



# Her Embarrassed Bear Mate (Crescent Lake Bears #5)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** As if a failed one-night-stand wasn't embarrassing enough for Alix, things quickly get worse when she meets Veronica again the next day. This time, they're being introduced by their parents who have started dating each other.

Awkward...

As they navigate their frustrations and feelings surrounding their family, they discover they have a lot in common. Maybe too much. But the more they try to stay away from each other, the more they find themselves drawn together.

Is it fate? There's only one way to find out but it means telling everyone the truth.

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Her Embarrassed Bear Mate is a paranormal fated mates romance featuring a bear shifter and her mate. It includes a standalone romance and a dash of steamy goodness. It is part of the Crescent Lake Bears series.

**Total Pages (Source):** 20

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

ONE

Alix

Alix wasn't someone who usually drank her problems away but the current circumstance definitely warranted it. That was why she found herself inside the bar of a random posh hotel with a ridiculously overpriced cocktail in her hands. She was well aware that getting drunk would solve nothing but she just wanted to forget.

The clicking of heels sounded behind her and a woman sank down on the stool next to her. "Whisky. Neat. And make it a double."

Just from the tone of the woman's voice, Alix could tell she also wasn't having a good day. She didn't know why or what but it made her feel slightly better knowing that all around her, other people were having shitty days too.

She took big swigs from her cocktail, glad that the taste of pineapple masked the harshness of the alcohol. She could never drink whisky the way the woman next to her was chugging it down.

"Another one," they said at the same time.

The bartender gave both of them a polite smile and swiped their empty glasses away.

"Rough night too?" the woman said.

Alix gave her neighbour a proper look. The whisky drinker was a stunner. Dark-

haired with long eyelashes and smokey eyeshadow that made her blue eyes pop. She had a distinct beauty mark under her nose that drew anyone's gaze to her full lips and sat on the barstool like it was a throne. On top of that, her handbag was an expensive brand and the necklace and earrings looked like they cost a fortune.

She was exactly Alix's type. Beautiful, out of her league, and clearly damaged.

"You have no idea," Alix responded finally. Usually, she would never confide in a stranger but that first cocktail was already making her lips looser. "I'm being forced to move even though I don't want to. It's not like I have a choice in the matter. You?"

"My dad is being an asshole."

The bartender arrived with their new drinks.

Alix picked up her pina colada. "Cheers to misery."

"They do say misery likes company," the woman toasted back.

Without hesitation, Alix took a big drink from her cocktail. It was sweet, creamy, and very coconutty. It was also a drink that suited a hot summer day on a beach, not a rainy night in the city. It certainly didn't suit her broody aesthetic.

The woman next to her, that was how it was supposed to look. Beautiful, mysterious, chugging whisky with a doomsday expression.

Alix chugged her cocktail down, trying not to think about how she could've gone to a supermarket and gotten drunk for the price of a single of these overpriced drinks. If it hadn't been raining, that would've been her choice but here she was.

Instead of ordering another pina colada, she asked for a glass of whisky too. The

woman next to her radiated class and wealth so Alix felt silly sitting there with her childish cocktail. She took a big sip, too big, and was overcome by the harsh burnt taste. She fought against the urge to cough which was a big mistake because it made her expel the sip with violent force. It sprayed all over the bar and some of it even hit the other woman's arm.

Alix wanted to die.

"Fuck, I'm so sorry!" she shouted, her entire body growing hot of embarrassment.

The woman next to her was a class act. She just smiled and dried her arm with a little napkin. "It's fine, don't worry about it."

"I'm not used to whisky," Alix confessed.

"I can see that," she said while taking a smooth sip of her whisky. Such a flex.

Alix considered leaving hers except that it cost way too much to waste it. She took the most miniscule sip but it still made her grimace. "Yugh. How can you drink whisky straight-up like that?"

"Practice," the woman rasped. "It's my dad's favourite drink so I developed a taste for it."

"The dad that's being an asshole?"

"The very same. Even when I'm mad at him, I'm still trying to get his approval. Pathetic, right? Anyway, if you don't like whisky, consider yourself lucky. It's a money trap. You have no idea how much money my dad has spent buying the finest bottles of whisky from goddess knows where. Not to drink, but to have."

Just like Alix suspected, the woman next to her wasn't just rich but wealthy. It made her feel even more embarrassed and small. While she got used to the whisky, she checked her phone to see if she had any new messages, like perhaps an apology from her mother, but no. It seemed like her mother genuinely didn't care that she was uprooting their entire life just for a new man.

At twenty-four, Alix was well aware that her mother had every right to move on with her life. She knew some people would probably find it pathetic that she still lived at home or that home was a static home in a trailer park. She should be happy that her mother's new man was opening his fancy mansion to the both of them. Not all her mother's boyfriends had been that generous.

But then again, this wasn't a regular boyfriend. This was a fiancé.

Alix's stomach turned just thinking back to her mother's earlier announcement. No warning, no conversation, no discussion. And somehow she was supposed to be happy for them?

Well, Alix was not happy. Maybe it was selfish but she'd seen enough of her mother's relationships break down over the years and the person who had to pick up the pieces was always Alix. But if they moved out of their home, there would be no more safety net to fall back on.

Why was her mother being so blinded by love?

The woman next to her ordered more whisky and turned to her. "Do you have a cigarette I can borrow?"

"You can't really borrow cigarettes because you consume them," Alix returned, not sure why she was choosing this moment to be pedantic. "But also, no. I don't smoke."

"Neither do I but this seemed like a good moment to start." The dark-haired woman let out a frustrated sigh and her head dropped down on the bar. "Ugh. I hate feeling like this."

Alix hesitated for a moment before reaching over and patting the woman's shoulder. Even though they were total strangers, she felt a sense of kinship with her seat neighbour. "Do you want to tell me why your dad is an asshole?"

"He's always so inconsiderate. He called to say he had something important to tell me but that he couldn't do it over the phone. So I drove all the way over, only to find out that all my other siblings are here too. And who doesn't get a guest room but has to rent an expensive hotel?" The woman pointed at herself. "Me."

"So what's the important news?"

"He still hasn't said! My youngest brother hasn't arrived yet and Dad wants to tell us all at the same time. If I'd known in advance, I would've come over tomorrow. But no, he didn't think about that, did he? It's like he doesn't understand I have my own life."

Alix didn't think it sounded all that bad but she tactfully didn't voice that. She didn't know this woman or their family dynamics or why this was such a big deal. To a degree, her opinion didn't matter. The dark-haired woman was clearly distressed and upset and that was that.

"I know I don't know you but I'm sorry you're having a tough time," she said. There was no reason to socialise or console this stranger, but at least it was taking her mind off her own problems. And all this doom and gloom of drinking in a bar looked good in films but in reality, it wasn't all that fun. She wasn't forgetting anything and she was only making a fool out of herself.

Her seat neighbour dropped her head on the bar. "I know I shouldn't let it get to me but it's always the same story. I thought a drink would calm me down but I'm just getting more and more riled up. A part of me wants to march home and give my dad a piece of my mind."

"Oh, I don't think that's a good idea. Drunk shouting never fixes anything. If you're feeling restless, you should go dancing," Alix suggested.

"Dancing?" The woman turned to look at her, her eyes slightly narrowed. "I don't dance."

"Then maybe you're not drunk enough yet. Drunk dancing is the best."

"If you think so, why are you here instead of drunk dancing yourself?"

"Touché." Alix said, finally cracking a smile. "Well, then maybe you and I should drink some more and find a club to go crazy."

"I don't know you."

Alix shrugged. "So? Do you have something better to do?"

The first smile appeared on the dark-haired woman's face and it instantly made her look a lot more approachable. "I suppose not. Do you know any good clubs?"

"I know all the good clubs. I'm Alix, by the way," she said, deciding that if they were going to party together, she should introduce herself.

"Alix? That's an interesting name. Short for anything? "

Alix had lost count of how many times she'd been asked that throughout her life.

She shook her head, a lot less prickly about it than when she was a child. "Nope, just Alix."

"Okay. Well, it's nice to meet you, Just Alix." A little grin appeared on the woman's face. "I'm Veronica."



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

### TWO

Veronica

Veronica was not the type to go to loud clubs with strangers and yet through a series of confusing events, she found herself dancing in the middle of a packed club with a woman she barely knew.

The song changed to a popular one from the nineties that set the club ablaze. People screamed and shouted and filled the club with a choir of nostalgic singing.

"I love this song!" Alix's hand landed on Veronica's arm. "Ready?"

The haze of alcohol and the electric atmosphere had Veronica in a tight grip. She didn't know why but she could feel herself getting swept up in the moment. She hummed along with the song as she waited for the chorus. A strange sense of freedom bubbled up within her as the beat dropped.

"Jump, jump, jump!" she sang along with everyone else while she pumped her fist in the air and jumped as high as she could. It was a catchy song and laughter welled up from deep within her.

Who knew the night would turn out like this? Somehow, she was actually having fun. She almost felt like a child again, carefree and reckless and without inhibitions or worries.

And it was all thanks to Alix. Veronica didn't know what had brought Alix to that bar

in the first place and if she was honest, she didn't really care. But she was grateful that they met, even if after tonight they would likely go their separate ways and never see each other again.

As Veronica sang along to the music, she took a good look at her newest acquaintance. She was ashamed to say that under normal circumstances, she would never have given Alix any attention. Alix was loud, her clothing cheap and out of season, and her hair was almost certainly coloured with a home kit. It was the kind of person Veronica had been taught to avoid her entire life.

Until now, she hadn't found any reason not to. But there was a sparkle in Alix's eyes that was genuine and a kindness to her smile even though she was clearly going through something herself. More than that, she was kind with the way she comforted Veronica in the bar. And the way Alix danced, it was impossible to look away. She twirled and spun around, clearly not taking herself too seriously. She was just showing off her moves while smiling like she was having the best time in her life, even though that was definitely not true.

Veronica was captivated. In her world, people only considered things beautiful if they were sparkly and perfect and curated. By that description, Alix wasn't beautiful. She was too raw and imperfect and carefree so why was she the most beautiful thing Veronica had ever seen?

The song changed to a slower beat with sensual lyrics. Instantly, the vibe in the club changed from chaotic and bright to dark and intimate.

Someone bumped into her and she fell forward, right into Alix's arms. Before she could apologise, they were dancing together. At first it was just them moving along with the rhythm but it quickly turned into them swaying together. With every movement, she could feel Alix's body against hers. It felt good. Alix was warm and soft and she smelled intoxicating. Kind of floral, slightly musky, a little spicy.

It wasn't clear who let their hands wander first but Veronica could feel Alix's hands slide along her back, down her arms, over the curve of her hips. She was happy to reciprocate and touched Alix wherever she could, enjoying the tension building between them.

“You are so gorgeous,” Alix murmured in her ear.

The warmth and tingling of Alix's breath made Veronica shiver. The sensation intensified even more when she felt a light kiss on her cheek. Not one to shy away from an advance, especially not from someone cute, Veronica initiated the first kiss. She bridged the gap and connected their lips, only lingering for a few seconds in case she had misunderstood.

Alix kissed her back right away with such intensity, it made Veronica weak to her knees. The first flickers of desire sparked through her body as the kiss deepened even more. It was clouding her head and making the rest of the world disappear.

She wasn't someone who believed in love at first sight but right now, she could swear she was in love with Alix. Not in a deep profound forever way but more like an intense rush of infatuation, like making friends on the playground as a child for just a day. Something incredibly deep and fleeting, a perfect memory that could never be tainted or ruined.

Once the kiss ended, she stared at Alix, wondering if there would be more. She did have that hotel room that suddenly sounded worth the outrageous amount of money she was spending on it.

“I think I could use some air,” Alix said, fanning herself.

“Air sounds good.” Veronica intertwined their fingers, her lips still tingling and her mind hazy. The alcohol and the kissing were definitely distracting her from her

troubles because she couldn't think about anything else but Alix and where the night would lead.

She followed Alix outside where they found a dark spot in the courtyard. Some people were smoking and Veronica managed to get two cigarettes off of them for her and her newest companion. She didn't know why but something about this night felt like some sort of fever dream. It was like nothing was real anymore and she attributed it to her mental state, the alcohol, and the company.

"How are you feeling?" Alix asked .

"Better," Veronica said as she searched her feelings. "Lighter."

"See, I told you drunk dancing is better than ranting."

"You were right. This is fun. I can't remember the last time I felt like this." She looked at the other woman, her head clearing up a little from the cool night air. "Are you okay?"

Alix leaned her head against the wall behind them. "Yes, I'm having a good time. You're Fun."

A laugh forced its way out of Veronica's mouth. "That's not something I hear often."

"Really?"

"Hmm. I've always been the diligent type. Study over play."

Alix gave her a curious look. "By choice? Or is this coming back to you wanting your dad's approval?"

“You’re reading me like an open book.” She leaned her head back too. “I know nothing about you except that you’re moving against your will. Why? Bad landlord?”

“No, bad mother. Well, no, that's not fair to my mum. I’m the one being difficult.” Alix took a drag from the cigarette in a way that made it very clear this wasn't the first time she smoked.

Unlike her trying the whisky.

Veronica smiled just thinking about it.

“What?” Alix asked.

“Nothing, just thinking you’re cute.”

Alix smiled and leaned in, connecting their lips once more. Unlike the kiss inside that had been wild and heated and charged, this one was softer and slower. There was the aftertaste of smoke and the softness of Alix's tongue, it made heat settle in Veronica’s stomach.

Going out and hooking up with a stranger wasn't her thing either but right now, she truly felt tempted.

When Alix pulled away, she was grinning. “See. You are fun.”

Veronica wondered if this was something Alix did often but she decided she didn't care. To a degree, she was glad she didn't know anything about the other woman. It felt freeing to not care if the person in front of her was a shifter, or if they were from the right family, or whether they were looking for the same thing in life. There was just Alix and her soft lips and the wonderful heat in Veronica's stomach that was growing more and more demanding with every second.

“Where are you staying tonight?” Veronica whispered .

Alix potentially looked surprised but pleased too. “Depends. Do you have any suggestions?”

“I have a hotel room that’s very empty. I could use company.” It was a bold proposal, one that was out of character for Veronica but she could tell Alix was keen and for once, she just wanted to feel wanted.

Alix gave her a dazzling smile. “Okay.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

### THREE

Alix

Alix was slightly dizzy by the time they reached the hotel room, the alcohol hitting her at full force now she was no longer dancing. She abandoned her jacket on the ground and almost tripped over her own feet when she kicked her shoes off. The carpet was soft and fluffy which suited the room. Even in her drunk state, she could tell it was far more luxurious than any Alix had ever been in. There was fancy tea on the table, upholstered chairs that looked comfortable and weren't bolted to the floor, and a high-thread bedspread. She didn't have long to admire the room, Veronica's hands were all over her and Alix could feel the heat building in her body. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been touched like this, so desperately and eagerly.

Desire sparked through her body, intensifying every graze and touch and press from Veronica's. It was intoxicating and made her head spin in a completely different way.

She bumped into the edge of the raised bed and lost her footing. The springs in the mattress creaked comically loudly as she fell down on it and the sound made Alix explode in laughter.

Veronica watched her with an amused expression. "You okay?"

Alix snorted and bounced herself up and down, using the mattress like a bouncy castle. The shrieking sound tickled her and she couldn't stop laughing. "This is fun."

“You’re adorable,” Veronica remarked as she pulled her top off and dropped it on the floor.

Instantly, Alix's attention was drawn and she sat back, blatantly admiring the woman in front of her. Veronica’s blue bra had little flowers on it and as pretty as it was, Alix just wanted to rip it off. She sat up and pulled Veronica into her so she could reach around for the clasp. Despite opening a bra every day, her fingers were not cooperating.

“I’ll do it,” Veronica said, reaching behind and letting the bra fall away with a grin. She undid her belt and pushed her expensive-looking trousers down, wiggling her hips seductively while she did.

Alix admired the little show, fully aware that she would never be able to match that elegance even if she were sober. Her gaze latched onto the elegant marking just above Veronica’s hip. As large as the size of a hand and composed of elegant swirling lines, it was no doubt a bear mark.

It was beautiful and Alix was mesmerised.

Without thinking, she brushed her fingers over the raised lines. “You’re a bear shifter? Or is it the mark of your fated mate?”

“So you're aware of what these markings mean?” Veronica looked surprised but pleased. “So it’s true what they say about the city. It is a public secret that shifters live in the nearby cottages.”

“I don't know about the city, but I grew up in Crescent Valley. I know all about the shifters who live there,” Alix declared, proud of her hometown even if she didn't always love it.



“Ahh, I see.” Veronica smiled. “And I’m a bear shifter. Hope that doesn't scare you off.”

“Not at all.”

As much as Alix enjoyed the view, she missed Veronica’s lips and body against hers. She pulled Veronica back in and captured her with more intense kisses. The way Veronica melted against her was divine. They were somehow a perfect fit.

Eager for more, Alix reached for the hem of her shirt, desperate to pull it off. Her clumsy alcohol-heavy arms let her down again and she got stuck in the fabric.

“Help!”

Veronica came to her aid, freeing her from the shirt prison. She was chuckling the entire time and Alix burst into another bout of giggles. All the alcohol she drank was definitely catching up with her and turning her into a silly mess. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been this drunk. Maybe never, except for the very first times she’d experimented with beer and alcopops as a teen. There was always too much pressure to be responsible and good for her to let loose.

But not tonight. Tonight, she was delightfully drunk and determined to live for herself for once. She wanted fun and sex and freedom.

Once she was rid of her shirt, she attempted to undo her own bra and struggled with it all the same. For some reason, her arms were twisting the wrong way and not managing to accomplish what she wanted.

“My fingers aren’t working,” Alix complained, snorting when she realised what she just said. “That’s not good for later. At least my tongue’s fine.”

“Are you sure? Because you’re slurring a little,” Veronica teased. She sat down on the bed, her hand resting on Alix's thigh. “Are you sure you want to continue? You might be a bit too drunk.”

“No, let’s do this!” Alix countered. She jumped off the bed so she could remove her jeans but staggered and thudded down on the ground. A shock of pain travelled up through her tailbone but it wasn’t nearly as bad as the embarrassment welling up in her. So much for being sexy and seductive.

Veronica held her hand out. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just hurt my bum,” Alix admitted sheepishly.

“I would offer to kiss it better but I think maybe you should have some water instead,” Veronica said in a very motherly tone. “I’ll get you some.”

While Veronica opened the window and grabbed a bottle of water from the mini bar, Alix sat back down on the bed. Her head was spinning and she wanted to die of embarrassment. The one time she tried to have a fun casual hook-up, she was actually too drunk to make it happen.

She had some water and enjoyed the fresh air, both helping to sober her up. It was slightly strange to have someone who was practically a stranger look after her with such attentiveness and care. It felt more intimate than making out, especially because they were both half undressed.

Alix reached for her shirt and pulled it back on. Even without buttoning it up, it made her feel less exposed and vulnerable. Unsurprisingly, Veronica put her shirt back on too which made it pretty clear the night was over.

“I’m sorry,” Alix said. “I didn't realise I was this drunk.”

Veronica gave her a smile. “No, you seemed fine at the club.”

“I think it only properly hit me now.” Alix put the bottle aside. While the water helped, her head was still heavy and had started to pound. “Sorry, I think I need a moment to lie down.”

“Go for it.”

Alix wanted to apologise some more but as soon as her head hit the pillow, the world started slipping away from her. She slurred some more words as sleep took over, bringing the night to a final, sexless, embarrassing end.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

### FOUR

Alix

Alix hugged her stomach as the car went over a speedbump. Her whole body was aching from the copious amounts of alcohol she drank last night and she had a pounding headache on top of that.

“You’re being quiet,” her mum remarked from the driver’s seat. “Where were you last night? Why didn’t you come home until this morning?”

Memories of her time with Veronica flooded her mind and she pushed them away before they made her feel even more awkward.

As lovely as the whole night had been, waking up in a random empty hotel room with just a thank you note hadn’t exactly been good for her ego.

Just thinking about it made Alix physically recoil. So embarrassing. She’d known it would likely be a one-night thing, something born from convenience and opportunity, but she hadn’t expected to be thrown aside like that.

“Alix?” her mum prompted, her eyes fixed on the road.

“I was out with Aditi and stayed over at her place,” Alix lied, mentally sending an apology to one of her best friends because she was using her as an alibi.

Her little sister, Trixie, chimed in from the backseat. “I like Aditi, she’s pretty.”

“She is,” Alix agreed.

“I was worried about you,” her mum said.

“I messaged you that I was okay.”

“Still. You know how important this dinner is to me. I really really like Dirk and he was so kind as to invite us over for a big family dinner.”

Alix refrained from pointing out that she would never see her mum's new boyfriend as family or that with them there, it wasn't a family dinner for Dirk and his adult children either.

For now, it was better to bite her tongue and hope her mother came to her senses before she sold their home.

They arrived at Dirk's house which was a mansion compared to their static home. Off street parking, beautiful ruby brickwork, large windows, and a double door. Nothing said wealth as a large front door. It was in a good part of town too which confirmed what Alix has been worrying about all this time. This was a wealthy man which meant he would always have more power in the relationship. If her mother was lucky, he wouldn't use it against her but no matter how Alix looked at it, if they got married, her mother's well-being would always be in the hands of this man.

She followed her mum to the front door, carrying the bottle of cheap wine they brought as a gesture more than a gift. Everything about this made her feel uncomfortable but she was just going to have to put up with it.

After all, she loved her mum and this was clearly important to her.

The door swung open and Dirk himself appeared with a big grin on his face.

“Hello, you gorgeous thing!” He embraced Alix's mum and kissed her on the mouth, lingering for longer than necessary .

Alix wished she could be anywhere but here. She gave Dirk an awkward hug on the way in and followed him into his house.

The hallway led to an open living area with white leather sofas in front of an oversized TV. Two younger versions of Dirk rose up to greet them and Alix didn't need to exchange a single word with them to realise they were uncomfortable too.

“Jonas,” the tallest one introduced himself. He looked to be somewhere in his late twenties but it was hard to tell.

“Levi,” the other son said, looking quite a bit younger with his spots and boyish face. He was likely somewhere around eighteen, although it was hard to say with boys around that age.

She shook both their hands politely. “Alix, nice to meet you.”

“And I’m Trixie!” her little sister announced, bouncing over to them to shake their hands too.

Her mum came over to greet the sons. “I’ve heard so much about you two. It’s so lovely to finally meet you. I’m Dianne. Gosh, you two are handsome. You take after your father for sure.”

Alix genuinely wanted to throw up. Instead, she offered the bottle of wine to Dirk. “Thank you for having us over for dinner.”

Dirk’s gregarious smile didn't really suit him. “Of course. It’s only right to have a proper family dinner now your mum and I are getting married.”

Delusional. This would never be a proper family. Alix tried everything she could not to roll her eyes at the whole thing.

Another man came in from the garden, looking a bit older than the other sons. He introduced himself as Nate and shook everyone's hand, including Trixie's.

"That's all your boys. Where's your daughter?" her mum asked.

"She's somewhere," Dirk said, looking around.

"She's on the loo," Levi chimed in.

A door opened behind Alix and she turned, preparing herself to meet the third sibling. Her mouth dropped when she made eye contact with the tall dark-haired beauty from last night. Veronica was even more beautiful than Alix remembered and it made her stomach clench.

Recognition and surprise flashed over Veronica's face but disappeared quickly as she recomposed herself.

"You must be Veronica," Alix's mum said, oblivious to the tension hanging in the air.

Veronica gave her a wide smile but it was nothing like the smile she had last night. "I am. It's nice to meet you."

A horrible feeling of dread settled in Alix's stomach and she was pretty sure it wouldn't soon clear up. Of all the people, why did she have to run into Veronica again? Memories of last night flooded her mind and it made her stomach clench. It has been such a wild and wonderful night, it was cruel that it ended like this.

And Alix thought the empty bed was bad. This was a hundred times worse.

The dark-haired woman paused in front of her, her expression and eyes blank. She held out her hand. “Hi, I’m Veronica.”

So they were pretending they didn’t know each other then? That was probably for the best. Alix had no desire to explain to anyone how they already knew each other.

“Alix. Nice to meet you,” Alix said, surprised her mouth was still working considering how heavy her tongue felt.

“I’m Trixie! Trixie Jones,” her little sister announced again, as always happy to meet new people.

Veronica chuckled, a lovely sound. “Nice to meet you, Trixie Jones. I’m Veronica Bearson. ”

Bearson. So on the nose.

Dirk clapped his hands. “Great, now that everyone has met, we can get this party started. Boys, help me set the table.”

“We’ll help too,” her mum said, pulling Trixie along.

While the others got into action, Alix had only eyes for Veronica. Her vibe was totally different from last night. Her whole body was stiff and tense, and her smile was so disingenuous.

Alix didn't need to ask, she remembered Veronica’s lamenting crystal clear. She wanted to say something but she didn't know what. What was there to say?

Veronica spoke first. “I’m sorry.”



Alix made sure nobody was within earshot but she didn't need to worry, nobody was paying them any attention.

“What are you apologising for? Accidentally sleeping with the daughter of your dad’s new fiancée or abandoning me in the hotel this morning?” Alix asked. It came out snappier than she intended but this whole situation was already bad enough, she didn't need this on top of the mess.

A sheepish look appeared on Veronica's face. “Both. My dad called really early because Jonas finally arrived.”

“You could've woken me.”

“Yeah, I'm sorry. I just felt awkward and wanted to get out of there,” Veronica admitted, her gaze falling to the floor.

At least she was honest.

“I'm guessing the engagement was the news?” Alix asked.

“Yup, that and this surprise meet-the-family dinner.” Veronica looked like she could murder someone and that someone was likely her dad.

Alix felt a little twinge of compassion. At least she'd known this was happening.

“Sorry,” Alix said.

The smallest of smiles lifted Veronica's lips. “For what? For being the daughter of my dad’s new fiancée or for unknowingly ambushing me and my siblings?”

“Also both.”

Before they could chat more, her mother called them over and that put an end to the conversation. The last thing Alix wanted was to have dinner with them but she had no choice. She just hoped it would be over soon and that Veronica wasn't going to tell them about last night.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

FIVE

Veronica

Veronica was trying her hardest not to stare at Alix but it was difficult when they were sitting opposite of each other at the table. Her heart was still pounding like crazy from seeing her again. The one time she let her hair down and did something wild. It was like the universe was punishing her.

To make matters worse, Alix looked super cute in her low jeans and floral shirt. It was a different outfit than last night but it suited her. She wore a dangly necklace that disappeared into her cleavage and Veronica remembered running her hands all over Alix's body.

She could still feel Alix's lips on hers.

Their eyes met and Veronica quickly looked away, embarrassed she was caught staring. It was bad enough that she knew what the woman in front of her looked like naked, she didn't need to be thinking about it now.

Her dad passed the salt around. "So, Trixie, is that short for anything?"

"No, I'm just Trixie," Trixie replied with a big grin. "And Alix is just Alix."

The memory made Vanessa smile. There was nothing just about Alix.

"I wanted special names for my special girls," Dianne added, sounding very pleased

with herself. The way she looked at Alix was with pure adoration too.

Veronica's stomach clenched. From what she'd seen so far, Dianne seemed like a perfectly okay woman but that didn't stop the fact that this whole thing was weird.

“So how did you two meet?” Jonas asked, diplomatic as always. Inside, he was likely just as angry about this but he was doing a good job not showing it .

“A speed dating event,” Dianne admitted a bit sheepishly.

It took everything Veronica had not to roll her eyes or glare at her dad. Why was he speed dating when the divorce wasn't even finalised? For that matter, why was he proposing to another woman before the divorce? Him and her mother hadn't been separated for all that long either.

Levi was less tactful. “Have you told mum about the engagement?”

“Of course,” their dad said. “She's happy for me.”

This time, Veronica couldn't hold back her scoff. Knowing their mother, she was anything but happy about this development.

Everyone looked at her and an awkward silence fell over the dining table.

“Some food went down the wrong pipe,” Veronica lied, not wanting to explain why this whole thing was rubbing her up the wrong way.

She knew her brothers wouldn't believe her but her dad and Dianne bought the excuse. When she accidentally looked Alix in the eye, she saw her own feelings mirrored in them.

Lots of unhappy people around the table then.

Her dad was happily oblivious to the tension around the table and kissed Dianne's cheek before turning his attention back to Veronica and her siblings. "I'm so glad you finally get to meet this lovely lady. I can't remember the last time I've been happy like this. The last few years were not good years, but you know that."

A hint of guilt welled up in Veronica but it only made her angrier. While she wanted her parents to be happy, she didn't like that their dad was dissing their mum behind her back. Maybe he didn't love their mum anymore but Veronica did and it would've been nice if he remembered.

Dianne lovingly rubbed his arm. "I know, darling. But upwards and onwards, right? We're going to make lots of happy memories together."

Veronica pushed her plate away. She hadn't been very hungry anyway but now her appetite was totally gone. If she were younger, maybe she would've thrown a tantrum but there was no point. She could tell from the way her dad was looking at Dianne, he was totally and utterly smitten.

Whether it was genuine love or just midlife-crisis lovebomb infatuation, that remained to be seen.

Their dad, oblivious to the tension, ate his salad. "Alix, your mum told me you work at a retirement home. What's that like?"

"It's... a job you need to love to do it," Alix said with an uncomfortable smile. "But luckily, I love it. I'm good at taking care of people."

"Veronica is like that too. She's a paediatric nurse," her dad bragged. "You two would probably get along well then."

He had no idea.

Veronica glanced up at Alix and their eyes met. For a moment, all she could see was the woman from last night. The way Alix's eyes had become dark with want, the crook of her very sensitive neck, the relaxed smile she had after she was thoroughly exhausted.

The thoughts made Veronica's pulse quicken and she quickly looked down.

It was a good thing that nobody knew just how well they got along.

She was grateful when Dianne spoke.

“Speaking of getting along, Dirk invited us to his birthday party in two weeks.”

“Party!” Trixie cheered.

Veronica wasn't looking forward to having this new woman inserted into their lives but she understood that her dad wanted his new girlfriend at his party. For now, she would put up with it.

After dinner, she found a brief moment of privacy to chat with Alix while her brothers went outside to shoot some hoops.

“I still can't believe you're Dianne's daughter,” Veronica said as they stood by the window.

Alix grimaced. “Yeah, I'm not thrilled about it either.”

“Do we need to talk about last night?”

“What’s there to talk about? We can’t tell anyone. We should just pretend it never happened.”

That stung but Veronica didn’t let it show on her face. “It’s not like we knew our parents were dating.”

“Still, it’ll be awkward if they find out we almost slept together. The whole situation is weird enough as it is.”

It didn't sit well with Veronica but what was there to say? If Alix didn't want to acknowledge the connection they made, then that was that. And it would be awkward if this came to light.

Veronica just shrugged as she hugged herself a little tighter. “Fine. We’ll pretend it never happened.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

SIX

Alix

After a few evenings of listening to her mum gush about Dirk, Alix was beyond relieved when she could escape on Friday night for her weekly ladies night.

She sipped her very tasty margarita on Aditi's sofa and enjoyed the peace and quiet.

"I had the worst week at work," Aditi announced as she settled on the other side of the sofa, tired rings around her dark brown eyes. "My supervisor is killing me with my shifts. It's like she doesn't believe I need sleep?"

"Is that the same supervisor who steals your lunch?"

"No, that's a different one." Aditi groaned loudly. "I hate being so low down the shit pyramid."

Alix gave her friend a consoling little pat on the shoulder. "There, there, it'll get better soon."

Maria chuckled, sensibly not drinking margaritas. "At least you can still go to work. I'm just a fat whale that lies around the house all the time."

"Because you're growing a human being," Alix pointed out.

"Or a shifter," Maria muttered. "It's a good thing they don't come out like that. I



don't want a bear shooting out of my vagina."

Aditi laughed. "Gross. Let's talk about something that won't make my stomach turn. Alix, how are you with your mum's new engagement?"

"Oh don't get me started. She dragged me and Trixie all the way over to have some misguided family dinner with her new boyfriend and his children because, in his words, we're all going to be a family!"

Aditi made a retching sound, as any good friend should. "Deluded. What were his children like?"

The image of Veronica imposed itself on Alix's brain and she felt her ears heat up. "They were... ok ay. He has three sons, one daughter. Can't say I paid much attention to the sons."

"Oh-oh... hot step-sister alert?" Aditi teased, not knowing just how close she was to hitting the nail on the head.

Alix buried her face in her hands. "Remember a few days ago when I messaged you for an alibi?"

"Yes. What was all that about?"

"I went out drinking. And I met someone."

"Okay...? I'm sensing a but."

"We met in a bar, she seemed in a really shitty mood, I was in a shitty mood. One thing led to another, we went clubbing and ended up kissing." Alix was well aware she was rambling and delaying what she really needed to say. She took another big

gulp of her margarita for liquid courage. “We almost slept together.”

Aditi gave her a typical Aditi look, with one perfect eyebrow cocked and icy glint in her eyes. She suffered no fools. “I don’t see what this has to do with needing an alibi. It’s not like your mum is going to be upset that you had a little one-night-stand.”

“I almost slept with the hot step-sister. Emphasis on almost because I was so drunk, I couldn’t get it up. Metaphorically,” Alix blurted out. Under different circumstances, she would’ve been pleased that she’d made the unflusterable Aditi look so surprised, but it only drove home how awkward and absurd this situation was.

“No!” Aditi looked genuinely mortified. “You’re lying. No!”

Maria just cackled. “Oh, Alix...”

“That dinner was the most awkward night in my life. When I told Lena—” she promptly swallowed her sentence. “Sorry.”

Aditi smiled but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Why are you apologising? I know you’re still hanging out with her. I don’t expect you to stop chatting just because Lena and I broke up. We were all friends first.”

Alix grimaced. “Still, I know it’s a sore spot.”

“I’m over her.” Aditi’s left eye twitched. She was lying and everyone knew she was lying.

“Alix, tell me more about your new step-sister,” Maria said tactfully.

“Don’t call her that.” Alix held out her empty glass for more margarita from the jug. “Her name is Veronica and she’s ridiculously gorgeous. Like, insane. Honestly, she’s

up there with Aditi.”

“Stop.” Aditi scoffed, somehow genuinely oblivious to how beautiful she was just because she didn’t meet the typical beauty standards. But anyone with eyes could tell she was stunning with her flawless brown skin, elegant nose, and those soulful dark brown bambi eyes.

“I’m serious. Objectively, you could be a model.” Alix sighed thinking about Veronica and her magnetising gaze. “But Veronica is fiiiiine ! Smoking hot. I honestly thought I was going to combust on the spot when I saw her.”

Aditi snorted. “Wow, hello, smitten kitten. What did your mum say about all this?”

“I didn't tell her! How awkward would that be? By the way, mum, I slept with the daughter of your fiancé?" Alix got second-hand embarrassment for herself. "Veronica and I agreed to keep it a secret from everyone so don't tell your mum either because then she'll tell my mum.”

“I won't,” Aditi promised.

Alix complained a bit more about the evening while Aditi complained about her job and Maria grumbled about being pregnant. There was comfort and relief in sharing their frustrations, even if they weren't able to find solutions. It was just nice to know someone cared.

After Maria went home to rest, Aditi made another pitcher of margaritas. Alix happily poured herself another glass, glad to let her hair down after the stressful eventful week she had.

“I’m hungry. Do you want to order pizza?” Alix proposed.

Aditi shook her head. “I ordered pizza last night but I have leftovers from my mum in the fridge if that’ll do?”

“Ooh, yum. Did she make her saag paneer?”

“Yes, she knows it's your favourite.”

Alix got up and swayed towards the kitchen, slightly unsteady on her feet thanks to the margaritas. She grabbed bowls from the cupboard and shamelessly opened the fridge. There was a kind of comfort and familiarity that came from their mothers being friends and practically growing up in each other’s houses.

Sometimes, she thought of Aditi more as a sister than Trixie.

It wasn't that she didn't love her little sister but the big age difference meant they hadn't grown up together whereas Alix and Aditi had.

After they devoured the reheated food at the kitchen table, Alix felt sleepy and relaxed. She rested her head on the table, her mouth tingling ever so slightly from the food. Saag paneer wasn't spicy- spicy but as always, Alix had a few bites of the vindaloo and that had left her tongue burning.

They also had more margaritas which explained why they were downloading a dating app on Aditi's phone and picking out pictures for her profile. As beautiful as Aditi was in real life, she did not like taking photos and she wasn't good at it either. Or maybe photos just couldn't capture how gorgeous she was.

As they looked through Aditi's gallery, copious pictures of her and Lena filled the screen.

Alix glanced at Aditi, trying to work out how her friend was feeling about all this.

The break-up wasn't super fresh but anyone would feel tender after ending a four-year relationship and a five-year friendship.

"Definitely not those," Aditi muttered, quickly swiping past the pictures with her ex only for more to appear. She sighed deeply. "I should delete these, I just haven't got around to it."

"You also don't have to. She was a big part of your life, you don't have to pretend it didn't happen," Alix said, feeling more forgiving and sentimental than while she was sober.

Finally, they found some good pictures of just Aditi and uploaded those to her profile. Alix helped with listing good qualities and then it was time to swipe. Since Aditi was a bear shifter, she was looking for kin and humans but there was no way to set that as a parameter in the app. Instead, they had to rely on limiting the search radius and hunt for clues in people's bios like emojis or code words.

"Too old," Aditi said, even though she chose the age limits. She continued swiping. "Too young. Too perky. Too macho. Too tall. Too short."

Alix rolled her eyes. "Come on, you're not giving anyone a chance. You're the one who wanted to try online dating."

"But none of them do it for me," Aditi complained, not even looking at the pictures as she swiped the people away.

"Stop!" Alix almost slapped the phone out of Aditi's hand. "Fuck, that's Veronica."

Now Aditi was interested. Her eyes shimmered like she just stumbled upon a treasure trove. "Ooooooh. Hello, hot step-sister."

Alix swatted the back of Aditi's head. "Don't call her that!"

"She's cute," Aditi agreed as she flicked through the various pictures of Veronica. "Not my type, though."

"Thank the Goddess for that." Alix leaned closer so she could go through Veronica's profile. It did feel a bit dodgy that she was having a little stalk but she was drunk and she was curious.

From the various pictures, it was clear that Veronica hiked. Or liked to pretend she did. This was an online dating profile, everything was always embellished. There was an adorable picture of her with a cute black cat that made Alix's heart melt and a gorgeous shot of Veronica in a little red bikini that looked like it had come straight from the two-fold in a sexy magazine.

Alix fanned herself. "Told you. Smoking hot."

"You should make yourself a dating profile and match with her," Aditi advised, looking a lot more excited by that prospect than her own dating life.

"No! Were you not listening to the whole story? I need to stay the heck away from her," Alix said, her mind swirling with images of their night together and that horrible awkward dinner. The whole thing was like some sort of soap opera and she couldn't believe this was happening to her in real life.

In any case, she was determined to keep the whole thing a secret and not let anyone know how attractive she found Veronica. Especially not Veronica.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

SEVEN

Veronica

It was strange enough to Veronica that her mum and dad didn't live together anymore, but a whole other out-of-body experience to arrive at her childhood home and find it filled with strangers. She wasn't so naïve to forget that her parents were both adults with their own lives, but that didn't explain why she had never met some of these people before. Did her dad never invite any of his friends to the family parties or were these all people he had met in the last months of being single?

She didn't know and she didn't like it either.

With her birthday present under her arm, she searched the crowd for her dad. There were people everywhere, all chatting and drinking and laughing rambunctiously. She found her dad in the kitchen making small talk with his arm wrapped tightly around Dianne. The sight made Veronica's jaw clench. She knew her parents hadn't been happy for a while but it was still confronting to see her dad so loved-up.

He waved when he saw her and hugged her when she was closer.

"Happy birthday, Dad."

He beamed. "I'm so glad you could make it."

Veronica wasn't. She wished she had a good excuse not to attend the party but she didn't like lying. Instead, she screwed on a smile and handed him his present. She'd

gone through great trouble to find a bottle of his discontinued favourite whisky and paid the online seller handsomely for it.

He only glanced into the gift bag and set it aside without much care. "Thank you, sweetheart. You haven't eaten yet, have you? There's a food truck coming later and I've organised an open bar tonight. They're dispensing drinks on the patio. You should get yourself something nice."

Veronica gritted her teeth. "Sure." Without another word, she made her way to the patio. She'd planned on driving back to her hotel tonight but decided that she would get a cab back instead so she could help herself to alcohol. Lots of alcohol. She wanted to be anywhere but here but there was no escaping the party. The ironic part about that was that her dad likely wouldn't pay her much attention but he would definitely notice if she wasn't here.

The patio doors were open and there were lots of people outside, all grouped around the rented patio heaters. Veronica could smell the harsh smoke of cigarettes and the sweet scent of vapes. She continued on to the bar where two men in neat white shirts were serving drinks. There was even a little menu printed out.

"Can I have a gin and tonic, please?" she ordered.

While she waited, Alix appeared out of nowhere with an empty glass in her hand. She looked taken aback and smiled hesitantly. "Hey."

"Hi." Veronica's gaze dipped automatically as it took in the whole of Alix. She stood out in the crowd and not just because she was a young woman in a sea of men. Alix was dressed differently, sporting nice dark jeans and a practical thick jumper that catered to the weather instead of current fashion. Her big earrings looked handmade and her handbag was worn but well loved .



There was no denying it, Alix was totally charming. She ordered a mojito and then they were both waiting, standing close, gazing at each other.

"Does your family always throw such big parties?" Alix asked eventually, hugging herself tightly.

Veronica shrugged, also holding her coat closed. "I suppose so."

"Must be nice to have money," Alix muttered under her breath.

The comment irked Veronica and while her first reflex was to refute it, she couldn't deny that her family was well off. The house had four bedrooms and a large garden that bordered a little stream. Not to mention, it was a nice area with expensive cars and neighbours who sent their kids to private school and retired early. It certainly was a big difference to the Alix's family who apparently lived in a caravan park.

It was a caravan park in a good area, but still. It did make her worry if Dianne was infatuated with her dad or her dad's money. It was something Veronica was determined to find out, although she was under no illusion that her dad would care.

She was glad when her drink arrived and she immediately took a big swig .

Alix watched her intently. "Hmm. I've seen that before. Is it that kind of night again?"

"You bet."

A faint smile lifted Alix's lips as she accepted her cocktail. "Same here. This is my second and I've only been here fifteen minutes."

Understanding filled Veronica and she cracked a smile of her own. "Looks like we're in the same boat again. And this time, we know we're drinking because of the same

thing whereas that night, we were blissfully unaware how our shitty moods were related."

Alix gave her a curious look. "I thought we were pretending that never happened."

"Right." She took another big swig from her drink. "So should we start over?"

"Sure." Alix held out her hand. "Hi, I'm Alix. My mum is marrying your dad."

It was amazing how such a simple sentence could feel so suffocating. Veronica practically downed her gin and tonic, not even wincing from the bitter taste.

"Woah, easy there," Alix remarked.

"Says Miss Two Cocktails In Fifteen Minutes," Veronica bit back.

Alix just looked amused. "Alright, so I don't have much of a leg to stand on. Sue me. I've never been to a birthday party like this. What am I even supposed to do?"

A smile curled Veronica's lip up. "You're supposed to chat and mingle and drink."

"Sounds more like an office mixer than a family party," Alix muttered under her breath.

She wasn't wrong. The whole thing was stiff and weirdly formal, especially now Veronica didn't know anyone. She felt like a stranger in her own home and she didn't like it one bit. She couldn't wait to leave but since that wasn't an option at the moment, she got herself another drink and made polite and boring small talk with everyone. The more people she spoke to, the more she drank.

After a little while and a lot of drinks, her dad announced that he wanted to give a

speech. Everyone gathered around while he stood in front of the hearth, the same place he always stood with Veronica's mum but this time with Dianne attached to him.

"Friends, family, I'm so grateful that you could all be here for my birthday party. Your presence here is the best gift any man could have. I hope you're all enjoying yourself. I certainly am. What more does a man need than his loved ones, a cold glass of whisky, and a good woman by his side?" He kissed Dianne demonstratively. "As you all know, I've been going through a rough time but I'm so glad to leave that all behind me. Those dark days are over and I'm excited to fill my life with more light. So thank you all for being here and celebrating with me. I hope you enjoy the party. It wouldn't be possible without the wonderful Dianne so let's raise a glass to her!"

Everyone cheered and clapped it but just left a bitter taste in Veronica's mouth. As irrational as it was, she couldn't shake the feeling that her dad was betraying her mum. Maybe not in practicality but certainly in spirit. They weren't even divorced yet. How was her dad already this deep into a new relationship and parading his new woman around like she was the main character in his life? Especially because he was in a total love bubble and totally oblivious to what anyone else thought of this all.

Veronica wanted to be happy for him, she really did, but he wasn't making it easy when he was happily declaring that he was renouncing the past. It made her feel like he was renouncing her too.

She ordered herself more drinks and wallowed quietly in a corner. By the time she circled back to Alix, it was a lot later, she was a lot drunker, and definitely no longer thinking straight.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

### EIGHT

Alix

Sitting under a commercial space heater, Alix couldn't quite comprehend how much money Dirk was spending on this party and she felt bad about how many expensive cocktails she was drinking. If it were up to her, she would've stopped at two but every time Dirk saw her without a drink in her hand, he encouraged her to the bar.

It made her wonder exactly how rich he was and whether he was using his money to buy his way into her mother's heart. This whole party certainly felt extravagant but she didn't know if this was a regular occurrence or if he was splurging to impress. Whichever it was, Alix could tell her mum was lapping it up.

She should never have let her mum guilt-trip her into coming.

As if summoned by her thoughts, her mum showed up with Dirk glued to her side. Both of them looked tipsy and happy.

Her mum gave her an affectionate pat on the cheek. "Alix, why are you sitting here all by yourself?"

Alix swallowed her real answer: that she didn't know anyone or had no reason to socialise. Instead, she just smiled. "I'm just getting some fresh air."

"It is warm inside," her mum agreed. "I have good news. Dirk invited us all to join him on their family holiday! They have a holiday home in Whitby. Fun, right?"

"Umm..." Alix didn't know what to say. "When is this?"

"In a few weeks. You'll be able to get time off, right?"

"Potentially, but I was saving my vacation days because we said we were going to visit Bruges over the winter holidays. If I use them up now, I won't have any left," Alix pointed out, frustration pooling in her stomach .

Her mum just laughed. "Oh, that's okay. We'll go to Bruges another time! Plus, Trixie is going to love the seaside a lot more than a city trip."

Alix was still not convinced but this didn't seem the time or place to argue about it. Mostly, she wanted to get out of here so she didn't have to look at her mum stroking Dirk's chest lovingly. Luckily, someone called for Dirk's attention and the two of them moved on.

Frustrated at the whole thing, Alix got herself another cocktail and sat back down on the half wall near the heater. She kept drinking and ignored everyone while she scrolled on her phone and gave her friends a play-by-play of this theatre.

Someone sat down next to her. "What number drink are you on?"

Alix felt herself smile. As awkward as it was that she and Veronica had almost slept together, Alix couldn't deny being glad that she had at least one person who also saw how insane this all was.

"I lost count a while ago," she said. "You?"

"No clue. Not enough, that's for sure."

"Ha, now you're speaking my language," Alix said as they clinked their glasses

together and shared a conspiring smile .

Veronica stretched out her legs, groaning. "Oh, it feels good to be off my feet. My heels are killing me."

It was unclear if this was an invitation to look but Alix couldn't help herself. She admired Veronica's shapely legs and couldn't help remember what it was like to have them wrapped around her. The only thing that could make this whole situation more of a mess was if she didn't get her pounding heart under control.

She composed herself. "I forgot to ask earlier but are all your family parties like this?"

Veronica let out a scoff. "Not quite like this. My family likes big parties, yes, but usually it's all family and family friends. I don't know who half these people are. Heck, I don't know more than ninety percent of the people here."

"That's still ninety percent more than me," Alix pointed out. "I know my mum and... you, I suppose."

Amusement shimmered in Veronica's eyes. "I thought we were pretending that never happened."

Heat rushed up to the shells of Alix's ears. "I meant from that awkward dinner but sure."

"Do you regret it? That night we're pretending never happened?" Veronica asked, conveniently looking anywhere but Alix.

"Hmm..." Alix searched her feelings. "No. I was feeling really low and down but you helped me forget that. I had so much fun that night and I really liked you. I wish I

didn't black out on you, that was so embarrassing."

"Oh, it wasn't so bad."

"It was bad. Top ten most embarrassing moments of my life," Alix said, cringing when she thought back to that night.

Veronica's eyes shimmered. "Really? Top ten? What else is up there then?"

"Well, there's the time I was on the bus and it was really hot — Hah! Nice try. I'm not telling you about the most embarrassing moments of my life." Alix couldn't believe she'd almost been lulled into sharing something so personal.

It was frustratingly easy to talk to Veronica. If that wasn't the case, maybe the first night would never have happened. Still, she was happy it happened.

"If circumstances were different, I totally would have called you," Alix admitted.

The smile on Veronica's face made her even more beautiful. "I totally would've wanted you to call."

The energy between them changed as Alix locked eyes with Veronica and the first flickers of desire crackled through her veins. She was well aware that their night together was the last thing she should be thinking about now but the alcohol was lowering her inhibitions and making her head feel a little woozy. Her rational thinking was certainly impaired too. It was making her feel selfish and reckless and like if the adults weren't going to have some self-restraint, why should she?

Somewhere in the background, a glass shattered and it broke the hypnotising tension. Both of them practically jolted backwards and Alix fixated her gaze on a patch of grass coming through a crack in the patio tiles.

Alix cursed herself. Even drunk, she had more sense than her mother.

After an awkward silence, Veronica cleared her throat. "Did, umm... Did they tell you about Whitby?"

"Yuppp. Mum framed it as some sort of family holiday,"

"You don't have to come," Veronica said.

She made a good point but Alix knew her mum was set on this holiday, she could tell from how excited she'd been. And she was definitely dragging Trixie along for this misguided idea of creating a blended family so Alix had no choice but to come along. Someone needed to keep an eye out for her little sister because their mum sure wasn't doing it.

Alix let out a frustrated sigh. "This is bullshit."

Veronica finished her drink. "You're right about that."

"Yup..." Alix repeated, not sure what else to say.

There really wasn't anything else to say.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

NINE

Veronica

Veronica considered not going on their family holiday because of the intruders but she'd been looking forward to it for weeks and had already requested time off. If she didn't go on the holiday, it wasn't like she'd be able to enjoy herself. She would just be sitting at home, worrying and wondering about what was going on in Whitby. Because of that reasoning, she found herself in their holiday cottage with her dad and siblings. They had arrived first and even though their mum wasn't there, for a little while it almost felt like everything was normal. The smell of the salty sea, the cawing of the seagulls, the sound of the waves breaking. It was one of her favourite places in the world and she really hoped it wasn't about to be ruined.

Levi threw a sofa pillow at her, briefly disengaging from the game he was playing on his phone. "Move. You're blocking my sun."

Veronica deliberately moved so she was blocking even more of the sun. "You move."

Predictably, another pillow came flying her way but she dodged it effortlessly. It almost hit Jonas who was carrying a tray with drinks and he threatened to pour them over Levi's head.

"Can't you little kids ever behave?" Nate grumbled from the corner of his sofa, mostly engrossed in whatever he was doing on his tablet.

Predictably, the next three pillows were all aimed at him. The whole thing made

Veronica laugh. Joking around with her brothers was almost enough to make her forget that this wasn't a normal family holiday.

The sound of a car pulling up on the gravel made all three of them stiffen and the fun atmosphere fell away.

"Looks like they're here," Levi muttered, not one to hide his displeasure.

Veronica's whole body tensed as she waited for the inevitable. She had her fingers and everything else crossed that something had prevented Alix from joining them. It was uncomfortable enough that Dianne would be here, or a child, but Veronica didn't know if she could take a week with Alix in close quarters.

The girl Trixie was the first to burst through the doors with a small barky dog chasing after her. She looked excited and not in the slightest shy about exploring the house. Dianne followed, her arm already around Veronica's dad. They looked sickeningly enamoured with each other and like they would prefer to be alone together.

But no Alix.

Veronica almost breathed a sigh of relief, although if she were honest with herself, a teeny tiny part of her was disappointed. As fucked up as the situation was, she couldn't stop thinking about their night together.

A car door slammed outside and rattling wheels of a heavy suitcase clattered in the hall. Moments later, Alix appeared in shredded jeans shorts that showed off her lovely muscled legs and a large shirt that fell down one shoulder. She was a vision. A tired vision, but a vision nonetheless.

"Kids, can you help unload Dianne's car?" Veronica's dad said, instead of helping himself. He was too busy pressing kisses on Dianne's cheek.

Jonas rolled his eyes behind their dad's back and Levi was pretending he couldn't hear anything over his headphones.

"I'll help," Veronica volunteered, not sure if it was to let her brothers off the hook or so she could have a teeny tiny moment alone with Alix. Just to make sure their secret hadn't come out, of course.

Alix gave her half a smile and the two went out to Dianne's car. It was a nice practical sedan, nothing like the flashy cars Veronica's dad leased on the regular.

"There are bags in the backseat and the boot," Alix said, unlocking everything with a click of the keys.

Veronica helped pull everything out, careful not to stand too close to Alix. All sorts of bags and boxes came out of the car, some plastic, some recyclable, some cardboard. It was an eclectic mix that felt more like how people moved, not went on a holiday.

"You brought a lot of stuff," Veronica remarked.

"My mum brought a lot of stuff," Alix corrected her. "And she doesn't know how to pack efficiently."

A bag for life with pillows came out of the car .

"You know, we have pillows here," Veronica said, not sure if she should be insulted or amused.

Alix hummed. "I'm sure you do but I can't sleep without my pillow."

"You slept just fine in the hotel." The words were out of Veronica's mouth before she

fully thought it through. She quickly glanced back at the cottage to make sure nobody had overheard them but luckily, they were alone.

Understandably, Alix didn't look pleased. "Don't talk about that here. I don't want anyone to find out."

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking. I don't know how to behave around you," Veronica admitted. She cursed her luck in life that the first woman who captured her interest in years had to be her father's fiancée's daughter.

Alix leaned against the car. "I thought we agreed we would pretend that night never happened."

"I know, it's just hard because every time I look at you, that night flashes through my mind."

"Then don't look at me."

Veronica almost laughed. The whole thing was ridiculous, and slightly damaging to her ego, but at least Alix was making herself crystal clear. Whatever attraction there had been that night, it was irrelevant. Right now, they were two strangers. Nothing more, nothing less.

Without saying anything else, Veronica picked up some of the bags and carried them into the cottage. If Alix wanted to keep distance between them, that was fine. It wasn't like Veronica was in love after one night, she wasn't her dad, but still... This was not exactly fun.

She set the luggage down at the bottom of the stairs and continued on to the living room where Trixie was trying to look at the game Levi was playing on his phone. Knowing her brother it was some shooter game that wasn't appropriate for little kids,

and to his credit, he didn't seem comfortable with her interference either.

In the veranda, her dad was loudly showing Dianne around, pointing out some of the paintings and features of the cottage like he was the one who picked them all and not their mum.

It made Veronica's blood boil.

The two lovebirds returned to the living room, totally oblivious to the tense atmosphere.

"Boys, are you okay with sharing the blue room?" her dad said, his strong voice booming through the room.

Levi pulled his headphones down. "Heh? But I always stay in the attic."

"I thought Veronica could take the attic and then Alix can have the garden room. That way, Trixie can have the room next to us. Dianne says she has bad dreams sometimes so it'll be easy to comfort her at night," her dad said, looking pretty pleased with himself for coming up with what he thought was a neat solution.

Veronica frowned at the suggestion. She wasn't pleased at all. It was bad enough that some strangers were coming on their family holiday but she assumed that Alix and Trixie would be sharing the spare room. Instead, everyone else had to give up their usual beds and privacy. She waited for any of her brothers to protest but Levi and Jonas shrugged and mumbled agreements.

Not wanting to be the difficult one, Veronica had no choice but to go along. Nothing about this holiday was normal so maybe the weirder it went, the easier it would be to accept that everything was changing. Whether she wanted it to or not.

TEN

Alix

Alix didn't like judging people prematurely but she didn't need to spend much time with the Bearsons to discover they had a very different definition of the word 'holiday'.

If it had just been her, her mum, and Trixie, they would've slept in until noon and hung around in the rental property, kind of seeing what the mood would bring. There would be mimosas for their mum, endless cartoons for Trixie, and lots of fast food.

This was different. It was just after dawn and everyone had been summoned for an elaborate breakfast in the veranda. A full English had been prepared by Dirk who seemed proud of himself. For good reason, it was the most extravagant full English Alix had ever seen. There were two types of sausages, homemade baked beans, thick cut bacon, and golden sauteed mushrooms. On top of that, there were rounds of local black pudding, crispy hashbrowns, and the choice of white and brown bread. And if that wasn't enough, a dozen eggs were cooking up in a pan with lots of butter and a pile of oranges had been freshly squeezed.

Alix dreaded to think how much money had been spent on just breakfast. She didn't know if this was a normal thing or if Dirk was aiming to impress but it was extravagant in her opinion.

The clicking of Princess' paws sounded on the tiles as she followed Trixie around, barking for attention. Like a typical Pomeranian, she had a big personality for a small

dog.

A stumble came from behind her and Veronica wandered in, looking absolutely meticulous. There wasn't a hair out of place and she had a loose floral shirt that was tied around her waist.

It should be illegal to look this good in the morning.

"Good morning," Veronica said politely. Even her voice was silky smooth but she didn't really engage or smile. Just poured herself a glass of water from the tap and checked her phone.

Alix watched the other woman from the corners of her eye. This was the view that she'd missed out on. As gorgeous as Veronica was, Alix didn't really recognise her though. This was not the same woman that had given her such seductive looks and teasing kisses.

Maybe that had all been an act. Or maybe she needed to be drunk to have fun.

Alix shook the wonderments away. It was none of her business how and why Veronica let loose.

Once everyone was up, they settled at the large dining table. Through the luck of the draw, Alix ended up in front of Veronica again which meant it was almost impossible to avoid her totally.

She dug into her luxurious breakfast while listening to everyone discuss what they should do with the day. Or rather, it was mostly Dirk listing what activities suited the weather. Every now and then, Alix stole a glance at Veronica who wasn't eating much.

Alix didn't know if that was normal or if Veronica was as uncomfortable with the situation as her. There certainly was a tenseness to her body language that implied she wasn't all that at ease .

"Mussels for dinner? None of you have come even close to beating my record." Dirk suggested between big bites of toast, offering an explanation. "We do this yearly competition to see who can eat the most mussels. I always win."

"Not this year, I've been training for this," Levi said, engaging with the conversation for the first time since everyone sat down.

Veronica pricked a tomato on her fork. "We'll probably have to make a reservation considering there's so many of us."

"What do mussels taste like?" Trixie asked, curious as always. She seemed very happy about being here and was swinging her legs back and forth.

"You wouldn't like it," their mum said. "It's seafood. Like shrimp."

"I don't like shrimp."

"Me either, bunny." She looked at Dirk. "Maybe we could go somewhere different?"

Dirk nodded. "Of course, I wouldn't want Trixie to be uncomfortable."

Alix tried not to think about how ridiculous it was to come to a seaside town without liking seafood. It was understandable for Trixie, she was only eight, but her mum was an adult. Not to mention, eating mussels was clearly a tradition for the Bearsons and now they couldn't have them.

"I'm sure the seafood place will have a kids menu or something Trixie will like," Alix



weighed in, not wanting to be a disturbance to the holiday they were imposing on.

"We can easily go somewhere else," Dirk said in a tone that made it clear it was final.

The rest of breakfast was eaten in mostly awkward silence and Alix blamed her mum. Not just for the mussel-situation but the entire holiday. Why on earth did she think this was a good idea? The whole thing was way too fast and totally misguided.

Of course, Alix couldn't say any of that. She'd learned a long time ago that her opinion didn't matter when it came to her mum's dating life. It never had.

Princess barked demandingly, as always generating a lot of noise for such a small dog. She even stood up on her fluffy hind legs, sniffing curiously and looking hopeful for any food that might fall to the floor.

"Don't beg," Alix chided, a little embarrassed by Princess' shameless behaviour. The dog was making it look like she was fed from the table which wasn't true.

"She probably needs a walk," her mum said .

While there was a garden, it wasn't fenced in so Princess needed constant supervision for all her pees and poops.

"I'll give her a quick stretch after breakfast," Alix promised, eager to get out of the cottage and have some time to herself.

Dirk pushed his empty plate away. "There's a little park a few blocks away. Veronica can show you."

"Oh, I'm sure I can find it myself," Alix said quickly.

"No, it'll be nice. Gives you girls a chance to bond," her mum chimed in, looking pleased by the prospect.

Alix wanted to protest more and insist that it wasn't necessary but she didn't know how to do that without arousing suspicion. There was no reason why the two of them couldn't go for a little walk together, even if she didn't think it was a good idea to be alone together.

"Trixie, you'll come too, right?" Alix asked, pleased with herself for coming up with a solution to the problem.

It wasn't perfect, but at least she wouldn't be alone with Veronica.

### ELEVEN

Veronica

The last place Veronica wanted to be was on a walk alone with Alix but luckily, the little girl was coming along with them. Still, just to avoid any awkward conversation or accidental temptation, Veronica stayed a few feet behind them all.

Big mistake. All she could look at was Alix's bum. Her hips swayed back and forth and thanks to her short jeans skirt and leggings, her toned legs were noticeable.

Veronica forced herself to look away and shifted her attention to the dog. The Pomeranian was small and walked with little dainty steps, her fluffy tail wagging back and forth. Alix had endless patience with her, stopping every time the Pomeranian wanted a pee or a sniff. Meanwhile, Trixie was running in front of them and picking flowers while waving at strangers.

It had to be nice to still be outgoing and unburdened.

"Trixie! Don't go too far ahead!" Alix shouted at her little sister.

"I'm not far ahead!" the girl shouted back.

Veronica felt herself smile. It was sweet how the two interacted and made her wonder what it would be like to have sisters instead of annoying brothers.

The Pomeranian barked at a dog on the other side of the street, earning herself a little

tug on the lead.

"Shut up, Princess," Alix hissed.

"Why is she called Princess?" Veronica asked, deciding that walking in silence was making things worse. And what was the harm in a casual chat?

Alix pulled the little dog along. "It's her nickname because she's a total spoiled brat. She's actually called Snickerdoodle but that's when we thought she was sweet and cute, not a spawn from Satan."

Veronica laughed. "She looks so innocent though. "

"Looks are deceiving. I try to teach her manners but my mum doesn't believe that small dogs need as much training. Now we've spoiled her too much and she basically rules the house."

The park came into sight, much to Trixie's delight, and she raced straight to the swing.

"Wow, this park is nice," Alix remarked, looking around with an amazed smile on her face. The morning sun was making her eyes shimmer and drew attention to the gloss on her full lips. The smile Alix had right now was a lot like the one she had on their night out, wide and toothy and carefree.

Veronica couldn't help but stare. She wasn't usually this drawn to someone she just met but then again, Alix wasn't exactly a stranger. They had shared some very intimate moments already which was exactly why all of this was so weird.

Trixie went to climb up the playground house while Alix and Veronica walked through the park, always keeping within eyesight of the little girl. They crossed paths

with an older woman walking a sluggish beagle and Princess charged towards the dog, almost strangling herself on her lead.

"No. Leave it." There was a surprising amount of authority in Alix's voice and the Pomeranian relented .

Veronica smiled, temporarily forgetting about who she was walking with and why. It just felt like a quiet beautiful morning at the seaside. Then she saw a man who resembled her dad and it all came flooding back. The irritation, the frustration, the feeling of powerlessness. She glanced at Alix, unsure how she was going to make it through a whole week.

"You're staring," Alix remarked.

"Sorry. I was just thinking this is so weird."

"What is?"

"You, me. This ridiculous family holiday. Even if your mum is marrying my dad, you're not family. No offence."

"None taken. I agree with you. It's all way too fast. And it's not that I want my mum to be single forever but she has a tendency to fixate on the man she's dating instead of looking after her children." Alix gestured to her little sister. "I don't mind looking after Trixie but sometimes, I feel like I'm the parent."

Veronica hummed to indicate she was listening. She didn't have the same experiences, there wasn't a big enough age gap between her and her youngest brother for that, but she felt for Alix. From the few interactions she'd had with Alix's mother, she could tell that it all seemed to be about what Dianne wanted. On that front, Dianne and Veronica's dad were a good match. Selfish and self-absorbed.

They stopped walking while the Pomeranian dropped a poop in the grass and Alix picked it up with a bag. She scanned the area, presumably looking for a bin.

"Can I ask something strange?" Veronica asked.

"The poop feels warm and squishy but you get used to it. It's just part of owning a dog," Alix said with a little grin.

Veronica snorted. "That's not what I was going to ask, but good to know."

"What do you want to ask then?"

"When did your mum and my dad start dating?" Veronica asked, trying to ignore the queasiness in her stomach. She wasn't sure if she was ready for the answer but she had to know if this relationship had gone on longer than her dad said. If that was the case, it would explain why they were getting so serious so fast.

It would also mean her dad had likely cheated, but that was a whole different problem.

Alix was quiet for a bit. "She first told me she met someone new about a month ago. That was after she'd just been to that speed dating event."

"And had they been chatting online before that? Did they know each other already?"

"No, I don't think so."

Veronica felt deflated. "So they really went from zero to a hundred in a month?"

"Sounds like it." Alix studied her. "Why are you asking? Did you think it has been going on longer?"

"I wondered. My parents only separated two months ago."

Alix's eyebrows almost lifted off of her forehead. "Wow. That's... wow."

They continued walking in silence. Princess did another poop and made intense eye contact with Veronica while she did so. After they picked that up and threw it in the bin, they returned to the playground where Trixie was trying to climb on the roof of the playground house.

"Trixie! Get off! That's dangerous!" Alix shouted, quickening her pace. Princess barked along and tried to run in the opposite direction.

As expected from a child who would climb a playhouse, Trixie didn't listen and climbed even higher, giggling with her height advantage.

"Get down!"

"But this is fun! I can see the whole world!" Trixie stretched her arms out .

Alix squealed, clearly panicked. Princess only barked louder which sounded like she was challenging Trixie.

Veronica observed from a slight distance. The whole thing reminded her of her job. The sick kids weren't usually the ones causing trouble though, the ones acting out were their neglected siblings who were dragged along.

"Oh no, we should go back or they're going to eat all my ice cream," Veronica shouted up. She hoped she wasn't overstepping but as long as she could get the little girl down, she was sure it wasn't a problem.

"What ice cream?" Trixie shouted back.

"My brothers messaged that they're eating all my ice cream. I need to go back to the house so I can stop them or there won't be any left. If you help me, I'll share it with you."

Trixie's face lit up and she clambered down with the agility of a monkey. "I can help!" She didn't wait and raced back to where they came from, whooping loudly.

The relief and gratitude on Alix's face was worth a picture. "Thank you."

"No problem. I'm used to dealing with kids. The trick is misdirection and distraction."

"I'll remember that. I'm always bargaining or begging." Alix cracked a smile as they set in motion. "So do we need to buy some ice cream on the way back?"

Veronica chuckled. "No, there should be loads in the freezer."

"You're clever."

They returned, walking much faster now that Princess had done all her pees and poops. Once they reached the front garden and Trixie was safely inside the house, Alix placed her hand on Veronica's arm.

"Thank you again. And for what it's worth, my mother doesn't keep anything about her dating life a secret. I wish she did, but I know far too many details. She won't have been dating your dad for longer than a month. I don't know what your dad was up to before that, but if he was cheating, it wasn't with my mum."

For some reason, Veronica believed Alix and it reassured her slightly. It didn't take away the absurdity of the whole situation but at least she didn't have to worry about this being an affair. It was a good thing because her opinion of her dad was currently at an all-time low and she really didn't want it to sink any further.



### TWELVE

Alix

Alix tried her best to tune out the obnoxious show on the gigantic screen that Trixie was watching with rapt attention. At least one of them was enjoying their holiday in this unfamiliar house with a bunch of strangers. Alix thought she would get used to being here once a few days had passed but she still felt as uncomfortable as the moment she stepped inside. The only saving grace of the whole situation was that there was no additional awkwardness between her and Veronica.

If anything, from the handful of interactions they had, Alix thought they got on well. And they were in the same boat so it was good to have someone who understood how she was feeling.

She focused on her phone and the group chat with her friends. It hadn't been used that much since Lena and Aditi broke up but desperate times called for desperate measures.

This whole thing is ridiculous. I know my mum is irresponsible but this takes the cake. Why do I even have to be here?

Her phone vibrated in her hands with a message from Lena. You're the one who chose to go on the holiday.

Because someone has to watch over Trixie. I couldn't leave her unsupervised in a house with random men, she typed back.

Maria's message popped up in the chat. When are you coming back?

Tuesday. One of you better be free that night because I'm going to need buckets of wine.

Is it weird being there with the woman you hooked up with? Lena asked, her message finished with a cheeky emoji.

A janky tune came from the TV and Alix thought about pulling a pillow over her head as she typed out her reply. It's actually not too bad. Veronica and I agreed we would just pretend it never happened and she's actually pretty nice.

I hear mating calls! Maria said. The message disappeared almost as soon as it came and was replaced by a new one. I hear wedding bells!

Alix shook her head.

A private message from Maria popped up on her screen. Shit! I totally forgot that Lena and Aditi broke up because of the fated mates thing. Do you think one of them saw it?

If they did, you can blame baby brain, she typed back. She hoped neither of them saw it but considering they were all actively chatting just now, what were the chances?

Chattering came from the garden, pulling Alix's attention away from her phone. Her mum and Dirk came in attached to the hip, giggling like teenagers.

"Alix, why are you always inside?" her mum chided. "We're having a rare sunny day. You should get some vitamin D instead of sitting in front of a screen all day."

Alix didn't point out that everyone else was also inside, they just happened to have

rooms they could stay in. In theory, she could stay upstairs too but she didn't want to be rude.

Her mum made a show of kissing Dirk, temporarily lost in her own world.

It took everything Alix had to not turn up the TV's volume.

"Alix, why don't you run out to the store and get some things for tomorrow?" her mum suggested after she was done. "Dirk wants to make a big roast dinner for everyone."

As much as Alix didn't like being bossed around, anything that would get her out of the house was a welcome distraction. And she was really done with Trixie's childish cartoons.

She pushed herself up from the couch, her leg slightly tingly from having been asleep. "Sure, if you write me a list, I'll get everything."

"Oh, you know what to get," her mum said.

Dirk nodded and held out his credit card. "Here, take this."

"Umm..." Alix gave them both a blank look. Did this man really just offer her his credit card? They barely knew each other. Was he not worried that she was going to abuse it? Not that she ever would but he didn't know that.

"Well, it's food for the family so you shouldn't have to pay for it," Dirk clarified.

There was that word again. Family . Dirk and her mum were throwing it around like they were some fully blended unit when in reality, this was more of an oil and water situation. There was no blending, no matter how much stirring they did.

Alix grimaced, not impressed with either of them. "It's fine, I'll just use my own card. You can pay me back later."

She was on her way out when Veronica came into the living room with her empty mug.

"Alix is popping down to the shop to buy everything for the Sunday roast. Can you go with her?" Dirk asked his daughter.

It was a total ambush.

Veronica looked lost for words but nodded. "S-Sure."

Since Alix didn't have any good reason why Veronica couldn't come with her, she just accepted her fate. If she protested too much, they might start asking questions why they didn't want to spend time together and that wouldn't be good for anyone.

The ride to the store was short but awkward. The good weather had also disappeared the moment Alix's mother commented on it and was now raining softly. Alix cranked up the volume of her radio, grateful to have music to bridge the silence. A song from her favourite band DK4 came on and Alix drummed along with the beat. She noticed that Veronica was humming along too.

"You like DK4?" she asked.

Veronica's chuckles filled the car. "Who doesn't? They're amazing. And Audra Green has an amazing voice."

"The best voice. And she's so good at writing lyrics too," Alix gushed.

"Not to mention, hot."

"So hot."

"Don't laugh at me, but when I was a teen, I had a massive crush on her. I used to dream that I would run into her during a Crescent Lake ceremony and we'd be magically fated mates." Veronica's face grew a shade pinker. "That's so embarrassing. I don't know why I just told you that."

Alix couldn't help but smile. "I think it's cute. And who hasn't had a crush on a celebrity when they were a teenager?"

"So who did you like?" Veronica asked.

"I'm not telling you."

"Aww, come on. I told you my crush."

Since there was no harm, Alix relented. "Alright. I used to have the biggest crush on Lisa Chen, the girl who played Dina in Wolf Town."

"The werewolf drama? Their portrayal of shifters is super problematic. It's making wolf shifters seem like some uncontrollable beasts when you and I both know they're just as polite and civilised as the rest of us."

"Oh, so problematic," Alix agreed as she pulled into the car park of the store. "But Lisa Chen was so cute! I was gutted when I heard she wasn't a shifter. It crushed all my dreams of discovering I was her fated mate. See, you weren't the only cheesy lovesick teen."

"Good to know."

The car came to a halt and Alix briefly locked eyes with Veronica. The rain clattered

on the windscreen and all of the awkward tension had somehow melted away. They shared a smile, one that reminded Alix of the night they spent together.

Veronica cleared her throat. "Just for the record, I'm no longer under the illusion that I'll have a rom-com meet-cute with my fated mate. That sort of thing doesn't happen in real life. People don't just bump into each other in a lift and throw sheets of paper all on the floor or get tangled together in the park by a dog's lead or---"

"Fall desperately in love after a one-night stand in a bar," Alix teased.

"Exactly." There was a strange intensity in Veronica's voice.

Alix gulped. "Exactly."

They spoke at the same time, the awkward energy back at full force.

"Do you have a list of—" Veronica said.

"We should get—" Alix chuckled as she unbuckled herself. "You first."

"Do you have a list of what we need to buy?"

"No, I got the very vague brief of Sunday roast. What am I buying? Beef? Pork? Ham? Chicken?" Worry bubbled up in Alix's stomach. "Dear god, he's going to make all of them, isn't he?"

Veronica snorted and rolled her eyes. "You bet. Welcome to the family ."

### THIRTEEN

Veronica

Sleep eluded Veronica no matter how much she tossed and turned. The bed up in the attic wasn't very comfortable and the whole room was dusty and stuffy without any windows to open. It still annoyed her that she had to give up her own room but it felt like wasted energy to be salty about it.

She reached for her bottle of water, disappointed to find it empty already. The bed creaked obnoxiously loud as she got out, only making her feel even more self-conscious. She tiptoed to the ladder leading down and popped into the shared bathroom to fill up her bottle. The running water made her aware of her bladder so she had a quick pee while she was here.

With her water bottle in hand, she left the bathroom and almost ran straight into Dianne.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't realise someone else was down here," Dianne said sheepishly. She was wearing a silky bright pink night gown that luckily fell down to her thighs.

Veronica forced a smile and gestured to the bathroom. "All yours."

Before she could leave, Dianne tripped over the raised threshold of the bathroom and almost fell. Her night gown slipped open and Veronica looked away as quickly as she could but not before she was treated to a vision that was going to haunt her nightmares. Underneath Dianne's night gown, she was wearing a racy set of lingerie

that left virtually nothing to the imagination.

Veronica wanted to scream herself. It was bad enough that her dad had a new girlfriend, she did not need to be reminded that they were adults with adult needs. It was cringey enough knowing her parents used to have sex, this was way way worse.

"Are you okay?" Veronica asked, her eyes screwed shut .

Dianne chuckled awkwardly. "Yes, I stubbed my toe. I think it's bleeding. Do you have any plasters?"

"There's a first-aid kit under the sink," Veronica replied dutifully when she wanted nothing more than to run away. Preferably to a different continent. The North Pole sounded good. Somewhere far, far away where people wore lots of clothing!

Totally flustered, Veronica quickly retreated to her room. She pressed the door shut behind her, relieved to be away from that awkward situation.

A noise came from the bed. "What the hell?"

Veronica froze. In her panic, she'd forgotten that her room wasn't her room anymore. Instead, she'd barged in on a very confused Alix who was illuminating the room with her phone screen. It was a good thing it was dark because Alix seemed to be wearing a very thin shirt without a bra underneath.

"I'm so sorry," Veronica reached for the door handle but couldn't bring herself to leave in case she ran into Dianne again.

"Veronica? What are you doing here?" Alix's voice was slightly rougher around the edges and she sounded like she'd been asleep already.



Under different circumstances, it would've been sexy as hell but sex was the absolute last thing on Veronica's mind at the moment. She just wanted to crawl in a hole or bang her head against the wall and give herself a concussion that would let her forget what she just saw.

Alix cleared her throat behind her. "An explanation would be nice."

Sheepishly, Veronica turned back around. "Sorry, I forgot that I'm sleeping in the attic. This is usually my room."

"Okay?"

"I just ran into your mum in the hallway and..." Veronica whimpered. "She tripped and practically flashed me. She wasn't naked except for what was clearly sexy underwear to seduce my dad. Eww, I never want to say that out loud again!"

Alix made a similar noise of disgust. "I'm sorry you had to see that. I wish I was surprised but the amount of times I've seen my mum in her night time underwear or strange men in boxers is too many to count. There's only so much privacy in a campervan."

Somehow, Veronica was even more horrified. "That's not okay."

"Oh, I know. But it's not like I have the power to stop her. That's why I slept over at my friend's house so much. There was always tasty food, a big table to do homework, and no unfortunate incidents." Alix was silent for a bit. "Just so you don't get a horrible impression of her, she didn't do this when I was a child. It was only when I was a teenager and more independent that she stopped being discreet. Or maybe she just couldn't cope with the loneliness anymore after Dad died."

It still wasn't okay but now Veronica felt bad for a different reason. It didn't stop her

being horrified and still suspicious of Dianne's true motives of going after her dad but it wouldn't hurt to give the woman a little more grace.

“I didn’t realise your dad was dead,” she said softly.

“He died when I was seven. I don’t have a lot of memories of him and Mum never talked about him much.”

Veronica took her first real step away from the door and leaned against the desk, her arms crossed in front of her chest. She wasn’t wearing anything under her shirt either and it was cold in the room. “I’m sorry. So Trixie is...?”

“She’s technically my half-sister but I don’t see her that way. To me, she’s just my little sister.”

Veronica smiled. “That’s sweet.”

“My mum tried her best to look after Trixie but I think she was overwhelmed and exhausted from being a single parent for so long. I helped out a lot, looking after Trixie and the house while she found ways to blow off steam.”

“Is that what you think she’s doing with my dad? Blowing off steam?” Veronica asked as she pushed herself away from the hard edge of the desk. It was digging into the small of her back and cutting into her skin.

“I don’t know. She’s had serious boyfriends before but this is the first time she’s gotten engaged. I don’t really know what she’s doing.” Alix let out a long sigh. “So what’s the deal with your dad?”

Veronica pointed at the end of the bed. “Can I?”

“Sure.”

She sat down, careful to leave enough space between them. “I don’t know what’s going on with my dad, if I’m being honest. I know him and mum weren’t happy in their marriage but it wasn’t always like that. I certainly have lots of memories of us all being one happy family. Or at least, that’s how it always seemed to me.”

The sheets moved as Alix pulled her knees up. “When did they get divorced? ”

Veronica gulped. “They’re actually still in the process.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah... I don’t agree with the way my dad has jumped into a new relationship but the worst part is the way he’s talking about his marriage and the past. He keeps saying how it was such a mistake to marry mum and how he should’ve left much sooner. It’s like he regrets it all, including us.” Veronica hadn’t meant to share so much but all her feelings of inadequacy were lurking just beneath the surface.

The fabric of the sheets rustled again. Alix shuffled closer and put her hand on Veronica’s bare arm, the kindness and pity evident in the gentle touch.

“I’m sorry,” Alix whispered. She was so close, her breath tickled the side of Veronica’s face. “I’m really sorry that he’s making you feel that way and for the part we’re playing in that.”

“It’s not your fault.” Veronica turned her head, only realising then how close Alix was sitting next to her. Shoulder to shoulder, Alix's hand on her arm, the darkness of the room. It was unexpectedly intimate and reminded her of the first night they met. There was a good reason she’d poured her heart out to a virtual stranger and it was Alix's ability to really engage and listen .

At that moment, Veronica was secretly glad that Alix was Dianne's daughter. Without this weird engagement, she might never have someone as wonderful and caring as her.

Affection surged through Veronica and she felt herself lean in closer. It was probably a bad idea to kiss Alix. They were barely wearing any clothes, their parents were getting married, they didn't even know each other all that well. None of that stopped Veronica as she inched closer and closer until there was no distance left. Even in the darkness of the room, her lips found Alix's with ease. They were soft and warm and parted without hesitation, only drawing Veronica in more. Her breathing grew heavier as the kiss deepened and she let her hand roam down Alix's body. The thin shirt ended around Alix's thighs and from there on, it was all just smooth soft skin.

Eagerly, Veronica moved so she could straddle Alix. With every kiss and touch, her body got hotter. It was making her head spin and she could feel the desire tingling between her legs. There was only one way to satisfy that feeling and that was by finally doing all the things she'd wanted to do since the first night they met.

The bed creaked loudly and both of them froze. The walls were thin and the loud noise was like reality hitting them over the head.

Veronica was the first to regain her senses. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that."

Much to her disappointment, Alix agreed. "You're right. The situation is complicated enough already."

That was an understatement.

"I should go back to my room," Veronica whispered, a part of her wishing that Alix would wrap her arms around her again and they would throw caution to the wind.

“Yeah, that’s probably sensible.” Alix's voice was flat and hollow, making it impossible to know what she was thinking. Was she uncomfortable with what just happened or disappointed that they were stopping?

As much as Veronica wanted to know, this was not the time or place. She had to get out of here before she did something else stupid because feelings aside, Alix was right, the situation was already complicated enough.

She returned to the attic, all thoughts of the awkward encounter in the hallway forgotten. The only thing Veronica could think of was Alix in her thin shirt, her smooth bare thighs, and the kiss that made her heart pound so fast, it felt like it was going to explode.

With her hands clenching the sheets, Veronica stared up at the sloped ceiling. Her heart was still racing.

She was in so much trouble...

### FOURTEEN

Alix

Alix ate her eggs quietly, her eyes fixated on her own plate to avoid looking at Veronica. After their unexpected midnight encounter, her cheeks and ears glowed red hot when she thought about their kiss and what almost happened.

It seemed like she was doomed to have almost-sex with Veronica which was honestly worse than if they hooked up properly. Then it would be out of their systems and everyone could move on.

Her mum reached for the orange juice. “Dirk was telling me there’s a lovely walk along the cliffs. I figured we could all go and enjoy the views and the fresh air.”

Nate cleared his throat. “Oh, we actually made plans to do some kayaking. There’s a local club that lets us use their equipment.”

Alix wished she had a good excuse too but none came to mind. She didn’t want to make it too obvious that going on a walk while her mum clung all over Dirk wasn’t exactly her idea of a fun morning either. It would just be up to her to watch the needy Princess and adventurous Trixie while having to avoid Veronica.

It was like someone had manifested her idea of hell.

She made the mistake of glancing up, only to find Veronica watching her. Images of the night before flashed through her mind and it made her cheeks and ears burn. This

was definitely not the time or place to be thinking of Veronica's soft lips, her tongue, her daring hands, her— Alix broke their eye contact and drank some water, almost choking on it.

Yes, there was no way she could go on this walk if Veronica was going to be there too.

After breakfast, she pulled her mum into the hallway for a private moment. "I'm not feeling so great. I think I'll skip the walk. "

"But then I'll have to watch Trixie and Princess all by myself. You know they're a handful."

Alix didn't point out that it was her mum's brilliant idea to bring everyone along on this stupid family holiday or that her mum was the one who chose to have a dog and a child without thinking it through.

Instead, Alix just took a deep breath in and out in an attempt to calm herself. "I just didn't sleep very well and I don't want to feel worse tomorrow when I have to drive us back."

Her mum agreed reluctantly and went back into the living room while Alix hid upstairs, glad to finally have a moment to herself. As big as the house was, there were far too many people in it and all the forced activities together were coming out of her ears. She was done with being constantly surrounded by people. It was so dire, she was actually looking forward to her commute because it meant she would have half an hour alone in her car.

She listened to the chatter and clattering of people getting ready to leave. Princess was barking extra loudly, Trixie was telling excited stories, the jangle of keys. Then she heard the sound of the door hitting the lock and then finally, silence. Sweet,

blissful, precious silence.

For the first time this week, Alix felt like she could breathe again. She caught up on some messages from her friends, read some nonsense articles on her favourite procrastination website until she was convinced everyone online was an idiot, and posted a handful of pictures on her social media so it looked like she had a life.

After that, she went back downstairs for some water and to watch some telly. She had no idea how long the others would be gone but she was going to savour every second on her own.

She passed by the large windows leading to the patio and something outside caught her eye. At first, she thought it might be a lost dog. On second glance, it was obviously not a lost dog but a brown bear moseying through the garden.

Alix stood frozen, unsure what to do. A normal person's instinct might be to call the police or animal control but as someone who grew up in a shifter community, Alix wondered if the bear in the garden might be a shifter. It seemed the most logical explanation because bears didn't live near the sea, did they?

The bear noticed her and stood up on its hind legs and waved. A bit dumbfounded, Alix waved back. Definitely a shifter then but that begged another question. Who the hell was it?

A sinking feeling hit her stomach. It wasn't Veronica, was it?

The bear wandered back and forth through the garden for a bit more, sniffing flowers, and doing funny hops. Its behaviour was certainly very human-like and kind of endearing. After a little while, it came to the house and knocked gently on the glass door.



Alix gulped and reached for the handle, unsure whether she should open the door or lock it.

The long nails of the bear's claw clicked against the glass and this time, it definitely gestured to the handle.

Carefully, Alix slid the door open slightly. "Hello...?"

The bear grunted softly and stuck its nose into the house.

Panic got the better of Alix and she quickly slammed the glass door shut. A cloud of pink smoke engulfed the bear and the form changed into Veronica. A very naked Veronica who looked a little shocked.

"Hey, you almost hit me," she said as she came into the house.

"Sorry, I didn't know it was you," Alix defended herself. Only an insane person would let a bear walk into their home and she'd almost been insane.

Veronica shrugged. "Fair enough."

"You gave me a total fright. I thought I was alone here and suddenly there was a bear in the garden. Why didn't you go on the walk?"

"You seemed uncomfortable over breakfast so I stayed behind to give you some space."

"Looks like that backfired on us," Alix muttered, unable to stop staring. She knew it was bad form on her part, she knew she was being blatantly obvious about it too, but seeing Veronica naked like this was making her brain glitch.

Veronica seemed entirely unbothered by being naked. Or being looked at, for that matter. If anything, there seemed to be a little bit of a pleased grin floating around her lips as she paraded through the house without any attempt to cover or get dressed.

She got herself a glass of water and returned to the living room, still totally naked. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

Alix stuttered. "Sorry?"

"Watching me." The hint of a grin grew into a full smirk. "You're staring. "

Nonsensical gibberish noises left Alix's mouth and her cheeks started to burn. Once again, she was powerless against her own desires and the impossible temptation that was Veronica. It was embarrassing how any and all thoughts had left her mind, only to be replaced with a haze of lust.

Veronica paused right in front of her. "So you do want me?"

"Was there ever any doubt?" Alix asked, finally managing to find her voice.

"Well... We didn't sleep together that first night. And last night, you didn't seem interested either." Veronica actually sounded insecure.

Alix was absolutely baffled by that. She thought she'd been the least subtle person ever in how much she'd been staring at Veronica. Maybe she'd done a better job at avoiding the bear shifter than she thought after all.

All that restraint was long gone.

Without wasting a second, Alix pulled Veronica into her and captured her in a desperate passionate kiss, hoping to convey just how much she wanted her. All the

good reasons why they should stay away from each other went out the window as she felt Veronica's body against hers. Her skin was cold from being outside and Alix was desperate to warm Veronica up.

"How long are the others going to be gone?" Alix asked between kisses, just barely holding onto the last ounce of sense.

"The walk is about two hours and my dad always likes to go for a drink in the local pub at the end," Veronica panted.

"Good."

They wasted no time removing Alix's clothes, a feat much easier when nobody was drunk, and finally, they were both naked. Skin to skin, hands running all over each other, kisses that grew more careless and wild. There was so much desire coursing through Alix's body, it was making her tremble.

She sank down on the couch, moaning as Veronica ended up on top of her. It was a sight to behold. The bright winter sunlight from outside was casting harsh shadows on Veronica's body and showing off all her curves. Alix's gaze was drawn to the pink mark on Veronica's hip, not that she needed any proof that Veronica was truly a bear shifter.

She'd seen that with her own eyes.

Without thinking, she traced one of the swirling lines with the tip of her finger. It was really pretty and looked so good on Veronica's pale skin.

"That tickles," Veronica said with a cute giggle.

Alix's apology got lost in their next kiss. She pressed herself into the kiss, desperate

to touch and be touched. Veronica's mouth felt so good, especially when she kissed Alix's neck with her burning lips.

"What do you like?" Veronica murmured in Alix's ear. "Anywhere I shouldn't touch?"

Alix's mind was clouded from the hot little kisses Veronica was giving. It was making it hard to think or formulate an eloquent answer beyond letting out encouraging moans. She wasn't sure if she had all that many preferences or had ever really been with someone who cared enough to find out.

"Alix?" Veronica paused and moved back ever so slightly.

"I like this," Alix said, turning her head to expose more of her neck. "I want you to kiss and touch me all over. And I want to make you feel good too."

She moaned when Veronica returned for more kisses and pressed her bare breasts against her. Alix let her hands glide all over Veronica's body, enjoying how her touch was clearly turning Veronica on. She could feel it from Veronica's faster breathing, the kisses that were growing more demanding, the heat radiating from between Veronica's legs.

Finally, finally, it was happening.

Alix spread her legs when she felt the brush of Veronica's fingers on her inner thigh. The touch was gentle and curious and much lighter than Alix wanted. Her heart was pounding and her whole body felt there was electricity coursing through it.

"Touch me," Alix whispered, moving her lower body so she was even more open. She was so ready, she was worried she would explode within seconds.

Veronica pressed her fingers in the right spot and Alix moaned. It felt good, oh so good, to finally give into the temptation. The pleasure built like a raging fire, much faster than Alix expected or had experienced before. The weeks of frustration and tension acted like one long session of foreplay and her body was ready. She wrapped her legs around Veronica and dug her fingers into the woman's back. Quickly, far too quickly, Alix came. The burst of pleasure took her off guard and she gasped and moaned into Veronica's neck, caught between the delightful waves of pleasure rolling over her body and the horrified feeling of coming so quickly undone.

"I-I... I'm sorry, I don't usually come so quick," Alix stammered, her head still spinning a little .

Veronica's hoarse chuckle vibrated against her skin. "Why are you apologising?"

"Because I came super fast?"

"Yes, I noticed that." A pretty satisfied smile hung around Veronica's lips. "But why is that something to apologise for? I want you to feel good, you can come as quickly as you want. You're not a teenage boy."

Alix wanted to argue but realised Veronica was totally right. There was no reason for her to feel bad and it wasn't like this was the end. She had her release but her body was still thrumming with desire, potentially even more so than before. Especially because Veronica was slowly grinding herself on Alix's thigh.

With a grin, Alix reached between their bodies and angled her hand in a way that she could reach between Veronica's legs. From the gasp escaping from Veronica's mouth, it was clear she found the right spot. Alix moved her fingers with the rhythm of Veronica's moving body, perfectly content to stay where she was with a view like this. Veronica was a vision. The way she was rolling her hips and rocking her body while she rode Alix's fingers was the sexiest thing in the world.

It didn't take long before Veronica's pace quickened and her movements grew more erratic. Alix's free hand intertwined with Veronica's as she offered support and connection. The heat between Veronica's legs got even hotter and the look on her face was one of pure delight. Alix moved her hand more, providing more pressure and friction until Veronica moaned loudly and collapsed on top of her.

"Fuck, that was so hot," Alix murmured in Veronica's hair. "You're so sexy."

"So are you," Veronica panted, her breath hot and ragged. "You have no idea how long I've been wanting to do this."

"Same. I wanted to rock your world that first night. I was so frustrated and embarrassed that I fell asleep," Alix admitted.

Veronica sat up just enough to look her in the eyes. "We finally made it happen."

"Hmm, this could've been last night if you hadn't left."

A grin tugged Veronica's lips up. "Or if you had asked me to stay."

"Okay, so we both chickened out. In our defence, there's a good reason why we shouldn't have hooked up," Alix said, her worried thoughts conjuring images of her mum and Dirk. They would not be pleased if they knew about this. Of course, she had zero intention of telling anyone about what happened here .

Veronica brushed her fingers along Alix's face. "It'll be our secret."

Alix was sure this was going to backfire on them somehow but right now, she didn't care. She just wanted to enjoy the moment and pretend nobody existed but her and Veronica on the last day of this weird holiday.

### FIFTEEN

Veronica

Veronica pushed her suitcase into the boot of the car, mostly relieved that the cursed holiday was pretty much over. Even if she had enjoyed spending time with her brothers and getting to know Alix, she was looking forward to going home. The whole week had given her a lot to think about, not just in terms of her dad and Dianne, but also what to do about the situation with Alix.

The most sensible thing would be to stay away from each other, but Veronica didn't really want that. She liked Alix, maybe a little too much. A part of her was tempted to just go for it. It wasn't like anything really stood in their way. Even if their parents got married, they wouldn't actually become step-sisters.

Still, it might be a bit weird and she didn't know what Alix thought of the matter. Maybe their night together was more a tick off the bucket list.

She returned back inside where everyone else was doing the last checks to make sure nothing was being forgotten. Her dad and Dianne were nowhere to be seen and she didn't want to know what they were up to.

"Everyone all set to leave?" she asked.

Her brothers gave her a vague thumbs-up, all engrossed in whatever they were doing on their phones.

Trixie popped her head up from behind the sofa. "I'm ready!"

As callous as it sounded, Veronica didn't care about any of their reactions. She just looked at Alix who gave her a brief but unmistakable smile. That was the extent of their interaction, not that Veronica blamed her. This was not the time or place. That being said, she really hoped they could talk before they parted ways about how to progress from here.

Her dad and Dianne returned from the kitchen, looking all loved-up.

"Ah, everyone is still here. Wonderful. Dirk and I had a little chat and we've decided on a weekend for our engagement party. We hope you'll all keep the date free because it will be a celebration of our families joining as a whole, not just the two of us getting married."

Veronica wanted to hurl. She was just about okay accepting that her dad was getting married but all this talk and pretence about creating a new family was really leaving a bad taste. They were never going to be a blended family, it was far too late for that.

Jonas stood up from the couch. "But you've just thrown a party."

"That was a birthday party, son. This is different, it's an engagement. We'll be renting a venue and renting out a hotel so everyone can attend without worrying about cost. It's going to be wonderful," their dad announced boldly, clearly determined to spare no expense. It was like he thought his riches were an infinite river of wealth that would never dry up.

It was delusional, but Veronica didn't think pointing that out would make a difference. Nobody was capable of stopping their dad's excessive spending, not even their mum. It was obvious now that was one of the reasons they were divorcing.



The whole thing was frustrating and Veronica wanted nothing more than to get out of here. If it wasn't for her unfinished business with Alix, she would be high-tailing out of there. Luckily, Princess chose that moment to bark at her reflection in the window and scratch the glass desperately.

"Do you need to walk her before you get in the car?" Veronica asked Alix, hoping to steal one more moment of privacy. They needed to talk so they were on the same page, even if that page was the last one in the book.

Alix nodded, seemingly catching on. "Yeah, I should give her a quick stretch."

"I'll come too, it'll be good to move a bit before I have to sit still for hours," Veronica declared. Not that anyone was paying them any attention. Her dad and Dianne were already back in their love bubble and lest she suddenly dropped dead, she didn't think her brothers would look up from their screens. They were just as fed up with the holiday and it showed.

The only person she actually had a rapport with was Alix. Veronica didn't know if it was amazing that they had bonded so quickly or that it was sad that a stranger understood her better than her own family.

She followed Alix out into the hallway and Princess chased after them as soon as she heard the jangle of her lead. The Pomeranian jumped at the front door, barking louder than what should be possible for such a small dog. She was so excited, Alix had to wrangle the harness on her. It was an adorable sight that surprisingly filled Veronica with a gentle warmth. Maybe this holiday had been weird and unusual but it had its upsides too.

Alix gave her another secret smile as they walked out of the door but didn't initiate any conversation or contact until the house was a good distance behind them.

"I thought we'd never get a moment of privacy," Alix remarked as she rounded the corner.

Veronica chuckled. "Yeah, it's a full house. Gosh. I'm looking forward to some peace and quiet."

"Lucky you. I have no way to escape the circus, I live with the circus."

"I would offer for you to come stay with me but I think that might be jumping the gun a bit," Veronica said, her gaze drawn to Alix's free hand. It was swinging back and forth between them and she was tempted to take hold of it but didn't, simply because she wasn't sure if it would be a welcome gesture.

"Yeah, I think that's moving a bit fast," Alix agreed, pausing to give Princess a moment to pee. "Does that mean you want to... umm... I don't know how to put it."

"Date?" Veronica suggested, amused by how flustered the other woman was getting. "I think so, yes? I mean, I like you but I'm aware our circumstances are a bit weird."

"Weird is putting it lightly. Our parents are getting married."

"True, but it's not like they've known each other all that long. And we met separately," Veronica pointed out, somewhat tentatively. The last thing she wanted was to argue or logic Alix into something. If they were going to become an item, she wanted an enthusiastic yes not a flimsy half-baked answer.

Alix's slipped her hand into Veronica's and squeezed it gently.

"I think a date would be nice," Alix said, her nose crinkling when she smiled. "But I think we should keep this between us until we're sure there's really something here. There's no point upsetting our family for what might be just a very hot fling."

"Agreed."

Princess ruined the romantic moment by squatting down for her morning poop. Alix had to let go of Veronica's hand but pressed a quick kiss on the back before she did.

Veronica grinned so hard, it made her cheeks hurt. "You're cute."

"I'm picking up poop. "

"Yes, but you're charming when you do it," Veronica teased. She meant it though, everything about Alix was charming and so wonderfully down to earth.

Alix's laugh clattered through the quiet morning. "You're funny."

"I try my best." Veronica slipped her hand into Alix's, pleased that she could do that now without worrying. There were surely going to be obstacles in their future, but none of that could taint how happy she felt. Right now, it was just utter bliss to have a peaceful moment where it was just her and Alix and nobody and nothing else to bother them.

Except Princess, who was peeing on every lamp post and wall that she passed. She did it with such dignity too, her curled tail always proudly stuck up in the air like she was completing a mission from the Goddess herself.

Veronica squeezed Alix's hand. "This is nice."

"It is."

"So since we're dating now... then I can do this, right?" Veronica paused and pulled Alix into her, catching her in her arms. The sparkling smile on Alix's face was all the permission she needed to connect their lips. She sank into the kiss, wishing they

weren't standing in the middle of the pavement. She wanted more but couldn't let herself get carried away because she wasn't looking to give any nosey neighbour a show.

Alix hummed, a soft and happy sound. "That was so lovely. Feels kind of surreal still."

"But good surreal?"

"Definitely." Alix squeezed her hand. "Hey, but we're not going to be like our parents and rush into things, right?"

Veronica grinned brightly. "Really? So you don't want a proposal by the end of the month? Shocking."

"Don't even joke about that!"

"Hmm, maybe it's too soon," Veronica admitted, her eyes rolling up when she thought about their lovesick parents and the stupid engagement party. At least she would get to see Alix but that was the only thing she looked forward to.

### SIXTEEN

Alix

After settling into her hotel room, Alix took the lift to the ground floor where the engagement party was being held. She didn't want to think about the insane amount of money Dirk had to have spent to hire the Crescent Lake Hotel as their venue, especially on the night of the crescent moon when rooms were at their most expensive. It had surprised her that they chose this hotel on this night and it gave her a bad feeling in her stomach about what was to come.

Everyone knew the night of the crescent moon was when shifters looked for their fated mates. Alix hadn't thought her mum and Dirk cared about being fated but since they were here, the most logical conclusion was that they were looking for the Moon Goddess' blessing.

She just worried about what it would mean for her later because these kinds of events usually ended with everyone going into the lake of fate.

The whole entrance was decorated with flower pieces and there were big custom printed banners with the couple's name on it. It was all excessive and over the top in her opinion but her mum seemed ecstatic so at least there was that.

She spotted some familiar faces who looked like they had just arrived and went over to them.

Aditi greeted her with a quick hug. "Wowie. I know you said he was posh but this is

like posh-posh."

"I can't believe my mum is marrying someone with so much more money," Alix muttered, careful not to speak up too much. There were lots of people, none who were paying her any attention, but still.

Aditi's mum, Rekha, seemed impressed at least. "Oh goodness. They've gone all out. It's stunning! How wonderful. This Dirk must be a good man if he wants to celebrate like this. Alix, what do you think of him?"

Alix searched her brain for the right words to describe her mum's fiancé. Granted, she didn't know him all that well but from what she'd seen over the holiday, he didn't seem like a bad man. But he didn't seem like a thoughtful cooperative man either. As lovestruck as her mum currently was, in her core, she was an independent woman. Once the pink glasses came off, Alix questioned whether the two would be compatible or if Dirk's overpowering presence would erode her mother's sense of self.

"He seems to be as into mum as she is into him," Alix said eventually, opting for a cop-out but safe response.

"That's good. Equality is important in relationships," Rekha said as she unwrapped her colourful scarf. "I'm going to say hello to some friends. I'll see you girls later."

Aditi waited until her mum was gone before she spoke, one eyebrow raised up. "So... Tell me what you really think of Dirk."

"It's honestly a little irrelevant what kind of man he is, it's just all moving way too fast," Alix said as they ventured further into the large hall. There were people everywhere, most of them strangers although she recognised some of their own friends and family too.

The whole thing looked like something straight out of a movie. As wonderful as it was, it just didn't feel like it fit. Alix would've much rather had a party at the caravan site with their friends and neighbours. Maybe they could've made a big bonfire and served cheap hot cocoa with glugs of rum for those who wanted a little extra to warm them up. Something small and cosy and intimate that was real.

She didn't want to think about how much money had been thrown at this when not that long ago, she had worked extra hours to afford a new pair of shoes for Trixie's dance class. Maybe Alix wouldn't be so salty if some of this wealth was trickling down to her little sister but it didn't seem like Dirk was interested in spoiling his soon-to-be-step daughter though and instead, spent all his money on himself and their mum. In his defence, it was his money. He could do with it whatever he wanted.

She just wished their mum was prioritising taking care of Trixie instead of living out her own teenage dreams of being a princess.

Someone called her name and she turned in the direction of the voice, waving when she spotted her neighbour Clarissa. The painter had cleaned up nicely and was wearing a pretty dress while her fated mate, Dee, came in a nice black suit .

"You made it," Alix said, happy to gather some familiar people in a sea of unknowns.

Clarissa smiled. "Of course. I'm surprised though, I didn't expect it to be so busy. I didn't realise your mum knew so many people."

"Oh, most of these are Dirk's friends and family, I think," Alix said.

"Speaking of Dirk's family, where's Veronica?" Aditi asked in a curious tone that spelled trouble. Knowing her, she had a checklist at the ready to make sure Veronica wasn't a bad influence.

Instantly, Clarissa's face lit up like she was a kid on Christmas morning. "Veronica? Who is that? Is it your crussssh?"

Alix's cheeks flamed up as she remembered teasing Clarissa not that long ago, before she and Dee had gotten together. "Oh, don't do that me."

"Payback is a bitch," Clarissa sang, clearly glad to be on the teasing end instead of the recipient of it. "So, spill. Who is this Veronica and why are you getting all flustered?"

"I'm not flustered," Alix denied, although she most definitely was. She pointed at the long table that had been covered with flutes filled with champagne or some other bubbly drink. "Look, free drinks."

That distracted her friends from the one topic that Alix did not want to talk about tonight, not even in a joking capacity. She picked up a glass and checked her phone where her new chat with Veronica was packed with witty messages from the past weeks.

I'm here. Where are you? Alix typed out. As much as she wanted to avoid anyone finding out about them, she wanted to see Veronica more. And it wouldn't be weird for them to be seen together. If anything, people probably thought it was nice that they were getting along. If only they knew...

Her phone vibrated. To your left.

Alix's head snapped up from her phone and she looked around as subtly as she could without it being clear she was searching for something or someone. If her friends caught on to that, there would be no end to the teasing. She spotted Veronica and her brothers picking up drinks at the very end of the table.

Just from a quick glance, she could tell that Veronica looked absolutely stunning. Her



elegant peach-coloured dress was decorated with light sparkles that matched her earrings and necklace without it being over the top. It was classy but then that was expected of Veronica. She was classy in a way that made Alix feel insecure to her core, with her cheap dress and cheap make-up. It was probably paranoia, but she couldn't help but feel that everyone else would be able to tell that she or her family didn't belong in this expensive venue that cost more than a year's worth of lot rent for a single event.

Maybe that was why she was so upset with her mum. Not just for marrying a man so quickly and uprooting their whole life, but for picking someone that made Alix feel inferior on every level. And she knew it wasn't about his level of wealth but rather the way he used it only for things that looked good, not causes that actually mattered.

If she were ever rich, she wouldn't spend it like this.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Veronica's arrival who looked even better up close. A few ringlets were deliberately kept out of her elaborate bun and they framed her face, drawing attention to her eyes and the beauty mark above her lip.

Alix couldn't stop staring.

"Hello. It's been a while." Veronica very formally held out her hand but there was a mischievous smirk playing around her lips.

"Yes, since Whitby, wasn't it?" Alix said, happy to play along despite the fresh love bites hidden under the scarf around her neck .

"Of course, when else would I have seen you?" She grinned when she leaned in, her voice reduced to a whisper. "By the way, you left your bra at my place last night."

Alix's eyes widened and heat rushed up to her cheeks. "Shhh!"

“Nobody is paying us any attention,” Veronica said, grinning even wider. She was clearly enjoying herself. “Are you okay? You look a bit flustered.”

Aditi chose that moment to join the conversation with a smile that suggested that she'd been eavesdropping. "Alix has been flustered the entire time. Hi, I'm Aditi. Friend, sister-in-spirit, confidant. You must be Veronica."

"And why must I be Veronica?" Veronica countered as they shook hands.

"Because Alix is blushing like crazy," Aditi pointed out.

To make matters worse, Clarissa and Dee pushed into the circle like sharks out for blood. In that moment, Alix regretted every time she'd teased her friends about their crushes and romantic encounters because it was all coming back to haunt her. Both of them shook Veronica's hand with just a little bit too much enthusiasm.

Who needed siblings with friends like that?

It was almost a relief when the speakers set throughout the room crackled and everyone's attention was drawn to the front where her mum and Dirk were taking centre stage for a speech. Almost.

"Hello everyone!" Dirk's low voice filled the entire room. "Thank you all so much for coming to our engagement party. We're very excited to join our friends and families as one so you better get used to each other."

Faint laughter rose up from the crowd. Alix rolled her eyes and unknowingly gravitated towards Veronica. From the conversations they had, she knew they shared the same feelings on this engagement. Both thought it was a bad idea. Perhaps it was a weird thing to bond over but that was what they did.

Dirk continued. "I'm just so over the moon that I've found this wonderful woman. Dianne, it's like the Moon Goddess herself sent you to me. You're so amazing and wonderful and perfect. I look forward to spending the rest of my life with you. Thank you for saying yes to my proposal."

As Alix expected, her mum was swooning from his declaration.

"Do you want to say anything, my dear?" Dirk asked, passing the microphone along.

"I mean, what is there left to say? You've said it perfectly." Alix's mum looked genuinely starstruck. "I think we're going to have a very happy life together and we're so glad that all our loved ones are here to celebrate with us. Since it's a crescent moon tonight, we hope you'll all join us in Crescent Lake later for good luck."

Alix groaned. She knew this was going to be the case the moment they had revealed what hotel they were celebrating their engagement in but she hadn't properly considered the consequences of it until now. Unless she wanted to openly oppose her mum's engagement, she would have to go into Crescent Lake herself and risk being marked by fate herself. If she didn't, it would be seen as a snub. As much as she didn't approve of how quickly this relationship had gone, she wasn't going to make her mother the gossip of the town. Like any dutiful daughter, she would swallow her opinion and smile and pretend everything was fine.

### SEVENTEEN

Veronica

Crescent Lake glinted mysteriously in the silver light of the crescent moon but Veronica wasn't in the right headspace to enjoy its beauty. She didn't understand why her dad and Dianne even cared about being fated mates. Or rather, why they hadn't come to the lake before they got engaged and started merging the family.

Maybe it was a generational thing. Or her father was just very rash and hadn't been able to wait for the Moon Goddess' blessing.

Veronica touched her bear mark through her clothes. She'd been so preoccupied with her dad's engagement, it was only dawning on her now that she had a new romance of her own she should be focusing on. Under regular circumstances, she wouldn't be coming to the lake of fate so soon after she started dating someone. While she longed for a fated mate, just like any shifter, she wanted someone to love her freely and not because some otherworldly power destined them together.

She glanced to the left where Alix was chatting with the only friend who had come along since the other two were already mated. Were they planning to go into the lake?

Veronica's heartbeat quickened. What if Alix was her fated mate? Then they would be forced to tell their parents about their new relationship. Or worse... what if they weren't fated? Veronica wasn't so foolish to believe their relationship would continue after that but they would still have to see each other at family events.

She squeezed her eyes shut. This was all a big mess and somehow, she'd made things even worse in the process. Maybe the most sensible thing would be not to go into the lake. That way, she could avoid making a detrimental discovery and it wasn't like anyone would notice. Despite insisting on her presence, her dad had barely spoken to her or her brothers.

Nobody would notice if she didn't go into the lake... except Alix.

Frustratingly, Veronica saw no other solution than having a conversation about it. Communication wasn't her strong suit but it was the only way to avoid misunderstandings and make things even more awkward next time they saw each other.

While everybody streamed down to the lake and the nearby hotel to get changed for a winter dip, Veronica texted Alix that she needed to speak to her. Up ahead, the light of Alix's phone illuminated her face as she read the message and nodded.

She waited for Alix near a large tree, away from all the people and the commotion they were causing. In the cold winter months, there were always less people looking for love but there were always some and those seemed excited by the sudden influx of candidates. The more people there were in the water during the ritual, the higher the chance was to find a fated mate.

Alix arrived, looking slightly skittish. "Hey. You wanted to talk?"

"Yeah, about the lake... Are you thinking of going in?" Veronica asked, deciding there was no point beating around the bush.

"My mum is insisting that I go in," Alix said with a resigned sigh. "She thinks it would be super cute if I found my fated mate on the night of her engagement party."

"And what do you want?" Veronica asked as she took Alix's hands in hers. They were trembling slightly so she pressed a quick kiss on them, grateful for the shrouding darkness. She could only imagine what people would say if they saw the two of them so intimately together.

Alix looked a little more reassured. "I don't know. I mean... If you also go into the water, we'll know by the morning if we're fated mates or not. If we are, what does that mean for us?"

Veronica chuckled, hoping to defuse the tension. "That you might have a proposal by the end of the month after all?" It was meant as a joke but both knew it wasn't really. If they were fated mates, Veronica had no intention of letting go of their connection, as new as it was.

A gong sounded from the beach attached to the lake, signalling that the ritual was about to begin.

"Let's not make any promises before we know the outcome of tonight," Alix said .

Veronica nodded in agreement. "You're right, there's no point speculating. But just so you know, I'll be looking for you in the water."

Surprise sparkled in Alix's eyes. "You want us to be fated?"

"I would prefer that over us having to go back to being strangers," Veronica said truthfully. She was aware it wasn't some grand romantic declaration but how could she? They'd only just started dating, there was no point pretending they were madly in love. While a fated mate bond could tie them together instantly, love was something that had to grow between them.

Alix chuckled softly. "Looks like you don't take after your dad when it comes to

rushing into things. Luckily."

"Is my insistence on taking it slow making your heart beat faster?" Veronica teased.

"Maybe."

"Oh, I see." The first real smile this entire evening appeared on Veronica's lips as she pulled Alix closer. "Let's take our time. I want to get to know you thoroughly before we make any commitments. Let's wait until we're old and senile before we get married."

Alix's delightful laughter filled the space between them. "Now you're just being ridiculous. And you're making plans for us to grow old together? That doesn't sound like you're taking it slow."

"That's true, good point." Veronica made sure nobody was watching them before she pressed a quick kiss on Alix's lips. "Let's just go through this ceremony and we'll find out in the morning what fate has in store for us."

They broke apart and made their way separately down to the beach where two groups had formed, as was tradition. Veronica joined all the shifters on the right, some of which had already taken their clothes off. Even though their shifter blood made them run hot, lots of them were shivering.

Another good reason not to look for love in winter times.

Veronica stripped until she was just in her underwear. The cold breeze made her shiver as she waited for the ceremony to start.

After waiting forever, an Elder appeared on the raised platform. Unlike everyone else, he was wearing a very thick jumper and mittens appropriate for the freezing

weather.

"Welcome to the night of the crescent moon where all your dreams or nightmares can come true. The water will reveal the truth you seek, but only to those who are brave enough to risk it all." The Elder's voice carried into the still night. "The mark will reveal the Moon Goddess' will and with it, your own."

Veronica couldn't help but search for Alix in the other group where the humans and kin were waiting. The crescent moon would reveal her own will as well but what did she want? Did she truly want them to be fated mates so it wouldn't be awkward around the dinner table or... did a deeper part of her yearn for something true and everlasting that would be hers and hers only? Someone who would be with her forever, who would be on her side, who would consider her above all others.

Perhaps it was foolish on her part, but at that moment, Veronica wanted Alix to be that person. Maybe they didn't love each other yet but there was understanding, compassion, and attraction. Everything else could grow if they nurtured it. If Alix woke up with her mating mark in the morning, Veronica would do everything in her power to make it happen.

It was with those thoughts in mind that she charged to the lake and plunged herself in ice cold water, completely at the mercy of fate and its whims.



### EIGHTEEN

Alix

The faint light of morning pushed through the gap of the hotel curtains and woke Alix from her restless slumber. She turned on her side, snuggling into Veronica's warm body until she remembered what morning brought.

She jolted up, the sheets and Veronica's arm falling away from her.

"Hmm... just five more minutes," Veronica murmured sleepily.

Alix gently touched Veronica's face. "Okay, you sleep five more minutes."

That worked out just fine for her because it gave her the necessary privacy to check her body for a mating mark. She stepped into the adjacent bathroom. There was no lock on the door for stupid hotel safety reasons but that was fine, as long as it closed, she got all the privacy she needed.

The harsh light took a moment to switch on and she squinted at her unsightly reflection in the mirror. Her face was still puffy from sleep and her dark hair matched the dark bags under her eyes but that wasn't her concern right now.

She touched her face with both hands and let them slide down her body, examining every inch of skin for irregularities. She checked the sides of her neck but the only irregular thing there were more hickeys. Her shoulders were smooth, her arms slightly cold. She couldn't quite see or reach the middle part of her back but mating

marks were usually as big as their shifter counterpart and there was no way she would miss something that big.

Her stomach tightened as she ran her hands further down. Maybe there was no mating mark. If that were the case, it meant neither Veronica or anyone else that was in the lake last night was her fated mate.

Alix didn't think she had a preference either way but now that she was faced with the possibility of that, she realised that wasn't what she wanted. Perhaps if they were in love and a serious relationship, Alix might believe that Veronica would disregard the Moon Goddess' opinion and stick with her. Considering they only just started dating, she was under no illusion that would be the case. She didn't want it either. There'd been many times where Alix had doubted her self-worth but she hadn't such low self-esteem that she was going to be someone Veronica settled for.

If they weren't fated, this would be the end---

Her left hand brushed over some unusual raised lines on the back of her leg and Alix contorted herself in an unnatural way to get a glimpse. She couldn't see it properly but there was definitely something pink that hadn't been there before.

Instantly, her heartbeat quickened. Was it a mating mark? And if it was pink, what were the chances it wasn't Veronica's? There was a reason why people believed in fate and that was because it always made sense.

From the random meeting in the bar to the weird situation with their parents to now this. It certainly felt like some other power was determined to get them together. If that wasn't fate...

Alix returned to the bedroom where she found Veronica sitting up in the bed, looking a bit dazed and confused. Her hair was no longer up in a nice bun but cascading

messily down onto her shoulders. It was reassuring to know that all her elegance and class required effort and wasn't some innate difference that somehow separated them.

In the early morning, they were just the same.

Veronica yawned. "What time is it?"

"Not sure, I didn't check my phone. I was a little preoccupied with, umm, checking my body instead." She hesitated, unsure how best to break the news. Should she dance around it for a little while or just plonk her leg up on the bed and get it over with?

Since subtlety wasn't exactly her strong suit, Alix decided on the latter. That was how she would want to be told something this life changing. She turned around, exposing her backside and the pink marking on her thigh. It was a good thing she was already comfortable being naked around Veronica, or this could've been awkward.

The stunned silence behind her made her nervous.

"I would really appreciate it if you said something," Alix prompted, nerves tingling through her body now she was on display. Maybe she'd gotten it wrong and it wasn't Veronica's mark after all .

The bed creaked and moments later, Veronica pressed her soft warm body against her. Her arms wrapped around Alix and soft kisses were peppered in her neck, retracing the love bites from last night.

Alix felt herself relax. This had to be a good sign. No shifter would embrace someone with someone else's mating mark like that. She turned around and found her final answer in the adoring glint in Veronica's eyes.

"So... looks like I'm your mate," Alix said, although it came out more as a declaration.

Veronica chuckled softly. "Yes, it looks that way. Wow, that's kind of unexpected."

"Bad unexpected?"

"No! Good unexpected. I just, well, didn't expect this."

Alix grinned. "That's kind of the definition of unexpected."

"I'm just taken aback. Two months ago, we were total strangers. And now, you're my fated mate? Although I suppose you already were my fated mate then, we just didn't know." Veronica gestured at the space between their naked bodies, not that there was much of it. "Guess that explains this. "

"It does," Alix agreed, leaning in to kiss the other woman. She didn't know if it was the familiarity, the moment, or the knowledge that they were fated mates, but the kiss somehow tasted sweeter.

"So... should I make some grand declarations now? You want that proposal now?" Veronica asked. Despite her teasing tone, her question seemed rather serious.

Alix rolled her eyes at the thought. "Please don't."

"What about a tiny promise instead, then?"

"What kind of tiny promise?" Alix asked curiously.

"A promise to take things slow and savour the journey and do things right. Even if we're fated, there's still a lot we don't know about each other yet. It's too soon to start

talking about things like love, but I do want you to know I'm in it for the long haul."

"That doesn't sound like a tiny promise at all," Alix pointed out, a smile lifting her lips. Even if it wasn't a grand declaration, her stomach felt light with butterflies. "But okay, I'm in too."

The smile on Veronica was bright like the sun and drove away the chill of winter. "Yay! So... that's it then? We're a couple now?"

"Yeah, I think so." Alix laughed at their unease. "Maybe this is why people do grand declarations because it's just so anti-climatic without one. "

Veronica pulled her onto the bed with her. "I'm sure it gets awkward after grand declarations too."

"It doesn't in the films," Alix said with a laugh. The butterflies in her stomach were threatening to escape and it was the most delightful exhilarating feeling in the world. It was no wonder everyone was so desperate for love.

"This isn't a film." Veronica pointed out as she leaned down for a kiss. "But if it was, we'd get a really fun montage of sexy and romantic clips now."

Instead, there was a sharp knock on the door. "Alix? Are you awake? I need to talk to you!"

Alix's head dropped down onto Veronica's collarbone. Of all the people to interrupt, why was her mother on the other side of the door?

"Alix?" Her mum knocked again. There was no way she was leaving.

"Just a second!" Alix shouted back as she untangled herself from Veronica. The last

thing she wanted was to be interrupted during such a lovely moment but it wasn't like her mum could've known.

In hurried silence, Alix got dressed while cursing her past self for throwing her clothes around the room without much care. While Veronica hid in the bathroom, Alix did one quick sweep through the room to make sure there was no glaring evidence of her presence.

Her mum knocked again. "Alix? Sweetheart, are you okay in there?"

Alix dashed to the door and pulled it open. "Yes, sorry. Still waking up. What's up?"

The redness in her mum's eyes revealed the outcome already. "We're not fated."

"Oh, Mum." Alix wrapped her arms around her mother, her heart quietly breaking for her. It wasn't the first time she had to console her mother after a relationship gone wrong but it never got easier.

She ushered her mum into the room, past the dangerous bathroom, so they could sit on the bed.

"I'm so sorry, Mum. What did Dirk say?" Alix asked gently.

"He said he still wanted to get married but I could see in his eyes that he was disappointed. Oh, Alix. I don't know what to do."

"Well... if you're not fated, then isn't it over?"

Her mum sniffled. "It's not that simple. This is my chance to give Trixie a stable home and a better life. Dirk is a good man and he's a good dad."

Alix tactfully said nothing about that, especially because one of his disgruntled children was hiding in her bathroom .

"I think I could put up with Dirk settling for me if it'll give Trixie a better life," her mum added, sounding mostly lost in thought. "I want her to have the best life and a stable home is the one thing I've never been able to give you girls. There's so much you lacked as a child, I don't want Trixie to grow up like that too."

"Mum... I didn't lack a single thing growing up. I love our campervan and the home you made for us. You helped me with my homework and held me when I cried and came up with the best cosy nights in. It was a full home even without a dad and I'm sure Trixie feels the same way." Alix took her mum's hand in hers. "You don't need a man to be a better mum. Just pay attention to Trix and be there for her instead of dragging us on holidays with people we don't care about. Trixie doesn't need extravagant holidays and fancy gifts, just her mother's time."

"Do you really mean that?" Alix's mum looked like she was ready to burst into tears once again.

"Yes, I mean it."

They hugged tightly and when Alix let go, her mum looked a bit different. She was still crying but there was a clarity in her eyes that hadn't been there in a while. She looked more like the mum from Alix's childhood memories and that could only be a good thing.

"I should have another talk with Dirk." Her mum got up from the bed, more determined than when she had come in. "Thank you, Alix."

"Anytime." Alix smiled, basking in the warmth of the moment. She was so relieved and elated, she felt light and happy.

Her mum paused. "I just need to nip to the loo."

"Nooo!" Alix dashed forward but it was too late. Her mum had already walked into the bathroom where she locked eyes with a shocked Veronica.

Shit.



### NINETEEN

Veronica

Veronica stirred her coffee while wishing she could be anywhere else that wasn't here at a small breakfast table with Alix and Dianne. This was not how she pictured her morning to go and it was giving her a headache.

"So..." Dianne said, not unkindly. "How long has this been going on?"

Alix let out a high noise. "Technically, only a few weeks. Technically-technically, we met on the night before that first weird family dinner."

"All this time? Alix!" Dianne tutted in a way only adults could and shook her head. "I can't believe that. You two were going to be step-sisters."

"Mum! We were never going to be step-sisters, we're too old for that."

Veronica just wanted the ground to swallow her up. She always knew this was going to be an awkward conversation but this was way worse than she expected. It made the time she accidentally got flashed by Dianne pale in comparison. Or maybe not, that truly had been a horrifying moment.

"Are you two happy? In love? Committed to each other?" Dianne asked. She sounded different from all the previous times they met. That dreamy tone of hers was gone and had been replaced by the hard edge of a mama bear.

Veronica gulped. "We are happy. It's a bit early to talk about love but I am committed to your daughter, yes."

The smile on Dianne's face was warm but reserved. "Wonderful. Then I hope you'll take good care of my daughter."

"I will," Veronica promised. So much for no grand declarations, this was her practically securing her mother-in-law's approval. In a different time, this would've been where she asked for Alix's hand in marriage.

Alix gave Veronica's thigh a light reassuring squeeze. Even without words, Veronica instantly felt a little calmer. That was the power of her fated mate's touch.

She felt herself smile. Her fated mate.

"Please don't tell anyone about this?" Alix asked her mum. "We want to share the news in our own time, maybe when things are a bit more settled."

Dianne nodded. "Of course, that's understandable. I won't mention it to Dirk. Speaking of, I should go have that chat with him. I left the poor man waiting."

Alix rose up to give her a hug. "You can do it, Mum."

"Thank you for your support." Dianne insisted on hugging Veronica too. "I'm happy for you both. I hope you'll come over for dinner soon so we can get to know each other a bit more. After all, we're going to be family ."

"Mum!" Alix exclaimed.

Dianne just laughed. "I'm kidding. But not about the dinner, I expect to see you two soon."

"Of course," Veronica said dutifully. Even if she didn't have the best opinion of Dianne, not after seeing her date her dad, she was still Alix's mum.

"Wonderful," Dianne chirped. She gave Alix one more kiss on the cheek, finished her cup of coffee, and dashed away looking quite bright for someone about to end a relationship.

Veronica sat and stared and felt like she'd just been on the bottom end of a bulldozer. What an eventful morning. She snapped out of her dazed thoughts when Alix took her hand.

"I guess my mum knows... That's one person off the list," Alix said.

"Hmm. And she didn't react that badly considering she found me hiding in your bathroom like a teenager." Veronica scanned the room quickly, just to make sure nobody was paying them much attention, before she stole a kiss from Alix's lips. "I guess it's a step in the right direction."

"It is."

"You know what? I'm excited about this," Veronica said.

"Good! I want you to be excited."

"I mean it. I didn't get to tell you earlier but I wished for this outcome."

Alix's expression softened. "You did? I didn't know that."

"Hmm-hmm. Not in a dramatic or desperate kind of way, but last night I found myself thinking how nice it would be if it was you. Someone kind and considerate and who gets me." Veronica pressed a kiss on the back of Alix's hand. "So yeah, I'm

really happy about this."

"Me too." Alix's smile made her eyes crinkle adorably. "I think this is going to be the start of something great."

A warmth surged through Veronica's body and filled her heart. "I couldn't agree more."

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:29 am*

Alix - 9 months later

Alix grunted as she heaved a cardboard box into the rented van. This was one of those times where she really would've benefitted of being a strong bear shifter but alas.

"How do you have so much stuff?" Despite her complaint, there wasn't a single hair out of place on Aditi. "How did all of this even fit in the campervan?"

"Magic," Alix said because she had no real explanation.

She spotted Lena nearing with a large box, clearly struggling. Before Alix could help her, Aditi had already dashed over to her. The concern on her face was so obvious, a stranger would be able to tell that she was clearly still head over heels with her ex.

"You okay?" Aditi asked.

Lena's smile was frosty despite the heat. "I got it."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I said I got it." Lena pushed the box into the van and let out a defeated puff. From everyone here, she looked to be struggling the most with the heat and the labour. Sweat was dripping down her brow and running down the sides of her face. She glared in Alix's direction. "Why did you pick the hottest day of the year to move?"

"V and I were finally ready to move in together," Alix said with a little shrug. She was used to Lena's dramatics and they had come to help her out for just the promise of pizza, she wasn't about to be ungrateful.

As if summoned, Veronica appeared behind her with a box. "I think there's only one more but then that's it."

"Lena and I can get it," Aditi volunteered quickly.

Lena gave her a withering stare. "Can't you do it by yourself?"

"It looked like a big box," Veronica said with an apologetic smile.

"Fine." Despite her complaint, Lena went along with Aditi.

Alix couldn't help but feel bad. She knew it was awkward for them to be around each other but she still appreciated both of them showing up to help her. They were good friends, that was for sure.

Even from a distance, she could see the two bickering over the last box and who was holding it how.

"Are they okay?" Veronica asked.

"As okay as they can be."

"Guess they're not being the classic stereotype of being best friends despite being exes."

"No, although that would've been nice." Alix watched her friends with a pensive look. "I guess it's hard to be friends when you're still in love with each other."

"I suppose that's true." Veronica hummed as she fanned her face. "Gosh, it's so hot."

"Yeah, I can see that," Alix flirted, no longer thinking about her friends.

"You can't possibly find me attractive right now. I'm sweating buckets."

"You clearly underestimate how hot I find you." With a big grin, Alix pulled Veronica in for a kiss. She didn't linger long because it really was too warm for that now. Instead, she turned to look at the packed van. "I can't believe I'm moving in with you. It feels like not that long ago, we were talking about taking things slow."

"Nine months is pretty slow."

Alix chuckled. "Some people would say it's way too fast."

"Are those people here?"

"Nope."

"I guess only you and I can decide what the right pace is for our relationship." Veronica swung her arm over Alix's sweaty shoulders. "How do you feel? Ready to leave the nest?"

"Hmm, I am but it is bittersweet. It's hard leaving Trixie behind but I know it's good for everyone involved. And Mum has been a lot more hands-on so I don't have to worry too much," Alix said. "And I really look forward to seeing you every day."

Veronica's laugh was warm like the summer breeze. "Same. I miss you when you're not around."

"Sappy."

"I'm allowed to be a little sappy, you're my fated mate."

Alix would never tire of hearing that. She pulled Veronica closer and kissed her again, savouring the connection between them. She never would've thought that a random failed one-night-stand would lead to this but then again, she couldn't picture it going any other way. If her romance had played out like some flawless romance film, it wouldn't have felt like her life. The ups and downs and awkward moments were to be cherished because they were what made this real.

Her mum called their names and Alix reluctantly broke away from Veronica.

"Guess we're not done packing yet," Alix said with a sigh. Her muscles were aching and she was already tired of moving which didn't bode well for the unloading.

Veronica chuckled. "Just think of the light at the end. We'll be officially living together."

"That does sound good." Alix swooned just thinking about waking up every morning with her fated mate. It was going to be a dream.

"Don't forget we have dinner with my dad later this week so we can meet his new girlfriend," Veronica reminded her.

"Ugh... How many is that since my mum?"

"This is number three, but he says this one is different."

"Is she?"

"No idea. At least he's actually divorced this time so that's something." Veronica shook her head, clearly not impressed with the whole thing. "And who knows, maybe this woman is going to be the one that sticks."



"Let's hope this one doesn't have any cute daughters though," Alix teased, snickering childishly.

"Oi!"

"I'm kidding. I know I'm the only one for you."

Veronica's eyes shimmered with affection. "Yes, you are. Now let's get that last box so we can officially move you in. I can't wait to start this new chapter in our life."

"Me either," Alix said, smiling so broadly, it was hurting her face. She was so ready for the next step in their relationship and looked forward to discovering what else life had in store for them.

Thank you for reading Her Embarrassed Bear Mate. I hope you enjoyed the romance between Alix and Veronica and didn't cringe too hard at all the awkward moments. If you did, I guess mission accomplished on my part but I hope you also found it romantic and sweet .