



# Trapped with the Ice Queen

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** A cozy cabin with only one bed, an Ice Queen CEO, and a snowstorm...

Dive into The Ice Queen series for all the frosty CEOs, all the thawing, and all the steamy scenes. (Oh, and the Happy Ever Afters!)

When high-maintenance CEO Vivienne Blackwood's luxury Christmas getaway goes off the rails, she finds herself trapped in a cozy cabin during a snowstorm with the grumpy yet very attractive Olympic snowboarder Alex Carter. As an ice queen who hates everything about Christmas, Vivienne clashes with Alex's down-to-earth, no-nonsense attitude, but they're stuck sharing a bed in close quarters. With forced proximity, witty banter, and undeniable chemistry, this ice queen romance heats up as Vivienne begins to wonder if the woman she initially dismissed just might be the key to her icy heart.

Can a cozy cabin with a gorgeous snowboard champion in a snowstorm at Christmas melt even the coldest of hearts?

**Total Pages (Source):** 45

1

VIVIENNE

Vivienne Blackwood hated Christmas.

The thought crystallized in her mind as clearly as the frost creeping across her windshield, despite the luxury SUV's best efforts to keep it at bay. Snow fell faster now, fat flakes swirling in her headlights like moths drawn to flame, and the GPS signal flickered ominously, the screen stuttering between navigation and static. She tightened her grip on the steering wheel, her manicured nails biting into the leather-wrapped rim.

In another hour, she would be safely settled in the most exclusive suite at the Silver Pine Resort, curled up in front of a designer fireplace with an obscenely expensive bottle of wine. Alone. Determinedly not thinking about what had happened exactly one year ago today.

Her car's Bluetooth chimed, interrupting the tense silence. Her assistant's voice crackled through the speakers, fighting against the growing interference.

"Ms. Blackwood? The resort called. They're concerned about the weather conditions."

Vivienne rolled her eyes, though no one was there to see. "I don't care if it's the fucking apocalypse, Sophie. I booked that suite months ago specifically to be alone, and that's exactly what I intend to do."

“But they’re saying—” Sophie’s voice dissolved into static, and Vivienne sighed heavily as silence swallowed the line.

Perfect. Just perfect.

The first few snowflakes had seemed almost whimsical when she left Denver, a delicate curtain draped over the jagged peaks of the Rockies. Now, the storm pressed in around her rented Range Rover like a living thing. Vast, hungry, relentless.

Her eyes darted to the rearview mirror, as if the storm might have gained sentience and chosen her as its next victim. The heated leather seats and the purring hum of the engine felt suddenly flimsy, an inadequate defense against nature’s fury.

“Blackwood women don’t panic, darling. We assess and adapt.”

Her mother’s voice drifted uninvited into her thoughts, the echo of lessons drilled into her since childhood. But what use was calm reasoning now?

The memory of last Christmas slid through her defenses, sharp and unwelcome. She’d come home early from a board meeting, clutching a tiny velvet box and brimming with excitement.

The house had been perfect. Stockings hung with precise symmetry over the marble fireplace. A twelve-foot tree in the foyer of their beautiful home, decorated in carefully curated ornaments. A holiday playlist humming softly in the background.

And then Chloe, her beloved, tangled in their very expensive sheets mid 69 with her personal trainer.

Vivienne blinked hard, the memory dissolving like smoke. She refocused on the road, which had narrowed to a pale, winding ribbon between snow-packed pines. The

windshield wipers flailed, struggling to keep up, while the Range Rover's tires gripped the icy surface with increasing uncertainty.

Her GPS screen flickered once more then went dark.

"No, no, no," Vivienne muttered, jabbing at the touchscreen. "Don't you dare."

The hot air blasting from the vents barely touched the chill spreading through her body. A shiver ran down her spine, and her pulse quickened. She was Vivienne Blackwood. CEO of Vivid Black, a multi-million-dollar fashion empire. She didn't get lost in snowstorms. She didn't lose control.

The engine coughed.

"Don't you even think about it," she warned, her voice sharp as a whip. But the Range Rover shuddered violently, a death rattle shaking through the chassis. The dashboard lit up like Christmas morning—except these weren't gifts. They were warnings.

The engine died with a final, pitiful sigh.

The silence that followed seemed to mock her. For a long moment, Vivienne just sat there, gripping the wheel like it was a lifeline. Outside, the snow continued to fall, relentless and indifferent. The road had vanished entirely beneath the mounting drifts, and the dense forest loomed on either side like silent sentinels.

She exhaled shakily and glanced at her phone. No bars. Of course not. She had chosen this mountain escape precisely for its isolation, hadn't she? To leave behind the bustling chaos of New York, the endless swirl of parties and obligations, the constant reminders of how spectacularly her life had derailed.

The SUV's interior was growing colder by the second. Her breath frosted in the air, forming little puffs of vapor that dissipated quickly. She was wearing a cashmere sweater dress tailored to perfection and boots that cost more than most people's monthly rent. Beautiful. Impractical. Useless against the cold.

Assess and adapt.

The glove compartment held an emergency flashlight, its batteries mercifully still functional, and a road flare. She rummaged through the trunk next, shoving aside designer luggage to find a space blanket and a first-aid kit. No extra layers. No gloves. No food.

What the hell had she been thinking?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:24 pm*

Her heart thudded heavily, the sound magnified by the oppressive silence. The storm seemed to absorb every noise, leaving only the eerie hiss of falling snow.

The visibility through the windshield was almost nonexistent now, the swirling white obliterating any sense of direction, not that she knew where she was anyway. The mountains loomed unseen but ever-present, their isolation pressing against her like an invisible hand. She squinted into the snowstorm, trying to find some semblance of a landmark—a tree, a rock formation, anything—but the world beyond the car was nothing but an endless curtain of white.

The silence grew heavier. Snow muffled everything, even the soft creaks of the cooling engine. It was as though she had been dropped into a void, a cold, unfeeling void where time ceased to matter.

A sudden gust of wind howled through the trees, shaking the SUV slightly, and Vivienne jumped. She clutched the flashlight tighter, her pulse thrumming in her ears.

Panic edged into her thoughts. What if no one found her? The storm was too fierce, the roads too treacherous. No one would think to look for her this high up the mountain.

Not tonight. Not in this.

She tried the ignition one more time, out of desperation rather than hope. The Range Rover sputtered weakly, its engine refusing to turn over.

Her throat tightened. She pressed her forehead against the steering wheel, trying to

summon the composure that had seen her through boardroom battles and PR crises. But this was different. This was primal. The storm didn't care about her success, her power, or her carefully maintained image.

She looked out the window again, watching the snow pile higher against the door. A few hours ago, the cabin of the SUV had felt like a fortress, a shield against the elements. Now, it felt like a coffin.

Time passed in an indistinct blur. Minutes? Hours? She had no idea. And worse, the storm's fury showed no signs of easing up. Her phone was a dead weight in her lap, its screen stubbornly displaying 'No Service.'

Options dwindled with each passing minute, each fresh wave of snow. She needed to do something, anything, before the storm buried her completely.

She forced herself to think rationally, to remember the survival articles she had skimmed in glossy magazines while waiting for her spa appointments. Stay in the car, they had always advised. Conserve body heat. Don't wander into the wilderness.

But how long could she wait?

Her stomach growled, a sharp reminder of the dinner she had skipped in her rush to leave Denver. The silence inside the SUV was deafening now, broken only by the faint creak of the frame as the wind pressed against it.

She switched on the flashlight and scanned the interior, as though something useful might miraculously appear. The beam of light caught on the space blanket she had found in the trunk, crumpled on the passenger seat. She spread it over herself, the material crinkling loudly in the stillness.

It wasn't enough. The cold seeped into her, bone-deep and unforgiving. Her thoughts

drifted to the headlines that would follow this disaster: “Fashion Mogul Freezes to Death in Mountain Storm,” “Tragic End for Vivienne Blackwood.”

Her chest tightened again, this time not from the cold. The weight of her loneliness settled heavily over her, more cruel than the storm outside.

A distant noise startled her—a low rumble, barely audible over the wind. Her heart leapt. Was it a plow? Another car? Rescue?

She strained her ears, but the sound faded almost as quickly as it had come, leaving her once again in silence.

Her hands trembled as she adjusted the flashlight, the beam catching on the ice-coated windshield. For the first time, tears pricked her eyes, hot and unwelcome.

“Blackwood women don’t panic,” she whispered, her voice shaking. “We assess and adapt.”

But as the hours stretched on and the storm howled louder, even that mantra began to lose its power.

The silence pressed in, growing heavier with every passing second. Vivienne flicked the flashlight off and leaned her head against the steering wheel, staring into the inky blackness of the storm. She’d always hated silence—true, suffocating silence. At least in the city, even during the loneliest moments, there was noise. Horns honking, distant music, voices filtering through thin apartment walls.

But here in the Rockies, the quiet wasn’t comforting. It wasn’t peaceful. It was hostile, a void so absolute it made her feel as though she’d been erased from existence.



She dug her nails into her palm, forcing her thoughts back to something tangible, something actionable. The storm would end eventually. It had to.

Her gaze drifted to the dashboard clock, its glowing numbers marking time in a way that felt almost mocking. Ten minutes had passed since the engine failed. Ten minutes that stretched like hours. The cold crept in, persistent and insidious, wrapping itself around her legs and shoulders no matter how tightly she tucked the space blanket underneath her.

She flicked the flashlight back on and rummaged through the car's compartments again, more frantic this time. The meager emergency supplies taunted her. There was no way she could survive out here overnight, not with just a thin blanket and a flare.

"Think," she whispered aloud, her voice shaky from both fear and chill. "Think, Vivienne."

Her mind churned through options, rejecting them as quickly as they formed. She could try to hike back toward the nearest town, but in this storm, she'd be lucky to take ten steps before getting hopelessly lost. She could sit tight and wait for someone to find her, but who even knew she was here? Sophie's call had dropped before she'd explained where she was.

Her breath hitched.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:24 pm*

For the first time, the thought occurred to her in sharp, painful clarity: no one was coming.

The flashlight beam wavered as her hand shook. The snow outside was already halfway up the doors. In an hour, maybe two, she'd be completely buried. The SUV's sturdy frame might hold, but it wouldn't save her from the cold.

She squeezed her eyes shut and let out a shaky exhale, trying to shove the panic back into the box where it belonged. Panic wouldn't help. Logic would. She needed a plan.

The SUV had to have some feature she'd overlooked, something meant for situations like this. She tapped the dashboard, cycling through the menus, but every screen displayed the same taunting message: System Offline.

Frustrated, she shoved open the center console and froze. Beneath a stack of receipts and loose change was an unopened granola bar.

Relief flooded her chest, even as she realized how absurd it was to feel hopeful over something so small. She tore the wrapper open and bit into it, the taste of oats and honey grounding her for a moment. It wasn't much, but it was something.

The act of eating seemed to remind her body just how much it was lacking. Her stomach growled louder, and a faint headache throbbed at her temples. She hadn't eaten since lunch—a rushed salad scarfed down between back-to-back meetings before she had left the city.

"I've survived worse," she said aloud, as if hearing her own voice might convince her

it was true.

But had she? Had she really ever been this alone, this vulnerable?

Her gaze flicked to her phone again, though she knew better than to expect a miracle. The expensive device was nothing more than a paperweight now, its screen stubbornly refusing to light up with bars or messages. She turned it off to conserve battery, just in case, and tucked it back into her bag.

The wind howled, rattling the SUV. Vivienne flinched instinctively, her eyes darting to the window. The snow was falling harder now, each gust sending it swirling like waves crashing against the car.

Her mother's voice echoed in her mind again: "Blackwood women don't panic, darling."

"Well, maybe they should," Vivienne muttered bitterly, her voice barely louder than the storm.

She shifted in her seat, pulling the space blanket tighter around her shoulders. The material crinkled loudly, breaking the deafening silence inside the car. She hated the sound of it, hated how cheap and flimsy it felt. A billionaire socialite reduced to sitting under a scrap of tin foil, freezing in a dead car on the side of a mountain.

Her thoughts turned to Chloe again. Chloe, who had laughed in her face when she'd confronted her about the affair with the personal trainer. Chloe, who had called her "cold" and "controlling," as if that somehow justified fucking the paid help.

"You are impossible to love, Viv," Chloe had said, the words cutting as sharp now as they had a year ago.

Vivienne clenched her jaw, shoving the memory away. It didn't matter. Chloe didn't matter. She wasn't going to die out here thinking about her ex.

Her fingers brushed the road flare in the passenger seat, and an idea sparked. If she couldn't rely on the SUV's lights or horn to signal for help, maybe the flare could attract attention. Someone—anyone—might see it and come.

She pulled on her boots, wincing as the cold leather met her bare legs, and wrapped the blanket around herself like a shawl. The icy metal of the door handle stung her palm as she gripped it, and she hesitated for a moment.

The storm outside roared, a wall of white and wind that seemed determined to swallow her whole.

She shoved the door open and stepped out.

The wind hit her like a physical force, stealing her breath and sending the blanket whipping behind her. Snow clung to her lashes and hair, blinding her as she stumbled forward, clutching the flare like a lifeline.

Her boots sank into the drifts, the cold seeping through the soles almost instantly. She fumbled with the flare's cap, her numb fingers struggling against the tiny plastic ridges.

Finally, with a snap and a hiss, the flare came to life, its red light cutting through the storm like a beacon. Vivienne held it high, waving it back and forth, her teeth chattering violently.

"Help!" she shouted, though her voice was lost almost immediately in the wind.

She stood there for what felt like an eternity, her arm aching from holding the flare so

high. The snow continued to fall, relentless, covering the SUV's roof now. The glow of the flare illuminated the storm in eerie, flickering shades of crimson, but it revealed no movement, no signs of life.

Her hope faltered, then broke entirely. She let the flare drop into the snow, where it sizzled weakly before fading.

The world went dark again, the storm swallowing her completely.

Shivering uncontrollably, Vivienne clawed her way back to the SUV, her muscles burning with every step. By the time she collapsed into the driver's seat, her body felt like ice, and her breathing was ragged.

She pulled the door shut behind her, but the cold had already invaded the vehicle and her body, settling into her bones. The blanket offered little comfort now, no matter how tightly she wrapped it around herself.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:24 pm*

Tears welled up in her eyes again. For the first time, she let herself feel the weight of it—the helplessness; the fear; the awful, crushing loneliness.

No one was coming.

She rested her forehead against the steering wheel, her breath forming tiny clouds that lingered in the frigid air. The silence crept back in, pressing down on her chest like a heavy weight.

2

ALEX

The storm was alive. Not in the romanticized, storybook way city folk imagined, but alive in the raw, unforgiving way Alex Carter knew all too well.

The wind howled through the pines, bowing their branches in reverence to Mother Nature, while icy gusts whipped at the windows of her cabin. From the warmth of her kitchen, Alex sipped black coffee, steam curling into the air as her mind cycled through the list of tasks she'd already completed.

The woodpile was stacked high, the generator ran smoothly, and the fire in the stonehearth burned steady. The scent of pine and cedar filled the small space, a testament to the freshly split logs she'd hauled in earlier. Her cabin was a sanctuary of practicality and self-sufficiency, every corner reflecting her need for order and efficiency. She'd built shelves to hold neatly labeled jars of dried goods and canned vegetables, made curtains from thick fabric scraps that kept the draft at bay, and hung

her snowboarding medals on a beam out of sight—mementos of a life that now felt like a half-remembered dream.

The cabin was hers in every sense: simple, efficient, and functional. It was a far cry from the blaring lights and crowded slopes of the Winter Olympics, where her name had once been shouted by strangers who now only remembered her in passing.

Alex Carter? Wasn't she the snowboard champion? The multiple gold medalist? Years ago? I can't remember the year. It was a long time ago.

Here, in this corner of the Rockies, she was alone, and it suited her just fine.

Alex stretched, feeling the satisfying pull of her muscles after morning chores, and set the empty mug on the counter. Her reflection flickered in the window: sharp cheekbones, chapped lips, dirty-blond hair in a short cut still mussed from her beanie. Outside, the world was white chaos. The kind of storm that turned roads into death traps and made every decision a matter of survival.

She glanced at the clock mounted on the wall, a basic analog she'd salvaged from her parents' garage years ago. The hands pointed to 3:30. Her late-afternoon patrol would need to start soon.

She moved to the mudroom section of her cabin, pausing to adjust the line of gear hanging on a rack she'd built herself: snowshoes, ropes, ice axes, an old first-aid kit in a dented red tin. The items were as well-worn as she was, tools of a life spent knowing how dangerous the mountains could be. She added a flare gun to the pile, the bright orange handle a sharp contrast against the muted wood paneling of the room.

Alex pulled on her snow gear with practiced precision. Layers of warmth and water-resistance went on first, followed by her thick-soled boots laced tight, gloves snug,

and a waterproof jacket lined with reflective tape. Each piece bore the scars of years spent navigating storms like this one—torn seams stitched back together, scuffed soles, and faded fabric. She wrapped a scarf around her neck and tugged it up to cover her nose.

Her breath clouded the lenses briefly as she glanced out the cabin's small window. The storm seemed to mock her with its intensity, snow whipping in wild arcs that made it hard to distinguish sky from earth. The whiteout conditions would be perilous, but she wasn't deterred.

Patrolling was a self-given responsibility, one she could technically ignore, but she wouldn't. The mountain didn't care who lived or died; it simply existed, indifferent and magnificent. Alex couldn't afford that kind of indifference. Not since that one time?—

She shook her head, unwilling to let the memory surface fully.

"Just another day," she muttered under her breath, steeling herself as she grabbed a radio from the shelf.

The familiar weight of the radio in her hand steadied her. She'd done this hundreds of times before, though something about today's patrol felt different.

She stepped outside, the cold biting at the strip of exposed skin between her scarf and hat. Snow swirled violently, stinging her cheeks and muffling the sound of her boots crunching through the drifts. The storm had erased all familiar landmarks, reducing the landscape to a uniform, suffocating white.

The cabin door shut behind her with a muffled thud, the sound swallowed instantly by the wind. Her truck waited just beyond, its dark shape barely visible. She trudged through the drifts, each step an effort against the storm's fury, and climbed into the



cab.

The truck's interior was as no-nonsense as the rest of her life. A wool blanket lay folded on the passenger seat, a compact emergency kit tucked beneath it. A pair of snow chains clinked against each other in the footwell. She patted the dashboard affectionately. "Alright, girl. Let's see what you've got."

The engine groaned awake as she turned the key, a low growl of defiance against the storm. Alex let it idle a moment as she adjusted the heater knobs. The map clipped to the dashboard showed her planned route: a loop down the main roadleading to the highway before circling back to the cabin.

It was a routine she knew well, one that allowed her to check for stranded vehicles or signs of trouble. She didn't expect to find anyone out here in this weather. No one should've been reckless enough to venture out, but "should" didn't mean much when people panicked.

She eased the truck into gear, its tires gripping the icy ground, and began the descent. The windshield wipers fought against the barrage of snow, creating narrow strips of visibility that let her see just enough of the road ahead.

As she drove, the storm roared around her, and yet Alex felt oddly at peace. This was her element—the solitude, the challenge, the untamable beauty of the Rockies. It was a far cry from the life she'd left behind, but out here, she could breathe.

The snow had always been her first love. Only love.

The first half-hour passed in eerie quiet, the only sounds coming from the heater and the rhythmic swish of the windshield wipers. The road wound through denseforest, the lodgepole pines leaning under the weight of the storm. Visibility was abysmal, and Alex kept her hands steady on the wheel, her eyes scanning the terrain for

anything unusual.

The storm was relentless, battering the truck with sheets of snow that turned the windshield into a flickering blur. Alex adjusted the defroster, watching as a small patch of glass cleared again, revealing the swirling chaos outside. The map clipped to the dashboard wavered in the heater's gusts, but her route was committed to memory, even the parts that the map didn't reveal. The sharp turns, sudden dips, and narrow shoulders of this mountain road were as familiar to her as the callouses on her hands.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:24 pm*

It was near the base of a hill when something caught her eye—a flash of metallic gray through the swirling white. She eased her foot off the gas, and the truck slowed to a crawl. At first, it looked like it might be debris—a fallen branch, maybe—but as she rolled closer, the shape solidified into the unmistakable outline of a vehicle.

A luxury SUV, utterly useless in conditions like these. Snow had already begun to pile on the roof, and ice crept like spiderwebs along the windows. Alex shook her head, incredulous.

“Of course,” she muttered, pulling alongside the stranded car. She killed the engine and slipped on her gloves as she braced herself against the cold. When she stepped out, the storm greeted her with ferocity, slapping her like an angry ghost. Snowflakes stung her cheeks and clung to her lashes as she trudged toward the vehicle, her boots crunching through knee-high drifts.

The SUV was in bad shape. Snow had packed itself tight against the wheel wells, and the tires—cheap all-seasons, from the looks of them—were no match for the icy incline. Alex glanced at the plates: out-of-state, naturally. She rapped on the frozen driver’s window, the sound muffled by the wind.

The figure inside jolted, then fumbled with the controls until the glass slid down a few inches. Perfume-laced air spilled out, a floral note that felt absurdly out of place here. Alex suppressed a groan.

The woman in the driver’s seat was striking—too put together for this rugged backdrop, like a porcelain doll dropped into the wilderness. High cheekbones, darkbrown hair falling in soft waves, and wide blue eyes that regarded Alex with

equal parts annoyance and relief. But it wasn't her beauty that caught Alex off guard; it was the absurdity of her outfit.

She was dressed for a holiday catalog, not a life-threatening snowstorm. A sweater dress clung to her figure, accentuating her breasts and Alex could see the shape of her freezing nipples through it. It was paired with knee-high boots that probably cost more than Alex's entire wardrobe. A crinkled space blanket, thrown over her shoulders like an afterthought, did nothing to protect her from the cold.

"You lost?" Alex asked, her voice rough.

The woman's expression tightened. "Obviously. My car broke down, and I've been trying to call for help, but there's no signal." Her tone was clipped, each word enunciated like she was speaking to someone beneath her.

A total bitch. A beautiful total bitch.

Alex arched a brow, leaning her weight onto one hip and letting her eyes drift over the stranger's body. "No kidding. You're lucky you didn't freeze to death out here."

"I wouldn't have been out here in the first place if this stupid mountain hadn't swallowed my GPS signal," the woman shot back, her ungloved hands clutching the steering wheel like it was the only thing keeping her tethered to sanity.

Alex resisted the urge to roll her eyes. The SUV's engine was silent, the hood blanketed in snow—whatever had gone wrong, this car wasn't going anywhere without a tow truck. And in this weather, that wasn't happening anytime soon.

"Right," Alex said, her tone deadpan. "Well, you can't stay here or you will die. Grab whatever you need and come with me. I'll get you somewhere warm before you do something else dumb, like walking into the woods."

The woman's jaw tightened, her eyes narrowing in indignation. Alex recognized the type: proud, stubborn, the kind of person who would rather dig in their heels than admit they were in over their head. But there was a flicker of uncertainty beneath her haughty exterior, a crack in the polished veneer.

She hesitated, her handstightening on the wheel again. Alex could almost see the internal debate playing out—the desire to argue clashing with the harsh reality of the situation. Eventually, the woman huffed and reached for a designer bag on the passenger seat.

“This is ridiculous,” she muttered, more to herself than to Alex. She rummaged through the bag, pulling out a leather wallet and a phone that was probably worth more than Alex's truck. A scarf, far too thin for the weather, followed.

“Is that it?” Alex asked, incredulous. “No extra layers? Boots that won't land you in the ER with frostbite?”

The woman glared at her, cheeks flushing pink—not from the cold, Alex guessed, but from offense. “I wasn't exactly planning to get stranded in the Arctic.”

Alex bit back a retort, her breath misting in the icy air. Instead, she took a step back and gestured toward her truck. “Fine. Just hurry up. The storm's not going to wait for you to decide whether or not you're above accepting help.”

The woman shot her one last frosty glare before shoving the items back in the bag and climbing out of the SUV to grab the rest of her luggage in the trunk. She teetered for a moment, her impractical boots skidding on the ice, and Alex had to fight the urge to reach out and steady her.

“This is going to be fun,” Alex muttered under her breath, turning toward her truck as the storm howled around them.

Getting her luggage secured in the truck bed was a battle against both the elements and the woman's protests about designer leather in the snow. By the time they were both inside the cab, Alex's patience had worn as thin as the visibility.

The truck cab was warmer than the SUV, but the tension inside could have frozen the windows. Vivienne Blackwood—she'd introduced herself with all the self-importance of someone who expected the name to mean something—sat stiffly, her shoulder bag clutched in her lap as if the seat itself might stain the fabric.

Alex glanced at her sideways, biting back the urge to say something cutting. Vivienne looked wildly out of place in the rugged cab of the truck, like a high-gloss magazine ad shoved into a survivalist catalog. Her hair, still styled in soft waves despite the snow, gleamed faintly in the dim light from the dash. She'd managed to drape the too-large coat Alex had given her over her shoulders but wore it like it was an affront to her dignity.

“Put this on too,” Alex said, tossing her a second, more practical coat she kept stashed in the backseat, her eyes never leaving the road ahead.

Vivienne caught it midair with the tips of her manicured fingers, holding it at arm's length as if it might bite her and making no move to actually wear it. Vivienne stared at her for a moment, clearly debating whether to push the issue, but eventually slipped the coat on with a delicate shrug. It swallowed her, the sleeves falling far past her hands, and the sight tugged at something in Alex's chest. She dismissed the twinge.

They drove in silence for a while, the storm howling against the truck as if trying to break inside. The wipers struggled to keep up with the snow, and Alex leaned forward slightly, her eyes narrowing as she peered into the blinding white ahead.

“Why are you out here?” Vivienne asked abruptly, her tone sharp enough to cut

through the noise.

Alex didn't look at her. "I live out here."

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“In this?” Vivienne gestured vaguely to the storm, her brows arching in disbelief.

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“Because I like it,” Alex said simply, her focus never wavering from the road.

Vivienne frowned, her confusion palpable. “It’s...isolated.”

“That’s the point.”

Another silence stretched between them, tense and brittle. Vivienne huffed softly, clearly unimpressed with Alex’s brusque answers. Alex, for her part, had no intention of elaborating. Let the woman think she was a recluse or a weirdo; she didn’t owe her, or anyone else, an explanation for her choices.

The road grew rougher as the snow piled higher, the truck’s tires crunching over patches of ice and buried gravel. Alex adjusted her grip on the wheel, her knuckles whitening as the vehicle slid slightly on a turn. She corrected effortlessly, her body attuned to the movements of the truck.

Vivienne, however, was another story. She flinched at every skid and bump, her hands gripping the dash with white-knuckled intensity. Her breath came in shallow bursts, visible puffs in the cold air.

“Relax,” Alex said, her tone bordering on exasperated. “This truck’s built for this



kind of weather.”

“That’s not exactly comforting,” Vivienne snapped, her voice tinged with panic.

Alex glanced at her, smirking despite herself. For all her poised exterior, Vivienne was flustered, her cheeks flushed and her composure cracking. She looked like a cat dropped into a puddle, outraged and utterly miserable. It was almost...endearing.

No. Not endearing. Just annoying.

“You’re not going to die in my truck,” Alex said, her voice softening despite her best efforts. “I know these roads. I’ve got this.”

Vivienne didn’t respond, keeping her gaze fixed firmly on the swirling snow outside. The faint light from the dash highlighted the curve of her jaw, the line of her neck as she tilted her head slightly. She was really pretty, Alex realized with a flicker of irritation— far too pretty for someone who was so determined to be a pain in her ass.

By the time they neared Alex’s home, the storm had reached a crescendo. Snow whipped across the windshield in dizzying spirals, and the truck’s headlights barely pierced the swirling white. Alex slowed the truck to a crawl, her eyes narrowing as she searched for the unmarked turnoff to her cabin.

“Almost there,” she said, more to herself than to Vivienne, who still didn’t look reassured.

Vivienne huddled deeper into the coats, her wide eyes staring out into the dark with a distant, almost haunted expression.

Alex clenched her jaw, trying to ignore the pang of sympathy that twisted in her gut.

She didn't want to feel anything for this woman, especially not something as inconvenient as concern. But there was something about the way Vivienne had gone quiet, her earlier defiance replaced by a fragile kind of fear, that made Alex's chest ache.

Finally, the cabin's silhouette emerged, a dark shape against the endless white. Relief coursed through Alex's veins as she pulled the truck to a stop in front of the porch. The sudden silence when she cut the engine was almost jarring, the storm's roar muffled now by the walls of the truck.

"Stay here while I get the door open," Alex said, her voice curt. She didn't wait for a response, shoving the door open and stepping out into the biting wind.

The cold hit her like a wall, stealing her breath and numbing her face in seconds. Snow crunched under her boots as she trudged toward the cabin, her body hunched against the storm. She fumbled with the lock for a moment before the door creaked open, the familiar scent of pine and woodsmoke wafting out like a welcome.

Turning back toward the truck, she caught sight of Vivienne through the windshield. The woman was sitting stiffly, the coats still swallowing her frame, her face half-lit by the dim glow of the interior light. She looked small, almost fragile, and for a moment Alex felt an inexplicable urge to go back and reassure her.

Shaking her head, Alex dismissed the thought. Fragile or not, Vivienne Blackwood was here now, and that was Alex's problem to deal with.

3

VIVIENNE

The moment Vivienne crossed the threshold of Alex's cabin, she knew she was in

trouble.

The transition from bitter cold to sudden warmth hit her like a brick wall, stinging her frozen cheeks. Melted snow dripped from her cashmere sweater dress onto the wooden floor, each drop a reminder of how utterly unprepared she was for this situation. Her feet, numb in her ruined leather boots, screamed back to life with painful tingles.

Alex's cabin was a single room—rustic, cramped, and wholly unremarkable. Weathered logs made up the walls, their uneven surfaces absorbing what little light filtered through the storm-dimmed windows. A wood-burning stove dominated one corner, radiating heat that fought against the drafts sneaking through the cabin's seams. The scent of woodsmoke clung to everything: the mismatched furniture, the worn curtains, even the air itself.

Vivienne froze in the entryway, clutching her luggage like a lifeline. Somewhere in her bags was a cream silk pajama set she'd packed for lounging in front of a beautiful gas fireplace as she sipped champagne. The reality of her new situation settled over her like a lead weight. This couldn't be the place. Surely, there was another door somewhere, one that led to something more civilized.

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Alex glanced back at her, raising an eyebrow. Snowmelt darkened her jacket, but she seemed unbothered by the wet or cold. "You coming in or planning to freeze out there?"

"I—yes, of course," Vivienne stammered, stepping fully inside. The door shut behind her with a thunk that felt disturbingly final, cutting off the howl of the wind. The cabin, for all its faults, was warm, but it felt stifling. Claustrophobic. The walls seemed to press in, and she fought the urge to fling the windows open and let the cold rush in, just to escape the overwhelming earthiness of it all.

Her gaze darted around, cataloging everything the space lacked. No thermostat. No state-of-the-art appliances or pristine surfaces. And, worst of all, no router or any sign of Wi-Fi. Her perfectly manicured nails, one broken from her earlier ordeal in the storm, clicked against her phone screen as she tapped it instinctively, as if sheer determination might summon a signal.

Alex dropped her bag near the stove with a wet thud, shaking the snow from her coat. Water droplets scattered across the floor, adding to the growing puddle around Vivienne's feet. "Don't bother. There's no service out here."

"I wasn't—" Vivienne began, but the three little bars refusing to appear on her screen betrayed her. She snapped the phone shut with a frustrated huff, the sound echoing in the too-small space.

"Right." Alex's lips quirked in what might've been a smirk, though it vanished as she turned to stack firewood next to the stove. Each log landed with a solid thunk that made Vivienne wince.

Vivienne turned her attention to the room again, willing herself to find something redeeming. A pile of books sat on a low table near a threadbare armchair, their spines worn and titles faded. A single mug rested on the kitchen counter, a faint ring marking its base. Tools hung neatly on the wall—an array of hammers, saws, and other implements she couldn't name but which, apparently, Alex found necessary. The whole place felt too primitive, too practical. No sense of real style.

Her designer sweater dress, damp from the snow, clung uncomfortably to her skin. She shifted, trying to find a position where the wet fabric didn't touch her, but it was impossible. The room's warmth only seemed to highlight how out of place she felt.

"I see you're not a fan of modern conveniences," Vivienne said, her voice sharper than intended. A draft whistled through some unseen crack, making her shiver despite the stove's heat.

Alex shrugged, not looking up from the firewood. The flames cast shadows across her face, highlighting the strong line of her jaw. Vivienne noticed how strikingly attractive Alex might be... in another world, of course. "I don't need much."

Vivienne bristled at the implication. "Well, clearly."

The sarcasm slid off Alex like melted snow, and she moved with an ease that grated on Vivienne—practical, steady, and wholly indifferent to the storm outside or the chaos brewing inside Vivienne's mind. The sound of her boots on the wooden floor was sure, confident, a stark contrast to Vivienne's own unsteady footing.

Desperate for a sense of control, Vivienne crossed the one-room cabin to the books and straightened them into a neat pile, her fingers leaving damp prints on their worn covers. Then she adjusted the throw blanket draped over the armchair, smoothing its edges. It was handmade, she realized, the stitches irregular but sturdy. Nothing like the cashmere throws that adorned her own furniture back home. It was a small act,

but it felt like reclaiming a piece of herself.

"Didn't know you were an interior designer," Alex said, her tone unreadable.

Vivienne ignored her. The neatly arranged books gave her some satisfaction, though it was short-lived. She glanced back at Alex, who was now crouched by the stove, coaxing a flame to life with maddening efficiency. The fire's glow softened her features, catching the hints of gold in her hair.

She found herself studying her rescuer despite herself. The way Alex's hands moved, sure and deliberate, as if every action served a purpose. The faint furrow in her brow, the flash of firelight catching in her dark eyes. There was an unshakable steadiness to her, a calm that should have been reassuring but only fueled Vivienne's irritation.

"Do you even have central heating?" she asked, the question escaping before she could stop it. Her toes curled in her wet boots, seeking warmth that wasn't there.

Alex glanced up, one eyebrow arching. A spark from the fire cast her face in momentary light. "That's what the stove's for."

"Right," Vivienne muttered, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. Another shiver ran through her, this one hard enough to make her teeth chatter.

The room suddenly felt smaller, and the absence of Wi-Fi loomed large in her mind. She fumbled with her phone again, stepping toward the nearest window in a desperate attempt to find a signal. The screen remained blank, reflecting only her own frustrated expression.

Frost patterns decorated the window's edges, delicate whorls that might have been beautiful in any other circumstance. Vivienne climbed onto the chair by the window, angling her phone upward. Her wet shoes slipped slightly on the worn upholstery,

and her balance, already precarious, wavered.

"Careful," Alex said sharply as Vivienne wobbled, one hand shooting out to steady herself.

"I've got it," Vivienne snapped, but she didn't—not entirely. Her grip faltered, and Alex's hand closed around her arm just as she started to slip.

The touch was brief, firm, and surprisingly warm through the damp fabric of her sleeve.

"You okay?" Alex asked, her voice low but not unkind.

"Yes," Vivienne said quickly, jerking her arm away. The chair steadied beneath her, but her heart raced—and not because she almost fell. The warmth of Alex's touch lingered, a stark contrast to the chill that had settled into her bones.

Alex paused for a moment before stepping back. "If you're done climbing furniture, maybe you should settle in. Storm's not letting up anytime soon."

Vivienne glared at her, but the sting of her own helplessness dulled the silent retort that died on her tongue. She stepped off the chair, her phone clutched tightly in her hand like a shield.

"Fine," she said, though nothing about this situation was fine. Not the storm. Not the cabin. And certainly not Alex Carter. Not the way the room's warmth was slowly seeping into her frozen limbs, making her increasingly aware of every point of contact between her wet clothes and sensitive skin.

The storm howled outside, a reminder that she was well and truly trapped.

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This was definitely not the Christmas escape she'd planned.

The shadows in the cabin grew longer as the storm raged on, darkness creeping in despite the warm glow from the woodstove. Vivienne sat stiffly in the armchair, her phone clenched in both hands. The faint tick of the wood-burning stove punctuated the silence, though it did nothing to drown out the rush of blood pounding in her ears. She jabbed at the phone's screen again, willing even a single bar of signal to appear.

Vivienne's chest tightened. "You're kidding."

Alex didn't answer. The click of metal against metal as she shut the damper was maddeningly casual, as though this were all perfectly normal. As though being cut off from civilization was just another Tuesday.

"Unbelievable," Vivienne muttered. She turned her attention back to the window and tugged it open an inch, icy wind stinging her hands and face. Leaning out, she held her phone up, her breath fogging in the bitter cold. The wind whipped strands of hair free from her carefully maintained style, another small indignity in a day full of them.

"Stop," Alex said sharply, her boots thudding against the floor as she approached. "You're letting the heat out."

Vivienne ignored her, craning her neck to see if the storm had cleared enough to reveal some distant tower. Snow lashed at her face, and the phone slipped slightly in her numb fingers. The metallic taste of panic rose in her throat; the device in her hand was her last connection to her real life, to the world she understood.



Alex's hand shot out, gripping Vivienne's arm. "Get inside," she said firmly, pulling her back.

The sudden touch sent warmth spreading through Vivienne's chilled skin, an unwelcome reminder of their earlier contact.

She liked Alex's hand on her. Even though she would rather die than admit it.

Vivienne stumbled, the window slamming shut behind her. "I was fine!"

"Sure you were." Alex crossed her arms, and Vivienne noticed how the gesture emphasized the strength in her shoulders. "Fine enough to drop your phone into the snow, maybe. What exactly were you hoping to accomplish?"

"I don't know. Something!" Vivienne snapped. Her hands balled into fists at her sides, her nails digging into her palms. "Unlike you, I can't just sit here like this doesn't matter."

"Because it doesn't," Alex shot back, her voice rising for the first time. "You're not going anywhere in this storm. That's the reality, whether you like it or not."

"Oh, I don't like it, thank you for noticing." Vivienne's voice dripped with venom. "Well, what did you expect, driving up the mountain in the middle of a snowstorm in that useless SUV? Room service to follow you up? Newsflash: You're lucky I even came along. Not even roadside assistance comes up this far."

Vivienne's face burned, but she refused to back down. "What I expected," she said coldly, "was not to be stranded with someone who thinks a wood stove counts as adequate heating."

Alex shook her head, the muscles in her jaw tightening. "You really don't get it, do

you? This isn't some vacation where you can control every detail like ordering something off a menu. The storm doesn't care about your schedule, and it sure as hell doesn't care about your complaints."

"I am not complaining," Vivienne said, though her voice cracked slightly. "I'm just pointing out that this"—she gestured wildly to the room—"is unacceptable."

Alex's expression darkened. "What's unacceptable is your attitude." She turned abruptly, crossing to a corner of the cabin where a small shelf held a handful of supplies. Reaching for a black emergency radio, she held it up. "Here," she said. "Knock yourself out. Maybe the NOAA will take pity on you."

Vivienne stepped forward, snatching at the radio. "Give me that."

"No." Alex held it just out of reach, her voice dropping into a warning tone that sent heat curling in Vivienne's stomach. "It doesn't work right now. The storm's blocking the signal."

"Then why even have it?" Vivienne demanded, tugging harder.

"For when the storm passes," Alex growled, her grip tightening.

They struggled briefly, the small device suspended between them like a lifeline neither was willing to relinquish. Behind them, the fire crackled, casting dancing shadows across the walls, and Vivienne was suddenly aware of how close they were standing.

Then it happened.

Vivienne's fingers brushed against Alex's hand, their skin colliding in a flash of warmth. For a moment, neither moved, and the cabin itself seemed to hold its breath.

The tension in the room shifted, sharp and electric. Vivienne's breath caught, her gaze flickering to Alex's, but the intensity there made her pull back immediately. She couldn't name the emotion she saw in those dark eyes, wasn't sure she wanted to.

The radio slipped from her grip, and Alex deftly caught it, setting it back on the shelf. She didn't look at Vivienne, but a faint flush colored her cheeks.

"Don't touch it again," Alex said quietly.

Vivienne swallowed hard, the heat from that brief contact lingering on her skin. Her frustration, her panic, all of it churned inside her, but it was something else entirely that made her feel like the floor beneath her was unsteady.

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She turned away abruptly, her voice clipped. "Fine. Keep your stupid radio."

Alex said nothing, her silence more unnerving than any retort.

Vivienne retreated to the chair by the window, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. She stared out into the storm, but the snow blurred before her eyes. She told herself it was the biting cold that had reddened her cheeks, nothing more.

The howl of the storm seemed louder now, as if the wind was intent on battering the cabin into submission. The last remnants of daylight had faded, leaving them in a bubble of warmth surrounded by darkness. Vivienne sat rigid in the armchair again, the tension from her earlier clash with Alex still hung in the air, thick as the smoke curling from the stove.

Alex glanced up from the small radio she'd been fiddling with, her expression calm but serious. A streak of soot marked her cheek, and Vivienne fought the urge to tell her about it.

"It's not letting up. If anything, the storm is getting worse."

Vivienne's stomach sank, though she kept her expression neutral. "How much worse?"

"Bad enough that we're not going anywhere for at least a day or two," Alex said, setting the radio down on the table. The soft thud felt like a death sentence. "Probably longer."

Vivienne stared at her, a flicker of unease breaking through her icy demeanor. "You're certain?" She noticed Alex's eyes drift down over her body before rising again and the feeling of being watched by her was an unwanted turn on.

Alex met her gaze evenly. "Positive."

The words hit harder than Vivienne expected, like the final nail in a coffin. She turned away, staring out at the white chaos beyond the window. The storm was unrelenting, determined to keep her here in this too-small space with this too-intriguing woman.

"So that's it," she said softly, more to herself than to Alex. "I'm just...stuck here."

Alex's voice was quiet but firm. "For now, yes. And fighting it won't change anything."

Vivienne swallowed hard, the weight of her circumstances pressing down on her. She wasn't used to feeling powerless. It didn't suit her.

Alex moved to the small kitchenette, the clatter of a pot and utensils breaking the heavy silence. "I'm making dinner. You can join me or not. It's up to you."

Vivienne bristled at the casual dismissal. She rose from the chair, smoothing the wrinkles in her sweater. "Of course I'll help. I'm not useless."

Alex raised an eyebrow but didn't comment, simply nodding toward a small stack of root vegetables on the counter. "Peel those then."

Vivienne stared at the paring knife Alex handed her as if it were an alien artifact. She picked it up gingerly and inspected the carrot in her other hand. The vegetable was fresh, she noted with surprise, not some canned approximation. "Peel it how?"

Alex let out a short, amused breath. "You've never peeled a carrot before?"

"I've never had to," Vivienne shot back, a defensive edge in her voice. "Some of us have people for things like this."

"Right," Alex said, shaking her head. "Well, consider this a crash course in self-sufficiency."

Vivienne glared at her but said nothing, focusing instead on the carrot. She slid the knife awkwardly along its surface, managing to gouge uneven strips off the vegetable. The domestic task felt foreign in her hands, like trying to speak a language she'd never learned.

Alex, chopping onions beside her, glanced over. "You're holding it wrong."

"I'm holding it just fine," Vivienne snapped, though she knew she wasn't.

"Sure," Alex replied dryly. "If you want to waste half the carrot."

Vivienne gritted her teeth, her irritation bubbling to the surface. "I don't see you offering any helpful advice."

Alex put down her knife and reached for Vivienne's hands. "Here," she said, her voice softer than Vivienne had heard it yet. "Like this."

Vivienne stiffened as Alex's fingers curled around hers, guiding her grip on the knife and carrot. The warmth of Alex's touch sent an unexpected jolt through her, and for a moment, the tension between them shifted into something else entirely. She looked up, meeting Alex's gaze.

Alex's dark eyes softened briefly before she pulled away, returning to her own task

without another word. But something had changed in the air between them.

The meal, simple as it was, came together quickly. They sat across from each other at the small table, the flickering light from the woodstove casting shadows on the rough wooden walls. The stew was surprisingly good, though Vivienne would rather freeze than admit it.

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"So, what's the plan now?" she asked, more to break the loaded silence than anything else.

"Survive the storm," Alex said matter-of-factly. "Keep the fire going, ration the food, wait it out."

Vivienne frowned. "That's it?"

"That's it," Alex confirmed.

The simplicity of the answer grated on Vivienne. She was used to plans, to action, to doing. Sitting still and waiting felt intolerable.

They fell into silence again, the only sound the scrape of Alex's spoon against her bowl and the constant howl of the wind. Outside, the storm showed no signs of weakening.

After dinner, Alex began organizing their supplies, stacking cans and folding blankets with deft efficiency. Vivienne watched from the table, her mind still turning over the events of the day. The cabin felt different in the darkness, smaller somehow, yet also safer than she wanted to acknowledge.

"Let me help," she said finally as she stood.

Alex hesitated, then nodded. "Fine. Grab those blankets."

Vivienne reached for them just as Alex did, and their hands touched.



Vivienne froze, her fingers brushing against Alex's calloused palm. Her breath caught as the warmth spread up her arm, mingling with a deep ache.

Alex seemed equally affected, her posture stiffening as she slowly drew her hand back. "Thanks," she said quietly, turning away.

Vivienne stood there for a moment, her pulse racing. She pressed her lips together, refusing to let the vulnerability show.

As Alex worked, Vivienne sank back into the chair by the window. She stared out at the storm, its fury unabated, and for the first time, she allowed herself to admit how helpless she felt. Not just about the storm or being stranded, but about the way her body seemed to react whenever Alex was near.

Her chest tightened, and she wrapped her arms around herself. The storm outside was unyielding, but the one inside her felt worse—a storm of fear, frustration, and something dangerously close to desire.

She glanced toward Alex, who was now tending the fire. The flickering light caught the strong lines of her face, the quiet competence in her movements. The same qualities that had irritated Vivienne earlier now seemed to draw her eye, much as she tried to resist.

Vivienne hated that she felt comforted by it.

Hated even more that she didn't hate it at all.

Alex woke with a start, the cabin's quiet morning air chilling her to the bone. The fire had long since burned out, leaving only the faint smell of ash and the cool bite of winter seeping through the cracks in the weathered logs that made up the walls. Her neck ached from the awkward angle she'd slept in on the couch, and her muscles protested as she stretched, groaning softly.

The night had been long—too long, in fact. She hadn't expected a restful sleep, not with the storm howling outside like some angry, primordial beast, but she hadn't anticipated just how restless it would be. Vivienne had taken the bed, of course, as if she were entitled to it, leaving Alex with nothing but a thin blanket and the lumpy couch. Despite her irritation, Alex had bitten her tongue. Arguing with Vivienne in the middle of the night wouldn't help either of them, and she'd already been through enough that day. So, Alex had endured it, listening to the storm outside rage on as she stayed in her corner of the room.

She wasn't sure what bothered her more—the fact that Vivienne had claimed the bed so easily, or the way Alex had silently allowed it. Maybe it was the look in Vivienne's eyes as she settled in, that blend of entitlement and exhaustion. She wasn't used to people like Vivienne—used to luxury and ease—but there was something about her that nagged at Alex, like an itch she couldn't quite scratch.

Now, though, watching her chest rhythmically rise and fall, Alex felt an odd wave of protectiveness. The thick quilt was pulled up snugly, and Vivienne's face was softened in sleep, no longer guarded or sharp. She looked beautiful and almost vulnerable. A side of her Alex hadn't seen yet, and it made the frustration that had built the previous day feel distant, almost irrelevant.

Alex huffed softly, the sound barely audible over the relentless howling of the wind outside. She rubbed her eyes, trying to push the thoughts away. She shouldn't be feeling this way. She should be annoyed, very annoyed, by Vivienne's snide remarks and constant complaining. Yet here she was, watching her sleep like some kind of

fool. There was no reason to pity her. Vivienne clearly had it all. But somehow, Alex couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to her than she let on.

Alex forced herself to focus. The storm was getting worse, the wind slamming against the cabin's small windows with a force that made the weathered walls tremble. It wasn't safe to stay still for long. She needed to check the firewood and reinforce the windows again before the temperature dropped further. The storm would have them trapped for weeks if they didn't stay on top of it.

The cold air hit her like a slap as she stood, and she winced, pulling her thick wool sweater tighter around her shoulders. The cabin was drafty, the cracks and crevices around the windows and door letting in icy gusts that seemed to seep into her bones. She glanced at the bed once more, then crossed to the nearest window, peering out into the whiteout conditions. The blizzard was relentless, blurring the world into an indistinct haze of white, the trees and hills swallowed by the endless flurry of snowflakes. Alex had seen worse, but this felt different, heavier somehow, more ominous. She needed to make sure everything was secure.

She moved to the woodpile by the door, assessing what was left. It wasn't much. Enough for the morning, but if the storm didn't let up soon, they'd be in trouble. Alex grabbed another armful of logs, their weight familiar in her calloused hands, and stacked them carefully near the dormant stove. Her movements were quick and instinctive as she sorted the wood by size and dryness. Every minute counted. Her thoughts briefly drifted to Vivienne, still sleeping, but she pushed them away. She didn't have time to babysit someone who couldn't take care of themselves.

But still, as she worked, she noticed the soft sounds from the bed. Vivienne shifted, the rustle of sheets and creak of old mattress springs cutting through the eerie silence. Alex glanced over, expecting to see her still asleep, but instead, Vivienne's gaze met hers from across the room. Her eyes were half-lidded, not quite awake but not far from it either, and there was a vulnerability there that unsettled Alex more than any

sharp retort or haughty comment ever had.

For a moment, Alex froze, caught in the quiet rawness that shone through Vivienne's bleary stare. Her face was pale in the weak light filtering in through the windows, and Alex saw something in her clear blue eyes—something fragile, something human. It made her chest tighten.

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Alex quickly averted her gaze, her hands moving faster, almost frantic, as she continued to stack the logs. She could feel Vivienne's gaze on her, but she refused to acknowledge it. She couldn't afford to. Not with the storm closing in, not with everything that was at stake. She had to focus on the survival of the cabin, on keeping them both safe.

Still, the image of Vivienne's quiet, unguarded expression stayed in the back of her mind, making it hard to push aside the odd feeling that had stirred within her. It wasn't pity. Alex wasn't that kind of person. But there was something more to this woman than just her sharp tongue and brittle armor, and it intrigued Alex.

With a heavy exhale, Alex finished her work on the woodpile and turned to gather more supplies, her mind spinning. She had a job to do. She couldn't afford to be distracted. Not now.

The storm howled outside, its fury unabated, and in the silence of the cabin, Alex worked, her movements sure and steady, trying to block out the storm that raged both beyond the walls and within her own mind.

She left to do outside chores, and when she returned to the cabin, her cheeks numb from the biting cold and her fingers stiff from the chill, she found Vivienne standing near the fireplace, looking completely lost. The fire had burned low during Alex's absence, and Vivienne's eyes darted between the matches and remaining logs, as if unsure of where to even begin.

Vivienne glanced up as Alex entered, her face flushing slightly, the faintest line of frustration tugging at the corners of her mouth. "I was just trying to"—she paused,

eyes falling back to the pitiful pile of kindling—"start the fire. But it's not as easy as it looks, is it?"

Alex couldn't help the smirk that tugged at her lips. "No, it's not. But it can be done."

She set her bag down by the door and moved toward the stove, eyeing Vivienne's failed attempt. The matches were already damp, and the kindling was poorly arranged; no wonder the fire wasn't catching. Alex's fingers twitched with the familiar need to take control, and she knelt down, gesturing for Vivienne to move aside.

"Here," Alex said, her voice firm but not unkind. She bent down, showing Vivienne how to arrange the kindling properly, stacking it loosely. Her fingers worked swiftly, placing each piece with precision. "If you want the fire to catch, you need to create space for the air to move or it'll just smother itself."

Vivienne watched her, still standing a little too far from the warmth of the stove. Her usual sharpness had softened a bit.

Vivienne stood with an innate grace, and the lovely lithe petite body of a dancer that Alex couldn't stop her eyes from roving over, and Alex wondered if she had done ballet or dance in her younger years. Looking at her now, Alex figured her to be at least 10 years older than her own 39 years. Vivienne had to be over 50, even though, without her armor of make up this morning, she looked good on it. Too good.

Alex struck a match, lit it, and held it close to the dry kindling. It took just a moment for the small flames to catch, slowly climbing up the fragile wood. She watched Vivienne out of the corner of her eye as the fire took hold, noting the way her gaze shifted from skeptical to intrigued.

"Now," Alex continued, straightening and brushing her hands off. "You can keep it going by adding bigger logs once the kindling has burned down a bit."

Vivienne nodded, though she didn't quite meet Alex's eyes. She seemed a little less defensive now, the walls around her coming down just slightly. "Right. I'll try again."

Alex couldn't help but feel a little satisfaction at the change in Vivienne's attitude, but it wasn't enough to let her guard down. She turned away, collecting more wood and stacking it near the stove. "You'll need to keep the fire stoked. It's not enough to just light it once."

Vivienne hesitated before stepping forward, her movements slower now, more deliberate. She glanced at Alex, and for the first time, there was something approaching respect in her gaze. "You know a lot about this...survival stuff."

"Comes with the territory," Alex replied, her tone flat, though her chest tightened a little at the implied compliment.

Vivienne's lips twitched, as if she was trying to suppress a smile. It was a moment of quiet acknowledgment between them—a shift, subtle but undeniable. Alex felt a familiar tug of something deeper inside her, but this time, she wasn't sure if she was more irritated or intrigued by it.

They worked in silence for a few minutes, their motions synchronized as they tidied up the cabin and prepared for the next wave of the storm. Alex showed Vivienne where and how to store the firewood properly, explained how to check the windows for cracks that might let in the cold air. Vivienne's responses were clipped, but she no longer snapped at every instruction.

As they moved closer together, Alex noticed the way Vivienne's dark hair fell around her face as she concentrated, partially obscuring her features. She pushed it back from her eyes, tucking it behind her ear in a way that seemed almost...intimate. Alex felt the pull of it, the small gesture suddenly becoming a point of focus. She swallowed, looking away, pretending she hadn't noticed. But the image lingered, the soft strands

of hair and the curve of Vivienne's jaw etching themselves into her memory.

Their proximity, too, was becoming impossible to ignore. They were side by side now, moving in a rhythm that didn't require words. Each time they passed close, Alex caught the faint, floral scent of Vivienne's perfume, and she found herself unconsciously adjusting her posture, trying to ignore the flutter of awareness stirring in her chest.

Vivienne made her hungry. In a way she hadn't been for years.

"Thanks for the help," Vivienne said quietly as she bent to grab a fresh log for the fire, her voice a little softer than usual.

Alex glanced at her, unsure whether to respond with the usual sarcasm or something else. But there was a quiet sincerity in Vivienne's tone that disarmed her. She gave a small nod. "Just doing what needs to be done."

They worked for a while longer, the silence between them no longer uncomfortable, just different. The storm continued to rage outside, but inside the cabin, the air felt less tense. The flickering light of the fire illuminated their faces in the dim room, casting long shadows on the weathered walls.

Alex felt a shift within herself, though she wasn't sure what to make of it. Beneath Vivienne's high-maintenance exterior, she was starting to see cracks—fragile moments of humanity that made Alex question everything she thought she knew about the woman. The way her eyes softened when she listened, the way she didn't protest as Alex showed her how to use the stove, the way she accepted her help without further resistance.

It wasn't much, but it was enough to make Alex wonder just what was hidden beneath Vivienne's carefully constructed facade.



As the daylight faded, the cabin was swallowed by the deepening shadows of the night. The storm outside had become a relentless, primal roar, the wind rattling the small windows and the gnarled trees bending under the weight of the snow. Alex stood by the stove, the warmth of the fire against her skin almost a comfort in comparison to the howling cold beyond the cabin's walls.

The evening was quiet, save for the crackle of the fire and the rhythmic clink of metal utensils as she prepared the last of their canned goods, turning them into something that resembled a simple but nourishing meal—a far cry from the luxurious fare Vivienne was undoubtedly accustomed to.

Vivienne's footsteps echoed behind her, hesitant at first, but gaining confidence. "Do you need help?" Her voice was tentative, but the offer felt almost genuine. It surprised Alex. She'd assumed Vivienne would avoid any effort that wasn't immediately comfortable or convenient.

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Alex glanced over her shoulder, catching the uncertain look on Vivienne's face. She nodded toward the small cutting board on the counter. "You can chop the vegetables. If you're careful, they won't end up in the pot whole."

Vivienne gave a little huff, rolling her lovely blue eyes as she moved to the counter. "I'm not exactly a chef."

Alex couldn't suppress a smirk. "I can tell."

The air between them lightened with the exchange, the sharpness that had marked their interactions earlier replaced with something more awkward, but oddly more comfortable. Vivienne took the knife, her grip unsteady at first, the blade slipping a little too close to her fingers. Alex was about to offer help when Vivienne steadied herself, her movements becoming more measured.

She didn't say anything, but Alex caught the way her brow furrowed in concentration, how the tip of her tongue peeked out of the corner of her mouth as she focused. Something about it was unexpectedly endearing.

The fire crackled behind them, the flames casting flickering shadows across the cabin walls. The warmth from it wrapped around them both, creating an oddly intimate atmosphere. Alex watched Vivienne for a long moment, wondering, not for the first time, what lay beneath the surface of the woman who had irritated her so thoroughly earlier.

"You're doing better than I thought," Alex said.

Vivienne looked up, her eyes catching Alex's for a brief moment. "I'm full of surprises." There was something in her gaze—a flash of vulnerability, quickly hidden behind a veil of sarcasm.

Alex turned back to the stove, stirring the pot with a little more force than necessary, not wanting to acknowledge the unexpected twist in the evening. "You don't have to pretend with me," she said after a long silence, not really meaning to speak the thought out loud.

Vivienne stiffened at the comment, her fingers pausing in mid-air as she reached for another vegetable. Her voice, when it came, was more careful now. "I don't know what you mean."

Alex shrugged, unable to explain what she had seen—the small, almost imperceptible shift when Vivienne's bravado cracked just for a moment. "Just...don't make yourself miserable because you think you have to be."

Vivienne's eyes darted to the floor for a second, then back up, guarded again. She pressed her lips together and nodded, though it was clear she was trying to dismiss the conversation. "What about you, then? How do you manage all this?"

Alex paused, the question unexpected. For a moment, she considered sharing something more personal, but the walls went up before she could even begin. She wasn't one to invite that kind of vulnerability, not here, not now. Not with her.

"Just get used to it," Alex said, her tone more clipped than she had intended. She met Vivienne's gaze, her words a little harder than she'd meant them to be. "You'll figure it out."

The silence that followed was thick, filled with the weight of unspoken things. The smell of the simple but hearty meal began to fill the cabin, warm and comforting.

Vivienne took her seat at the small table, her body language still guarded, though less tense than before. The storm outside raged on, but inside, there was a quiet sort of truce between them, a rare moment of peace.

Dinner was eaten in an awkward silence, the only sounds the clink of cutlery against plates and the occasional crackle from the fire. The warmth from the stove filled the space, but Alex still couldn't shake the discomfort gnawing at her.

Once the dishes were cleared, the moment of decision arrived—the familiar, unavoidable question of where they would sleep. Alex had already resolved it in her mind: she would take the couch again. It was the only way to avoid another uncomfortable night spent in close proximity to Vivienne, who had already claimed the bed with that same entitled air.

She could share the bed with Vivienne, but she didn't trust the hunger that was growing deep inside of her.

She rose from the table and stretched, then moved toward the small couch by the wall, a ritual she had settled into without much thought. She expected Vivienne to say something—anything—perhaps a snide comment about the arrangement. But when she turned around, she found Vivienne still seated.

Vivienne hesitated, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her sweater, her gaze dropping to the floor. Her usual confidence was gone, replaced by a vulnerability that tugged at something deep within Alex. "You don't have to sleep on the couch," she said quietly, her words strangely sincere. "There's plenty of room in the bed."

Alex felt a strange twinge in her chest at the offer. It was unspoken, but it carried an understanding—an acknowledgment of the discomfort that had passed between them, a silent olive branch. Her heart raced, and for a moment, she was tempted to accept, to allow herself the comfort and warmth of sharing the bed. But her rational mind

kicked in, reminding her of the need to maintain a distance.

"No," Alex replied quickly, her voice almost too sharp. She couldn't let this shift in their dynamic pull her in. She had to keep her guard up. "It's fine."

She moved to the couch, settling herself onto it with deliberate care. The fabric was rough against her skin, and the weight of the day pressed down on her, but it was nothing compared to the weight of Vivienne's presence. She could feel it, even from across the room—the subtle tension that hadn't quite resolved.

As the night deepened and the storm raged louder, Alex lay awake on the couch, her body tense despite the exhaustion that weighed heavily on her. The howling wind outside seemed to mirror the turmoil inside her chest, a swirl of conflicting emotions: frustration, protectiveness, and, worse yet, a growing attraction that she couldn't quite shake.

She closed her eyes, trying to push the thoughts away, but the image of Vivienne, the way she had looked at her so invitingly just a moment ago, imprinted in her mind. Alex took a steadying breath, trying to ignore the fluttering in her stomach. It wasn't supposed to be like this. She wasn't supposed to care. But the storm outside wasn't the only thing that felt like it might break her.

As the night wore on, the fire in the stove began to die down, casting longer shadows across the cabin. Alex listened to the sound of Vivienne's breathing from the bed, her own eyes refusing to close. The quiet intimacy of the moment was overwhelming, and she found herself wishing, against her better judgment, that she had accepted Vivienne's offer.

The cabin felt colder without the bed's warmth, and Alex pulled the scratchy blanket tighter around her shoulders, trying to block out the growing chill. She knew she should get up and tend to the fire, but the thought of leaving the couch, of putting

more distance between them, felt like too much. Instead, she lay there, lost in the storm of her own thoughts, waiting for the first hints of dawn to creep in through the windows.

5

VIVIENNE

The soft crackle of the fire was the only sound in the room, a gentle hiss and pop of the logs as they were consumed by flames. The room, dimly lit by the orange glow, felt warm, too warm under the blanket, but it did nothing to ease the shiver crawling up Vivienne's spine. Her body was tense, restless in a way that had nothing to do with the cold.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:24 pm*

She turned onto her other side, her gaze drifting across the room. Alex was stretched out on the sofa, the rise and fall of her breathing filling the silence. The rhythmic sound seemed to pulse in time with Vivienne's own heartbeat, slow and steady, but where Alex's breath was easy, Vivienne's was shallow, rapid, her chest tight, her mind restless.

The small room was still, and the space between them was thick with all the things they hadn't said—the things they couldn't say. Vivienne stared at Alex, unable to stop. She traced the outline of her body, the way the blanket barely covered her. The curve of her arm, the way her shaggy short golden hair fell across her face, the strength in her posture even as she slept—it all swirled in Vivienne's thoughts, each small detail intensifying the heat already spreading under her skin.

She shifted again, unable to settle, her mind caught in a dizzying loop. Alex was too close, but still so far. The desire that simmered inside her had been there, just beneath the surface, since that first moment they had met, but now it was impossible to ignore. She could feel it like a pressure in her chest, a weight settling lower, making her skin tingle, her breath catch. Every part of her screamed to close the distance between them. But she couldn't. She shouldn't.

Her fingers curled into the blanket, gripping it tighter as though that might anchor her. She pressed her palm flat against the pillow, digging the heel of her hand into the soft fabric in an attempt to still her body, to stop it from betraying her thoughts. Her mind, however, was not so easily controlled. It only spurred her desire further.

She hated that it was this Alex Carter, of all people who was creeping beneath her carefully curated defences. This woman whose life and world were so different from

her own, this woman who had become the living embodiment of everything Vivienne could never control. But even in this chaotic mess of emotions, even when Vivienne tried to push it away, she couldn't help it. She couldn't stop the way her body betrayed her, the way her thoughts turned dark with longing as she stared at Alex in the low light.

What was it about her? What was it about the way Alex carried herself so effortlessly? The way she took up space without even trying, without apology? It made Vivienne feel small, but not the kind of small that made her angry. It made her want to know what it was like to just be. To let go, even for a moment. To release the constant tension she always carried and fall apart in Alex's strong arms.

To feel pleasure... all the pleasure... from Alex's capable hands.

But this—this thing between them—it wasn't that simple, was it? They weren't supposed to feel this way. Not here, not like this. The distance between them wasn't just physical; it was the weight of everything unsaid. The conflict. The history. The undeniable differences in the way they moved through the world. She could feel it now, heavy and suffocating in the space between them.

She tried to close her eyes, but the images of Alex—her body, her presence, her warmth—danced behind her eyelids. Her body ached for release, for the pressure to dissipate, but all she had was the weight of her thoughts. She could almost feel Alex's gaze on her, the sharpness of it cutting through the dark, though she knew Alex was still asleep.

It made Vivienne's heart race, made her blood burn hot, but she couldn't stop herself. Her fingers slipped from the edge of the blanket, brushing over the soft, cool skin of her neck. Her mind screamed for control, but she wasn't sure she wanted it anymore.



No one had ever made her feel like this—vulnerable, exposed. But the feeling of Alex close, even in silence, was palpable. Her body hummed with need, her fingers now tracing the curve of her collarbone, the softest touch, a search for something to calm the storm inside her.

She could feel body heat up, and her mind begged for release. But the thought of Alex on the other side of the room, the weight of her presence, kept her paralyzed. She was caught between her own desire and the quiet, ever-present fear of what would happen if she let go. What would happen if Alex knew she was touching herself?

The room held its breath, every sound amplified in the stillness. The fire crackled softly, a steady rhythm that underscored Vivienne's shallow breaths. Beneath the blanket, her movements were small and tentative, as though afraid to disturb the fragile quiet. Her fingers caressed her skin, the brush of her touch igniting sparks that danced along her nerves.

She had tried to be silent. Careful. But each shift of her body, each tiny gasp she fought to suppress, felt deafening in the otherwise tranquil space. She swallowed hard, her pulse pounding in her ears, her thoughts racing even as her body moved of its own accord.

Her gaze flicked to Alex, her form still stretched out on the sofa, her chest rising and falling in a slow, steady rhythm. Asleep. Blissfully unaware.

Her fingers trembled as they pressed into the heat pooling between her legs. Her body arched slightly, hips tilting under the covers as a soft, involuntary sigh slipped past her lips. She froze, eyes wide, her heart hammering against her ribs as she waited, listened.

Nothing.

The fire continued its steady song, the room otherwise undisturbed. Alex hadn't moved; her breathing remained unchanged.

Vivienne's body, however, refused to be still. The tension coiling inside her demanded release, and her frustration and desire tangled together into something she couldn't tame. She hated herself for it—the lack of discipline, the sheer audacity of her need—but the thought of stopping felt unbearable.

Her fingers moved against her clit again, slower this time, deliberate, as though savoring the torment she was inflicting on herself. Her mind swam with conflicting thoughts: the ache in her chest that felt dangerously close to longing, the burn of shame at her vulnerability, the simmering anger that Alex could make her feel like this without even trying.

She did her best to swallow her moans as her pleasure began to run through her.

And then, it happened.

A faint rustle, a creak of the sofa.

Vivienne's eyes shot open, her breath hitching in her throat. The blanket bunched in her fists as she went rigid, her entire body seizing with panic.

Alex stirred, turning slightly, her face now angled toward Vivienne. The shadows cast by the firelight softened her features, but her expression—half-lidded dark intriguing eyes, brows furrowed faintly in what could have been curiosity or concern—sent a chill down Vivienne's spine.

She knows.

The thought slammed into her like a physical blow. She squeezed her eyes shut,

willing herself to disappear, to dissolve into the bed and become as invisible as the flickering shadows on the wall.

"Vivienne."

The sound of her name was soft, barely more than a whisper, but it struck like a thunderclap in the silent room. Her eyes snapped open, meeting Alex's from across the small space.

There was no question now. Alex was awake and fully aware, her gaze sharp despite her lazy, half-asleep posture.

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Vivienne's throat worked, but no words came out. Her mind scrambled for an explanation, a way to spin this moment into something less damning, but the flush of heat still coursed through her.

"What are you doing?" Alex's voice was calm, steady, but there was an edge to it—dark, dangerous.

Vivienne's lips parted, but the air in the room felt too thick, choking off her words. She sat up abruptly, pulling the blanket tight around her shoulders as though it might shield her from Alex's piercing gaze.

"I—" The words caught in her throat, tangled with shame and something else. Something raw and hungry that she couldn't quite name.

Alex didn't press. She simply watched, her eyes unreadable. The weight of that silence, that gaze, was too much to bear.

"I thought you were asleep," Vivienne managed at last, the words tumbling out in a rush, as though that might absolve her of what had just transpired.

Alex tilted her head, her expression unchanging. "Clearly."

The word hung between them, sharp and cutting. Vivienne's skin prickled with embarrassment.

"I wasn't—" she started, but the lie died on her tongue.

Alex's eyes narrowed, not in anger, but in something that made Vivienne's stomach twist and her pulse race. "You don't have to explain," Alex said finally, her voice low, almost a murmur. She leaned back against the sofa, her gaze never leaving Vivienne.

The words should have been a relief, a reprieve. But the way Alex said them, the way she looked at Vivienne, sent a jolt of something electric down her spine.

For a moment, neither moved. The fire crackled as the room settled into an uneasy quiet once more. But the air was different now, charged, alive.

Vivienne clutched the blanket tighter, her skin still burning white-hot from Alex's gaze. She didn't know what to say or do. All she could feel was the weight of her own vulnerability and the undeniable pull of the woman lying across the room from her.

The room felt alive, thrumming with an unspoken energy that pressed down on Vivienne like a physical force. She couldn't look away from Alex, whose gaze was locked on her with an intensity that made the firelight seem dim by comparison.

There was no more pretense now. No masks, no games. The distance between them felt impossibly small, and yet it buzzed with tension so thick it seemed to vibrate in the air.

Vivienne's breath hitched as Alex moved, the subtle shift of her body breaking the fragile stillness. Alex sat up on the edge of the sofa, unhurried but deliberate, her eyes never leaving Vivienne.

"You've been holding back," Alex said, her voice low, each word precise and weighted.

Vivienne's throat tightened. She couldn't find her voice, couldn't summon a sharp quip or cutting remark. Instead, she was acutely aware of her own uneven breathing, the way her chest rose and fell too quickly.

Alex stood, each step measured as she closed the distance between them. She looked sexier than anything Vivienne could imagine as she pushed her messy waves of blonde hair out of her eyes. Vivienne's pulse raced, and the heat in her body coiled tighter with every second.

"You think I didn't notice?" Alex murmured, stopping just short of the bed. She leaned down slightly, her hands braced on the edge of the mattress. Her presence was overwhelming, her voice curling around Vivienne like smoke.

Vivienne couldn't answer. Words felt inadequate, irrelevant. She was caught, pinned beneath the weight of Alex's gaze, her body blazing.

Alex reached out, her fingers brushing Vivienne's cheek. The touch was light, almost gentle, but it carried an unspoken promise that made Vivienne's stomach twist.

"Tell me to stop," Alex said, her voice softer now, but no less commanding.

Vivienne's lips parted, but no sound came out. The air between them seemed to crackle, every second stretching into eternity as she grappled with the question.

Stop.

She should say it. She should push Alex Carter away, reassert the boundaries that had already blurred too far.

But...she didn't want to. She wanted more. Much more.

Instead, she leaned into Alex's touch. Her breath came out in a shaky exhale, her eyes fluttering closed as she let herself fall into the moment.

Alex's hand slid to the back of her neck, her touch firm but careful, grounding Vivienne as she moved closer. The kiss, when it came, was inevitable—slow at first, a test, a question.

Vivienne's breath caught, her fingers clutching at the blanket she still held around her shoulders. Alex's lips were warm, insistent, drawing her into a rhythm that left no room for second-guessing.

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The kiss deepened, Alex's control unwavering. She pressed closer, her hands guiding Vivienne with a confidence that made Vivienne's head spin.

Vivienne didn't fight it; she couldn't. Her body responded instinctively, yielding to Alex's touch, her own hands reaching up to grasp at the fabric of Alex's shirt. It was as though the tension that had built between them had finally snapped, and now it flooded out in a torrent of heat and desperation.

The blanket slipped from her shoulders, forgotten as Alex pushed her back against the pillows. Vivienne gasped, her senses overwhelmed by the press of Alex's body, the scent of woodsmoke and something distinctly Alex filling her lungs.

Her usual walls, the defenses she wore like armor, crumbled under Alex's touch. There was no room for pretense, no room for anything but this—this raw, unfiltered connection that left her vulnerable and exhilarated all at once.

Alex's movements were deliberate, each touch calculated to draw a response from Vivienne. Her lips traced a path down Vivienne's neck, her hands mapping out every curve, every shiver.

Vivienne's head tilted back, her breath escaping in shallow gasps. Her body felt like it was burning, desire pooling low and insistent, her mind too fogged with sensation to process anything beyond the press of Alex's mouth and the weight of her hands.

For once, she didn't try to control it. She let herself go, surrendering to the pull of Alex's dominance, to the way Alex seemed to know exactly how to unravel her.



And yet, amidst the chaos of sensation, there was something grounding in Alex's touch—a steadiness that kept Vivienne from spinning completely out of control.

The fire crackled in the background, its warmth a pale imitation of the heat between them. The world beyond the cabin felt impossibly far away, as though it no longer existed.

In this moment, there was only Alex.

Vivienne looked up at Alex and saw a smirk playing at the edges of her lips and a shadow dancing in her eyes.

Alex's fingers traced a deliberate path along Vivienne's collarbone, a touch that was both gentle and possessive. The firelight caught the angles of her face, shadowing her expression into something almost lustful. Her other hand gripped Vivienne's arm, holding her in place with quiet authority.

"I've seen the way you look at me," Alex murmured, her voice low and rough. "When you think I'm not watching." Her fingertips ghosted down Vivienne's arm, raising goosebumps in their wake. "The way you try to hide it behind those sharp comments and that perfect facade."

Vivienne's breath caught in her throat. She wanted to protest, to maintain some semblance of control, but Alex's proximity made it impossible to think clearly. The heat of her body, the steady pressure of her hands, the way she seemed to fill every inch of space around them—it was overwhelming.

"I don't—" Vivienne started, but Alex's grip tightened slightly, cutting off her words.

"Don't lie," Alex said softly, dangerously. "Not now." Her free hand slid up to cup Vivienne's jaw, thumb brushing across her lower lip. "You've spent so long

pretending, haven't you? Always in control. Always perfect." She leaned closer, her breath warm against Vivienne's ear. "But that's not what you want right now, is it?"

The question hung in the air between them, heavy with implication. Vivienne's heart hammered against her ribs, her body trembling with need and uncertainty. Alex was right—she was always right, damn her—and the realization made Vivienne's chest tight with something between fear and anticipation.

Alex pulled back just enough to meet her gaze, eyes dark with intent. "Tell me what you want, Vivienne."

It was a command, not a request. The way Alex said her name—like she owned it, owned her—sent a shiver down Vivienne's spine. She parted her lips, but no words came out. How could she possibly voice the chaos of desire and need that thundered through her body?

Alex's smirk deepened, understanding flickering in her eyes. "Or maybe," she said, her voice dropping lower, "you need me to show you instead."

With that, Alex crashed her lips against hers, running her hand up her neck to grab fistfuls of hair, tipping her head back slightly. Alex moved her focus to her exposed neck, leaving searing kisses on her skin.

Vivienne gasped at the touch, something she wasn't used to. She felt wetness between her legs, hotter and more insistent, and her breath came in ragged in gasps. She wanted more; she wanted Alex.

Alex ran her hand along Vivienne's side, tracing her curves, and playing with the bottom edge of her silk nightgown. Vivienne's breath hitched when Alex lifted it slightly, just enough to playfully tease her upper thigh, and she felt her skin warm.

Vivienne moved again to lift Alex's shirt, wanting to touch her, but Alex's eyes glinted as she pushed Vivienne down again and held her arm in place against the mattress. Alex stayed silent, but Vivienne didn't need words to know what she meant. Instead, she put her head against the pillow and closed her eyes, focusing on the pointsof contact between Alex's fingertips and her skin.

"Tell me now, what you want, Vivienne," Alex growled. "Tell me or I will stop now."

Vivienne swallowed and kept her eyes closed. The threat of Alex not continuing was enough to prompt hesitant words from her.

"I.. uh..." and Vivienne Blackwood certainly wasn't used to sounding hesitant.

"Tell me, Vivienne," Alex's weight pinned her arm harder and Vivienne felt more turned on than she thought she ever had. Usually she was the dominant one. In fact, always she was the dominant one. This wasn't how sex usually went for her.

"I need you to fuck me." The words tumbled out of Vivienne's mouth all of a sudden, her desire that she had had from almost their first meeting was spoken aloud for the first time.

She knew for a fact she had never begged someone to fuck her before.

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Alex leaned down, inches from her ear, and huskily purred, “Good girl.”

Alex dipped lower, hovering over Vivienne’s body now, and trailed kisses from herear, down her neck, down to the top of her breasts. Alex pulled down the silk nightgown til the fabric was taut, and Vivienne was about to protest—it was an expensive nightgown, after all—but Alex didn’t hesitate- she ripped it down the middle, tearing it from Vivienne’s body and leaving her naked and gasping. Vivienne squirmed underneath Alex, who pinned her down again with one hand and looked her body up and down with a look in her eyes like she wanted to devour her.

Vivienne gasped again.

“Do you want me to continue,” Alex asked, fixing her gaze and Vivienne found herself nodding furiously. She had never wanted anything more. Alex’s attention was a curious mix of rough and dominant mixed with tenderness and she liked it more than she would ever admit.

“Say it, Vivienne.”

“Yes... please... please make me come...” Vivienne barely recognized her own voice as needy and desperate as it sounded.

Alex, with her free hand, ran it roughly over Vivienne’s body, pausing at her breasts to tease her nipples roughly. Vivienne found herself moaning into the touch and wanting more and more. Alex dipped her head trailing kisses and bites across Vivienne’s chest, down over the swell of her breasts, sucking her nipples into her mouth and then biting them as though she was relishing Vivienne’s yelps and moans.

The kisses moved along Vivienne's soft belly, and down to her wanting pussy. Vivienne felt her legs opening instinctively.

Still holding down Vivienne—though she didn't need to; Vivienne had become pliant and wanting—Alex brought her other hand down to Vivienne's knee as far as she could reach then slowly, slowly brought it up along the outside of Alex's own thigh where Vivienne curled it around her. Vivienne was well and truly open and exposed to her now. She felt her own wetness seeping. Alex then snaked her hand over to Vivienne's inner thigh.

She paused there, the two women holding their breaths in unison, as if waiting for what would happen next. Flashes of desire flooded Vivienne's mind, and she wanted nothing more than to rip off Alex's clothes and feel her skin and see her body.

But she didn't.

She wasn't in control this time.

She didn't want to break this spell, whatever this was. She didn't want Alex to change her mind and take her hands away and go back to the couch. She wanted this moment to last forever, as if in some kind of suspended animation, but her body wasn't willing to wait. It coiled tighter with heat until she squirmed under Alex's touch, trying to will it to move closer.

"Please..." Vivienne begged.

Alex quirked a smile in the corner of her lips, but it was fleeting, gone as quickly as it came. But she got Vivienne's message.

Alex squeezed Vivienne's inner thigh roughly, eliciting a squeal that was half-moan, half-surprise from Vivienne, and she brought her hand up further, further,

further...until she was inches away from Vivienne's pussy. She could feel Alex's larger hands, the callouses from the physical labor, against her sensitive skin, and she felt close to bursting right then.

Alex teased Vivienne, first running a finger along her slit back and forth, then tracing tight circles around her clit. Vivienne felt another rush of wetness between her legs as her entire body responded to Alex's touch. Alex stayed there, circling Vivienne's clit, pressing down with more pressure as the seconds ticked away.

Even though Alex was still wearing her pajamas, Vivienne felt the barriers between them melt away—all the ones that really mattered anyway. She felt her chest and the muscles in her stomach loosen, as if anticipating, hoping, for what came next.

“Stay still,” Alex commanded.

Alex let go of Vivienne's arm, watching her with those deep honey-colored eyes to make sure Vivienne didn't move. She obliged, staying as still as she could with the rush of pleasure flooding her body. Alex dropped her right hand down and slammed what felt like two fingers straight into Vivienne.

Vivienne moaned with pleasure, the sudden pressure inside her tantalizing. It'd been far too long since she had been intimate with anyone that she feared she would have forgotten how it went, how it felt. But her body remembered. Her inner walls loosened to make space for Alex's fingers as Alex curled her fingers upward to find that sensitive spot that would make Vivienne see stars.

Vivienne rocked her hips in time with Alex's fingering, finding a shared rhythm that felt natural. Each time Alex's fingers slipped in deeper, her body jolted with excitement and she felt warm liquid pooling between her legs.

Alex didn't let up, though, either not noticing the sticky heat or not caring. She

plunged a third finger inside Vivienne and began to fuck her hard. Relentlessly slamming in and out of her with her thumb sliding against Vivienne's clitoris.

Vivienne could hardly keep up, her mind and body unraveling as Alex continued. She was lost to the fucking and the intensity of pleasure she felt building deep inside her. She caught her breath just long enough to open her eyes and look at Alex, surprised to find that Alex was already watching her, studying every twitch on her face and jolt of her body, adjusting her pace to maximize Vivienne's pleasure. Vivienne noticed a twinkle in her eyes, as if Alex were getting pleased simply by watching Vivienne's pleasure.

She leaned her head back against the pillow again, stretching her neck upward, exposing the soft skin. Alex took the opportunity and leaned down, leaving more searing kisses and bites against her neck as she kept pushing hard inside of her.

"Come for me, Vivienne," Alex commanded, her thumb more insistent on Vivienne's clitoris. Vivienne thought there was more inside her now, maybe 4 fingers fucking her hard- she had lost track of what was going on. She had lost herself to pure sensation.

"You feel so good to fuck. So wet for me, Vivienne. Come for my fingers, there's a good girl."

Vivienne felt her body tighten, the sensation building up until her orgasm crashed over her, sending shivers of pleasure down her body as she cried out and felt herself gushing into Alex's hand.

"Good girl," Alex growled in her ear as she held her through the shudders of her orgasm, her fingers still deep inside Vivienne.

And when it was over, the quiet returned as Alex slid her fingers out of Vivienne

and pulled away from her. The silence was thick and heavy, but no longer as suffocating.

Silently, Alex gave her a final look that Vivienne couldn't decipher, then slipped out of the bed, moving toward the couch, where Vivienne saw her crawl under the blanket.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:24 pm*

Vivienne, still reeling from her orgasm, lay there, naked, legs open, and well and truly fucked. She could feel the insides of her pussy still throbbing from the pounding she had just received. She grabbed for the blanket to cover herself, still feeling the sticky liquid between her thighs. After the orgasm aftershocks rocked her body and reality seeped in, she couldn't help but wonder what the hell happened and what it all meant. For her, for Alex, for both of them.

The cabin's darkness felt different now, charged with unspoken questions and the heat of their encounter. Even the constant howl of the wind couldn't drown out the thundering of her heart.

She rolled over in the bed, preparing for a night of fitful, restless sleep.

6

ALEX

Alex woke with a sharp inhale, the kind that made her ribs ache against the stillness of the cabin. Her gaze darted instinctively to the window, where faint beams of soft morning light filtered in the cabin. The storm outside hadn't let up, though it carried a strange hush now, the kind that promised it was only gathering strength.

Her body felt like a live wire. Heat still clung to her skin, and an unmistakable ache in her muscles reminded her of the night before. A low, simmering thrill coursed through her as she registered the undeniable weight of Vivienne's presence over on the bed. The blankets rustled as she shifted on her sofa, careful not to disturb Vivienne.

Alex stared at the ceiling, trying to piece her thoughts together, but chaos reigned in her mind. What the hell had she been thinking? The last thing she should have done was let things escalate. But then...she had.

A sharp exhale escaped her, and she rubbed a hand over her face. It wasn't just the physical act that was getting to her; it was the way it had felt. A complete unraveling, giving in to the raw, magnetic pull Vivienne had on her. It had been an unrelenting, unapologetic release—a chance to silence Vivienne's sharp tongue and Alex's own restless anger all at once. And it had worked, hadn't it?

Her lips twitched into something between a grimace and a smirk. That woman was maddening and impossible to tolerate for more than five minutes without saying something infuriating. But last night? Last night, Vivienne had been—Alex swallowed hard—silent of smart remarks. Surrendered. Begging and pleading to be fucked. And that had been intoxicating in ways Alex wasn't ready to admit.

The wind outside rattled the cabin, a stark reminder of the world beyond their fragile bubble. Alex tore her gaze from the ceiling and glanced toward Vivienne across the room. Vivienne lay facing the other way, her dark hair spilling over the pillow, one hand clutching the edge of the blanket like a lifeline.

A pang of guilt shot through Alex. She'd crossed a line. Sure, Vivienne had been a willing participant, but the circumstances—this cabin, the storm, their mutual frustration—had driven them both to act recklessly.

Her jaw clenched as memories of her past crept in unbidden. The years she'd spent keeping people at arm's length, guarding her independence like a fortress. She'd learned early on that letting someone in too far meant giving up control. Control was what kept her steady. It kept her sane. And now, in one reckless night, she'd handed it over and taken it back in the same breath.

Alex pushed herself upright, the couch creaking beneath her. Every movement felt too loud, too deliberate. She needed to get away, to put some distance between herself and Vivienne before the woman woke and unleashed that razor-sharp wit of hers.

The hum of the generator buzzed faintly in the background, a reminder that even their electricity was on borrowed time. Alex swung her legs over the side of the too-small couch and stared down at her hands. She didn't regret what had happened—how could she, when her blood still thrummed with the memory? But she knew she couldn't let it happen again.

Her priority was survival, not indulging in whatever complicated, chaotic thing was brewing between them. Vivienne needed her help, her stability, not this mess of tangled emotions and unresolved tension. And Alex? Alex needed to stay in control.

With a deep breath, she stood and moved toward the window. The light outside was cold and gray, the snow falling in heavy sheets. She placed a hand on the cold glass, her palm meeting the chill with a steadiness she didn't feel.

The storm outside roared, but the storm inside was louder.

The day progressed with painful slowness, each hour marked by careful avoidance and mounting tension. When evening finally arrived, it brought with it a darkness that seemed to seep into every corner of the cabin.

The cabin felt smaller today. Alex hadn't thought that possible, but the blizzard outside seemed intent on proving her wrong. Snow lashed against the windows, a relentless barrage that sent faint tremors through the walls. The light had grown dim, gray shadows stretching long tendrils across the wood floor, and the wind howled like a living thing, making Alex's task of stocking firewood feel like a race against time.

She hefted another log onto the pile by the stove, the dull thud breaking the oppressive silence. Her breath hung in the frigid air, mingling with the faint scent of wood smoke and something faintly floral—Vivienne’s perfume, no doubt. Even now, the woman managed to leave traces of her presence everywhere.

In the corner of her vision, Vivienne paced near the window wearing yet another fancy outfit entirely unsuited to her surroundings, arms crossed tightly over her chest.

“Do you think this storm is ever going to let up?” Vivienne’s voice cut through the room, sharp and exasperated. She cast a glance over her shoulder, her expression caught between irritation and discomfort.

Alex resisted the urge to sigh. “Storms like this can last days. Sometimes longer.” She grabbed another log and shoved it into the stove with a little more force than necessary.

Vivienne let out a groan and threw her hands in the air. “Days? That’s just fantastic. As if this place wasn’t miserable enough already.”

Alex straightened, her back stiff. “You’d prefer being out there, I take it?” She nodded toward the window, where the storm raged in white fury.

Vivienne huffed but didn’t respond, instead returning to her pacing. Alex watched her for a moment, her irritation mounting. The woman couldn’t seem to sit still, couldn’t seem to stop talking. Every complaint, every sigh, grated on Alex’s nerves, yet it was impossible to ignore the undercurrent of vulnerability threading through Vivienne’s words.

“Would it kill you to be useful for once?” Alex finally snapped, unable to keep the frustration from spilling over. “There’s plenty that needs doing if you’re that restless.”

Vivienne froze mid-step and turned, her eyes narrowing. “I’m sorry. Did I ask to be stranded in the middle of nowhere with Miss Mountain Woman of the Year? Forgive me if I’m not exactly thrilled about the accommodations.”

Alex clenched her jaw, her fingers curling into fists at her sides. The audacity of this woman. “Accommodations? This isn’t a five-star resort, princess. It’s survival. And if you’re too wrapped up in your own whining to see that, then maybe you should?”

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The lights flickered once, twice, and then the cabin plunged into darkness.

For a moment, there was only the sound of the storm outside and their uneven breathing. Alex felt the shift in the air like a tangible thing, the weight of the darkness pressing in on them.

Vivienne broke the silence first. “Oh, great. Just what we needed. Can this day get any worse?” Her voice, sharp and accusing, cut through the blackness like a blade.

Alex closed her eyes, willing herself to stay calm. But the tension that had been simmering all day was too much, and Vivienne’s tone was the final spark that lit the fuse.

She spun on her heel, her boots scuffing against the wooden floor as she closed the distance between them. “You want to know what’s worse, Vivienne? You. You are the worst thing about this day.”

Vivienne gasped, the sound more surprised than offended, but Alex didn’t stop. “You’ve done nothing but complain since you got here. You rarely lift a damn finger to help, and you have the nerve to act like this is all some personal affront to you. Well, guess what? You’re not the only one stuck in this situation.”

The words tumbled out before Alex could stop them, her frustration boiling over into anger. She was aware of how close they were, aware of the warmth radiating from Vivienne despite the chill in the room. She was hyperaware of everything about her, from the sharp set of her jaw to the defiant tilt of her chin.

Vivienne's lips parted, but whatever retort she had died unspoken. In the silence that followed, Alex could hear the faint hitch of her breath, could see the flicker of something vulnerable in her eyes.

Damn it. Why did this woman get under her skin like this? Why did she let her?

Alex stepped back abruptly, breaking the tension. "Stay here. I'll check the generator." Her voice was rough, clipped, and she didn't wait for a reply before turning toward the door.

The storm outside howled as she stepped into the icy wind, but it felt easier to face than the storm brewing inside the cabin.

The storm tore at Alex as she wrestled the door shut behind her, biting wind forcing itself into every crevice of her clothes. The generator hunkered a few feet from the cabin, partially buried under a mound of packed snow. Cursing under her breath, Alex yanked on her gloves and stomped through the icy drifts, the cold stinging her face like a reprimand.

She bent low to inspect the generator, her fingers fumbling as she cleared ice from the casing. A quick inspection revealed the problem: fuel lines were frozen. She sighed, muttering a curse into the night. If the storm didn't ease, there'd be no fixing it until morning.

The cabin's faint glow through the window drew her gaze back. She lingered a moment too long, the frigid air sinking into her bones as a far heavier thought pressed into her mind. Vivienne was alone inside—alone and furious, probably pacing the room and muttering about her misfortune.

The idea of going back in felt like stepping toward a fire, one she wasn't sure she wanted to extinguish. But staying outside would accomplish nothing, and if she was

honest with herself, the frost gnawing at her fingertips wasn't the only reason she wanted to head back in.

Alex kicked at the snow, her jaw clenched as she trudged to the cabin.

Inside, the room was dim, lit only by the flickering glow of the woodstove. The warmth hit her like a wall as she stepped in, shoving the door shut behind her. Vivienne sat curled in one corner of the couch, wrapped in one of the blankets Alex had painstakingly retrieved the daybefore. Her dark silhouette stood out against the muted orange light, her features shadowed but unmistakably tense.

"You fixed it?" Vivienne asked, her tone clipped.

"No. It'll have to wait." Alex's reply was as curt as her movements as she tugged off her gloves and stomped the snow from her boots.

Vivienne scoffed. "Of course it does. Why wouldn't it? Just one more thing to make this entire situation more unbearable."

Alex whipped her head around, heat rising in her chest. "You think it's unbearable for you? I've been out there freezing my ass off while you sit in here?—"

"Freezing your ass off? You're the one who chose to live out in the middle of nowhere like some recluse. Some of us actually enjoy civilization!" Vivienne's words were sharp, like daggers meant to hit their mark.

"Civilization?" Alex shot back, her voice rising. "You mean your cushy life where you don't have to lift a finger because someone else does it all for you? God forbid you should have to learn how to survive on your own for once."

Vivienne rose from the couch, the blanket slipping from her shoulders. Her face was



illuminated now, the flicker of the fire painting her features in shifting hues of frustration and...was that desire?

“At least I don’t hide behind a wall of self-righteous solitude,” Vivienne snapped, stepping closer. “You act like you’re above everyone, like you don’t need anyone, but let me tell you something, Alex Carter—you’re just as human as the rest of us.”

Alex froze, her breath catching at the edge of Vivienne’s words. Her fists clenched at her sides, nails digging into her palms as the tension thickened around them like the storm outside.

“Shut up,” Alex said quietly, the words less a demand and more a plea.

“No,” Vivienne countered, her voice trembling with both fury and defiance. “You don’t get to tell me to shut up. You don’t get to?—”

Alex moved before she thought, closing the space between them in two strides. The heat of Vivienne’s body, the fire in her eyes—it all ignited something primal in Alex.

Her hands found Vivienne’s waist, and in the same moment, Vivienne’s fingers curled into the fabric of Alex’s shirt. Their mouths crashed together, teeth and lips clashing in a kiss that was more battle than surrender.

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The sharp intake of Vivienne's breath hit Alex like a jolt of electricity, and she pulled the woman closer, her grip firm and unrelenting. Vivienne didn't resist; if anything, she met Alex's intensity with equal fervor, her nails grazing along Alex's arms as their bodies pressed together.

The world beyond the cabin faded. The storm, the cold, the darkness—it all dissolved under the weight of their connection, as volatile and undeniable as the storm that had brought them together.

Alex pushed Vivienne backward, her movements urgent, until Vivienne's back hit the edge of the couch. She hesitated, just for a moment, her gaze locking onto Vivienne's.

Vivienne's eyes softened, her lips parted as if she might speak, but no words came. Instead, her hands pulled Alex down, the fight in her giving way to something raw and unguarded.

Their breaths mingled, ragged and uneven, as Alex guided Vivienne down onto the couch. The firelight danced over their entwined forms, casting shifting shadows on the walls that seemed to move with them.

Every touch, every kiss, was charged with an intensity that Alex hadn't allowed herself to feel in years. The anger and frustration that had built between them found an outlet here, transforming into something she couldn't deny.

The firelight cast dancing shadows across Vivienne's face as Alex pressed her into the couch, one hand braced beside her head, the other gripping her hip with barely

contained urgency. The anger that had fueled their argument still simmered beneath the surface, transforming into something darker, more primal.

"Is this what you wanted?" Alex's voice was rough, her breath hot against Vivienne's neck. "To push me until I snapped?"

Vivienne's response was a sharp inhale, her body arching up into Alex's touch. The movement sent a jolt of satisfaction through Alex's chest. Even now, Vivienne couldn't admit it, couldn't voice her surrender. But her body betrayed her, every tremor and gasp telling Alex exactly what she needed to know.

Alex's grip tightened, asserting control as she pulled back just enough to meet Vivienne's gaze. In the flickering light, Vivienne's eyes were dark with desire, her usual sharp edges softened by want. The sight sent a surge of possessive heat through Alex's veins.

"You've been trying to get under my skin since you got here," Alex murmured, her free hand sliding up to grasp Vivienne's jaw, holding her still. "Congratulations. You succeeded."

A small sound escaped Vivienne's throat—not quite a whimper, but close enough to make Alex's pulse quicken. The woman beneath her was a far cry from the uptight CEO who'd arrived at her door. This Vivienne was undone, her carefully maintained control fracturing under Alex's touch.

Alex leaned down, her lips brushing against Vivienne's ear. "But sexually," she whispered, feeling Vivienne shiver beneath her, "I'm the one in control."

The declaration hung in the air between them, heavy with promise. Outside, the storm raged on, but inside the cabin, a different kind of tempest was brewing—one that threatened to consume them both.

Alex's hand slid lower, savoring the way Vivienne's breath hitched at her touch. She kept her movements deliberate, measured, even as her own desire threatened to overwhelm her. This wasn't just about physical release anymore; it was about power, about dominance, about finally silencing the storm that had been building between them since the moment they met.

"Tell me to stop," Alex challenged, her voice dark with intent. But they both knew Vivienne wouldn't—couldn't—say those words. Not now, when every fiber of her being was crying out for more.

The fire crackled in the background, its warmth nothing compared to the heat building between them. In this moment, with Vivienne trembling beneath her touch, Alex felt a fierce sort of triumph. She'd finally found a way to render that sharp tongue speechless, to turn those biting remarks into desperate gasps.

And she intended to savor every second of it.

Alex pulled down Vivienne's wool-lined leggings, the fabric peeling away to reveal Vivienne's buttery smooth skin underneath. Alex repositioned Vivienne so she could fit between her legs, and she could feel the heat radiating off the woman. She looked up to look at Vivienne and saw her unravel before Alex had even started.

Alex didn't bother with any slow build-up. She was too frustrated, too heated, and she needed her now. She put her face in between Vivienne's legs and nipped at the soft skin of her inner thighs, replacing them quickly with kisses as she made her way upward.

When she got to the top of her thighs, she deeply inhaled Vivienne's musky scent, letting it cloud her practical sensibilities, and she pressed her face against her silk panties, already damp from excitement. Alex smiled against Vivienne's heat and, keeping her panties on, slipped a finger in between the sides, eliciting a soft moan.

That was all Alex needed, and she tore away the delicate panties and tossed them on the floor. Without missing a beat, Alex licked her folds from the bottom to the top, taking care to press a little harder at her clit before sucking on it.

She was delighted to find Vivienne was already wet, as if she, too, got riled up with their arguments and bickering. Alex didn't spend any time thinking about what that meant for them or their dynamics and instead savored Vivienne's taste. She ran the flat part of her tongue up and down, letting it slip through her folds. She increased the pressure as she continued and reached up under Vivienne's shirt to squeeze her breast, knowing it would undo the woman who got under her skin and frustrated her like nobody else could.

Alex continued, licking around Vivienne's sensitive clit, making Vivienne beg for release, before running her tongue lightly, so very lightly, over the swell of it, spurred on by Vivienne's sharp gasps. Alex roughly grabbed Vivienne's breast in a show of ownership and slowly ran her thumb over her hardened nipple, knowing it was less from the cold than from their shared passion.

Vivienne lay on the couch, pushing against the back of the fabric, and Alex could feel her body tense as waves of pleasure rocked her body. Alex put her other hand on Vivienne's spread leg, pressing down on it hard to make sure she didn't move or squirm. Every time Vivienne made a move to paw at her, Alex pushed down harder, a clear signal that she was in charge and she called the shots.

Alex moved her hand from Vivienne's breast to push two fingers between her folds, angling her fingers upward, never letting up on sucking on her clit. At this, Vivienne moaned loudly and twisted her body on the cushion. Alex, once more, pushed down hard on Vivienne's leg so it was flush against the cushion again.

She spoke against Vivienne's heated skin, her voice coming out in muffles. "I said, don't move."

Vivienne stilled, though Alex could feel her legs shaking with pleasure; Alex allowed it, reveling in the woman's undoing. She slipped in another finger as she picked up the pace, swirling her tongue in large circles against Vivienne.

Alex hooked Vivienne's legs over her broad shoulders, giving her more access to the woman's enchanting pussy. She plunged her tongue deeper, picking up the pace with both her tongue and fingers. She felt Vivienne's thighs clench slightly around her face, and Alex eased the pressure as the wave subsided, only to increase again, bringing Vivienne to the edge once more.

Alex snaked her free arm up Vivienne's side, squeezing her waist, and gripping the side of her ribs, pulling Vivienne's body closer to her mouth. She exhaled hot breaths against Vivienne's pussy as she stilled her tongue but increased the pace of her fingers, plunging them deeper til she found the soft area that made Vivienne lose control.

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“Does this feel good?” Alex said, her voice still muffled.

Vivienne whimpered with pleasure in response.

“I asked you does this feel good?” Alex repeated, gripping Vivienne’s body harder as she leaned forward to stretch Vivienne’s legs that were still hooked over her shoulders.

“Yes,” Vivienne managed to pant out, but just barely.

“That’s what I thought,” Alex said as she lapped Vivienne’s clit with the tip of her tongue and then sucked it, targeting all her attention to Vivienne’s swollen clitoris.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Vivienne moaned, and Alex reached out to grab a pillow on the other couch cushion and put it over Vivienne’s mouth.

“I didn’t tell you you can come yet,” Alex said, still pressing the pillow against her to muffle her moans. Alex wasn’t worried about anyone hearing—she had no neighbors, after all—but she wanted to draw out Vivienne’s pleasure as long as possible while staying in control.

“Alex, please...” Vivienne moaned from under the pillow.

Alex rewarded her with a playful nip on her thigh before going back to draw circles around her clit, her fingers sinking deeper inside Vivienne as they continued to fuck her.

Hot wetness dripped down Alex's fingers down to her wrist, and she removed her fingers from Vivienne to lap the liquid, spurring her on even more. She could barely contain her own excitement, and her own clit pulsed with excitement and desire.

She wet a finger from her left hand and then lowered it to Vivienne's anus. As she pushed it deeply and slowly inside Vivienne's ass, she continued to fuck her pussy with her right hand and she sucked on her clit again, finally dropping the pillow to grab her breast again. She felt Vivienne's whole body begin to shake as her finger pushed into her ass.

"Come for me," she growled against Vivienne's wet heat. "Now."

Alex knew she didn't have to tell her twice; she was already teetering on the edge, desperate to fall over. Alex could feel the orgasmic wave crash over Vivienne as her legs shook with pleasure, still draped over Alex's shoulders, now sliding down.

Alex's own body responded to Vivienne's pleasure, and she felt her own orgasm send her over the edge as she pressed her tongue against Vivienne's clit even harder, trying to soak up as much of her scent and taste as she could.

When the moment ended, the room seemed quieter. The fire crackled softly, its glow casting warm light over them. Vivienne's legs fell off Alex's shoulders as she moved to sit up, breathless and quiet. Alex could sense that Vivienne was avoiding eye contact at all costs as she silently retrieved her still damp panties from the floor.

Alex, still on her knees on the cold wooden floor, stared at the ceiling, her thoughts a whirlwind. She'd crossed a line—again. But as her gaze drifted to Vivienne, watching as she gracefully cleaned herself up wordlessly, Alex couldn't summon the regret she thought she'd feel.

Instead, all she felt was the faint hum of something that felt far more dangerous than



the unrelenting blizzard outside.

7

## VIVIENNE

Morning crept into the cabin, casting pale light across its modest interior. Ice framed the windows in intricate patterns, and the muted glow filtered through the panes, turning the disorganized space into a patchwork of shadows and light. The faint hum of the woodstove filled the quiet, its warmth battling the persistent chill that had seeped into every corner of the cabin.

Vivienne sat cross-legged on the sofa, wrapped in one of Alex's oversized wool blankets. Her gaze followed Alex's movements as she crouched near the sink, tools strewn around her in an unceremonious sprawl. A flashlight lay propped against the counter, illuminating the tangle of pipes beneath it. Steam curled upward from a pot of water Alex had set on the stove, a testament to the creative measures she'd taken to keep the pipes from freezing entirely.

Vivienne's fingers tightened around the blanket. She had never seen someone work with such calm precision. Alex's brow furrowed as she tightened a fitting, her movements deliberate and sure. Every twist of her wrist, every glance at the tools, seemed to have purpose. It was...impressive. Vivienne hated to admit it, but she was beginning to see Alex in a new light.

The same hands that had been rough and demanding last night now moved with a surprising gentleness, coaxing stubborn pipes into cooperation. Vivienne shifted in her seat, unsettled by the thought. She wasn't supposed to be noticing things like this. Alex was supposed to be just an irritant, a fleeting distraction until this nightmare of a snowstorm passed.

And yet, here she was, mesmerized by the curve of Alex's shoulders as she worked, by the way her breath fogged the cold air.

"You're staring," Alex muttered, not looking up.

Vivienne started, heat rushing to her cheeks. "I—no, I'm not," she retorted, a little too quickly.

Alex snorted, her lips quirking in a brief, lopsided smirk. "Sure, princess."

The nickname was still infuriating, but it lacked the usual edge. It sounded almost...endearing, like a playful teasing.

Vivienne pressed her lips together, determined not to rise to the bait. Instead, she forced herself to look around the room. The state of the cabin—the scattered tools, the faint smell of damp wood, the barely contained chaos—grated against her sensibilities. Yet, there was something strangely comforting about it. It felt lived-in, a far cry from the sterile, meticulously curated spaces she was used to.

Her gaze drifted back to Alex. "You're good at this," she said, the compliment feeling awkward in her mouth.

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Alex paused, glancing up at her with raised eyebrows. “What, fixing things?”

Vivienne shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “Yes. I mean, clearly you’ve done this sort of thing before.”

Alex didn’t respond immediately, turning her attention back to the pipe. “You grow up in a place like this, you learn to handle things yourself,” she said simply. “Not much choice.”

There was no judgment in her tone, but the words still hit Vivienne like a subtle rebuke. Of course Alex was self-sufficient. She’d had to be. Vivienne, on the other hand...

Her chest tightened. How useless she must seem in comparison, fumbling to light a fire while Alex rebuilt their temporary world with her bare hands. She swallowed hard, trying to push away the thought of Alex’s rough, calloused hands over her body.

Instead, she focused on the rhythmic scrape of Alex’s wrench, the faint hissing sound as steam escaped the pipe. “What if it doesn’t work?” she asked, her voice quieter now.

Alex shrugged, not looking up. “Then I’ll figure something else out.”

Vivienne blinked. The answer was so matter-of-fact, so confident, it was almost infuriating. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Alex echoed. She set the wrench down and wiped her hands on a rag, finally meeting Vivienne’s eyes. “Survival isn’t about getting it perfect. It’s about doing what you can with what you’ve got.”

The words stuck in Vivienne’s mind like a burr. Survival. It was such a foreign concept to her, so far removed from the privileged, insulated life she’d built. Yet here, in this cramped cabin with Alex’s steady hands and pragmatic outlook, it felt startlingly real.

“I... I can help,” she said.

Alex blinked, clearly taken aback. “Help?”

“Yes. I mean, I can hold something or...I don’t know, pass you tools or something.” Vivienne’s cheeks burned, but she refused to back down.

For a moment, Alex just looked at her, as if trying to gauge her sincerity. Then she gave a small, begrudging nod. “Fine. Hold the flashlight.”

Vivienne scrambled off the sofa, clutching the flashlight as though it were a lifeline. She crouched awkwardly beside Alex, the coldness of the wooden floor seeping through her leggings.

“Point it here,” Alex instructed, gesturing to a section of the pipe.

Vivienne adjusted the beam of light, her fingers brushing against Alex’s as she handed over a screwdriver. Alex didn’t flinch, didn’t pull away, and for some reason, that small detail made Vivienne’s chest ache.

They worked in silence, save for Alex’s occasional instructions. The tension that had defined their earlier interactions seemed to ease, replaced by a tentative sense of

cooperation.

When Alex finally straightened, wiping her hands on her jeans, Vivienne felt an unexpected swell of pride. “That should hold,” Alex said, nodding at the now-secured pipe.

Vivienne glanced at her, a small, tentative smile tugging at her lips. “See? I’m not completely useless,” she said, more to herself than to Alex.

Alex’s mouth twitched, her expression softening just enough to make Vivienne’s breath catch. “Not completely,” she said, her tone almost warm.

In that moment, the storm outside felt just a little less cold.

The storm had eased, its once-howling winds now little more than a whisper that swept against the cabin walls. The stillness left behind felt heavier somehow, like the world itself had stopped to catch its breath. Inside, the fire cast flickering shadows that danced across the walls, painting the room in hues of amber and gold. The air was warmer near the stove where Vivienne and Alex sat, a small table between them.

Steam curled upward from their mugs—Alex’s filled with tea, Vivienne’s with a generous splash of whiskey she’d insisted was for the chill. It was quiet, save for the occasional crackle of the fire and the clink of ceramic against wood.

Vivienne studied Alex from across the table. Her posture was loose but guarded, a faint line between her brows betraying her ever-present vigilance. In the shifting light, Alex seemed less imposing, her sharp edges softened by the glow. For once, she didn’t look like the woman who had spent the day barking orders and repairing pipes. She looked...human.

Vivienne wrapped her hands around her mug, savoring the warmth against her

fingers. The silence between them wasn't uncomfortable, exactly, but it felt fragile, as though one wrong word could send them retreating to their respective corners. Still, the quiet pressed on her, urging her to speak.

"Have you always lived out here?" she asked.

Alex glanced up, her eyes briefly narrowing in suspicion, but something in Vivienne's expression must have disarmed her. She leaned back in her chair, her mug cradled loosely in one hand.

"Not always," she said after a moment. "Grew up in a town not too far from here, spent some time elsewhere, then I came back."

Vivienne tilted her head. "Elsewhere? That's awfully vague."

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Alex smirked faintly. “It’s all you’re getting for now.”

The tease caught Vivienne off guard, and she felt a smile tug at her lips despite herself. “Fair enough,” she said, taking a sip from her mug.

The quiet stretched again, but it didn’t feel as heavy this time. Vivienne traced the rim of her cup with her finger, gathering her thoughts. She’d been drawn to Alex’s rare moment of lightness, but she couldn’t ignore the weight she’d carried into this room with her.

“I’ve always been bad at this,” she said suddenly, her words breaking the calm like ripples in still water.

Alex’s brow furrowed. “At what?”

Vivienne hesitated, her eyes fixed on the amber liquid in her mug. “At...letting people in. At being vulnerable.” She laughed softly, the sound tinged with self-deprecation. “I guess it’s easier to keep people at arm’s length when you know they’re just going to leave anyway.”

Alex didn’t respond immediately. When Vivienne looked up, she found those warm brown eyes studying her, unflinching but not unkind.

“People leave,” Alex said finally. “That’s just how it is. But that doesn’t mean you stop trying.”

The simplicity of the statement hit Vivienne harder than she expected. She looked

away, her grip tightening on the mug. “I don’t know,” she murmured. “Trying just feels exhausting.”

Alex made a low sound in her throat, something between agreement and acknowledgment. “It is,” she said. “But it’s worth it. Sometimes.”

Vivienne glanced at her, caught by the flicker of something raw in Alex’s expression. “You’ve been hurt before,” she said, the words more an observation than a question.

Alex’s lips twitched, but it wasn’t quite a smile. “Haven’t we all?” she said lightly, but there was no mistaking the pain beneath the deflection.

Vivienne leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. “You’re not as tough as you pretend to be, you know,” she said, her tone gentle but teasing.

Alex raised an eyebrow. “And you’re not as helpless as you act.”

Vivienne laughed, the sound warm and unguarded. “Touché.”

The space between them seemed smaller now, the air charged with something that felt both fragile and electric. Vivienne hesitated, the words on her tongue feeling heavier than she expected.

“I had a fiancée once,” she said finally. “It didn’t work out. She didn’t like the person I was becoming.”

Alex’s gaze didn’t waver. “And who were you becoming?”

Vivienne smiled faintly, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “Someone who wanted more than what she could give.” She shook her head, as though trying to dispel the memory. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”



Alex leaned forward, her elbows resting on her knees. “Because you need to,” she said simply.

Vivienne’s chest tightened. How did Alex do that? Strip everything down to its bare truth without even trying?

The fire crackled, filling the silence that followed. Vivienne’s gaze drifted to the sofa, its cushions rumped from Alex’s restless nights. She set her mug down, the faint clink drawing Alex’s attention.

“You know,” Vivienne said, her tone casual but her heart hammering in her chest, “that sofa looks like it’s about as comfortable as a bed of rocks.”

Alex tilted her head, a shadow flickering in her eyes. “It’s fine.”

Vivienne smiled, slow and deliberate. “Come on, Alex. There’s plenty of room in the bed. I promise I won’t bite.” She paused, her smile turning sly. “Unless you ask nicely.”

Alex blinked, clearly caught off guard, and for the first time, Vivienne saw her flush. “I’m fine,” Alex said gruffly, her gaze dropping to her mug.

Vivienne leaned back, crossing her arms. “Suit yourself. But if you wake up tomorrow with a crick in your neck, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Alex muttered something under her breath, but Vivienne didn’t press. She picked up her mug again, letting the silence settle over them once more.

The cabin had settled into an eerie quiet, the kind that followed a storm’s fury. Outside, the wind had died, leaving only the occasional groan of the trees as they shifted. Inside, the fire cast a steady, golden glow across the room, its warmth licking

at the edges of the bed where Vivienne lay waiting.

The quilt was heavy over her legs, a cocoon of softness that contrasted the sharp edges of her nerves. Her heart beat fast, the rhythm drumming against her ribs as she watched Alex hesitate near the foot of the bed.

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Alex stood there, her broad shoulders tense, one hand gripping the back of her neck. Her hesitation was palpable, an almost physical barrier in the charged air. The firelight played tricks, highlighting the hard lines of her jaw and the slight twitch in her fingers.

Vivienne shifted slightly, propping herself up on one elbow. Her voice, when she spoke, was soft, coaxing. "It's just a bed, Alex. Not a declaration of war."

Alex glanced at her, the faintest quirk of her lips betraying a reluctant amusement. "Feels like one."

Vivienne smiled, letting her fingers trail across the edge of the quilt. "You think too much." Her tone held a playful lilt, but the look in her eyes was unguarded. "Come here."

Alex didn't move right away, her gaze dropping to the floor. For a moment, Vivienne thought she might walk away and go back to the couch. But then Alex exhaled, a slow, deliberate sound, and crossed the space between them in two long strides.

She paused at the edge of the bed, her weight shifting from one foot to the other. "I don't..." Alex started, but her voice trailed off, the words faltering.

Vivienne reached for her hand, her fingers brushing against Alex's calloused palm. "You don't have to explain," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Just be here."

That seemed to break something in Alex. She sat down slowly, the mattress dipping

under her weight. Her shoulders were still taut, her body coiled with a tension Vivienne could feel from inches away.

Vivienne moved closer, her hand sliding up Alex's arm. Her touch was light, almost hesitant, as though afraid to spook her. "It's okay," she murmured, her lips curving into a faint smile. "I don't bite, remember?"

Alex huffed a laugh, the sound low and almost reluctant. "I remember," she said, her voice rough around the edges.

The air between them thickened, the quiet amplifying every shift, every breath. Vivienne's hand moved to Alex's cheek, caressing circles on her smooth skin. Alex turned slightly into the touch, her eyes closing for just a moment before they met Vivienne's.

"Why are you doing this?" Alex asked, her voice barely audible.

Vivienne's heart clenched at the vulnerability in the question, the unspoken weight behind it. "Because I want to," she said simply, her hand falling to Alex's chest. She could feel the steady thrum of her heartbeat beneath her palm, a grounding rhythm that steadied her own nerves.

When Alex finally leaned in, it was tentative, as though she still wasn't sure this was allowed. Vivienne met her halfway, her lips brushing softly against Alex's. The kiss was gentle at first, exploratory, but it deepened quickly, the heat between them sparking to life like the fire that warmed the room.

Vivienne shifted, pulling Alex down onto the bed with her. The quilt tangled around them as their bodies pressed together, the warmth of Alex's skin seeping into her own. There was an urgency to Alex's movements, a different type of hunger that Vivienne hadn't seen before but welcomed all the same.

She tugged at the hem of Alex's shirt, her fingers brushing against the bare skin beneath. Alex shuddered under her touch, her breath hitching as Vivienne's hands explored the planes of her back.

"You're so tense," Vivienne murmured against Alex's lips, her tone teasing.

"Hard to relax," Alex muttered, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Vivienne's laugh was soft, a low, warm sound that filled the space between them. "Let me help with that," she said, her voice tinged with both playfulness and promise. "Stay with me tonight. Not because it's practical or because the couch is uncomfortable, but because you want to."

For a long moment, Alex just looked at her, searching her face for something. Whatever she found there must have convinced her, because the tension in her shoulders finally eased.

"I want to," Alex admitted, the words carrying the weight of confession.

Vivienne lifted Alex's shirt above her head and pulled it off then slid out of her nightgown, discarding the garments on the floor next to them. She pulled her down to lay next to her, acutely aware of all the points their skin touched.

They lay like that in silence, Vivienne trying to match her breathing with Alex's. Vivienne rested her head on Alex's chest, the rise and fall of her breathing lulling her into a sense of peace she hadn't felt in... well, longer than she could remember.

Alex's hand moved to her back, her fingers drawing slow, aimless patterns there. "You okay?" she asked, her voice rough but tender.

Vivienne smiled, her eyes drifting closed. "More than okay," she murmured.

The rhythmic sound of Alex's heartbeat filled her ears, grounding her in the moment, and the shared intimacy—different from what they had experienced together so far—felt like a welcome change. For the first time, the cabin didn't feel quite so cold, and the storm outside seemed a distant memory. Whatever lay beyond this night, Vivienne found she wasn't afraid to face it. Not anymore.

8

ALEX

The first thing Alex noticed was the warmth. It radiated through the heavy quilt, seeped into her limbs, and pooled in her chest. For a moment, she didn't move, caught in the hazy pull of dawn where sleep and wakefulness blended into one. The pale light filtering through the windows cast a golden glow over the cabin, softening the edges of their rough surroundings.

Then she realized the warmth had a shape. Her arm rested over Vivienne's waist, the curve of her body tucked neatly against Alex's own. A strand of long brown hair tickled her nose.

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Alex stiffened. Her first instinct was to retreat, but the press of Vivienne's back against her chest rooted her in place. It wasn't just the fear of waking her. It was the unexpected comfort of the moment—a feeling so foreign she didn't know how to dismantle it.

Her gaze flicked to the hearth. The fire had burned low, embers glowing faintly beneath a layer of ash. The scent of pine and smoke mingled with Vivienne's natural scent, a strange but not unwelcome blend of wild and refined. She let out a slow breath, watching it fog in the cold air above the quilt.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

The thought echoed in her mind, heavy and insistent. Alex had promised herself to keep her distance, to treat Vivienne as nothing more than a temporary presence—a charge to protect until the storm passed. But here she was, wrapped around her like an anchor, her body betraying a closeness she'd sworn to avoid.

Her hand twitched, and she carefully, carefully shifted her arm. Vivienne stirred slightly, her breathing hitching before settling back into a steady rhythm. Alex froze again, her heart thudding against her ribs.

What are you doing?

Her jaw clenched as she fought to rationalize the situation. It was the cold, she told herself. Sharing body heat was survival, not intimacy. It didn't mean anything. But the excuse rang hollow in her mind, unable to stand against the quiet pull of her growing attachment.

Her gaze drifted to Vivienne's face. In sleep, her features were softer, stripped of the sharp angles and guarded expressions that usually defined her. Her lashes rested against her cheeks, a faint crease marking the corner of her mouth as if caught mid-thought, even now.

Alex frowned. There was something unsettling about seeing Vivienne like this—unguarded and vulnerable. It blurred the lines Alex had drawn between them, made her wonder how much of the glamor was armor rather than artifice.

Her chest tightened, the dissonance between what she thought she knew about Vivienne and the woman lying in her arms growing louder. How much of this was real? How much of it was her own loneliness, twisting circumstance into something more?

She rolled onto her back, creating a few inches of space between them. The cool air rushed in where Vivienne's warmth had been, but Alex ignored the shiver it sent through her. Distance was safer.

Safer for who?

The question hung unanswered in her mind, sharp and unrelenting. Alex closed her eyes, willing it away, but the memories came anyway—past relationships fractured by her inability to let anyone in. It was easier to push people away than to let them see the raw parts of her life.

But Vivienne was different. She had stumbled into Alex's world, uninvited and unprepared, and somehow managed to hold her ground. That should have annoyed her. Instead, it unnerved her in a way that felt too much like admiration.

The quilt shifted beside her, pulling her back to the present. She opened her eyes to find Vivienne stirring, her movements sluggish and half-aware.



“Mmm,” Vivienne murmured, her voicethick with sleep. She turned toward Alex, blinking slowly as her gaze focused. “Morning.”

Alex quickly averted her eyes, hoping the faint blush creeping up her neck wasn’t visible in the dim light. “Morning.”

Vivienne stretched beneath the covers, her lips curving into a small, sleepy smile. “Do you always look this grumpy when you wake up?”

Alex scoffed, trying to conceal a small smile. “Only when someone hogs the blanket.”

“Me? Hog the blanket?” Vivienne arched a brow, the teasing lilt in her voice cutting through the quiet. “Pretty sure you were the one clinging to me.”

Alex’s ears burned, and she swung her legs over the side of the bed, planting her feet on the cold floor. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

Vivienne chuckled, the sound warm and soft, settling between them like a truce.

For a moment, Alex hesitated, glancing back over her shoulder. Vivienne’s gaze met hers, something unspoken passing between them. It wasn’t tension exactly—more like a fragile understanding, teetering on the edge of something they both recognized but which neither of them dared to say aloud.

“I’ll get the fire going again,” Alex said finally, her voice low.

Vivienne nodded, her smile fading. “Okay.”

As Alex knelt by the hearth, coaxing the embers back to life, she couldn’t shake the feeling that the atmosphere in the room had shifted. It wasn’t just the warmth

returning to the cabin. It was something deeper, more intimate—something she wasn't sure she was ready to face.

The storm outside had quieted, its ferocity reduced to a faint whisper against the cabin walls. Inside, the space felt warmer, not just from the fire crackling in the hearth but from the shared purpose in the tiny kitchen.

Alex stood at the counter, sleeves rolled up, hands buried in dough as she kneaded with practiced ease. The weathered apron tied around her waist was streaked with flour, a testament to years of use. Across from her, Vivienne clutched a knife, poised over a cutting board with a mix of determination and trepidation.

"You're holding it wrong," Alex said without looking up.

Vivienne glanced up, her brows knitting. "I'm holding it exactly how you showed me."

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Alex wiped her hands on the apron and walked around the counter. Standing behind Vivienne, she reached around to adjust her grip on the knife. The proximity was unavoidable, and Alex felt a flicker of warmth that had nothing to do with the stove.

"Like this," she murmured, guiding Vivienne's hand into position.

Vivienne stilled, her breath catching for the briefest moment. Then she nodded, her voice soft. "Got it."

Satisfied, Alex stepped back, reclaiming her place by the dough. She began to knead again, stealing occasional glances as Vivienne awkwardly sliced a carrot. The cuts were uneven, but there was a quiet determination in the way she worked, her jaw set with concentration.

"You're doing fine," Alex offered, surprising even herself with the gentle encouragement.

Vivienne's lips quirked in a small, appreciative smile. "High praise coming from you."

Alex snorted. "Don't let it go to your head."

The banter felt easy, almost natural, as they settled into a rhythm. Vivienne continued her slow progress with the vegetables, while Alex worked the dough until it was smooth and pliable. She set it aside to rise, dusting her hands clean as she leaned against the counter to watch Vivienne's progress.

Alex chuckled, shaking her head. “You’re trying. That counts for something.”

Vivienne set the knife down and turned to face Alex, leaning against the counter. “We didn’t exactly do a lot of cooking in my family. Everything was catered, including on Christmas. Perfectly plated, perfectly timed—no mess, no effort.”

“That doesn’t sound very festive.”

Vivienne shrugged, a shadow crossing her features. “It wasn’t. Not really. Christmas was more of a performance than a celebration. My mother would plan every detail months in advance. Every table setting, every course, every ornament.” She paused, her gaze distant. “It looked like something out of a magazine. It was beautiful, decadent, but it always felt hollow.”

Alex studied her, noting the tightness in Vivienne’s posture, the way her fingers gripped the edge of the counter. It was the first time Vivienne had shared something so personal, and Alex felt an unexpected ache in her chest.

“That sounds exhausting, living up to those expectations,” Alex said quietly.

Vivienne nodded, her smile faint and wistful. “It was. I used to wish we could just have one messy, chaotic Christmas, you know? Something real.”

Alex hesitated before replying, the vulnerability in Vivienne’s words tugging at something deep inside her. “My parents were teachers, so my older brother and I didn’t have much when we were growing up,” she began, her voice steady but low. “Christmas was...simple. Homemade decorations, handmade gifts, whatever food we could scrape together, and the same battered string of lights my parents had since before I was born. But it felt like Christmas, you know? Cozy. Warm.”

Vivienne’s gaze softened, her head tilting slightly as she listened. “That sounds

wonderful.”

Alex shrugged, uncomfortable with the praise. “It was enough. They made it enough.”

They fell into a brief silence, the only sounds the crackle of the fire and the quiet scrape of Vivienne’s knife against the cutting board. Alex turned back to her work, shaping the dough into rolls with methodical precision.

“Do you still do any of those things?” Vivienne asked after a while.

Alex paused, her hands stilling. “Not really. My mom passed away from breast cancer, and after that, I didn’t see much point. Christmas just became another day for us.”

“I’m so sorry,” Vivienne said, looking up at Alex.

Alex shifted, feeling the heat of Vivienne’s eyes, and stared at the dough to avoid eye contact. “It was a long time ago.”

Silence hung in the air, then Vivienne spoke. “Maybe it doesn’t have to be. Just another day, I mean.”

The words hung between them, unspoken possibilities blooming in the quiet. Alex didn’t respond, unsure how to process the strange mixture of hope and hesitation that Vivienne’s suggestion stirred in her.

Instead, she reached for the pan and began placing the rolls onto it in neat rows. Vivienne set the knife down, wiping her hands on a towel before stepping closer.

“Need help?” she asked.

Alex raised an eyebrow, a small smirk tugging at her lips. “You sure you want to risk it? Dough isn’t as forgiving as carrots.”

Vivienne rolled her eyes, but her smile was warm. “You might be surprised what I can handle.”

Their fingers brushed as Vivienne reached for a piece of dough, and Alex felt her breath catch in her throat. She busied herself with the rolls, trying to ignore the way her pulse quickened at the brief contact.

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As they worked together, the cabin filled with the scent of rising dough and freshly chopped herbs. The storm outside was a distant memory, its fury replaced by the quiet rhythm of their shared tasks.

Vivienne's laugh broke the silence, soft and genuine. Alex glanced at her, catching the way her eyes lit up as she struggled to shape the dough into something resembling a roll. It was lopsided and uneven, but the pride on Vivienne's face was infectious.

Alex found herself laughing, too, the sound surprising in its ease.

"You're terrible at this," she teased.

Vivienne grinned, holding up her misshapen creation. "Maybe. But I'm getting better."

Alex shook her head, the warmth in her chest spreading. For the first time in years, Christmas didn't feel like just another day.

Outside, snowflakes drifted lazily. Inside, the cabin was aglow with candlelight, the modest meal spread across the small table giving the space a sense of quiet celebration. The fire crackled in the hearth, its warm glow mingling with the golden flicker of the candles, casting soft shadows on the walls.

Alex sat back in her chair, her fingers wrapped around a mug of tea that had long since cooled. Across from her, Vivienne sipped from her own cup, her cheeks flushed—not from the fire's heat, Alex suspected, but from the wine they'd shared earlier while waiting for the rolls to bake.

The table was a testament to their efforts, scattered with the fruits of their collaboration: misshapen rolls, roasted vegetables, and a small dish of hastily improvised gravy. It wasn't much, but it felt enough, and for the first time in years, Alex felt the faintest glimmer of holiday peace.

"You really were terrible at chopping those carrots," Alex playfully teased, breaking the silence.

Vivienne laughed, a soft, musical sound that Alex noticed started to feel like it belonged. "I think you mean artistic. Imperfection is very in right now."

Alex smirked, setting her mug down. "If that's what you're telling yourself."

Vivienne leaned her elbow on the table, resting her chin on her hand as she studied Alex. "You know, you're not as intimidating as you pretend to be."

Alex raised an eyebrow, leaning back in her chair. "Oh? And what makes you think I'm pretending?"

Vivienne's lips curved into a sly smile. "Well, for one, you've spent the entire evening letting me ramble on about my miserable childhood Christmases while you patiently refilled my wine glass. That's not exactly the behavior of a hardened misanthrope."

Alex felt her face warm under Vivienne's gaze and shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not a misanthrope. I just don't have much patience for—" She hesitated, searching for the right words. "Let's just say I'm not usually one for company."

Vivienne tilted her head, her smile softening. "And yet, here we are."

Alex met her eyes and found herself holding Vivienne's gaze longer than she intended. There was something disarming in the way Vivienne looked at her, as if she



could see past every carefully constructed wall Alex had built.

Clearing her throat, Alex reached for her mug again. “What about before the storm?” she asked, her voice low. “What were you really doing out here?”

Vivienne looked down at her hands, her fingers tracing the rim of her cup. She didn’t say anything for a few minutes, and Alex gave her time to process her thoughts.

Finally, she said, “Trying to figure out who I am, I suppose.”

Alex frowned. “You don’t know?”

Vivienne’s laugh was short and self-deprecating. “You’d think I would by now. But it’s hard to see yourself clearly when you’ve spent your whole life being told who you’re supposed to be.”

Alex leaned forward, resting her forearms on the table. “Who’s been telling you?”

Vivienne shrugged, her movements small and tense. “My mother. My colleagues. The whole damn world, it feels like.” She glanced up, meeting Alex’s gaze. “You’re lucky, you know? You don’t care what anyone thinks of you.”

Alex’s mouth twisted into a wry smile. “That’s not luck. That’s exhaustion.”

Vivienne blinked, her head cocked to the side in question. “What do you mean?”

Alex hesitated, then sighed. “When you’ve spent enough time being told you’re not enough—by people, by life—it just...wears you down. After a while, you stop trying to prove them wrong.”

The words hung in the air, heavier than Alex intended. Vivienne’s expression shifted,

the teasing glimmer in her eyes replaced by something softer, more understanding.

“That must have been lonely,” Vivienne said quietly.

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Alex shrugged. “Sometimes. But I got used to it.”

Vivienne reached across the table, her fingers brushing Alex’s wrist. The touch was light, tentative, but it sent a warmth through Alex that soothed her.

“You shouldn’t have had to,” Vivienne said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Alex looked down at Vivienne’s hand, at the way her fingers rested so delicately against her skin. It would have been so easy to pull away, to retreat behind the safety of her walls. But she didn’t.

Instead, she surprised herself by speaking. “My mom used to say that Christmas was a time for making peace—with others, with yourself. I haven’t done much of that in a long time.”

Vivienne’s smile was faint but genuine. “Maybe you’ve started tonight.”

Alex glanced up, meeting Vivienne’s eyes again. The flickering light made them shimmer, their usual sharpness softened into something that looked almost like genuine care.

The silence stretched between them, not awkward but weighted with unspoken affection. Alex could feel the shift, the moment tipping into something deeper, something she wasn’t sure she was ready for but didn’t want to stop.

“Thank you,” Vivienne said suddenly, her voice breaking the quiet.

Alex frowned, her brow furrowing. “For what?”

“For letting me be here. For...this,” Vivienne said, gesturing vaguely at the table, the fire, the closeness between them.

Alex shook her head. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“Yes, I do,” Vivienne insisted, her voice firm but kind. “You’ve given me something I didn’t even realize I needed.”

Alex didn’t know how to respond, so she didn’t. Instead, she stood and began gathering the plates, using the excuse of tidying to process the knot of emotions Vivienne’s words had stirred.

When she turned back, Vivienne was still watching her, her expression unreadable. Alex felt her chest tighten, the weight of the moment pressing against her ribs.

For tonight, at least, she decided to let it in.

9

## VIVIENNE

Vivienne stretched her legs toward the fire, the quilt draped over her lap radiating the heat of their shared space. She inhaled deeply. The air smelled of wood smoke and pine, scents she now intimately associated with Alex, and she noticed she didn’t recoil from them anymore.

A pine branch rested on the mantel, its green needles kissed by melted snow. Beneath it, a cluster of candles flickered in uneven rhythm, their soft glow transforming the modest room into something cozy and almost magical.

Vivienne's gaze drifted toward Alex, who was setting another two mismatched mugs of tea on the table. The woman moved with quiet purpose, her movements efficient yet unhurried. Even now, she was mindful of every detail, stoking the fire to keep the cabin warm, brushing stray flour off the counter, making sure Vivienne didn't go without.

It wasn't the Christmas Vivienne had imagined for herself—or even one she would've considered celebrating—but for the first time in years, it felt like the day carried meaning. No glittering lights or towering trees. No carefully curated social media posts of a perfect holiday. Just this: warmth, care, and the quiet kind of connection she'd forgotten to miss.

Alex turned, catching Vivienne's gaze. "Tea's ready."

Vivienne smiled, feeling a flicker of nervous energy at how her heart seemed to respond. "Thank you." She rose to join Alex at the table.

"I found your medals, by the way. Winter Olympics 2006 Turin. 2010 Vancouver. 2014 Sochi. 9 gold medals. 2 silver. Did you forget to mention your famous athlete history?"

"Must have slipped my mind," Alex said quietly.

"What was your sport?"

"Snowboarding," Alex said as she set the table.

"Of course," Vivienne said. "And, to be the best in the world? I'm not surprised at your dedication and skill. I don't know much about sports but this is a LOT of Olympic medals. You must have been the golden girl of the US team. You must have been famous."

Vivienne wondered for a moment as she looked at Alex if she vaguely remembered her face and her name from the champion she had been. Vivienne might not have followed sports, but she wasn't immune to the news and social media.

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“Something like that,” Alex said. “It wasn’t for me.”

“So that is why you ran away to the mountains?”

“Not quite that simple. I had a girlfriend- Sasha Rogers- you might know that name.”

Vivienne raised her eyebrows. That name, she did know. SashaRogers- elegant, beautiful, immaculately dressed, was on every reality show there was.

“Sasha and I met when she was a young Skier on the US team. She was obsessed with fame, even then. She was well into social media and wanted to make us the golden couple. I couldn’t do it. Being recognized and photographed everywhere I go isn’t for me. And, she changed. Fame changed her. And one day, I realized I didn’t like her anymore. I didn’t like the life she had made for us.”

Vivienne nodded. Alex’s secrets were unravelling bit by bit.

The tea was strong and slightly bitter, but Vivienne savored its warmth as it traveled through her. The silence between them wasn’t awkward; it was full and alive with a thousand unspoken things. Her fingers traced the rim of the mug absently as her thoughts wandered.

“How’d you manage this?” she asked, gesturing to the pine bough on the mantel.

Alex shrugged, a hint of a smile tugging at her lips. "Found it during one of my firewood runs. Thought it might help us feel a little less stranded, I guess."

Vivienne's heart swelled with affection. "It's perfect."

Alex ducked her head, fiddling with the edge of the table, and Vivienne realized just how rare that bashful look was on her. She wanted to see more of it.

The table between them now held something else—two small packages, neither wrapped in the traditional sense but unmistakably gifts. Vivienne hesitated, her fingers brushing the newspaper-wrapped bundle she'd been hiding since this morning.

"I, uh...made you something," she said, her voice tentative. She placed the folded package on the table, pushing it gently toward Alex.

Alex raised a brow, clearly caught off guard. "You made me something?"

Vivienne nodded, feeling her cheeks flush. "Don't get your hopes up too high. It's, well, you'll see."

Alex peeled back the folded edge of the paper, her eyes widening as the delicate shape of an origami flower emerged. The folds were precise, though not perfect—a testament to Vivienne's effort rather than any real skill.

"An origami flower," Alex said, her voice soft with something like wonder.

"It's silly, I know," Vivienne rushed, suddenly embarrassed. "I found an old piece of paper in one of the books, and I just?—"

"It's not silly," Alex interrupted, her fingers tracing the edge of the flower with care. She looked up, and there was something unguarded in her expression that made Vivienne's breath catch. "Thank you."



Vivienne swallowed hard, brushing hair back from her face. "Your turn," she said, nodding toward the small object in Alex's hand.

Alex chuckled, holding out what appeared to be a piece of carved wood. The shape was rough but unmistakable: a small bird in flight, its wings spread wide. "It's not much. Just something I carved when I couldn't sleep."

Vivienne took the bird, her fingertips running over the grain of the wood. It was simple, yes, but also beautiful in its imperfection. She imagined Alex working on it by firelight, her hands shaping something so delicate from a piece of kindling.

"It's perfect," Vivienne whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "Thank you."

Their eyes met, and for a moment, the weight of the storm, the uncertainty of what lay beyond this cabin, all of it melted away. In its place was something fragile, a connection that neither had expected but couldn't deny.

Vivienne smiled, feeling warmth spread through her chest. "Merry Christmas, Alex."

Alex's lips curved in that rare, breathtaking smile. "Merry Christmas, Vivi."

Vivienne's eyes sparkled, and she smiled at the nickname, something special only Alex called her. They stayed like that in the moment, the glow of the candles and the quiet of the storm wrapping around them like a promise.

As the night wore on, the fire crackled softly, its light gilding the simple pine bough draped over the mantel. The storm outside had gentled into a low, sporadic whisper, as if even winter was reluctant to disturb the quiet warmth of the cabin. The table was set once more, the remains of their earlier teamwork now transformed into a modest but inviting dinner: golden slices of roasted potato, a small portion of pan-seared trout that Alex had in her freezer, and a shared mug of spiced cider.

Vivienne smoothed her napkin over her lap, acutely aware of Alex's presence across from her. They ate in companionable silence at first, the glow of the candles casting flickering shadows over their faces. The simplicity of it all—the shared meal, the pine-scented air, the hush of the snow outside—felt oddly sacred.

“So,” Vivienne began, breaking the quiet. She felt the weight of Alex's gaze, steady and patient. “Do you ever think about what happens after this?”

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Alex paused abruptly, her fork suspended mid-air before she set it down. Her shoulders tensed almost imperceptibly, a ripple of hesitation moving through her. “After what?” she asked, though her voice suggested she already knew the answer.

Vivienne gestured vaguely toward the window. “After the storm. After we go back to...wherever it is we came from.”

Alex leaned back in her chair, her expression suddenly guarded. The shadows carved sharper angles into her face, softening only at the edges. “I haven’t thought that far ahead,” she admitted. “I guess I never do.”

Vivienne tilted her head, studying her. “That surprises me.”

Alex huffed a short, dry laugh. “Why?”

“You’re so methodical. Practical. I assumed you’d have a plan for everything.” She offered a small, teasing smile, hoping to lighten the tension. “You probably even had a plan for how to survive if I’d been useless.”

Alex’s lips twitched, not quite forming into a smile. “Not useless,” she said softly, her gaze dropping to her plate. “Just...untested.”

Vivienne felt a strange pang at the word, both a recognition of its truth and a silent rejection of it. She let the moment stretch, their quiet breaths filling the space between them, before daring to press further.

“And now?” she asked. Her voice was gentler now, almost hesitant. “Do you still

think of me that way? Untested.”

Alex’s eyes flicked up to meethers, their depths unreadable. For a moment, it seemed she might deflect again, but then she exhaled, the weight of her thoughts spilling into the space between them.

“No,” she said. Her voice was low, almost a whisper, but firm. “I don’t.”

Vivienne felt her chest tighten, not with anxiety but with a tender ache. She leaned forward slightly, resting her elbows on the table.

“Can I ask you something else?” she said.

Alex gave a small nod, her expression open but wary.

“What do you want for yourself?” Vivienne’s words were soft, almost tentative. “Not just what you think you’re supposed to do or what you need to get by. But what you really want.”

Alex seemed taken aback, her brow furrowing as she stared down at her plate. She rubbed the back of her neck and let out a slow breath.

“I don’t know,” she said eventually. Her tone wasn’t dismissive; it was honest, tinged with the faintest thread of regret. “I’ve spent so long just...getting through. Surviving. Wanting something more feels”—she paused, searching for the right word—“risky.”

Vivienne nodded, understanding all too well. She wrapped her hands around her mug of cider, letting its warmth seep into her palms as she weighed her next words carefully.

“Risky how?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Alex looked up, her eyes steady in a way that made Vivienne’s breath hitch. “Because if you let yourself want something,” Alex said slowly, “you have to be ready to lose it.”

The honesty of the statement, the quiet resignation behind it, struck something deep in Vivienne. She looked away for a moment, blinking against the sudden hot sting of tears. When she turned back, her voice was steadier, though her heart was anything but.

“I know what you mean,” she said. “For a long time, I didn’t let myself want much either. I thought if I could just be perfect, if I could keep everything under control, then maybe it wouldn’t hurt so much when I lost it.”

Alex’s gaze softened, a flicker of understanding passing between them. “Did it work?” she asked quietly.

Vivienne shook her head, a wry smile tugging at her lips. “Not even a little.”

They both laughed, the sound low and intimate in the small space. For the first time that evening, the weight of their fears seemed to lift, leaving only the quiet warmth of their shared presence.

“Maybe it’s not about avoiding the hurt,” Alex said after a moment, her voice thoughtful. “Maybe it’s about finding something worth the risk.” Alex looked up at her, catching her eyes. “Or someone.”

Vivienne looked at her, studying her face, the flickering candlelight catching in her eyes. The words settled in her chest like a seed, fragile but full of possibility.

“Maybe,” she said softly. And for the first time in as long as she could remember, she allowed herself to hope.

The fire burned low, its embers casting a dim orange glow over the room. Outside, the storm had calmed to a gentle snowfall, the howling wind now a distant memory. The cabin was quiet, save for the crackle of the logs and the soft creak of the wooden floor as Alex stepped hesitantly toward the bed.

Vivienne sat on the edge of the mattress, the quilt bunched at her side. She’d been waiting, watching Alex with a mixture of anticipation and unease. She replayed their earlier conversation, looking for clues. She could see it in Alex’s posture that she, too, was deep in thought, the slight tension in her shoulders, the way her hands lingered by her sides as though unsure where they belonged.

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“Alex,” Vivienne said softly, breaking the silence. Her voice carried no demand, only an invitation. She reached out, her hand hovering in the space between them, waiting.

Alex’s eyes flicked to hers, the firelight reflecting in their depths. She hesitated for a moment longer, then stepped forward, taking Vivienne’s hand. Alex’s fingers were rough but warm, their touch grounding.

“You don’t have to,” Alex murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I know,” Vivienne said, her thumb brushing over the back of Alex’s hand. “But I want to.”

The simplicity of the admission seemed to disarm Alex, her shoulders softening as she allowed Vivienne to guide her closer. Vivienne rose to her feet, her fingers still tangled with Alex’s, and stepped into the space between them, closing the gap. The warmth of Alex’s body was a comfort, steady and real, and Vivienne leaned into it, letting herself be enveloped in the moment.

“This isn’t just...” Alex began, her voice faltering.

“I know,” Vivienne whispered again, cutting her off gently. She cupped Alex’s face in her hands, her touch light but deliberate, coaxing Alex to meet her gaze. “It’s not just that for me either.”

The weight of her words hung in the air between them, and for a moment, Vivienne worried she’d said too much. But then Alex leaned forward, resting her forehead against Vivienne’s, her breath warm against her cheek.

“Okay,” Alex said, the word a quiet surrender.

Vivienne smiled, relief and possibility blooming in her chest. She tilted her head, her lips brushing against Alex’s in a kiss that started soft but deepened quickly, the tension between them finally breaking. Alex’s hands found Vivienne’s waist, pulling her closer, and Vivienne melted into her, her fingers tangling in Alex’s hair.

When they broke apart, both of them were breathing heavily. Alex’s eyes searched Vivienne’s, her expression unguarded in a way Vivienne hadn’t seen before.

“Come to bed with me,” Vivienne invited.

Alex nodded, her hand trailing down to find Vivienne’s again, and allowed herself to be led, her usual confidence replaced by something softer, more vulnerable. They climbed into the bed together, the quilt pulled up around them, cocooning them in shared warmth.

For a moment, they simply lay there, facing each other in the flickering candlelight. Vivienne’s eyes danced across Alex’s face, as if trying to memorize every detail, and she reached out, her fingers brushing over the scar on Alex’s cheek.

“Does this still hurt?”

“Not anymore,” Alex said, her voice rough but tender. “Not like it used to.”

Vivienne nodded, her hands sliding down to rest in the middle of Alex’s chest, feeling the steady rhythm of her heartbeat. “Good,” she said. “You don’t deserve to carry pain forever.”

She felt, more than heard, Alex’s breath catch, her eyes narrowing as though she were about to respond, but Vivienne didn’t give her the chance. She leaned in, pressing her



lips to Alex's again, this time with more urgency. Alex responded in kind, her hands finding Vivienne's back, her touch strong but careful.

Vivienne shifted, taking the lead and surprising herself. She guided Alex's hands to her waist, encouraging her touch, and Alex obeyed, her usual dominance melting into trust.

She could tell Alex wasn't used to this—not being in charge. Alex's movements were more hesitant, as if unsure of what to do.

Vivienne leaned in to kiss her then looked in her eyes. "Can I?" She motioned to take off Alex's shirt, and Alex nodded slowly, lifting up her back to let Vivienne remove the shirt.

Vivienne pulled it over Alex's head and gently put it on the floor by the bed, along with her own shirt.

"You're beautiful, you know that?" Vivienne said before she could stop herself.

Alex stayed quiet for a few beats before she whispers a quick "thank you," clearly not used to the affection.

Vivienne leaned down to kiss her, but before she could sink deeper into the kiss, Alex rolled her over so she was on the bottom now. Alex deepened the kiss, and Vivienne could feel all the passion they'd been holding back.

Vivienne ran her hand down Alex's body, feeling all her curves. She reached Alex's waistband, and tested the waters by letting her fingers dip a little beyond the waistband. When she didn't feel any resistance from Alex, she maneuvered her hands to unbutton her pants, letting it stay open. She decided to let Alex decide how far she was willing to go, but Vivienne didn't have to wait long because Alex wriggled out of

her pants, leaving her just in her panties.

Vivienne responded in kind, shimmying out of her own pants and kicking them to the floor. She didn't feel as exposed as she had expected. None of the same fervor from the last couple times were there, and all that was left was a deep desire from each of them.

Vivienne reached up, pulling Alex on top of her, feeling her weight press down on her. Alex rolled to the side, surprising Vivienne, and they lay side by side again, facing each other.

Before Vivienne had time to think, Alex closed the gap between them and kissed her, drawing her body closer until they were flush against each other. Vivienne could feel Alex's hands slide down the side of her body, over her waist, along her hips, down her leg, tracing her silhouette. Vivienne inhaled deeply, trying to commit the touch to memory as she instinctively pressed closer against Alex, even though there wasn't any room between them.

Alex's hand made their way back up her leg and made a diagonal line before her fingers stopped right at her entrance.

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Silently, Vivienne beckoned Alex to continue by rubbing herself against Alex's hand and put her own hand behind Alex's back.

Alex must have understood because she slipped two fingers inside Vivienne, causing her to gasp with pleasure. Vivienne dug her nails into Alex's back, leaving crescent moon-shaped imprints in her skin.

"Oh yes," Vivienne sighed.

She could feel Alex's gaze on her, but it wasn't the harsh hungry stare Vivienne had gotten used to. It was softer, almost...loving. She shook her head to dismiss the thought. It wasn't like that between them, right?

She tried to distract her mind and be fully in the present, and she ran her hand over Alex's full breasts down her stomach, stopping just before she reached Alex's dark golden pubic hair.

Vivienne fluttered her eyes open and looked at Alex, who simply kissed her and moved her body so her pussy was directly on top of Vivienne's waiting fingers. Vivienne tentatively slipped one finger inside Alex, feeling the warmth and wetness of her desire, before slipping in a second finger.

She felt Alex relax just slightly, her body not as rigid anymore.

They stayed like that, facing each other, their fingers working in circles against each other's clit, their folds, and inside each other. Vivienne could feel Alex's warmth pool around her hand, and she relished the sensation. She wanted to make Alex

unravel just as much as she had unraveled her so many times now.

She moved her fingers inside Alex, finding the soft spot with zero problem, her fingers instinctively knowing exactly where to press to make Alex's back arch in pleasure. A deep moan escaped Alex's lips, and Vivienne continued her pace, making sure to stay consistent.

Alex's fingers stilled inside Vivienne only for a few seconds before they found their rhythm again, matching Vivienne's.

"Lay down flat on your back," Vivienne instructed, and though Alex hesitated only slightly, she obliged.

Vivienne got on her knees then slid on her stomach, positioning herself between Alex's thighs. "I want to taste you."

She watched as a shadow flickered across Alex's eyes before she lowered her head and ran her tongue down Alex's folds. They were already soaked, and she relished Alex's musky taste that reminded her of woodsmoke. Alex moaned, her voice husky with desire, and Vivienne could feel all her muscles loosening, letting in Vivienne.

Vivienne hummed against Alex's clit, letting the vibrations travel through her entire body. Vivienne looked up through her eyelashes to watch as Alex's chest rose and fell with her hums. She flicked Alex's clit softly with her tongue and felt as Alex's body shuddered with pleasure, then lightly sucked on the tip of her clit, causing Alex to let out a deep moan.

"Just like that," she said, her voice cracking.

Alex wrapped her strong legs around Vivienne's body, drawing her face even closer

until her nose was buried in Alex's soft pubic hair. Vivienne inhaled Alex's scent, her own clit throbbing, and she moaned against Alex's skin.

Vivienne continued lapping at Alex's clit, while taking breaks by running her tongue in between her wet folds. She brought up a hand and slipped two fingers inside Alex, arcing her fingers upward to find that soft spot again, and Alex cried out in pleasure.

Alex's cries only spurred on Vivienne as she pushed her fingers faster and farther inside Alex, feeling the way Alex's walls tightened around her. Every time Alex's body responded, Vivienne pressed a kiss on Alex's clit, making Alex's body tremble.

Vivienne picked up her pace, fingering Alex harder while sucking on her clit as she reached up with her free arm and playing with Alex's nipple. Alex could hardly breathe, and her breath came out in ragged gasps and half-moans that were swallowed by another moan before Vivienne felt Alex's body shake beneath her. Alex's legs, still wrapped around her and secured at her ankles, trembled so much Vivienne had a hard time staying in place. She did, though, and kept licking Alex's clit in circles until she cried out, her orgasm crashing over her in waves.

With a satisfied smile, Vivienne lapped up Alex's sweet juices before she licked her lips and rested her head on Alex's chest, her arm draped over her waist. The fire had burned down to embers, the room bathed in the soft golden glow of the remaining candles. Alex's hand rested on Vivienne's back, her fingers tracing lazy circles that sent a shiver down her spine.

Vivienne closed her eyes, letting the rhythmic sound of Alex's heartbeat ground her. But her mind refused to quiet, thoughts swirling in a relentless tide. She'd told herself she wouldn't let this happen—that she wouldn't let herself feel this much for someone she might lose. Yet here she was, her chest full to bursting with something she was too afraid to name.

“What are you thinking about?” Alex’s voice was low, tinged with sleep but still curious.

Vivienne hesitated, her fingers brushing idly against Alex’s side. “I don’t know,” she lied.

Alex hummed softly, her hand pausing for a moment before resuming its gentle motion. “Liar,” she whispered, the word carrying no malice, only affection.

Vivienne smiled faintly, but the weight in her chest didn’t lift. She pressed a soft kiss to Alex’s collarbone, then settled back against her, letting the warmth of the moment lull her into stillness. For now, at least, the questions could wait.

10

ALEX

The first thing Alex noticed was the quiet. Not the oppressive, heavy quiet of the storm but something gentler—a stillness that held the world in suspended animation as faint sunlight filtered through the cabin’s windows. For a moment, she lay still beneath the quilt, her breathing measured, her gaze tracing the way the light danced over the walls.

Next to her, Vivienne stirred, a subtle shift that drew Alex’s attention like a magnet. Her profile was relaxed, her dark hair spilling across the pillow in disarray. In sleep, Vivienne’s guarded expression softened, leaving her looking vulnerable.

She wasn’t used to waking up next to someone, and it unsettled her how right it felt.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:25 pm*

Sliding carefully from the bed, Alex moved with practiced stealth, keenly aware of the groan of the old wooden floorboards beneath her weight. The morning chill bit at her skin, but she welcomed it. Pulling on her boots and jacket, she stepped outside to face the aftermath.

The world was transformed.

Snow lay thick and untouched, a pristine blanket that muted everything. The horizon stretched endlessly, the jagged peaks of the Rockies softened beneath layers of white. The storm clouds were breaking apart, fragments drifting lazily across an impossibly blue sky. Alex took a deep breath, the icy air burning her lungs in the best way.

She stared out at the landscape, her jaw tightening against the sudden rush of thoughts. How long could this last?

Her life had always been predictable in its simplicity: hard work, solitude, the occasional visitor who left as quickly as they came. Vivienne didn't fit into that world, and Alex wasn't sure she wanted her to. Wanting Vivienne meant wanting change, and change meant risking everything she'd spent years building.

The snow crunched beneath her boots as she walked toward the shed, where her tools and supplies were stored. Opening the door, she grabbed a hatchet and began splitting some firewood. Each strike of the blade into the wood was a release, the rhythmic motion grounding her as her thoughts threatened to spiral.

What if Vivienne went back to her refined world of fashion and regretted everything they'd shared? What if Alex was left behind, holding on to memories that were never

meant to last?

The sharp crack of the splitting log echoed in the stillness, cutting through her growing unease. Alex leaned on the hatchet, her breath visible in the cold morning air. Maybe she was overthinking this. Maybe she should just let herself enjoy it while it lasted. Not everything had to last forever.

A flicker of movement in the cabin window caught her eye, and she turned to see Vivienne watching her. Even from a distance, she could feel the weight of Vivienne's gaze, as if the cabin walls weren't there at all.

Alex hesitated, caught in the strange pull between retreat and return. She buried her hands in her pockets, grounding herself in the rough wool of her gloves. One more breath. One more moment.

When she finally stepped back inside, Vivienne was sitting at the edge of the bed, the quilt draped loosely around her shoulders. Her expression was unreadable, though her lips curved slightly in a way that might have been a smile.

"Good morning," Vivienne said, her voice soft and still touched with sleep.

"Morning." Alex cleared her throat, brushing snow from her jacket before hanging it near the fire. "Storm's eased up. Looks like we'll have some sun today."

Vivienne nodded, her gaze lingering on Alex for a moment longer before shifting to the fire. "That's good. I wasn't sure it ever would."

Alex busied herself with rekindling the fire, but she could feel Vivienne's presence in the room like a live wire. As the flames caught, fire crackling to life, she glanced over her shoulder.



“You okay?” Alex asked.

Vivienne’s eyes flicked to hers, something uncertain but warm in their depths. “I think so,” she said. Then, after a pause: “Thank you...for last night.”

Alex swallowed hard, the weight of Vivienne’s words pressing against her chest. “Yeah,” she said, her voice low. “Thank you too.”

Vivienne shifted on the bed, pulling the quilt tighter around her. “You know, it’s strange,” she said, her tone contemplative. “All my life, I’ve spent Christmases in these perfectly curated settings—decorated trees, lavish dinners, everything staged for the perfect photo. But it never felt like this.”

Alex turned, leaning against the hearth. “Like what?”

Vivienne met her gaze, her expression open, almost raw. “Real.”

Alex didn’t respond right away. The word hung between them, heavy with meaning. Finally, she nodded, her lips curving into a small, wry smile. “Yeah. I get that.”

For a fleeting moment, Alex let herself believe this quiet, sunlit morning could stretch on forever.

After their shared breakfast, Alex stood at the kitchen counter, sharpening her knife with slow, methodical strokes. The sound of metal gliding against the whetstone was oddly soothing, a rhythm that helped steady her thoughts. Beside her, Vivienne sat at the table, her hands wrapped around a steaming mug of tea.

The cabin was quieter now, the storm’s departure leaving behind a stillness that felt both serene and disquieting. Outside, the snow sparkled beneath the pale winter sun, its untouched surface so bright it almost hurt to look at.

Vivienne broke the silence first. "It's strange, isn't it? How quiet it gets after a storm like that."

Alex nodded without looking up. "Yeah. Like the world's holding its breath."

Vivienne sipped her tea, her gaze drifting to the window. "I suppose I should feel relieved, knowing the worst is over." She paused, her fingers tightening around the mug. "But I don't."

That made Alex glance up, her brow furrowing. "Why not?"

Vivienne hesitated, as if weighing how much of herself she was willing to reveal. "Because the storm made everything...simple. Survive or don't. Now that it's over, I have to think about what comes next." She gave a rueful smile. "And I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:25 pm*

Alex set down the knife, her hands resting on the counter. “You don’t have to figure it all out right now.”

The words came easily, but as soon as she said them, Alex felt the weight of their contradiction. She was no better at staying in the moment than Vivienne seemed to be. Even now, her mind churned with questions about the days ahead.

Shaking off the thoughts, Alex turned back to the counter and began slicing carrots for their next meal, using the knife she had just sharpened. “We’ll dig out the path today,” she said, her tone deliberately practical. “Check on the shed, see how much wood we’ve got left. After a storm like that, the drifts’ll be high. Won’t be easy, but it’ll give us something to do.”

Vivienne set her mug down and leaned forward, her elbows resting on the table. “You’ve done this before. Weathered storms like this on your own, I mean.”

Alex shrugged. “Comes with the territory. Winters up here can get rough. You learn to make do.”

Vivienne tilted her head, studying Alex with a mix of curiosity and admiration. “You make it sound so easy and matter-of-fact. Like it’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.” Alex’s voice was quiet but firm. “It’s just...life. You adapt or you don’t survive.”

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The fire crackled softly in the hearth, its warmth filling the space between them.

Then Alex straightened, brushing her hands on her jeans. “Come on. Let’s get started before the sun drops. Snow is easier to move when it’s not frozen solid.”

Vivienne followed Alex to the door, pulling on her borrowed coat, boots, and gloves. The cold hit them as soon as they stepped outside, sharp and invigorating. The air smelled clean, almost new, the kind of crispness that only came after a storm.

The snow was deep, just as Alex had predicted. They worked side by side, clearing the path with a pair of shovels Alex had unearthed from the shed. The effort was grueling, each scoop a reminder of how unrelenting nature could be, but there was something about it that Alex found cathartic too.

Vivienne paused to catch her breath, leaning on her shovel as she watched Alex work. “You’re good at this.”

Alex glanced up, brushing a strand of stray hair from her face. “At shoveling snow?”

Vivienne smiled. “At living out here. Surviving. Knowing what to do and how to do it.”

“You’d be surprised what you can learn how to do when you don’t have a choice.”

Vivienne’s smile faded, her gaze dropping to the snow. “I suppose that’s true.”

For the rest of the morning, they worked in relative silence, their breaths visible in the frigid air. When they finally finished clearing the path, Alex led the way to the shed. Inside, she checked the woodpile, nodding with approval at the supply they still had.

“We’ll be fine for a while,” Alex said. “But if the weather holds, we’ll need to make a run to town soon.”

Vivienne hesitated. “And if it doesn’t?”

Alex turned to her, her expression neutral. “Then we make do.”

As they made their way back to the cabin, the sun climbed higher in the sky, its light casting long shadows over the snow. Inside, the warmth of the fire greeted them like an old friend, the contrast to the cold outside almost startling.

Vivienne removed her coat and gloves, rubbing her hands together to chase away the chill. “I think I’ll miss this.”

Alex looked up at her, her brow furrowing. “Miss what?”

Vivienne gestured vaguely at the cabin, the fire, the snow outside. “All of this.”

Alex didn’t respond right away, instead mulling over her words carefully, knowing Vivienne wasn’t just talking about the surroundings so much as who she was surrounded by. When she finally spoke, her voice was low, almost hesitant. “You don’t have to leave yet.”

The words hung in the air, heavy with meaning.

After they finished morning and afternoon chores, they sat across from each other at the table, their plates of dinner mostly untouched. The fire flickered softly in the hearth, its warmth a sharp contrast to the growing unease in the room. The storm had fully cleared now, leaving behind a world that was quieter than Alex had expected, as though the chaos of the weather had muted everything else in its wake.

Alex watched Vivienne’s gaze drift between her food and the window, her expression distant and indecipherable. It was the same look she’d had earlier—that quiet searching, as though something was pulling at her from within, something Alex

wasn't fully privy to, a part of herself Vivienne kept concealed.

Alex couldn't help but notice how it mirrored her own feelings—this nagging, restless hunger to figure out what came next.

“So,” Vivienne said, breaking the silence. Her voice was calm but heavy. “What happens now?”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:25 pm*

Alex stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Vivienne’s tone was matter-of-fact, “the storm’s over, but we’re still stuck here. The world is waiting outside, and we’re inside, pretending it’s different.”

It was a fair point. Alex felt it too—the weight of the outside world pressing in, even if the storm had kept it at bay for a little while longer. But Vivienne didn’t understand. She couldn’t.

“You’re not the only one with a life to get back to,” Alex said, her words sharper than she meant. “This cabin, this isolation, it’s not my reality either.”

Vivienne’s brow furrowed. “What does that mean?”

Alex hesitated, her heart pounding a little harder. She hadn’t meant to reveal any more of herself than she absolutely had to. She could feel the panic starting to creep in—the same panic that had been clawing at her since the night they’d shared their first kiss, when everything had shifted so quickly. “It means...this isn’t real. Not for you. Not for me. We’re different. You don’t belong here, Vivienne.”

There it was. The truth that Alex had been holding back for days. The reality that had gnawed at her every time she looked at Vivienne.

Vivienne’s face paled. “I don’t belong here?” she echoed, her voice small and tight with disbelief. “And you do?”

Alex stood abruptly, the tension in her muscles telling her that she was ready to

explode if she didn't move. "I'm not pretending to be someone I'm not. You live in a world where everything's easy, Vivienne. You come here, play at being some kind of rustic princess for a few days, and then you go back to your perfect life. But that's not me."

Vivienne stood, too, her chair scraping loudly across the wooden floor. "You think I don't see that?" she spat, her voice rising in frustration. "You think I'm just here for some...vacation? You think I don't understand that this is your reality, not mine?"

Her words stung more than Alex was willing to admit. She tried to quell the surge of anger rising in her chest, but it was too late. She couldn't stop it from boiling over. "You don't get it, Vivienne. You don't get what it's like to live with the world always watching, always expecting. I've spent my entire life hiding from people, protecting myself from everything that might remind me how different I am."

Vivienne took a step closer, her eyes flashing with defiance. "And what about me? What about what I've been hiding? What about my life? You think the world isn't always watching me, holding its breath waiting for me to fail?"

The words hung between them, heavy with accusation. Alex opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She didn't have an answer for that. Not yet.

"I'm not pretending to be someone else," Vivienne continued, her voice quieter now but no less intense. "I'm trying to figure out what I really want. And I'm trying to figure out if this"—she gestured between them—"is real."

Alex felt a chill sweep through her. The walls she had so carefully built around herself were starting to crack, and she wasn't sure if she was ready for that. She wasn't sure if she could handle it.

"I don't know if I can do this," Alex said, her voice barely above a whisper. The



confession felt like a weight she couldn't carry anymore. "I don't know if I can let someone in. Not like this."

Vivienne recoiled, her expression pained as if the words punched her in the gut. "You're scared, Alex. Scared of what this might mean, scared of what might happen if you let me stay."

Alex opened her mouth to deny it, but she couldn't. Because she was scared. Terrified, even.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered, her voice cracking. "I want to be with you, but I'm not sure I know how to be anyone else but who I've always been. And I'm afraid you'll leave once you figure that out."

Vivienne looked at her square in the eyes. "I'm not going anywhere, Alex."

But Alex wasn't sure she believed that. She wasn't sure she could ever believe it.

The silence between them stretched on, thick and heavy. The fire crackled, but it did nothing to ease the tension that had settled between them.

Finally, Vivienne spoke again, her voice quieter now. "Maybe we're both scared. But we won't know anything unless we try."

The words hung in the air, still unresolved, but for the first time, Alex didn't feel like running from them. Maybe that was the beginning of something. Or maybe it was the end.

Either way, she knew one thing: things had changed. And now, she had to figure out what that really meant.

## VIVIENNE

The stillness of the cabin felt heavier this morning, thick with the remnants of the storm. Outside, snowflakes drifted lazily, the wind a soft whisper against the walls, like the world exhaling after a long breath. The fire in the hearth crackled, casting its steady warmth throughout the room, and for a brief moment, Vivienne allowed herself to sink into the quiet peace she had come to savor these last few days.

She hadn't realized how much she'd been craving the calm until the storm started to fade, the oppressive weight of it lifting from her shoulders. For the first time in days, it felt like she could breathe again, like the storm had washed away the pressures of the outside world, even if only temporarily.

But then her phone rang.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:25 pm*

Vivienne froze. It was a harsh contrast to the warmth of the room, the sound too loud in the quiet, the jarring ring pulling her out of the cocoon she'd been living in. The screen flashed to life, and for a moment, she just stared at it. The name on the display sent a wave of dread through her—a contact she hadn't seen in over a week, someone from her office back in New York.

She'd almost allowed herself to forget about the outside world, the way the storm had swallowed it whole, leaving her in a small, insulated bubble with Alex. But now, the intrusion felt like a breach, something that had no place here in this fleeting moment of peace.

With a slow, deliberate motion, she picked up the phone from the couch, her heart thudding as she accepted the call and brought the phone to her ear. She tried to swallow the knot that had formed in her throat but found it stuck there, lodged tight with the weight of the decision she knew was coming.

“Vivienne,” the voice on the other end greeted her, its tone too familiar, too cold. It was all business, a voice that could have belonged to any one of the countless people who had called her before, demanding her time, her attention, her life. “We’ve got a situation. We need you to come back. It’s urgent.”

Her stomach twisted in response, and she glanced toward the window, watching the delicate snowflakes fall. They seemed to mock her, drifting with no purpose other than to exist. She couldn't let herself think about what was happening beyond the confines of this cabin. Not yet. She had been running from it, from the calls and the endless demands, trying to hold on to the fragments of something real, something she hadn't known she could want until now.

“Can’t it wait?” Her voice was small, almost a whisper, but even as she spoke, she knew the answer. It couldn’t wait. It never could.

There was a pause on the other end, and then the voice came back, clipped and professional. “Vivienne, this is serious. We need you here. Now.”

The weight of it settled on her chest like a stone. She had tried to push it out of her mind, the constant pressure to return, to step back into the role—the prison—she had created for herself. It had always been this way. She had built her life around the demands of her career until there was nothing left to give but the hollow shell of her own expectations.

The reality was crashing back in, the promises she’d made to herself about change, about stepping away from it all, slipping through her fingers like water. It wasn’t just about the phone call, or the job; it was about everything. About what her life had become, and what it was never meant to be.

It wasn’t meant to be this hard.

Vivienne’s grip tightened around the phone, the cold metal pressing into her palm. She wanted to scream, to throw the damn thing across the room. Instead, she inhaled deeply, the air filling her lungs with a false sense of calm.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” she said, her voice sounding distant, even to herself. It was the only answer she could give.

She ended the call without waiting for a response, her finger trembling as she pressed the red button to disconnect. Her heart pounded, and she felt the walls of the cabin closing in on her.

Alex was still in the next room, oblivious to the turmoil stirring inside of Vivienne.

For a moment, she considered going to her, seeking comfort, trying to put off what had just become all too real. But it was impossible. The weight of the decision hung in the air, and Vivienne knew there was no escaping it.

She stood, pacing to the window, pressing her hand against the cool glass, as though it might provide some answer. Outside, the storm had subsided completely, but Vivienne couldn't shake the feeling that it had simply been replaced by something else: a storm of her own making, one she couldn't outrun.

She glanced back toward the small flickering flames in the hearth and then at the door that led to the rest of her life.

She had to go back. But that didn't mean she had to leave everything behind.

Not yet.

Vivienne sat in the silence of the cabin, her hands cold despite the warmth of the fire. The phone call had been an unwelcome reality check, but it was the silence afterward that had swallowed her whole. There was nothing left to do but face the tempest brewing inside her.

She hadn't planned on leaving. Not like this. She hadn't imagined that the quiet space they'd carved out for themselves could end so abruptly, her world cracking open to reveal the pressure and weight of the life waiting for her back in New York.

Her thoughts spun, each one tighter than the last. She had told herself that maybe, just maybe, this time would be different. That she could step away, let go of the demands of her career, let go of the life that had kept her tethered to a version of herself she no longer recognized.

But that was before the call. Before the reality of the work waiting for her, the world

that was demanding her return with its cold indifference. Her fingers trembled as they gripped the edge of the table, staring at the half-empty mugs of tea that had once felt like the center of something meaningful. The storm outside had cleared, but the turbulence inside her hadn't.

Vivienne closed her eyes, trying to center herself. She didn't want to bring this tension to Alex. She didn't want to shatter the fragile peace they'd found. But she knew there was no way around it. The truth was pressing, suffocating.

Alex was standing by the window, looking out at the quiet morning, her back turned to Vivienne, as though she were trying to pull herself together too. But this was different. The cabin had been their refuge, but now it was a cage, and Vivienne could feel it closing in.

"Alex," Vivienne's voice was soft at first, hesitant. She could feel the weight of the words even before they left her mouth. "I have to go back. They called. There's an emergency at work."

Alex turned, her expression unreadable, but Vivienne could see the flicker of something behind her eyes. Something that said she'd been waiting for this moment.

"I know," Alex said quietly, her voice more resigned than anything. "I figured it was only a matter of time."

Vivienne's chest tightened. It wasn't just the weight of the words. It was the way Alex said them, like she knew the inevitable. Like she'd always known that this was all temporary.

"Alex, I...I don't know what to do," Vivienne admitted, her voice wavering. She hadn't realized how much she needed to say this until the words tumbled out.. "I want to stay. I want to be here with you, but everything else—everything that's waiting for

me—it's all pulling me back. And I don't know if I can walk away from it."

Alex's gaze softened, but there was a flicker of something else there, too, something that cut deeper than Vivienne wanted to admit. "You can't stay, Vivienne," Alex said, her voice quiet, with an edge to it that made Vivienne's stomach turn. "Not for me. Not for this."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:25 pm*

Vivienne's heart stumbled, a painful twist inside her chest. "What do you mean?" she asked, but the answer already felt like it was slipping through her fingers.

Alex took a step back, crossing her arms over her chest, her eyes avoiding Vivienne's. "You don't belong here," she said, her voice flat now. "You belong in that world. The one you've built for yourself. The one that's waiting for you. The one that's always going to demand you."

The words felt like a slap, and Vivienne recoiled from the sting. She had wanted something else. Something more. But this was what Alex was giving her. A reminder of all the things she could never be, not here, not in the quiet spaces where they had shared something real.

"I'm not like you, Vivienne," Alex continued, her tone sharpening. "I'm not... I'm not someone who fits into your world. And you know that. This whole thing—us—it's just a distraction. You were lonely, and I was there. But that's all it is. It was just sex."

Vivienne felt her pulse quicken, the tears burning behind her eyes, but she swallowed them down, trying to keep her composure. "You don't mean that," she said, her voice cracking, barely above a whisper. "You can't mean that."

But Alex was already stepping back, retreating further. "It was never going to last," she said, her voice cold and distant now. "It wasn't supposed to. You have a life waiting for you, and I'm just a memory. You need to go back to it. I can't be part of it. And I won't pretend like this means anything more than it did."



The words hit Vivienne like a wave, sweeping her under, pulling her down until she could barely catch her breath. She wanted to scream, to demand more, to fight for the things they'd shared. But all that came out was a broken sob.

"How can you say that?" Vivienne's voice cracked as she lost her composure, a raw ache leaking through her words. "How can you say that after everything? After what we've shared?"

Alex's expression flickered, but it was too late. The damage had been done, and the space between them had never felt more insurmountable.

Vivienne took a step back, her body trembling. "I have to go," she said, her voice barely audible.

The world she had built with Alex, the fantasy she had let herself indulge in, was slipping away, leaving nothing but the hollow echo of what could have been.

The door creaked as Vivienne opened it, and the chill outside rushed in, a reminder that winter had not quite let her go. The world beyond the threshold was white and endless. Snow clung to the trees in delicate clusters, and the air felt still, like everything was waiting for something to break.

But something already had broken.

She stood at the threshold, staring out at the quiet, frozen world that had once felt like a sanctuary. But now, it felt as though she were standing at the edge of a precipice, and she was about to tumble into an abyss. The weight of what she had to do pressed on her chest, and for a moment, she couldn't move.

The phone call had shaken her—her work, a cold reminder that there was no escaping her life, no matter how far she tried to run. It had felt like a sign, a cruel signal that

her real life was still out there, waiting for her, waiting to drag her back to the chaos of deadlines and demands.

Her fingers shook as she pulled the phone from her coat pocket again, glancing at the screen. There was a signal now, faint but just enough to call for help.

Her car was still out there, stuck in the snowdrift, a silent monument to her bad luck. They had left it behind when Alex rescued her, but now, it was a reminder of the life she couldn't seem to shake. She could call roadside assistance; they could have it cleared away. It felt like the simplest solution, but also the hardest. Calling for help meant facing the reality that she would be leaving. That the moment here, with Alex, was slipping through her fingers.

She couldn't breathe through the tightness in her chest, but she knew she couldn't stay. Not after everything. Not after Alex had pushed her away. After the words they'd exchanged, sharp and final, leaving her heart cracked open and bleeding. Exposed.

A part of her still hoped for something different. Maybe Alex would apologize. Maybe they would work through it. But the voice in her head, the one she'd tried to ignore, kept telling her it was already over and she had to let go.

She turned to look back at the cabin, the warmth inside now feeling like a distant memory, like something she had only imagined. The fire inside was still burning, the light flickering through the windows in a way that made her feel small and lonely.

Her heart thudded as she stepped back inside, her feet heavy on the floorboards. She couldn't do this alone. She needed something to help ease the hurt, to make this all feel less final.

Alex was standing near the fire, her back to Vivienne as she poked at the embers. She

hadn't said anything since their argument, and the silence between them felt like a suffocating weight. Vivienne knew what she had to do; she couldn't leave without speaking to her. But the thought of saying goodbye to Alex, of turning away from something she had allowed herself to believe in so fully, twisted her insides.

"Alex." Vivienne's voice broke through the silence, raw and fragile. "My car. It's still stuck. I could call someone for help...or we could shovel it out together. I don't know what you want, but I can't leave without doing something about it."

Alex didn't turn around at first, but Vivienne could see her shoulders tense. She could feel the resistance in the air, the heated words of their argument thick between them. When Alex finally spoke, her voice was quieter than Vivienne had expected.

"Vivienne..." She sighed, her hands stilling over the fire. "I think it's time you go. Take the snow gear I gave you. You'll be fine and warm in that until help arrives. You've got to get back to your life. And I've got mine."

The words hit Vivienne like a slap, but she couldn't bring herself to flinch. She had known this was coming. She had seen it in the way Alex had closed herself off, in the distance that had crept between them. She had seen the finality in Alex's eyes, and now, she could hear it in the coldness of her voice.

"Alex," Vivienne whispered, her throat tight. "I don't want to go. I've never wanted anything more than this, than...than what we've shared."

But Alex didn't meet her gaze. She stood there, unmoving, her face unreadable. "I don't think you understand, Vivienne. This isn't real. It's just... It's just something that happened. I'm not the person you think I am."

The words twisted like a knife, deeper, deeper. Vivienne's heart pounded against her rib cage, and she couldn't breathe. She had thought that maybe, just maybe, there was

something more to what they had—something lasting, something real. From inside her coat pocket, she felt the wooden bird Alex had carved for her, but it no longer felt grounding for her. The truth of the situation felt like a heavy weight she couldn't carry anymore.

Without another word, Alex turned away, facing the fire.

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Vivienne's legs shook as she walked to the door, her fingers brushing the cool handle, trying to steady herself.

She had to go. She had to leave.

She stepped outside, the chilly wind biting at her face, but she didn't feel the cold. She didn't feel anything at all.

She knew she had to call for help and head back to her car. But no matter how much she tried to convince herself, the thought of leaving this place, of walking away from the warmth Alex had given her, felt like it would break her in two.

The world around her was nothing but white noise, and as she walked through the snowy road that would lead her back to her car, she realized there would be no turning back.

12

ALEX

The cabin felt colder now. The fire, though still crackling, no longer had the same warmth. The air was thick with a silence that pressed against Alex's chest, as though it were trying to suffocate her. She stared into the flickering embers, the glow casting shadows that danced across the walls like ghosts, reminders of what was lost.

Vivienne was gone.

It wasn't just her absence in the physical space that hurt; it was the emptiness she left behind. Alex could still see her—Vivienne's laughter, the way her blue eyes softened when Alex had caught her gaze, the way her delicate hands had fit so easily into Alex's, like they had always belonged there. The memory of Vivienne's smooth, warm touch lingered on her skin, a feeling she didn't want to forget.

But now, the cabin felt like a tomb. The space where Vivienne had been, where they had shared everything, felt hollow. The light from the fire cast long shadows on the walls, but it was a different kind of darkness that had filled the room. The kind that didn't have an easy escape.

The last words she had said echoed in Alex's head, a chorus of sharp, biting tones. "This isn't real. It's just something that happened."

Alex squeezed her eyes shut, as if she could squeeze the words out of existence, out of her memory. She had said that. She had pushed Vivienne away, told her that it was nothing. Had she even believed it then? She wasn't certain anymore, but now, with Vivienne's absence stretching out before her like a gaping hole, Alex could feel how wrong it had been.

How wrong she had been.

Her fingers curled into the quilt wrapped around her shoulders, the fabric soft against her skin, Vivienne's fresh scent lingering, but it did nothing to soothe the ache in her chest. She remembered how it felt to have Vivienne close, how easy it had been to forget the world outside the cabin when they were together. That warmth, that feeling of belonging—it was all gone now.

Why had she done it?

She could still feel the warmth of Vivienne's touch, that softness in her gaze as they

had shared everything they'd been, all the raw, unspoken moments between them. But she had let it slip away. Let her fear—of change, of vulnerability, of losing herself—dictate her actions. She had convinced herself that they were too different. That what they had was just a fleeting thing, a distraction from the life she knew.

But it wasn't.

Her mind raced, replaying every moment they had shared, every touch and laugh, every comfortable silence that hadn't needed words. She had allowed herself to feel it—to let her heart open up in a way she hadn't let anyone in for years. She had let herself believe that there could be something more between them.

And now, that belief felt like a cruel joke.

Alex stood and walked to the window, gazing out at the snow-covered landscape. The trees, heavy with snow, swayed gently in the wind, their branches creaking in the quiet. The world beyond the glass seemed frozen in time. And inside, the world felt just as still.

She wanted to call out. Wanted to scream, to tell the empty room how wrong everything felt. To ask for another chance. To take back the harsh words, to undo the damage she'd done.

But there was no one left to listen.

Her eyes fell on the origami bird Vivienne had made her for Christmas. It rested on the coffee table, delicate and perfect in its simplicity, a symbol of something that had felt real when she had first received it. She had smiled so genuinely at Vivienne's gift, touched by the thought and care behind the paper folds, though she hadn't understood how much it would come to mean.

Alex picked up the bird carefully, as though it might crumble in her hands. The thin paper was fragile against her fingers, the sharp edges softened by the memory of Vivienne's hands holding it. She turned it over in her palm, studying the intricate folds, the way each crease had been made with such patience.

It felt like a fragile piece of Vivienne herself.

A lump formed in Alex's throat, and she swallowed hard, trying to keep the tears at bay. She hadn't wanted to care about something so fragile. But the weight of the paper in her hand felt like the weight of everything she had lost—everything she had pushed away.

The fire crackled again, the sound like a sharp reminder of the absence that now filled the room.

Alex closed her eyes, and for a fleeting moment, she could almost feel Vivienne beside her again—her breath warm against the skin of her neck, her laugh echoing softly in the quiet space. But when Alex opened her eyes, the silence returned, and Vivienne was gone.

The pain of it was physical, a tightness in her chest that made it hard to breathe. She sank down into the couch again, staring blankly at the fire, at the now cold space where Vivienne had been.



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The quiet was suffocating. And in the stillness, Alex realized just how much she had allowed fear to define her. How much she had let it control her, push her away from something real. Something she wanted.

And now, she was left with nothing.

The fire crackled, and the paper bird—once a symbol of hope, of something beautiful—now felt like an anchor, weighing her down.

Alex awoke to a cabin that felt emptier than ever before. The fire in the hearth had died sometime in the night, leaving the air brittle with cold. She didn't bother lighting it again. She didn't see the point. The faint gray light of morning seeped through the curtains, dull and lifeless, matching the heaviness that had settled in her chest.

The days since Vivienne's departure had blurred into one another, a monotonous routine of chores and silence. Alex moved through them like a ghost, her mind replaying every moment, every word, every mistake.

The paper bird still sat on the coffee table, exactly where she had left it. She hadn't touched it since that first night, too afraid it would disintegrate, as fragile as her resolve. But she couldn't bring herself to put it away either. It sat there, a quiet reminder of everything she had ruined.

She glanced at it now as she nursed a cup of lukewarm coffee, her hands wrapped tightly around the mug as though it might provide some comfort. But the heat didn't reach her, not really.

The mornings were the hardest. Waking up and reaching for someone who wasn't there. Remembering, all over again, that Vivienne was gone. That she had sent her away.

She tried to distract herself with work. The fence around her cabin needed repairing after the last storm, and the tool shed roof had sprung a leak, water pooling in one corner. Normally, she would have tackled these tasks with her usual determination, losing herself in the physical labor. But now, her hands faltered, her focus shattered by the thoughts that refused to leave her alone.

Alex would catch herself staring off into the distance. Images of Vivienne haunted her: the way her smile had lit up the room, the way she had thrown herself into every challenge during their time together, no matter how small, whether it was starting the fire or peeling carrots.

And the way she had looked at Alex—with trust, with hope. With something Alex hadn't recognized at the time but now knew it was love.

The realization gnawed at her.

In the quiet of the cabin, she replayed their conversations, dissecting every word. She heard Vivienne's voice in her head, soft and hesitant when she'd asked Alex to come with her to her SUV. The hope in her tone, the vulnerability she had laid bare. And then Alex's response—sharp, dismissive, cruel.

She had told herself she was doing the right thing. That they were too different, that their lives would never align. But now, alone in the suffocating silence of the cabin, Alex wondered if she had been lying to herself all along.

The truth was, she was afraid.

Afraid of what Vivienne represented—change, vulnerability, the possibility of something more. Afraid of leaving the life she had built here, the one that had kept her safe and predictable for so long.

But safety had come at a cost. And now, that cost felt unbearable.

Alex found herself walking out to the woods more often, her boots crunching through the snow as she retraced the paths she and Vivienne had taken. The trees loomed tall and silent, their branches heavy with snow, and Alex couldn't help but imagine Vivienne beside her, her cheeks pink from the cold, her laughter echoing through the forest.

She reached the spot where they had first crossed paths—the place where Alex had found Vivienne stranded, cold and frightened. The memory played out in her mind like a scene from a movie, vivid and raw.

Alex crouched down, her gloved hand brushing the ground where the snow had long since covered any trace of their meeting. She closed her eyes, the cold seeping through her jeans, and let herself feel it—the loss, the regret, the love she hadn't been brave enough to acknowledge.

The love she had pushed away.

Back at the cabin, the afternoons dragged on as her thoughts refused to settle, no matter how busy she tried to stay.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Alex stood on the porch, watching the sky bleed into shades of pink and orange. The mountains loomed in the distance, their peaks glowing in the last light of day. It was a view she had always loved, one that had brought her peace.

But now, it felt incomplete.

The sunset reminded her of the firelight dancing on Vivienne's skin, of the way the warmth of her presence had filled the cabin in a way the flames never could.

Alex leaned against the railing, the wood rough under her hands. For the first time in years, she felt truly lost.

Vivienne had been a storm in her life—unexpected, intense, and impossible to ignore. She had shaken everything Alex thought she knew about herself, about what she wanted, about what she was capable of feeling.

And now that the storm had passed, all that remained was the silence.

But in that silence, Alex began to hear something else.

A question.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:25 pm*

What are you going to do about it?

The storm had fully passed, leaving a clear, crisp day in its wake. Sunlight streamed through the window, glinting off the untouched snow outside and casting fractured beams across the cabin walls. Yet inside, the air felt colder, heavier, as if Vivienne had taken all the warmth when she had left.

Alex sat at the edge of her bed, cradling a mug of coffee between her hands. The steam curled upward in lazy spirals, its faint bitterness filling the cabin. She hadn't bothered with breakfast; the thought of eating turned her stomach. The coffee was barely warm now, more an excuse to keep her hands occupied than a source of comfort. She stared into the mug, as though the swirling liquid might offer answers she couldn't find on her own.

Her gaze drifted to the corner of the cabin, where Vivienne's presence still lingered in subtle ways. A faint indentation in the pillow she'd used. The mug she'd favored, now washed but not yet put away. Alex swallowed hard, the memories sharp and immediate. She could almost hear Vivienne's voice, the teasing lilt of it, the way it softened when she spoke of things she cared about.

Alex stood in front of the small mirror above the sink, her reflection sharp and unyielding. The person staring back at her looked tired, worn thin by regret and indecision. Her hair was still damp from a quick shower, the scent of pine soap clinging faintly to her skin, but the routine had done little to clear her head.

Her gaze shifted to the window. The vast stretch of snow glistened under the sunlight, serene and unbroken. It felt like a taunt—how something so still could hold so much

chaos beneath its surface. That chaos mirrored the storm still raging in her chest.

On the table behind her lay her pack and coat, waiting. The sight made her throat tighten. She had packed the essentials: a change of clothes, a few snacks, and the paper bird Vivienne had given her. The bird was tucked between her folded sweater, its edges carefully protected.

Unfolded, it would just be an ordinary scrap of paper. But folded, it carried weight—a symbol of something fragile yet enduring, a glimpse of Vivienne’s heart that Alex had struggled to hold on to.

Alex ran her fingers over the counter, her thoughts restless. She had spent days trapped in a cycle of regret, reliving every moment of Vivienne’s stay, every laugh, every glance, every argument. She had tried to convince herself it was for the best, that letting Vivienne go was the right thing to do, for both of them. But that lie had worn thin, leaving her raw and exposed.

She turned back to the mirror, studying her reflection. Her own face felt unfamiliar, marked by the weight of emotions she had spent years suppressing. She had built a life on solitude, convincing herself that love was a risk not worth taking. But now, that life felt hollow, like the snow outside—beautiful but cold, silent but suffocating.

“I can’t keep doing this,” Alex whispered, her voice breaking the stillness of the room.

Her eyes flicked to her bag again, where the paper bird was encased, protected. The gift had been unexpected, a moment of vulnerability that Alex hadn’t known how to accept. Now, it felt like a beacon, calling her toward something she wasn’t sure she deserved but couldn’t ignore.

She turned from the mirror and walked to the window, her breath fogging the glass as

she leaned against it. Her mind raced with questions, doubts, fears. Would Vivienne even want to see her again? Had Alex pushed her too far away? Could love really bridge the gap between them?

Her heart ached with the uncertainty, but for the first time, it also pulsed with hope. She thought of Vivienne's laugh, the way her eyes lit up when she spoke about the things she loved, the way she had fought through the storm with an unyielding spirit.

"I can't let this end here," Alex murmured, the resolve in her voice steeling her.

She turned back to the table, her movements steady now. The pack was light, but it carried the weight of a decision that felt monumental. She slung it over her shoulder, her fingers brushing against the coat's rough fabric as she grabbed it.

Alex took one last look around the cabin. The fire had long since burned out, leaving only ashes behind. The space felt emptier than it ever had, the silence pressing in on her.

"This isn't home anymore," she said softly, her words a farewell.

As she stepped outside, the cold air hit her, sharp and bracing. The mountains stood tall and indifferent, their snowy peaks piercing the blue sky. The path before her was uncertain, but for the first time, she didn't feel afraid.

Alex zipped her coat and adjusted the pack on her shoulder. She had no idea what waited for her in New York, no guarantees that Vivienne would even hear her out. But she knew one thing for certain: She couldn't stay here, trapped by her own fear.

Not anymore.

With one final glance at the cabin that had been her fortress for years, Alex started

down the path, her boots crunching against the snow. The weight in her chest lifted slightly with each step, replaced by something unfamiliar but welcome.

Hope.

13

VIVIENNE

The city moved at its usual breakneck pace, but Vivienne felt like she was standing still.

Her office sat perched above the chaos, a pristine bubble in the midst of it all. Sunlight slanted through the glass panes, spilling onto her modern desk and casting angular shadows against the cream walls. The skyline stretched beyond, all sharp lines and gleaming edges, a perfect mirror of her life—or what it used to be.

She scanned the papers in front of her, black ink bleeding across contracts and correspondence, each word blurring into the next. The coffee on her desk had grown cold hours ago, untouched, its rich aroma dulled by her mounting irritation.

“Where is the draft I asked for?” Vivienne’s voice was clipped, her gaze fixed on her assistant, who hovered anxiously by the door. “I said three o’clock.”

“It’s...being finalized, Ms. Blackwood. I’ll have it in a few minutes,” the assistant stammered before retreating.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:25 pm*

Vivienne's jaw tightened as she turned her focus back to the papers, the office eerily quiet except for the hum of the city outside, as if everyone were afraid of breathing around her. It wasn't the delay that had set her off; it was everything else—the gnawing emptiness that had rooted itself in her chest since she left Colorado.

She had thought throwing herself back into work would help. It hadn't.

Her staff walked on eggshells, their usual respect now tinged with unease. She knew her behavior had changed, sharp edges where charm used to be. Meetings felt hollow; triumphs rang false. Every time she closed her eyes, the memories crept in: the warmth of the cabin's firelight, the sharp bite of the snowstorm, and Alex—always Alex.

The woman who had unraveled her carefully constructed life with quiet strength and maddening vulnerability.

Vivienne straightened her posture, adjusting the cuffs of her tailored blazer. She refused to cry. Not here, not now. The carefully curated image of Vivienne Blackwood didn't allow for cracks.

But there were cracks.

She caught her reflection in the floor-to-ceiling window, faint and ghostlike against the glittering cityscape. Her makeup was flawless, her hair meticulously styled, but her eyes told another story. They were tired, shadowed by nights spent reliving the cabin and all its tangled emotions.

It wasn't just heartbreak; it was the dissonance of being back in a life that no longer fit.

She stood abruptly, moving to the window as if the eagle-eye view could offer clarity. The city stretched endlessly before her, vibrant and unyielding, but she felt no connection to it now. She had spent years mastering this place, molding herself into someone untouchable. And yet, all it had taken was a storm and a stubborn woman in a cabin to make her question everything.

Vivienne's fingers found her necklace, a simple silver chain with a small pendant she had worn for years. She rolled it between her fingers absently, the motion a tether to the present.

"You're not even here," she whispered to herself under her breath, the words barely audible.

Her phone buzzed, jolting her back to the present. She ignored it. The constant demands of her position, once exhilarating, now felt like white noise. A knock at the door followed, and her assistant peeked inside, timid but determined.

"Ms. Blackwood, the draft is ready for review," she said, holding out a folder.

Vivienne took it without a word, retreating to her desk. She flipped it open, scanning the lines with mechanical efficiency. Every word was polished, every detail accounted for, yet none of it mattered. Not really.

Her gaze drifted to the framed picture on her desk, the one she had ignored for weeks. It held a picture of her and her brother at a gala, both smiling for the camera. She remembered how Alex had asked about him once, a casual curiosity that felt anything but. Alex had cared about the details, about the parts of Vivienne she had long since buried beneath ambition and appearances.

The memory stung, but it also lit a small flame in her chest—a reminder of something she wasn't quite ready to let go. Not just yet.

Vivienne set the folder aside, sat down, and leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes. The city hummed beyond the walls, indifferent and eternal, but inside her office, the silence was deafening.

It wasn't enough. None of it was enough.

Vivienne sat at her desk, her fingers poised over her keyboard, though the words on the screen blurred together, meaningless. Her coffee sat untouched beside her, its once-steamy liquid now cold, a reflection of her lack of focus. The latest projections for the next quarter, notes from a client meeting, and a half-written email were all vying for her attention. But her mind refused to focus. It drifted, as it always did, back to the Rockies, to the cabin, to Alex. She tried to steady herself, to rein in the thoughts that unraveled each time she took a breath, but they slipped away again, tugging her toward memories she wasn't ready to face.

They were still too painful.

She leaned back in her chair, rubbing her temples, her gaze flicking to the skyline outside her office window. The city stretched endlessly, its rhythm a steady hum beneath her feet, but it felt like a backdrop, distant and cold. Not like the cabin—wild but alive, pulling her into its embrace even when it hurt.

Her assistant's voice crackled through the intercom, jolting her from her thoughts. "Ms. Blackwood, there's someone here to see you. They say it's important."

Vivienne frowned, irritation prickling her already frayed nerves. "Is it the investor? I thought we rescheduled."

A pause. “No, ma’am. They aren’t on the schedule.”

Vivienne sighed, straightening her blazer as she sat up in her chair. “Fine. Send them in.”

The door opened, and Vivienne turned with rehearsed composure, ready to dismiss whoever it was. But the words froze in her throat when she saw Alex standing there, her patched pack slung over her shoulder, looking as out of place in her office just as much as Vivienne must have looked out of place that first day in Alex’s cabin.

For a moment, the world stilled. The hum of the city, the ticking of the clock, even her own breath—all of it faded. Only Alex remained, a vivid figure against the muted gray of her office.

“Hi,” Alex said, her voice soft but steady.

Vivienne’s chest tightened, a rush of emotions flooding her—relief, anger, longing, and something deeper, a trembling ache she hadn’t dared to fully feel until now. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t stay away.” Alex stepped forward, her boots scuffing against the waxed floor. “I needed to see you. To tell you”—she hesitated, glancing around the sleek, impersonal office—“to tell you that I was wrong.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:25 pm*

Vivienne folded her arms, more out of habit than defensiveness. “About what?”

“About everything.” Alex met her gaze, her own dark eyes brimming with emotion. “About pushing you away, about thinking this”—she gestured between them—“couldn’t work. I was scared. I am scared. But losing you? It’s worse than anything I could imagine.”

Vivienne’s heart pounded, each word striking a chord she’d tried to silence. But the wounds were still raw, and she wasn’t ready to let them heal so easily.

“You hurt me, Alex.”

“I know.” Alex’s voice cracked, and she dropped the pack to the floor, taking another step closer. “And I’m sorry. For everything. I thought I was protecting both of us, but I was wrong. I don’t want to protect myself from you. I want to be with you, Vivienne. No matter where, no matter how.”

The weight of Alex’s confession settled between them, fragile and heavy. She took a shaky breath, her fingers curling into her palms. “You think it’s that easy? That showing up here and saying this fixes what happened? What you said?”

“No.” Alex shook her head, her expression raw. “I don’t expect this to fix anything. But I needed to try. I needed you to know how I feel, even if it’s too late.”

Vivienne stared at her, her defenses wavering. There was no script for this moment, no prepared answer. All she had was the truth of her own heart, still bruised but beating wildly for the woman standing before her.

It wasn't fair, Vivienne thought. How Alex could stand there, raw and unguarded, offering up pieces of her heart Vivienne had spent weeks trying to forget. The sight of her was like light spilling into a room Vivienne hadn't realized was dark. The ache that had settled in her chest since the night Alex left flared up again, but this time, it wasn't just pain—it was need. The need for the person who had made her laugh and taught her to let go. She wanted to reject it all, to cling to her anger, but that old defense was slipping, crumbling.

She thought of the woman she had been before—driven, exacting, and untouchable. That woman would have dismissed Alex Carter without hesitation, locking her feelings away behind the fortress of her ambition. But that fortress had crumbled, stone by stone, during those days in the mountains. Alex had done more than hurt her; she had forced her to see the parts of herself she'd been too afraid to confront.

“Why now?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“Because being without you was unbearable,” Alex said, stepping even closer, her presence as grounding as the earth beneath them. “Because I love you, Vivi. And if there's any part of you that feels the same, then I'll do whatever it takes to make this work.”

Vivienne's office felt different now, the sterile coldness of the past few weeks receding, replaced by a softness in the air. The tension between them, that heavy, unspoken thing that had been present since Alex's sudden appearance, had started to ease, replaced by the tentative beginnings of something new.

They sat across from one another at Vivienne's desk, close but not quite touching, the space between them filled with the cautious hope of what could be. The shiny glass of the desk reflected their images, two women from entirely different worlds, yet here, in this moment, trying to make sense of a future neither had expected.

Vivienne's fingers rested lightly on the edge of her computer, the rhythm of the city outside faintly echoing in her mind. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this weightless, this free.

The fog of the past few weeks—the arguments, the distance, the unsaid words—had begun to lift, but she knew better than to believe it was gone completely. The future was still uncertain, the unknown vast and daunting, but for the first time, Vivienne wasn't afraid of it. She looked at Alex, the woman who had torn apart her carefully built walls and made her question everything she thought she knew about herself.

Alex caught her gaze, and Vivienne could see the vulnerability in her eyes, the same vulnerability she'd seen in the mountains when Alex had let her in, despite her own reservations. She hadn't expected to feel this—this mixture of trust, relief, and something deeper, something raw. It was messy, it was uncertain, and it was everything Vivienne had been running from for so long.

“So, how does this work?” Vivienne's voice broke the silence, steady but uncertain, as she broke eye contact and looked at the papers scattered across her desk. The weight of the question hung between them, too big to ignore. “You're in the mountains, and I'm here. How do we make that work?”

Alex shifted in her seat, her eyes soft but determined. “I don't know yet. But I'm ready to figure it out.” She paused, her voice taking on a slightly lighter tone. “I'm not saying it'll be easy. I'm not asking for anything perfect.”

Vivienne nodded, her lips pressing together in a thoughtful line. “Neither am I,” she admitted, looking down at her hands. She felt the tension in her shoulders begin to loosen. “I'm just...not sure how we fit into each other's worlds. You have your life there. Your peace. Your freedom.” Her gaze flicked back to Alex. “And I've spent so long building this life, my identity here.”

Alex's smile was small but genuine. "I get that. I don't expect you to leave it all behind for me."

Vivienne's chest tightened at her words, a flicker of the woman she'd been before, the one who had never been afraid to walk away from something that didn't serve her, but now she couldn't shake the feeling that walking away from Alex would cost her more than she was willing to pay. She met Alex's gaze again, her voice quiet but firm. "But I can't keep running from everything, either. From you. From...this."

Alex's eyes softened. "You don't have to. We don't have to know exactly what it looks like right now. We just have to try."

Vivienne leaned back in her chair, folding her arms across her chest. The cool touch of the office air felt different now, more comfortable. The walls weren't closing in anymore. "What does trying look like for you?" she asked, a half-smile tugging at her lips. "You want me to give up my life here for a cabin in the mountains?"

Alex's expression was serious, her voice steady. "I'm not asking for everything to change overnight. I'm asking you to take a chance on something real. On us. I'm asking you to trust me, just like I'm trusting you."

Vivienne took a breath, feeling the air in her lungs as if for the first time in weeks. The air in the room felt less stifling, the weight of the decision ahead no longer as heavy as it had seemed before. She looked at Alex, her heart pounding a little faster, a little louder. It was terrifying, but it wasn't the kind of fear that made her want to retreat. It was the kind that made her want to step forward.

"I think..." Vivienne hesitated, trying to sort through the flood of emotions that were rising within her. "I think I'm ready to try."

Alex's eyes brightened, and she reached out, her hand stopping just shy of



Vivienne's. The touch wasn't necessary, but it felt like the most honest gesture she could offer in this moment. "We'll figure it out. One step at a time."

Vivienne nodded, the promise of it settling in her chest like a quiet thrill. She wasn't sure what this new beginning would look like. There was still so much left unsaid between them, so many questions yet to be answered. But she didn't feel the overwhelming need to have all the answers right away.

For the first time in her life, she was willing to take a risk.

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As they stood together, the weight of the moment settled between them—not as a burden but as something grounding, a foundation they could build on.

“We don’t have to figure it all out right now,” Alex said, her voice steady. “No timelines, no grand plans. Let’s just start with lunch.”

Vivienne blinked, her lips quirking into the faintest smile. “Lunch?”

“Yeah.” Alex grinned, her confidence returning. “Something simple. We’ll eat, talk, and see where it goes. No pressure.”

Vivienne hesitated, glancing around the office as if tethered to it by invisible strings. Her calendar was packed, her emails overflowing—but in this moment, none of it seemed as important as the woman standing before her. She could feel the beginnings of something unfamiliar yet thrilling: the choice to let go, to not have everything mapped out for once.

“Lunch sounds...good,” she said at last. “But you’re paying.”

Alex laughed, a rich, genuine sound that sent warmth blooming through Vivienne’s chest. “Deal.”

They left the office, their steps in sync, a quiet strength between them. As they stepped into the bustling streets, the city alive with the usual noise and rush, they moved together through the crowd, a united front against the uncertainty of the future. Their hands brushed together as they walked, the simple connection more grounding than anything they had said in the past few minutes. They didn’t have it all

figured out, but they didn't need to. For once, it was enough to simply be together, the rest of the world falling away.

The city felt brighter as they walked, the possibilities endless, the future unwritten but full of promise. And for the first time in what felt like forever, Vivienne wasn't afraid to leap.

## EPILOGUE

### 5 YEARS LATER

The mountain air carried a crisp stillness, the kind that only came after fresh snow.

Outside, the world was blanketed in white, the towering pines bowing under the weight of glistening frost. Inside Vivienne and Alex's home, the quiet was filled with a different kind of warmth—a gentle hum of holiday preparation.

The living room was a reflection of the life they had built together. The stone fireplace, Alex's handiwork, crackled with golden flames, while the mantle above it bore elegant garlands of evergreen sprigs and twinkling lights, a nod to Vivienne's eye for detail. Nearby, a Christmas tree stood proud, its decorations a careful mix of shimmering glass baubles and homemade trinkets. One ornament caught the light—a delicate snowflake etched with the words "First Christmas Together," a relic from years past.

Vivienne stood at the dining table, a thoughtful expression on her face as she arranged a centerpiece. Her fingers moved with practiced grace, tucking sprigs of holly among the candles she had chosen for their understated elegance. A faint hum escaped her lips, a melody Alex couldn't quite place but recognized as one of Vivienne's holiday habits—new this year and wholly unintentional.

“Caught you,” Alex teased, leaning in the doorway with a playful grin. She was dressed casually in a flannel shirt and jeans. Her hair, now grown out to her shoulders, was tied back, though wisps had already escaped. “Didn’t think I’d ever hear you humming a Christmas tune.”

Vivienne paused, narrowing her eyes but unable to suppress the slight smirk. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, of course not.” Alex crossed the room, stealing a cookie from the tray Vivienne had set aside for guests. “Must have been the wind whistling Jingle Bells.”

“Those are for the party!” Vivienne swatted at her, but her reprimand lacked any real heat. She shook her head, her dark curls bouncing, and turned her attention back to the table. “And for the record, I wasn’t humming Jingle Bells. I have standards.”

Alex popped the cookie into her mouth with a grin, leaning a hip against the table as she chewed. “Well, whatever it was, I liked it. It’s good to see you enjoying the season.”

The comment caught Vivienne off guard, and for a moment, she stilled, her gaze drifting to the tree. She let out a soft breath, her voice quieter. “I didn’t think I ever would, not like this.”

Alex’s expression softened. She reached out, resting a hand lightly on Vivienne’s back. “You’ve come a long way, Vivi. We both have.”

Vivienne turned to look at her, the warmth in Alex’s dark brown eyes steadying her. It had taken years to unlearn the habits of a life spent rushing from one goal to the next, years to embrace the quiet moments like this one. But with Alex, she’d found her way, not just to the holidays but to something deeper—a home, a life, a sense of belonging.

“Do you think they’ll like it?” Vivienne asked, nodding toward the decorated room.  
“The city crowd and the mountain crowd?”

“They’ll love it,” Alex said without hesitation. “It’s us. A little bit of you, a little bit of me. That’s why it works.”

Vivienne’s lips curved into a smile. Alex was right. The room was a reflection of both of them: the crisp lines of Vivienne’s taste softened by the rustic charm Alex had brought into her life. Even the scent—a blend of pine, cinnamon, and something warm and buttery—felt like a perfect blend of their worlds.

As if on cue, Alex pulled her into a loose hug, resting her chin on Vivienne’s shoulder. “You know,” she murmured, “I think this might be the coziest Christmas yet.”

Vivienne leaned into her, letting her guard down for just a moment. “It’s certainly better than my old routine of work, wine, and denial.”

Alex chuckled, her breath warm against Vivienne’s cheek. “Progress.”

They stood like that for a moment, wrapped in the glow of the firelight and each other. Outside, the wind stirred the snow into a delicate dance, but inside, there was only stillness and peace.

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“Now,” Alex said, pulling back with a glint in her eye, “how about you let me help with something before the guests arrive?”

“Help?” Vivienne arched her brow. “Is this the same Alex who once tried to decorate cookies with a hammer?”

Alex shrugged, unbothered. “Hey, you’ve got to admit, they were pretty memorable.”

Vivienne laughed, the sound light and free. “Fine. But you’re on firewood duty. And no hammers.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Alex winked before heading toward the door, grabbing her coat on the way.

Vivienne watched her go, her heart full in a way it hadn’t been in years. She turned back to her centerpiece, adjusting a single holly berry until it sat just right. The room glowed warmly around her, not just from the lights and fire but from the life she and Alex had created—a life worth celebrating.

Soon after, their guests arrived. The kitchen was alive with the energy of the holiday party preparations. Pots clattered, laughter echoed, and the warm, savory scent of roasted vegetables mingled with the sweetness of spiced cider simmering on the stove. Vivienne moved with practiced efficiency, deftly arranging the last of the hors d’oeuvres on a gleaming silver platter.

“I still can’t believe you’re hosting a Christmas party,” Emma said, leaning against the counter with a glass of wine in hand. Vivienne’s longtime friend from New York

had arrived earlier that day, her suitcase overflowing with designer winter wear ill-suited for the rugged mountain terrain. She was watching Vivienne with amused disbelief, clicking her red nails idly against the glass. “Last I checked, you hated Christmas.”

Vivienne smirked, not looking up from her task. “People change.”

“People do,” Emma agreed, her gaze drifting to Alex, who was hauling in an armful of firewood from outside. Snowflakes dusted her hair, and she greeted the room with a grin that was as easy as it was genuine. “And some people have a very specific influence, it seems.”

“Do you have a point?” Vivienne asked, arching a brow as she placed the platter on the counter.

Emma took a sip of her wine, clearly savoring the moment. “Just that it’s nice to see you like this. Happy. Relaxed.”

Vivienne hesitated, the comment catching her off guard. She glanced around the room, taking in the sight of their guests—friends and family from both their lives mingling. Her mother was chatting with Alex’s father near the fireplace, the two of them laughing over what looked like an old photo album. A group of Alex’s mountain and old snowboarding friends were gathered near the Christmas tree, swapping stories with Vivienne’s colleagues from the city.

It was a strange but heartwarming blend, and for a moment, Vivienne allowed herself to simply be.

“Okay, who’s ready for cider?” Alex’s voice cut through the room as she carried a steaming pot to the counter. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold, and her eyes sparkled with the kind of joy that always seemed to radiate from her.

“Me, please,” Emma said, raising her glass. “And I’ll take mine without the rustic mountain twigs, thanks.”

Alex laughed, pouring the cider into mugs. “It’s a garnish, not a twig. But I’ll make yours extra plain, just for you.”

Vivienne rolled her eyes, grabbing one of the mugs and pressing it into Emma’s hand. “Ignore her. She’s been insufferable since we started decorating.”

“Only because you insisted on color-coordinating the ornaments,” Alex retorted, handing a mug to Vivienne with a wink.

“I was ensuring balance and harmony,” Vivienne shot back, though her smile gave her away.

“Balance, harmony—same thing,” Alex said with a shrug, leaning against the counter beside her. She glanced at the room, her expression softening as she took it all in. “This turned out pretty great, didn’t it?”

Vivienne followed her gaze, the tension she hadn’t realized she’d been holding releasing in a quiet exhale. “Yeah,” she admitted. “It did.”

The party was in full swing now, the air filled with music and the sound of happy conversation. Someone had turned on a playlist of holiday classics, and a few people were swaying to the music near the tree. Vivienne and Alex’s dog, a graying but still sprightly border collie named Scout, weaved through the crowd, earning a steady stream of pets and scraps.

“I’ve got to admit,” Emma said, swirling her cider, “I wasn’t sure how this whole ‘mountain holiday’ thing was going to go. But it’s...nice. Cozy.”



Vivienne smirked. “High praise coming from you.”

“Don’t get used to it.” Emma’s tone was teasing, but there was an undercurrent of sincerity in her words. She glanced toward Alex. “She’s good for you, you know.”

“I know,” Vivienne said quietly, her gaze softening as she watched Alex laugh with a group of guests.

The doorbell rang, and Alex moved to answer it, revealing another group of friends from the nearby town. They entered with bursts of laughter and a flurry of snow, their arms loaded with gifts and bottles of wine. Alex welcomed them with the kind of easy warmth that had first drawn Vivienne to her, and soon the room was alive with even more energy.

“Come on,” Emma said, nudging Vivienne’s arm. “Let’s mingle before the food runs out.”

Vivienne allowed herself to be pulled into the crowd, greeting guests and exchanging stories. Everywhere she looked, she saw evidence of the life she and Alex had built together—a life where their worlds could coexist, where the sharp edges of the past had been softened by the love and trust they had found in each other.

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Later, as the party began to wind down, Vivienne found herself standing by the window, watching the snow fall in lazy arcs. Alex joined her, slipping an arm around her waist.

“Hey,” Alex said, her voice low and intimate. “You okay?”

Vivienne nodded, leaning into her as she ruffled the top of Scout’s furry head. “Just thinking.”

“About what?”

Vivienne hesitated, then smiled. “How lucky I am.”

Alex kissed the top of her head, holding her close. “Me too, Vivi. Me too.”

The room behind them was still full of life, but in that moment, it felt like the rest of the world had faded away. Together, they stood in the glow of the Christmas lights, watching the snow fall, content in the knowledge that they had built something real—something worth celebrating.

The living room glowed with the warm light from the fireplace, the soft hum of conversation punctuated by bursts of laughter. The guests had settled into a comfortable rhythm, some clustered near the Christmas tree, others on the plush couches Alex had stubbornly insisted on keeping despite Vivienne’s argument for something more modern. Now, Vivienne had to admit they fit perfectly, their oversized cushions creating a cozy retreat for their friends and family.

Near the hearth, Alex was in her element, telling a story about a particularly wild rescue mission from her early years in the mountains. Her hands moved animatedly as she spoke, her expression lighting up with each punchline. The crowd around her hung on every word, the warmth of her presence drawing people in like the fire she stood beside.

Vivienne stayed back for a moment, savoring the scene. There was a time she might have felt out of place in a setting like this, surrounded by so much unfiltered joy. But now, it felt natural, like slipping into a perfectly tailored dress.

A hand touched her arm lightly. She turned to see her mother, elegant as ever in a cream-colored cashmere sweater, holding two glasses of mulled wine.

“I thought you could use a drink,” her mother said, passing one to her.

“Thanks,” Vivienne said, taking a sip. The spices were rich and comforting, mingling perfectly with the scent of pine and cinnamon that filled the room. “Enjoying yourself?”

Her mother’s smile was soft, her eyes wandering over the room. “I am. You’ve built something beautiful here, Vivienne.” She looked at her daughter with a rare openness, her voice quieter. “I’m proud of you.”

Vivienne blinked, the words landing with a weight she hadn’t expected. “Thank you,” she said, her throat tight. “That means a lot.”

They stood together in comfortable silence for a moment before her mother added, “Alex is wonderful, by the way. I got her to show me her Olympic medals. Very nice! She also has a real way of making people feel at home.”

“She does,” Vivienne agreed, her gaze finding Alex again. “She’s...” She hesitated,

searching for the right words. “She’s everything I didn’t know I needed.”

Her mother reached over, squeezing her hand. “Hold onto her. Someone like that doesn’t come around twice.”

Vivienne nodded, her chest swelling with gratitude and something deeper—certainty.

As the evening wore on, Alex rejoined her, pulling her gently toward the tree where the crowd had gathered for the final part of the evening. A small stack of presents sat beneath the twinkling lights, and someone had suggested a gift exchange to cap off the night.

“Okay, everyone,” Alex said, raising her voice to quiet the room. “Before we get into this, I just want to say a quick thank you to all of you for being here tonight. This is our first real Christmas party in this house, and it means the world to us that we get to share it with all of you.”

A round of applause and cheers followed, and Alex glanced at Vivienne, her eyes crinkling with affection. “And I also want to thank Vivienne for putting up with my terrible decorating skills and agreeing to host this chaos in the first place.”

Laughter rippled through the group, and Vivienne rolled her eyes playfully. “You’re welcome,” she said dryly, though her smile betrayed her amusement.

As the gift exchange began, Vivienne found herself sitting cross-legged on the floor beside Alex, their shoulders brushing. The room buzzed with warmth and laughter as people unwrapped everything from hand-knit scarves to novelty mugs, the atmosphere light and joyful.

Finally, Alex leaned over, placing a small, neatly wrapped box in Vivienne’s lap.

“This one’s for you,” she said softly.

Vivienne raised an eyebrow, the weight of Alex’s gaze making her pulse quicken. She carefully untied the ribbon, peeling back the paper to reveal a velvet jewelry box. Her breath hitched as she opened it to find a delicate gold bracelet, its charm shaped like a tiny snowflake.

“It’s beautiful,” Vivienne said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Alex reached out, gently clasping the bracelet around her wrist. “It’s a reminder,” she said, her voice steady. “That even in the coldest, hardest times, there’s beauty to be found. And that no matter where we are, I’ll always be here for you.”

Vivienne swallowed hard, the weight of the moment pressing against her chest. She leaned forward, cupping Alex’s face in her hands. “I love you,” she said, her voice breaking slightly. “More than I ever thought I could.”

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Alex smiled, her eyes shining. “I love you too.”

The room around them seemed to fade, the noise and movement blending into a soft hum as they kissed—a kiss that felt like a promise, like every choice they’d made to get here had been worth it.

When they pulled apart, the party had continued around them, but Vivienne felt a sense of stillness, of peace. She looked at Alex, and for the first time in years, she wasn’t thinking about the next deadline, the next obstacle. She was simply here, in this moment, with the woman she loved.

The snow outside had started to fall heavier again, blanketing the world in quiet. From the window, the lights of their home glowed warmly against the dark, a beacon of everything they’d built together.

As the night wound down and the guests began to leave, Vivienne and Alex stood together at the door, bidding each person goodbye with hugs and laughter. When the last guest had gone, they turned back to the living room, now quiet and still.

Alex wrapped an arm around Vivienne’s waist, pulling her close. “Merry Christmas, Vivi.”

“Merry Christmas,” Vivienne replied, resting her head against Alex’s shoulder.

They stood there for a moment, watching the fire crackle and the snow fall outside. The future stretched ahead of them, unknown and full of possibility, but for now, they had everything they needed.

Together.