a hand over his face. “You sick too?”

“Brain tumor. The chances of dying before they remove it are just as high as if they do crack open my skull like a melon and scoop it out.”

“I swear to God, you kids use cancer like a free pass for everything. Come on up. You can stay the night, but Styx ...” He turns to his son’s window. “... if you get her pregnant, you get to be the one to tell your mother, and I had nothing to do with this sleepover. I didn’t even know about it.”

“Nice, Dad. That’s really tactful.”

“I’m just stating the facts, kid.”

“The girl tells you she’s dying, and you tell me to go get laid, but to make sure we use protection?”

“Well, I didn’t want to embarrass you both by asking if you’re having sex, and even I’m not that much of an asshole to make you sleep on the couch. Your dad is not a

cock-blocker.”

“Okay, Dad.” Styx puffs out his cheeks in a long exhale. “Don’t you have to be up early tomorrow?”

“Yeah.” Mr. Hendricks shakes his head. “Just don’t ... don’t tell your mom.”

“Hang on,” Styx says to me, ignoring his father completely. “I’ll buzz you up.”

“Thanks,” I say. He stares down at me with a smile and I smile back, wondering what the hell he’s doing. “Styx, it’s fucking freezing out here. Seriously, my nipples have turned to ice.”

“Shit. Sorry. Coming.” A beat later, a loud buzz pierces the quiet morning. I head over to the metal grate between the two storefronts and push it open, then I hurry up the stairs, exhaling my hot breath into my cupped hands to warm them.

Styx waits in the doorway at the top of the landing under a flickering fluorescent bulb. He has a duvet wrapped around his shoulders, and he opens his arms wide. I stare for a beat, and then I crash into him. I’m so damn cold my joints ache.

“Nice to see you too.”

“I was an idiot.”

He chuckles low and deep, and the sound resonates through his chest and into mine. “I know.”

“I didn’t mean it.”

“It’s okay if you did, Stones. We’re different, and it’s okay to not be okay. It doesn’t

changeus.”

“Yeah?”

He wraps the duvet tighter around us. “Yeah.”

I snuggle closer, relishing his strong, steady heartbeat against my ear and the smell of teenage boy—an intoxicating mix of cologne, sandalwood soap, and laundry detergent. “How’d you get so smart for a seventeen-year-old?”

“It’s cancer wisdom.”

I laugh and stare up at him. “Oh yeah? Think a little of it might rub off on me?”

Styx grins, and I swallow hard because I never noticed he had flecks of gold in those deep brown eyes, or the way his cupid’s bow appears to be carved from granite with two sharp peaks and the cutest little dip in the middle. I knew he was hotter than the average seventeen-year-old, but I’d never had the breath stolen from my lungs when I looked at him. Not until now.

“Stick with me, kiddo. I’ll teach you everything I know,” he says, but his smile is quickly replaced by a frown. Shit. He’s obviously reading the surprise on my face. I try to school my features, but it’s too late. Styx just caught me looking at him like a lovesick goober. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Can we go inside?”

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“Sure.” He slides his arm around my shoulders and turns us toward the door. I slip out from under his embrace and enter the apartment first, feeling awkward as fuck, and completely unsure of myself. What the hell am I doing?

“Cool apartment.”

“Yeah, it’s okay. I’m still getting used to having two rooms. You always think divorce is going to be awesome—two rooms, two sets of everything—but so far, it’s kind of a pain in the ass. Sorry about my dad, by the way. He thinks he’s cool, but he’s just old.”

“You know I can hear you, right?” Mr. Hendricks calls from behind his closed door.

“That’s kind of the point.” Styx opens the fridge and grabs out a carton of juice, then drinks it straight from the lip. He finishes drinking and wipes the juice from his chin. For a split, crazy half-second, I think about crossing the room and licking the residue from his skin. Instead, I cross the room and take the carton from him.

“Did you want a glass? Sorry. I just contaminated it with my cooties.”

“I like your cooties. Besides, aren’t cancer cooties all the same?”

“Yes.” He nods resolutely, a huge-ass smile bursting free. “Yes, they are.”

I drink. Styx studies me. I close my eyes and tip my head back, swallowing down the sticky, sweet liquid. When I’m done, I close the carton and hand it back to him. I turn away because the awed look he’s giving me makes me smile and I don’t want him to

see. I don't know how to behave around him now. I don't know how to be us when all I want to do is kiss him.

"So ..." Styx puts the juice away and turns to face me. "You wanna watch TV or something?"

"Can we go to bed?"

Great, Alaska. Just great. Why not just stick a neon flashing sign above your head that reads whore?

"Er ... sure."

"I mean, I'm kind of tired, and I don't know, maybe the adrenalin of sneaking out and travelling across the city by myself after two is wearing off."

"You want me to take the couch?"

"No." I answer too quickly. Oh my God. When did I become such a mental case?

"Can we just hang out in your room? I don't think I can sleep by myself."

"Cool."

I exhale. "Cool."

Styx grabs the duvet off the chair and walks the short hallway. He turns at the door.

"Are you coming?"

I shake my head and offer a weak smile. "Yeah."

"What the hell is up with you, Stones? You're acting weird."

I just shrug and walk toward him. He steps aside to let me enter.

This bedroom isn't like the one at his mom's. It's devoid of posters, Rolling Stonemagazines, and vinyl. Basically everything Styx.

He closes the door behind him, and I jump. "I can leave it open if you want?"

"No, it's fine."

Styx crosses the room to the bed underneath the bay window and I follow. I glance out onto the street. A bum pushes a cart filled with cans along the sidewalk. He stops and bends to pick up the can I'd thrown, before tossing it in amongst the others. Guess now I know why Styx heard me and his dad talking. There's no soundproofing in this apartment whatsoever.

Styx throws the duvet on top of the bed and climbs in, holding the blankets aloft for me.

I take a tentative step forward and pause. "I don't have anything to sleep in."

"Oh, yeah." He lets the duvet fall and sits up, yanking off his shirt and throwing it at me. "Here."

Nervous laughter bubbles out my throat. "I didn't mean you had to give me the shirt off your back."

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“It’s fine; I have others. I’m just too lazy to get up.”

“Right.”

“Is there somewhere I can change?”

“Bathroom’s across the hall. Or you can change here.”

My brows shoot skyward. “Here’s fine, I guess. Just cover your eyes.”

Styx rolls his eyes instead, and then he makes a show of covering them, as if I just asked him to clean his room. I take a second to make sure he’s not peeking and then I turn around and strip off my jeans and boots. I take off my jacket and T-shirt and throw his on. I lift the fabric to my nose and smell the soft, worn cotton. Styx. It’s so odd that someone who was a stranger to me just two months ago can be such a comfort.

I debate removing my bra, but the shirt is far too see-through for that. I turn around. Styx’s peeking through his fingers. I grab the cushion at the foot of the bed and toss it at him.

“You said you wouldn’t look.”

“I said no such thing.”

I replay our conversation in my head. He’s right. He never promised anything.

“Asshole.”

“Come on. There’s a hot, half-naked girl in my room, and I’m not gonna look? I thought you knew me better than that.”

I jump on the bed and punch him in the arm.

He holds his hands up in surrender. “Ow! Ow! Jesus, woman. What are you on, ’roids or something?”

“You suck.” I climb under the covers and press my freezing hands against his naked chest.

“Holy shit, Elsa. Can you keep your fuckin’ ice-queen hands to yourself?”

“That’s a first. Can’t say I’ve ever had a guy ask me to stop touching him.”

“Well, get used to it if you’re going to insist on freezing me to death.”

My teeth chatter, and Styx pulls me close. I rest my head in the crook of his arm and snuggle in while he strokes my hair. “Styx?”

“Yeah?”

“You think I’m hot?”

“Your cancer doesn’t affect your ability to see, right?”

“No.”

“And you have mirrors in your house?”

“Shut up.” I slap his chest. He flinches.

“You first.” He grabs a fistful of my hair and gives it a playful tug, then he crushes me as he leans over and turns out the light. “Go to sleep, Stones.”

“I’m scared.”

“I know.”

Long seconds tick by, and the words are on the very tip of my tongue, but every time I try to speak, I can’t.

“Fuck! You’re thinking so goddamn loud I can’t sleep. What the hell is going on in that head of yours, Stones?”

This is why I came here. It’s why I didn’t head to Eleanor’s in the middle of the night, because Styx just gets it. He gets me. “Would you do it? If it was your choice to make?”

“The surgery?”

“Yeah.”

“You want the honest truth, or the truth of a guy who wants you to stick around?”

“Both?”

“Well, the guy who wants you to stick around says have the surgery.” His throat bobs against my forehead.

“And the other guy?”

“The other guy’s a dick. Don’t listen to him.”

I laugh, but all I really want to do is the opposite. A strangled sob tears free of my throat and Styx squeezes my shoulder.

“I know it’s kinda fucked up to put pressure on you, but please don’t listen to the other guy.” His voice catches in the back of his throat and he coughs. “I’m not ready to lose you, Stones. I’ll never be ready for that.”

Styx may only be a seventeen-year-old punk kid, but he always knows exactly what to say.

“Cancer wisdom?” I ask.

He nods. "Cancer wisdom."

The sky outside is San Francisco gray. It's early. Too early to be awake, but Mr. Hendricks has been juicing. I'm sure he's trying to be quiet, but with the thin walls in this apartment, it's like listening to a herd of elephants press their wheatgrass by jumping up and down on top of it.

"Jesus, Dad," Styx yells and thumps his fist against the bedroom wall. Some of the cracked paint flakes off and falls to the floor.

"Sorry, sorry. I know. I'm trying to be quiet, but this goddamn juicer didn't get the memo."

I glance up at Styx's face. "The memo?" he mouths.

I cover my mouth so my laughter won't be heard.

"Christ. I hope I never grow old."

The laughter dies on my lips, and my throat constricts. Styx is sick, just as sick as me, but it's even worse for him because this is his second time around. He beat cancer once, and it still came back. The reaper wasn't done with him yet, so what does that mean for him? For me? For us?

I rest my head on his shoulder and squeeze his side tightly. He bows his head. I'm sure he's wondering what the hell is wrong with me and why I'm now clutching him tighter than a Vulcan death grip.

"You okay?" he whispers against my hair.

“Forty is not old, kid,” his dad bellows from the kitchen.

“Can you shut the fuck up, old man? Some of us are trying to get laid here.”

“Right then, I won’t ask if either of you want a wheatgrass juice.”

“Jesus, go to work already, hippy.”

“Sure.” Mr. Hendricks knocks once and pokes his head through the door. “Just go to school, okay?”

“Can I borrow your truck?”

Styx’s dad frowns. “Are you going to school with it?”

“Probably not.”

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“Alright. Then don’t tell your mother,” he says, tossing his keys at the bed. Styx plucks them from midair as if they’ve performed this routine a number of times. “We’ll order in tonight, yeah?”

“We always order in. Will you just leave already so I can fuck my girlfriend?”

Girlfriend? Is that how he sees me, and was he ever going to clue me in? And for the love of God, why are they discussing me and Styx having sex?

“Right, sorry. Going. Oh, and kid, happy birthday.” He closes Styx’s door and a beat later, beyond the crashing furniture—which is likely just his bike squeezing through the tiny kitchen and hallway—he opens the front door and leaves.

Wait. What? I glance up at him. “Today’s your birthday?”

“Yeah. Officially an adult.”

“Oh my God. Styx, why didn’t you tell me?”

He shrugs. “Guess I didn’t want to jinx it. For a long time, I didn’t think I was going to make it to this day. Anyway ... sorry about all that girlfriend stuff.”

“Did you really mean it when you said you were trying to get laid?”

“No!”

“So, you don’t want to have sex with me?”

He exhales loudly and rubs the sleep from his eyes. “You know, I was sure cancer was going to be the thing to take me out of the game, but it seems you’re determined to kill me early, Stones.”

I push up on my elbow and stare down at him. I’m sure my hair is as crazy as usual, and my cheeks get kind of puffy when I sleep, but I can’t resist seeing Styx’s sleepy morning face.

“Do you want to kiss me, Styx?”

His throat bobs. I let out a slow, steady breath and lick my lips. He follows the movement, watching me as intently as I watch him. My heart hammers against my ribcage, a wild, untamable beast, and I know without a doubt he can feel it.

Styx reaches out and cups my cheek, searching my face. “Yeah, I wanna fucking kiss you.”

I grin and flop back on the bed. “Well, I would kiss you, but your morning breath smells like shit.”

“Oh, you’re gonna pay for that.”

Styx rolls on top of me, pinning my arms above my head. I try to kick, but his weight immobilizes my legs too. He leans in, and just when I think he’s about to finally kiss me, he opens his mouth and breathes on me. I thrash and squeal, tossing my head from side to side, trying to escape his death breath. Styx continues breathing his foul, putrid breath on me as tears stream down my cheeks.

Eventually our struggles dissipate, and silence fills the space between us. His sweats are soft and worn against my bare thighs, and his erection presses into me. My panties are soaked, my heart races, and my body trembles beneath his. His skin on my

skin is too hot, too much. I ache. All over, I ache for him, for Styx Hendricks, the weirdo loner, that kid with cancer. The boy who shoved his way into my life and became such an important fixture, such a permanent part of me, that I can't breathe without him.

I can't process anything I feel. I want, and I ache, and I don't know how to turn it off. I don't know how to focus on anything but him, but I'm scared. Scared of loving him, scared of losing him. I'm scared to live.

I swallow around the lump in my throat, and fight back the tears pricking my eyes, but they spill over my lashes anyway.

"Shit. Stones, I'm sorry." Styx tries to move but I wrap my legs around his hips and my arms around his shoulders, and I pin him in place. Like a butterfly stuck through the middle, I clutch him to me.

"Don't go. Stay, please ... just stay." I whisper the words over and over like a mantra, but I'm not even sure if I'm talking about right now or forever.

Stay. Just stay.

He nods and buries his head in the pillow beside me. I'm sure he's afraid I'll go all Carrie-at-the-prom on his ass if he moves, but I don't care. I need to hold onto something. If I don't, I'm afraid I'll fall apart completely.

"I'm not going anywhere, Stones. Not without you."

"Promise?"

He pulls back and studies my face. I don't know what he finds, but in his eyes, I see it's not a promise either of us can keep. We don't get to decide, and that's what sucks

about this situation. We met because we go to a hospital once every three weeks and have our bodies pumped full of chemicals, and if I hadn't felt a sense of obligation to sit with the others, I probably never would have uttered a word to this kid. Our diagnoses brought us together, but it may be the very thing that tears us apart. I don't know who I'm more afraid for—Styx or me.

I don't know which is worse—dying too young, or being the one left behind.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ALASKA

After breakfast, we sit on his dad's crumby couch and prepare to watch a movie. I snatch the popcorn from his hand and stare at the man-child. "Seriously? Peter Pan?"

"It's a classic."

"It's old."

"Yeah, hence it being a classic." He throws an unpopped kernel and it hits me right between the eyes. Bastard. I grab a fistful and peg it at him, but he just gives me a typical Styx grin and picks up the pieces one by one, placing them into his mouth and crunching them hard.

I hope he breaks his teeth.

"I thought you were so much cooler than this," I say.

"It's about a kid who never grows up, and who lives forever. What's cooler than that?"

"A sexy street rat who steals loaves of bread to feed his tiny monkey." I toss the popcorn into my mouth and stare at the boy on the TV. "Peter Pan is about a loner who's too stubborn to know a good thing when he sees it. Come to think of it, I see now why you're totally into this dude."

“What? I’m not into this dude. I just think he’s the best Disney has to offer.”

I laugh. “I bet you were one of those kids who dressed like Peter for your first trip to Disneyland.”

“I’ll have you know,” he says, tossing back several pieces of popcorn and chewing around his words, “I dressed like Captain Jack Sparrow.”

“You did not?”

“I did. The parents say I got to meet him at the park, and I nearly wet myself. The first thing I said when he went to shake my hand was, ‘I gotta pee!’ Apparently, I had my junk hanging out too. We were almost evicted from Disneyland.”

I gape at him. “Bullshit. You just made that up.”

“I really didn’t.”

“Then I’m embarrassed for you.” I tear my eyes away from Styx’s and stare at the screen. “Do you ever wish you could go back?”

“To Disneyland?”

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“To being a kid. To being free of cancer and all these stupid teen hormones, and school ... and life?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because when I was a kid, I still had cancer.”

“Shit.” I shake my head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“And when I was a kid, I couldn’t do this ...” Styx leans across the space between us. I stare at him like he’s lost his damn mind, but he slides his hand behind my neck, threads it into my hair, and pulls me closer. I hold my breath, waiting, wishing he’d erase the excruciating distance between us where his mouth hovers over mine. “I’m gonna fucking kiss you now, Stones.”

He searches my gaze. His lip quirks in a crooked smile.

“‘Bout time.” I debate closing the gap, but I want him to do just as he said, and fucking kiss me. With bated breath, I wait.

Styx’s lips finally brush mine. It’s the softest of touches, but I feel it everywhere. A live wire arcing between his body and mine. A spark, a flame, a fiery comet burning through us, fusing us, forging us.

His lips part mine, his tongue slips inside, and I moan against his mouth. I open for

him. I've kissed boys, I've let them take things further than I was ready to, but with Styx, it's not enough. We're not close enough. His thick thumb strokes the nape of my neck. I slide my hands from his face to his chest. His skin is so warm. Is he burning up like me? Does he feel this heat and desire the way I do?

I scramble across the couch, knocking the bowl of popcorn to the floor. I climb into his lap.

"Oops." I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, swollen from his kisses. "Sorry."

Styx slides his hands down my back and grabs my ass. "I'm not."

I search his face, a little embarrassed now that I'm straddling his lap. He grins up at me, takes my chin between his thumb and forefinger. "You're so fucking beautiful."

I laugh. "I'm so glad you brushed your teeth."

"Cute, Stones. Real fucking cute." He shoves me on the sofa and climbs on top, the way he did earlier in his room. He wedges himself into the space between my legs on the narrow cushions. "You used your wish yet?"

I frown, not wanting to talk cancer right now. I want to be reckless and wild. I want to kiss until my lips hurt, until my body can't stand the savage ache between my legs. I want to seize the freaking day, because who knows how many more we'll get? "No. I figured I'd save it for something noble like a free trip to Amsterdam to meet my favorite recluse writer."

Styx rests his weight on his elbows and studies my face. "Oh, Christ. Tell me you didn't watch that film?"

"Worse. I read the book."

He scrunches up his nose. I never realized how cute his nose was before this. “God, I feel so dirty.”

“Shut up. The Fault in Our Stars is literary genius at its finest.”

“More like sadomasochism. Who wants to read a book that rips their heart out?”

“For someone so against it, I can’t help but think you might have read this book you find so abhorrent.”

“Nah, I watched the movie.”

“You’re a dick.”

“And you’re coming with me.” He kisses my lips and then pulls away. Styx stands up and holds out his hand.

Is he crazy? He wants to leave now? What is wrong with this guy?

“Um ... no. We just got to the kissing. I have no intention of going anywhere.”

“Not even Disneyland?”

“What are you talking about?” I frown, wondering what he put on that popcorn. “Are you high?”

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“Maybe. Now, do you wanna go or not?”

“What do you mean ‘Do I wanna go?’”

“It’s a pretty straightforward question, Stones. Are you going to let me kidnap you and take you to Disneyland, or am I going to drop you off at school?”

“School or Disney? Those are my options?”

“I’m going to Disneyland. You can’t stay here, so you either take my hand and we can have the adventure of a lifetime, or you can go to class and have to sit through detention. What’s it gonna be?”

“We can’t just go to Disneyland. How will we get there?”

“Dad’s truck.”

“You’re going to drive to Disney?”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because it’s a million miles away.”

He pulls his phone from his pocket and taps at it. “Turns out it’s four hundred and eight miles. Longer if we go through Big Sur.”

“Why the hell would we go through Big Sur?”

He shrugs. “Cause it’s my birthday and that’s where I want to spend it.”

“You’re insane.”

“Probably. Now, are you going to take my hand or not?”

This is madness. “My parents will kill me.”

“Saves the cancer from doing it.”

“That’s not funny.”

“No, it’s not,” he says, all traces of humor gone. “Neither is regretting that you didn’t take my hand when you had the chance.”

I throw my head back and stare up at the ceiling. “I must be certifiable.”

“You do have that look about you.” Styx grins. I kick at his shin, but he backs away and gestures for me to hurry up. “Last chance.”

I place my hand in his and he grips it tightly and yanks me to my feet. “Thatta girl.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ALASKA

Styx's gaze darts to mine and then across the road at the immaculate Victorian house.

"You're sure your dad's not home?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. He leaves for work at ungodly o'clock."

"Then what the hell are you waiting for?"

That's a good question. What am I waiting for? "A sign that this isn't the stupidest idea you've ever had, and that I'm not the dumbest teenager alive for following you to Disneyland."

"It's a couple of days—four at the most. Five tops."

"I can't help but notice your plan has gone from a day at the most to let's take a whole week off."

"You only live once, right?"

I shake my head and take out my phone, pulling up my Insta stories.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Going on an adventure. Duh." I roll my eyes.

“You’re gonna livestream our escape?”

“That’s the plan.”

Styx stares out the window. “Oh shit. Is that your mom? I thought you said she wasn’t here.”

“No. I said my dad wasn’t here.” I shrug. “My mom is always home.”

“Stones, won’t she lose her shit if she sees you?”

“Yep.” I check my hair in the viewfinder and hit Live.

“Then what—”

“What up, Aerosol Addicts? You guys remember my homecoming date, Styx, right?” I turn the camera on him. He makes a derp face, so I steal the limelight back. “Well, we have a treat for you. This bonehead is taking me on a mother-freaking road trip. Say hi, bonehead.”

I shift closer to Styx and he jumps in the frame.

“Hi, bonehead.” He grins, and in his stupid polarized wayfarers, he looks even cuter than usual.

“You’re a dick.”

He grins wider, and I realize that I’m gaping at him again like a dumbass. I turn my attention back to the screen. My notifications are going crazy. I’ve never seen so many damn hearts and heart-eye emojis floating across my screen. “So, here’s the deal: I’m scheduled for surgery next week. A surgery I don’t know if I’ll survive. I

mean, chances of not dying are pretty good, but that's all they could guarantee. I don't know if I'll lose the use of my arms, or if I'll be much more than a vegetable, so Styx is breaking me out. I'm going on an adventure, in case I can't anymore."

I swallow hard and glance at Styx, who's watching me with rapt attention. "And my goodfriendStyx—"

"Friend?" he says. I flip the camera on him again and roll my eyes, because the comments coming in are just hilarious.

"Myfrieend"—I draw out the word—"Styx is helping me escape reality for a little bit, but here's the catch. The mom monster is home, so we need to get in and grab my stuff and get out without her ever knowing I was here."

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Styx's brows shoot skyward, and he removes his sunglasses. "Wait, what? You didn't say we were going in while your mom was there."

"Um ... duh! Of course we are. Don't tell me you're chicken?"

"I'm not a chicken. I just thought we'd wait until she went out." He frowns at the house. "Maybe we should go over the plan."

I grin. He's totally chicken. "The plan is to follow my lead, and don't get caught."

"So, you don't have a plan then?"

"Nope." I hold my hand out for his, the way he did back in his dad's apartment. "You ready, loner boy?"

He pops his gum like an asshole. "I was born ready, baby."

"Don't call me baby."

"Jesus, you're a hard woman to please."

"I am. It's a fault I'm actually rather proud of," I say and open my car door. "Now. I'm going to ask you again, Mr. Hendricks, are you going to take my hand or not?"

"You know, you're really fucking hot when you get all domineering like that."

I roll my eyes and make a come-hither gesture and he leans closer. "Styx, are you in

or out?”

“Oh, I’m in.”

“Then get out of the goddamn car and cover me.”

“Cover you? What is this, a Black Ops mission?”

“If you wanna make out at Disney, then yeah, this is Black Ops, and we’re teenage badasses. Now, cover me while I sneak in my bedroom window, and give me a boost while you’re at it.” I run across the road and hide behind the Ficus in front of the house. Styx follows, but the tree is not nearly large enough to conceal both of us, so he just stands there like an idiot.

“Okay, Addicts,” I say with a goofy conspiratorial smile. “We’re going in.”

“On a scale of one to really scary, just how terrifying is your dad?”

“Korean-dad-level terrifying.”

“Right, and what’s your mom likely to do if she catches us?”

“Call my dad.”

“Okay, and just out of curiosity ... what are the chances of you going without clothing on this trip?”

I laugh. “You kiss a boy once and all of a sudden he thinks he’s Don Juan.”

“It was more than once, Stones.”

Shaking my head, I sign off, because I can't exactly climb through my window while I film.

I run along the front path and take the stairs two at a time, then I slip my phone into my cleavage and smile at Styx. "I'm gonna need a boost."

He slides his hands together and interlocks his fingers. I step into his joined palms and he lifts me. I grab onto the support pillar and attempt to pull myself up, but the chemo has made me weak. I struggle, my legs flailing wildly against the painted column. Styx shoves his hands under my butt and I squirm and kick.

"Ow! Jesus, Stones. You just kicked me in the goddamn eye."

A loud laugh escapes me. "Sorry."

With another boost, I hoist myself onto the portico roof underneath my window. I lie, panting, unable to ignore the burn in my arms and legs. Eventually, I sit and quietly draw up the window sash.

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I pull myself over the threshold, wincing when my body hits the floor with a thud. I pause for a beat to listen for my mom, but her terrible singing echoes down the hall. I push up onto my elbows, but I'm slammed right back down when Styx lands on top of me.

The wind is knocked from my lungs, and thank God, because I'd probably tear him a new one if I had the voice to speak.

"Shit, sorry." He rolls off me. I take shallow half-breaths until my lungs will allow them to deepen. "I thought you would have moved out of the way."

"No, jackass. I didn't have time," I whisper. "It's not every day I have to climb in my freaking window with this pathetically weak chemo body. It took all the strength I had just to climb out of it last night."

He turns his head towards me and whispers, "Please tell me there's a back way out of here?"

I roll my eyes, rise, and grab my overnight bag from the closet, then empty out the paint supplies as quietly as I can onto the bed. I throw my meds, clothing, underwear, shoes, and several sterile dressing kits for my PICC line into my bag, and hoist it on my shoulder. Safety first. Then I remember my goddamn brain cells and go back for my makeup essentials: gloss, concealer, foundation, mascara, and my Kat Von D Tattoo Liner. The tip is so damn sharp I may be able to stab Styx with it if he annoys me on this trip.

I toss in my favorite black nail polish too, just in case I have to touch up. Or use it to

paint his face while he sleeps. Payback for crushing me under his weight.

He shakes his head like I'm a total girl, and I shoo him toward the window. At the last second, I eye my chemo blanket—a hideous pastel pink and blue faux-mink blanket with rainbows and ice creams, and which is only redeemed by the black bats, grim reapers, and crooked tombstones that read RIP. My friends gifted it to me before chemo, back when they were friends who didn't treat me like my cancer was contagious. I debate leaving it behind—hell, I even debate calling them and telling them to come with—but I wad it up in my bag and toss it out the window to Styx who's waiting on the stairs below. Then I climb through the window, and gently ease it closed behind me.

The descent is faster than the ascent, but the soles of my feet still sting with the impact when I jump from the portico column to the stairs. Once we're on the sidewalk, I smile at Styx.

“Last chance to back out,” he says.

I tilt my chin defiantly. “Not on your life, loner.”

“Come on. Let's get out of here before anyone realizes I'm stealing you away.”

“Still scared of my dad, huh?”

“Terrified.” He grins and hefts the bag high on his shoulder. We run across the street, and I let out a “whoop” when Styx starts the truck and we peel away from the curb.

I pull out my phone and hit Live on my Insta story. “What's up, Addicts? Okay, so it was totally Mission Impossible kind of stuff, but we did it. We snuck into my house, grabbed my things, and escaped without the mom monster being any the wiser. No thanks to loner boy, who practically crushed me to death when he came in the

window.” I angle the camera toward Styx.

“Hey, how the hell was I to know you hadn’t moved?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe guess that I’m not an athlete and therefore have some idea that I’d be recovering on my floor after leaping through my window.”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly a leap; you flailed for a good long while there.”

“You suck. So we’re currently stuck on the 101 in traffic leaving SF, but we have tunes—mine, of course, because Styx would likely make me listen to Led Zeppelin the whole way.”

“Hey, Led Zeppelin were the founding forefathers of hard rock. Don’t knock the Zeppelin.”

I roll my eyes. “We’re gonna make a stop for snacks, right? You can’t have a road trip without snacks.”

“Of course.”

“Styx is a little freaked that my dad is still going to come after us.”

“Thanks for going public with that shit, Stones,” he mutters. “I don’t look like a pussy at all.”

I poke my tongue out at him. “Our parents are going to kill both of us,” I tell the camera. “But hey, it saves the cancer from doing it, right?”

Styx smiles. “Right.”

I chuckle and sign off, promising to update my followers as any new developments arise, but as much as social media has been my life for the last few years, it's not everything. Being here with loner boy, feeling freedom thrum through my veins, the butterflies in my belly as Styx grins at me, and the feel of his lips on mine? Those things are everything.

We stop at a diner in a place called Davenport for lunch. It overlooks the water along the coast. It isn't until we sit down that I realize something I should have thought of long ago. "Styx?"

He doesn't look up from his menu. "Yeah?"

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“Do you have money?”

That does get his attention. “I thought you had money?”

“What? No. I didn’t bring any money. I mean, I have maybe a hundred dollars in my purse, but I—”

“You’re kidding, right? Who comes to Disneyland without money?”

“You’re the one who dragged me along on this trip.”

“Yeah, but I thought you’d pay your own way. I mean shit, Stones, I’ve seen your house. Your parents must be loaded.”

I lean across the table and hiss, “Are you fucking kidding me right now? You’re playing the rich-kid card?”

A huge grin splits his face and he folds his menu and leans back in his chair. “God, Stones, you’re so damn easy to rile up. Of course I’m shitting you. I’m not gonna invite you to Disney and drag you halfway across the state without bringing enough money to cover it. We got no sense, but we do have a shit ton of cash, little lady.”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“But a loveable one, right?”

I shake my head and mutter, “About as loveable as my ass.”

“So, we’re talking pretty fucking loveable, then?”

I blush and hide behind the enormous menu. Thankfully, the waitress comes to take our order, and just to get back at Styx, I pick the most expensive thing, even if all I want are fries and a cherry coke.

When the waitress leaves, I stare out at the ocean. The sun glints off the rolling waves, stinging my eyes. Silence settles over us. As if he can sense my melancholy, Styx grabs my hand and draws it across the table. Electricity sparks up my arm, and I draw my attention away from the sea.

“Do you ever think of just wading out into the ocean?” I ask.

“A little chilly for a swim, isn’t it?”

“No. Not to swim.”

“Ah. You mean ... to end it.”

I bite my lip, ashamed now that the words are out, suspended between us. He brings my hand to his lips and places a soft kiss to the bony flesh. I’ve always been slim, but cancer rapes from within. It sweeps through your body like a tide, leaving nothing left unravaged by the waves.

“All the time,” Styx says quietly.

“Really?”

“Yeah, but it’s the ‘what if’ that gets you.”

“The ‘what if?’”

“What if things get better? What if I actually beat this disease? What if I don’t choose to end it and the girl I’ve had a permanent boner for since fifth grade falls in love with me?”

I laugh, despite my melancholia. “Who said anything about love?”

“Who didn’t?”

The waitress returns with our food and I poke at my grilled steak, choosing instead to eat the fries. “Does it ever get any easier?”

“Cancer or love?”

I give him a pointed look. “Cancer, dumbass.”

“I don’t know. You know that saying, ‘God only gives you what you can handle?’”

“Yeah?”

“I think that’s bullshit. I think we’re given the obstacles we’re given by fate, God, or a fucking eight-limbed elephant man, and we just do the best we can. Some of us sink, and some struggle to the surface, but I don’t ever see anyone swimming.” He looks out at the ocean and gives a humorless laugh. “I think life sucks, and it’s a cycle of endless birth, death, and rebirth. You have cancer. What you do with it is what fucking matters.”

“What I do with it?” I ask in disbelief. “What the hell am I supposed to do with it, other than try and get rid of it?”

“You’re supposed to live, Stones. We’re all just here to live.”

How can he be so fucking chill about this? How can he be content with only making it to eighteen, and any birthday beyond that is just icing on the really fucked-up cake? I glare at him across the table, at the food he’s shoveling into his mouth, and the blob of ranch on his unshaven face, and I laugh. It’s a slow, disbelieving laugh that quickly turns into something more, into full-out hysterics and then sobbing tears. Styx studies me as he wipes his mouth clean, places the napkin over his half-eaten food, and throws several bills on the table.

He grabs my hand and pulls me to my feet. I follow him, blind through my tears, and when he pulls me into a hug beside the car, I fall apart.

“I’m ... I-I’m ... s-sorry.” I sob into the soft fabric of his hoodie. He doesn’t say anything. He just lets me cry as he holds me so tight I can’t breathe, and I don’t want

him to ever let go. His hand rests on the back of my head. I don't know how he knows to be exactly what I need, but he does. Maybe it's that cancer wisdom he mentioned. For a long time, we just stand there, holding onto one another as if we're each other's lifeline. That's how it is for me, at least. I don't know what I bring to the table for him, but Styx isn't just my friend—he's my rock. I'd be lost without him.

I step out of his embrace and sniff. My mascara is likely all over my face, and I can feel how puffy and red my nose is.

"Come on. It's cold out here." He opens the car door.

"I think I got your hoodie all wet."

A salacious grin tips the corners of his mouth.

"You're sick," I say.

He laughs. "Yes, I am." Styx takes off his hoodie and hands it to me. "Put this on. We don't need you coming down with a cold."

"Okay." I press the fabric to my nose and smell it. Styx. "Does this mean I have to give you my scrunchie now that I have your hoodie?"

"You own a scrunchie?"

"No."

"No problem. I'll take your panties instead."

I laugh. "Oh my God. You're so gross."

“Get in the car, Stones.”

“I’m not sure I want to. I might be safer taking my chances hitchhiking to Disney rather than travelling with a pervert.”

“Get in the fucking car.”

I throw his hoodie on as he fishes another out of his duffle bag, and I climb into the front seat. Styx hops in a moment later, and we screech out of the small gravel lot. He commandeers the Spotify playlist and I let him because finding music that will impress him is exhausting.

“Thank you,” I say over Panic!’s “Far Too Young to Die”.

He turns the volume down. “For what?”

“For being my life preserver.”

His brows shoot skyward. “Well, it’s only fair since my words were the ones that sent you spiraling. Sometimes I forget this is all new to you.”

“How did you get through it?” I frown. “The last time, I mean?”

“I don’t think I really knew what was going on. I took my meds when I was told to. I spent a lot of time in the hospital—practically lived there for the first three months of my diagnosis while my friends went to movies, and Comicon, and started dating girls. I made friends with the other patients until they dropped off like flies.”

“That must have been so hard.”

He shrugs and darts his eyes from the road to glance at me. “No different from what

you're going through now.”

“It’s a little different.”

“How?”

“Because I have you,” I whisper. A sad smile flits across his face, but it’s chased away as quickly as it came. “Styx?”

“Yeah?”

“Promise me you’re not going anywhere.”

His eyes dart from the road again back to me, but he doesn’t say a word. We both know he can’t. We both know it’s a promise neither of us can keep. Seems like such a simple thing: don’t die, but at seventeen, it’s never been more complicated.

CHAPTER TWENTY

STYX

Alaska is quiet for a lot of the trip. We sing along to old Faith No More, Foo Fighters, and Panic! At The Disco songs. Shit everyone knows, but I suspect most people don’t actually like. When I put on a Mazzy Star playlist, I can tell she’s listening intently.

“Okay.” Alaska shakes her head. “This just won’t do.”

“What?”

She turns down the volume. “This dreary music.”

“I thought you were enjoying it.”

“I was, but now I’m not, so I get to choose something else.”

“Okay, but I can’t promise I won’t die a little inside if you put on that song from Moana.”

Alaska laughs. “It’s like you don’t even know me.”

“Then enlighten me, Stones. What’s your favorite song?”

“Right now?”

I shake my head. “Of all time.”

“No way. Too hard.”

“Fine, then. Right now?”

“This.” She fiddles with my phone and selects a track, but covers the screen so I can’t tell what the song is. The first few strains of an electric guitar echo through my dad’s shitty speakers. “Oh Christ, tell me that’s not Ed Sheeran.”

“This is not Ed Sheeran,” she protests with a pout. “James Bay is actually hot.”

“James Bay?” I listen to the distorted vocal and the laid-back rhythm. It has a very chilled eighties vibe, and I don’t mind it.

“Tell me you know who James Bay is? I thought you wanted to be a music journalist?”

“Yeah, a rock journalist; not top-forty shit.”

“Come on, have you actually listened to this guy’s lyrics? He’s like the Bob Dylan of our generation.”

“Okay, first of all, no one is the Bob Dylan of our generation. Bob Dylan is Bob Dylan; no one is ever coming close to that. And I’m pretty sure this dude is at least what? Thirty?”

“He’s twenty-five.”

I waggle my eyebrows. “Aren’t we the diehard fangirl?”

“Shut up.”

“He’s too old for you.” I grin. Her cheeks are all pink. I want to kiss her. Bad. “You know that, right?”

I put on “Seaside” by The Kooks. She rolls her eyes. “It’s like you’re an old man in a seventeen-year-old’s body.”

“So what would you do if James Bay were here right now?”

“I’d tell you to shut up for a start, and then I’d tell him to sing.”

“Really? That’s it?” I dart a glance at her, trying to see more in her expression than she’s apparently willing to give. “You wouldn’t ask him to fuck you even though you might never be in a truck as fancy as this with him ever again?”

“Is that what you’d do if the guys from Taint were here? Aren’t you like, their biggest fanboy?”

“Uh ...” He clears his throat. “Well, I’m a fan. That’s actually what I used my wish for.”

“You did not?”

“I did. I got to go backstage and meet the band. Interview them. I think they thought it was cute, me living out my music journo fantasies when everyone in the room was pretty sure that wasn’t going to happen, but it was cool, nonetheless. And, no. That’s not what I’d do if they were here. I don’t bat for my own team. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. If I did, I’d probably be Levi Quinn’s bitch.”

“Are those rumors true? I mean, what do you even do with a twelve-inch penis?”

“Why don’t you slide on over here and find out.” I wink.

Alaska scowls. “Oh my God, has that line ever worked for you?”

“No, actually.” I sigh. “I’ve never talked to a girl long enough to use that line.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m serious.”

“Nuh-uh. No way.”

“Way,” I say solemnly. “It’s kind of hard to hit on girls with a breathing tube sticking out your nose.”

“So you’ve never ...”

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I swallow hard and clear my throat. Jesus. I'm not sure I'm ready to admit this out loud to the girl of my dreams, but there's no sense in lying. I don't want to lie to her. "No. You?"

She shakes her head. "No."

"What about Cole Meyers?"

She laughs. "What? Why would I sleep with Cole Meyers? He's the biggest player in our school."

"And yet, you dated him for a whole year." Shit. She studies me. I feel her eyes burning into the side of my face. Great. Now she thinks I'm a freak and a total stalker. "I mean, that's ... what I heard."

I chew the inside of my cheek. Fuck. She's going to think I'm a total psycho. Right now, she's probably planning her escape and trying to calculate how far she'd fall to her death if she opened her door and jumped down the ravine to the beach below.

Her hand rests on my thigh and I almost drive us off the road. "Not a lot of guys would notice that."

I shrug, aiming for nonchalance. "I noticed."

"I'm glad." When I glance at her again, her smile is coy. "And to answer your question, no. I've never had sex. I'm still very much a virgin, and even if I wasn't, I'd never give it up to a sleaze ball like Cole Meyers."

“Then why date him for so long? I mean, if you knew he was a sleaze ball, why devote so much of your life to someone?”

She shrugs. “Why do we do anything? For attention? To feel? To be wanted?”

“You had my attention. For years. You had my attention, and you were wanted ... more than you will ever know.”

“Were?”

“Are.” I let out a shaky breath. I can’t believe I’m saying this shit. Not because it’s not true—it is—but because I thought I’d go my whole life without ever telling this girl how perfect she is. How I’ve wanted her since the day I laid eyes on her in junior high, and how I’d never thought in a million years that I’d get to kiss her, let alone convince her to run away with me. “Fuck, Alaska. I want you so goddamn bad.”

A beat passes, a long, silent beat, and I can’t take my eyes from the road because I’m terrified I’ve said too much. I’m scared she’s going to run, or that she’ll realize that what she feels isn’t what I feel.

“Can you pull over?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you—”

“Styx, pull over.”

“Yeah, okay.” I check my rearview. The road is quiet, so it’s not like I’m holding up traffic as I drive onto the shoulder and bring the car to a stop on a patch of lush green grass. “Look, I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. I shouldn’t have said ... I-I can take you home if—”

She scrambles across the center console and climbs into my lap. Her ass lays on the horn, her lips are on mine in seconds, her tongue deep in my mouth. She tastes like cherry cola. When I get over my initial shock, I slide my hands into her hair, and kiss her back, moaning into her mouth. Before I'm ready, she pulls away and smiles down at me.

"I want you too." She chuckles then bites her lip. "You know, in case that wasn't obvious with me climbing in your lap like a great big whore?"

"Hey, don't knock the whores. That's an honest profession, right there."

She laughs and rests her hand on my chest. "I may have been a blind idiot for a long time, but my eyes are wide open now."

"I like you wide open."

She throws her head back and laughs. "Oh my God, you're insufferable."

"Did I say you? I meant your eyes."

"Smartass."

I trail my fingers up under the hoodie and the thin shirt she wears beneath it. Her flesh is hot, soft, and as I slide my fingertips along her smooth skin, my dick throbs. I want more. I want all of her. I always have, but I will myself to be patient, not to rush this. The last thing I want is for her to feel pressured. Even though her eyes are closed and she's squirming like she enjoys my hands on her body, I slide out from under the hoodie, and she frowns. "Coming Down" by the Dum Dum Girls is playing and all at once, I feel like a giant fucking pussy because I finally have the girl of my dreams within reach and I'm letting her go.

She lifts her hips, as she tries to maneuver her body off mine, and then she sighs and says, “I think I’m stuck.”

I laugh. “I guess there are worse places to be stuck, right? Unless, of course, you’re having major regrets about kissing me.”

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“No regrets about the kissing. I may have some about climbing into your lap though, since I can’t get off.”

“Oh God, there are so many puns I could make right now.”

“But you won’t because I’m this close”—she pinches her thumb and forefinger together, barely leaving any space between—“to punching you in the face if you laugh at me one more time.”

I press my lips tightly closed to swallow my laughter. Stones laughs too. It does things to my cock, really good things that I’m sure she’ll be mortified by if I let her keep sitting on me. I reach for the handle and open the door.

It takes a little more maneuvering, but she climbs off me and out onto the grass where she stands, laughing. At me? At us? I don’t know. I don’t care because I have to kiss her again.

I climb out of the car and move toward her, but Alaska has other ideas. She runs. I chase, and when I finally catch up, we go down in a heap in the grass by the side of the road. Her lips meet mine and I roll us so that I’m on top. She wraps her legs around my hips and pulls me closer. “I’m so glad we got out of that car.”

“Yeah, gotta stretch the legs.”

“Stop, revive, survive.”

“What?” I laugh, wondering what the hell she’s talking about.

“It was a thing I heard on an Australian cop show once.”

“You’re so fucking weird.”

“Right back at ya, loner.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ALASKA

Isit huddled nearthe fireplace in our cabin. I’m starving, and I’ve been cursing Styx and his need to see the stupid wilderness since we arrived. As of right now, we have a gas fireplace, a packet of cold hotdogs, and the ingredients for s’mores. A girl can’t survive on marshmallow and graham crackers alone.

I huddle closer to the enclosed fireplace and warm my hands, careful not to let the duvet slip from around my shoulders. This is what I get for following a boy to Disneyland and not packing appropriately.

Outside, in the freezing wilderness of our Big Sur camp, Styx lets out a howl. I shuffle to the window. I’m not opening this door unless he’s produced some kind of caveman skills and created fire.

The idiot jumps up on the picnic table and beats his chest like King Kong. “Stones, you better get your fine ass out here because this guy just created fire.”

I open the door, wincing when the chilly air reaches into the room with icy fingers. “For real?”

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“For real.” He nods, and though it’s almost completely dark outside, his smile is a flash of white teeth against the gloom. “We’re eatin’ tonight, sugar.”

I laugh at his yokel impersonation. “Please never call me sugar again. It’s disturbing.”

“Bring the hotdogs, woman.”

I frown and pick up the hotdogs, marshmallows, chocolate, and crackers, and carry my loot outside into the freezing evening. Styx jumps down from the table, but he still manages to gloat by striding up to me, taking my head in his hands, and kissing me hard. I lose my grip on dinner. The items fall to the forest floor, and I couldn’t care less. I slide my hands around Styx’s neck and press my body against his. Heat arcs through my chest, down to my core. It spreads to every part of me, engulfing me in flames. We’ve spent so much time kissing today, it’s a wonder we made it this far at all.

It’s too cold for crickets, but around us, the night sounds envelop us like a shroud. The fire hisses and crackles. Underneath our feet, the forest floor cracks and pops with every movement. When I pull away, our heavy breaths drown out the rest of the forest and the empty campground, and my hunger has been replaced by a deeper need.

“Me, make fire. You, cook sausage,” Styx says with a grin, like a total caveman.

“You are entirely too proud of this feat.”

“Oh, I’m gonna be milking this for a while yet.” He bends down to pick up my

dropped grocery items.

I throw my head back and stare at the stars winking into light. “Hazel Grace never had to contend with a caveman. She had champagne and a fancy French restaurant.”

“Who the fuck is Hazel Grace?”

I roll my eyes and sigh. “As if you don’t know.”

He winks. “I’m starving. I created fire, now make my dinner, wench woman.”

“Screw you. Cook your own damn sausage on a stick. Your fire sucks. I’m going back inside where the fire is warm.”

“Fine,” Styx relents. “I’ll cook your dinner.”

“Keep talking.”

“And make your s’mores.”

“See?” I lean in for another kiss. “Better already.”

We roast our dogs and eat s’mores until we’re sick. I sit on his lap by the fire, despite having my own chair. We drink the beer that Styx stole from his dad’s fridge, and my head gets buzzy and dizzy when our kisses turn from sweet pecks to hot and heavy and his warm hands travel my body.

“Should we go to bed?” Styx’s teeth tug gently on my earlobe.

“Uh ... yeah.”

“I’m not trying to pressure you. I don’t need sex.”

A nervous laugh bubbles up my throat. “O-kay.”

“I mean, I want sex. I really, really want sex. It’s not that I don’t want you, I just ... well, we’ve gone this long without it, right?”

I clear my throat. “Right.”

“And hey, we have two beds, so you don’t have to sleep with me.”

“You don’t want me to sleep with you?”

“Yeah, of course I want you to.” He rubs a hand over the back of his neck in a nervous gesture. “I just ... again, with the pressure.”

I smile. “You should see your face.”

“Goddamn it, Stones. You’re really busting my balls right now?”

“I want to sleep with you, both beside you and in the Pornhub sense.” I scrunch up my nose. “But ... can we just take it slow?”

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He presses a kiss to my neck, his hot breath sending a shiver down my spine. “We can go as slow as you want.”

“Okay. Then, let’s go to bed.” I climb off his lap and hold my hand out to him.

“Why don’t you go in?” Styx adjusts himself in his seat. “I’m gonna need a minute.”

“Really?” I raise a brow and grin.

“Really.”

“Was it the Pornhub that did it for you?”

“No. Not specifically, but that didn’t help. You should just refrain from using the words ‘bed,’ ‘Pornhub,’ and ‘I want to sleep with you’ from now on.”

I laugh and gather up the remains of our feast.

“And you should definitely avoid bending over in front of me in tight jeans.” He reaches out and grabs my waist, pulling me back down on his lap. I shriek and squirm against him, but his hands pin me tight and his breath in my ear steals the fight from my body. “Really, these jeans should be illegal. So should you wearing my hoodie.” His hands slide under the thick fleece of the sweater and graze my skin. My body is electric.

I grab his hand and guide it up over my bra. He squeezes hard. A cry escapes me. I turn my head, angling my body in his lap. I capture his lips with my own and moan

into his mouth as his hands slip into my bra and squeeze my nipple. Heat unfurls in my chest, snaking its way down between my legs. Moisture pools in my panties. The silky fabric sticks to my too-hot flesh.

His fingers glide over my breasts and torso and pause at the waistband of my jeans. I pop the button, lace my fingers with his, and steer him beneath the denim. Our joined hands barely fit, but I don't want him to stop.

His fingers toy with the edge of my panties. "Are you sure?"

I don't trust my voice not to waiver, so I nod. I slide his hand lower, over the silk fabric. His erection presses into my back. I want to touch him the way he's touching me. I want to explore every inch of him, but my heart stutters at the idea, and I can't move. His hands caress me, driving me mad. My body shakes, my cheeks flush, and just when I begin to feel hot and tingly all over, a gruff voice comes from behind our camp. "You guys okay over here?"

Styx jerks his hand out of my panties and up to my waist, squeezing my body tight beneath his hoodie. I bury my face in his neck to hide my embarrassment.

Styx clears his throat. "Yeah. We're good. Thanks."

The man walks around our chair and stands closer to the fire. He's wearing khaki pants and a puffy jacket with an embroidered logo that reads Big Sur Campground, and thank God, because for a minute there I thought he might have been a serial killer.

"I'm Noah. I help run this place." He holds out his hand to shake but seems to think better of it. Awkward. "Do you think you guys could keep it down? One of the other campers had a quiet word to me about the noise."

“Yeah, sure,” I say. “We’re ... er ... going to bed now anyway.”

“Okay, well, don’t forget to put out the fire first,” Noah says. “Can’t have the whole forest burning down.”

“Right,” Styx agrees.

He turns and walks a few feet away. I hold my breath, not sure if I want to laugh or run away in embarrassment, but the man faces us again. “Your parents do know you’re here, right?”

Guilt washes through me, but I smile and say, “Of course. They’re totally cool with it. We’re from Monterey. So, you know, they wouldn’t have to go far to find us.”

He glances at the truck parked by the cabin, probably checking the San Francisco license plates. Nice work, Alaska. He’s going to rat us out for sure. “Monterey, huh?”

“Yep.”

“So you probably go to school with my daughter?”

I swallow hard and shrug. “It’s a big school.”

“It’s not that big.” He looks up at the stars and sighs. “You know there’s an amber alert out for you guys, right?”

“What?” I say.

“That’s not us,” Styx adds.

“Okay, you can cut the shit, because your faces have been plastered all over the

national news for the last hour.”

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“Christ.” Styx exhales loudly and tips his head back, his eyes closed, and brow furrowed.

“You know I have no choice but to report you?”

“Come on, man.” Styx squeezes my side. “Please don’t do that.”

“We have cancer,” I blurt. The man stares at me with his brows raised and a you don’t expect me to buy this bullshit expression on his face. “It’s true. We’re just ... we’re just trying to make it to Disneyland.”

“Disneyland?” His tone is incredulous.

“Come on, Noah,” Styx says. “You remember what it was like to be young, don’t you?”

“I’m thirty-eight, kid. That’s not old.”

“It’s kinda old,” I say, though I regret it instantly when his frown deepens. “Sorry.”

He seems to hesitate, wets his lips, and then says, “What kind of cancer? The News didn’t specify. They just said you were sick.”

“Alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma,” Styx says.

I point to my head and shrug. “Brain tumor. I have surgery next week.”

“Hence the Disney road trip.” Styx grips my waist, as if he’s afraid I’ll be snatched away at any second. I know how he feels.

“Please? Please don’t report us.” I beg. “We just ... we just wanna feel like normal kids for a minute.”

“Ah, shit.” He scratches his stubble. “I could get into real trouble doing this. If I’d been here this afternoon when you checked in, I would have had some questions and made a few calls. You’re lucky Ella was the one to handle your reservation.”

“Is that your daughter?” I ask with a sad smile.

“Yeah.”

“She’s our age, right?” I slide my hands into the pockets of the hoodie Styx gave me.

He shakes his head. “She’s fourteen.”

“What would you do if she were in our shoes?”

“She wouldn’t be in your shoes because I’d kill her if she ever ran away with a boy across the state. Cancer or not.” He sighs. “Look, if I don’t report this, I could get in a lot of trouble.”

“Please?”

“Maybe it’s for the best,” Styx says. “Maybe this was a stupid idea.”

“No. It’s not a stupid idea. It’s the best idea, and it’s the only real shot we have. They’re going to cut open my skull in a week. They’re going to carve a tumor out of my brain, and I may end up a vegetable for the rest of my life. I’m seventeen, sir, and

not to lay the guilt on thick, but this may be the last chance I get to be a kid, to kiss a boy, and forget about this disease that's trying to kill us both. So I'm begging you, please, please don't report us."

"Jesus Christ." He shakes his head. "You feel safe with this guy?"

I sniff and wipe away my tears with the heel of my hands. "Yeah."

"You trust him enough to know he'll stop if you ask him to?"

"Of course. I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

He nods. "You have any problems, you go for the eyes, and then the groin, and then you run and find me. Cabin twenty-eight, over there by the big Fir."

"Doesn't that kind of defeat the purpose? Telling me how to protect myself in front of the guy you think I need protection from?"

"Don't bust my balls, kid." He points to Styx. "And you, you lay a finger on her when she says no, and I'll kill you myself."

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“I’m not going to touch her if she doesn’t want me to.”

“If I call the cops now, you’ll spend the night in the waiting room at the police station until your parents can get down here to pick you up. You’ve got until first light. You stay here where it’s warm and safe, but that truck better be out of my campground before my grocery delivery tomorrow at seven a.m.”

Styx nods. “Yes, sir.”

“I’ll report it then, but we never had this conversation.”

“Thank you.” I sniff back my tears.

He nods. “Drop your key in the deposit box by the office.”

“Will do. Thanks, man.”

“Good luck with your surgery, and no more drinking,” He says. “I hope you kids make it. I really do.”

I’m not sure if he means to Disney or through cancer. I’m not sure it matters. We could die in our sleep tonight. All we have is right now. It is the only guarantee life has given us, and I plan to make every millisecond count.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

STYX

I pull into a gas station and turn off the truck.

“Race you for the restroom,” Stones says, her smile wide and unassuming. I just stare at her. I can’t believe she’s here with me. I can’t believe I’m this lucky. The fact that she’s even deemed me important enough to talk to, let alone kiss, touch, and run away with is a goddamn miracle.

“What? Do I have Cheetos in my teeth?” She flashes perfect pearly whites at me, and I grin and shake my head.

“Your teeth are fucking perfect, Stones. Just like the rest of you.”

Her eyes grow wide, like me thinking she’s gorgeous is news. She hurtles across the center console and grabs the cords on my hoodie, pulling me in for a kiss. I slide my fingers into her hair and kiss her so deep she moans. The car behind us honks, and we break apart and grin. “I think your teeth are fucking perfect too.”

I laugh and pull away, opening my door. “Go pee, Stones. I need a minute away from you to calm down and lose my boner.” I slide out of the car and adjust things below.

“For the record, your boner is perfect too,” she shouts.

Chuckling, I slam the door. The guy behind us flips me off, and I mouth “sorry” but he’s an asshole so I’m not really sorry about making him wait while I kiss my girl. His Dodge Dart pulls out, the tires screeching on the concrete as he drives off.

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Alaska slides out of the vehicle and bends over to grab her purse. I stare at her ass, and when she stands and turns toward me, I'm holding the gas pump in front of my junk.

"Wow. You weren't kidding about that boner." She grins and blows me a kiss. "I'm getting snacks."

And I'm getting harder just watching her walk away.

I swipe my card, fill the tank, and head inside to piss. Stones comes barreling out of the door, her arms full of snacks.

"Hungry much?"

"Starved. Hurry up. I didn't pay for these."

"What the fuck?"

"Go, go, go, go!" she shouts.

"Jesus, Stones." I glance at the clerk, who's staring with his brow creased in confusion. He's not budging though, and I don't know what the fuck else to do as Alaska barrels forward so I turn tail, hit the fob on my dad's truck, and run like hell.

Inside the car, I slam the stick into drive and peel out of the gas station, almost clipping another vehicle in the process. The woman lays on her horn, and I lay on mine, and take the right exit onto the freeway.

Stones is cackling like a maniac, and I laugh too, caught up in her madness. “Wanna tell me what the fuck that was about? If you needed money, baby, you should have just asked.”

“I didn’t really steal this stuff,” she crows. “But you should see your face.”

“Are you kidding me right now?”

“Nope.” She grins and takes my hand from the wheel, toying with my fingers and sliding her sleeves over them before resting them in her lap. “I paid for every item.”

“You’re fucking crazy.”

“But I’m never dull,” she says with a crooked smile. She’s still holding my hand hostage, and fiddling with it in the sleeve of her oversized hoodie—myhoodie.

“No, you’re never that.” I take my hand back, needing to focus on the road. When I place it on the wheel, a bright teal velvet scrunchie is wrapped around my wrist.

“Did you buy me a scrunchie?”

“No. I bought me a scrunchie, which I’m giving to you.”

“I think you’re supposed to wear it first so it smells like you.”

“Eww, that’s gross. Who wants my ratchet-unwashed-hair smell on their scrunchie?”

I grin. “Me.”

“Well, that might be kind of hard.” She points to her hair, which is thinning in patches now, and that she mostly covers up with a bandanna tied in a bow on top of

her head like a pinup girl. Some days she wears it like a badass biker chick. It's totally fucking hot. "Lucky for you I bought more than one." She takes a pink velvet scrunchie and stuffs it in her cleavage.

I wet my lips. "I'm totally getting that out later."

Stones gives me a flirty smile. "I'm totally going to let you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

STYX

I turn the stereo off and glance at Stones. She's out cold, snoring lightly with a thin line of drool pooling on her shirt from her chin. I pull my phone from my pocket and turn it on. I've pretty much had it switched off since we left SF. I think Stones just turned hers to silent because our parents were calling so much.

I dart my eyes between my Instagram app and the road. I go live, whispering to whoever might be watching, "She sleeps, ladies and gentlemen. She looks like a fairy princess, commandeers my heart like a queen, and snores like a wildebeest. She's not any of those things. She's just a girl who's trying to live while dying. A girl this court jester loves."

I turn the camera back to my face and wink. "And I think the girl might even love me. Say what you want about how tragic our lives are, our diagnoses, but the way I see it, Alaska Stone and I are the luckiest kids alive. Now, I gotta quit talking before she wakes and mauls me like the beast for filming her with drool on her shoulder."

I tag her IG handle, end the video, and wince when her phone chimes on the dash. Stones doesn't wake, and I tuck my phone in the console and drive. We're so close. Just a few more hours from the happiest place on Earth, but in a way, a part of me doesn't even care if we make it, because this right here, her asleep and me driving into the night in our shitty little truck is everything. And I can't imagine a happier place on Earth than right here, with her by my side.

An hour later, I'm fighting to keep my eyes open when we drive into a hotel at Pismo Beach. I shake her gently and she breathes deeply, her lips curling into a sleepy smile. "I was having the best dream."

"Yeah? What about?"

"You and I stole your father's car and we went on a road trip to Disneyland."

"Wow, that must have sucked. I bet we drove each other fucking nuts."

"We did. But I also dreamed that we were dying."

My brow furrows—I can't help it. My features turn to ice; my face shuts down. "Also not just a dream."

"It's okay though, because when we died, it was just like flying. The two of us together, we flew, across Disneyland and Big Sur. We flew across cities and oceans and we held hands the entire way, and our lips were flapping in that way they do when people skydive."

The absurdity of her words hits me like an anvil, and I burst into laughter instead of tears. I swipe at my eyes and clear my throat. "Flapping lips, huh?"

"Yep." She smiles up at me and grabs her cheeks, pulling them apart rapidly. "You looked so funny too. Do it with me. I wanna see if the dream is anything like the real thing."

"I'm not doing that."

"Oh, come on, I did it for you."

“No.”

“Come on, Styx. I did it for you; do it back.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Boo, you suck.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “You really want me to flap my lips?”

“Please?”

“The things we do for love.” I raise a brow. She sucks in a breath, and I ignore it. Grabbing my cheeks, I pull them in and out until they’re making squishy sounds of their own. I do it until my face aches. She grins like a loon.

“Happy now?”

“Love?”

I study her face and smile. “What?”

“You said ‘the things we do for love’.”

“So?”

She clambers across the seat again and climbs into my lap. Her ass lays on the horn, but I don’t care because her lips are on mine, and I was right. This car is the happiest place on Earth. Her kiss is the happiest place on Earth, and nothing I live to see will ever top it.

When we come up for air, we’re both panting. My dick is hard, and I’m trying not to let her feel it through my jeans.

“You love me?” she asks.

“Yeah, Stones. I’m surprised you haven’t figured that out yet.”

“Will you ... will you go get us a room?”

I chuckle. I might need a minute for the blood to drain from my dick before I can do anything, but I nod and kiss her forehead. “You may have to detach yourself from my hips first.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“Don’t ever apologize for wanting to kiss me.” I grin and she climbs off my lap. Her cheeks are flushed, and she looks a little embarrassed at her outburst because she sinks down in her seat and pulls the blanket up to her chin. “I’d kiss you forever if I could.”

“Me too.” Her smile fades and she picks up her phone, likely to avoid my gaze. There are unshed tears in her eyes. I wish we could live, really live, without the constant reminder that we’re dying.

“I’ll be back.” I slide from my seat and close the door, relishing the cool Fall air on my skin. I walk slower to the office than I should, but my boner is awkward, and I don’t need the attendant staring. So I breathe deeply, and I try to ignore that the girl I want—the girl I love—is waiting for me in my dad’s truck.

The old lady manning the desk is more engrossed in her soap opera on the TV than she is in talking to some kid who needs a room for the night. She doesn’t ask questions, I pay cash, and she hands me the keys and tells me where to find the ice machine.

I walk back to the truck and open her door.

Alaska pounces from the front seat. “I saw your video.”

I grimace. “Oh yeah?”

“Uh-huh.” She bites her lip. “You know, if you weren’t so stinkin’ cute, I’d probably punch you for filming me while I slept.”

“No. No, please,” I mock protest. “Anything but your girly punches. I can’t take it.”

She pouts and wraps her arms around me, pushing her nose to my chest and breathing me in. I reciprocate, bowing my head to rest against her hair. I wanna stay like this forever, just breathing her in. Jesus. I sound like a fucking member of a boy band with his jockstrap pulled too tight, cutting off the circulation to his brain.

Too soon, she moves. I grab our shit from the floor on the passenger side and take her hand. “Come, my lady. Your chamber awaits.”

Alaska rolls her eyes. “You’re such a dork.”

“It’s my special talent.” I lead her to the bank of hotel rooms, slide our key in the lock, and open the door.

Brown. Brown is all I see. Brown furniture, brown walls, brown drapes, and overall, the smell of the room is musk and old Russian dude, sauerkraut, and also, the color brown.

“Wow,” Stones says. “That’s ...”

“Brown.”

“Pretty much.” She moves inside the room, turning on lamps with yellow, stained shades. “I wonder how many kids have lost their V-cards after prom here?”

“I wonder how many people were murdered here.”

She grins at me. “Good point.”

“We can’t stay here.” I shake my head, not wanting to even set foot across the threshold. She deserves so much better than this. I mean, we haven’t exactly been hitting the high-rollers’ rooms on this trip, but she deserves better than ... brown.

“Sure we can.” She jumps on the bed and I move inside the room and close the door behind me.

“Stones, I don’t know if you should be on there.”

“Why? Afraid I’ll catch a life-threatening disease? Too late.” She winks and pokes out her tongue, fishing her phone out of the pocket of her jeans.

I wish she wouldn’t do that. Make light of our illnesses. I mean, fobbing off my illness and making jokes has always been a coping mechanism for me, but I swear to God it’s like a knife to the fucking heart every time she does it. Every time she reminds me this is finite, that we’re finite.

“What’s up, Addicts?” she says to the camera on her phone. “We’re currently in our lovely accommodations for the evening. You guys, you’ve never seen anything browner. Seriously, it’s like shit puked in here. Isn’t that right, Styx?”

I push off the dresser and come closer. “It’s exactly like shit puked up in here.”

“See? I’m not lying.” She turns the camera to the room and pans slowly across the furnishings. I come up behind her and wrap my arms around her waist. Tucking my

face in against her neck, I kiss her soft skin. She tilts her head, allowing me better access, and I kiss her soft and slow, licking, sucking, and gently sweeping my teeth over her tender flesh until she's panting. She tastes like salt and coconut body cream. A little moan escapes her, and for a beat, I forgot she was still filming.

"Say goodbye, Stones," I say.

"Goodbye, Stones," she says with a chuckle, and tosses the phone down on the bed.

"You turned it off, right?"

"What? You don't wanna cross 'make a sex tape' off your bucket list?"

I laugh and reach for the phone. "Not today." I glance away from her lips to the screen and sure enough, it's still recording. "Sorry, kids. This is a private show. Besides, we're already in enough trouble. I don't wanna spend whatever time we have left in a jail cell for contributing to the child pornography epidemic." I wink and hit the end button, and toss the phone on the bed.

"Pornography, huh? What makes you think we're getting naked at all?" she asks.

"Er ... nothing. We don't have to do anything if you don't want to."

She laughs and pushes me back on the bed, and climbs on top. "I'm kidding. We're totally getting naked. I'm going to shower first though."

"O-okay." She climbs off my body and across the bed. She grabs the toiletries and sterile dressing kit for her PICC line from the duffle bag and heads into the bathroom. I fold my arms behind my head and stare up at the ceiling, puffing out my cheeks and slowly exhaling.

“Styx?” Alaska pokes her head around the doorframe.

I turn and look at her. “Yeah?”

“It’s normal that I’m terrified, right?”

I grin. “Yeah, I think that’s perfectly normal.”

“Are you—”

“Yeah. I’m terrified too.”

She exhales a huge sigh and covers her face with her hands. “Oh, thank God. Don’t go anywhere, okay?”

“I won’t.”

She disappears from view and the door snicks softly closed behind her. I try to calm my trembling limbs, but I can’t so I get up and remove my clothes. Then I realize that’s kinda fucked up. What if she doesn’t want to? What if she thinks I’m being presumptuous? What if she takes one look at my chemo body and runs for the hills?

I get dressed again, as quickly as I can, and then I lie on the bed, but that’s too presumptuous too, right? What the fuck? How do guys do this shit?

Breathe, Styx.

Just fucking breathe.

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Condoms!Shit. I need condoms. I pinch the bridge of my nose and wish the blood would drain from my dick just long enough for some to filter back to my brain. Where did I last see condoms? My dad's truck.

I grab the room key and run outside. Where the hell did I park? I run through the lot, half-crazed out of my mind, then I spot Dad's truck where we left it at the front of the hotel. I should move it in from the main entrance, so the cops don't drive by and see it.

I jump in and park it at the back of the lot, far from the street. Then I rummage through the glove box, in the trash lining the truck floor, and behind the seat. They're nowhere to be found.Shit. Did Alaska throw them out the other day? I search my memory. No. She put them back inside the car. So where the fuck are they?

Christ, she's gotta be finished her shower by now. I jump out of the truck and head for the office. The lady is still watching her soap opera. There are no condom vending machines, despite this being a place that looks like its patrons desperately need protection. "Er ..." I clear my throat. "Have you ... do you guys sell? Um ..."

"If you're looking for condoms, you'll find none here. The nearest you'll get is the drug store a block away."

"Shit."

"Maybe you should just abstain."

"Thanks. That's sound advice."

She grunts and I pull my baseball cap down on my head and leave the office. I walk back to the truck and jump in. I don't want Stones to feel pressured, but I also want to be prepared. The last thing either of us needs is an unwanted pregnancy.

Then it hits me. I won't make it to have kids. Let's face it—stage three is pretty much worst-case scenario, and the only way to go from here is to slide right on into stage four. All the poking, the prodding, the tests and chemo—it's not for us. It's for them. It's to ease their collective conscience. The doctors, our parents, hell, even Carissa, they're all invested in our treatments, in a cure, because it makes it easier to go on living knowing that you fought like hell for a kid whose time was cut way too short.

Alaska and I know differently. We'll both leave this Earth without making our mark on it, and when our parents die, we'll be forgotten. There will be no one to remember us, no one to carry on our genes or our legacy. This is it. This is all we get. A road trip to Disney, stolen kisses, the illusion of freedom, and our first time in a "brown" motel room. Now. All we get, all we're promised is now, and I intend to make every goddamn second count.

I turn the key in the ignition and peel out of the lot, my tires screeching on the blacktop. I tell Siri to find me the nearest drug store and I head there and back in record time. Of course, everything felt so slow as I waited in line with a basket of prophylactics, lube, candy, Advil, Gatorade—to keep our strength up—and a bunch of cheap flowers that has seen better days. I could swear every old lady in the state of California was waiting in that line as I paid for my items, but fuck that noise. YOLO, right?

After I park the truck, I grab my goodies and the room key, and head back to the shittiest motel room on the planet to be with my girl. When I slide the key in the lock, Alaska is on the bed, wrapped in a towel, her knees drawn up to her chest, and her face wet with tears. My heart hammers against my ribcage. Fuck.

I drop my loot and run to her side. “Stones, what’s wrong? What can I do?”

“You left me,” she says in an accusatory tone. “Do you not want to have sex with me? Fuck, I sound like such a girl right now, but you ... just tell me. I can take it. If my scars and my chemo paunch are repulsive to you, I get it.”

“Stones, stop.” I take her face in my hands, forcing her to look at me. “I already know every inch of your body, even though I’ve barely touched you. Even though I’ve never seen you without your clothes. You don’t have a paunch. You’re fucking hot.” I shake my head. “You’re beautiful, perfect. And I definitely want to have sex with you. Trust me on that. I can’t breathe knowing you’re naked under that towel, and I want you so bad.”

“Then why did you run?”

“I wanted it to be perfect.” I glance at the room around us and laugh. “As perfect as it can be in a shitty hotel like this. I wanted to be prepared. I didn’t want to have to stop halfway through to look for a condom, and when I went out to the truck, I couldn’t find them.”

“You went to get condoms?”

“Yeah. I know that might seem kind of like I was expecting something, and I’m totally okay to wait if you are—”

A line forms between her brows. “You wanna wait?”

“No. Stones, I wanna have sex with you. I want it—I want you—so bad, but only when you’re ready. I just want everything to be right.”

She sniffs and her lips tip up in the corners. “What else did you buy?”

The breath leaves my lungs in a rush, and I stand and walk over to my discarded items. I pick up the bag and dump it out on the duvet. The flowers are even worse for wear now that they've been hanging on the brown carpet with whatever flesh-eating viruses live within the fibers, but I hand them to her and she smiles. "You got me cheap drug-store flowers?"

"I did."

"They're perfect," she says, thumbing the bruised petals. She lifts a stem that no longer contains the head of the rose and laughs. "Especially this one."

"Who doesn't love a thorny stem, right?"

She sets the bouquet down on the dresser and picks up the bottle of lube, carefully reading the description. Her brows pinch and she bites her lip. "And this?"

"I heard it goes better with lots of lubricant."

"You've really never done this, have you? You weren't just lying to make me feel better?"

“Nope. Still a virgin.”

“I find that so hard to believe.”

“Why?”

“Because if I hadn’t been a self-absorbed idiot, if I knew the real you—if I’d spoken to you before—I would have jumped your bones.”

“You hated me.”

“No.” She shakes her head with a coy smile. I want to taste that smile, kiss it from her lips, and steal it for my own. “I didn’t hate you. I wanted you to think I did, because you were a total dick at our second chemo session. Besides, what’s the point in falling in love with someone who’s dying?”

I don’t know if she means herself or me. I suppose it doesn’t really matter. “I think there’s a point. Why wouldn’t you want to live the time we have left?”

“I’m scared, Styx.” Her eyes widen, as if she can’t believe she just admitted that out loud. She’s quiet for a beat, and then she licks her lips and whispers, “I’m so scared of dying. I’m scared of the nothing that comes after.”

I crawl up the bed toward her. My knees straddle her thighs as I cup her cheeks in my hands. “Me too.”

I kiss her lips, her eyelids, and the tears on her skin. She wraps her arms around me

so tight that it hurts my ribs, but I don't dare move. I tuck her hair behind her ear with trembling fingers. She tilts her face up, and I press another gentle kiss into her lips. Stones opens for me, and I tentatively dart my tongue inside. She moans against my mouth and pushes in deeper. I lean into the kiss. Placing my hands on the mattress, I shift my weight, settling between her legs. Alaska fumbles beneath the pillow and I hear the crinkle of a packet. I break away to look at the object in her hand. I laugh. The long string of condoms dangles from her fingers and I take them from her. She had them all this time, and like an idiot I searched that truck for twenty minutes.

“Let's ... let's not use my dad's condoms. It's fucking weird to think of my old man sticking it to a woman other than my mom.”

“But it's not weird to think about him sticking it to your mom?”

“Gah! Jeez, stop.” I drag a hand across my scalp. “Do you want my dick to go soft?”

She laughs and then bites her lip, looking up at me. “Is it ... is it hard right now?”

“Yeah, Stones. It's always hard around you.”

Her breath catches as she seems to consider this. Her mouth opens and quickly closes again, as if she was going to speak but thought better of it.

“What? Tell me.”

The air leaves her lungs in a rush. “Will you show me?”

“Only if you show me yours.”

“I asked you first,” she counters.

“What are you? Five?”

“Yes. Never doubt my ability to perfectly emulate a pissed off toddler. Now show me. Please?” She whines, and I come up on my knees before her. I unbutton my jeans and unzip the fly, but her tiny foot reaches out and she pokes my chest with her big toe. I have to fight the urge to tilt my head for a better look because I know she’s naked under that towel. “Shirt first.”

My lips curl in a half smile. And I grab the fabric and pull it over my head. I look down at her as her eyes rake over every inch of me before lowering to my erection. She sits up, reaches out, and runs her hand over the denim straining against my cock. I inhale sharply. She strokes me again, and then glances up at my face.

Stones unwraps her towel and lets the ends fall on the bed. She leans back and lets me study her. My eyes drink her in, from her smooth tan stomach to her perky upturned tits, the rosy nipples that form hard peaks as I watch. And then finally to the trimmed hair between her legs.

I run my hands over her thighs and spread her wider so I can see everything. She’s beautiful, pink, wet, and waiting. I explore her soft flesh, grinning when her body jerks as I touch her opening, and her clit. She likes that last one a lot, so I concentrate my efforts there, and within a few seconds, she’s panting, her legs are trembling, and sweat is beading on her brow and between her breasts.

I want to taste her. I have no fucking idea what I’m doing, but I’ve watched enough porn to get the gist of it, so I slide down on the mattress and lower my head between her legs.

Her hands dart out to cover herself. “What are you doing?”

“Tasting you.” I dart my tongue out and force my way between her fingers.

“I don’t ... are you sure?”

“Stones, it’s all I’ve wanted to do since we met.”

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“What if it’s ... what if I don’t taste—”

“Would you just shut up and let me eat your pussy?”

She balks, her mouth gaping open, and I use her shock to my advantage, darting my tongue between her fingers once more until she moves her hands and allows me complete access. I taste her, bury my face in her pussy and fucking breathe that shit in. I’m nervous as hell. I have no idea how to do this shit properly, how to make a woman come, and I regret my inexperience because her first time should be perfect. She deserves that. A guy who knows how to fuck, how to make her orgasm. I don’t know how to do either of those things, but I don’t care if it takes all night. I’m gonna try my goddamn best.

I concentrate my efforts on her clit. Sucking, rather than licking—thank you, Pornhub, for that little “how to eat pussy” tutorial. She seems to like that a lot, and within seconds, she’s panting, her body jerking, her fingers scratching and clawing at my scalp, holding me in place as she moans. Holy fucking shit. I’m gonna send a goddamn gift basket toCunnilingusDude81.

When she stops writhing, I come up on my knees and climb off the bed, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. I tear off my jeans and discard them on the floor. Then, with some hesitation, I slide my boxers off too. Her eyes widen at the sight of my cock, jutting out before me. Stones climbs to her feet and crawls across the bed. Her hand wraps around me, and I suppress the urge to grip her hair and tug her head back, exposing the line of her throat. She holds my cock and gently runs her hand along my shaft. A moan escapes me, and then, when she lowers her head and takes me in her mouth, hollowing out her cheeks and sucking me hard, I blow my fucking

load right down her throat. Without warning.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.”

Stones chokes.

I cringe, and rake my hands over my scalp, fighting off the post-orgasmic glow, and the desire to both slit my fucking wrists in shame and pass out on the bed. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

She glances at the mattress with a nervous chuckle. “Guess I don’t need to ask if I did it right.”

I take her chin between my thumb and forefinger and tilt her face up to mine. “I am so, so goddamn sorry.”

“Styx, it’s fine. An eye for an eye, right?”

I lean down and kiss her lips, forgetting that she just swallowed my cum. I taste myself on her, and it’s both hot and a little bit repulsive. And salty as fuck.

She climbs back up the bed and reaches for the pack of gum on the nightstand. After unwrapping a piece, she folds it in half with her tongue as she takes it in her mouth and chews. She offers me one, but I shake my head. No way am I getting rid of the taste of her.

Several minutes later, Stones removes her gum and sticks it to the nightstand. I crawl on the bed, sliding into the space between her legs. Then I kiss her, deep, hard, as passionately as I’ve wanted to since the first day I saw her at school. It isn’t long before my dick is hard and she’s panting again as I slide it through her wet lips.

“Do it. Fuck me, Styx.”

“Yeah?” I pant, just as breathless.

“Yeah.” She peppers my face with kisses.

I lean up and grab a condom from the bed. I rip into the foil and sheath myself.

Stones hands me the bottle of lubricant. I don't know how much I'm supposed to use but a huge glob covers the tip of my dick and drips onto the towel beneath her. She cringes, but her expression quickly turns from disgust to longing as I coat the condom in the sticky fluid, stroking myself. I close my eyes, my throat bobbing as I swallow hard and relish the sensations.

“You're beautiful.”

I open my eyes and grin. “Guys aren't beautiful.”

“You are.”

“You just love me for my cock.” I lean forward, grasp my dick, and run the head over her clit to punctuate my words.

“And your flapping mouth.” She grins, but the smile quickly fades. Mine does too.

“Will you go slow?”

“I'll do whatever you want me to.”

“Okay, just ...” She wets her lips and exhales a shaky breath. “Be gentle?”

I nod and rub her clit until her breathing picks up speed, then I settle between her

thighs and enter her as gently and slowly as possible. The breath catches in her throat. The exhaust fan in the bathroom continues its lazy rotation, the low thud the only other sound.

“Did I hurt you?”

“It’s fine,” she whispers. Tears betray her words. They creep out of the corners of her eyes and roll across her face, marking the pillow.

“Shit, Stones. Do you want me to stop?”

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“No, don’t stop. I can take it. I’m no stranger to pain. I’ve had chemo and a metric fuck-ton of needles, remember?”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” I study her gaze as I hold my weight off her body. “Fuck. The last thing I ever want is to hurt you.”

“I’m okay. Just do it,” she says, but she cries harder with every thrust.

This sucks. Jesus, this sucks so fucking much. I hate hurting her. I hate that it feels so good for me, regardless of how much pain I’m causing her.

I rest my forearms either side of her head, gently stroking back her hair and kissing away her tears as I thrust in as shallowly as I can. Stones shoves me deeper with her heel on my ass. She cries out and I kiss her face.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I whisper it over and over like a fucking mantra. Then I groan and come inside her.

I feel like shit the whole time. I’m an eighteen-year-old who finally lost his fucking virginity, and after all that this illness has taken from me, from her, from us, I couldn’t even enjoy it because it meant hurting her.

I lie there trembling as my mind threatens to give over to sleep, but I’m not okay. She’s not okay, so how can I be?

I push up onto my elbows and slide free of her body. Blood stains the towel beneath her. Alaska’s eyes widen as she stares. I guess we’re both surprised by how much

there is.

I slide off the condom and discard it in the trash. My dick bobs as the cold air assaults it. I need a shower. I'm so fucking tired, I just want to fall into bed and sleep for a hundred years, but I hold out my hand.

She stares at it.

"Come on."

"What?"

"Come shower with me."

"No, we'll get our lines wet. I'll just clean up after you."

Shit. I didn't think of that. I glance at the few remaining sterile dressing kits in her bag. I could always head back to the drug store afterward.

"Nope," I say. "Not happening. You're coming with me, little lady. If they get wet, we'll change the dressings."

She screws up her nose. "I just did mine."

I get to my feet and hold my hand out again. She doesn't take it. "Take my fucking hand, Alaska."

"Alaska? You never call me that. It sounds like I'm in trouble."

"You will be if you don't take my hand."

Finally, she places her hand in mine, and I pull her from the bed into the tiny bathroom. Stones stares at her reflection in the grimy mirror above the sink. She's glassy-eyed and her cheeks are pink, flushed with embarrassment or from crying, I'm not sure which.

After a crap ton of prepping her line, and my port, with waterproof guards, gauze, and medical tape; she leans against the vanity as I run the shower. Her legs and arms tremble. "I thought I'd look different."

"You do." I wrap my arms around her waist and press a kiss to her shoulder.

"Shut up. No I don't."

"No. You're right; you don't look different. But you're still just as fucking gorgeous as you were an hour ago."

She shrugs out of my embrace and shoves me toward the shower. "Go wash your stink off, you fucking cornball."

I grab her hand and tug her into the cubicle with me. Once the curtain is closed behind us, there's barely any room to move at all. We both shuffle awkwardly to get under the spray. I grab the soap, and almost elbow Stones in the face, then I turn her so she's facing the wall and pull her tight against me, washing her shoulders, her tits, and wrapping my arms around her from behind. She takes the soap from my hands and runs it along my arms, up my shoulders, and the back of my neck. And I busy my hands in other ways, with her tits, her hips, and finally her stomach and lower abdomen.

Her hand grips my wrist tightly. "No. It hurts."

"I'll make it better. I promise."

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She lets go, and I continue trailing my hands over her wet body, and down between her legs. I try not to delve inside her pussy. Instead, I focus only on her clit. I keep my touches light as I circle that little center of nerves I can't wait to get to know better. Her breath catches again and this time I bring her to orgasm with her back against the tiled walls and her hands jerking me off. We come together, and the water runs cold soon after. I take my time drying her body, and she does mine. We nip and touch, kiss and caress, unable to get enough of one another.

The bandages surrounding our lines are soaked, and even though all I want is to take her back to bed and fall asleep, we can't risk an infection in the tube that runs straight to our hearts, so we temper our lust and carefully clean, sterilize, and rebandage the areas, one after the other.

In the room, I strip the comforter from the bed, and we lie on top of the bottom sheet, covering ourselves with Stones' chemo cuddle blanket. For the first time in days, I let thoughts of home creep in. What will happen when we get back? Will our parents separate us? For two days our phones have rung incessantly, and I know it isn't fair for us to be this selfish, but a part of me doesn't care. Because I am selfish. I have to be. I don't know how much more time we have.

Stones is curled up in my arms, and I watch the TV with bleary eyes, unable to stop thinking about the future, about how little time we may have left. But for a second, only a split second, I let myself imagine we're normal kids, with a normal relationship. Able to do all of the things that regular kids do: date, finish high school, go off to college, travel, get a job, have kids, get married, buy a house. All of the things our illness deprives us of. All of the things we'll likely never do. At least not together.

One in fifty kids is diagnosed with cancer every hour, and only ten percent make it out alive. I stroke Alaska's hair and smile, knowing we're both fucking lucky to have even made it this far. It's pretty fucked up when stage-three and stage-two cancer patients think they're lucky, but hey, at least we're not dead yet. All the shit people take for granted. The pettiness, the anger, the arguments over who owns what, who ate the last donut, who left the toilet seat up, and those people who are concerned with how much they have, what they've got, what they earn, and what they can take? None of them get it. That insight belongs only to the terminally ill. Those of us who know our days are numbered. To kids like Alaska Stone and me, as fucked up as life is, as unfair and cruel, it's also sometimes perfect.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ALASKA

I glance out the window, nerves running riot inside my veins. Styx grips my hand and squeezes hard. "You ready?"

I nod. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"You're sure about this?"

"I'm sure."

"Then let's do it."

We climb out of the car and I sling my backpack over my shoulder and head toward the long line. My gaze flits over everything—the people, the signs, the booths.

Once we gain entry to the park, we walk up Main Street to the castle. We take several selfies before asking another parkgoer to take a full-length shot of us. I realize a little

too late that we maybe should have asked an adult because realization dawns in the girl's eyes, and I balk as she looks between me and Styx, and her mouth gapes open. "Holy shit! I know you! Kaitlyn, come here."

I glance at her friend, who's busy taking her own selfies with the castle.

"Coming," she says, snapping more pictures of herself.

"That's okay. We don't need—"

"Holy fucking shit. You're Styx and Stones."

"Er ... no, we're—"

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“You are. We’ve been following your story since you met in chemo. Oh my God, you guys are so lucky.”

I frown. Styx squeezes my hand, because I know he’s thinking the same thing I am. Lucky? Lucky? We’re fucking terminally ill. “Yeah, we’re super lucky.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean about the cancer. That sucks, but like ... at least you found each other before you—”

“Kaitlyn,” her friend admonishes her.

At least one of them has a brain.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it that—”

“It’s fine. Will you just ... will you take our picture?”

“Sure.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

The girl snaps several pictures of us before handing back my phone. “Can we get one with you?”

“With us? Um ... okay?” I look at Styx, and he grins, but he looks as uncomfortable as I do. The girls rope another person into photographing us, and then they start furiously typing on their phones. “Wait. Please don’t post that.”

“What do you mean? It’s not every day you get to meet two celebrities.”

“Can you, can you just wait until the end of the day? Please? If we post anything right now, we’re sitting ducks for our parents and the cops to find us. They’ll scour the park.”

“It’s a big place,” Kaitlyn says.

Man, this bitch is getting on my nerves. I give her an acerbic smile. “Not when you have security cameras.”

“Oh, okay sure.”

“Can we post later?” Not Kaitlyn asks.

“Give us till midnight?” Styx says. “We want to see the light parade.”

“Sure,” Kaitlyn agrees, but she doesn’t look happy about it.

“For what it’s worth,” Not Kaitlyn says, “I think what you guys are doing is really brave.”

“Thanks.”

“And I’m really sorry you’re sick.” Not Kaitlyn looks between us, and swallows hard. “I hope you guys beat this thing. My dad had a carcinoma. He wasn’t so lucky, but I hope you kick cancer’s ass.”

A lump forms in my throat, and I fight back tears. “Thank you.”

She smiles. Kaitlyn has the good grace to look chagrined. I lead Styx away, walking

as fast as I can towards Tomorrowland before I completely lose my shit. I pull him to the side of a hedge, resisting the urge to throw up. I don't know what's wrong with me. Why the hell should their words affect me like this?

“You okay? Stones, if we need to go—”

“We're not going.” I glare at him. “I'm fine. Or I will be.”

“Okay. Then let's go ride Space Mountain until we puke.”

“Should we make it really worth our while and eat our weight in corndogs and Dole Whip first?”

Styx wraps his arm around my shoulders, and pulls me in close to whisper, “I thought you'd never ask.”

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If I thought a whole day at Disneyland was tiring, a whole day at Disneyland with cancer is truly insane. Despite the overcast weather, lathering ourselves in sunscreen, staying out of the midday sun, and replacing our Mickey Mouse ears with giant, floppy hats, we were both burned to a crisp, but we were happy.

We spent a lot of time between rides sitting on benches, and hopping on the Disneyland Railroad to get from one point of the park to another. We even spent a bit of time on Tom Sawyer's Island so we could sit in the shade, away from the bustle of the crowds. Neither of us were capable of going on ride after ride, but it didn't matter because that's the magic of the park.

Styx wraps his arms around me from behind, resting his chin on my head. He smells like cotton candy, and boy sweat, and it's heaven. He squeezes me tightly as Peter Pan and Tinkerbell are projected onto the castle wall and I laugh.

"Maybe I should start calling you Tink from now on, my little angry pixie."

"First of all, Tink is a fairy, dumbass. Not a pixie," I shout to be heard over the swell of music and cheers from the crowd. "And secondly, if you call me Tink—cancer or not—I will punch you in the face."

His deep chuckle resonates through his chest and into me. Despite the violence I just threatened, I smile and lean back in his arms to watch the show. It's no wonder they call it the happiest place on Earth. Disney has a way of making you forget that you're fighting for your life.

After the park closes, we check into a nearby hotel. We can't actually afford to stay at Disney, and Styx's funds are running low. We need to conserve what little cash we have.

This room looks clean at least. Neither one of us have discussed how crazy it was to stay in that cheap, crappy hotel in Pismo, or that we could have picked up an infection from such an unclean environment. I don't know if Styx thought about it or not. I guess I got so lost in the moment I didn't think about it at all, until now.

"You wanna shower first, or should I?" he asks, kicking off his Cons and slumping on the bed.

"Why don't we shower together?"

That crooked smile plays across his lips again. "Why the hell didn't I think of that?"

"Because you're not as smart as me," I say, pulling my dress over my head and tossing it on the bed beside him. I turn and walk toward the bathroom, removing my bra and panties and discarding them to the floor. Styx is on his feet in a second, wrapping me in his arms and kissing my shoulder and neck as we awkwardly moon-boot shuffle our way to the bathroom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ALASKA

I wake in the middle of the night.

I'm slick with sweat, my mouth is dry, and my eye throbs. Searing pain shoots through me and I pull away from Styx and sit up. The aching in my head is unlike anything I've felt before. I'd get my pills if I could move, but everything hurts. My

whole body screams, and I'm both burning up from the inside and ice-cold all at once.

I open my mouth, but no words come out, just an ungodly scream as Styx leans over and switches on the light. The brightness pierces my vision, rendering me blind. My stomach twists, revolts, and I puke before everything fades to black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

STYX

Jesus Christ.

“Stones, baby, stop. Stop!” I scream at her convulsing body as if what I’m saying makes perfect sense. As if she were seizing by choice. Puke covers her face and mouth, and her eyes roll back in her head. “Fuck. Fuck!”

I turn her on her side, attempting to hold her down with one arm so she doesn’t hurt herself, and I fish my phone off the nightstand and dial 911.

“Nine-one-one. What’s your emergency?”

“My girlfriend. She’s seizing. She has a brain tumor.” I shake my head. My heart thunders against my ribcage, and fear grips my gut like a vise. “Diffuse Astrocytoma. She has Diffuse Astrocytoma.”

“Okay, and where is she now?”

“On the bed.”

“Are her airways clear?”

“I don’t know. She vomited.”

“Can you turn her on her side for me?”

“She’s already on her side.” I put the phone on speaker and throw it on the bed.

“Good man. Now don’t hold her; she should stop soon. I know it’s frightening, but she’ll be okay. Paramedics are on their way. You just stay on the phone with me until they get there.”

“Yeah, okay.” My teeth chatter. Shock, most likely.

Alaska gradually stops the worst of her shaking. Her eyes are wide, her pupils dilated and unfocused, and her mouth is a little blue in the corners.

“Baby, baby wake up.” I gently slap Stones’ cheek, trying to bring her back to me.

“Styx, the paramedics are almost there. Can you open the door for them?”

“But ... she’s naked.” I glance down at her body. Her hair is slick with vomit and sweat, and I smooth it back from her head. “I’m naked. She’s underage.”

“These men are professionals. They’re just here to do a job. Do you have a blanket you can cover her with?”

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I glance at the puke sullyng the hotel duvet and grab her chemo blankie instead. I place it over her and throw on my jeans and shirt. I don't have time for shoes. Then I yank open the door and shove the desk chair in front of it to hold it in place.

Alaska moans and tries to sit up. "Styx?"

"I'm here, baby. You're okay. It was just a seizure."

"My head hurts."

"I know," I say.

"Styx, you need to make sure she stays still," the woman on the phone says. I was so caught up in Stones, I completely forgot she was still there. "Don't let her get up until the paramedics arrive."

"Okay." I meet Stones' wide-eyed gaze and cup her cheek. "Don't move."

"Paramedics?" Alaska lifts her head, but quickly lowers it again. "Who are you talking to?"

"Just lie still, babe. The paramedics will be here—"

Her eyes close, her face contorts, and the scream that comes from her mouth is bloodcurdling.

"Stones?"

Her cries become a strangled sob and her body jerks and thrashes on the mattress.
“Shit, Stones. Baby stay with me.”

Fuck.

This is all my fault. I never should have brought her here. I took her away from her doctors, from her family, and if she dies, it’s all on me.

All my fault.

The wait at the hospital is torture. I’m left in the waiting room, and no one will tell me what’s going on. I’m not immediate family, and because there’s a missing-persons report in place, they won’t let me see her until her family arrives.

After thinking about making a break for it into the ER, I pace back and forth in the overcrowded room. I call my mom and tell her where I am. She yells. A lot. But her and dad are on a flight along with Alaska’s parents within the hour. At some point, a cop comes to talk to me. The words “kidnapping”, “underage,” and “of consent” are thrown around.

A lot.

I’m eighteen now. I could be tried as an adult.

For kidnapping my girlfriend and taking her to Disneyland?

When I say as much, he warns me that he has no problem taking me down to the station in handcuffs, but I don’t care what happens to me. My cancer will likely kill me before they can even get a court date, so it seems like I have nothing to worry

about anyway. He doesn't arrest me. And I go back to waiting.

Three hours after I called my mom, our parents race into the ER waiting room.

Alaska's mom rushes to the nurse's station.

"Mrs. Stone. I'm really sorry," I say, but Mr. Stone shoots me a glare so vicious and full of repugnance that I take a step back. My mom and dad wrap me in a hug, squeezing me so tight I can't breathe.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry," I whisper, to them, to Alaska, to her parents.

"Shh," Mom soothes. "It's okay."

"I fucked up, Mom. I coulda got her killed. She was fine. We were fine, and then I woke up, and she just started seizing."

"It's okay, honey. You called the paramedics and did the right thing. Did they check you over?"

I pull away and stare at her. "No. Why would they? I'm fine."

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“Styx, you’re sitting in a hospital waiting room miles away from home in a T-shirt and no shoes. Your nose is dripping, and you’re burning up.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t notice.”

“I know you care about Alaska, she’s a very sweet girl and we adore her too, but Styx, you have to take better care of yourself. You were in no position to drive halfway across the state on an impromptu road trip.”

“I love her, Mom.” I swallow hard. Alaska’s parents are permitted into the ER, and it takes everything I have not to demand they let me in. Mom and Dad both exchange a worried look. “This was my idea. Stones had nothing to do with it. It was all me.”

“It’s okay. We can talk about it later. Right now, we need to get you seen to and on a flight back home.”

“Home? I’m not going anywhere without Stones.”

“Honey, her parents talked to the hospital on the car ride here. They’re flying her back via Air Ambulance.”

“Air Ambulance?”

“The OR is already prepped for her surgery.”

I shake my head, looking between my parents. “She doesn’t want the surgery.”

“She doesn’t have a choice, Styx. Her tumors aren’t shrinking, they’re getting worse. If she doesn’t have the surgery, she won’t make it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

STYX

In the ER, the nurse changes the dressings on my port and takes blood. I’m also given an infusion of antibiotics because despite our best efforts to keep Alaska’s PICC line and my port from getting wet, they did. My skin is hot to the touch, and I’m sporting a nasty rash because of it. I guess that’s what I get for trying to be a regular teen, going down on my girl in the shower.

We fucked up. I fucked up, and we could both die because of it. That’s what’s so fucking tragic about this whole trip. We wanted to be normal teenagers. We wanted to forget about the cancer trying to kill us, and we just gave it ammunition, fuel to use against us.

The nurse begrudgingly sees to my care, and sometime around nine a.m, I’m discharged with strict orders to see my doctor as soon as I get home. Mom and I head for the airport. Dad will go back to the hotel and get mine and Alaska’s things, and then he’ll drive his truck back to SF.

Every second I’m away from her is torture; every hour that passes is hell. My body—so used to the feel of hers it mourns the loss.

I drive myself mad with worry. All I can see is her in that OR, alone, a team of doctors in charge of removing the tumors in her brain, but not one of them know what they hold in their hands. None of them know how precious and special she is.

I don’t talk on the plane ride home. I can’t. Instead, I close my eyes and pretend I’m

asleep. I'm pretty sure my bouncing leg and the agitation rolling off me in waves give me away though.

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When we land and find Mom's car in the parking lot, I head to the driver's side and hold my hand out for the keys. "I wanna drive, and I wanna see her."

"No."

"Mom."

"No, Styx. Your dad and I have let you get away with a lot up until this point."

"I'm eighteen, Mom. You can't make me do shit anymore."

"I'm asking you, please? I know you're worried about Alaska. I am too, but you need to think of your health now."

I laugh without humor. "Fuck, don't you get it? It doesn't matter. None of it matters without her."

"It matters to me!" Mom screams.

I snap my head up to look at her. Her words are like a bullet to the gut. Tears of pain and frustration spill over her cheeks, ruining her mascara. Guilt worms its way through my chest, and I can't look at her. I'm afraid that if I do, I'll shatter.

It makes no difference, because saltwater slides down my face anyway.

"It matters to your dad, and if Alaska were in this parking lot right now, she'd tell you it matters. You matter! What happens to you matters."

“I need to be there. Please, Mom?” I sob. “Please?”

She winces, as if I’m breaking her heart, and nods. “Okay, I’ll take you. But I want you to promise me if it gets too much, you’ll come home.”

“I will. I promise,” I agree, throwing my arms around her. The tender flesh surrounding my port twinges, but I ignore it. If I don’t, she’ll notice, and she won’t take me to the hospital at all.

Stones was so afraid of this surgery, so worried she’d lose herself. I’m worried she’ll lose the way she feels about me. It’s selfish and stupid, I know. I should just be happy if she comes through it alive, and if I have to spend every day for the rest of our lives reminding her of who I am, I’ll do it. But there’s still a selfish part of me that wonders what if the piece they take out belongs to us? What if she doesn’t remember our Homecoming, our first kiss, Big Sur, or Pismo? What if they remove all the memories of us singing in my dad’s truck at the top of our lungs, making love in that shitty hotel room, or Disneyland?

What if she’s forgotten us?

My throat constricts and the tears come thick and fast. I don’t even bother to hide them because right now, the girl I love—my brilliant, talented crazy-beautiful girl—is across town in the OR, having her brain dissected. I may never get my Alaska back.

She’s inside that operating room, and she could be flatlining as we speak. God, I hope she doesn’t die.

Don’t die, Stones. Please don’t die.

I think of her body beneath me, her small frame perfect, her wispy strands of hair fanned across the pillow as she looked up at me with both fear and determination in

her eyes. I'll never forgive her, never forgive myself if she dies.

It's funny. From the second I was diagnosed, I've prayed to whatever god or being, to the universe, to fate that I would make it through this illness, and right now, I'd give everything—every breath of air in my lungs, every beat of my heart, and every white blood cell in my body.

I'd offer them up gladly to save her life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

STYX

Mom shakes me awake. I hadn't known I'd fallen asleep. I hadn't known you could fall asleep in the hard, plastic waiting-room chairs.

"Honey, the surgeon is here," Mom says.

I blink and bolt upright. The flesh around my port throbs and I flinch but quickly ignore it and get to my feet.

"How is she?" I blurt. Stones' parents and the doctor all look at me as I barrel toward them. Mom walks up and squeezes my hand. The surgeon glances between us and Alaska's parents. Mrs. Stone nods. Mr. Stone clearly isn't ready to acknowledge my existence.

"She's in recovery," the doctor says.

A collective gasp of relief goes through the group.

The surgeon gives a pained smile. "It was a tough surgery. The tumor was embedded deeper than we expected. It's encroaching on the optic nerve, but has also attached itself to the carotid artery. We've taken as much as we could, but I'm afraid we couldn't remove it all."

My heart beats double time, and my legs threaten to give out. My whole body is

shaking. She's alive.

Mom's phone rings and she shoots the Stones and apologetic look as she steps away to answer it.

"It's the hospital with your results," she says. I nod and turn back around to the surgeon, but a motion beyond the waiting-room window catches my eye. Snow. There's snow in San Francisco. In September. I move toward the window and watch the falling flakes.

The doctor goes on and on about Stones' treatment.

"Look at this. Come look at this! It's snowing."

"Styx?" My mom's voice is shaking, panicked. "Honey, it's not snowing. That's a cherry blossom mural. You've seen it at least one hundred times."

I turn and look at my mom, her eyes are saucers, whirring and spinning as she races toward me. My heart beats double time.

"Mom, I don't feel so good," I whisper, afraid the Stones will hear and keep me from their daughter. I don't like the way they're looking at me with their red, beady eyes.

The next thing I know, I'm on the floor. My arm is throbbing, my head is too, and I can't stop shaking. It's so cold. So fucking cold I'm freezing my balls off. "I don't wanna go to hospital. I don't wanna go. Just let me die here in the snow. Please, please, just let me die."

"Styx," my mom says, shaking me. "Oh my God, you're burning up. Someone help us!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ALASKA

The quietbeep, beep, beepof the hospital room wakes me. Not that I could get much sleep with all of the noise in my head.

I groan and clear my throat. My brain hurts. Everything hurts. I try to move my arm, but a hand reaches out and touches mine.

“Lie still, honey. You just had surgery.”

“Mom?” I blink several times, trying to focus on my parents. “Dad?”

“Yes, sweetheart?” my dad—who rarely uses terms of endearment—takes my other hand and squeezes.

“Where’s Styx?”

They exchange a pained glance.

The breath catches in my lungs. “What? He’s okay, right? Where is he?”

I grab the blanket and attempt to toss it off me, determined to go and find him myself if they won’t give me answers, but the pressure in my skull intensifies every time I move.

“We don’t know yet,” Mom says.

“You don’t know what yet?”

“We don’t know what’s happening,” Mom continues. “Viv is waiting to hear from the surgeon.”

“The surgeon?” Oh, God. Panic seizes my gut. “What’s wrong with him? Mom, I need to find Viv. I need to be there when he wakes up.”

“You’re in recovery. You focus on getting better,” my dad barks.

“In a few hours when he’s out of surgery, then you can see him.” Mom gives me a tight smile, but I can tell by the pitiful expression on her face that she doesn’t know if that’s true.

“I love him, Dad,” I snap. My head spins. Nausea roils through my gut. I’ve exerted too much energy, and the heavy tug of the morphine tries to pull me under. “Mom, tell him.”

“I know. It will all be okay. Your surgery went great, honey. You did so well. Your dad and I are very proud of your bravery. Just get some rest.” Mom pats my hand as if I’m a small child throwing a tantrum.

I don’t want to be coddled and cajoled. I want to know where my boyfriend is. I want to see him, touch him, and know that he’s okay.

Oh God, Styx. Please don’t die.

CHAPTER THIRTY

STYX

I open my eyes and stare up at the apparatus overhead. Three mechanical arms housing monitors, lights, and other annoying equipment that makes entirely too much noise, hovers over me.

Great. I'm in the fucking ICU.

I swallow hard and lick my cracked lips. My breath labors, and my throat is scratchy and dry. A small tube rests under my nose, forcing more oxygen into my body. I lift my hand to remove it, but my limbs are heavy with morphine, and I miss.

Alaska. Where is she right now? Did she make it through the surgery? I don't remember anything past Mom getting me to the hospital and the wait with her parents.

I glance over at the corner of my room. My mom and dad are sleeping in hospital chairs, side by side, her head on his shoulder, his resting against her crown. Their hands are joined. For a moment, I just watch them, wondering if my recent brush with death will be the thing to bring them together. Will they comfort one another when I'm dead?

I feel like shit. I lift my head from the pillow and try to find my call button. What I find instead is a new Hickman line poking out of my chest. Fuck. As if I didn't look like Frankenstein enough already, now I have more tubes sticking out of me. I glance

at my torso. From armpit to neck, I'm covered in bandages. I try to move, but agony rips through my muscles.

"Mom?" I cry out.

She startles. So does my dad.

"Hey, there's my baby boy," Mom says.

"Hey, champ." Dad rubs the sleep from his eyes. "Welcome back to the land of the living."

"What happened? Did Alaska make it out of surgery already?"

"Yeah, honey. Surgery went great. She's in the ICU too."

My room is flooded with artificial light as a nurse bustles in from her station behind the glass sliding doors. "Hey stranger. Nice to see you awake." Her face is vaguely familiar, but I don't know this woman at all. "I'm Maggie. I took care of you after your resection a few years back."

"Oh," I say, annoyed at the intrusion more than anything. She continues to check my vitals, and jot her findings down on my chart. I just want her to go away, but she starts up a conversation with my dad about his college football team. "Mom, I need to see her."

"Woah, you're not going anywhere, young man." Maggie pushes a button on the monitor beside my bed. "You gave us all quite the scare. We'll need to run a few more blood tests, and you'll need a few more rounds of antibiotics before you can leave this room."

“But I’m fine.” I yank at the oxygen tube under my nose. Maggie touches my hand, obviously telling me to stop.

“Let’s leave this on a little longer,” she says. I don’t fight her because I don’t have the strength.

Mom sighs. “Honey, you had sepsis.”

The entire world turns on its axis. “What?”

“You went into septic shock, your port was infected.”

“Shit.” Oh fuck. An infected port is no joke, but sepsis? How am I still breathing?

Maggie tuts, as if she’s my goddamn mom. “Language.”

“They removed your port, but they had to clean away a little of the tissue that was infected too. The doctors say you’ll need physiotherapy to strengthen your right side.”

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“This is serious, Styx. No more running away to Disneyland,” my dad says.

“Oh, Disneyland. That sounds fun,” Maggie says. My mom glares. “Right, well, everything looks good. We’ll come check on that wound and change your dressing a little later.”

Maggie finally takes the hint and makes herself scarce.

“We almost lost you, kid.” Dad runs a hand through his hair.

“But you didn’t,” I assure them both. “I’m still here, and I need to see her. Please? Can’t you go talk to Maggie, and Stones’ parents?”

“You heard the woman, Styx. You can’t leave this room.”

“Sepsis is not contagious.”

“No, it’s not. But, honey, Alaska just had brain surgery. Are you sure you want to take that risk?”

“Fuck!”

“Maybe in a few days,” Mom says, and grimaces when I shake my head. “I know it’s not what you want to hear, Styx, but perhaps you can visit with her once you’re up and walking around again?”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I need to see her. I need to see with my own two eyes that she's okay, but the Sepsis Nazi over there isn't going to let me.

"Dad, did you get our phones from the hotel?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Did you give Alaska hers?"

He nods. "I gave it to her mom."

"Can I have mine?"

"Styx, you need to rest," Mom warns.

"I'll rest when I know she's okay."

She arches her brow in that way that only seriously pissed off moms can, but she relents, fishes the phone from her bag, and hands it to me.

I tap the screen. The black abyss glares back at me. It's dead. I want to fucking scream.

"It's okay," Dad says. "I'll go get your charger from the truck. In the meantime, I'll talk to her parents."

"Thanks."

"Jesus." Dad shakes his head and turns to my mom. "Was I this much of an asshole when it came to you?"

“Completely.” Mom grins. I haven’t seen her do that in ... well, I can’t remember the last time.

“True love, right?” Dad says as he heads out of my room.

“Asshole,” I say, but I glance at my mom, who’s gaping after him.

Maybe when I’m finally dead and buried, they’ll get their shit together.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ALASKA

I exhale a deep breath and close my eyes. His dad was just in here twenty minutes ago, so it's not like I didn't know Styx was still alive and well but seeing his profile pic flash up on Facetime makes my heart skip and stutter. I hit accept, and his face fills my screen.

"There she is." He shifts against the pillows, his brows creasing with a wince. "Jesus, baby, you scared the shit out of me."

"The feeling's mutual, loner boy. Imagine my surprise when I woke after surgery to find that you've collapsed."

"Yeah, sorry about that."

"Typical. You're always trying to steal my thunder."

He smiles, and I smile back.

"They shaved the rest of my hair." I point to the side of my head now covered with bandages.

"I see that."

"Now I really look like I have cancer. You know, in case everyone couldn't already

tell by the Frankenstein scar on my head.”

“Nah, you’re a badass. You look like Charlize Theron in *Fury Road*.”

“But Asian, right?”

“That’s the best kind of badass,” he says in a husky tone that sends my heart racing and causes my flesh to prickle with heat. I remember that voice in the shower after Disneyland, as we’d touched, and he’d kissed me in places I didn’t know boys could kiss.

Before it all went to hell.

“It’s so good to see your face, Stones.” His smile is half dazed, like all he wants to do is look at me. As if both of us making it through surgery isn’t miracle enough.

“You should have been here when they took out my drainage tube. Not so pretty then.” I laugh, and white-hot pain shoots through my skull. My head swims and I close my eyes and breathe.

“Stones ... you okay?”

“Yeah, I just ... I don’t know. I get this pain sometimes.”

“Have you told the surgeon?”

“Yeah. He said it’s normal after this kind of procedure.” I roll my eyes, but even that hurts. “Is it wrong to miss chemo? I’d take puking over brain surgery any day.”

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“Tell me about it. They cut me open my chest and neck, and all I can think is, this is going to hurt like a bitch when I’m puking my guts up after chemo next week.”

I frown. “Why did they operate? No one would tell me anything.”

“Infected port.”

“Oh my god, Styx.” I press my hand to my lips in shock. “Was it ... was it from the shower, from getting our lines wet?”

“You mean when I ate you out in the bathroom?”

“Shh! My mom is just outside my room.”

He chuckles. “Probably. It was worth it though.”

“You realize my pussy nearly killed you, right?”

This time he doesn’t hold back. He laughs so loud I hear him not just through the speaker on my phone, but also down the hall. I cover my mouth to hide my own laughter.

“Goddamn it, Stones, I miss the shit outta you.”

“Right back at you, loner boy.”

He shakes his head. “Soon. As soon as they let me out of here and I can walk again,

I'm coming to see you."

"Then hurry up, because I'm lonely as shit in here."

I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, wishing I could call Styx but I don't want to wake him. It's well after midnight, and the ICU is quiet, save for the heinous beeping of the machines in my room and in the other patients' rooms. It's like a chorus of computers, all singing at once, and it's annoying as fuck. I don't know how anyone is supposed to sleep through this.

Down the hall, the night nurse says, "Mr. Hendricks. Where are you going?"

"I'm just stretching my legs. My ass is killing me."

"You can't walk around the ICU; it's after two a.m. The other patients are sleeping, and you can barely stand as it is."

"I won't disturb anyone, I promise. Doc said I need to get up and get moving."

Typical argumentative Styx. He always has an answer to everything. I guess he's had a lot of practice convincing adults to do exactly what he wants.

I shake my head, but I'm smiling from ear to ear. I'd get up too, if I thought I wasn't going to land flat on my face. When the nurses came by earlier to help me walk to the bathroom, I almost passed out. There's this air bubble in my head, and I can feel it moving when I move. It's so disconcerting, that at one point, I was screaming for them to take me back to surgery.

"He didn't mean in the middle of the night," the nurse says.

“I can’t sleep.”

“That doesn’t mean no one else can. Go back to your room, Mr. Hendricks.”

“This is madness!” Styx shouts. “It’s a deprivation of my basic rights as Miss. Stone’s boyfriend.”

“Mmhmm, if you don’t go back to bed, I’m afraid I’m going to have to transfer you to another hospital. One where you’re less likely to cause a commotion and keep all the other patients awake.”

“Okay, okay. I’m going,” he says. “Don’t transfer me. I’ll die without her.”

I scoff and pull my phone from the tray beside my bed.

Me: Nice try, bonehead.

Several seconds later, my phone buzzes with a text.

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Styx: Don't say I never do anything for our love.

Me: What, like wake up all of the ICU? I wouldn't dream of it.

Styx: Every cell in my body misses you.

My heart trips all over itself, and tears well in my eyes because I know exactly how he feels.

Me: You're such a dork.

I grimace at my text. I'm out of my mind with longing. I just lack the ability to say it as casually as he does.

Me: I miss you too. I wish we could go back to LA, back to Disneyland.

Styx: Me too, but without the sepsis and seizures.

Me: Yeah, definitely without those things. Get some sleep, Styx. Hopefully they'll let us see each other in the morning.

Styx: I'll threaten to sue if they don't.

Me: Sue?

Styx: For depriving me of you.

A dreamy sigh leaves my lips. Who even am I now?

Me: I love you, loner boy.

Styx: Love you too, Stones. More than life itself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

STYX

By lunch, I'm given the all clear to see Alaska. This fucking sepsis is a pain in my ass. My organs feel like they're being squeezed in my dad's wheatgrass juicer, but I lie when the doctor asks me how bad my pain is because I'm afraid they'll keep us apart. My mom and the nurses give me shit about not resting, but I can't. Every waking second, all I can think about is Stones, and when I'm asleep, I dream we're back at Disney, and we're healthy, watching the fireworks, and she's wrapped tightly in my arms.

I walk down the hall, my ass sticking out of my hospital gown, my IV pole clutched in my hand like a life support. She lies in bed, staring at the ceiling as her mom's mouth opens and closes rapidly. From behind this glass door, Mrs. Stone sounds like the parents in *The Peanuts* movie.

Wah, wah, wah.

Alaska turns her attention to me and smiles. I stare at my girl and press my hand against the glass separating us, but I don't hit the button to open the door.

It's a blood infection, you pussy. She can't catch it by being in the same room.

I know this. I've spent the last two days reading up on sepsis and all the ways I could put her at risk. The truth is, I can't. Not unless I plug a needle in my arm and give her a blood transfusion, but I still feel like a ticking timebomb. I'm still afraid I'll detonate, and she'll be caught in the blast.

I stand outside her room, and watch her smile disappear completely. All the color drains from my face. I feel it. Just like I feel the weightlessness of my body as I stumble back from Alaska's door.

"Styx? What are you doing out of bed?"

I turn toward Maggie, who's watching me as if I'm the Unabomber, about to press the trigger. My heart rate soars, my head feels woozy, and I pitch forward, stumbling into her.

"I need a wheelchair here," Maggie shouts to her colleague—the ball-busting nurse from last night.

I'm vaguely aware of them putting me into a chair and the breeze on my face as they rush me toward my room. They don't even call for another nurse to come lift me onto

my bed. I guess because I weigh next to nothing nowadays.

Alaska pounds on the window to my room as she screams my name. I lift my head to see her through the commotion. Her mom is trying to pull her away but our eyes lock. She presses her hand against the glass wall, the way I did just a few moments ago. Her face is twisted, tormented, and tortured with pain as tears stream down her cheeks.

Don't let this be the last time we see each other. Please? Don't let this be the end.

I pray to whatever god or entity who will listen. The truth is, I don't believe in any of it anymore. Life is cruel. Alaska just had her skull cut open, my blood is trying to poison me, and I'm likely going to die without ever getting to kiss the girl I love goodbye.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

ALASKA

For an excruciating three hours, they wouldn't let me near him. They wouldn't tell me what was wrong with him or if he was even okay. The Hendricks rushed into his room about thirty minutes after Styx's fall, and ten minutes after that, they wheeled him downstairs to run more tests.

It's close to four p.m. when Styx's mom comes to tell me that he collapsed from exhaustion. He's still so weak from the sepsis, and he hasn't been resting—which is likely my fault. She doesn't say that, of course, but she doesn't have to. I know it just as well as she does.

The doctors come to visit me again. They're moving me from the ICU to the children's hospital just as soon as they can free up a room for me. I don't want to

leave, but I have no choice. I'm well enough to leave the ICU, but not well enough to go home, it seems. Our next chemo session is in four days, and they're still not sure how to handle it, given puking up my guts will likely cause extra pain in my head and increase my risk of an aneurysm. So, for now, all I can do is wait. Wait to live, wait to die, and wait to find out whether Styx will ever make it out of this hospital.

It's funny how the terminally ill spend so much time waiting, while death creeps closer every second.

Waiting fucking sucks.

By dinnertime, they still don't have a room for me, so it's another night in the ICU. I'm not complaining though. Styx is sleeping soundly, but I've been in his room, holding his hand for the last two hours as I doze in the lounge by his bed.

His warm fingers squeeze mine, and I glance at Styx. There's a goofy, sleepy grin stretched across his face.

"Hey," he murmurs in a husky tone.

A lump forms in my throat and tears prick my eyes.

"Hi." I smile and wipe away the saltwater before it can fall from my lashes. "You scared the shit outta me."

"Consider it payback for LA." He chuckles and shifts on the mattress. "We gotta stop doing that to one another."

"Yeah, we really do."

"Come here," Styx says, giving my arm a weak tug.

"Where?"

"Come lie with me."

I laugh and shake my head. “I can’t. I’ll squash your lines.”

“They’re plastic; they’ll bounce back.” His face turns serious, and the desperation in his eyes claws at my resolve. “Get your sweet ass up here, Stones. I wanna hold my girl.”

It takes a little maneuvering with his central line and heart-rate monitor, and my IV, but eventually I settle in against his side and he wraps his good arm around me, holding me as tightly as his weak body will allow.

I wish we had the power to make time wait for us.

I’d make it wait forever, right here. I’d use up all of the seconds it’s stolen from me, from us, and the lifetime it’s going to steal from our future. If I had the ability, I’d hit pause right here, and I’d never let him go.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

STYX

Three days later, I walk between my room and Stones’ in the UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital. It sucks that we’re at different ends of the ward, but it could be worse. At least neither one of us is in the ICU.

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Walking is still difficult for me, but I'm determined to get stronger and get the hell out of this hospital. Not that it hasn't been nice being this close to my girlfriend without the twenty-four-hour parental supervision. Stones and I have had plenty of opportunities to make out in the teen lounge, which is often occupied by us alone. Our moms have been pretty good about giving us time to ourselves, but they're never far away, hovering in the designated parent lounges or the corner of the room, and pretending they don't notice our lovey-dovey shit.

Today, there will be a serious lack of making out, because I'm taking Stones to the arts studio where she can enjoy the excited shrieks of tiny humans while she paints. It may not be with a spray can, but it beats the coloring books the hospital superhero visitors bring us.

As I turn the corner and walk toward her room, Mrs. Stone is at the other end of the hallway, likely returning from the lounge with fresh coffee in her reusable cup. She glances up, and her shoulders fall ever so slightly, but she smiles anyway. I give her a lazy wave.

Yep, coming to steal your daughter away again. Sorry not fucking sorry.

Someone announces a "code blue" over the loudspeaker. A nurse rushes between us and through Stones' door, followed by another, and then one more.

I freeze.

A heartbeat passes. We stare at one another.

No!

The coffee slips from her hand. The china shatters. Tawny liquid spills out over the waxed hospital floors as she runs toward her daughter. I move as quickly as my feeble body will allow, stopping in front of the open door. Joanie is in the way, her hands over her mouth, a strange wailing coming from her throat. I push into the room. Alaska is on the ground. She's not moving. Another nurse begins compressions on her inert frame. "I need a crash cart in here."

"Stones!" I pitch forward, desperate to get to her, as if I could help, as if I might save her.

"Get them out of here," the nurse working over my girlfriend says.

A woman grabs my arm and tries to usher me out. "Come on. You can't see this."

"No! Stones, wake up. Get up, baby." I shove the woman away, and a male orderly drags me from the doorway. "Get the fuck off me!"

"Alaska! Honey!" Mrs. Stone whimpers, as a female nurse escorts her from the room. "What's happening to my daughter?"

"Someone shut that door," the nurse yells. She leans over Alaska and throws her weight into her compressions. It's too much. Too hard. She'll break her. The door closes before me, shutting us out. No!

She can't go like this. She can't. It's supposed to be me. I'm supposed to go first.

I slump to the floor. I can't breathe. My lungs scream for air and yet I can't take a breath until I know she is. It's not supposed to be like this. She isn't supposed to fucking die. It should be me. I've been preparing for this my whole life, and Stones

can still get through this. She has to.

Joanie shouts at the staff. “I want to see my daughter!”

“They can save her. They have to save her,” I say to no one at all. “Save her!”

The orderly grabs my wrist but I pull free from his grasp. “You’ve opened your stitches.” He nods toward my chest, which is soaked with blood. “Come on. Let’s go get that looked at.”

“Don’t fucking touch me.” I lean against the wall for support and I watch the door as if I could see right through it, see my girlfriend lying on the floor as a team of medical professionals tries to save her life. I stare at that door as if I can see the future, see her regaining consciousness, see her laughing and calling me loner boy.

“You should see your face,” she’d say, as if this were all some hilarious joke. But it’s not a joke. None of this is a fucking joke.

The door opens as a doctor rushes in. The nurse is still on her knees, but she’s no longer performing CPR.

She looks at her watch. “Time of death—nine twenty-three a.m.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

STYX

I walk the halls of the hospital like a ghost. Maybe she didn't die after all. Maybe I'm the one who coded on the floor. It sure feels like it.

I walk until my feet can no longer carry me. My wound aches, but I suspect the pain is dulled by the sheer torment of my heart cracking in two.

I push out into the garden. The icy air stings my face. It feels like a betrayal. Why should I get to breathe, to see, to feel, when she doesn't?

A quiet sob escapes me, and I stare at the railing.

I could just jump. I could end it all now, climb up and let the wind take me. But the fall to the terrace below is only ten feet, fifteen at the most. Would it kill me, given how fragile my body is right now? Or would it just hurt like fuck and see me staying in this goddamn hospital for even longer?

I stagger to the railing and lean against it, bowing my head as I calculate the drop and the kind of damage it might do, or not do. And wouldn't that be just my luck? Stuck here and slowly dying of internal bleeding from a broken heart and failed suicide attempt. Who knows? Maybe it would be worth it.

"Don't do it."

I straighten and look at the long-haired loser from my chemo sessions. Harley.

I swipe at my eyes with the heels of my hands. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

He steps closer and studies my bloody T-shirt, then he leans against the railing and looks down at the terrace below. “I built this place.”

I glare at him. “You built the hospital?”

“No. I built the gardens,” he says with a wistful smile. “I landscaped them so patients would have a place to come and see something beautiful in a time of such cruel brutality. Never expected I’d be seeking comfort in them less than a year later. Life’s fucked like that.”

I look at his stoic face, really look at it. He can’t be that much older than me. Twelve years? Maybe fourteen? Will I seem this put-together if I make it past twenty-five?

I guess we’ll never know. I don’t intend to make it through the fucking day without Stones.

I sniff as the Bay air assaults my nose and eyes. “Yeah, life is fucked. Cancer is fucked. Then you die, right?”

“Sometimes.” Harley’s smile is childlike, but there’s a sadness in it too. “And sometimes you live, but if you jump, you’ll never know.”

“Stones is dead,” I choke out.

“Ah shit.” Harley shakes his head. Tears prick his eyes, but he doesn’t cover them like I do mine. They fall, thick and fat over his lashes. “When?”

“I don’t know. Thirty, maybe forty minutes ago.” Another sob breaks free of my body. My stomach is in knots; my chest feels as if it’s completely caved in. Like she reached in and ripped the heart right through my fucking rib cage.

He pulls me into a hug, and I let him because I’m not sure I can hold myself up any longer.

“I don’t know how to live without her. I don’t want to live without her.”

“I know,” he whispers. “Believe me, kid, I know.”

I clutch this man to me who is all but a stranger, because I’m afraid if I don’t, I’ll jump, and I won’t care if death is brutal and slow. I won’t care if my parents cry over my motionless body as a machine breathes air into my lungs, or if they’re forced to switch off the machines after three weeks when there’s no brain activity. They deserve more than that.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:48 am

But I wasn't prepared for this. I can't do this. The love of my very short life just died on the floor of her hospital room.

She broke my heart, and I'm not sure it will ever beat again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

STYX

"I'm afraid it doesn't look good." Dr. Watson glances down at the findings of my latest PET scan and biopsy. "Styx's cancer has metastasized to the lymph nodes—as we previously knew—but now we're seeing a very rare case of male breast carcinoma with a distant metastasis in the right maxillary sinus and extending to the nasopharynx."

"In English, doc." I sneer, but he won't look at me. He looks instead only at my parents, as if they're somehow more deserving of this information than I am.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hendricks, your son's cancer has spread to the breast and naso—"

My shrill laughter pierces the room. "I'm sorry, did you just say I have breast cancer?"

"Male breast cancer is not uncommon, however the fact that it's metastasized to the nasopharynx region is something we've only seen before in one other patient."

"Is he dead?"

“Styx,” Mom admonishes.

Doc clears his throat. “Yes, though he developed extensive skeletal and lung metastases. He passed twelve months on from refusing chemotherapy.”

“Awesome. So what you’re saying is that instead of three years to live, I have one. Kinda shortchanging me there, aren’t you, doc?”

“So what are we looking at treatment wise?” My dad, ever the optimist. Fucking hippie.

“My recommendation is to begin a more aggressive form of chemo, radiation, and an immediate double mastectomy.”

I stand, knocking my chair to the ground. All three adults in the room watch me like I’m a caged tiger who just found a large opening in the fence. “This is bullshit.”

“Styx.” Mom takes my hand, but I yank free of her grasp. “Sit down.”

“No.” I stalk toward the door. My dad is on his feet, blocking my path. “Move.”

“Kid,” he says. “Take a seat and we can talk about this.”

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“Move,” I say through my teeth. “Before you’re forced to fight a kid with a terminal illness.”

Dad puts a hand on my shoulder, but I shrug it off. He moves. I yank open the door and walk into the hall.

“Just leave him,” Dad says.

“Like hell I will,” my mom snaps.

I pick up my pace, hoping to outrun her, but my mom has spent the majority of motherhood taking care of a sick kid. She’s fitter than a goddamn Olympic medalist right now. And me? I’m not. I’m out of breath just walking three feet.

She grabs hold of my arm and pulls me into a hug. I can’t remember the last time I allowed her to do this, and all I can think is what a shitty son I’ve been.

I ran away. I took my sick girlfriend, and I ran away. I caused our parents so much unnecessary worry. And now, she’s lying in a morgue. They want to wheel me into surgery and carve me up like a turkey at Thanksgiving, and I’ll likely still be dead before the year is out.

“I don’t want this, Mom. I don’t want to spend the rest of my days in the hospital while they pump me full of more drugs that don’t work.”

Her throat bobs, and her eyes fill with unshed tears. “Is this ... is this because of Alaska?”

“No. It’s because I’m tired. I’m just so fucking tired. I’m sick of hospitals, and the drugs, and ... I’m just fucking sick of being sick.”

“I know. I know, honey,” Mom soothes. She pats my back the way she used to when I was ten years old and terrified the hospital clowns would sneak into my room at night when the nurses weren’t looking and choke me with my breathing tube.

I rang that fucking bell. I rang that bell six years ago to signal the end of my treatment and the beginning of my life as a survivor, and now I’m here. Stage fucking four.

Balls. Fucking balls.

Or, in this case, I guess, breasts.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

STYX

I can’t be here. I can’t breathe.

I sit in the church pew and stare at the glossy black veneer box. Inside that coffin is a body I’m familiar with. I know every line, every curve, every freckle, divot, and scar. I spent hours worshipping them all, but I no longer know the feel of her in my arms.

It’s only been a week since she died of a subarachnoid hemorrhage, and I’ve already forgotten what it feels like to hold her, to kiss her lips, and interlock my fingers with hers. Now she’s different. Now she’s dead.

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Her organs have been removed, her casing sewn up, as if she were a teddy bear someone pulled the stuffing out of. I should be glad pieces of her have gone on to save other lives, but I'm not. How can someone else live with a heart that used to beat only for me?

Inside that coffin is a girl I used to know. Now she's just flesh, bone, and embalming fluid. She was killed by a fucking aneurysm, her organs picked apart for the living. Her brain is dead and left to rot in what was the prettiest head I'd ever seen.

I stagger to my feet. Mom grabs my hand, but I shrug her off. I walk away without a backward glance because that girl in the casket, that empty shell? That isn't my Stones. She isn't anything. The girl I love is dead, and I won't find her in this church. I won't find her anywhere on this Earth.

My Stones is long gone. And I won't be far behind her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

STYX

Three days later

Mom knocks on my door. I don't answer. She's probably just trying to get me to shove more food in my face. I don't wanna eat. I don't want to get up and shower, or leave my room.

I watch all of the videos of Alaska I'd saved to my phone. I play her highlights on

Instagram, over and over, and scroll her feed, read our messages, and listen to the voicemails she left me. None of it brings her back. All of it makes me feel like shit, and yet I do it anyway. I replay our trip to Disneyland in my head, and every conversation we ever had; every look or smile she shot my way is etched in my memory. And that's all I have—memories.

Mom opens my door and peers in. I'd tell her to fuck off, but I don't even have the energy for that. "Honey, there's a phone call for you."

I scowl. Who the hell would be calling me? "Take a message." I roll over in bed and stare at the wall.

Mom comes into the room and offers me the phone. "You'll want to take this."

I'm sure I don't, but if it will get her to leave me the hell alone, I'll do it. I hold my hand out and she places her cell in it.

"Hello?"

"Styx, it's Dean. I run Clarion—"

"I know who you are. What the hell do you want with me?"

"Alaska Stone came to see me."

I grit my teeth. "Alaska Stone is dead."

"Before, dude. She came to see me the night you cancelled. She painted a mural."

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“What?”

“That’s not all,” Dean shouts, as if he’s in the middle of a Coachella crowd. The noise in the background is deafening. “I don’t know if you know this, but she had a lot of fans.”

“Yeah, she did,” I say, choking back the lump in my throat.

And I was her biggest.

Tears fall from my lashes, and my mom sits on the edge of my bed, stroking my back. I don’t have the heart to tell her that it hurts. Everything hurts now—a side effect of chemo, sepsis, and maybe even a broken heart.

“They’re all here, man. We’re just waiting for you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just get down here,” he says and hangs up before I can ask any more questions.

Mom parks the car half a block from the alley, and Dad helps me into a chair they rented from the hospital. I can still walk, but not without a lot of pain and not without expending a hell of a lot of energy—something I have very little of these days.

I don’t have any idea what Dean was talking about, but as we get closer to Clarion, it

becomes apparent that it's busier than your usual Saturday morning. Like three-hundred-people busier. Individuals move aside to let us pass and a cheer goes up from the crowd as I'm wheeled through it.

Dean stands on the scaffolding they usually put up when they repaint the alley. He holds a loudspeaker in his hand and smiles down at me. "Alright, people, listen up. Now that our guest of honor is here, I wanna take a moment to thank you all for coming."

"What the hell are you doing?" I shout, but he just grins. "I had the absolute pleasure of watching Alaska Stone work in this alley. And this guy"—he points to me—"is the one who made it all possible."

Another cheer goes up, and I glance at the faces around me, spotting familiar smiles in the crowd: Harley, Carissa, Jan, Wan, and several other people from our chemo sessions. Alaska's friends from school, my neighbor, Joe, and Uncle Carlos. Even Mr. and Mrs. Stone are here. Everyone.

I shake my head. "I don't understand what the hell is going on."

"Alaska wasn't just a gifted artist; she was an awesome kid. I felt smarter just standing next to her, and though she was taken way too soon, she'll never be forgotten. So, does everyone have their spray cans ready?"

A collective "yeah" comes from the crowd.

"Then put your masks on and get fucking tagging. Write whatever you want, to Alaska, to Styx, to someone you might have lost from this shitty illness." Dean jumps from the scaffolding and greets my mom and dad, then he holds his hand out to me for a fist bump. A woman gives him a spray can and paper mask, which he offers to me. "Hey, man. We've got a special spot over here for you."

Mom leans down and whispers, “Told you that you’d want to take that call.”

Dean leads the way, quickly getting lost in the crowd as Dad eases my wheelchair through the tight spaces between bodies. “Did you do this?” Dad asks.

“No.” She smiles down at me. “This was all Dean. Alaska made an impression on everyone she met.”

“Yes, she did.”

“We were really lucky to know her.”

“Yeah,” I sniff back tears.

“But she was lucky too,” Mom says. “She was lucky she had you in her last few months.”

I’m not sure that’s true, but I smile up at my mom anyway because I can’t stand the thought of her seeing the anguish reflected in my gaze. She squeezes my shoulder and I put my hand over hers and squeeze back. I ignore the way her face blanches when she realizes how weak I am.

We finally catch up to Dean and he pulls a sheet off the wall. I glance up at the mural Alaska painted.

It’s of me, and of her. We’re locked in an embrace—I’m a punk-rock angel with bright blue wings tucked in against my back, and she’s a blue-haired queen with a broken crown.

I stand in front of the piece and stare up at the beauty of it. Of her. Of us. Through my tears, it blurs, the colors running together in a neon swirl.

“It’s all yours, man,” Dean says and steps aside. I glance at the wall and then at the people around us—friends, fans, strangers, and loved ones, all gathered for one girl.

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My girl.

I put on the mask and shake my can, laughing as the paint forms a bright pink arc on the wall.

I'm exhausted by the time I sit back in my wheelchair, out of breath, and so fucking tired I can barely keep my eyes open, but I do. I watch the people around us create art, and write messages on the walls to a girl who's gone, but not forgotten.

I glance at my handiwork, so juvenile in comparison to her smooth, even strokes.

Forever.

That's what I wrote. That's how long I'll love her. Even after I'm worm food in the ground.

Forever.

EPILOGUE

STYX

Carissa wheels me back into my hospital room and another nurse helps lift me on the bed. It's the same room Alaska died in.

I've had nightmares ever since they brought me in here, always of the same thing. That fucking castle again, lit up like it was during the fireworks. Only there's no one

there. No park-goers, no staff, no parade—just me and a big fucking castle that I can never reach, no matter how fast I run.

I close my eyes and drift. The shrill beeping of my heart-rate monitor pierces the quiet room. White noise fills my head. Fireworks go off behind my eyelids and I open them to see the sky above lit with dazzling colors: blue, violet, green, pink, and silver. The night glitters with them.

Hello, Disneyland ...again.

Fuck. It's the same nightmare. I don't wake up.

A soft feminine giggle wraps itself around me. "Open your eyes, loner boy."

I squeeze them tightly shut, because this bad dream just became infinitely worse. I can't see her. I can't see her and walk away. I can't go back to a world without her.

Wake up. Wake up, fucker!

When I open my eyes, it's not to a hospital room. It's to Alaska, and she's standing right in front of me.

I inhale sharply. "Stones."

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A slow smile creeps across her full lips. “What took you so long?”

I shake my head, wiping away the tears that sting my eyes with the back of my hand. I reach out and touch her face. Real. She’s real. “What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you.” She kisses my lips and I kiss her back. Fireworks burst overhead, showering us with starlight. “You should see your face.”

“Am I asleep? Is this a dream?” My breaths are short and sharp, labored. “Oh fuck. I’m dead, aren’t I?”

She studies me with a wistful smile. “Do you feel dead?”

I frown, and stare at my hands on her face. They’re no longer emaciated. I check in mentally with my body. I don’t feel pain, or the morphine clouding my mind. I don’t feel anything but warm and content. Happy. It’s fucking weird. “I don’t know. What am I supposed to feel?”

“I think the term you’re looking for is ... at peace.”

A glimmer of panic slips through me for my parents, for everyone who fought so hard to keep me alive these past few months, and then as quickly as it came, it’s gone again.

“I’m not gonna wake up again, right?”

Stones’ soft smile is mesmerizing. “Right.”

“And you’re really real. You’re really here?”

She grabs my hand and presses it against her chest, over her heartbeat, that’s as strong and steady as it ever was when she was alive. “You tell me.”

My eyes widen. “How is that possible?”

“How is any of this possible?” She throws her arms wide and flings her head back, staring up at the fireworks. They glitter over her skin, shimmering, showering us both with sparks that should hurt, but don’t.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” I whisper, trailing my fingers over her collarbone, between her breasts just to feel her heartbeat again. An errant strand of her hair tickles my fingers and I gently tug on it. “Your hair grew back.”

She nods. “So did yours.”

I slide my hand over my scalp, expecting skin and finding hair, lots of it, so much that my fingers get tangled.

She laughs. “Come on.” Stones tugs my hand and begins walking, leading me toward the castle. I dig my heels into the pavement. She glances back, her brow furrowed in confusion.

I don’t want to leave. What if this is all a dream, and moving from this spot means I lose her again?

My hand grips hers like a lifeline. I yank her back to me, wrapping my arm around her waist. I press a kiss to her forehead. Please don’t let this be another nightmare.

“We’re gonna be late,” Stones whispers.

“Late for what?”

She grins and presses her lips to mine. “Forever.”

The End