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Flying Into the Fire
by BrynnaRaven

Summary

When former Fleet Marine Force Corpsman, now ER/Trauma nurse Cora is recruited by her flight paramedic friend Uncas to work as a MedEvac nurse, her traumatic past and emotional fears must be faced when she meets and tries to resist falling for Nathaniel, a MedEvac pilot with a past of his own. Meanwhile, Uncas finds his dream girl at last in 911 dispatcher Alice, and they share a powerful and very sweet connection full of affection, humor and mutual understanding. Just when everything seems to be running smoothly, will disaster tear it all apart again? Cora/Nathaniel with Uncas/Alice as Secondary Main Characters.

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own The Last of the Mohicans, or any of the music or lyrics represented in this story in the text or as headers. There are some real places mentioned, but only as part of the story to make locations feel authentic. I in no way claim that the events of this story actually occurred in any of these places or times, and any resemblance to real people or situations is purely coincidental. This story is a work of fiction and as such, all events occurring within are made up. I own nothing and I make no profit from anything in this story,
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Chapter Summary

The story begins with a glimpse into Cora’s military past and a traumatic experience, fast-forwarding to the present day where we meet Uncas and Nathaniel. Uncas tries to convince Cora to come and work as a flight nurse, and Cora must decide with the help of her family what is best for her.

Prologue

WARNING: This chapter portrays a modern military combat situation that involves trauma and death. I have tried to be sensitive and it does not give extreme details. If you feel that this may be a problem for you, proceed with caution.

Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, five years ago

“Let’s go, let’s go, we’ve got a nine line! Move your nasty fucking bodies, people! Andrews, Davis, Frejo, Gaston, Martinez, Munro, move your asses, let’s GO!” yelled Gunnery Sergeant Duncan Heyward as he ran through the berthing, followed by the combat MedEvac crew he oversaw. He gave them a rundown of the nine-line call for assistance as they headed out to the pad where the Bell Boeing MV-22 Osprey helicopter waited for them. “Major Ambrose, Captain Beams, sirs, are you ready?” he hollered to the pilot and copilot over the whining roar and wash of the starting propellers as he climbed up into the hold behind them. Ambrose gave a thumbs-up from the pilot seat, and the crew settled in for takeoff.

Ensign Cora Munro took a deep breath, gripping the barrel of her M4 carbine, and met Heyward’s brown eyes. His face was perpetually sunburned out here in the unforgiving desert heat, almost matching the strawberry-blond hair beneath his helmet. He flashed her a brief smile and a wink. She smiled back and looked down at the expanse of desert below as the helicopter headed toward their destination – an Explosive Ordnance Disposal team had multiple casualties after an Improvised Explosive Device had exploded under their Humvee. It never seemed to end out here - these men, and sometimes women, getting blown up. She was glad to be on Duncan’s crew. He was a great crew chief - an excellent commander who everyone loved and respected. It a had been a major stroke of luck that they had ended up together here, and while she got on well with the other crew members and loved them all, Duncan’s familiar face was a godsend when she missed her father and sister so much. They had been friends since they were kids living on base at Camp Pendleton, California. Both their fathers had been Marine Corps Drill Instructors, and they had met in sixth grade when Cora had punched Billy Masterson in the face for picking on Duncan not long after his family moved there. They had been best friends ever since, and her younger sister Alice loved him like a big brother, too. In high school Cora’s family had moved away, but they had kept in close contact and remained best friends, writing and calling regularly and even visiting a couple of times.
Duncan had always joked that he would marry Cora someday if neither of them never met the right person, though she knew he was at least half serious.

They had continued to stay in touch when Duncan joined the Marine Corps right after high school, and Cora had opted to join the Navy to become a Corpsman. She had completed the initial medical training, and had then gone on to earn a nursing degree and a commissioned officer rank. After months of rigorous training, passing a Marine Corps physical fitness test, studying, testing, and oral boards aptly named “murder boards”, she had earned her status as a Fleet Marine Force Warfare Officer, attached to a forward-deployed combat Marine unit as a MedEvac crew member. Duncan, now a Marine Corps flight crew chief, had also been assigned to that unit. They had deployed together seven months ago, and each had been equally glad to see the face of the other. They spent a lot of time together here, more than they had in years, and Duncan had recently confessed that he was still in love with her. She loved him because he was her best friend, but she didn’t feel the way he did, even though he was a wonderful, good man. She’d tried, back in high school and even now she had allowed him to kiss her once, just to see, but her feelings didn’t go beyond friendship. Duncan understood, he always had, but she still felt so badly about disappointing him and wished it was different. She had always known he felt more, and had hoped she would come to love him that way too. “You’re still my best friend, Cora,” he’d said, “and I would never trade that for anything. I hope one day you meet a guy who’s everything you deserve.” She sighed. Out here it could be hard to sort out feelings anyway, because things could get so intense and so scary in a matter of seconds, and as MedEvac, they saw the worst of the worst combat injuries – and often deaths. This was Duncan’s third deployment, and Cora’s second, her first as FMF. It never got easier, and for her, the faces never left her memory.

She was jarred out of her reverie when a colossal impact rocked the low-flying Osprey, throwing her sideways into Gaston and Frejo as the giant helicopter started to spin out of control.

“Fuckin’ A, we’re hit! The starboard motor’s gone, we’re going down!” Captain Beams’ distraught voice carried over the din. Everything was mayhem for what seemed like ages before they hit the ground and everything went black.

“Cora! Come on, Jesus Christ, we gotta get out of here! Frejo, help me get her up!” Cora came to, seeing Duncan’s face above her, a searing pain in her left shoulder and arm. Her head hurt too, and she could feel wetness trickling down one side of her face.

“What…the fuck…happened…?” she asked, smelling acrid smoke and fighting to wake up enough to make sense of things and get moving as Heyward and Frejo dragged her out of the wrecked body of the burning MV-22, still clinging to the strap of her M4. She could hear some of the other guys yelling nearby over the crackle of the flames starting to engulf the aircraft, too quiet compared to the sound of the massive turboprop engines when they had been in the air.

“We got hit with a fuckin’ surface-to-air missile and crashed, that’s what,” Duncan grunted frantically, moving faster. “We gotta get away from this thing before it blows up, come on, Cora, you have to move!” Cora began to try to run with the two men holding her up, gaining a little strength with each step, but dizzy and unsteady. Finally far enough away, Frejo let go of her and Duncan held onto her for a moment.

“Gunny, Ambrose and Beams are still in the cockpit!” Gaston yelled, blood smeared across one side of his face, the leg of his pants torn and showing badly damaged skin. Davis had dragged a supply bag out with her and was tending to an unconscious and badly burned Martinez a few feet away, and Andrews was sitting beside them, stunned but conscious and stable. Cora could tell she had a steadily bleeding head wound and maybe a concussion, with a possibly dislocated left shoulder and ugly burn blisters rapidly rising on the same arm beneath where her BDU blouse sleeve was
rolled above her elbow.

Duncan looked down at Cora desperately. “I have to go back with Gaston, we can’t leave Ambrose and Beams. Remember…you’re my best friend, and I love you.” He let go of her and started to leave.

“No! You’re my best friend too, goddammit, and I’m coming with you!” she hollered, starting to run after him, swallowing her nausea.

“For God’s sake, Frejo, take her and get her out of here!” Duncan roared back. Frejo grabbed her around the waist and dragged her back from the flaming wreckage. She screamed in frustration and pain as the movement jarred her left arm.

“Munro, you’re fuckin’ hurt, come on! Let them go!” Frejo growled.

She kept fighting him, ignoring the blinding pain in her injured shoulder as Heyward and Gaston climbed into the fiery wreckage to get the pilot and copilot out. In an instant, the Osprey’s fuel tank exploded. The percussive force of it knocked Cora and Frejo to the ground.

“DUNCAN, NO!!!” she screamed, scrambling to her feet. Frejo grabbed her again before she could run toward the wall of flame and plume of black smoke that now consumed the aircraft.

“Jesus Christ!” he choked out. “Munro, they’re gone, come on, they’re gone.”

Ears ringing and still reeling from the force of the explosion, Cora stopped struggling and looked back at Frejo as his muffled voice registered, tears streaking through the dust and black soot marring the brown skin of his face. She sagged in his arms and fell to her knees on the hot, dusty earth.

“Oh, God, No, Duncan…NOOOOOO!!!”

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Chapter 1: Different Shades of Blue

“The sun's been shinin' down on me day and night
    Gettin' away with murder, livin' a lucky life
    All good things finally come to an end
    Hit ya like a train if you try to pretend
    Everybody knows that she broke your heart
    Everybody knows that it's tearing you apart
    The row you've been sailin' on sprung a leak
    You won't admit, but it's startin' to make you weep

When you got nothing left to lose
    Might sound good, but I'm not sure that's true
    You carry the pain around and that's what sees you through
    The different shades of blue

I can tell by the way you hang your head
    The way you cast your eyes and things you haven't said
    You've got the past ten years written on your face
    Your whole damn life's been one big race
    Everybody goes there whether they want to or not
Everybody’s got to hold on to what they got
And start to settle in for the long haul
Real life baby, oh, you can’t have it all

When you got nothing left to lose
Might sound good, but I’m not sure that’s true
You carry the pain around and that’s what sees you through
The different shades of blue”

-Joe Bonamassa/James House-

Albany, New York, present day

“Dispatch to Unit 208, respond to possible B and E, Oak Grove and Cherry.”

“Dispatch, this is 208, can I get an exact location?”

“406 Oak Grove Drive.”

“208 responding.”

“Copy.”

Uncas Greatsnake sighed and leaned back in his chair, turning up the volume on the scanner as he propped his feet up on the desk, adjusting the leg of his black uniform cargo pants.

“Damn, I could listen to her talk every day for the rest of my life,” he said wistfully.

“Dude. Are you pining over Dispatcher Girl again?” his older brother Nathaniel teased, knocking his feet off the desk as he walked by with a cup of coffee.

“I can’t help it. Do you hear her? She has the sexiest voice I’ve ever heard. Throaty yet feminine and delicate…I want her to read to me.”

“You’ve got problems, you know? She’s probably hideous in real life, did you ever think of that?”

“No way, bro. Nobody with a voice like that is hideous. Someday…someday I’ll find her and marry her.”

“You’re nuts, but you’re my little brother, so I have to love you,” Nathaniel said with a grin, taking a sip of his coffee. “At least you’re entertaining me on a boring shift.”

“Shut up, you’re not my real brother,” Uncas teased back, both of them laughing. This had been their go-to joke for most of their lives, since Nathaniel had been adopted by their parents before Uncas was born. They were currently trying to amuse themselves through an uneventful 24-hour shift at AirMedic, the air ambulance facility they both worked for – Uncas as a flight paramedic, and Nathaniel a helicopter pilot.

“Hey guys, anything good yet?” Brian Hunter asked as he sauntered in from outside. They usually flew with a nurse as their second medical crew member, but they had recently lost two nurses, so other paramedics like Brian were having to fill the gaps until they hired new ones.

“Nah, nothing so far. The only thing you’ve missed is another episode of “The Voice.” Nathaniel snickered into his coffee cup, then dodged as Uncas kicked a Hi-Tec booted foot at him,
nearly spilling the hot liquid down the front of his black flight uniform. Both men sobered as the next call came over the scanner, a domestic violence call requesting police support.

Nathaniel held his coffee cup tighter, his jaw ticking as he tried to force away the memories that kind of call brought back. After seven years, being left by his former fiancée, and a career change, it had mellowed some, but he wasn’t fool enough to think he could ever forget. He had started working toward his helicopter pilot license at sixteen, using part of the life insurance trust from his parents to pay for flight school. His adoptive father, Sidney Greatsnake, was a career deputy with the Albany County Sheriff’s Office, and Nathaniel had dreamt of being an air support pilot with the Albany Police Department from boyhood. To qualify for a pilot slot, the department had required him to serve as a patrol officer for a few years first, so he’d gone through the academy as soon as he’d turned twenty-one. In his last year of patrol, he and his partner and close friend John Cameron had responded to a domestic violence call. Dispatch had not known the aggressor had a gun, and he had fired on them when they came to the door, hitting John in the neck and Nathaniel in the leg. Nathaniel had managed to take out the shooter, but John had bled out on the front porch in his arms before EMS could get there, leaving behind a wife and two young children.

Once he’d finally healed up, Nathaniel had gotten his air support slot. After a couple of years on APD air support, disenchanted and tired of chasing criminals and seeing one bad situation after another, he had decided to switch gears and apply as a pilot at AirMedic, hoping that the work would be rewarding enough to pull him out of the funk he’d been in since John had died and Judith had taken off. Uncas had eventually decided to join him, looking for a new challenge after working on ground ambulances since graduating paramedic school. Both were enjoying it. It was a slower pace for Uncas, and for Nathaniel too, but he was happier than he’d been in a long time, and his schedule allowed him to volunteer time to fly as a search and rescue pilot for the program their father worked with via the Sheriff’s Office.

Another call came over the scanner, a motor vehicle crash at a remote highway location with serious injuries. Nathaniel and Uncas exchanged a look with Brian, knowing this one would likely be calling for MedEvac, and they’d be headed to Albany Medical Center since it was a level 1 trauma center. Sure enough, the call came through to their dispatch coordinator Dave a couple of minutes later, and they were up and running to the helicopter pad, where everything had been inspected, stocked, and readied for immediate takeoff at the beginning of the shift. Within ten minutes, Uncas and Brian were secure, Nathaniel got the go from air traffic control, and the Bell 206L Long-Ranger took off into the night.

“Hey Cora Munro, is that you?” A deep, rich male voice asked from behind her as she left the 24-hour coffee shop in the lobby of Albany Medical Center.

“Uncas! Hey! I haven’t seen you in forever!” she said with a wide smile. “What are you doing here?”

“We just brought an MVC patient into the Emergency Room. I’m just making a coffee run here before we take off back to home base. I forgot you worked here, how are you? Geez, I haven’t seen you since our last ACLS class.”

“I’m good, just on my rare break and doing the ER/Trauma deal as usual,” she replied, giving her friend a hug. She had known Uncas for several years now, having met him not long after she’d been discharged from the Navy. She had moved to New York to be near her father and Alice, taking
a job as a nurse at AMC. She maintained a paramedic certification in addition to her RN license, since she worked in the hospital’s ER and was a valuable member of the trauma team, and occasionally needed to be able to perform skills like intubation during a code. That didn’t normally fall under the RN scope of practice, but it did for a paramedic, so she held both. Uncas had been a co-instructor in her initial certification course, and they had also been classmates several times when renewing their various Life Support certifications. Cora liked him a lot. A few years younger than her, he was tall and exceptionally good-looking, funny but not a jackass, and he was damn smart and good at his job. He reminded her a little of her Corpsman crewmate Frejo, with the same sense of humor, near-black eyes and smooth dark skin – though Frejo was Seminole while Uncas was Mohican and Delaware, and Uncas had a long, raven-black ponytail where Frejo had sported a military high-and-tight. “So, what’s new with you, Greatsnake?” she asked as she sipped her coffee. “You still riding an ambulance?”

“Nope. My older brother finally convinced me to join the prestigious world of MedEvac, so I’ve been on a flight crew with AirMedic for about a year now.” He flashed her the AirMedic logo patch on the sleeve of his utilitarian black uniform.

“Your brother? I didn’t know you had a brother. Paramedic? Nurse?”

“No, pilot actually. He used to be a cop, then he went to APD air support. He kind of switched things up a few years ago and started flying MedEvac, and I was ready for a change so I joined up after a while.”

“That’s awesome! You know, I was on a MedEvac crew in the Navy, with a Marine combat unit.”

“Seriously?! Holy shit, I knew you were a combat Corpsman, but you never told me you were MedEvac! Hey, any chance you’d be interested in moonlighting a shift or two a week with AirMedic? We just lost two nurses who couldn’t hang, so we could really use somebody like you who has experience and knows what the hell they’re doing.”

Cora glanced away. “I don’t know… It’s been a while.”

Uncas frowned slightly at her sudden change in demeanor. She looked like Nathaniel whenever they heard DV calls on the radio, and he wondered briefly about what exactly had happened to her in her pre-civilian life. His phone buzzed with a text message and he checked the screen. Nathaniel. “Where the hell are you? Did they have to grow the damn coffee beans first?” He chuckled.

“Hey, listen, I gotta jet before Officer McSpeedy up there has a coronary, but think about the job, will you? We’ve had other paramedics subbing in and we’re getting desperate.” He pulled a pen out of his pocket and jotted something on a business card. “Here’s my number, and this is the card for AirMedic. Just in case.”

“Okay, I’ll give it some thought. It was great to see you. Have a good night.”

“You too!” He watched Cora head back toward the ER, absently stuffing the card into the cargo pocket of her navy-blue scrub pants, then rushed to get his coffee so he could get back to the helipad.
Two days later, Cora was still thinking about Uncas’ offer as her feet hit the paved road at a strong, steady pace, keeping time with her sister Alice on one side of her, and her father on the other.

“Keep it up, girls! One more mile to go, and the last one to finish buys breakfast!” Master Sergeant Ed Munro called out. He was retired from the Marine Corps now, but once a Marine always a Marine, and his Drill Instructor mentality would never die. He still wore his graying hair in the high-and-tight cut of a Marine, and his bright blue eyes could still line you out without a single word, having spent more than twenty years striking fear into the hearts of recruits for thirteen weeks at a time - and potential boyfriends when the girls were old enough. He had been a tough but fair and loving father, and his daughters were his one soft spot. Cora and Alice had been running with their dad since high school. The long runs gave them time to talk and sometimes to work things out, and later, when the girls’ mother had died after a long battle with metastatic breast cancer, it had been an escape and salvation for all three of them. After Cora had left the Navy and moved here, they had picked it right back up, running together once a week and having breakfast at their favorite diner after. Cora was now thirty, and Alice twenty-six, but to their father they were still his little girls and they all enjoyed keeping tradition.

Ed lived in a suburban area right outside of Albany, in the same house he had bought when they had moved out here. When Maureen Munro had been diagnosed with cancer and Ed had come up for reenlistment again, he had decided to slow things down. Instead of staying at Pendleton as an active duty Drill Instructor, he had opted to go inactive reserve and had taken an assignment attached to a Marine reserve unit in New York, since his wife had always wanted to live in upstate New York. Alice shared her Albany apartment with her cat, a guinea pig, and several fish, working as a 911 dispatcher and teaching aerial yoga part time at a downtown studio. When she’d moved home, Cora had bought and partially renovated a little farm in West Sand Lake about ten miles away, where she lived with an Irish Wolfhound, a ferret, and two horses, one hers and one Alice’s. She drove into Albany for work, and for the family run day, which she looked forward to every week.

“So how much insanity did you have at the ER this week?” Alice asked Cora when they were seated at their regular table at Jack’s Diner on Central, heaping breakfast plates before them.

“Don’t get me started,” Cora replied, rolling her eyes. “You know how it is during a full moon just as much as I do.”

“God, do I ever. I’m so glad it’s over, that shit was exceptionally harrowing this week, I felt even sorrier for the first responders. I just dispatch the calls and hear the crazy, they’re the ones who have to go right into the crazy. But still, there are always the good calls mixed in there. And…you know, the not-so-good ones.” Her smile faltered a little as she brought her coffee cup to her lips.

“Did you get anything good this week?”
“Yeah, I did. We had some pretty bad stuff come in on trauma, but that stuff is never easy, and the typical ones in the ER who think their cold is a bigger emergency than a heart attack. But I had this one ER patient who was the sweetest, funniest man, and he kept us all entertained for a few hours until he was admitted. There was a little girl too, she’s a frequent flyer with a heart issue, and we all just love her. Oh, and I ran into a friend of mine who’s a paramedic the other night, and he had an interesting proposition for me.”

“Oh, really? What kind of proposition? Is he a cute paramedic?” Alice waggled her eyebrows suggestively and Cora snorted.

“No, pervert. I mean yeah, he’s pretty cute, but I don’t think of him like that, and he’s a little young for me.” She twisted her napkin in her fingers. “No, he used to be a street paramedic but now he works for an air ambulance company, and he… um, asked if I wanted to moonlight with them because they need experienced flight nurses.”

“Seriously? Wow. What did you tell him?”

Cora shrugged. “I said I’d think about it.”

Ed set his fork down, swallowing a mouthful of hash browns. “Cora… well… are you considering applying?”

“I don’t know yet, Pop. I might. I was going to see what you guys thought and take the weekend on it, maybe more if I need to.”

“You know you’re the only one who can ultimately decide if that’s the right thing for you, and I’m going to stand behind you no matter what you decide. My only worry is that you haven’t been on a MedEvac team since your last deployment, and I wouldn’t want it to stir up bad memories for you.”

“I know, and that’s part of my consideration. I just… I don’t know, it’s been five years, and sometimes I really miss being on a flight crew. I love ER and Trauma team, but it’s not the same. I’m never going to know if I can handle it if I don’t get back in the saddle, right? Besides, civilian MedEvac won’t… it won’t be like it was out there.” Her eyes lowered to the mottled burn scars on her left forearm. Skin grafts had helped keep it from developing much contracture, but it was a permanent and not very pretty reminder of what had happened in Afghanistan, and the devastating loss of Duncan and the other three men from the crew. So were the scars higher up, the one on her scalp and the ones from two different surgeries to repair the extensive soft tissue damage to her shoulder.

Ed’s eyes softened and he placed a hand over hers. “Cora. I would to anything I could to keep you from being hurt. I loved Duncan like a son, and I’m thinking as your father because I love you, but this needs to be your decision. If you feel like this is something you want to do, then do it. I know what it is to miss that life, just not in the same way as you.” Cora squeezed his hand and smiled in thanks.

“I think you should try it, Cora,” Alice said softly. “You’re right, you’ll never know if you can do it again unless you try. And I think… I think that Duncan would want you to do what makes you happy, too.”

Cora met Alice’s gaze, her brown eyes misty. Alice had been her rock through all the ugly aftermath and recovery from her injuries, and she had loved Duncan just as much. “Thanks, Al. I think he would, too. I’ll think about it some more.”
The conversation shifted to Alice’s aerial yoga classes, and Alice was delighted when Cora told her she would be able to come and help her with her kids’ class that coming Wednesday because she had the night off. When they were done with breakfast and Ed’s eyes were beginning to glaze over from listening to what he called affectionately called “girly-speak”, Cora took the check and paid it, and the three of them headed to Ed’s truck and piled in for the ride home. Later as she drove home along 43 East and cranked up Joe Bonamassa on the radio, she thought more about the prospect of working for AirMedic. She had to admit she really did miss flying sometimes. Combat service had a way of wearing you down, but at the same time you’d miss the insanity of it for the rest of your life once you were done. It was complicated for her to sort out herself, and people who hadn’t been in those shoes didn’t get it. But she wasn’t sure if it was that, or just missing the whole military package – and her crew. She had a chance to get the flying back, but she’d never get back the four crewmates they’d lost. Maybe it was time to try again. Work with a new crew. Not better, just different. Maybe it would be ok. Maybe one day she could tamp down that fear that always reared its head, and kept her from loving anything outside her family too much – the fear that always reminded her that she could still lose more.

Author’s Note:

I hope you enjoyed this first chapter of Flying Into the Fire. I am so excited to be writing this new story, for so many reasons. Especially because Uncas and Alice are ALIVE, and are secondary MC’s!!!! I just enjoyed the hell out of writing that first scene between Nathaniel and Uncas – I’ve been waiting and waiting to give them humorous brotherly interaction, and I just love them already, and Cora and Alice are equally fun. This is still a Nathaniel/Cora focused story, but Uncas and Alice are very likely going to get almost as much focus, because they have a story of their own in this plot. This is obviously very different from Where We Start Again. I wanted to do a modern setting, and the wheels started turning not very long after I began writing WWSA. I was thinking, in 1757 Cora was a battlefield nurse, so of course she might be a nurse in a modern setting, but the true modern day equivalent of what Cora was doing back then lies in the badassery of a Fleet Marine Force Corpsman. These people do amazing work, y’all, and they not only have to be rigorously trained in trauma and emergency medicine, they also must be fully combat trained to deploy with a USMC combat unit. I have some personal love tied up here, because my husband is a former Marine who was seriously injured in Iraq, and Fleet Corpsmen helped save his life. So what better role for Cora than this? Let me just say how much I appreciate being able to pick my husband’s brain while simultaneously reading all kinds of stuff about MedEvac (civilian and military), how one earns status as an FMF Corpsman, what types of helicopters are used by what branches of the military and civilian flight companies, etcetera… and hubby has also been looking stuff up for me because he’s fucking amazing. It also really helps that both of us are nurses in real life (but not MedEvac ones, though I’ve thought about it before). Poor Duncan and Gaston, and Major Ambrose and Captain Beams. Writing a combat-themed scene made me really nervous, for obvious reasons. It’s a VERY sensitive issue that a fair number of people have some connection to, myself included. It was very important to me that it be realistic and not be overly dramatic or bullshitty. I made my husband beta-read it because he would tell me if it was, having been there himself, and having direct experience with the loss of two commanding NCOs on his team. This scene made me very sad to write, but was
a way to kind of get some original film plot elements into this story (there are more of those in the
future too), and to be the basis for some of Cora’s major issues that will play out. The loss of a close
friend in a traumatic situation is something I have directly experienced, so I can’t say I enjoy doing
this to characters, but it does lend some authenticity and real emotion to it.

As for the rest, I’ve obviously tweaked the ages of the characters a bit because in a modern
setting Alice can’t be eighteen, and Cora and Nathaniel and Uncas wouldn’t have gotten where they
are without putting in some significant training and service time. I couldn’t make Duncan a Major or
Munro a Colonel either, because those ranks don’t fit their modern military jobs, so to be correct and
authentic, I re-ranked them as Marines. In general, being correct about military anything is something
I’m going to be very uptight about, being married to a Marine, and being raised by a Vietnam Army
veteran (and son of a 26-year Navy NCO) and the daughter of a WWII Army Captain. I HAD to
make Munro a DI (Drill Instructor) – these are the guys who scream at all the recruits all the way
through boot camp. I just have this amazing picture of him in this modern role, a cross between
Maurice Roëves and R. Lee Ermey from Full Metal Jacket, but with a sense of humor and a soft spot
for his daughters. He’s awesome. I’ve had months to plan this all out, and it’s come together nicely.
Nathaniel has a past that, while not quite as badass as Cora’s, mirrors it emotionally, so you
obviously don’t need a crystal ball to tell what will happen there.

When you think about Nathaniel and Uncas and their dad (who is Sidney Greatsnake in this
story because Chingachgook means ‘great snake’ or ‘great serpent’), you always think of them in a
helper role because they’re badass heroes, so I tried to put them in modern ‘helper’ roles that fit all
the characters together, including Alice, who is a dispatcher. I have a couple of family members who
are law enforcement as well as friends who are, and several friends who are firefighters and
paramedics, and dispatchers are just as important. They have a big job, and don’t often get the
recognition they deserve for what they do. We’ll get to know a little more about that perspective from
Alice, and because Uncas has the job he does, he gets her. It will be fabulous, I wanted to give
Nathaniel more of a past than just “he’s a MedEvac Pilot”, because doing that job takes a lot of
training and specific experience – not just any pilot can do it. Police air support pilots are one of the
ones who would have the right kind of experience. To fly air support, a lot of police departments
require going through the police academy and serving some time on the streets first, so that the pilot
knows exactly what and who they’re supporting on the ground. I don’t know if Albany PD is one of
those departments, I just used that detail because it worked in the story to give Nathaniel the past I
wanted in losing his partner (John Cameron!!!) and having some familiarity with what Cora has gone
through, and then ending up in a place where they will cross paths professionally. Plus, the thought
of Nathaniel in a flight suit and Uncas in EMT utilities is like... way sexy. WAY. You know you’re
thinking about it. You are. Enjoy that. You’re welcome.

The dispatch codes and unit numbers I use in this story are real ones used by Albany Police
and Fire, but I have no idea who actually drives unit 208, it’s just a story with an authentic detail. I
will use some Marine Corps and medical lingo, but I promise I’ll try to explain everything so you can
follow (speaking of which, the ‘ACLS’ class Uncas mentions stands for Advanced Cardiac Life
Support, a necessary certification for emergency and critical care-level nurses, paramedics and the
like). Jack’s Diner on Central in Albany is a real place too, though I’ve never been anywhere near
there. It gets great reviews on Yelp! There are some other places that are real that the characters will
visit too, and it’s fun to add that authenticity to the story. MohawkWoman grew up in upstate New
York and has been a HUGE help with that kind of thing, and especially with finding a good location
for Cora’s little farm that isn’t too far from Albany. She rocks, as usual.

This story has a soundtrack. Some chapters have a song, there are playlists of songs for many
characters and for certain scenes, and for each couple too. This is what happens when you have a
story living in your head for six months while you make yourself finish the historical one first, hehe.
The theme song for this chapter is “Different Shades of Blue” by Joe Bonamassa – I felt it applied
well to both Nathaniel and Cora, both past and present. Sometimes I’ll use a song as a chapter header, and if there are others in the “soundtrack”, I’ll list them in the author note along with who or what they belong to. This part is a lot of fun, too.

Thank you for reading, I hope you’ll stay tuned! I’m so happy to be writing about the whole family being together!!!!
Cora takes the job at AirMedic and she and Alice discuss implications. Uncas has an unexpected Dispatcher-Girl moment, and we meet the Greatsnake family as a whole. Cora starts her first MedEvac shift, and things are a little awkward between her and Nathaniel when they meet and each find something they weren't expecting.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2: I Dare You to Move

“I dare you to move
I dare you to move
I dare you to lift yourself up off the floor
I dare you to move
I dare you to move
Like today never happened
Today never happened before

Welcome to the fallout
Welcome to resistance
The tension is here
The tension is here
Between who you are and who you could be
Between how it is and how it should be

Maybe redemption has stories to tell
Maybe forgiveness is right where you fell
Where can you run to escape from yourself?
“Hey so did your nurse friend ever apply?” Brian asked Uncas as they were stocking supplies in the helicopter at shift start. “I mean I love you guys and all, but it sure would be nice to go back to my regular days off and quit working all this extra time.”

“Oh, come on, Bri, it’s not like you have anything pressing going on in your personal life right now, unless you’re hiding a girlfriend somewhere and haven’t spilled yet.” Nathaniel chuckled from the cockpit, running his regular preflight checks.

“Yeah and at the rate I’ve been working I’ll be single forever if we don’t get some new blood around here.” He plopped down on a jump seat and ran a hand through his short black hair.

“Yeah, she did apply,” Uncas replied, pushing buttons on the defibrillator to run the necessary function checks. “I think she’s interviewing with Owen in the next couple of days.”

“Level with me,” Brian smiled mischievously and leaned forward. “Is she hot?”

“Jesus Christ, Hunter, the woman hasn’t even set foot in the door yet and you’re already gearing up to run her off,” Nathaniel rolled his eyes.

“Aw, don’t listen to him,” Uncas chuckled. “You’ll find a girl one day. You’re nice, and smart… for a Huron.” Brian laughed. The two of them were always making jokes about their historically-opposing tribal ancestries.

Uncas finished the defibrillator check and the three of them headed back into the hangar, where the emergency call line from central dispatch was ringing at Dave’s desk. “Shit, where the hell is Dave?” Uncas grumbled, dashing into the empty office to grab the phone. “AirMedic.”

“AirMedic, I have a request for medical evacuation, are you ready to copy?”

Uncas almost choked, his jaw dropping for a second at the sound of the voice on the other end of the line. Dispatcher Girl!!! Holy shit…Uh. Medical emergency takes priority. Get a grip. He composed himself and tried to sound professional. “Ready to copy, dispatch, go ahead.” He took down the location and details she gave him, trying not to hyperventilate.

“….AirMedic, do you copy?”

“Yes! Sorry. Copy. Thank you. Have a wonderful evening.”

“Um… thanks, you too.” The dispatcher let out a sexy, breathy laugh that erased his brain of
“Wait! What’s your - ” CLICK. “Name….?” He groaned and stared at the receiver. Too late. He slammed it into the cradle.

“Hey, man, I’m so sorry!” Dave huffed breathlessly into the office, his thin brown hair sticking out on one side, perpetually a nerdy, hot mess. “I thought I had ten seconds to take a whiz. What was the call for?”

“For me to completely fuck up the chance to meet my destiny,” Uncas moaned, throwing his head back and clapping his hands over his eyes.

“Huh?” Dave pushed up his thick black-framed glasses, confused.

“Forget it, we gotta go.” He jogged out of the office to alert Nathaniel and Brian, and they took off out to the helicopter pad.

“So how did your interview go?” Alice inquired, unhooking a silk trapeze. She and Cora were cleaning up the yoga studio after her evening aerial class, taking down the trapezes to put away for the regular classes in the morning. She’d been teaching here for a few years now for a little extra income, and it was a nice, calming contrast to dispatch, very helpful in keeping her on an even keel.

“It was good. I took the job, just one 24-hour shift a week for now to see how it goes. If I like it I can cut my hours at AMC and do more.”

“That sounds like a good plan. I’m glad you decided to do it, I think you need to. When do you start?” They carried their armfuls of silk into the storage room at the back of the studio and set them down.

“My first shift starts tomorrow evening, they’ll have me orienting with a pilot and a two-man crew to get familiar with everything. I’m sure it’ll be different than what I’m used to, especially in a helicopter that’s tiny compared to the Ospreys we were flying.”

“Are you nervous about the flying? You haven’t been on a helicopter since the crash. Is that going to be a problem?”

“I can’t say for sure. I mean, yeah, I’m nervous, but not so much about flying, that’s never really been a big trigger. Explosions are a lot worse for me, and certain sounds. Flying I miss, and I want to do it. We’ll see how it goes.”

Alice picked up her phone and hit a button, the resonant beat of Elastic Heart starting over the bluetooth speakers. She jumped up to grab the bottom of the lyra suspended from the studio’s high ceiling and pulled herself up, throwing her legs upward to hook her knees around the hoop so she could hang upside down and grin at her sister. She held her arms out and wiggled her fingers. Cora smiled and took her hands, using them as leverage to swing her body upward onto the lyra frame with Alice. They wordlessly began going through the motions of one of their partnered lyra routines. Alice had started aerial classes for lyra and silks the summer Cora had graduated from high school and gone to Navy boot camp, and had gotten very good at it. After Cora’s injury when she’d recovered from her burns and her shoulder surgeries well enough, Alice had convinced her to learn and had taught her. It was good physical and emotional therapy, and she’d already had decent upper
body strength thanks to her rigorous military physical fitness requirements. She generally preferred silks where Alice was more of a lyra girl, but they were each good on both, and they loved being able to share something so therapeutic. Sometimes they both had rotten, awful shifts at work, and it really helped to grind some of that out.

“Oh hey!” Alice dropped back to the floor once the song had ended. “You have to tell me who the AirMedic dispatch guy is when you meet him. I called over there for MedEvac last week and he’s got one of those sexy baritone voices that could just melt butter. I want to know if he’s as hot as he sounds!”

Cora laughed and dropped down after her. “Sure, I’ll let you know. If he’s cute I’ll fix you up with him.”

“Hey, if he’s not my type he might be yours.”

“No fucking way, Al. You know how I feel about screwing around between teammates. It’s not done.”

“Maybe not in the military, but you work in a civilian hospital, you know it happens all the time. Besides, a dispatcher isn’t your teammate, and you make all kinds of excuses not to go out with guys.”

“I’m busy, and I don’t mess with coworkers!”

“And I’m the damn tooth fairy. Coworker or not, you need to let your guard down a little bit, Cora. It’s been five years, and Duncan wasn’t even your boyfriend. You can’t be emotionally stunted and alone forever. You’ll become a crazy cat lady.”

“I don’t even have a cat, you do. And I’m not alone, I have you and Pop, and Scout and Monty.”

“Fine, crazy ferret and giant hairy dog lady. Whatever. You know what I mean. I’m single because I’m in a rut and my last boyfriend was a dick. You’re single because you have issues and you’re punishing yourself, and I hate to see you do that. And Duncan would hate it too, you know he would. He wanted you to be happy. So do I.”

Cora frowned and zipped her hoodie, picking up her car keys. “I am happy, Al. Look, I have to go, I still need to check on the horses and clean Scout’s cage, and Monty’s probably tried to eat the doorframe by now.”

“Ohay.” Alice sighed at her sister’s typical deflection as she set the alarm and locked the studio door. “But let me know how your first shift goes. I’m on tomorrow and off Friday, so stop by after your shift ends. I’ll feed you cookies and you can tell me all about your first day.”

“Hello?” Uncas tucked his phone between his shoulder and his ear, handing Nathaniel a Tupperware container and shutting the fridge door in their parents’ kitchen in the Guilderland home where they had grown up. “Yeah, hey! Uh-huh, Owen told me. You’ll be with us. Yup. Great, see you later.”

“Who was that?” Nathaniel glanced back over his shoulder.
“The new nurse, Cora Munro. She’s starting with us tonight.”

“Huh. Let’s just hope she’s not like the last few. It’d be really good to get someone who can deal and doesn’t quit after two months. How do you know her again?”

“She was a student in my paramedic cert class a few years ago, and we’ve been through ACLS refreshers a couple of times together. She works in the ER at Albany Medical Center, and she’s on the trauma team.”

“She sounds good on paper. As long as she works in the air as well as she does on the ground.” Nathaniel was skeptical after the last two nurses, and Uncas hadn’t told him much about this new girl’s background.

“She’s good, bro. You’ll like her. She used to be – Oh hey, Dad.” Both men turned around as their father walked in from the front hallway, stopping in for dinner during his shift with the Sheriff’s department. Sidney Greatsnake greeted his sons with a grin, his weathered light brown skin crinkling around his dark eyes. He tossed his hat onto the counter, smoothing his short, gray-peppered black hair and flipping a couple of buttons open on his black uniform shirt, the shiny brass of his badge glinting in the kitchen light.

“Hello, nêthêm!” Yvette Greatsnake sang out, kissing Sidney’s cheek as she sashayed into the kitchen. “What the boys left of dinner is on a plate for you at the table. Eat up.” Her long, glossy, silver-streaked black hair hung down the back of her loose bohemian-style dress to her waist, held back from her fine-boned face by a silver barrette. She set down a basket of dried herbs on the counter, taking a mortar and pestle down from a cabinet to grind them up. She and Sidney were an unlikely pair, but thirty-five years together showed that opposites could work out just fine. Of Mohican descent, Sidney had spent his entire adult life as a deputy with the Albany County Sheriff’s Department, where Yvette, of Delaware descent, was a Doctor of Naturopathic Medicine, running her own herbal practice in Guilderland. They had their commonalities that brought them together too, one of them being a mutual love of bluegrass and folk music that had them both performing with a local band. Their home was a happy one, and Nathaniel and Uncas, close to their parents, spent a fair amount of time there when they weren’t at their own house.

The radio on Sidney’s hip crackled before a call came through from dispatch for another unit, a familiar female voice carrying across the kitchen. When the unit copied and the call ended, Uncas sighed.

“Still kicking yourself for not getting her number last week?” Nathaniel grinned impishly, tossing the Tupperware containers from the fridge into a bag to take to work with them.

“Don’t remind me. I may never have another opportunity again, I can’t believe I blew it.”

“I’m telling you, let it go. This isn’t a Spider-Man comic and I doubt she’s your Mary Jane, dude. Find a real girl.”

“Hey, asshole, don’t knock Spider-Man. Spider-Man is my everything. Besides, I don’t see you up to your neck in women the last few years either. You’ve gone out with like three chicks since Judith dumped you, and good riddance, she wasn’t worth it.”

Nathaniel shot him a warning look. “Come on, we need to go or we’ll be late. Bye Dad, be safe. Bye, Mom.” They kissed Yvette and hugged Sidney, then walked out to the two motorcycles parked in their parents’ driveway.

Sidney opened the fridge after finishing his dinner and surveyed the contents thoughtfully for
something to take back on shift with him. “I worry about Uncas sometimes.” He sighed and shook his head.

   Yvette giggled. “Oh, leave him alone. He’ll meet the right girl one day. He’s only twenty-nine, he’ll be fine.”

   “This voice thing is a little out of hand. It’s weird.” He took a bowl out and lifted the lid, sniffing the contents.

   “Don’t eat that!” Yvette took it from him.

   “Why not?”

   “You’re not going through menopause.” She replaced the lid and put it back, and Sidney shook his head, chuckling quietly.

   ———

   “You know where the locker room is, so go ahead and stow your things and get settled. You’ve met Brian, and the rest of the crew should be here any minute, so you’ll see them shortly – you already know Uncas anyway.” Owen Phelps, the AirMedic manager, smiled warmly. Cora had liked him immediately when she’d interviewed. He was professional and by all appearances ran a tight ship, but he was also friendly and approachable with kind grey eyes set in craggy features that made him seem tough but in a fatherly way.

   “Thank you, Mr. Phelps,” she smiled back.

   “It’s fine to call me Owen. I’m taking off for tonight, but I’ll be here during the day tomorrow, so give me a shout-out if you need anything.”

   Cora walked back to the locker room to get situated, her stomach in nervous knots. As she passed by the windows that looked out to the parking area, she watched two motorcycles rumble into the lot, the riders clad in black uniforms similar to hers. Owen waved at them as he got into his car. Uncas and the pilot brother? One wore a bomber jacket and a copper-colored helmet with a tinted visor, and rode a Triumph Bonneville that reminded her a little of the one Duncan’s father had owned, only this one had a gorgeous vintage look, with distressed brown leather saddlebags and seat, and an olive-green fuel tank and fenders with copper accents. Very nice, she thought appreciatively. The other wore a black leather motorcycle jacket and blue visored helmet, and rode a blue and red Harley Fatboy with pinstriped spider webs on the tank. That has to be Uncas, she smiled to herself, remembering his intense love of all things Spider-Man.

   She went into the locker room and stashed her things in an unclaimed locker, pulling her stethoscope, trauma shears, and other regular-use items out of her backpack to stock her pockets. The black EMS-style uniform was nicer than her regular scrubs – it had better cargo pockets, and it was made of heavier fabric, more like the BDUs she’d worn in the military. She closed her locker and headed for the door, and as she rounded the entryway corner, she ran smack into something tall, warm, and very solid. Yelping in surprise as the collision knocked the wind right out of her, she tried to spring back, but found she was anchored by a pair of arms, and large, strong hands that gripped her elbows over the snug long sleeves of the undershirt she wore.

   “Whoa! Hey, sorry about that! Are you ok?” the guy asked in a low-pitched voice that was somehow both gentle and commanding at the same time.
“Yeah, sorry…” Cora trailed off, looking up at him and still trying to catch her breath. He smelled like the leather of the dark brown bomber jacket he wore, and something else faintly woodsy and pleasant. She wasn’t particularly short at five foot eight, but he had five or six inches on her. His facial features had a chiseled, slightly rugged look with high cheekbones, a strong jaw and chin, wide, firm mouth, and an aquiline nose that might have been too big on anyone else’s face but his. He had thick, wavy, almost-black hair that hung past his shoulders, and a red bandanna was tied loosely around his neck under the collar of his jacket. Piercing blue-green eyes met hers from beneath dark brows and sooty black lashes, arresting all her conscious thoughts for a moment. There was nothing ‘pretty’ about him, his features were too strong for that. He was just… Powerful. Intriguing. And she needed to stop staring into those eyes, like right now, because the way they electrified her made her feel more than a little unsettled, and it made her want to crawl behind something and hide. She stiffened, extricating herself from his arms, and backed away.

“Dude, are you trying to knock her out before she even makes it to the helicopter?” Uncas came in behind him with a joking smile. “Hey, Cora! This is my brother I told you about, he’s our pilot.”

“Your brother…?” she repeated, still a little dazed. She was confused about the brother part, because while his skin was tanned from time spent outdoors, this guy was clearly not Native American like Uncas. And those eyes… She frowned slightly, and her confusion must have been apparent as she glanced from him to Uncas.

“He’s adopted, so unfortunately I still legally have to claim him.” Uncas laughed as the brother bent over to retrieve the motorcycle helmet he’d dropped when they had collided in the doorway.

“Nathaniel Poe,” the guy said, straightening and sticking out a hand.

“Cora Munro,” she replied, taking his hand and giving it a firm shake. Strong grip, long, slim fingers, callused in places. Touching him unnerved her, and she recoiled slightly, dropping his hand. She didn’t know what to think of him yet. There was something about him that made her feel irrationally bristly and guarded, even though he seemed nice enough, if not a little inappropriate compared to the pilots she was used to. Now that she was a safe distance from him, she could see that he was long-legged and lean, not bulky but lithe and strong. His black utility flight suit was partially unzipped in front under the leather jacket, showing a dark grey t-shirt with a graphic of a rocking chair, and the words ‘I ROCK’ printed above it. THIS is the brother who used to be a police officer? This is the pilot with years of experience? God, I hope he’s not a cocky jackass. She had expected someone more… well, cop-like. Formal, more regimented, far more professional-looking. Not a guy with long hair and a motorcycle who wore smartass t-shirts and was… uncomfortably sexy. Not a guy who looked at her in a way that made her breath catch and her heart race a little. What the hell is wrong with you? She scolded herself. Pull yourself together, it’s not like he’s the first attractive man you’ve ever seen! Except there was something about this guy that made his undeniable allure harder to ignore. Well, she’d have to. Maybe she’d be lucky and he would turn out to be an arrogant jerk, if the t-shirt was any indication. That always made it easier with the doctors at work.

Nathaniel surveyed Cora Munro, his perpetual cop brain trying to get her measure. She’d been soft and breathless, off her guard for just a few seconds when they’d collided, looking up at him with big, dark-lashed eyes the color of melted chocolate, her full, lush lips parted in surprise. She had a mane of dark brown hair that fell over her shoulders and down her back in a tumble of unruly waves. She didn’t wear any makeup, nor did she need any. Her skin was fair and smooth, just a few lines around her eyes and mouth, enough to tell him that she smiled often enough to put them there, and frowned enough too. Her face was captivating with high cheekbones, a straight nose, and a
pointed chin with a tiny dimpled cleft in the center, the soft angle of her jawline shadowing the smooth, slender column of her neck. She was thin, but he could feel firm muscle beneath her shirt sleeves, and she was a little taller than average. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting, but it sure as hell wasn’t what he was looking at. In those few seconds, something inside him had risen to the sight and feel of her, and as much as he knew he ought to let go of her, he couldn’t seem to do it. Then for some reason her whole demeanor had changed in an instant, and he could almost see the wall going up around her as she’d retreated behind it. Now she seemed like a totally different person, too composed, too rigid, and he was perplexed by the change. She avoided his direct gaze, her eyes shuttered and taking him in with a calculating, wary glare. So it was going to be like that. Oh well, maybe she’d be like the other ones and not last long. The next twenty-four hours would tell him whether she could hack it and be part of this team.

“Well, nice to meet you, Cora.” His eyes flicked over her again and he smiled wryly. “Make sure you tie up all that hair before we take off anywhere. Prop wash is pretty intense.”

She snorted and smirked at him, rolling her eyes. “Please. You haven’t felt prop wash until you’ve ridden an MV-22 Osprey blowing sand and hundred-and-twenty-degree wind. This ain’t my first rodeo, hot shot.” She angled past him and marched down the hall, pulling her hair up into a smart knot as she went. Nathaniel sniffed. Well, she had a thick skin and a smart mouth, anyway, so there was hope for her yet. Her comment registered and he mentally smacked his forehead. MV-22? Shit.

“What the hell was that all about, bro? Are you trying to piss her off?” Uncas frowned at him, crossing to his locker to throw his bag and jacket inside. “I told you, she knows what she’s doing. Be nice to her, we need her.”

“She was in the military?” That might account for some of her stiff bearing, but there was something else hiding behind that wall of hers, too.

“Yeah, she was a MedEvac Corpsman with a Marine combat unit in Afghanistan, I thought I told you.”

Oh, this was getting better and better. “No, you didn’t tell me. All you said was that she worked in the ER. What else do I not know?”

“That’s all I know, she doesn’t really talk about it.”

“I don’t imagine she would.” He didn’t exactly go around freely discussing the most harrowing things he’d seen as a cop, and he definitely didn’t talk about John with just anyone. MedEvac in Afghanistan was likely an even less pleasant discussion topic. He’d put money on her having some damage there.

“Hey, Uncas my man!” Brian came in, grinning from ear to ear, and high-fived Uncas. “Nice job on the new nurse! She’s a hottie!” Nathaniel sighed loudly and slammed his locker shut. “What the hell is his problem?” Brian asked Uncas, who shrugged. Nathaniel stalked out of the locker room and down the hall.

A couple of hours into the shift, their first call was an order to standby for transport of a critical patient from a rural hospital into Albany. Cora, Uncas and Brian used the standby time to make sure they had everything necessary for the patient they would be moving, while Nathaniel waited inside for their go-ahead call to lift off. As soon as it came, he jogged out to the helicopter pad where the rest of the crew was still hanging out ready to go and waiting, Cora and Brian laughing at some ambulance story Uncas was telling. She was getting along well with them, and Nathaniel thought that was at least a good sign. Given how hard the last nurse had been to get along with, he
could at least be thankful Uncas liked this one. She’d been all right when Nathaniel had given her a run-down on the helicopter specs earlier, just reserved and formal, different than she was with Uncas and even Brian. Brian flirted with her some, and he had found himself feeling a weird sense of relief when she had remained professional and not taken the bait. She knew Uncas, so Nathaniel wasn’t surprised she was at ease with him, but he felt a little irrationally annoyed about how buddy-buddy they’d been all evening too. It was stupid, he knew, but he couldn’t help it. He shoved his thoughts away for the time being.

“Hey, you about done holding hands with Miss Munro?” he called out, giving Uncas a teasing grin and winking at Cora. “We’ve got work to do. Let’s go.”

Uncas and Brian laughed. Cora looked mildly amused, but said nothing as the three of them climbed up into the cabin. From the pilot seat, Nathaniel watched her as she buckled her harness. The sleeves of her undershirt were pushed above her elbows now, and he caught sight of a large patch of shiny, irregular scar tissue that dominated the upper half of her left forearm and disappeared under the sleeve. An odd sorrow spread through his chest at the sight. It wasn’t hard to guess where a combat veteran might have gotten a burn scar like that. His gaze traveled to her pretty face, the fine angles highlighted by the light of the setting sun hitting her through the small side window of the cabin. There was something compelling about this woman. She was attractive, but it was much more than that. He liked the friendlier side of her he saw with his brother, and the softness he’d glimpsed in the locker room. He found himself wanting more and more to draw her out, to see if he could make her smile and let down her guard with him. His pulse thrummed when he realized she was staring back at him, her brown eyes luminous in the fading light.

“What are you looking at?” she asked him, raising an eyebrow and surreptitiously pulling her sleeves back down.

“Well… I’m looking at you.” He held her gaze and watched her eyes go from suspicious to shocked, and she glanced down into her lap for a moment. When she looked back at him, they were full of surprise, and a touch of curiosity. The corners of her lips twitched just a bit at first, and then curved a little in a tentative, shy smile. Ah, there you are, he thought with satisfaction. He smiled broadly at her from beneath the visor of his pilot’s helmet, then turned back to the control board to prepare for liftoff, the starting whine of the propeller engine drowning out all sound.

By the time the night was almost over, Cora had gotten her flight legs back on an interhospital transfer and two emergency calls. Back at the AirMedic base, she sat alone in the open side door of the Long-Ranger, enjoying the quiet after the busy night. The guys were inside, she assumed hitting the cots in the locker room to get a little sleep between calls. She knew she ought to be doing the same, but she was still buzzing with adrenaline from the last call, and from the sheer high of success on her first shift back in the MedEvac saddle. It had been a huge relief to realize that she was okay doing this. She’d been a little shaky before the first liftoff, and had been glad for the distraction of Uncas telling funny stories, and even for Nathaniel’s smart-aleck teasing. Her preflight jitters had fallen completely by the wayside when she’d caught him staring at her from the cockpit, those canny eyes of his practically melting her from the shadow of his helmet visor. She had burned with self-consciousness when she’d noticed him looking at her scars, but when he had met her eyes, there was no revulsion there, no pity or even sympathy. It was something kindred, something that said I see you. Then it had shifted in the next few seconds to a stirring of something heady that made her pulse race and her breath quicken. Afraid of what she felt, and terrified he would see it there naked on her face, she had bristled and asked him what he was looking at, and he had answered with the obvious I’m looking at you, but she got the feeling he hadn’t meant it in the simple sense. She had been wrong to think there wasn’t a trace of his former career left in him, because the one cop-like thing about him was the way he looked at her like he could see right into her soul, and she didn’t like it. Or, more accurately, she didn’t like that it made her heart pound and her brain turn to useless
mush. Much like his smile afterward had done the same. That kind of potentially disastrous complication had zero place in her world, especially in a work environment. Her close friendship with Duncan and his feelings for her had been messy enough when they were deployed with the same unit – outright fraternization was something else altogether, and she would not go there. She sighed heavily. One shift a week. It was only the first day, it would fade. Her phone buzzed in her shirt pocket, and she checked the screen.

It was Alice, also working overnight at central dispatch. “So what’s the scoop on dispatch guy? Is he as dreamy as he sounds?”

Cora snorted and typed a response. “Dave? Hardly. Sorry to disappoint. I wouldn’t call his voice dreamy either, maybe he had a cold that day.”

“Damn. That’s too bad. Is the pilot hot?”

Cora groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. “The pilot is fucking annoying.”

Alice’s reply popped up a moment later. “Oh my God. He’s totally hot, isn’t he?”

“I have to go, I’ll talk to you when I get off tomorrow evening.”

“You better spill. Don’t think I’ll forget!” Cora put her phone back in her pocket and dragged her hands down her face. How the hell did Alice always know how to read her, even through a stupid text message?

Inside the building, Nathaniel stood in front of the coffee machine, waiting for it to finish brewing a new pot. He knew now that he had been wrong to have any doubts about Cora. Three transports had been enough to tell him that. He’d expected anyone just starting to be hesitant to jump in right away, but she wasn’t. She and Uncas and Brian worked fluidly together, and when he had an opportunity to steal a backward glance, he liked watching her. She was intelligent, levelheaded, and very capable. Best of all she had a talent for keeping patients calm – most of them did not enjoy flying while strapped to a stretcher, and it was common for conscious ones to panic. She had a voice that was low and pleasantly throaty, and he could catch the soothing, sultry lilt of her speech here and there as she talked to the patients while they traveled. He began to understand how his brother could be as hooked as he was on just the sound of a woman’s voice.

“So, what do you think of Cora now? Still skeptical?” Uncas strolled in and leaned on the counter next to him. Brian was crashed out in the locker room.

“Nope. She’s good at this. She’ll be fine.”

“She’s more than good, man. You saw it yourself.”

Nathaniel glanced heavenward. “Okay. She’s the best flight nurse on the planet, and I never should have doubted your cosmically-gifted ability to choose her. The building of a shrine shall commence immediately.”

“Smartass.”

“Better to be a smartass than a dumbass, as dad always says.”

“What is with you? You’ve been weird all night, since the minute you… Oh. Oh, wait a minute. Oh, this is good, this is so fucking good right now.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Nathaniel shot back, exasperated.
“You like her.” Uncas laughed incredulously.

“Well of course I like her. She’s nice enough, and she’s doing well with you guys. Why wouldn’t I?”

“No. I mean you LIKE her like her.”

“Jesus Christ. You’re ridiculous. I don’t have time for this.” Nathaniel poured himself a cup of coffee, and after a pause, poured a second and turned to leave.

“Are you taking her coffee? You are, aren’t you?”

“No, they’re both for me, I’m just really tired, asshole. Go cuddle with Brian and leave me alone.” Nathaniel pushed his way out the door to the helicopter pad to the strains of Uncas singing “You liiiike her, you want to daaaaate her…” He could see Cora’s booted feet hanging under the belly of the helicopter from where she sat in the open side door. She looked up, startled, as he rounded the fuselage and approached her.

“Hey,” he greeted her, holding out the coffee cup.

She took it with a small, nervous smile. “Thanks. What’s this for?”

Nathaniel set his cup down and climbed up to sit next to her. “Solidarity in being awake, I guess.” He picked up his cup. “I hope black is ok.”

“You know it. I survived two deployments on what could most kindly be called brake fluid.” She took a sip and sighed. “This is a damn sight better.”

“Yeah, about that… I owe you an apology, I was kind of an ass to you earlier. Nobody told me you had any MedEvac experience, and our last couple of hires bombed miserably, so I was feeling a little doubtful.”

She nodded and slid him a sidelong glance, the corner of her lips quirking slightly. “And what do you think now?”

He groaned inwardly. Sweet Jesus, woman, don’t ask me that. “I think you’re going to be just fine,” he said.

She suddenly reached over and grabbed his pilot helmet out of the cockpit and touched the vinyl lettering over the visor. “So, I have to ask. What’s with the ‘Hawkeye’ thing?”

“It’s an old nickname. It started when I was a police cadet, because I had the top marksmanship score in my graduating class, and it carried over to air support because I never lost a suspect on the ground.”

“Ah, yes, that makes sense. Uncas said your dad is in law enforcement too?”

“Yeah. He’s a sheriff’s deputy, has been his whole life, but he’s retiring this year. Our mom is a naturopath.”

“Where is your real family?” she asked, then seemed to think twice. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t ask you about that. You don’t have to - ”

“No, it’s okay. My mom and dad and my two sisters were all killed when our car got hit by a drunk driver. I was only two, and my car seat saved my life.”
“Wow. I’m sorry. That’s… God, that’s awful.”

“I don’t really remember them, just little bits. I don’t remember the wreck at all. I was pretty banged up. My dad was the first responding unit, and I guess once the fire department cleared me to be moved, he held me and kept me calm, and they couldn’t get me to let go of him after that. He had to ride in the ambulance with me and stayed in the ER too. Apparently, I threw a huge fit when social services came to get me, and when he told my mom about the whole thing, neither of them could stop thinking about it. I didn’t have any other family to take me, and they were already registered as foster parents because they thought they couldn’t have their own kids, so they fostered me and then legally adopted me. Uncas kind of proved them wrong about the not being able to have kids part about a year after they took me home.” He smiled fondly.

“What an amazing story. You’re very lucky, they sound like nice people.”

“They’re pretty great. What about you, do you have family around here?”

“Yeah. My younger sister, and my dad. He’s a retired Marine Corps Drill Instructor. My mom died when I was seventeen. She had breast cancer.”

“That must have been hard.” He watched her face, not wanting to push too hard.

“It was. It made leaving home for the Navy a lot harder, but my dad didn’t want me to stay just because of that, and neither did my sister. It wasn’t easy, but in the end it was the best choice – I’ve gotten a pretty decent career out of it anyway.”

“We’re glad to have you, with your experience. It’s just a lot less space than you’re probably used to, if you were working on Ospreys. That’s a hell of a difference from our little Long-Ranger here. I’m sure the cases we deal with are a lot different too.”

“Different is good sometimes.” She looked away, turning her gaze to the night sky, clear and full of stars. Nathaniel was quiet, his cop brain thinking about the next move. He could tell this was a touchy subject, and he didn’t want to screw up and lose her. Where she had quickly walled herself up earlier when they’d met, after working most of the night she was now relaxed and the shutters were open for the time being. He wanted to keep it that way. He wanted more… of something. More of her.

“Yeah… sometimes it is,” he replied quietly, looking intently at her.

Cora looked back at him briefly, and thought she saw a flash of sadness behind his eyes in the shadows. It was gone as quickly as it had come, but it left her wondering how much lay beneath this man’s surface.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:

Nêhêm: “My heart” (Delaware/Lenape)

I really enjoyed all the character interaction in this chapter. The humor is really fun to write, and I love the relationships between the siblings so much. Cora and Alice have a very caring connection that is humorous at times, and I like how Alice tries to push Cora
to stop hiding from her issues. I couldn’t resist making them aerialists. I have several friends who perform on both lyra and silks, and it is such a gorgeous, amazing art. I could really see these girls in a modern setting, especially Alice, doing something like that, and I loved the idea of Alice getting Cora into it as a form of physical therapy after she was injured. I have this great image of Alice teaching kids.

Meanwhile, poor Uncas just can’t catch a break with Dispatcher Girl, and you got to meet Sidney and Yvette Greatsnake. I love Yvette in my head. She’s like a modern cross between Kanshiopán from Where We Start Again and Gramma Tala from Moana. You’ll definitely see more of them. Dave the dispatch guy, in case you’re wondering, is not based on anyone from the LOTM movie, he’s just an OC. In my head he’s like a disorganized, short-haired version of Weasel (the bartender played by T.J. Miller) from Deadpool. I have no idea why, that’s just how I thought of him when I invented him.

And of course, we have the initial meeting and first impressions of Nathaniel and Cora. They got off to a little bit of a rocky, awkward start, but obviously things turned out ok. I had originally planned for them to be a lot more prickly and bitchy with each other, but it just wasn’t working. I think I scrapped that whole last section three or four times and wanted to scream until I finally listened to what the characters wanted and felt, and wrote it the way it is. Now it feels right. These are two people who have both been through a lot. They see something kindred in each other, and they’re very attracted, but they are also both scared. They are both grown-ass adults, so it’s not like they don’t realize there is an attraction, they just don’t quite know what to do with it. Nathaniel is probably more willing to pursue it, where Cora comes from a place where fraternization is not okay, and she personally doesn’t believe in it, even outside the military. We’ll just see about that, bwa-ha-ha-ha-!!! Cora is about to wake up to a whole new world. You also got a little more of Nathaniel’s backstory and how he came to be adopted by the Greatsnakes. I’ve left his last name Poe because his birth family loved him, and I think Sidney and Yvette would want him to remember that. This is a modern setting where he would know who his birth family was.

When deciding on fun character attributes for all these people, I decided to give Nathaniel a collection of smartass t-shirts, and it has become my favorite thing. Finding and making up his future shirts is HIGHLY entertaining, and I’ve had help from my husband, and from MohawkWoman and BlueSaffire. Lastly, I have to say it again, I adore Nathaniel and Uncas together. They make me laugh so hard that I snort. Separately they are these amazingly sexy, smart, capable guys who ride around on their motorcycles in a devastating cloud of hotness, and together they’re a couple of comical little boys sometimes. But they love each other, and it’s awesome to write them together in this story and let them give each other shit as only brothers can.

“Dare You to Move” by Switchfoot is the theme song for this chapter, because I think it applies very much to Cora’s position in this chapter, and the conversation between her and Alice at the yoga studio. Cora is coming to a crossroads where she is going to have some choices to make about her future and her happiness. The sisters’ lyra song is “Elastic Heart” by Sia, which is another Cora theme song. Whenever Uncas is determined to one day find his lovely Dispatcher Girl, I always hear “I’m Gonna Be (500 Miles)” by The Proclaimers, and in the scene where he answers the phone and actually gets to speak to her, I was hearing “Dream” by the Everly Brothers. It’s terribly corny. I love Uncas and Dispatcher Girl. At the end of the chapter when Cora and Nathaniel are talking in the helicopter, we finish out with “Sweet Jane” by the Cowboy Junkies.

Thank you MohawkWoman for all the inspiring brainstorm discussions. And thank you all so much for reading. I hope you’re enjoying the story. Stay tuned for the next chapter!
Chapter Summary

A chance encounter finally brings a long-anticipated meeting, and Cora and Nathaniel open up with each other. Alice and Cora have a needed confrontation, and they end up needing a little rescuing.

Chapter Notes

Due to length, the Author's Note is included in the chapter text at the end.

“We have been so close together
Each a candle, each a flame
All the dangers were outside us
And we knew them all by name

See how the bramble and the rose intertwine
Love grows like the bramble and the rose
Often cruel and often kind

Now I've hurt you and it hurts me
Just to see what we can do
To ourselves and to each other
Without really meaning to

See how the bramble and the rose intertwine
Love grows like the bramble and the rose
Often cruel and often kind
So put your loving arms around me
And we’ll sing a true love song
And we’ll learn to sing together
Sing and laugh the whole night long

See how the bramble and the rose intertwine
Love grows like the bramble and the rose
Often cruel and often kind
See how the bramble and the rose intertwine
Love grows like the bramble and the rose
’d round each other they will wind
’Round each other we will wind”

- Barbara Keith -

“This is just the kind of day your mother loved best,” Ed Munro said with a wistful smile. “Sunshine, warm weather, everything green, and wonderful music.” Alice and Cora strolled among craft and music booths with their father, enjoying the beautiful May afternoon at the annual Twin Rivers Folk Festival. They came as a family almost every year they could, and had since they’d moved to New York. Maureen Munro had loved bluegrass and Celtic music, owing to her and Ed’s Scottish and Irish heritage, and she had loved to come and listen to the variety of bands that played the festival each year before she’d gotten too ill to attend.

“They have a great lineup this year. This is definitely the kind of day I needed after my last two ER shifts. Wednesday was ridiculous.” Cora said, stopping next to Alice to look at a booth displaying merchandise from one of the more well-known bands playing.

“How are things going with the flight job?” Ed asked when they continued on toward the area where all the food trucks and booths were. “Are you doing all right there?”

“Yeah, actually. I like it. It’s a nice change of pace, and I’m getting used to being back in the air. It’s good, Pop, I promise.”

Ed put his arm around Cora and squeezed her close. “I’m glad, sweetheart. I was worried about it, but it’s good to know I was being overly cautious. If you’re happy, then I’m happy. I’m proud of you for getting back to it.” He put his other arm around Alice. “I don’t know how I got so lucky with you girls, I wish your mother could see all the wonderful things you both do. But then, I’m sure she does. Come on, let’s get some dinner, it smells delicious over here and I’m starving.”

Food purchased, they sat down on the grass in front of the stage to eat and listen to the band that had just started to play.

“Speaking of your new job, Cora, how are things with Captain Hawkeye Pierce, still
awkward?” Alice snickered, taking a bite of her artisan grilled cheese sandwich.

Cora tittered a little at Alice’s use of the private nickname they had given Nathaniel, referencing both the ‘Hawkeye’ on his helmet and the endless M.A.S.H. reruns they had grown up watching with their parents. “It’s okay. He’s… um, he’s not too bad to work with actually.” After three weeks, she was settling into the regular routine at AirMedic, and was starting to consider picking up another shift. She still felt wary of Nathaniel, but he really was nice and funny, and as long as she avoided being alone with him for too long everything was fine. Working with Uncas was great, and Brian had been able to go back to his regular team, which he was happy about.

“Who’s this, now?” Ed asked, raising a grey eyebrow.

“He’s Cora’s hot helicopter pilot.” Alice grinned wickedly.

“He’s not my anything, Alice, and I never said he was hot!” Cora rolled her eyes. “She’s kidding, Pop. Things were just a little weird with him at first. He’s kind of a blunt-talking smartass.”

“Sounds like my kind of guy,” Ed chortled, standing up. “Listen girls, I’m going to take off, I’ve got to be up early tomorrow. I’m heading up to Lake George for the day to fish with Jerry Nelson across the street.” Cora and Alice stood up to hug and kiss their father goodbye.

“Oooooh. Let’s go get some fried dough for dessert,” Alice said after he had left, eyeing the booth hungrily and tugging Cora’s arm. She loved fried dough, and could never pass it up at fairs or festivals.

“Okay,” Cora agreed, happy that Alice was at last distracted from pushing the Nathaniel issue any further.

“What time did Dad say their set was starting?” Uncas asked Nathaniel as they milled around in the folk festival crowd.

“Seven. We still have a little bit.” He tossed his empty water bottle into a trash can and rejoined Uncas on the park path.

“Awesome. Maybe we should…” A woman’s laughter carried over the sounds of conversation around them, and Uncas stopped dead in his tracks. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Nathaniel looked confused.

“Sssshhh! There it is again. Listen…” The soft, sultry laugh came once more, followed by the sound of a very familiar voice. He couldn’t make out the exact words, but he would know that voice anywhere.

“Dude, is that…” Nathaniel strained to hear as well.

“Dispatcher Girl!” Uncas whispered.

“No way in hell.” Nathaniel said, incredulous.

“She’s here! Where is she? I have to find her!!! Help me! Use your cop ears!” Uncas looked around desperately and started to walk, trying to find where her voice was coming from. After all this time wondering who the woman with the enchanting voice was, he was not missing another chance to find her.
“Right there.” Nathaniel pointed to where two women stood on the grass near the stage with their backs to them. She was almost as tall as the dark-haired woman beside her, long-legged and willowy with elegant, agile bearing. A thick swath of straight, honey-gold hair fell down the back of her cream-colored lace top almost to her waist as she tipped her head back and laughed again. The world seemed to slow down as she turned her head, showing a straight-nosed profile with delicate brows, and a softly squared jaw above a graceful, slender neck. As if she could feel his eyes on her, she turned all the way around and looked right at him. Her hazel eyes were big and soulful, nearly the same shade of gold as her hair in the fading sunlight, and he was utterly gone when they met his and her soft, pink lips parted in a shy smile as she whispered something to the woman next to her. The other woman turned around, and he was shocked back into the present when he recognized her face, her dark eyes looking at Nathaniel next to him like a deer trapped in the headlights. He glanced at Nathaniel, who didn’t seem to be doing much better. What the hell is Dispatcher Girl doing with Cora Munro? He wondered, then shook himself. Who the hell cared? She was right here, and she was… glorious. He set his jaw.

“He’s headed straight for them with his buddy in tow.

“Come on,” he said to Nathaniel. “It’s time to go get my Mary Jane.”

“Holy overload, Batman,” Alice whispered to Cora, awestruck. “That shouldn’t even be legal.” She smiled nervously at the guy who she’d caught staring at her. She’d never seen anyone quite like him before. He was tall and powerful-looking, not an ounce of fat on him, though not as wiry as the slightly taller guy standing with him. He looked to be American Indian, with a smooth, coffee-and-cream complexion, finely chiseled features, firm, slightly full lips and deep, dark eyes that flashed like onyx beneath his stern, arched black brows. His shiny, raven-black hair was pulled half back from his face and fell well past his shoulders. He wore black motorcycle boots, jeans that hugged his lean hips and thighs just so, and a dark green t-shirt that fit snugly enough to hint at the muscular physique underneath – not like he lived at the gym, but like he worked at something physical on a regular basis. The guy standing with him was pretty easy on the eyes too, but she barely gave him a second glance as those intense dark eyes burned holes in her. Whoever this guy was, he was drop-dead gorgeous. His raw, commanding presence made Alice unable to look away, and she couldn’t seem to find a coherent thought anywhere. And he was headed straight for them with his buddy in tow.

“Hey, Cora, I didn’t expect to run into you here,” he said with a smile as they approached. His deep, resonant voice was so familiar, she just couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

“Uh, hi,” Cora replied, shifting uncomfortably beside her. “What are you guys doing here?”

Wait… Cora knew these guys?

“Our Mom and Dad are playing with their band next,” he told Cora, then turned his attention to Alice. “Uh… Hi, we haven’t met,” he held out his hand to her. “I’m Uncas Greatsnake, and this is my brother Nathaniel Poe. We work at AirMedic with Cora.” Uncas and Nathaniel… ooooooohhh. The paramedic and the pilot. That would explain why Cora looked like she wanted to scream beneath her smile. Oh my God… HE’S the sexy phone voice! Alice nearly gasped as realization suddenly hit her. “Alice Munro,” she replied breathlessly, staring into his smoldering eyes as he gently grasped her hand. “Um… sister…” Oh my God, Alice, pull it together. “Sorry, I mean, I’m Cora’s sister.” She laughed lightly. Uncas smiled, and she could have sworn that strong, capable hand was trembling as it held hers.

“Yeah, Cora mentioned she had a sister, but I didn’t… I mean, you’re so… are you, uh… this may sound a little strange, but do you happen to work as a dispatcher? Your voice is really
familiar.” Nathaniel made an odd, strangled sound at this, then cleared his throat, and Uncas shot him a weird look. He finally let go of her hand, and she was a little sorry for it.

“Actually, yeah, I do. I think I talked to you on the phone a few weeks ago as a matter of fact. Your voice is familiar too.”

“Alice. It is really nice to meet you,” Nathaniel said with a grin as he shook her hand, his green eyes twinkling with something she didn’t quite understand.

“Yes, it’s nice to meet you as well, Cap - uh, Nathaniel. It’s great to be able to put faces to the names my sister talks about.” She smiled sweetly at Nathaniel while Cora looked like she wanted to crawl under a rock.

“Well,” Uncas said, “since we’re all here, do you guys want to sit with us and watch the next band? Our dad plays banjo, and our mom plays autoharp and sings.” He and Nathaniel both smiled proudly.

“Sure, that sounds great!” Alice ignored Cora’s desperate, pleading look. No way was she turning down a chance to hang out with Uncas, and from the way Nathaniel was looking at Cora, this could get very entertaining.

An hour later, Cora finally felt like she was starting to relax, which was a monumental feat sitting beside Nathaniel. His presence was nerve-wracking, and she could barely look at him without her heart trying to thump out of her chest. His hair was pulled half back from his face like his brother’s, and he was wearing boots and a pair of faded blue jeans that had no business fitting anyone that well. His light grey t-shirt was the humorous variety he favored, this time featuring a cartoon of Lionel Richie dressed in a red and white striped Where’s Waldo? stocking hat with a caption of “Hello? Is it me you’re looking for?”. It fit in the same category as his jeans, outlining his lean torso perfectly and showing off the wiry, corded muscles of his tanned arms. Sweet mother of mercy, this is so unfair, she moaned in her head. The flight suit was bad enough, but at least it covered most of that. She couldn’t even distract herself by talking to Alice, because she was sitting off to the side with Uncas, and they had been talking quietly almost the whole time. She turned her attention back to the band, cleverly named ‘The Thin Bluegrass Line’, since all the members were either sheriff’s deputies or deputy wives like Nathaniel’s mother. They were an incredibly talented group, and Nathaniel’s parents were particularly riveting, Sidney with his expert banjo picking and Yvette with her autoharp and lovely voice. Their talents combined with the standup bass, dobro, guitar, fiddle, whistles, and all the harmonizing voices of the band members gave them a sound that both roused and haunted you, depending on the nature of the song, and a lot of people were getting up to dance in front of the stage.

“This song is so beautiful,” she heard Alice say a few bars into the next piece, an instrumental with a waltz meter. “They’re really good!”

“It’s called ‘The House in Rose Valley’,” Uncas told her, standing up. “It’s my favorite. Want to dance with me?” He held out a hand, and she took it with a soft smile. They meandered down toward the stage, and Cora watched them bumble through the first few waltz steps, both of them laughing and Alice blushing. She thought Uncas might be too, if his skin wasn’t dark enough to hide it. Alice was showing him the steps, and soon they were moving more smoothly.

“They’re getting along well,” Nathaniel said, leaning in right next to her, his voice in her ear making her tingle and shiver a little.

“Yes, they certainly seem to be.”
“I have to tell you something crazy, but you have to swear you won’t repeat it.”

“Hey, I’m swearing nothing without hearing it first.” Cora smiled and raised an eyebrow.

“He’s sort of had a crush on your sister for a while now.”

“But he’s never seen her before.” She frowned, perplexed.

“Nope. But he’s heard her dispatch plenty of calls.”

Cora stared at him in disbelief. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“Serious as a heart attack. I thought he was nuts, but I stand corrected. She exists, and she seems like a nice girl.”

Cora couldn’t help herself; she threw her head back and dissolved into peals of laughter. “That’s completely insane,” she gasped, catching her breath a moment later.

“Yeah… totally improbable, yet here it is,” Nathaniel watched her, entranced. He’d never seen her laugh like that, and something about her being unguarded and free made him ache with longing.

“What?” she asked, catching him staring at her.

“Nothing. I like it when you laugh, that’s all.” He could see the blush creeping up her cheeks under the park lights as she sobered at the bluntness of his answer, but for once she didn’t look away. He had never seen her out of uniform, and he didn’t know whether to be sad or happy about it now, because he’d never get the image of her out of his head after this. She had on dark skinny jeans that fit her slim curves like a glove, and a loose, rose-colored tank top made of some airy, embroidered fabric that had buttons all down the front. Nothing out of the ordinary, but somehow on her everything was out of the ordinary, and everything about her right now was beautiful. Her arms were graceful, and defined in a way that told him she was stronger than average. He could see the entirety of the large burn scar on her left arm, and a small, pale surgical scar along her collarbone. Beneath that, a much larger one extended from under her collarbone diagonally across the front of her shoulder to just below the deltoid muscle. Her hair was pulled loosely up in a leather clip, curly tendrils of it escaping and brushing her face and the soft curve of her shoulders and neck. Her dark eyes were wide with surprise, her blushing cheeks were almost as pink as her top, and he found himself straying to very inappropriate thoughts about whether she blushed like that everywhere. He cleared his throat. “Well, I guess we’ll see what happens with them.”

“I guess so,” she replied softly, looking away. “Her last boyfriend was an asshole and didn’t last long, so at least I don’t have to worry about Uncas if they end up together. He’s a nice guy.”

“And hey, we already know he doesn’t care about looks.” Nathaniel grinned.

Cora laughed again. “This is true.”

They were both quiet then, just listening to the music and the harmonized lyrics of the song the band was playing now. Something almost tangible hung in the air, swirling around them with the music as the words touched their ears.

“We have been so close together
Each a candle, each a flame
All the dangers were outside us
And we knew them all by name

See how the bramble and the rose intertwine
Love grows like the bramble and the rose
Often cruel and often kind.”

“Clear sky tonight,” Nathaniel murmured, noticing that Cora was looking up at it.

“Yeah… you know, when I was in Afghanistan, there were remote places where the stars were so thick at night you’d have thought the sky was white and the stars were black. You could even see the colors of the gases in the Milky Way.”

“That must have been something to see,” he replied, wanting to let her lead whatever tenuous thing was happening right now.

“It was. Sometimes I think it was the only redeeming thing about everything going on out there. Even so, there were my teammates, and the MedEvac work, so it wasn’t all bad all the time. I busted my ass to make Fleet Marine Force status, and I got to do what I wanted, at any rate. That at least was worth it.”

“So why didn’t you stay in?”

“Hmmmm. I wasn’t given the choice. My last deployment five years ago… I got hurt, so they med-boarded me out.”

Nathaniel looked at her. She was still gazing at the sky, hard to read but not closed off. Just… melancholy. He took a deep breath and decided to risk it. “Cora, what happened to you?”

She thought hard for a moment, then sighed. “It happened to all of us. We were on our way to a multiple casualty situation - there were nine of us altogether - and our MV-22 was hit by a missile. We crashed, but most of us got out alive, just injured. When our crew chief and another Corpsman went back to get the pilot and the copilot, the fuel tank exploded and we… uh, lost all four of them.”

“Jesus Christ,” Nathaniel whispered, closing his eyes. “Is that how you burned your arm?”

“Yeah. That happened when I was unconscious, the Osprey was on fire and several of us got burned. My shoulder got torn up pretty badly in the crash, too. It was dislocated and there was a lot of soft tissue damage, plus I had broken my clavicle and needed a plate – the shoulder was what ultimately earned me the medical discharge. It took two open surgeries to repair all the damage, and I needed too much recovery time. I couldn’t even have the second surgery until my burns had healed enough, because I couldn’t do the physical therapy. The only good thing I can say about the whole experience is that it made me a better nurse.” Whatever Nathaniel had expected to hear about how she’d gotten hurt, this was not it. No wonder she didn’t talk about any of it.
Cora looked back at Nathaniel. He wasn’t saying anything, not even the ‘I’m sorry’ she was so used to hearing whenever she divulged this information to anyone. He was just staring at her, with an unnerving sadness in his eyes. Not pity sadness, but understanding sadness. Empathy sadness. It wasn’t the first time she’d seen it, nor was it the first time she had wondered what it was that made him look at her like he got it. Like he knew something no one else did. Well, as long as they were sharing…

“Why did you leave Albany PD?” she asked softly. He looked unsure of what to say for a moment, staring up at the night sky.

“Well… It’s complicated. I wanted to fly for as long as I can remember, and my dad being a cop, I guess that’s why I chose air support, but I had to do my time in patrol first so I’d know what I was doing. My last year on the streets, my partner and I responded to a domestic violence situation, and the guy had a gun in the house. He’d already shot the girlfriend, and when we got there, he shot both of us. Killed my partner, hit him right in the carotid. I was luckier. The bullet missed my femoral artery by about five millimeters, so all it did was tear my leg up pretty good.”

“My God. Did you… were you able to stop him?”

“Yeah, I did, but it was too late for John, my partner. I was off duty for a while after that, and at some point my fiancée decided she couldn’t hang, and took off with another guy. I guess she’d been running around with him for a while by then.”

“Ugh, that’s rough. If I had a dollar for every Marine that happened to, I’d be living high,” Cora smiled sardonically. “What a shitty thing to do, though, after what you’d already been through.”

“It wasn’t all her fault I guess. We were young when we met, and I had been so focused on my career, and then I was angry and depressed after John died, and nothing was like she thought it would be. It happens, and it was for the best. I don’t think we would have been very happy.”

“Not likely,” Cora agreed. “It’s never a good sign when someone bugs out as soon as things get real.”

“No, it’s not. Anyway, after I healed up and went back on duty, I got my slot in air support, but by then I don’t think I felt the same way about any of it anymore. I did the job for a couple of years, but I wasn’t feeling it. I was depressed, and I had a different way of looking at it than I did when I started that journey. I spent most of my life thinking that was what I wanted, to fly, but to be like my dad, too… except I had to realize I didn’t need to be a cop to be like my dad, all I had to do was just… be like him. Help people the way he did. So three years ago, I decided to do that a different way, and I went to MedEvac and search and rescue instead. I’m a lot happier now.”

Cora swallowed hard, her heart aching for him. Now she understood why he looked at her like he’d felt her pain – because he had. Maybe not the same way, but close enough. She didn’t know how to feel yet about sharing that kinship with him. “At least you got to choose. I was pretty angry about getting discharged after I’d worked so hard, and I didn’t know for a while if I’d be happy with anything else. But I’m happy at the hospital, and it’s great to be back to flying now, too. And it was so good to come home and be with my dad and Alice. Alice… she’s amazing. She really went above and beyond for me. I never thought she’d turn out to be the family ass-kicker, but she helped me get back up in so many ways.”

Nathaniel chuckled. “You guys were raised by a Marine, I’m pretty sure she’s not the only ass-kicker in the family. You’re kind of a badass too, you know?”
“I guess there’s a little of that in all of us, if we managed to live through all this crap,” she sighed. “Even you. But don’t let it go to your head.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Besides, Uncas is a lot of the reason I didn’t end up worse off than I did – he’s a lot like your sister I suppose.” Cora smiled at that, watching Uncas and Alice heading back toward them, both looking like they’d just won the lottery. And maybe they had. She hoped so.

“Well, that was nothing short of spectacular,” Alice sighed to Cora as they walked to the parking lot later. They had stayed to the end of Thin Bluegrass Line’s set, and taken their leave once Nathaniel and Uncas went to help them break their equipment down and load it off the stage.

“I’m glad you had a good time. Uncas is a really wonderful guy.”

“He’s incredible! How is it that you work with that kind of criminal hotness with a personality to match, and you never thought to introduce me before? And you’ve known him for what, like three years now besides working with him?”

“Well, I hardly ever saw him before the last several weeks. As for the rest, I… I don’t know, I was trying to get used to working MedEvac again, and I guess any kind of dating subject matter was pretty far from my mind.”

“Except for Captain Hawkeye.” Alice goaded.

“No! I do not think about dating him!”

“Oh my God, Cora, you are unbelievable. You like him, you just won’t admit it. Why don’t you grow a pair and go out with him? You haven’t been on a single date in like six years.”

Cora groaned. “Stop it, Alice. I have to work with him, and I keep telling you, I don’t fraternize.”

Alice laughed. “You’re in the civilian sector. The rules are different. Is there a policy?”

“Uh… none that I know of, I haven’t exactly checked, because why would I?!”

“Because you know you totally want to nail him. Or him to nail you. Either way, you need a good nailing, Cora. It isn’t human to hold out for as long as you have.”

“Jesus H. Christ, Alice, you’re killing me. Stop.” Cora covered her face with both hands.

“Alice laughed. “You’re in the civilian sector. The rules are different. Is there a policy?”

“Killing you because you know I’m right. What the hell are you so afraid of, that you might like it? God forbid! Look at your face right now. And I see the way he looks at you. Fucking Ray Charles could tell you what this looks like!” Alice hit the unlock button when they reached her old Jeep Liberty, and got into the driver’s seat. Cora got into the passenger seat and slammed the door shut. Alice could tell she was getting upset, but she didn’t care anymore. She was annoyed at Cora’s persistent avoidance and self-sabotage. She was so strong and had worked through so much, but relationships were still like kryptonite to her, and it didn’t seem fair at all to Alice. Nathaniel seemed nice and was obviously smitten, and she could tell by Cora’s behavior that he was really getting under her skin. Alice had never seen that happen before, and she wanted something good to come of it.

“What are you trying to do, Al? What the hell do you want from me?”
“I don’t want anything from you, Cora! I want things for you! I cannot understand for the life of me why you continue to deny yourself things that you deserve to have! I get that you feel guilty because Duncan was in love with you! I get that! But you do NOT get to punish yourself for the rest of your goddamn life and never let yourself even have a chance with someone just because you didn’t love him back!”

“That’s not what I’m fucking doing!” Cora yelled.

“Well then what the fuck is this all about, Cora?!”

“GODDAMMIT, Alice! What if I had? What if I had loved him back? What if I had loved him back and wanted to marry him like he did me? What if I fucking had? You tell me how much worse this all would have been if I had! Because I can’t fathom it. Not if it has already ripped me to shreds when he was just my best friend!”

Alice reeled back in shock, her eyes filling with tears as Cora’s words sunk in. She had never thought of it that way, never thought that might be the source of Cora’s fear of getting involved with anyone. It made more sense now. Losing Duncan had been so hard on her that she was terrified it would destroy her to lose someone else if she ever really fell in love.

“I’m sorry, Cora,” she whispered. “I didn’t know… you never told me that.”

Cora swiped a tear off her cheek. “Yeah well, I guess I didn’t always know that was my problem. I’ve kind of had to think about it a lot lately, so I’ve had some eye-opening mental health revelations.”

“Why? Because of Nathaniel?”

“Because he scares the crap out of me and I don’t know what I’m going to do yet.” Cora dissolved into sobs. “There, I admit it. Are you happy?”

“No!” Alice leaned over and hugged her sister. “Of course I’m not happy when you feel like this! I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too. And I’m glad you had a good night.” Cora sat back and pressed her palms against her eyes. “You gave him your number, right?”

“Uh, damn skippy I did.” Alice grinned.

“Good. At least one of us has their shit straight here.”

“Cora… please don’t be afraid. You need to be happy, too. Don’t wall him off like that. You’re always going to be afraid to lose people, because it just happens. You know as well as I do there are no guarantees. There weren’t with mom, or Duncan. But that doesn’t mean you loved them any less, or that you should lock yourself away. You’re alive. Being too scared to live won’t protect you, it’ll just make it worse. Because one day you’ll be a crazy old bat, and you’ll look back and think ‘damn, I’m lonely. I totally should have banged that hot pilot’.”

Cora bubbled over with laughter. “Alice, you’re insane. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She turned the key in the ignition. The engine made a weird coughing sound and nothing happened. “Shit. Are you kidding me?” She tried again. “It’s not the battery. Dammit, it must be something else.”

“Want me to call a tow truck? We can have them take it to that place Pop uses.”
“Yeah, I guess. Shit. Shit, I do not need this right now.” They got out of the Jeep while Cora called the tow company. As she hung up, one of the Albany PD cruisers patrolling near the park pulled up.

“Everything all right, ladies?” The officer asked, leaning on the open window. He was about forty-five with close-cropped gray hair and kind brown eyes.

“Yes, thank you,” Alice said. “Just car trouble. My sister just called a tow truck.”

“If you’d like, I can wait with you until they come,” he offered. “It’s getting pretty late.”

“That’s very kind of you, officer, we - ”

“Hey, Ben! What are you doing out on this beat? Damn, I haven’t seen you in forever, man!” Alice and Cora turned at the sound of Nathaniel’s voice. He and Uncas approached the cruiser as the officer stepped out, grinning.

“Holy hell, Poe, is that you? What’s with all the hair?” They gave each other a back-slapping hug, and the officer greeted Uncas. “I was just checking up on these ladies.” Nathaniel caught sight of Alice and Cora and frowned.

“Hey, are you guys all right? What happened?”

“It’s ok,” Cora told him. “Alice’s car won’t start. I called for a tow, and your, uh, friend was just offering to wait with us.”

“Yeah, Ben here was my Field Training Officer at Albany PD. Don’t believe anything he tries to tell you about me, it’s all lies.”

“I wouldn’t,” Ben laughed. “Nathaniel was my all-time favorite boot.”

“We can wait for the tow with you guys,” Uncas offered, stepping closer to Alice. “You’ll need to get home after that anyway, and I think we can take care of that, too.”

“That would be amazing,” Alice replied gratefully. My hero.

“As long as you’re ok riding on a motorcycle, that is.”

“Yeah, I’m good. So is Cora, she used to have one herself.” At that, Nathaniel looked at Cora with a raised brow, and she shrugged at him.

“When you’re all squared away, then, so I’ll get back to it. Poe, good to see you. Behave yourself.” Ben clapped Nathaniel on the back.

“You too, Ben, be safe.” The cruiser angled away and out of the lot. Alice grinned, thrilled at the idea of riding home snuggled up to Uncas and getting to spend more time with him. Once the tow truck had finally come, they followed Uncas and Nathaniel to their parked bikes, where they gave their jackets to Alice and Cora, as well as passenger helmets. Alice smiled wickedly at Cora as she climbed on the back of Uncas’s Harley behind him. Cora looked less than thrilled about the prospect of cuddling with Nathaniel all the way to West Sand Lake, but she’d live. She didn’t have a choice.

When they got to Alice’s downtown apartment, Uncas parked and got off after her. Her heart was pounding from being so close to him, and she didn’t want it to be over so fast. She wanted to keep sitting there with her arms around him, feeling all that glorious strength under her hands.
“Let me walk you up,” he said. “You shouldn’t go alone this late, not in this neighborhood.”

“It’s not that bad,” she laughed. “Besides, I was raised by a drill instructor, he made me and Cora learn all that McNinja stuff they teach in boot camp.”

“Come on, you’re a dispatcher and I’m a paramedic, we know what goes on. Downtown is downtown. Besides, I’d really like to.”

“Okay,” she said, her cheeks coloring. At her door, they stood in silence for a minute. “It was really nice to meet you,” she told him quietly.

“Yeah… you too. More than you know. Listen… I’d really love to see you again. I was going to call you, but since we’re here, I figured I’d ask now, you know?”

“I’d like that too. I’m working the next few days, and I have an evening yoga class I teach on Wednesdays, but I’m free after that and through Saturday.” And this will now be the longest week of my entire life.

“I’ll get off my last shift at seven on Friday night, so how about Saturday? Do you like to hike? We could go hiking Saturday.”

“That sounds great. I love to hike.” I’d climb Mount Everest barefoot with you.

“Awesome. Let’s both look at trails, and I’ll call you this week and we’ll talk about where to go.”

“Great. Thank you so much for the ride. Good night, Uncas.” She handed him back his jacket with a smile.

“Good night, Alice.” he murmured.

She sighed softly, standing in the doorway as she watched him go. She had never quite felt this way before, and it was kind of mind-blowing. He just seemed… different. Good-looking, yes, but it wasn’t just that. She had an odd feeling everything was about to change. It was both exhilarating and a little frightening, and she wanted it more than she’d wanted anything in a very long time.

Oh, thank God. Cora sighed inwardly as Nathaniel shut off the Triumph in her driveway. Riding home wearing his jacket that smelled like him, pressed against his back with her arms around him was not doing any favors for her fortitude or her confusion, and by now she was ready to scream. She got off the bike as quickly as she could, removing the helmet and the jacket, and handing them both back to him.

“Thank you,” she said. “I appreciate you bringing me all the way out here.”

“It’s no trouble at all, actually. We’re practically neighbors. Uncas and I live just a few miles away, in Wynantskill.”

“I see.” You’re kidding me, right? Could this get any weirder?

“Will you let me walk you to the door?”

“No.” Shit, that was rude. “I mean, that’s not necessary, but thank you.”
He chuckled, amused. “I know it isn’t necessary, but I’d like to anyway. Cop habits die hard, and I’d like to see you safe inside before I go.” Unable to argue with him, she conceded. “So you used to have a motorcycle, huh? I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“I did. I had a really nice Honda Nighthawk, but I sold it before I deployed, and I never bought another bike because my clutch arm was kind of screwed up for a while.”

“Ah, yeah. When did you start riding?”

“I learned in high school. My best friend’s dad taught us, he actually had a Triumph a lot like yours, just not as pretty. Duncan – my friend – had a bike pretty much since he could ride one, and I got my Nighthawk right after I finished my basic Hospital Corpsman training, before I went to nursing school.” She turned her key in the front door and could hear whines and snuffling on the other side. “Watch out,” she warned. “My dog is kind of big, but he wouldn’t hurt a fly.” She cracked the door cautiously, but she was no match for the hairy beast on the other side. He shouldered his massive body through the opening, shoving Cora aside and bounding straight for the stranger behind her. “Monty, NO! Down!”

A moment later, Nathaniel didn’t quite know how to react. A monstrous grey Irish Wolfhound stood taller than him on its hind legs, resting its huge, hairy front paws on his shoulders, sniffing and licking his face.

“Well, hello to you too, big guy,” he grunted, rubbing the dog’s wiry-haired neck.

“I’m so sorry,” Cora gasped, clearly trying not to laugh at him. “He does this to everyone. Montcalm! I said DOWN. Now.” The dog whined a little and obeyed. “In the house, boy, fun’s over. Go on.” He voiced his protest with a gruff bark and lumbered back into the house, Cora shutting the door gently behind him.

“Well… I can certainly see why you were reluctant to let me walk you to the door. That’s quite an animal you’ve got there.”

“He looks scary, but as you can see, he’s harmless. He’s a big baby. And he gets along great with the horses, since he pretty much is one.”

Nathaniel laughed. “You’re full of surprises, you know that?”

She smiled shyly, and he could see the blush on her cheeks in the porch light. He knew he made her nervous, but damn if he didn’t like it just a little. His eyes flickered to her mouth for a second, and he silently listed every reason why he needed to leave now and stop thinking about kissing those soft lips. He wanted her, yes, but dammit, he liked her, and that was more important. He wanted her to be comfortable with him, because he wanted everything about her; her courage, her stubbornness, her softness, her hard, sharp edges, her sadness, and most of all her laughter and her smiles that he never saw enough of. One wrong move would destroy all the progress he’d made, and something had shifted tonight, he could feel it.

“I should go. It’s late, and your hellhound in there is waiting for you.” He grinned down at her.

“Yeah. Thanks again for the ride home. I’ll see you Thursday at work.”

“Good night, Cora.” He turned and started down the walk to the driveway.

“Good night, Captain Hawkeye Pierce.” He cast a sidelong glance back over his shoulder. She stood in the porch light, arms crossed lightly over her chest, a mischievous little smile lifting the
corners of her mouth.


“Maybe not,” she shrugged nonchalantly, “but you said your nickname carried over from the police academy to air support, so now you have a carryover to MedEvac, too. See? It’s perfect.”

He nodded appreciatively, flashing her a broad smile and a wave goodbye, and threw on his bomber jacket. As he backed the motorcycle out of the driveway she lifted her hand and gave a tentative little wave. When he roared off down the road, he could still see her standing there, backlit in the now open doorway with that wooly mammoth of a dog sitting beside her. Between her sister turning out to be Dispatcher Girl and whatever had changed between him and Cora tonight, he had a feeling things were about to get interesting.

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**Author’s note:**

I feel like this is an eventful chapter. For one thing, YAY, Uncas and Alice finally got to meet! And of course, they’re smitten from the first moment. I absolutely love the way Alice is turning out in this story. She’s a pistol! And her and Uncas are both adorable. I wanted him to be flabbergasted, but not necessarily shy – I mean he’s been waiting at least a couple of years for this moment, so he’s not going to screw it up. Plus, he’s Uncas. I think Alice has been waiting too, she just didn’t know what for. Now she does. In addition to Uncas finally getting Dispatch Girl, I think Nathaniel and Cora have finally made some headway too. Nathaniel’s shirt in this chapter is both funny and ironic – I do believe he is what Cora is looking for, she’s just stubborn. After their enlightening conversation here, they’re now on a playing field where each knows that the other gets their damage, and that can be a powerful thing. Nathaniel has had more time to come to terms with his, and while it’s there, it doesn’t seem to affect his behavior much because he’s dealt with most of it. Cora is a different story. She’s recovered from her injuries, but she’s really scared to let herself fall for anyone, and here you find out more specifically why. I feel sad for Cora, because I know those feelings well. But Alice is right that she can’t do that to herself forever. I had not originally planned for Cora and Alice to have an argument, but Alice had some things she needed to say, and she was feeling pretty frustrated with Cora. She loves her very much, and she’s tired of seeing her punish herself over Duncan, though she really didn’t understand why Cora was doing that until now. This was a good Come-to-Jesus meeting for both Alice and Cora. And yes, both girls are slightly potty-mouthed – they were raised by and around Marines, and Cora is a sailor/Marine herself.

If you’re not a M.A.S.H. fan or didn’t grow up watching it like I did, Captain Benjamin “Hawkeye” Pierce was one of the military doctors on the show, played by Alan Alda. Alice and Cora giving Nathaniel this nickname was my genius husband’s idea. On the show, the character was given the nickname “Hawkeye” by his father when he was a kid, because The Last of the Mohicans was the father’s favorite book. Which is way cool and so perfect. :) Also, the name of Nathaniel’s ex-fiancée is significant from the J.F. Cooper books. In The Deerslayer, which is the book that preceded The Last of the Mohicans, Nathaniel was a very young man, maybe nineteen or twenty, and the girl who fell in love with him in that book was named Judith Hutter. He didn't love her back in the story, so she ended up running off with a British officer.

Ben, the cop character who had a cameo when Alice’s car broke down, was inspired by a special family friend who was killed in the line of duty a few years ago. He was an exceptional police officer and an exceptional person, and we miss his smiling face. His real name was not even remotely used, of course. He just wanted to be in the story for a minute, and I kind of liked bringing him back to life for just a little while, too. This chapter wouldn’t have been complete, of course, without the girls being “rescued” by the guys, and getting to ride home with them. Alice obviously
thoroughly enjoyed that, and Cora kind of did too (you know you did, Cora, don’t deny it). Nathaniel definitely did. He’s got it so bad for Cora, and he has such fortitude trying so hard not to push her. She’s not making this easy for him, but I think it will be worth it (wink, wink). I love Cora’s dog. For a lot of reasons. He’s a cool dog.

The theme song for this chapter is a lovely bluegrass song called “The Bramble and the Rose”, because I like it for the romance happening in this chapter overall, and mostly for Nathaniel and Cora. I particularly love the version of this song done by The Black Family on their album Donkey Riding. “The House in Rose Valley”, which Uncas and Alice dance to, is actually the song played in the LOTM film during the lacrosse scene at the Cameron farm. There are a lot of beautiful recordings of it, but my favorite remains the one by accordionist Phil Cunningham (of Silly Wizard fame) that is featured in the movie – it’s on his 1984 album Airs and Graces. When Alice first sees Uncas staring at her, I hear “This Magic Moment” by Ben E. King and The Drifters (thanks to MohawkWoman’s jokes), and when Uncas sees her, I hear the first lines of “Crimson and Clover” by Tommy James & the Shondells. When Alice is watching Uncas leave her apartment, I hear “Dreams” by The Cranberries. I told you this was corny, right? I warned you. What I hear for Nathaniel and Cora in this chapter other than the theme song is “Fade Into You” by Mazzy Star, when they’re talking on the grass about all the stuff that happened to them, and at the end of the chapter when Nathaniel is riding off, it’s “Steal Your Heart Away” by Joe Bonamassa (Nathaniel is clearly a blues man).

That’s about it. These first three chapters have gone fast because I’ve been off from school and had free time, but I start a new class soon, so they’ll likely slow down for a while because I don’t know that weekly updates will be possible – we’ll see. I have three classes left, and they are more work than the last seven have been. I will not stop updating regularly though, because this is how I stay sane, so keep checking in! Thank you for reading, and stay tuned!
You Make Me Smile

Chapter Summary

A sick, sniffly Cora gets a pleasant surprise, and finds herself beginning to forget about her barriers in favor of accepting kindness and comfort. Msgt Munro pays an unexpected and awkward visit, and at long last, Uncas finally gets to spend a day in the company of Alice, and as they get to know each other, they find they share a deep connection that only intensifies their budding feelings.

Chapter Notes

author note is in ending text due to length.

Chapter 4 – You Make Me Smile

“There's some kind of light at the end
When touching the edge of her skin

Once so hard to speak
Now so easy to play around
Catching your eye you know
That eye that slapped you in your face
and called you a puppy
Well how do you say
I was hypnotized

Hypnotized

My words, they pour
Like children to the playground
Children to the playground
You make me smile

There's some kind of light at the end
Stoned, forgetful, and then
I'm drinking what used to be sin
And touching the edge of her skin

Could you be the one that's not afraid
To look me in the eyes
I swear I would collapse
If I would tell how I think you fell
From the sky
Yeah my words, they pour
Like children to the playground
Children to the playground
You make me smile

There's some kind of light at the end
Stoned, forgetful, and then
I'm drinking what used to be sin
And touching the edge of her skin

It's the feeling I get
My palms would sweat
Like some kind of daydream

I'll never forget
I'm stuck in this spin
Why does it begin
By touching the edge of her skin

There's some kind of light at the end
Stoned, forgetful, and then
I'm drinking what used to be sin
And touching the edge of her skin.”

-Justin Furstenfeld & William Noveskey-

The next Friday evening, Cora sat curled up under a blanket on her large, plush sectional couch next to Monty, who was sprawled on the big chaise at the end with his head on her lap. Scout, her sable ferret, was snoozing away on her lap as well, burrowed into the blanket beside Monty’s face. The afternoon had been overcast and humid, threatening a rainstorm that had yet to come. Cora sneezed and blew her now raw nose and tossed the tissue into the near-overflowing trash bin by the coffee table as her phone chimed with an incoming text message. “Hey, I just wanted to see how you’re feeling. You ok?” Her traitorous heart fluttered when she saw that it was from Nathaniel.

“I’m ok. Still feel like crap, but it’s more like death warmed over now instead of straight up death.”

“Did you get some sleep? Are you resting?”

“Yes, mother, I’ve been utterly useless all day.”

“Good. Smartass. Did you eat?”

“Not yet. I’ll drag my ass off the couch in a little while.”

“All right. Feel better, ok?”

“Thanks.” Cora set the phone back down and sighed. She had initially thought she was just tired and headachy at the start of shift at AirMedic the previous night, since it had been an exhausting week in the ER and she hadn’t been sleeping well, but as the night wore on, she’d developed body aches and her throat had started to get scratchy. She’d spiked a bit of a fever after returning from a call, and not wanting to put patients at further risk, had decided she should go home. Nathaniel and Uncas had both agreed, offering to call in Jonathan, the nurse from the secondary team on call. She had come home and slept the rest of the night and a little late this morning, and had spent the rest of
the day on the couch dozing, blowing her nose, popping cold medicine, and watching ridiculous movies. It was sweet of Nathaniel to check on her. He was always being nice to her, and she never quite knew what to do with it. Part of her wanted to keep her distance and tell him to stop, but another part of her knew that was because she secretly liked it too much, and the implications of that still scared her breathless. She both hated and loved the tingly, twitterpated feeling he gave her every time he smiled his gorgeous smile at her, or said something funny, or simply walked into a room, or, God forbid, touched her in some casual, innocuous way that made her have fleeting thoughts about him touching her not so innocently, which led to mental forehead-smacking and the near-dropping of coffee cups. Trying to sort it out in her head was proving to be a distressing and extremely sleep-depriving operation, which probably hadn’t done her immune system any favors when faced with work stress and the cold and flu patients hitting the ER. She felt like a hot mess.

A third of the way through Goonies, Cora had dozed off again, and woke with a start thinking she’d heard an engine rumbling in the carport. Monty’s head shot up like a periscope, and he unfolded himself from the couch with a gruff bark. Carefully moving the blanket with the still sleeping Scout inside, she got up just as a knock sounded on the front door. She looked out the peephole and almost whimpered out loud. Why the hell is Nathaniel Poe standing on my porch? She looked down at herself. Socks, ratty sweatpants and Navy Nurse Corps t-shirt, underneath a shapeless grey knit housecoat. God only knew what her hair looked like by now. Fan-fucking-tastic. This sexy bastard shows up unannounced, and I look like I should be cast as Jeff Lebowski. Oh well. Maybe he’ll give up after this. She unlocked the deadbolt and opened the door, grabbing Monty’s collar to restrain him.

“Hi.” His eyes traveled over her once, and he gave her that damnable, heart-stopping crooked grin, his motorcycle helmet in one hand and a paper bag in the other.

“Hi yourself. What on earth are you doing here? Montcalm. Sit.” Monty obeyed, his tail thumping gleefully on the wood floor.

“I’m sorry I didn’t warn you. I got off work, and you said you hadn’t eaten earlier, and I kind of figured you probably hadn’t gotten around to it yet if you’re still feeling bad, so…” he held up the paper bag.

“You brought me food?” He brought me food. What is your deal, Captain Hawkeye? She eyed him suspiciously.

“Not just any food. My mom came over earlier this week and made a whole stock pot of chicken and dumplings to freeze. It’s the best comfort food ever, especially when you’re nursing a nasty cold.”

Her stomach growled audibly. Damn you. “I’m too hungry to protest, that actually sounds amazing. Please come in. Monty, go lay down.” She snapped a stern knife-hand at the dog, who retreated to the couch. She stood aside so Nathaniel could come in, and after removing his jacket, he followed her through the foyer and living room to the kitchen, his boots thudding on the hardwood flooring. “Sorry it’s kind of messy in here. I never got to do the dishes, and today was not that kind of day.” She gestured listlessly at the farmhouse sink piled half-deep with dirty dishes.

“It’s fine, don’t worry. This kitchen is great, by the way.” He gazed around appreciatively. The floors were all original hardwood like the rest of the house, almost grey in color but variegated from dark to light shades. On one end the original stone and brick hearth dominated the narrow wall. The longer wall was lined with distressed whitewash cabinets, except for around the gas stove and the wide sink where they were a distressed smoky blue, and the curtains on the big window above the sink had a matching shade in the fabric print. The countertops were all deep-toned butcher block,
including the sit-down island over which hung an iron pot hanger with a few pieces of copper cookware on it. Between the pots, bundles of basil, parsley, and lavender from her garden hung, drying. At the far end where they were standing was a sturdy wooden farmhouse table with matching chairs. Cora smiled. She loved her kitchen, too, and Nathaniel standing in it was giving her mild palpitations. A dark five o’clock shadow gave him a rakish look and emphasized the stark lines of his face and the contrasting green of his eyes. Today’s t-shirt was tan with a graphic of a helicopter that said ‘Runways are for Beauty Queens’, and he had on another pair of comfortably worn jeans that made her want to sigh a little. Stop it, she admonished herself.

“Thanks,” she replied. “I really like how it turned out. I did some remodeling when I bought this place a few years ago. Some I had done, and some my dad and Alice helped with – we built the island base together. I had that section of wall there taken out to open it up some, so we used the ship lap from it to do the island.” She went to a cabinet and took down a couple of bowls, and got out a pot to heat the soup in.

“It’s awesome.” He brought the bag over and set it down next to her by the stove, pulling out a big plastic container full of soup. “Why don’t you hang out and let me take care of heating this up?” He set the pot on the stove and flipped the burner on, pouring some of the soup into it.

“Okay… thanks.” Cora opened a drawer and handed him a wooden spoon to stir with, then leaned against the counter.

“I also brought you my mom’s signature herbal tea blend for colds and flu. I told you she’s a naturopath. She grows all her own stuff, and keeps us well-stocked with remedies. It’ll cure what ails you, believe me. She comes from a long line of Delaware medicine men and women. And there’s whisky in there for a hot toddy, too,” he told her, stirring the pot. “Nothing kills a cold better, I promise – especially combined with Mom’s tea. Drink that and bundle up in blankets for the night and you’ll feel amazing in the morning.”

“Might be better than popping DayQuil every four hours. I’ll take it.” She sneezed into the sleeve of her robe and sniffled, and it made his heart flop over in his chest. Lightning flashed outside the kitchen window, followed by a clap of thunder.

“Here comes the rain, finally,” Cora said, breaking his gaze and going to the window, where fat raindrops had begun to patter against the glass, quickly escalating to a fast, heavy storm. “Maybe now my shoulder will quit hurting, this weather’s been bugging it all day. Gives me a damn headache.”

“Yeah, I hear you.” The rain always made his leg ache, too, from hip to knee. He turned the stove off and poured the chicken and dumplings into the two bowls she’d set out. “All right, let’s get some food in you. You’re going to love this. Table?”

“No, we can sit in the living room. I don’t feel good enough for formal dining. Just don’t put your bowl down anywhere near Monty.” He laughed and followed her into the living room, which he’d only glimpsed on the way in. Like the kitchen, it had the same greyish hardwood floors, with a multicolored medallion-print area rug, windows and a set of French doors with striped curtains, and bright, cream-colored walls that helped the room seem bigger. All the molding and baseboards looked original and was stained a deep walnut color. The couch was a decadent, rusty-colored plush sectional with a huge chaise on one end, occupied by her enormous dog, who panted and thumped his long tail happily when Nathaniel plopped down beside him.

“Hey there, Monty.” He scratched the dog’s ears, and Monty licked his forearm. “Ah, you’re right. This couch is a lot better than a wooden chair.”
“I love it, but I’ll admit I pretty much picked it out solely because it gave Monty his own space to lay. Then he doesn’t try to sit on my lap,” Cora laughed, eating a spoonful of the hot soup. “Wow, this is amazing. Can I borrow your mother? Seriously, this is the best chicken and dumplings I’ve ever eaten.”

“I told you.” He smiled, glancing at the TV, where the Fratellis were in hot pursuit of the Goonie gang to get to One-Eyed Willie’s ship. “Hey, is this Goonies? I love this movie!”

“Me too, I always watch it when I don’t feel good. My mom always put it on for me and Alice when we were sick growing up, and Alice brought a copy to the hospital when I got hurt too, so it’s kind of a go-to now.” She tucked her feet under her and settled back to eat her soup. They watched the rest of the movie, each taking seconds on the chicken and dumplings, and by the time it was over, the downpour outside had stopped. Suddenly the blanket on the cushion next to Nathaniel moved, and a small, furry, beady-eyed head poked out.

“Jesus, what the hell is that?!” he yelled with a start, nearly dropping his empty bowl on the floor.

“Oh, no, I forgot about Scout! I’m sorry, I should have warned you. He likes to hide and sleep.”

The animal slid its long, slinky body out of the blanket and onto his lap, yawning and blinking at him. A ferret. She has a ferret? Wonders never cease with this girl. It made an odd little clucking sound and scaled the front of his shirt, shoving its face into his hair, sniffing with its little wet nose and licking his ear furiously. “Hey, slow down, little guy, we just met!” he laughed, setting his bowl down and picking up the ferret. He set him in his lap on his back and scratched his soft golden belly, his little dark brown paws wriggling. “It’s like… a furry knee sock with eyes,” he chuckled as Scout flipped himself upright and slunk down onto the floor, bouncing and making that little clucking noise again. The dog got up to engage him, tossing him gently with his nose and sending the ferret into another frenzy of leaping.

“Oh, this is funny, watch. Monty loves him.” She blew her nose again. Full of surprises, he thought, watching Monty lay on the floor while Scout climbed onto his back. He stood up and took Cora’s now empty soup bowl.

“You want more?” He asked.

“I think I’m good. That was fantastic. I can get the dishes, you don’t - ”

“No, it’s fine. You’re supposed to rest. Do you have a tea kettle somewhere?”

“Yeah, in the lower cabinet to the left of the stove.”

He set the bowls in the sink and started the tea kettle to boil on the stove, wandering back through the kitchen doorway and looking at the big display of photos on the living room wall while he waited for the water to boil. There were formal military portraits of Cora and a dark-haired, blue-eyed man he assumed was her father, as well as family photos; younger versions of Cora and her sister, their blonde, brown-eyed mother, and their father, and then just the girls and their now salt-and-pepper-haired father in later ones. He looked at one of her dad, straight and stiff in Marine dress blues, standing proudly beside a smiling Cora in her Navy dress blues.

“That was when I got my Fleet Marine Force badge,” she said, coming up to stand beside him.
“You’re an officer. I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, I got a commissioned officer rank when I completed a four-year nursing degree. Then I went through FMF training.”

“See, you are a badass.” He smiled, moving on to a collage frame. “Are these from Afghanistan?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She nodded, watching him while he took in the photos. “That’s all of us there,” she pointed to one of her with the medic crew beside their titanic MV-22 Osprey, then to individual ones, naming each crew member as she went. The last several were of a square-jawed, dark-eyed man with reddish hair, some with him and Cora together. They both looked happy, and the way the guy was looking at her in a couple of them made him curious about the nature of their relationship. “That’s Duncan,” she said softly. “He was our crew chief.”

Nathaniel paused, remembering what she had said the week before about losing their crew chief and another medic when they’d tried to rescue the pilots. She’d called all the other crew member by their last names except him. “You guys were close.”

She pressed her lips together and nodded. “Thick as thieves since sixth grade, and Alice, too. We all grew up together at Pendleton, our dads were both DI’s. His dad – Charlie - was the one who taught us both to ride a motorcycle.”

“Heh, shit. I’m sorry, Cora, I didn’t know, or I wouldn’t have - ”

“It’s okay. Really.” The kettle began to whistle from the kitchen. “That sounds like the hot toddy alarm,” she said with a little smile, heading into the kitchen with him behind her. He took a mug from the tree on her counter and set about brewing the tea.

Cora picked up the whisky bottle to read the label and nearly choked. *The Balvenie Port Cask, aged 21 years.* The seal was already broken, so she pulled the cork out and took a whiff. Sweet, spicy, just a little smoke, with a hint of something almost floral. The man had excellent taste. She replaced the cork and held up the bottle, raising an eyebrow at him. “So do you always make hot toddies with two hundred dollar whisky?”

He shrugged. “Only for people I like.” He winked at her and grinned, his eyes crinkling at the corners. Cora’s breath caught for just a second, and she set the bottle down, her cheeks burning. Damn it, why did he have to say things like that?

Nathaniel watched Cora’s cheeks bloom with color, and held his breath for a moment. He shouldn’t try to make her blush on purpose, but he couldn’t help it sometimes. He liked the innocent way she reacted to him now that she wasn’t so guarded around him like she had been at first. It was refreshing, a little heart-stopping, and damn sexy. Like the rest of her. Even sick she still made his pulse kick up, in her baggy sweats and charmingly ugly housecoat, her hair in a messy, loose braid, and her nose irritated and red. Her voice was husky from her cold, and slightly nasal from congestion, and she likely had absolutely no clue how goddamned adorable she was. She opened an upper cabinet and took down two whisky tumblers, shrugging at his questioning look.

“Hey, my dad’s family is from Scotland. It’s a cardinal sin to bring a bottle of proper single-malt Scotch into my house just to pour it in tea. I want to try it alone first. You want one?”

Nathaniel laughed out loud. “Sure, why not?”

She poured two fingers into each glass, neat, and handed him one. “Cheers.” She clinked her
glass against his and took a sip, closing her eyes. “Damn, that’s good.”

Nathaniel watched her with hooded eyes as she took another sip, wondering in retrospect if this had been the best idea. All he’d been thinking about initially was doing something nice for her because she didn’t feel good. Now she was standing there pleasurably sipping whisky, and all he could think about was how it would taste on her lips. He quickly tossed back the rest of his glass, then poured a shot into the mug of tea, handing it to her when she set down her empty tumbler. She took the mug, her fingers brushing his and making his spine tingle, then grabbed a towel from under the sink.

“Come on, we can sit outside now that it’s not raining anymore. It’ll be nice and cool out.” He followed her into the living room, waiting while she picked up Scout and deposited him back in his cage for the night. She opened the French doors and led him out onto the back deck, where she dried off the big wooden porch swing so they could sit down on it. Monty came out with them, wandering off the deck to run around in the dark for a while and then coming back to settle by the swing.

“This is a really nice place,” he said, rocking the swing gently with one foot.

“Thank you. It’s very old, and it needed some updates, but it’s been worth it. It’s peaceful, and there’s just enough land to have a nice garden and good space for Monty and the horses to run.” They sat quietly for a while, rocking back and forth. Cora was starting to feel better already, full of hot soup and his mother’s good tea, listening to the sounds of the frogs and crickets and the creak of the swing. By the time she set the empty mug aside on the patio table, the whisky had set in, making her feel sleepy and relaxed - not how she usually felt around Nathaniel. It didn’t seem smart for him to still be here, but he’d been nice enough to come over after working for twenty-four hours and feed her, and despite her angst, they were friends and she liked hanging out with him. She found her thoughts drifting to when they had talked the previous weekend at the folk festival.

“What made you want to fly when you were a kid?” she asked quietly.

“Hmmm. Well, my birth father was a small aircraft pilot, so I guess some of it came from knowing that. My mom and dad – the Greatsnakes - were always really transparent about my birth family, they wanted me to know about them, that they loved me.” He pointed at the sky, where the storm clouds had thinned and separated to reveal the stars behind them. “They used to tell me a story of their people, about how Sky Woman died giving birth to the sun and moon. The sun gave her body to the earth to bring it life, and the moon took the stars from her breast and threw them into the sky so they would always remind him of her soul. They said that I should think of my parents and my sisters when I looked at the stars, because it was their monument too, and the Milky Way was the pathway to Heaven. So when I was little, I wanted to fly there to see if I could find them.” He smiled wistfully. “Obviously, I got older and figured out it didn’t quite work like that, but the urge to fly never really went away.”

“I like that story about the stars. Monuments to souls. That’s a good way to think about the people we’ve lost.”

“I’ve never been able to think of it any other way since then. It helped to think about it when John died, too. I guess it makes it suck less, anyway, if that’s possible.”

“You were close, then?”

“Yeah. He and I met when I was in eighth grade and he was a junior in high school – we were in Junior Police Explorers together. He went through the APD academy a few years ahead of me, and we ended up partners when I got off FTO. By then he was married, had a couple of little
kids, just babies at the time. I still see them pretty often - they’re like family, and the kids love Uncas too.”

“That’s heartbreaking,” Cora murmured. “Especially for the kids. It’s good that they have you, you understand what it’s like to lose parents so young.”

“Did your friend Duncan have a family?”

Cora looked over at him briefly, her eyes sad. She sighed and leaned her head back against the porch swing, looking up at the sky. “He didn’t. He... um, he wanted to marry me, actually.”

“I see.” Nathaniel closed his eyes and took a breath, feeling like puzzle pieces were finally starting to fit together with her. He wasn’t sure he had a right to ask her for more, but she was talking and he wanted to know. He needed to know. “So… you guys were in love then?”

She shook her head. “No. He was. We were never involved. We weren’t in the same chain of command, so technically we could have been, but it still would have been messy on the same team, and I just… I never... He was my best friend, and I loved him very much, but not like that. Not the way he loved me. Sometimes I wish he’d found someone else, but then that would have almost made it worse when he died. Just like it… it would have been so much worse to lose him if I had loved him the same way. It was so hard already, you know?” Her voice came in a husky, pain-laced whisper, and aching realization dawned on Nathaniel with this last puzzle piece. It explained an awful lot about her. He could imagine there were a lot of mixed, confusing feelings for her, and maybe this was why she sometimes looked at him like she wanted the same things he did, but then other times she looked like she just wanted to run and hide. He reached over cautiously and took her hand in his, wanting to offer her some kind of comfort. He expected her to recoil, but she didn’t, and it surprised him when her fingers curled around his. He looked down at her in the dark, her eyes wide and her breath a little quicker. He wanted very badly to lean forward, to touch her face, to kiss her, but it wasn’t time yet. Not when she’d had alcohol, and not when they were talking like this. Right now, she just needed a friend. Right now, the gentle press of her palm against his was enough. She started to relax when he didn’t do anything else, and they sat together in silent solidarity for a while.

“Thank you so much for the soup, and everything,” she said softly. “I really appreciate it, and you didn’t have to do that. It was very nice of you.”

“You’re welcome, and I wanted to. But I should go soon,” he whispered, squeezing her hand lightly. “You really need to rest.”

“So do you. But it’s late, the roads are wet, and you just worked a twenty-four-hour shift and I know you’re exhausted. The ER nurse in me has reservations about you riding home on a motorcycle. I’ve got a guest room, if you… uh, if you want to just crash here and go home in the morning.” Cora thought she just might have lost her mind as the words tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Nathaniel looked like he was thinking hard for a minute, then sighed. “Yeah, you might be right. Add having a drink with you to that, and you’re definitely right. You’re sure you don’t mind, though? I can always call Uncas to pick me up, we’re not far.”

“Don’t wake him up, he’s just as tired as you are, and he has an early date with my sister tomorrow. I really don’t mind, Nathaniel.” She should, but she didn’t. There was nothing remotely sane about inviting him to stay, but she didn’t care about possible consequences tonight. Maybe it was the whisky. Maybe it was that he was caring and warm and sexy, and made her heart race the way it never had before, or maybe it was just the way he understood and the way his hand felt
wrapped around hers. Maybe she really wanted to know that he was safe somewhere and not on the road, because she didn’t like the idea of anything else bad happening to him. And maybe, too, she just felt raw and worn out and a little selfish for once, and she just wanted him nearby because he made her feel good. She stood up, letting go of his hand, and started toward the French doors with Monty close behind her. “Come on, I’ll show you where the guest room is.”

Nathaniel woke uncharacteristically late the next morning, the sun well up and shining through the neat white window curtains, casting rays across the patchwork quilt on the iron-framed bed. He rolled over and sat up, taking a second to lose his confusion and remember that he had slept at Cora’s house. He got out of bed and went across the hall to the bathroom, hearing someone moving around in the kitchen and low-volume music playing. There were fresh towels and guest toiletry items on the bathroom counter that had not been there last night, so she was obviously already up, and cooking breakfast judging by the delicious smells. After he had showered and dressed, he made his way down the narrow hallway and through the living room where Scout was snoozing away in his cage, curled up in a little hammock. Now that it was daylight, the view from the windows showed the grassy expanse of the fenced meadow beyond the deck and the garden that butted up to woods, and a picturesque little red barn off to one side. Two horses grazed near the middle, one a glossy bay and one a buckskin. Monty bounded between them, running around the meadow in wide circles. When Nathaniel reached the kitchen doorway, he stopped dead in his tracks, frozen to the spot where he stood and completely gobsmacked.

A muddy pair of black Wellington boots had been carelessly kicked off by the open back door. Cora stood in front of the stove with her back to him, pouring pancake batter onto a hot griddle. Her frumpy sweats were gone, replaced by a snug green tank top and a pair of cutoff denim shorts. They weren’t indecent, but they certainly didn’t hide much either, and heat spread through him at the sight of her long, lithe legs and the faint ripple of the delicate muscles in her shoulders and back, her thick dark ponytail swinging across them as she danced to the music playing through the speaker dock on the counter. The cruel irony did not escape him that the current song was Marvin Gaye’s “Let’s Get It On.”

“I’ve been really tryin’, baby
Tryin’ to hold back this feeling for so long
And if you feel like I feel, baby
Then, c’mon, oh, c’mon…”

He stood transfixed, fascinated by how unreserved and carefree she was when she was alone and didn’t think she needed to hide herself. She was beautiful, funny, and incredibly sexy, and the more he saw of the real her, the more he wanted. He felt a little guilty spying on her like this, but he couldn’t bring himself to look away.

“Don’t you know how sweet and wonderful life can be
I’m asking you baby to get it on with me
I ain’t gonna worry
I ain’t gonna push, won’t push you baby
So c’mon, c’mon, c’mon, c’mon, baby
Her hips swayed provocatively as she hummed along, her voice still a little scratchy. She dropped the spatula she was holding and bent over to retrieve it. Holy God, woman, you’re killing me, he groaned inwardly, desire rising in him hot and fierce. All right, dammit, this has to stop. Right now. He stepped into the kitchen and leaned against the island.

“Good morning.”

Cora yelped in shock at Nathaniel’s amused voice behind her and whirled around, her hands flinging up in mid-flip of a pancake, sending it flying into the air as he stood there leaning casually on her kitchen island, his hair loose and still damp from the shower, and the heated look in his eyes making her knees go a little weak. The pancake landed square on his head.

“Dammit, you scared me! How long were you standing there?” Her cheeks tingled with the force of her embarrassed blush.

“Not long,” he chuckled, removing the pancake. “Man, talk about breakfast on the fly.” He grinned, and she couldn’t help laughing along with him.

“I hope you like blueberry pancakes. They’re made from scratch, but I had to use frozen blueberries since it’s too early to pick any fresh yet.”

“I think I’ll survive. They smell great, thank you.” He smiled again, sending her heart into another round of backflips. She got out two plates and loaded them with pancakes and bacon, setting them on the table with the jug of maple syrup.

“How did you sleep?” she asked from the counter, pouring two cups of coffee.

“Like a rock. Thanks for leaving me towels, by the way. How about you, are you feeling better? You look better.”

“I do feel a lot better.” She handed him one of the mugs and sat down across from him. “All that stuff you brought is like magic.” It probably didn’t hurt that she’d slept like the dead for once after two good shots of whisky, though she was surprised she had slept at all with him two doors down.

“Good, I’m glad. Damn, these really are good pancakes.”

She smiled behind her coffee mug, then set it down and ate her own breakfast. When they had finished, he got up with her and took the plates to the sink, turning on the water to rinse them off. She opened the dishwasher, and he helped her rinse and load the rest of the dishes sitting in the sink from the previous day.

“Thanks for your help,” she said, closing the dishwasher. Nathaniel was still standing beside her, looking down at her. She gazed back at him, mesmerized for a moment by the way the sunlight from the window was hitting his eyes. Sometimes they looked blue, sometimes darker green or even grey, but in the bright light they were an amazing pale sea green with a burst of gold around the pupils.

“It’s no problem at all,” Nathaniel murmured. He was acutely aware of how close Cora was standing to him, staring up at him with her big, beautiful eyes, their deep brown slightly more cognac-hued in the morning sun. She smelled good, like pancakes and sunshine and the freshly
picked lavender in the vase over the sink. The baser part of his mind was starting to think very inappropriate things about that big, sturdy kitchen table.

“Good morning, sweetheart, I – who the HELL are YOU, and what are you doing in my daughter’s house at eight-fucking-thirty on a Saturday morning?”

Nathaniel’s head snapped up to see a very angry and very real version of the man in Cora’s photos speed-walking toward him, fierce knife-hand extended and a vein throbbing across his forehead, wearing warmup pants and a black t-shirt that said ‘Embrace the Suck’. He was a few inches shorter than Nathaniel, but there was something incredibly fear-inducing about the insanity in his intense blue eyes and the furious, ear-splitting bark of his voice, and Nathaniel suddenly had a deeper understanding of why many Marine recruits probably thought they might not make it through boot camp alive. It gave him mild police academy flashbacks, and he almost smiled, but stopped himself to avoid being choke-slammed by a rabid Marine.

“Pop, what on earth are you doing here?” Cora gasped. “I didn’t know you were coming over!”

“Well, we’re missing our run since your sister is going hiking and you’re sick, so I thought I’d come out and see if you needed help with anything today. Don’t change the subject. Who the hell is HE?!” he snapped another knife-hand in Nathaniel’s direction.

Nathaniel stepped forward and dared to look Cora’s father straight in the eye. “I’m Nathaniel Poe, sir. I work with Cora at AirMedic, I’m a helicopter pilot.”

“Right. So you’re the pilot. You have two seconds to tell me what you’re doing here looking like you spent the night, before I hang you.”

“Jesus, Pop! You’re being rude, stop it!” Cora barked. “He didn’t do anything! He brought me soup and tea after work last night, and it wasn’t safe on the road for a motorcycle after it rained, so I told him to stay. In the guest room.”

“Oh. Well, then. Out-fucking-standing. I’m Ed Munro.” He stuck out a hand. Nathaniel shook it, returning the bone-crushing grip, and Munro grinned toothily, eyeing the sarcastic helicopter graphic on Nathaniel’s t-shirt. “Nice shirt.”

“I like yours, too, sir.” He smiled back at Ed.

Cora sighed and rolled her eyes at Nathaniel. “So this is my crazy drill instructor father. I’m sorry. Pop, you want breakfast? I made pancakes.”

“Sure, sweetheart, thanks.” Ed kissed her cheek and got out a plate. “How are you feeling?”

“A lot better than yesterday.”

“Excellent. Say, where did this fine dram come from?” He picked up the bottle of whisky from the counter.

“Oh, Nathaniel brought it. For my cold.”

Ed eyed Nathaniel with an appreciative raised brow. Monty bounded through the back door with a bark and attempted to bowl the older man over, waving his bullwhip-like tail all over the kitchen.

“Montcalm, no! SIT!” Cora ordered.
Ed shook his head and rolled his eyes. “I don’t know why you had to give that dog such a bloody stupid name. If you wanted to name him after a general, you could have named him Chesty, or even Mattis, for Christ’s sake.” He sat down at the table to eat his pancakes, and Nathaniel burst out laughing. Ed pointed his fork at him. “See, he gets it. And he knows good whisky. I like him. He can stay.”

“I’m so glad you suggested this place to hike, it’s gorgeous! I can’t believe I’ve never come out here!” Alice huffed breathlessly as she and Uncas arrived at the top of Plotter Kill Falls.

“It’s kind of an odd pick since it’s so close to civilization, but it’s one of my favorites for a good day hike, and I haven’t been here in ages.” Uncas looked over at her and smiled. He had thought she might enjoy the Plotter Kill Preserve trail, and he was glad he’d been right. They sat down by the stream to rest and drink some water, and he watched her in the afternoon sunlight, tiny beads of waterfall spray strung like jewels in her honey-gold ponytail. Everything about her was... golden. Soft and smart and kind-hearted. He still couldn’t quite believe she was real, after all this time listening to her voice over the radio and wondering if she was as beautiful as she sounded. He had imagined her millions of times, but it all fell far short of the reality.

“Let’s hang out here for a while before we go back down. It’s kind of hot today, and it’s nice up here.” She smiled her sweet smile and unlaced her hiking shoes to kick them off by the rock she was sitting on.

“Nice socks.” Uncas grinned at the sight of her bright green toe socks. “They make your feet look like Muppet feet.” Damn, she’s so cute.

Alice giggled. “They kind of do. But, they’re great for moisture-wicking, circulation, and avoiding fatigue. We yoga instructors have all the ins on this stuff, don’t you know?” He watched her tug them off and roll up her lightweight grey trail pants. Her toenails were painted a pearly light pink like her tank top, and her legs were graceful and strong, like the rest of her.

“So what kind of yoga do you teach, anyway? Is it like Hatha yoga? Or that hot sweaty kind?” Don’t think about hot sweaty anything, man. Just don’t.

“Other instructors offer those classes at the same studio, but I teach aerial yoga, both adult and kids’ classes. I’m an aerial performer, so I teach what I know. Cora does it too, I taught her after her shoulder was doing well enough. Sometimes she helps with my kids’ class.”

“I’ve never seen any of that kind of thing before. It sounds interesting, like flying or something.”

“Well, it is, a little, though the yoga stuff is pretty stationary even though you’re suspended from a silk trapeze.” She stuck her feet in the cold water and sighed. Uncas took off his boots and socks and stuck his feet in beside hers. Trying to imagine whatever she was saying about silk and trapezes was making him glad for the shock of the cold water anyway. Time for a subject change before this got embarrassing.

“So, how long have you been a dispatcher?”

“Six years now. I started a couple of years into college classes, and I liked doing it, so I just stayed. It works well for my yoga teaching schedule too.”

“Oh yeah? What did you study in school?”

“I thought about vet or tech school, and I was doing prerequisites for that. I took some
communications classes too, when I started with central dispatch. I never finished, though. Cora got hurt, and I dropped out, and I haven’t really had much motivation to go back since I’m comfortable and happy where I am for now. I never expected to like dispatch as much as I do. I mean it’s not always easy, and it’s definitely not what I would call fun, but… it’s meaningful. I really do love it most of the time.”

“Oh yeah, no, I get that for sure. I rode an ambulance for years before I did MedEvac. You guys are like the central engineering for all first responders. I don’t think dispatchers get enough recognition for what they do. It’s easy to forget when firefighters and cops and everyone else are the ones people actually see, but I’ve been to so many calls when it was the dispatcher who saved somebody because they helped people keep their head or gave good CPR instructions or whatever.”

“Yeah… there’s a lot more to it than just answering calls or sending help. It’s good to hear someone other than my family say that.” Alice smiled appreciatively, melting a little as he stared at her with those brooding dark eyes. He gets it. He’s gorgeous and sweet and he totally gets it. Where have you been all my life, Uncas Greatsnake?

“Well, yeah… I mean my dad’s been a deputy all his life, and without dispatch and EMS, my brother might not be here, so, you know.”

“Yeah, Cora mentioned something about what happened to him and his partner. I wasn’t a dispatcher just yet when that happened, but I remember it on the news. And… uh, the final dispatch when they buried Officer Cameron. Those are definitely no one’s favorite thing. I’m really glad I’ve never had to do it.”

“I hope you never do. John was a good guy, and Nathaniel took it pretty hard, they’d been friends a long time before that – all of us had, really. Losing him was hard.”

“Hmmm. Yeah, I know what you mean. Cora’s best friend Duncan got killed when they were in that helicopter crash in Afghanistan, but we had all been friends most of our lives by then, so he was like a big brother. It was rough for all of us, our dads are friends, and we had already lost our mom, so we all felt it pretty hard. And Cora had a lot of physical recovery with the burns and her shoulder and stuff. I stayed with her a lot, traveled back and forth.”

“Oh yeah, Nathaniel needed a lot of help too, his leg was in really bad shape for a while. It still bugs him, but he did better than they thought he would initially. Cora’s lucky to have a sister like you, you know. To be there for her like you have been.”

“It sounds like Nathaniel is lucky to have you, too.” She gazed at his profile, admiring the shine of his blue-black hair and the smoothly angled lines of his nose, cheekbone and jaw. He almost looked like a painting sitting in the filtered sunlight. Never in a million years had she expected to meet someone like him. He knew what she’d experienced because he’d been there in a way himself, and as a first responder, he understood and respected her job. Plus, he was funny and polite and compassionate, and he loved his family. If he wasn’t too good to be true, she could definitely see this going somewhere.

“What?” she heard him ask softly, realizing he was looking back at her.

“Nothing… this is just a really nice day. I’m glad we could do this.”

“Me too.” He flashed her a brain-melting smile. They sat for a while longer, then put their shoes back on and started to head back down an alternate trail to the bottom of the fall so they could walk back to the parking area. On the way, they talked about the different ways they had grown up and their families, and she asked questions about his family’s tribal background, and the meaning of
his name.

“Uncas is a Mohican name, from my dad’s people, and it means Fox. Our last name, Greatsnake, has obvious meaning, but that’s the Anglicized version of it that changed over time as European settlers moved in. It originally came from a sachem, or elder, whose name was ChingAch-Gòok, which is literally ‘Great Serpent’.”

“It’s really cool that you guys can trace that back. And I love that your family speaks the Lenape language and taught you and your brother, too. I have to admit, I kind of have a crush on your parents. They’re so sweet together, and so talented, and I love that your mom is an herbal doctor. Do you and Nathaniel play music, too?”

“Not like they do. We can both play the guitar okay, but neither of us plays in a band or anything. We just like to play with Mom and Dad at home sometimes.”

“I’d love to hear you all! Their band was so good last weekend!”

“Well, they’ll have some more gigs coming up soon, maybe we can go see them sometime. Hey, watch out!” His arm whipped out and grabbed her around the waist to stop her from falling as her foot slipped on the muddy shale of the narrow path into the gorge below.

“Thanks,” she breathed, all too aware of his strong arm wrapped around her, and the fact that she was pressed very tightly against the entire well-built length of him. Your parents certainly named you aptly… Fox indeed. She almost sighed when he let her go so they could keep walking. When they had reached the bottom of the fall and hiked back out to his blue Chevy pickup, he opened the passenger door for her.

“I know we’ve already been out all day, but there’s this great diner in Schenectady just down the way, called The Blue Ribbon – I’d love to take you there for dinner, if you’d like to go. My parents used to take us there all the time growing up, and their fried clams are the best I’ve ever had.”

Spend more time with you? Where do I sign up?!

“I’m in! I’m starving, and I love fried clams. Let’s go!”

“So I didn’t know all that stuff about Cora’s friend. She doesn’t talk about her service too much, but I think Nathaniel knows some of it. She talks to him sometimes.” Uncas dipped a french fry in ketchup and chewed thoughtfully.

“Well, he probably gets it more than most. I’m glad she does – talks to him, I mean. I can tell he likes her, and I think she likes him too.” Alice finished the last of her basket of clams and set it aside.

“Uh, yeah he definitely does.” Uncas smiled mischievously. “Did you, uh, know that he stayed over there last night?”

“What?! Are you shitting me?” Alice grabbed his arm in excitement. “I’m going to kill her for not telling me!”

“Well she probably will later, he still wasn’t home yet when I left to pick you up, so who knows what went on. He swears nothing happened though.” He laughed, and Alice shivered. He had the sexiest deep-voiced laugh, and she loved it.
“He’s probably not lying,” she sighed. “Cora’s kind of hard to crack. She didn’t date too much before Duncan died, and she hasn’t dated anyone at all since, plus she has this stupid personal rule about fraternization, so I hope he’s patient. I like him, I think he’d be good for her.”

“I think she’d be good for him too. He’s pretty determined when it comes to getting what he wants, so if he really likes her, he’ll hang. We’re both kind of like that.” He flashed her another sanity-arresting grin, and her insides quivered. *If he smiles at me like that again, I’m going to crawl across this table like Tawny Kitaen in a Whitesnake video.*

“So you live in Wynantskill? House or apartment?”

“Oh, house for sure. Nathaniel and I went in together on a really nice little cabin out there about four years ago now, up till then we both had apartments in Albany. It’s a great place, it’s kind of far out and backs right up to the woods, and a tributary from the kill runs through behind us, so we can just walk out and go fishing or canoeing anytime we want. It even has a platform treehouse out back.”

“Seriously? That sounds like heaven to me. I love my loft, but the city gets old sometimes. Do you have any pets?”

“No, actually. We always had dogs growing up, but we’ve never gotten around to it as adults. You?”

“Yeah. I love animals. I have a cat, a guinea pig, and some fish too. And I have a buckskin quarter horse named Blue Feather, but he lives at Cora’s since she has the barn at her place, and she’s got Ranger there to keep him company. She has a nice creek too, so we go riding in the woods a lot.”

Uncas watched her across the table, listening to her captivating voice, so much better in reality than over the radio. There was something about her eclectic, electric personality that drew him in and pulled hard at his heartstrings, even more than her voice ever had. “So… a dispatcher who teaches aerial yoga and has a cat, a guinea pig, some fish, and a horse. You’re kind of awesome, Alice.”

“Hey, you’re pretty great yourself.” She blushed, and he wanted to lean across the table and make her blush some more. She was still smiling, and he liked the way her hazel eyes sparkled, and how her smile lines had dimples in them and her two front teeth were just a hair longer than the rest. It felt dumb and cliché to think that he might be falling for her, but he’d already been halfway there all this time anyway. But now that he’d found her, they had time, and time with her was all he wanted anyway. When they had finished their apple pie and he had paid the check, they walked out to his truck. The diner had speakers that fed outside, and the faint strains of Louis Armstrong’s “A Kiss to Build a Dream On” wafted into the parking lot. Alice giggled as he pulled her in for a spontaneous parking space dance, and after a minute they were just swaying slowly to the old-time rhythm of the trumpet solo.

“Give me a kiss before you leave me
And my imagination will feed my hungry heart
Leave me one thing before we part
A kiss to build a dream on
And when I'm alone with my fancies, I'll be with you
Weaving romances, making believe they're true…"

She was looking up at him with those gorgeous golden eyes again, and he’d promised himself he wasn’t going to be that guy and try to make out with her on the first date. Dammit, this is hard. She’s so kissable. “I better get you home,” he murmured, reluctantly letting go of her. Unless he was imagining things, she looked mildly disappointed, but she agreed and got into the truck.

Back at her apartment, he walked her up to the door. She paused with the key in the deadbolt and smiled shyly. “Want to come in for a bit?”

“Sure. I’d love to meet your furry and scaly gang.” He followed her inside and gazed around when she flipped on the lights. “Wow, this is a great place!”

“Thanks! When I moved in the landlord had just renovated.” It was an open loft, with the living area and kitchen on the lower level, and a metal staircase that went up to the bedroom and bathroom area. The architecture was modern, and the décor was tasteful yet eclectic, with a big, comfortable couch, wood and glass tables, and framed art and photos on the walls. Something that looked like a big hula hoop and long red scarves was hanging from the high-beamed ceiling beside the staircase. Her aquarium was against the wall near the kitchen, a variety of pretty angelfish and goldfish swimming happily to the surface when Alice dropped food in for them.

“Hi, ‘Tato!” she cooed, picking up the small orange cat that jumped off the couch and wound around her legs. “This is Sweet Potato, or just ‘Tato most of the time,” she grinned. “She’s just like her name, so she won’t bite or scratch you.”

“Hi there, ‘Tato-Cat. Nice to meet you.” Uncas stroked the soft fur between her ears, and she butted her head upward into his hand, purring. “Aaaaw, you are a sweet potato, huh? Come here, you.” He took the cat from Alice and tucked her into the crook of his arm. She lay there, content and purring while he petted her head and scratched under her chin. Alice watched, smiling an adorable, crooked smile. I’ve got the cat on my side… I’m definitely winning.

“Mrs. Nesbit lives in there,” she pointed to the cage beside the fish tank. “But she’s asleep in her igloo right now, so you’ll have to meet her officially later.” He peeked into the cage to see a cute little white guinea pig with grey and brown patches sleeping inside a plastic igloo on a bed of straw. “I’ll warn you now, she’s a shoe sleeper, and she likes to chew holes in things.” Her giving him warnings for the future made him smile.

“So what’s this hula hoop thing over here?” He walked over to the staircase and peered up. The bedroom area had only a stem wall separating it from downstairs view, so via the open staircase he could see part of the bed with a bright sari silk patchwork bedspread and pillows, and an artful sheer curtain arrangement on the wall hanging over the headboard. Great, I’m trying to play it cool and she’s got a Kama Sutra den up there. Not helping. Not. Helping.

“It’s my lyra and silks. For aerial acrobatics.”

“Okay, now I’m really curious as to what you do with this stuff.”

“Hang on, I’ll show you if you want.” She disappeared upstairs for a minute and came back down in a pair of gray leggings, and pulled up a playlist on her phone. Uncas stood back and set the cat down, leaning on the staircase railing to watch her as Seal’s “Kiss From a Rose” started and she began ascending the silks by wrapping them around her arms and legs and using the resistance as
leverage to pull and push herself upward. *Hell, no wonder she looks so strong.*

“Is this the song from *Batman Forever*?” he chuckled.

“Yeah,” she laughed, disengaging the silks and switching to the lyra. “It was the only good thing to come out of that movie, right?” She worked through a series of smooth, graceful poses on the lyra, holding herself in place at times with only her ankle and foot, and Uncas thought he had never seen anything so amazing in his life. This girl was absolutely, breathtakingly bewitching, and he wanted her like the fire of a thousand suns. She switched back to the silks again and ended the song with them wrapped around her knees and thighs, hanging upside down and grinning.

“Well, there you have it. That’s aerial acrobatics. What do you think?”

Uncas mentally picked his jaw up off the floor. “I think it’s… the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen. It’s like… you’re… you’re *Spider-Man* or something.” *Oh my God, she’s Spider-Man. Spider-Woman. Whatever. I want to marry her.*

“Hey, now, I could just as easily be Batman.” She flipped upright and lowered herself to the floor with a smug smile.

“Oooooh. A DC girl, eh? I’m more of a Marvel guy myself.”

“I kind of guessed when I saw your Harley. But it’s cool. Batman can hang with Spider-Man, right?”

“I have no objection.” *And I need to leave this place right now before I forget about how I was going to be a gentleman on the first date.* “Listen, it’s getting late, I really should go and get out of your way.” He started for the door and she walked with him to open it for him.

“This was a great day, thanks so much for taking me out there. It was beautiful. Everything was… beautiful.” She leaned toward him a little, and his pulse kicked into high gear.

“I had a great time too, Alice. I hope we can do this again sometime soon. Can I call you tomorrow and maybe we can plan something?”

“Sure, that sounds perfect. I’d love that.”

“Good night, Alice.”

“Good night, Uncas.”

He forced himself to turn and walk away, hearing the door click shut behind him. He got in the truck and sat there for a minute, half of him kicking himself for not kissing her, and the other half telling him it was better not to for now. Except that half of him was full of shit. He’d just spent an entire day in the company of the girl he’d been dreaming about for the last two years, and he hadn’t kissed her? *Fuck it. Fuck propriety, this already defies all odds anyway.* He got out of the truck and took the stairs two at a time back to her apartment door.

Alice leaned against the closed door and sighed shakily. He wanted to see her again, and she wanted to see him too. She had wanted him to kiss her so badly, but he hadn’t, and she hadn’t wanted to be so forward as to kiss him. Maybe he was just being a gentleman, but she couldn’t help feeling a little irrationally disappointed. She started to move away from the door and heard the thud of footsteps running up the outside stairwell. Her heart began to pound. She flung open the door just as he came down the breezeway, his dark eyes blazing, making delicious heat spread through her with the naked intent she saw there. Her lips curved in a brief smile, but when he reached her all was
forgotten. The breath left her body in a rush as he took her face in his hands and covered her mouth with his. Her arms wound around his neck, meeting the slow, sensual movement of his lips with that of her own. She gasped in surprise when he backed her up to the open door, pressing flush against her, causing arousal to spring to life deep in her belly, spreading like a brush fire in all the right places. He deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping into her mouth and stroking against hers, and she sighed and relaxed into him, ardently returning each caress. Her fingers wove into his silky hair, and she could feel every hard plane of muscle, every delectable angle of him against her through her thin leggings and tank top, and the warm, strong touch of his hands as they grazed down her arms and spanned her waist, his thumbs stroking the sides of her belly. His lips feathered lightly after a moment and paused, still warm and close.

“I wasn’t going to do this,” he whispered against her mouth. “I wanted to, but I was trying to be nice.” God, he couldn’t help it, though. She was everything right now.

“You are nice,” she breathed. “This is nice… so much better than nice…” She kissed him briefly again, and he ran his tongue over her full lower lip, like he’d wanted to do all day, every time she’d smiled at him. She made a little purr of pleasure in her throat and it almost sent him over the edge of reason. He savored the faint taste of apple pie on her lips, the feel of her, all her softness and sweetness and the way she didn’t smell like any kind of perfume, just clean cotton and her. Finally, he had this woman in his arms, after all this time wondering if he really was as crazy as everyone had thought. Now the only thing that seemed crazy was how right he had been all along, and how right this felt now, like a dream he never wanted to wake up from. He buried his face against the soft curve of her neck, breathing her, aching for her.

“Uncas…” she raised her head and looked up at him, her eyes shining in the dim light. “You could have called central dispatch, you know.”

“Oh, thank God, she doesn’t hate me.” Well… that’s easier said than done. I mean, come on… ‘Hello, dispatch? I need to find the girl with the gorgeous voice, can each of you speak into the phone for me please?’ That might be a little more creepy than just hoping I’d get to meet you someday.”

Alice laughed again. “Well, ok, that’s true. But here we are now, so it would seem fate had its own way of working things out in our favor, right?” She rose onto her toes and kissed him, slow and lingering.

“Definitely,” he murmured. “I really should go now, before I get myself into more trouble. Alice… you’re wonderful.”

“So are you. Good night, Uncas.”

He kissed her one more time. “It is now.”
Author’s Note:

This chapter is obnoxiously long, so I hope you still enjoyed it. I didn’t expect it to be so long, but there was a LOT of ground to cover that has no place in the next chapter, so here it is. Plus, there was no way I was going to split it into two chapters and make you guys wait for Uncas and Alice’s first date. So let’s see. Cora loosened up a whole lot, and Nathaniel is his awesome self with his chicken soup and ridiculously expensive whisky (Balvenie is definitely top notch, y’all). Nathaniel and Cora are inching right along with their angsty apprehension, although neither of them seems at all as apprehensive as previous chapters (Nathaniel is over there like “She let me hold her hand for a minute!!!! Eeeeeeek!!!”). Cora and Nathaniel both revealed quite a bit of telling information here, which can only be helpful, right? Monty is still the crazy behemoth dog. Scout the ferret is super cute, and that little noise he makes when he’s playing is called “dooking” (I had ferrets for twelve years, and oh my goodness they are fun pets). I couldn’t resist giving Cora a ferret, or Alice a cute little kitty and guinea pig. All the pets, including the horses, will keep making appearances in various parts of this story. Alice’s horse Blue Feather is named after one of the Huron characters in the LOTM film, and Cora’s horse Ranger is a nod to Captain Robert Rogers and the ‘Rogers’ Rangers’, a special forces-type recon and wilderness unit he commanded during the French and Indian War and the American Revolution (Rogers appeared as a minor character in my story Where We Start Again). I will also mention, for those who are crushing on the Brian Hunter character, you have not seen the last of him either! He is a minor character but I have plans for him throughout the story, so rest easy, he’s going nowhere. I rather like Brian, and I’m glad you do too!<br />

Ed Munro went full drill-instructor in this chapter, and I had fun with that (so did my Marine husband, he helped me with all the details of what Ed might do and say). Nathaniel took it in stride, of course, because he’s Nathaniel, and managed to charm Ed in his own way. For those of you unfamiliar, the drill instructors of the United States Marine Corps are probably among the most feared men (and women) on earth, especially to new recruits. Nobody can yell or put the fear of God in you like those crazy people. A knife-hand, the gesture I referred to a few times, is when they snap their fingers and hold their hand stiff, flat and straight-fingered and point it palm-up at someone, bent at the elbow, usually while they are screaming at them for some random transgression they committed. If you Google it you’ll find a million photos of DI’s doing this to recruits, and most Marines will knife-hand someone at least once in a while. Even Cora does it to the dog; after all, she was raised by a crazy DI and she served with a bunch of Marines, so you know her and Alice grew up in fear of the knife-hand from Dad – and they know how to throw some knife-hands of their own, too. XD As for Munro’s comment about the dog’s name, for those unaware, Lieutenant General Lewis Burwell “Chesty” Puller is a famous core figure in USMC history, namely for his actions in WWII and Korea – he is frequently referenced by any and all Marines. And of course USMC General James Mattis is the current U.S. Secretary of Defense, but has also been a respected figure among Marines for some time.<br />

And finally, the first date for Uncas and Alice. They are so perfect for each other. They’ve both seen a sibling through something very difficult and life-altering and helped them heal. Uncas is a paramedic, so he absolutely gets the significance of Alice’s job as a dispatcher. So many dispatchers save lives, from giving instructions to people over the phone in an emergency, all the way to staying on the phone with someone who is suicidal until help can arrive for them. They hear and deal with harrowing, haunting things every single shift, and they don’t forget it any more than the first responders who see it. Alice is awesome in a lot of ways, her job is one of them. The Plotter Kill Preserve, where they went hiking, is located in Rotterdam, NY not far from Schenectady (about half an hour west of Albany). It’s a seven-mile nature preserve trail with three waterfalls, and the photos of it are beautiful. The Blue Ribbon Diner and Bakery in Schenectady, NY, is a real place, and I have it on good authority that they really do have the best fried clams. My mother is from New Jersey, and I live in New Mexico now, so there are no such thing as good fried clams here (or any
fried clams really), much to my dismay. Alice’s cat likes Uncas (not surprising, who doesn’t immediately love Uncas and Nathaniel), and I’m sure the guinea pig will also love him once she’s awake. And Alice very cleverly showed Uncas her beautiful aerial performing, so he’s pretty done falling on his face for her now, clearly (especially since she’s Spider-Woman). Alice is pretty happy he came back and kissed her after all, too. So is Uncas. Cora and Nathaniel may be going at a snail’s pace, but Uncas and Alice don’t have even close to the same kind of emotional issues where relationships are concerned, so they are both in a much better place to get this show on the road.<br />

The theme song for this chapter is “You Make Me Smile” by Blue October. I love this song for both couples, it has an achingly sweet, new relationship butterflies kind of air to it, and is applicable to both the gentle care Nathaniel shows Cora (and what looks like a light at the end of the tunnel for them), and all the new, electrifying feelings between Alice and Uncas. For Nathaniel and Cora, I didn’t have a lot of music for their scene except a little bit of “Quiet Mind” by Blue October, because they are starting to become a source of comfort and empathy for each other over the things they’ve been through, and Cora is starting to realize this even though it still scares her some. And of course the “Let’s Get it On” bit, because humor is always fun, and Cora needed to torture poor Nathaniel a little. I couldn’t resist having Alice use “Kiss From a Rose” for her demo, purely to bring in the Batman vs. Spider-Man angle with her and Uncas (but Alice and I agree that Batman Forever was SO BAD). I loved “A Kiss to Build a Dream On” by Louis Armstrong for the diner scene, and when Uncas leaves without kissing Alice the first time I was thinking of “You Better Go Now” by Billie Holiday. When they kissed at the end the song there was “Kiss Me Slowly” by Parachute, and “Kissed You (Goodnight)” by Gloriana, which was what inspired the ending scene in the first place. <br />

That’s about it. Thank you to everyone who is reading, PMing, reviewing, following, etc. I love hearing from you, even if it’s criticism – knowing is good. I will update more as I can, and now that I’ve started my class and know what’s in store, I expect to be able to generally update within two weeks unless school and life are just too crazy.
Wicked Game

Chapter Summary

Uncas and Alice are sailing along smoothly together. Meanwhile, an unexpected encounter occurs while Cora is at work at the ER, and a passionate kiss during a vulnerable moment forces her and Nathaniel to a major crossroads in their developing relationship.

Chapter Notes

Author's note included in chapter text at the end.

Chapter 5 – Wicked Game

“*The world was on fire and no one could save me but you
It's strange what desire will make foolish people do
I never dreamed that I'd meet somebody like you
And I never dreamed that I'd lose somebody like you

No, I don't want to fall in love
No, I don't want to fall in love
With you

What a wicked game you played to make me feel this way
What a wicked thing to do to let me dream of you
What a wicked thing to say you never felt this way
What a wicked thing to do to make me dream of you

And I don't want to fall in love
No, I don't want to fall in love
With you

The world was on fire and no one could save me but you
It's strange what desire will make foolish people do
I never dreamed that I'd love somebody like you
And I never dreamed that I'd lose somebody like you

No, I don't want to fall in love
No, I don't want to fall in love
With you
With you

Nobody loves no one…”

-Chris Isaak-
Uncas stood in front of the fridge in the kitchen of the cabin, smiling down at the screen of his phone as he typed a message. “Hey there. Just thinking about you. Make it to work ok?” He shut the fridge and walked toward the living room, almost running into Nathaniel on his way in.

“Hey, watch where you’re going, you’re gonna hit a wall staring at that thing!” Nathaniel dodged around him.

“Uh, sorry.” Uncas grinned as Alice’s reply popped up. “I did. Are we still on for lunch and a movie tomorrow before you go to work?” It had been almost two weeks since their first date, and they had spent quite a bit of their free time hanging out together… and always ending it with a goodbye like the first night. He was most definitely stuck on Alice Munro.

“Sure thing, I’ll see you around noon?”

“Can’t wait. Have a good night.”

“Copy that, dispatch.”

“Hey! Are you even listening to me?” Nathaniel asked, waving at Uncas to get his attention. “Who are you talking to, anyway? Oh, wait, you’re grinning like a fool, it must be Mary Jane again. ‘Help me find her! Use your cop ears!’” he mocked jokingly. “Where were your Amazing Spidey Senses then, huh?”

“Oh, shut up. You’re just mad because I was right all this time, and she turned out to be as beautiful and awesome as I always knew she was. I told you.”

“I’m just messing with you. I’m glad things are going well, she seems nice. You’ve certainly been seeing her every chance you get.”

Uncas sighed. “I think it’s love, bro. I mean, she’s Spider-Woman.”

Nathaniel rolled his eyes. “She’s definitely perfect for you. Maybe sometime she can wrap you up in her silky web. But if you start running around singing Nickelback songs, I’m gonna throat-punch you.” He laughed, and Uncas socked his shoulder.

“You wouldn’t laugh if you’d seen what she can do with that aerial stuff. It’s mind-blowing. You know Cora does it too, right?” He wiggled his eyebrows.

Nathaniel had stayed most of the morning when he’d spent the night at Cora’s house. Her being sick didn’t dismiss the need to clean the horses’ stalls, and the drink tank at the back of the meadow had been full of algae and badly needed a draining and scrubbing too, so he had offered to help her and her dad so she wouldn’t have to work so hard when she still didn’t feel at her best. When she’d showed him the inside of the red barn, her teal-blue silks and lyra had been hanging from the roof beams in the middle, and she had explained what they were for. As if he needed any more reason to think she was the most complex, desirable woman he’d ever met. She hadn’t done more than explain it, and to tell him Alice had taught her to do it when she was recovering, as a form of physical and emotional therapy. “It works pretty well, it relaxes and centers you. When I’ve had a really rough shift, or a stretch with a lot of bad dreams it’s easy to get lost in that, be uncomfortable in my own skin. Doing something that’s beautiful and fluid kind of helps me make my body back into itself and remember who I am without the bad stuff.” Just the way she talked about it was enough to tell him he had no business seeing her do that right now, not when he couldn’t – shouldn’t – act on the way it made him feel thinking about her like that.
“Uh… yeah, I did. I mean I haven’t seen her do it, of course, but I saw her stuff when I stayed over there.” He smiled and turned to the cabinet to get a cup.

“Yeah. Now who’s grinning like a fool? You’ve got it bad. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you all up in flames like you are every time she’s around you.” Uncas grinned. It was about damn time Nathaniel got hung up on the right kind of woman. Cora was nothing like Judith, who he had never really liked. She’d been too moody and too shallow. Uncas had always suspected she just liked the glamorous idea of being with a pilot, and her true colors had come blazing through after Nathaniel had been shot. She’d taken off with her secret ski-resort fly-boy when the reality of everything Nathaniel would be dealing with, both physically and emotionally, had sunken in. Cora had some issues, but Uncas liked her a lot; she was smart, compassionate, and she could match Nathaniel any day in the blunt smartass department. Her issues revolving around the loss of her friend and her combat trauma seemed to have his brother treading carefully with her, and he could tell he really liked her – and suspected she felt the same even if she shied away some. Maybe she’d come around soon. Uncas hoped so. He had a feeling she probably needed Nathaniel as much as he knew Nathaniel needed her, whether either of them would admit it or not.

Nathaniel’s phone went off ringing in his back pocket. “Hello? Hey, what’s going on? Wait, slow down…. He what? Jesus. Where did they take him? OK… OK, is he all right? OK. It’ll be all right. I’m coming right now, OK? See you soon.”

“Who was that? What the hell happened?” Uncas asked as Nathaniel hung up and immediately went for the keys to his Blazer.

“Alexandra Cameron. She was at work late for some meeting, so James had a ride home from lacrosse practice with another kid’s mom, and they were in a car accident. Everyone’s good, but James got hurt, lacerations and a broken arm that needs a rod. He’ll be fine, but she’s by herself there with Susan with no help and they’ll probably end up there overnight. They’re at Albany Medical Center, I have to go.”

“Shit. Hang on, I’ll follow you in the truck. Alice is working till eleven tonight and I can help Alex with Susan if she needs it so you can stay with her.” He grabbed his own keys and ran out the door with Nathaniel.

“All right, Mrs. Cameron, I just called Surgical Services to let them know James will be coming up as soon as we’re done down here,” Cora said as she came back through the glass door of the ER bay where her nine-year-old patient lay with his arm in a splint, looking somewhat battered and scraped, but resting easier after a dose of IV Fentanyl. “Dr. Hernandez, the orthopedic surgeon, will see you in pre-op for questions and she’ll go over everything before you sign the consent forms, but in the meantime if you have any questions I’ll answer whatever I can, or call her for you. James, how is your pain now, did the medicine I gave you help?”

“Yeah, I feel a little bit better now,” replied the sandy-haired boy, his brown eyes worried and wide as he looked at his mother and sister. “Do I really have to have surgery, mom?”

“Yeah, honey, to fix up your broken arm so it heals right,” replied the exhausted-looking woman from the chair beside the stretcher. Her dark blonde hair was escaping from its bun, and she still wore business casual attire from work – she had told Cora she was a public-school teacher. Her daughter Susan, who was a couple of years younger than James, sat in the chair beside her looking at a magazine, but watching everything Cora did carefully.

“In the meantime, I’m going to get that cut on your forehead stitched up. Mrs. Cameron, is there anything I can get you? A warm blanket? Do you need to notify anyone?”
“No, thank you so much, and please, call me Alexandra. I’ve called a close family friend who’s on the way, and James and Susan’s father passed away several years ago – so there isn’t anyone else to call.”

“Can I have a warm blanket?” Susan piped up. “Um. Please?” She added at her mother’s stern *mind your manners* look.

“Sure you can. I’ll be right back.” Cora left the room again to get a suture kit and procedure tray from the supply room, and a bottle of lidocaine with epinephrine from the Pyxis machine.

“Hey, Cora, how’s it going?” Cora looked up from the Pyxis and smiled at Ashley Bullock, one of the other ER and trauma nurses. She had started at AMC a few months ago after transferring from another hospital, and she and Cora had become friends. Ashley was tall and striking, of Mohawk descent with long black hair, coppery skin, and a beautiful, infectious smile, and her proficiency and easygoing, drama-free nature were things that Cora very much appreciated in a coworker.

“Oh, good, just getting ready to suture a head lac. You doing ok?”

“Yeah, we got a call-ahead from MedEvac, they’re bringing in a trauma patient from somewhere up north, some young guy who had a bad car accident. We’re just waiting for them to get here.”

“OK, I’m close to done in there, so I can help if you guys need an extra pair of hands. Just let me know.”

“I’ll probably take you up on that. And hey, if you’re not busy Saturday night, a few of us were going to meet up for drinks at Muldoon’s, you want to come?”

“Sure, that sounds good.” Cora smiled. She liked Ashley, she had no other plans, and she needed to get out more anyway, so why not? She grabbed a blanket out of the warmer and went back to James’ room.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re here!” Alexandra cried from inside. Cora stood outside the door, frozen. Nathaniel and Uncas were in the room, Mrs. Cameron throwing her arms around Nathaniel while Susan launched herself off the chair at Uncas. Her mouth dropped open and a completely irrational surge of jealousy shot through her at the sight of Nathaniel hugging the other woman back, saying something to her in a soft voice, and her murmuring in reply. *What is with you? Get a fucking grip, Munro.* Nathaniel let Alexandra go and went to James.

“Hi! What are you guys doing here?” She forced a smile as she breezed back in.

“Hey, Cora, I forgot you were working tonight!” Uncas said, holding Susan, who had her arms gleefully wrapped around his neck.

“Hi.” Nathaniel smiled at her from the bedside as she handed the warm blanket to Alexandra and set her supplies on the bedside table.

“Hi,” she replied, butterflies leaping to life in her stomach as she covertly looked him over. Today’s ridiculous t-shirt depicted a black cast-iron pot and tea kettle facing off angrily, the kettle saying, ‘*What did you just call me?’*

“Wait, you guys know each other?” Alexandra’s eyebrows shot up.

“Yeah, Cora moonlights with our team one shift a week at AirMedic,” Nathaniel answered.
“Oh, that’s so funny, what are the odds?” Alexandra looked at Cora and smiled. “Nathaniel and Uncas are old friends. Nathaniel and my late husband John were partners when Nathaniel was with Albany PD.”

Cora’s heart broke a little. Oh. OH. Oh, holy shit. This is John’s family. “Of course. Yes, he’s mentioned that before, I just didn’t make the connection.” Nathaniel had never mentioned John’s last name, and Cora wasn’t sure whether to feel better or worse knowing who these people were, but now she could understand why Alexandra and Nathaniel seemed so close. If she didn’t have anyone else to call, of course she would have called him. “All right, James, we’re ready to get that cut stitched up, OK?”

“Hey Susan, why don’t we go see if the coffee shop has any cookies?” Uncas said, to which Susan readily agreed. Alexandra mouthed thank you at him as he left the room with the little girl.

“Can my mom and Nathaniel stay here?” James asked, his voice a little shaky.

“Sure they can,” Cora replied, scrubbing her hands at the sink.

Nathaniel sat down with Alexandra as Cora dried her hands and started setting up the procedure tray on the table after she’d gloved up. He admired how patient and sweet she was with James, answering all his worried questions and explaining what she would be doing, and that it wouldn’t hurt except for a poke when she administered the local anesthetic. James took the whole thing like a champ, and once he was numb and realized he really couldn’t feel what she was doing, he relaxed. Nathaniel watched her as she irrigated and then sutured the cut near James’s hairline, her practiced, nimble fingers working quickly with the needle and hemostats, producing a row of five neat surgeon’s knots. He never really got to see her work up close because he was always flying, and she didn’t do this kind of thing as a flight nurse – most of her work in flight was centered around IV access, intubation and other life support measures, and in cases of injuries or trauma, controlling bleeding or stabilizing body parts.

“That’s it, you’re all done!” She smiled, gently cleaning around the sutures and applying a dressing.

“Really? Wow, that didn’t hurt at all!” James touched the dressing lightly.

“I’ve never seen a nurse stitch anyone up before,” Nathaniel said. “You’re better at it than some doctors I’ve seen.”

Cora laughed. “Well, thanks. Every Corpsman learns, and we did plenty of it both stateside and deployed. Not every civilian nurse does it, though. I can because I have the training and certification to, but even so, every state and facility is different.” She cleaned up the tray and supplies from the bedside table and sat down at the computer attached to the wall to chart. “Alexandra, James, I think we’re just about done here. Let me go see about getting you discharged from the ER so we can get you guys moved up to pre-op.” She left the room, Nathaniel unconsciously staring after her, admiring the flattering way her cargo scrub pants fit.

“I like her, Nathaniel.” He turned to see Alexandra smiling knowingly at him, the worry temporarily erased from her face.

“Huh? Oh, Cora? Yeah, she’s a fantastic nurse. Gets along great with Uncas, too. She’s good to fly with.”

“Pffffttttt. That’s not what I meant when I said I like her. Don’t play dumb with me, I’ve known you too long. I saw how you looked at her.”
Nathaniel cleared his throat. “Well… we’ll see. She’s been through a lot, when she was deployed. There’s stuff to work out. But yeah, she’s… she’s something else.”

“I’ll say. You never looked at Judith like that. She didn’t deserve it anyway.”

“Maybe not.”

“Well… don’t let her get away. Life is short, I know that too well.”

“I’m not planning to, not if I can help it.”

Uncas sent him a text letting him know that he was with Susan in the waiting area and to let him know when they went upstairs. While Nathaniel kept James busy talking to him, a woman in scrubs with short, spiky dark red hair and purple reading glasses came into the room.

“Hi there, I’m Kate, the ER charge nurse tonight. I just wanted to let you all know that Cora is going to be with another patient, so I’ll be helping you out until it’s time to head to pre-op.”

Alexandra talked to Kate for a few minutes. Nathaniel was mildly disappointed that Cora had been pulled away, but it was the nature of her job. When he left the room to go find a bathroom a few minutes later, he saw her with a doctor and a tall black-haired, dark-skinned nurse, gownned and coming in with a serious-looking trauma case brought by the AirMedic crew Brian was on tonight. Brian and Matt, another recently hired nurse, were both with the stretcher, Brian straddled over the patient doing chest compressions while Matt ventilated with a bag and mask. The other nurse took over bagging while Matt gave them report, Cora catching Nathaniel’s gaze for half a second before they headed into a trauma room where the rest of the team waited to take over so the AirMedic crew could be relieved.

A while later, an ER tech showed up to transport James up to pre-op after he had been discharged. Alexandra went with them while Nathaniel headed out to the waiting area to get Uncas and Susan. On his way to the double doors, he saw Kate the charge nurse talking quietly with Cora and the other nurse she’d been running with earlier, all of them looking somber and tired. He couldn’t help overhearing bits of the conversation, something about family being on their way and the need to notify them, and Kate telling both Cora and the other girl to take a break for a little while. His heart sank, knowing the trauma patient must not have made it. That was always the shittiest part of the job – as a cop, as a Medevac crew, as a nurse or paramedic or firefighter, nobody ever wanted to see that happen, or to have to be the one to tell a family their loved one couldn’t be saved. Out in the waiting area, he found Uncas sitting with Susan asleep on his lap, watching whatever mindless crap was on the wall-mounted TV.

“Hey, they’re on their way up to surgery now, so we can go be bored in that waiting room with Alex once he goes back to the OR.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Uncas stood up with Susan in his arms and they headed toward the elevators. Cora came out of the double doors and saw them.

“Hey, guys. Finally on your way up to surgery?” Her pasted-on “nurse face” smile might fool most people, but it didn’t fool Nathaniel or Uncas – they both knew better. She looked a little pale, and her eyes had that hard, flinty look she got when she was trying to stuff her feelings into a box, the way she’d been trained to do as a Corpsman and as a nurse.

“Yeah,” Nathaniel replied. “You taking a break?”

“Yeah, it’s my lunch, and I’ve earned it tonight. I just need to go decompress a little after that
trauma case.” She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. Uncas looked at Nathaniel and jerked his chin at Cora, then nonverbally indicated that he would take Susan upstairs. Nathaniel gave him a brief nod as he got into the elevator with the sleeping little girl.

“You want some company, or would you rather be alone?” He asked quietly.

“I don’t mind, but what about James?”

“We’ve got nothing to do but wait right now. Alex is back in pre-op with him, and we aren’t allowed back there since we’re not family. I’ve got some time if you need an ear.” He touched her arm. She nodded and he went with her up the elevator to the top floor, where she used her access badge to get out onto the roof where the helipad was located. They walked to the edge of the roof, and she leaned her elbows on the low wall that surrounded it, Nathaniel following suit beside her, their elbows touching. “Want to talk about it?” He glanced over at her, her eyes still hard and glittering in the moonlight.

Cora could feel herself beginning to tremble, her body losing the surge of adrenaline that had carried her through the code in the trauma room, and had made her able to push away the faces of the scores of other young guys in the desert, ones like that kid who’d just died, that she never forgot. “It never gets easier, you know? No matter how many times I do this. Here, Afghanistan, wherever. That kid was nineteen years old, and now his parents are driving down here so they can be informed and claim his body, and they still don’t know what they’re going to hear when they arrive. I hate losing them. I hate it every damn time.” Her breath hitched painfully. “You’d think I’d be used to it by now, tough combat medic and all.” She laughed wryly as a tear escaped and coursed down her cheek, and she swiped it away.

“Hey.” Nathaniel turned to her and drew her gently into his arms. She tensed for a moment, unable to breathe, caught completely off guard by the gesture. He sighed softly. “Having those feelings just means you’re still human, Cora. Your compassion makes you the kind of nurse you are, the kind of person you are, and you… you are extraordinary. There’s nothing wrong with letting the losses hit you like that.” He was whispering against her hair, his arms wrapped around her and holding her close, and it felt so, so damn good just to let him hold her, just for a moment. She felt defeated and sad from the loss of the young patient, but it was so much more than that, too. It was five years of guilt and the self-imposed loneliness that came with her fear of loving someone she could lose. It was weeks and weeks of exhausting herself with denial and apprehension, trying to pretend she didn’t feel utterly broadsided by Nathaniel. His tenderness now overwhelmed her, like it always did, and she was losing all her resolve to fight it anymore. She couldn’t even remember the last time someone had held her like this, if ever. Maybe Duncan, but she’d never felt with Duncan what Nathaniel made her feel. She’d been trying so hard to avoid letting anything like this happen with him, but now that it was happening, she wanted it, needed it so much that it made her ache deep in her chest with the force of letting herself admit it. All the fight went out of her with a sob. Still trembling, she wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek against his shoulder, letting the flood of tears come. His arms tightened around her, one hand stroking her back while the other pressed her against the solid warmth and strength of him.

When her tears subsided on a shaky sigh, Cora found that she did not want him to let her go. Slowly, she became more and more aware of the comfort of his faintly woody scent, and the heat of his skin beneath his shirt where her palms lay on his back. Of how he felt pressed so close to her, how she fit against all the hard, taut lines of him, and the feel of his hand gliding up and down her back and his chin resting on her hair, her head tucked against his chest. Her pulse kicked up wildly, and she wondered if he could feel it with her so close to him, if he could feel her begin to tremble again, not with emotion this time, but with the dangerous, electrifying thing stirring to life inside her. He must, because she could feel the pounding rhythm of his heart too, and the rise and fall of his
chest as he breathed. Slowly, he pulled back enough to look down at her, his hands resting on her sides. Her arms slid from around his waist, her hands shaking as they grazed haltingly over his forearms. He drew a sharp breath at her touch, and when she met his gaze, his eyes smoldered in the dark with a primal heat that made her entire body thrum with heady anticipation. Her lips parted, her breath quickening, and as she blinked slowly up at him she could not think of one single reason why any of this had ever seemed like a bad idea. His hands moved up her arms and came to rest on her jaw, thumbs gently wiping away the wet tracks of her tears.

The air between them was charged with an almost palpable tension as Nathaniel leaned closer. Time seemed to stop for a long, maddening moment before his head dipped down, his lips claiming hers at last. He was tentative at first, as if fearful of rejection, but when she made no protest he deepened the kiss, fierce and urgent in comparison to the gentleness of the buildup. Cora opened her mouth to him with a sigh, meeting the tantalizing stroke of his tongue with hers, liquid fire blazing through her from her chest to the very core of her as her arms twined around him, her hands smoothing over his shoulders and back. He broke away briefly to gaze down at her, his hands framing her face and stroking her hairline. His breathing was as ragged as hers, and she knew the same raw, naked, vulnerable hunger burning in his eyes must surely be evident in hers too, because there was no longer any denying that she felt it. Her fingertips touched his jaw, drawing him back to her, their lips meeting once, twice more, his asking for permission, hers granting it. His hand curved around the nape of her neck as he fully took her mouth again, fingers weaving into her loosely braided hair. There was no room for common sense, no place for conscious thought; his kiss stole every sensibility from her, and she willingly gave herself over to the madness of it, weak all over and unable to stop it even if she had wanted to. But she didn’t want to, God help her. She had never in her life felt like this, nothing and no one had ever set her on fire the way Nathaniel did. All she wanted now was just to feel this, to feel him. She buried her face against his neck with a rough, sobbing breath, his arms holding her tight against him. Her lips pressed against his skin beneath his stubble-roughened jaw, hands plunging into the soft thickness of his hair, holding him close to her while her mouth traveled over his face, kissing his cheeks, his brow, his nose, his chin, desperate for the contact to appease the foreign wildness coursing through her.

Nathaniel wrapped his arms tighter around Cora as she kissed his face, pulling her flush with him and marveling at the sweetness of finally holding her like this. She gazed at him, her hands caressing his hair, her dark eyes shining bright in the moonlight with the wonder of discovery and the heat of her passion. Her breath came in shallow gasps through her parted lips, which were every bit as soft as he had imagined they would be when he had thought about kissing her before. If touching her innocently had been maddening then, kissing her now was absolutely harrowing. Her surrender to this moment, the fervent caress of her mouth on his skin, filled his body with the breathless yet enthralling fear of what was happening here, and the desperate hope that this was not too soon, not a mistake, because God, he wanted it, had wanted it for so long now. With a low groan, he slanted his mouth over hers again, hopelessly undone by those lush lips, the sensual thrust of her tongue against his, and the warm, slender curves of her body melting into him. He had never wanted anyone the way he wanted Cora, with this reckless burning that made him want to abandon everything just to lose himself in her, just to keep her with him like this for as long as he could. He broke their kiss to move elsewhere, and she protested with a soft whimper and a nip of his lower lip that sent a sharp jolt of arousal through him. His mouth traced along the underside of her jaw, nuzzling just beneath her ear and breathing in the intoxicating scent of her skin there, her subtle lavender mixed with a hint of the hospital’s soap on the hand that was buried in his hair.

All sense of time was lost to Cora, all sense of anything but Nathaniel, and the delicious pulse of desire that bloomed with each feathery touch of his lips as he kissed the sensitive spot behind her ear, working his way slowly down the side of her neck. The whine and blip of an approaching ambulance siren below abruptly jarred her brain back to the present, and an acute wave of panic
came crashing down on her, sweeping away the haze of passion clouding her sensibility. A painful knot of doubt rose into her throat as the reality of what she was doing set in. She was at work, she was supposed to be on her lunch break, and here she was up on the roof making out with her crew pilot like a sneaky, irresponsible teenager. A coworker, for God’s sake, who she had to be on shift with the following night. While his brother was downstairs waiting with their friend’s child. Jesus Christ, what the hell am I doing? This is insane. This is unacceptable. This is professional misconduct. She shook her head and pushed at Nathaniel. He stopped and retreated, looking confused and worried as a flush of shame rose on her cheeks and hot tears sprang to her eyes.

“I’m… I can’t… I’m sorry, I just can’t, this isn’t… I’m so sorry. I have to go,” she whispered, her voice breaking. She turned and ran back to the access door, disappearing through it, and he could hear her hurried footsteps echoing in the concrete stairwell. He stared after her, wondering what had happened to make her shy away so suddenly, and his heart sinking with the realization that things had very likely just gotten royally screwed up between them.

“What the hell happened to you? You’ve been crying, I can tell. Sit your ass down and talk to me.” Alice yanked out a chair in Ed’s kitchen, and Cora sat down with a sigh. She had wanted to go to Alice’s after getting off work this morning, but Alice was doing laundry at their father’s because she had a lunch date with Uncas, so she had come here instead.

“Where’s Pop? I don’t think I want him to hear this.”

“He’s in the garage messing with the lawn mower or something. Why do you care if he hears anyway?”

Cora sighed shakily. “Because he already threatened to kill Nathaniel once just for standing in my kitchen. This time he might actually do it.”

“Wait. Hold on. What does your awful experience at the hospital last night have to do with him? You won’t see him till you go to work at AirMedic tonight.”

“Uh, well… let me just tell you what happened, because you’ll probably hear some of it from Uncas later anyway.” Cora launched into the story of how Nathaniel and Uncas had ended up at the hospital, and what had happened on the roof. By the end of it she was crying again, like she had been the whole way here from work.

“Shit, Cora. Half of me wants to high five you and the other half wants to smack you. You just left him up there?”

“I didn’t know what to do, Alice! I still don’t. I asked Jonathan to switch shifts with me, I can’t see him and deal with this at work tonight, it’s unprofessional to bring personal stuff there. I need some time. This is exactly what I was trying to avoid.” She plunked her head down on her arms miserably.

“Well, did you at least enjoy it while it was happening? Because if he kisses like his brother does…” Alice grinned sappily.

“God, yes,” Cora moaned. “I never should have thought I could be friends with him and not have this happen. Now everything is complicated.”

“No, it’s not. Look, I hate to sound like a bitch, but I just don’t know that I feel all that sorry for you. I’m not really even sure what you’re upset about. Here’s this ridiculously attentive, sweet,
sexy guy, who does shit like bring you soup when you’re sick and clean disgusting algae out of your horse trough, and you’re fucking freaking out and running away because you finally made out with him. Do you know how fucking ridiculous that sounds to me right now, Cora?"

“I know it’s dumb, but it was a knee-jerk reaction, okay? I’ve had issues with this stuff for years, I can’t change overnight.” Cora sniffled and wiped her nose on a paper napkin from the table.

“What’s going on in here, girls? Cora! Why the hell are you crying?” Ed came in from the garage and sat down next to Cora at the table. “What’s wrong, did something bad happen at work?”

“Cora’s having boy trouble,” Alice told him, getting up to go deal with her laundry.

“What do you mean? Is it that pilot? What did he do to you? I’ll kill him.”

Cora dropped her head back onto her arms and groaned. “Pop, he didn’t do anything. Well, he did, but… so did I, and it wasn’t anything bad, per se… goddammit, this is a mess. I’m a mess,” she sobbed.

Ed got up and poured Cora a cup of coffee, then set it down in front of her and sat down. “All right, I think you’d better tell me what’s going on here, since you’re crying in my kitchen about it. Out with it.”

Cora blew her nose on the napkin, and began to tell Ed everything that had been going on since she had met Nathaniel, and about her reluctance not only to get involved with a coworker, but her guilt about Duncan and her fear of getting attached to someone she could lose. He listened to what she was saying, nodding here and there, and when she finished, he sat for a minute, thinking.

“I told you, Pop, it’s a mess. And now it’s even worse after last night.”

“Do I want to know?” Ed cringed. “I don’t want to have to kill the man, Cora, I actually kind of liked him.”

“He kissed me.” Cora covered her face with her hands.

“Well, did you want him to?”

“What kind of question is that, Pop?!”

“A perfectly legitimate one, now answer it!”

“Fine. Yes, I did. A lot, actually. Except then I freaked out and ran off, and I was supposed to work with him tonight, and I haven’t slept, and I don’t know what to do or how to deal with this now, because I’m just so tired.”

“Hmmmm. Well, I see where this seems a bit messy with the work situation. But at this point, it is what it is. You’re going to have to face it and quit acting like you’re sneaking around with a subordinate, because the civilian code of conduct is a lot different. You’re not going to be disciplined for smooching a civilian pilot, and you’re both grown-ass adults.”

“That’s what I keep telling her.” Alice interjected, sitting back down at the table with her laundry basket of folded clothes. “She’s freaking out over nothing. Well, not nothing, I mean I get it, Cora, I do, but we’ve had this conversation already. He likes you, and you like him, and if being with him would make you happy, you can work the rest of it out. You can’t keep putting a bag over it, pretending there’s nothing going on between you when there clearly is.” She reached over and hugged Cora. “I have to go, Uncas is picking me up at noon and I need to get ready. Just… it’s
going to be fine, ok? Get some sleep, take this next shift off to get your head space clear, and you’ll figure it out. I love you, Betty.” She kissed Cora’s cheek.

“I love you too, Al.” Cora smiled at the use of the old nickname – when they were children, their mother had loved Paul Simon, and the two of them had always liked to sing along to ‘You Can Call Me Al’. For most of their lives they had called each other Betty and Al in reference to the song.

“You sister’s right, Cora,” Ed said when Alice had left. “As for the rest… sweetheart, I know you feel guilty about Duncan, but there’s no fault in knowing he wasn’t the right man for you. I know it hurt to lose your best friend, it hurt us all to lose him. But you can’t go on like this forever. You’re making yourself miserable trying to deny feelings that you should be happy to have.”

“I know, Pop, I just… I guess I’ve never really had to come to terms with my relationship issues all this time. I didn’t even realize I had them until recently. I was so busy recovering from everything else, and getting my life back and starting a new career outside the Navy when I never expected to have to, so dating wasn’t even on my radar. Now that it’s sitting in front of me, I’m flipping out. I don’t even know if I know how to be in a relationship at this point.”

Ed laughed. “That part will likely take some doing, but it’ll work itself out. In the meantime, you’ve got to get there to begin with. Stow your insecurity and take the leap.”

“What about you? You lost Mom, and you don’t date either. It’s not because you’re scared to love someone else?”

“For a long time, it was. It took time to get past that. Losing your mother left me with a hole too big to fill for a lot of years, and I’m so glad I had you girls to keep me from sinking. But now... I think anything is worth the risk for the right person. If I could go back, knowing I’d lose your mother, I’d still love her again. I wouldn’t trade all those years with her or you girls for anything, even to lose the hurt. And if I met a woman who made me feel like that again now, I’d risk it again, and I think your mother would want that for me. I just haven’t met her. Duncan wasn’t it for you, but that doesn’t mean you can’t have the right man when he does come along. Maybe you’re scared of this because it’s the first time you’ve thought someone could be that man?”

Cora nodded, her eyes filling with tears again. “He terrifies me. I’ve never felt this way before. I just don’t know what to do with him, and part of me is really afraid I’m too screwed up to be any good for him. I don’t want to drag him through the mud.”

“If you’re really worried about that, maybe you should think about seeing a counselor. You’ll have to figure all that out one way or another, Cora, whether it’s with this man or any other, and there’s no shame in needing some help. We’ve all got our demons, and it sounds like Nathaniel’s not a stranger to that himself. But for what it’s worth, he seems like a good man, and he didn’t get scared off when I threatened to kill him, so I don’t think you’re going to scare him off too easily either.”

“Well, there is that.” Cora smiled wanly. “I’ll think about the counselor if I feel like I can’t get my shit straight. Listen, I better go too. I’m exhausted, and I need to get some sleep so I can make some sense out of this.” She stood up and picked up her purse and keys. At the door, she hugged her father. “Thanks for your help, Pop. I love you.”

Ed hugged her back tight. “I love you, too. It’ll be alright, girl. It’ll be alright.”

“Nathaniel, nkwis, what in the world is wrong with you today?” Yvette asked across the breakfast table on Saturday morning. “You’re brooding, and you’re not eating. You love my fritatta.”
“Your mother’s right. You look like you got dumped the night before prom.” Sidney took a sip of his coffee. “Are you gonna tell us what’s going on, or what?”

“He’s got runaway girl issues,” Uncas said.

“Girl? What girl? There’s a girl?” Yvette’s eyebrows shot upward. “Why didn’t you tell us you were seeing someone?”

Nathaniel shot Uncas a thanks a lot glare. “I’m not seeing her, Mom. Not… technically. I don’t really know what it is. I want to, but it’s complicated.”

“How so?” Sidney asked.

Nathaniel sighed and explained to his parents about Cora, his feelings, and the issues she was facing because of her history with Duncan and the helicopter crash.

“Oh… that is a little complicated. What a shame she had to go through all that. I’m sure there’s lasting damage, those things will always be a part of her, even if they don’t always live in the front of her mind. She’s just scared for things to change from what she knows, poor thing.” Yvette shook her head sadly.

“I know she is. I was trying to be careful, take things slow, and it was working – at least, I thought it was.” Nathaniel shrugged, taking a bite of his breakfast.

“So this is that pretty girl you were sitting with at the folk festival? She seemed so nice. Just like that sister of hers who’s been occupying so much of your brother’s time these days.” Yvette winked at Uncas.

“She is nice, I’ve known her for a while,” Uncas said. “She’s just got some issues from her friend dying and all that. Alice said she’s also got some personal rule about not dating coworkers. I mean, she was a Naval officer, and their dad was a career Marine, so her standards are kind of different.”

“Well, I can understand that part,” Sidney said. “The department has similar rules. But if there’s no policy at AirMedic, I’m not sure what the issue would be.”

“I don’t know, Dad. We don’t have a policy, but she’s had that stuff ingrained her whole life, it’s kind of hard to turn it off. That’s not the biggest issue anyway. The issue right now is that I screwed up big time, because I’m pretty sure things went a little further than she was ready for just yet. I saw her at the hospital the other night, she took care of James, and there was… uh, an incident later on.”

“At the police station, Dad…”

“An incident?” Sidney raised a brow. “Like an argument?”

“Yeah, more like a face-battle, Dad,” Uncas snickered.

Yvette swatted his shoulder and chuckled. “Kchèptunhe. Leave your brother alone. So what happened, Nathaniel?”

“I don’t really know. She was upset about a bad trauma case, I was trying to help, and things got… carried away. Then she just took off on me, said she had to go. I mean she was at work, and I guess kissing her on the job wasn’t the best idea in retrospect, but it just happened, you know? So I left her alone, and I was thinking maybe we could talk about it at work before shift started, or find some time once we were off the clock. Then I got there Thursday night and found out she switched shifts with Jonathan, and I sent her a text, but she didn’t say anything back except that she was all
right. I didn’t see her before I left work last night, so she must have come in late on purpose, and now she’s working till seven tonight, so I don’t want to bug her. She obviously doesn’t want to talk to me anyway.”

Sidney sighed. “She’ll come around. If she’s that gun-shy, just give her some space. You’ve got a few things to work out here. My father always used to say ‘Son, women are a breed apart, and they make no sense.’ But that’s not really true. You just have to think about what makes her tick. You’ve done right by her to be patient and not push her, but this was bound to come to a crossroads sooner or later. Everything does.”

“It’s true. Every woman’s heart comes with different instructions. She just has to find someone who pays enough attention to see how they are written in everything she does, someone who cares enough to read them.” Yvette smiled gently at Sidney and squeezed his hand beside hers. “You’ve been through a lot too, Nathaniel, and you’ve come a long way from where you started. You know at least a little about where she’s coming from. If she’s the right girl for you, she’s worth your effort.”

“She is, Mom. She’s… I’ve never felt this way, not even close. I’ve never been so glad Judith did me the favor of running off.”

“Much like her mind-blowing sister,” Uncas smiled dreamily. “Look, just give her a couple of days to simmer down, and then try to talk to her. She’s not going to disappear forever, she’s a rational person. I know I give you shit about it, but all joking aside, I really do like Cora, and Alice likes you. We both kind of enjoy seeing you two happy. You’re good for each other, you know? You fit.”

“Thanks.” Nathaniel sighed and stood up to take dishes to the sink. “Are you hanging out with Alice again tonight?”

“No, she took an extra swing shift today to help a coworker out whose kid is sick, so she’ll be working till later on. If you’re up for it, Brian sent me a text earlier about hitting Muldoon’s after work tonight – we could go hang out, shoot a little pool or something. Get your mind off this for a bit, anyway.”

“Sure, that sounds good. We haven’t seen much of Brian anyway, since he went back to his regular schedule.” He closed the dishwasher and picked up his keys. “All right, I’m out. I have errands to run. I’ll see you later, Uncas. Mom, Dad, thanks for breakfast and wisdom.” He kissed Yvette’s cheek and hugged Sidney.

Driving back along I-90 East, he turned up the radio, the song seeming to come straight out of his mind as he thought about Cora.

“Dark moon, levy road, weighed down in broken souls
Black water on both sides, nowhere to turn around
Cruel words, bad joke
Tread water till you can’t float
Gotta know that she’s the one
And how deep this river runs…
Red lips, blue heart, on the shore and torn apart

Can’t see beyond the light, and that’s not very far

Swam out against the tide

Inbetween the truth and lies

Gonna see where this love comes from

And how deep this river runs…

Old fears won’t leave, staring back at you and me

Let go and hold on, too late and too far gone

Out here without a boat

How was I supposed to know

I’ll tell you when it’s done

How deep this river runs…”

He wanted her, of that there was no doubt. Since the first time he’d met her, she had gotten under his skin, and he couldn’t get her out of his mind no matter how hard he had tried in the beginning. Now he didn’t want her gone, he just wanted to make this right again, because she ran deeper into his blood every time he saw her, and now that he’d kissed her, there was no going back and no denying it. So he’d give her time if that was what she needed, and hopefully he could get her down from her tree without blowing it completely.

Author’s Note:

Nkwis: “My son” (Delaware/Lenape)

Kchèptunhe: “He jokes/he talks silly” (Delaware/Lenape)

Well, even if things didn’t quite turn out rosy in this chapter for Nathaniel and Cora, at least Uncas and Alice are functioning well, right? This chapter has heavy Nathaniel/Cora focus, because things really needed to move forward with them. Cora is dragging out the resistance, and at this point I feel pretty bad for Nathaniel. He’s totally besotted with her, and she is with him too, but she’s making it so much harder than it needs to be. Hopefully not for long! I kept thinking about the kiss scene in the film on top of the bastion at Fort William Henry, and how that might translate into a modern setting, so voila, hospital roof. Makes sense. Cora would have roof access since she’s on the trauma team and they meet MedEvac cases coming in, and it stands to reason that she’d choose a relatively quiet, unpopulated place to decompress after losing a patient. I was going to have that whole scene originate differently, but the logistics of it were weird, and when I came up with the idea of the Camerons being involved I liked it a lot better the way it played out. Nathaniel gets to see Cora being awesome with people he cares about, she gets to meet some people that are important to
I had to laugh at the whole bit between the Camerons and Cora’s disastrous trauma case, because to me it just smacks of a dramariffic television show. As a real life nurse myself, that makes me twitch a little, but hell, this is fiction and it’s a romantic drama, and all that stuff had to happen to get the scene set right. And really, sometimes stuff in the ER at a major metropolitan hospital (and level 1 trauma center) is just that crazy, so it’s not that over-the-top. Plus, Brian was pretty cool in that part, right? Yay Brian! As for Cora stitching James Cameron up, this is not a common occurrence, but it is a possible one. Scope of practice laws for Registered Nurses are different in every state, because each state has its own Board of Nursing. In about 24% of U.S. states, suturing can legally fall under the scope of practice for an RN, but only if the laceration is simple and does not involve blood vessels or muscle/tendon/ligament tissue, and the nurse must have the training and certification required to perform the skill. Some individual hospitals within those states may allow this where others do not. I could not figure out if New York was one of those states where it’s possible, and for the purposes of fiction it didn’t really matter much, so here we just assume Cora is able to suture. As a Navy Corpsman she definitely would have done it, as even Corpsmen who aren’t nurses do sutures. The federal government has a whole different set of rules for scope of practice when it comes to military medics and nursing.

Cora is a fabulous nurse and she does some awesome things besides nursing, so it’s nice to bring some of that to the forefront in this chapter, because when it comes to romance and relationships, she’s kind of a hot mess so far. She’s good in pretty much every other aspect of her life, but her feelings for Nathaniel are messing with ideologies and standards she has lived with for most of her life about professional behavior, and emotionally she’s dealing with something major that she hasn’t had to face up to until she met him. She’s really having to learn to step outside her comfort zone, and it’s scary for her. A little bit about that – for a person who is used to military rules and regulations like Cora, this is hard. Having traumatic experiences behind it and the resulting Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder makes it even harder. With PTSD she is more alert, more anxious, and as a result anything that happens to disrupt the “normal” she has become used to, or poses a big change, is really going to send her spinning. This isn’t the case with every person who has PTSD, but it happens a lot. That being said, she’s not out of line in the way she’s reacting to this situation. No matter how bad she wants it, it’s still going to scare the bejeezus out of her at first, and Nathaniel does understand this. Alice understands too, but she’s also losing her patience a little. She’s moving ahead with her life, as she should, and she really wants Cora to be able to do the same (Helloooo, epic double dates??!). The heart to hearts with the family members were nice to write, it’s always wonderful when families are functional and have good relationships, and parents and siblings can give sage, valuable insight and advice. Sidney and Yvette are lovely and supportive, and it’s especially good to have Ed Munro in that role, because it’s a stark difference from the difficulty he and Cora had in the film (though he did threaten to hang Nathaniel at first back in chapter 4).

This chapter’s theme song is “Wicked Game” by Chris Isaak, for quite obvious reasons, and because the line “The world was on fire and no one could save me but you” is just way too apropos to pass up use of that song. “I’m Yours” by Jason Mraz is kind of a running theme song for Alice and Uncas. When Cora leaves Nathaniel standing on the roof and they’re both individually having their angst about it, I hear “Come Around” by Rhett Miller. Nathaniel gets a lot of Joe Bonamassa’s music too – I can’t help it, Joe is amazing, and his stuff is so fitting for Nathaniel in this story. The Joe song I always hear in my head for him regarding Cora is “Oh, Beautiful!” because it’s the way he feels about her when he looks at her: “Oh, beautiful, if you were mine/I would write you letters and pour you sweet wine/Oh, beautiful, why you so blue?/If you could only see the way I see you.” I liked “How Deep This River Runs” for that last bit, too, because it illustrates the situation well.

That’s all for this chapter, Let’s see what chapter 6 brings. Hopefully I can update within a week, so keep checking back. As always, thank you for reading and reviewing, I hope you continue
to enjoy the story as it unfolds.
Fire Meet Gasoline

Chapter Summary

Nathaniel and Cora's relationship issues come to a head and must be dealt with. Meanwhile, Uncas comforts Alice after a difficult shift and their relationship takes a new turn as well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 6 – Fire Meet Gasoline

It's dangerous to fall in love, but I
Wanna burn with you tonight
Hurt me
There's two of us, we're bristling with desire
The pleasure's pain and fire
Burn me

So come on, I'll take you on, take you on, I
Ache for love, ache for us, why
Don't you come, don't you come a little closer
So come on now, strike the match, strike the match now
We're a perfect match, perfect somehow
We were meant for one another, come a little closer

Flame you came to me, fire meet gasoline
Fire meet gasoline, I'm burning alive
I can barely breathe when you're here loving me
Fire meet gasoline, fire meet gasoline

I got all I need when you came after me
Fire meet gasoline, I'm burning alive
And I can barely breathe when you're here loving me
Fire meet gasoline, burn with me tonight

And we will fly
Like smoke darkening the sky
I'm Eve, I wanna try
Take a bite

So come on now, strike the match, strike the match now
We're a perfect match, perfect somehow
We were meant for one another, come a little closer
Flame you came to me, fire meet gasoline
Fire meet gasoline, I'm burning alive
I can barely breathe when you're here loving me
Fire meet gasoline, fire meet gasoline

I got all I need when you came after me
Fire meet gasoline, I'm burning alive
And I can barely breathe when you're here loving me
Fire meet gasoline, burn with me tonight

But it's a bad bet, certain death
But I want what I want and I gotta get it
When the fire dies, darkened skies
Hot ash, dead match, only smoke is left

Flame you came to me, fire meet gasoline
Fire meet gasoline, I'm burning alive
I can barely breathe when you're here loving me
Fire meet gasoline, fire meet gasoline

I got all I need when you came after me
Fire meet gasoline, I'm burning alive
And I can barely breathe when you're here loving me
Fire meet gasoline, burn with me tonight, yeah…”

-Gregory Kurstin, Sam Dixon, Sia Furier-

““It’s been great working with you again, Cora.” Brian smiled at her as they left the helicopter after returning from a call near the end of shift on Saturday. “Jonathan’s cool and everything, but sometimes a little change-up is nice, you know?”

Cora smiled back as they walked into the building. “Thanks. It’s nice to know I can work well with more than one team, too.”

They walked into the building, and their crew pilot Jack Winthrop looked up from pouring a cup of coffee. “Hey, Brian, did you still want to hit Muldoon’s after work?”

“Hell, yeah, I’m there. I still owe you an ass-kicking at pool from last time,” Brian laughed. “Hey Cora, you want to come with? I mean, if you don’t have other plans or just want to head home or whatever.”

“Actually, it’s funny you should ask, because I was already going. I had plans from earlier this week with some of the staff from the ER.” She’d decided to keep her plans with Ashley tonight despite everything that had happened this week. She really needed to talk to Nathaniel, but it could wait till tomorrow when she hadn’t been at work for twenty-four hours and had gotten some rest. Tonight, she just wanted to go do something social and have fun for once, instead of going home to another night of disturbed sleep over the situation. Getting dressed up nice and going out with friends would be good for her, and would keep her mind off Nathaniel for now.

“Awesome! Uh, might one of those staff members happen to be that nurse from Wednesday? The one we saw again last night?”
“Ashley? Yeah, she’s the one who invited me, why?”

Brian smiled a little shyly. “She’s, um… really pretty. And nice. But I’m betting that also means she has a boyfriend or a husband, right?”

“Actually, she doesn’t. She moved back here a few months ago after a breakup to be near her family again, and she’s not seeing anyone that I’ve heard about. I’m sure you’ll get a chance to talk to her tonight. She’s really cool, you guys would probably get along great. We can all head over together when we leave here, and I’ll introduce you two when she gets there.”

“Sounds like a plan to me! Now I’ll definitely have to kick Jack’s ass at pool.” He nudged the pilot with his elbow.

“Laugh it up, smartass,” Jack grinned, his blue eyes twinkling. “We’ll just see about that. Although if I’m being a good wing-man, I might have to let you win.”

Cora rolled her eyes in amusement and walked back to the locker room to take a quick shower and change out of her uniform. *They’re as bad as Nathaniel and Uncas*, she thought. This musing made her sigh. She liked Jack and Brian, but she had gotten rather used to working with Nathaniel and Uncas now, and it wasn’t the same without them. She still didn’t quite know what to do about Nathaniel, though. Could they be romantically involved and still work together? This was all brand new territory – the work issues, the feelings, all of it – and it still scared her. She had felt better after sleeping on and off most of the day on Thursday, and while switching shifts with Jonathan and not talking to Nathaniel at all had felt a little underhanded, at the same time she had really needed to take the time and space to think about how to handle what had happened between them on the hospital roof. Her father and Alice were both right, there was absolutely no way in hell she could keep trying to pretend there was nothing happening with him. Not after that kiss. Not after the way she couldn’t stop thinking about how it had felt, the way her pulse raced at the mere memory of how it had rocked her world when she had just stopped being afraid for a minute. Much like the night he’d come over when she was sick, and she had simply let herself enjoy his company and his kindness without worrying about what it meant. This thing between them wasn’t going to go away, and at this point she didn’t think she wanted it to, so there wasn’t much left to do except try to figure out what they were going to do about it. What to say to him after the last few days not speaking to him at all was another story. She’d have to face that beast head-on tomorrow.

“You’re off your game tonight, bro,” Uncas said over the strain of blues guitar from the jukebox, as Nathaniel failed to sink yet another ball. He chalked his cue and studied the table. “Still stewing about Cora?”

“I guess. Sorry I’m not much fun.” He leaned on his cue and reached for his glass of water. “So is Alice coming after she gets off, or what?”

“I think so, and Brian and Jack should be here any time too. I’ll hear from her soon. Maybe she knows something, you can ask her when she gets here.”

“I don’t know, maybe. I don’t want to drag her into this, though. It’s not right. This is between me and Cora. She’s off work now, I’ll try to call her tomorrow.” He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. He hated not knowing what was going on with her, and he’d stopped himself from texting her again at least a dozen times since Thursday. She’d likely gone home after work Thursday morning to sleep, and then he’d had to be at work from Thursday evening to Friday evening, so he had only sent her the one message on Thursday before work, just to see if she was all right. She had
responded with only a quick “Yes”. He’d been all right with that, expecting to see her at work soon, but then he’d arrived only to find Jonathan there instead, and that had stung. They’d had a busy shift after that, and with her on the one immediately following he didn’t think she’d respond well to him bothering her at work, especially after she hadn’t shown up early like she usually did. He’d assumed that, too, was a bid to avoid seeing him, so he’d left it alone. At this point he was about to lose his mind just thinking about all of it. Worrying about whether things would settle down, afraid she’d let her fear get the better of her and tell him she wanted nothing to do with him anymore outside of professional contact. He didn’t want that. He was too far gone to even try to pretend that would ever do again. He couldn’t stop thinking about her, about everything that made him want her. How sweet and careful she’d been with James, like she was with all her patients, and how it still broke her heart when she couldn’t save someone. The complicated mix of both her trauma and the stubborn resilience that had pushed her through to get where she was now – damaged but far from broken. How he was always getting little glimpses of her sense of humor and her love for her family, and the pleasure she took in simple things like a good cup of coffee, or the right song on the radio, or being out in the sun with her horses and her goofy, behemoth dog, and how just for a little while she’d let him into that world of hers. And there was no way he’d ever forget what it had felt like to have her in his arms, to kiss her, and God, the way she’d kissed him back… it had been like madness, like nothing he’d ever felt, and now that he’d gotten a taste of that fire inside her, he wanted so much more.

“Yeah, you can call her tomorrow…” Uncas said, glancing up from the billiard table, “Or, uh, you can maybe just go over there and talk to her now?” He nodded toward the front.

Nathaniel’s gaze snapped to the doors, where he saw Jack Winthrop walking in, followed by Brian with Cora beside him. She didn’t ever need any help to look amazing to him, but he’d never seen her quite the way she looked tonight, and his entire being responded to the sight of her as if he’d been struck by lightning. She had on a form-fitting, pinup-style bright red and white striped top with cap sleeves and a wide, scooped neck that had a little bow on one side, dark, almost black skinny jeans that left no graceful line of her to the imagination, and a pair of retro-style red heels with white t-straps. She had on makeup, another first, and her hair was loose, hanging nearly to her waist in its natural waves, making him instantly ache to bury his hands in it. Sweet mother of mercy, this woman is going to kill me. She laughed at something Brian said as they headed toward the bar together and sat down, while Jack caught sight of Uncas and Nathaniel and started to make his way over to them. What the hell was she doing here all dolled up, and why was she so cozy with Brian? Nathaniel suddenly had a strange, proprietary surge of anger, and despite his normal friendliness with Brian, at this moment he wanted to punch him in the face. Before he could do or say anything, Jack was there greeting them. Nathaniel absently conversed with him and Uncas for a while, casting glances toward the bar here and there, where Cora was still chatting with Brian. She didn’t even look his way.

Another small group came in the door and she turned to say hello to them. He recognized one girl as the nurse he’d seen her with in the ER on Wednesday.

“You gonna go talk to her, or what, man?” Uncas asked when Jack went to the bar to order a drink.

“Not now. She doesn’t even know we’re here, and she looks a little busy over there with Brian,” he growled, leaning over to take his next shot, whacking the cue ball hard enough to send balls flying all over the table.

“Hey, slow your roll. What’s gotten into you?”

“Oh, nothing except she doesn’t talk to me for three damn days, and then she shows up getting all friendly with Hunter.”
“Look, dude, she’s just sitting with him and talking to that other girl. No matter what the case, you need to clear the air with her sooner than later, and you need to calm the fuck down. She’s not Judith, and you damn well know it.”

Nathaniel bit back a reply and just shook his head. Maybe he was overreacting. Maybe not. “I’m not going over there right now. She’s there with her friends from work, and I’m not making a big deal out of this for everyone to know about. We’re adults.”

“Then catch her later, but either way, deal with this.”

Nathaniel watched as Jack smiled and said something to Brian, gesturing over his shoulder toward the billiard tables before turning to come back over. Brian turned around to them and waved. Cora turned slowly to see Nathaniel staring at her, her eyes wide. He could see the flush of color rise to her face from all the way across the bar, and she quickly turned away back to her nurse friend.

“You up for another game when you’re done with this one, Nathaniel? Brian’s too busy getting his man game on over there, so I don’t think he’ll be trying to kick my ass like he planned.” Jack laughed.

“Sure, whatever,” Nathaniel replied absently, glaring over at the bar where Brian, Cora, and the ER nurse were talking. Cora looked considerably more unsettled now than she had when she’d first arrived, and her foot was tapping nervously on the rung of her barstool.

Uncas looked down at his phone, and his face fell. “Hey, Jack, you can take over for me, buddy. I gotta go.”

“What’s going on, is something wrong?” Nathaniel asked, his attention finally distracted from Cora and Brian for a moment.

“I don’t know yet. Alice just texted and said she’s not coming when she gets off, she’s had a hard time at work and she just wants to go home. She seems… off, you know? Like something’s wrong. I think I better go check up on her, see if she needs anything.”

Nathaniel nodded in agreement. “Yeah, go ahead. I hope she’s all right, keep me posted if you’re going to be a while.”

“You gonna get out of here too?” Jack asked as Uncas walked away.

“Nope. I’ve got a reason to stay.” Nathaniel chalked his cue again.

“Is that reason wearing a striped shirt and hanging out at the bar?”

“It is, and it’s a better looking reason than you or Hunter.”

Jack chuckled. “Yeah, I didn’t think it was Brian you’ve been staring at all night.”

At the bar, Cora drifted in and out of the animated conversation between Brian and Ashley, who seemed to be hitting it off pretty well. She tapped her foot on the barstool, trying to still her trembling hand on the glass as she finished her Shirley Temple – she hadn’t planned to stay long, so she wasn’t imbibing alcohol before the drive home. Part of her wished she could, with Nathaniel burning holes in her from across the bar. Seeing him here was the last thing she’d expected, and now she was a bundle of edgy nerves.

“Hey, guys, I’m on my way out, but I wanted to say hi and bye first,” Uncas said behind them. “Brian, thanks for inviting us, man, sorry I can’t stay, but Alice is off soon and I want to go
check up on her.”

“No, it’s cool, I’ll see you another time. I wasn’t even sure if you guys would make it tonight anyway, so do what you need to do.” Brian clapped him on the shoulder.

“Is Alice all right?” Cora asked, concerned.

“Yeah, sounds like she just had a rough shift, you know how it is. I figured I’d go see if she needs anything, since her place isn’t far.” Uncas put his arm around her and leaned closer to whisper in her ear. “I’m not trying to stick my face where it doesn’t belong, but… talk to Nathaniel, ok?”

“I’m going to,” she promised quietly. She had wanted to wait till tomorrow when they could talk alone somewhere. This was a far from ideal place to hash things out, but they were both here, and things would only be worse if she took off again. She couldn’t do that to him again, he didn’t deserve it.

“Hey Ashley, do you want to play a game of pool?” Brian asked.

“Sure, I’d love to!” Ashley smiled at him. “Are you coming too, Cora?”

“I’m actually going to take off soon, I’m really tired from work, and I need to take care of something before I go. You guys have fun, though.”

They said their goodbyes and Cora waved to her other coworkers at a nearby table. *No time like the present to face the beast.* She stood up and started toward Nathaniel, only to find he was already halfway to her. Her heart pounded erratically as they approached each other. He didn’t look happy.

“I think it’s about time we talked,” he said, his voice clipped and his eyes hard.

Cora sighed and nodded. “I think you’re right.”

“Not in here. Come on.” He touched her elbow, motioning for her to follow him, and she couldn’t help the tingling shiver she felt from the slightest contact of his hand. She went with him out the rear door that exited behind the brick building, where there was an alley and a small overflow parking lot. No one was out there, and with the door closed the music inside was muffled. Nathaniel turned to face her, his arms crossed over his chest and a muscle ticking in his jaw.

“So I’m trying to understand what’s going on here, Cora, but at this point I’m having some trouble. I could deal with you leaving me on the roof. I could deal with everything, right up until the point you showed up here tonight. You want to tell me what the deal is with Brian? Because for all your personal bullshit rules about not fraternizing with coworkers or whatever, you sure don’t seem to mind stepping out with him, and I’m kind of confused here.”

“Excuse me?” Cora reeled back in shock. She’d expected him to be upset, but this unfounded and ridiculous accusation infuriated her. “What the hell are you talking about, are you out of your goddamn mind? You have no right to say something like that to me! How dare you!”

“Well, you’ll have to excuse me for thinking the worst. See, I was stupid enough to think we were actually getting somewhere. Then right when it seemed like you wanted me as much as I want you, you took off with no explanation, didn’t speak to me for three days, and avoided me at work on purpose - ”

“I didn’t speak to you for three days because I needed some space, and it’s not like you were blowing up my phone trying to get ahold of me either!” Cora retorted.
“Well I was trying to give you your space, and we were both working! And I could understand all of it, Cora, but then you show up here tonight with Brian, chatting him up like everything’s fine, and from my point of view this doesn’t look good, okay?”

“Jesus Christ, Nathaniel, this is ludicrous! I made plans with Ashley from work before any of this even happened! Maybe I just figured I’d go out and be social for once, which is likely the same reason you’re here, and it just so happened that Brian and Jack were coming over here too! And, by the way, the only reason I was hanging out with Brian at all was because he wanted me to introduce him to Ashley, not because of whatever asinine reasoning you’re thinking!”

“Wait… Ashley?” He looked mildly confused for a moment, then the realization of how wrong he had been seemed to dawn on him.

“Yes, Ashley! He asked about her after they met Wednesday, and since we were all coming here, I offered to introduce them! So whatever you were thinking, you can just unthink it, okay?”

Nathaniel raked a hand through his hair, all the bluster going out of him. “Fuck. Cora, I’m sorry, I’m an idiot. I shouldn’t have - ”

“No, you shouldn’t have. But then, there are a few things I shouldn’t have done either, so I guess that makes us even in the screw-up department.” She laughed bitterly. “This has been one hell of a week. I was fine, you know? I was fine all by myself, with my dog and my house and my job, perfectly at peace being emotionally stunted and not even realizing it. Everything was so convenient. And then here you come, and you… damn you, you are not convenient, Nathaniel!” She groaned in frustration, turning away from him with her hands over her face. She felt the heat of him at her back before his hands touched her, tentatively resting on her shoulders.

“I’m sorry for being an ass about Brian, I was out of line. But I’ll be damned if I’ll apologize for what happened the other night, Cora, because I’m not one bit sorry. I want you, in no uncertain terms, and I think you know that by now, but I’m not going to pursue this if you’re not on board. So if you don’t want me, just… God, just tell me, and we can end this right now and stop torturing each other.”

He dropped his hands from her shoulders, and the abrupt loss of contact almost hurt. There was a rawness in his voice she’d never heard before, and when she turned back to face him, there was pain and vulnerability in his eyes that made her ache as if her chest would split open. She was always so worried about how she felt, it was too easy sometimes to forget that he had been hurt terribly in the past, too. She’d broken Duncan’s heart because she hadn’t loved him, and now here she was putting Nathaniel through this mess because she knew she was falling for him, and she was terrified of that. How foolish it would be to do such a thing, to throw away a chance like that – one her friend had not lived to ever have. “Someday I hope you find a guy who’s everything you deserve,” he had told her. Well, she didn’t know if she deserved Nathaniel, but she did want him.

“No. I’m not going to tell you that,” she said vehemently, shaking her head. “I can’t tell you that. Dammit, you… you come along and you give me rides home, and bring me soup when I’m sick, and kiss me like you did, and make me have all these… these stupid FEELINGS, and now my head is a fucking mess and I don’t even know what to think about this anymore, except that I do want you!”

Nathaniel looked momentarily taken aback at her exasperated admission, and then something else entirely flashed across those brilliant green eyes, something thrillingly predatory. “Then quit trying so hard to think about it,” he growled.

Before she could even blink, he closed the space between them, backing her up to the brick
wall behind her. One of his hands snaked around her waist and splayed at the small of her back, while the other cupped her cheek, turning her face up to his. His mouth closed over hers, and there was nothing cautious about the way he kissed her now, or the way she responded; both insistent, merciless, and full of pent-up desire and frustration. Cora felt set aflame with the hard wall behind her and his body flush against her, his thumb stroking her jaw and his tongue plunging into her mouth to find hers. She gave it to him, meeting each suggestive thrust, heat suffusing her rapidly as she slid her hands up the firm muscles of his torso and grasped his shoulders for balance. He broke the kiss for a moment, the intense fire blazing behind his eyes making her breath hitch.

“I just don’t know what to do with you,” she sighed.

He gave her a wicked half-grin. “I’ve got a few good ideas. This isn’t a bad start.”

“Smartass,” she breathed, grabbing the collar of his bomber jacket and pulling him back to her for another kiss. She gasped as he pushed her back against the brick wall again, pinning her in place with his hips, and a soft moan escaped her at the feel of the intimate pressure of his body on hers. When he buried his hands in her hair and drew her lower lip into his mouth, she went weak all over, wrapping her arms around his neck and sinking into him with a purr as a wave of arousal spread like wildfire through her lower belly and groin. There would be no more fighting, no more denying what he made her feel; she was helpless to do anything but give in to it at last.

Nathaniel ran his tongue across that soft, supple lower lip, relishing Cora’s passionate response, her little sounds of pleasure and every soft, urgent flick of her tongue against his driving him to distraction. She tasted like cherries from whatever she’d been drinking earlier; sweet, delectable, like he knew the rest of her must be. He wound his hands further into her thick, silky hair, the way he’d been aching to do since the moment she’d walked into the bar – really, since the moment he’d met her. She looked sexy as hell tonight, and that bow on the neckline of her top made him wish he could unwrap her right here and taste every inch of her. But he couldn’t take this too far, not yet, and not here. Not until they worked this out a little more, not until they were both equally ready to take that step. He slowed the kiss down gradually, nibbling the corner of her lips, fading out to soft caresses and finally pulling back to look down at her in the dim light. Her eyes were hazy and hooded with desire, her skin flushed, and her lips pink and slightly swollen from kisses.

“God, you’re beautiful, you know that?” He drew in a ragged breath and leaned his forehead against hers. “You make me have feelings too, just so you know. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you.”

“Me either,” she confessed softly. “I’m sorry about the last few days, Nathaniel. You just… you really scare the hell out of me, and I haven’t had to deal with anything like this. Ever. This is all completely new to me.”

“You’re not the only one who’s scared here, okay? You’re just the only one running from it.” He stroked her cheek, feathering gentle kisses across her lips. “Don’t run from me,” he whispered. “Let me be good to you.”

Cora nodded silently, her eyes filling with tears as she kissed him back and held onto him tight, burying her face against his neck for a long moment. “I really don’t want to leave you now, but I need to go home. I’m so tired, and I need to make sure Monty and Scout and the horses are all right.”

“I should go back in soon anyway, Jack’s probably wondering what the hell happened to me.” He took her hand and kept it in his as he walked with her to her gray Tribeca. Standing by the driver’s side door, he reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair off her face, his touch lingering there. “Go get some sleep. I’d offer to take you home, but if I did that I might not leave, and that
wouldn’t be good right now. We’re going to do this right, take things slow. But I’d like to see you tomorrow so we can talk about this more. Can we do that?"

“Yes. I wanted to, before. I was going to call you tomorrow, but we both ended up here instead. Come over in the morning around ten, if that works for you? I’ll make brunch and maybe we can take Ranger and Blue Feather out. Going for a ride and talking is good, right?"

“Yeah. Anything with you is good.” He smiled and leaned down to kiss her one last time, slow and searingly thorough. It left her quivering, feeling a little senseless, and wondering why in the world she’d ever wanted to run at all.

Alice parked in her apartment lot and got out of her car, grabbing the tote bag she always took to work with her. She fished through it for another tissue to blow her nose, having cried all the way home. Failing to find one unused, she sniffled and slung the bag over her shoulder, pulling her red belted sweater closed over her leggings and tunic. Walking across the lot, she caught sight of the distinctive blue and red Harley parked in one of the visitor spots. Uncas is here. She nearly started to cry again, just from the relief of not having to be alone. She went up the stairs and found him waiting by the front door with a grocery bag in one hand. When he saw her, her eyes red and her cheeks blotchy from tears, he immediately ran to her.

“Jesus, Alice, what happened? Come on, let’s get you inside,” he said, putting an arm around her and steering her toward the door. She unlocked it, and they went inside, where he turned on lights and made her sit down on the couch. He set his bag and hers down on the coffee table, then sat down next to her and pulled her into his arms. She leaned against him with a sob, taking refuge in his warm, solid strength.

“I’m sorry, I just had a horrible shift,” she choked, launching into another wave of tears as she told him about several particularly bad calls she had taken, one involving a child that had made her shake for the rest of the shift. The nature of her job meant she never talked to anyone on their best day, but some days were far worse than others, and today had been like that, just a string of heartbreaking, horrifying calls that made her feel the suffocating press of all the terrible things that could happen to people. Some days she felt like she could help, and other days, days like today, she just felt drowned in hopeless misery. She often did not know how things turned out for callers and victims once EMS or law enforcement arrived, and she hated imagining the terrible impact of the events on parents and spouses and brothers and sisters, and whoever else loved those people if things did not end favorably. And sometimes it was just the sadness of people who it seemed no one loved at all – abused children, people who died alone and no one knew – those shattered her just as much.

Uncas held Alice until she stopped crying, handing her tissues from the box on the end table. He understood her feelings on a deep level, because all the things she heard over the phone were things he’d seen firsthand too many times while riding an ambulance. That was part of the reason he’d made the decision to start working MedEvac with Nathaniel. Too many years of that had started to take their toll on him mentally, and he’d needed the change. It killed him to see Alice affected like this by the same things, but it also made him fall a little harder for her, because he couldn’t resist her compassion and her giving nature. Her heart was as golden and beautiful as the rest of her, and it made him want to hold it in his hands and protect it from ever being hurt. He could certainly understand why she needed her yoga classes and her aerial acrobatics to help balance out the other half of her life.

“Alice… I’m so sorry you had such a shitty day,” he murmured, kissing her forehead. “Do you need to eat? I can cook something, and I stopped at the store on the way over and got chocolate chip cookie dough in case you needed cookie therapy.”
She smiled wanly at him, her red eyes and cheeks doing nothing to diminish how lovely she was. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but you’re a Godsend. I’m starving, and I’m sure it’s not helping me feel any better.” Sweet Potato jumped up onto the couch with a ‘meow’ and shoved herself between them, butting her head against Alice as if to comfort her.

“All right. You sit tight with ‘Tato-Cat, and I’ll take care of food and let Mrs. Nesbit out for her evening jaunt.” He scratched he cat’s ears and took the grocery bag into the kitchen, opening the cage door for the guinea pig on his way.

An hour and a half later, they were cuddled on the couch watching *Mystery* on PBS, polishing off a few of the freshly baked cookies after the chicken and mushroom pasta Uncas had cooked for them. Sweet Potato was asleep in her cat bed on the rug, and Mrs. Nesbit was crumb-hunting around the coffee table and crawling in and out of Uncas’s overturned boots. Alice felt much better, but still emotionally exhausted. She sat curled against Uncas with her head on his chest, listening to the reassuring sound of his steady heartbeat. His tender care and understanding floored her. She hadn’t wanted to seem too needy and ask him to come over when she’d left work, but the fact that he’d known how much she needed someone and had shown up anyway… it made her fall deeper into the rabbit hole she was already halfway down anyway, and all she wanted every time he was around was to just keep falling into him. She slid an arm around him, her hand stroking along his ribcage, and felt the rhythm of his heart quicken under her ear as he ran his fingers up and down her spine in slow, lazy strokes. They had spent a fair amount of time together like this since that first date, but tonight it felt different. Tonight there was a charge to it all that made her feel like she wanted more, because the more she was with him the more she wanted all of him. She had dated enough to know nothing had ever felt remotely like this did, and life had been crazy enough in the past that now she just wanted to feel this. Their mother’s death and Cora’s injuries, all the aftermath and therapy and recovery, had all taken its toll on her over time. Now that she finally had reached a point in her life the last couple of years where she was happy and settled, she was ready for what she felt with Uncas, ready to bust through the glass ceiling and live, and bask in the glow of being lucky enough to find someone like him. And after a day like today, she was ready to forget it all and just lose herself in him, because he knew what it was like, and because his understanding made him like a lighthouse in a storm to her.

“I should go soon and let you go to bed, you’ve had a long day and I’m sure you need some sleep.” His deep voice rumbled in his chest under her cheek. She sat up and looked at him, reaching out to touch the smooth, dark skin on his jaw, then followed by leaning across and brushing her lips there, trailing over to his neck and beneath his ear, the softness of his hair tickling her cheek and making her breath quicken. “Alice…” he sighed, his pulse thrumming beneath her lips.

“Don’t go,” she whispered, pulling back. “I want you to stay. I don’t need sleep. I need you. I just need you.” He stared back at her for a moment, but she could see the faster rise of his chest as her words sunk in, and the further darkening of his eyes as the unmistakable flame of desire rose hot in them.

The air between them grew thick with the weight of Alice’s words and the anticipation of what would follow them. In a flash, Uncas had her in his arms, crushing her to him as their mouths melded, tongues tangling with heated intent. She shed her red sweater and tossed it somewhere behind her, then clambered forward to straddle his lap, her hands sinking into his hair as her body melted against his. The thrill of knowing there would be no stopping this time coursed through him; he had wanted her fiercely since the first time he’d laid eyes on her, but he had wanted to take it easy and just enjoy getting to know her more than he’d been willing to jump into the physical aspect too soon. It was still early, but he couldn’t deny how badly he wanted to be with her. He’d waited so long to find her, and it suddenly no longer made sense not to give in to everything they both seemed to be feeling. He groaned softly as she rocked her hips against him, sending a flood of arousal
through his body. He slipped his hands beneath her long top, stroking the silky heat of her skin beneath it.

“Upstairs,” she gasped, breaking away for a moment, her eyes hooded. “Condoms in the night table.”

“Gladly,” he muttered, rising off the couch and taking her with him.

They fumbled up the metal staircase to her bedroom in a tangle of limbs and hot, desperate kisses. Standing by her bed, Alice shed her leggings and kicked them away. He came forward to her in the dim light provided from downstairs. She shivered as he ran his hands up her bare thighs and under the hem of her top, his rough palms grazing over the sensitive skin of her belly, her hips, and over her backside, pulling her close enough that she could feel the evidence of his arousal against her. She pulled his t-shirt up over his head, drawing in an appreciative breath at the sight of him. He was tattooed, a black rectangular cross design just beneath the hollow of his throat, with a fine line and a series of rectangles under it extending across his chest on either side. She hadn’t seen it until now, and she found it incredibly sexy. From there he was all smooth, copper skin and hard planes of lean muscle, and all this time touching him over his clothing was no comparison to touching naked skin now, so exquisitely capable and all hers. He sucked in a breath as she pressed her mouth to the center of his tattoo, her hands roaming over him. Her fingers touched the sensitive line of muscle at each hip above the waistline of his jeans, then moved to unbutton them.

Uncas pulled the clip from her hair and let it fall, his fingers pushing into the honey-gold silk of it, cradling her head as his mouth slanted across hers. His tongue teased across her lips and then slid inside where she met it with her own velvety, taunting strokes. His pants and socks joined his shirt on the floor, and he grasped the hem of her tunic, drawing it slowly upward, revealing her to him just a few inches at a time and enjoying every second. When it was gone at last, he drank in the sight of her, all creamy skin and svelte, strong curves, her lacy pale blue bra and panties barely hiding what lay beneath. He made a primal sound deep in his throat as he brought her down onto the bed with him, pushing the silk comforter away. She lay half beneath him, her breath coming in soft pants as his lips trailed over her neck and down over her collarbone, his fingers deftly releasing the clasp at the back and doing away with it in one swift motion.

“God, Alice, you’re so beautiful,” he whispered, his dark eyes smoldering in the dim light, gazing down at her like she was the only thing on earth he cared about. He cupped the weight of one full breast in his hand. She moaned as his fingers, then his tongue, teased the nipple to a hard peak, sending waves of pleasure jolting down through her body. He moved across to the other breast, then his mouth continued downward over her belly and hips, casting little flicks of his tongue over her sensitized skin that made her quake. She cried out softly at the pressure of his lips at the apex of her thighs, wet heat blooming there. No one had ever made her feel like this, so worshipped, so full of unfulfilled need. It would have been more frightening if she hadn’t already been so mindless with wanting him that she could think of nothing else. Suddenly her panties were gone, his boxer briefs joining them on the floor, and his mouth was on hers again, stealing her breath, the long, hard length of his erection pressing against her belly with his body flush along hers.

If there was anything to regret about this, it was only that he hadn’t found Alice sooner. She was like heaven beneath his touch, her body rising to him like she’d been made for it, her soft lips parting for his kiss and her hand slipping between them to wrap around him, nearly undoing him with her gentle, sensual strokes. He groaned, kissing and nipping along her neck and receiving the same attention back from her. He stopped, his breath ragged as he looked down at her, so utterly beautiful with her skin flushed all pink and her hazel eyes darkened almost copper with the heat of desire, the honeyed silk of her hair spread around her face like a halo.
“Uncas… I need you. I want you,” she whispered, her hips arching against him, making him burn to be inside her.

“God, I need you too, Alice.” He rolled on a condom and settled in the cradle of her hips, one hand gliding along her thigh wrapped around him. Her fingers wove into his hair and brought him back to her, and he kissed her deeply as he slid inside her.

“Oh God,” she breathed, clinging to him as he began to move. Heaven. She was heaven, and he never wanted to let her go. Their breathing grew more frantic with each deep, slow thrust, their bodies humming with the rising tide of pleasure washing over them. It swirled within, coiling tighter and tighter as they lost themselves to it, until her release shattered her around him and she cried out with the overwhelming force of it. As they came down from the high of it, he drew her into his arms, both trembling, a sheen of sweat drying on their skin.

“Will you stay here tonight?” she whispered, pressing her lips to the hollow of his throat. “I want you here with me.”

He cupped her face and kissed her, slow and gentle. “Alice, welsit awèn, you can have me for as long as you want. I’ll always stay with you.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:

Welsit awèn: Beautiful person (Delaware/Lenape)

Well. This was quite an eventful chapter. I felt a little bad for Brian, unwittingly getting caught in the middle of all that angst between Cora and Nathaniel. Fortunately, I don’t think he ever actually knew what was going on, because lucky for him Nathaniel is a little too mature to actually punch someone in the face (and he was a cop, Cop Nathaniel knows better than that). Plus, Brian got to meet a pretty girl, yay! He’s very happy about that. And Jack Winthrop is over there playing pool alone and rolling his eyes like “There goes Nathaniel again, having a ‘reason to stay’ since 1757.” I think for a minute during this scene, Nathaniel’s being dumb might have even eclipsed Cora’s being dumb, but it also bears remembering that though he’s in a better place with his issues, he still has some lasting baggage from his evil ex-fiancée cheating on him while he was recovering from a near-deadly gunshot and his partner had died (I kind of want to punch her in the face, and I bet Cora does too). So he sees her with Brian, who he knows thinks she’s hot, and naturally, he’s pretty bothered by it. I wanted him to get irrationally mad and jealous, enough that he and Cora would have a heated argument, but not so that he’s just being an outright dick. That’s just not his style, he’s generally a pretty nice, levelheaded guy. I just wanted them both flustered enough to really make that yummy brick-wall kiss worth it. And now Cora has finally been talked (or kissed) down from her tree, and it looks like her and Nathaniel can finally move forward (Nathaniel is very relieved, he’s pretty gone for Cora at this point and he just wants to keep melting her brain with kisses so she can’t run away).

Now Uncas and Alice... First of all, Uncas is so sweet and caring, just like his brother, and I love the way he gets how hard Alice’s job can be sometimes. Doing any kind of job like that takes a toll on you mentally, not matter how much you love it – nursing is
no different. I’ve had days where I felt awesome about what I was doing, and I’ve had days that crushed me to dust. Alice had an exceptionally terrible day. I was originally going to give more specific details about the “bad” calls, but that’s a very emotionally sensitive thing, and I don’t know what my readers or their loved ones have experienced in real life, so I didn’t, because I’m not trying to make anyone have a hard time reading this. Plus, I didn’t want that to overshadow what happened next, because… uuuuuhhhhhhh that was really good for them, and I hope it was good for you too. I was kind of going off the parallel in the film (the way the script was originally written) when Alice and Uncas kiss under the waterfall and she ends up across his lap in a moment of vulnerability that makes them both give in to their attraction, her seeking comfort and him giving it. Hope that works for ya. I have to giggle a little imagining them stumbling up the stairs in their desperation to get to Alice’s room, heehee. ;) The theme song for this chapter is “Fire Meet Gasoline” by Sia. That’s always been in my head for Nathaniel and Cora, and all that pent-up passion between them – bound to explode into flames eventually. In my head, the blues song playing in the bar when Nathaniel is thinking about (and then first seeing) Cora is “Heartache Follows Wherever I Go” by Joe Bonamassa, followed by his song “Prisoner” when they are out in the alley - slow, sexy, and just how they feel about each other, especially Nathaniel. At the end of the bar scene when Cora finally lets go of her fears, it’s “Shake it Out” by Florence and the Machine – so perfect for her there with the lines: “And I am done with my graceless heart So tonight I’m gonna cut it out and then restart Cause I like to keep my issues drawn It's always darkest before the dawn… And I'm damned if I do and I'm damned if I don't So here's to drinks in the dark at the end of my rope And I'm ready to suffer and I'm ready to hope It's a shot in the dark aimed right at my throat Cause looking for heaven, found the devil in me Looking for heaven, found the devil in me Well what the hell I'm gonna let it happen to me” For Alice and Uncas, I hear “Lovely Tonight” by Joshua Radin, and “In Your Eyes” by Peter Gabriel, but the main theme for their entire scene is “Lead Me On” by Joe Henry. It seems so perfect for them there. That’s about it for Chapter 6, stay tuned and thank you so much for continuing to read!
I Was Made For You

Chapter Summary

Uncas has a little accident, providing a chance for him and Alice to hang out with Nathaniel and Cora, who are making strides in developing their relationship. A difficult moment for Cora creates a stronger bond between her and Nathaniel, and they reach the point where they are ready to take the next step together, taking their slow burn to an inferno.

Chapter Notes

Author's note included in chapter text due to length.

Chapter 7 – I Was Made for You

“All of these lines across my face
Tell you the story of who I am
So many stories of where I've been
And how I got to where I am
But these stories don't mean anything
When you've got no one to tell them to
It's true, I was made for you

I climbed across the mountain tops
Swam across the ocean blue
I crossed all the lines, and I broke all the rules
But, baby, I broke them all for you
Oh because even when I was flat broke
You made me feel like a million bucks
You do
I was made for you

You see the smile that's on my mouth
It's hiding the words that don't come out
And all of my friends who think that I'm blessed
They don't know my head is a mess
No, they don't know who I really am
And they don't know what
I've been through like you do
And I was made for you

And all of these lines across my face
Tell you the story of who I am
So many stories of where I've been
And how I got to where I am
But these stories don’t mean anything
When you've got no one to tell them to
It’s true, I was made for you
Oh yeah, well it’s true that I was made for you”

-“The Story” Philip J. Hanseroth © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc-

Alice hung suspended upside down from her silks, well above the lyra beside the metal staircase. She watched below with a smile as Uncas pulled himself up on the lyra and threw his legs over the bottom of the hoop to sit on it like a swing, looking up at her. He wasn’t much of an aerialist yet, but he was strong and fast, and she enjoyed his fluid movements in any case. Damn, he’s sexy. She worked the silk wrapped around her body loose enough to drop down several feet, so that she ended up hanging at eye level with him, still upside down.

“Hey there, Spider-Woman.” He gave her an enticing grin.

“Well, if you’re going to insist on that instead of Batwoman…” she smiled wickedly and reached toward him with the ends of the silks in her hands, wrapping them around his neck and using the fabric to pull him to her for a long, deep kiss.

“You can trap me in your web any day,” he murmured.

“Keep talking like that and I might make good on it one of these days.” She laughed softly and he kissed her again. “Oh! That reminds me! I have a surprise for you. I’ll be right back.” She flipped herself right side up and shimmied back up the silks, swinging onto the stem wall to jump down into the bedroom.

Damn, that’s hot, she doesn’t even need the stairs. Uncas smiled to himself. Life with Alice in it was interesting in many ways, and he was loving every minute of it. He sighed and began to swing steadily back and forth on the lyra while she was busy with whatever she was doing up there.

“So one of the girls at the yoga studio sews custom yoga and dance outfits, and I had her make this for me. What do you think?” Alice asked from the top of the stairs. He looked up, and his jaw dropped. She stood there grinning, wearing nothing except a very sexy push-up bra and boy-short panty ensemble made of red web-print Spider-Man fabric with blue trim.

“Holy shit!” he breathed. And promptly lost his balance, falling off the lyra. There was a hollow resonating sound as he fell past the staircase, and he hit the floor with a pained grunt.

“Oh my God! Uncas!” Alice yelled, running down the stairs to him. She knelt beside him as he sat up groaning, one hand pressed to the top of his head.

“Maluwe,” he muttered as blood began to seep through his fingers at a rather alarming rate, trickling over his forehead.

“Shit! I’m sorry, are you all right?! You’re bleeding everywhere! I’ll get a towel, we need to put pressure on it.” She got up and came back with a clean dish towel.

Uncas folded the towel and pressed it to the wound. “I hit the staircase on the way down. Fuck that stings. I promise this looks worse than it is, babe.” He kept pressure on it until the bleeding slowed down a little and he could try to get a look at the damage in the bathroom mirror with assistance from Alice.

“It’s split open pretty good, I think you’re going to need stitches,” she said, taking a close
look at the open gash while he bent his head in front of her.

“That’s what I was afraid of. You better put some clothes on, that underwear is dangerously sexy,” he joked, trying to lighten the mood so that pained look of guilt would leave her pretty face. “We’ll definitely have to revisit the wearing of that when I’m not requiring medical attention. But dammit, I don’t want to go sit in the ER all night just for this.” He replaced the towel.

“Well… we were going to spend the night at your house tonight anyway, and you’re only like five miles from Cora. She has suture kits and all kinds of stuff at her house, we could just hit her up and see if she can do it, if you’d rather. I’m sure she’s home, she’s off tonight and she’s probably not doing much, as usual.”

“That sounds a lot better than sitting in the ER for hours on end, and I trust her. Grab your stuff, we can take my truck if you want, but you’ll have to drive.”

Cora took out a knife from the block on her kitchen counter and chopped up the freshly cooked chicken breasts on the cutting board, taking it over to where Nathaniel was cooking chicken pot pie filling on the stove. Today had been the perfect kind of day. The weather was sunny and warm, and the woods were green and alive with wildflowers and ripening wild berries. She and Nathaniel had taken Ranger and Blue Feather out for a ride up the creek for a picnic lunch, with Monty lumbering along with them and dashing in and out of the water. Nathaniel had wanted to cook dinner this evening, so she was helping him prep.

“Here’s the chicken when you’re ready to add it.” She took a whiff of the aroma wafting from the pot. “Mmmmm. That smells amazing, I can’t wait.”

“This and the crust are both my mom’s recipe, and I assure you, it’s the best.” He smiled and took the cutting board from her, adding the chicken to the mix.

“After having her chicken and dumplings, I don’t doubt it,” she replied, toeing up to kiss him on the cheek. He let her, then turned his head and caught her lips with his. Her stomach fluttered and she smiled dreamily to herself as she went back to the counter to start rolling out the dough for the crust. It had been almost three weeks since they had gotten together to talk about how to move forward, and things were going well. Nathaniel had been very up front about his desire to try to make a relationship between them work, and while she was nervous about it after six years out of the dating pool and no substantive experience with serious relationships to speak of, Cora wanted to try, too. She’d been living with self-imposed rules for too damn long, and he was worth breaking rules for, because she adored the way he made her feel. For one thing, there was the intensity of the attraction between them, which was undeniable, and the way his touch and his kisses so delightfully robbed her of all her faculties. But she also loved how warm and funny and affectionate he was, the quiet power he exuded and yet was so gentle and good-hearted, and how he never pushed her for more than she was ready for. Everything about this was so new to her, and freeing her fears enough to just let herself experience the growing magnitude of what she felt for Nathaniel was starting to get easier - more so than she had anticipated, thankfully.

As for work at AirMedic, they had both decided that they were adults who had been fine working together all this time, so they would continue to do so. Deeming it the most professional thing to do, the two of them had sat down with their manager, Owen Phelps, and apprised him of the situation. Since there was no policy against them being involved, they could remain on the same team. Their relationship didn’t theoretically have much chance to interfere with patient care, because he was busy flying while she was working, but since Nathaniel’s brother was also a member of the
team, Owen had informed them that if anything became difficult or too distracting for any of them, the option to switch teams was still there. For now things were working just fine, if not better than before, since the previous tension between her and Nathaniel was no longer there.

“How did your session with Virginia go this week?” Nathaniel asked, adding a little more dried parsley and salt to the pie filling.

“Good. I really like her, she’s got this way of asking questions that kind of force me to come up with helpful solutions myself instead of just telling me what I need to do. And she does that Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing thing for trauma recall. I might try that again, it really helped before, right after the crash. It kind of cleans up the mess in my brain.” Cora had wanted to make the best effort she could at being healthy enough to do this relationship thing right, so she had taken her father’s advice and made an appointment with a counselor her charge nurse Kate had recommended, a nurse clinician who specialized in trauma recovery and relationship counseling. Cora liked her immensely. She was brutally honest, yet caring, and she got right to the meat of things – not unlike Alice, but in a more structured, clinical way that helped Cora figure out how to develop a healthy relationship while overcoming her fears and recognizing the occasional need to step outside her comfort zone to progress forward.

“I’m glad you like her. Finding a good therapist can be hard. I hated the first couple the police department sent me to, but the third one I did pretty well with.” Nathaniel turned off the stove and brought the pot of filling over to pour it into the bottom crust that Cora had pressed into a blue ceramic pie dish. He leaned against the countertop, watching her put the top crust on the pie and pop it into the hot oven while she absently sang along to the bluesy, husky tones of Beth Hart coming from the speaker dock. He smiled, loving the sound of Cora singing in that throaty, sultry voice of hers. It did wicked things to him.

“Baby, it’s cold when you’re gone
Don’t make me wait, wait too long
Whenever you’re near I have all this feeling
You’re melting me down
Oh, I’m a believer

Strike a match and set me on fire
Watch it burnin’, flames gettin’ higher
You light me up with sweet old desire
So won’t you come close to my fire?”

She set the oven timer and crossed back to him. Still leaning on the counter, he took her hand and pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her waist so she was pressed along his front.

“Hmmm. We’ve got thirty-five minutes to kill while that bakes,” he murmured, grazing one index finger down the side of her throat to the open collar of the plaid button-down shirt she wore. Her lips curved in a mischievous smile, and she leaned a little closer, her arms sliding up around his neck.

“Well, Captain Hawkeye, what do you think we should do?” She cocked a dark brow at him, running her hands down the front of his t-shirt that featured the phrase ‘May the Forest be With You’ in a Star Wars font filled in with images of trees.

He grinned wolfishly, and instead of answering, kissed her. At her encouraging hum of pleasure, he deepened the kiss, sliding his hands down to her denim-clad backside to swap positions with her. He lifted her so she was sitting on the counter with him standing between her thighs, his hands still gripping her hips to hold her against him. Cora without her former reservations was a wild
turn-on, and he loved this side of her, so fiery and passionate compared to the stiff, standoffish shell she’d worn so often at first. At this point neither of them seemed to be able to keep their hands off the other, and lately they were slowly inching into riskier territory that made them both wonder how much longer it would be before they took the next step. They had discussed sex early on, but had agreed to move toward that gradually. Out of respect and concern for Cora’s comfort easing into a relationship, Nathaniel was not willing to push for anything physical until they were both ready; Cora had not been with anyone since before her last deployment, and it had been quite a while for him as well. They would both know when it was time, and until then he was enjoying the hell out of driving her to distraction like this, and her doing the same to him.

Her mouth left his, her lips teasing over the rough five o’clock shadow on his jaw as she trailed kisses and little nips down his neck. She hooked a finger into the collar of his t-shirt and tugged it down a little, pressing her lips to the dusting of hair peeking above it at the hollow of his throat, then flicking her tongue over it and eliciting a quiet groan from him in response. Her position slightly above him allowed him to nudge her head back easily to return the favor, taking pleasure in her soft gasps as he kissed his way down the smooth skin of her throat, his rough chin leaving it slightly pink in his wake. When he reached the opening of her shirt a few inches down from her collarbone, he flipped the first button open. She made no move to stop him, so he undid a few more, exposing a strip of creamy skin and the middle of her plain bra. He touched his lips to her sternum between her breasts, and her breath caught, her hand in his hair stilling for a moment. He raised his head back to her level, his eyes questioning.

Too far?

Her eyes showed a mix of surprise and arousal, but no hesitation. With a sudden release of the breath she’d been holding, she leaned forward and kissed him, her tongue darting against his. Slowly, he slipped a hand into the open placket of her shirt, cupping the swell of one small, firm breast and feeling the nipple harden against his palm beneath the pale pink microfiber. He brushed the pad of his thumb across it, and she arched into him with a soft moan against his lips, her fingers still tangled in his hair.

The doorbell rang, and they both startled, springing apart. He pulled his hand from inside her shirt as Monty barreled in through the dog door and bounded toward the front door with a joyful bark.

“Shit!” Cora hissed, jumping down from the counter and frantically trying to do up her buttons with trembling fingers.

“I’ll get it.” Nathaniel rushed to the door as the bell rang a second time, checking the peephole before grabbing Monty’s collar and throwing it open to reveal Uncas standing on the stoop, holding a bloody towel to his scalp. Alice stood behind him looking a little sheepish, but when she saw that it was Nathaniel who answered the door, her face lit up like a Christmas parade.

“What are you doing here?” Uncas asked, taking in Nathaniel’s mildly disheveled hair and slightly flustered demeanor.

“Uh… cooking dinner? What are you doing here?”

“Bleeding. I need sutures. Where’s Cora?”

“I’m right here,” Cora said breathlessly, rushing to the door. “What the hell happened to you?” She ushered them inside.

“I texted you like four times on the way here, but you never answered me. He was sitting on my lyra and he, um… fell off and hit his head on the metal stairs,” Alice explained, hugging Monty and rubbing his neck. Her eyes traveled over her sister curiously, settling on the front of her shirt, which in her haste she had buttoned crooked. Cora slapped a hand over it and blushed deep crimson. Alice narrowed her eyes at her and grinned like a fox.
“Go sit down at the kitchen table, the light is better in there. I’ll go get irrigation and suture kits.” Cora hurried off to the small linen closet in her bedroom where she kept a stock of medical supplies, and Alice quickly followed behind her.

Uncas sat down at the long farmhouse table and smirked up at Nathaniel. “Cooking dinner, huh? Is that what you kids are calling it these days?”

“Shut up before you end up needing more stitches.” Despite trying to sound gruff, Nathaniel glanced away and smiled.

“Well, good. You guys have been a little tight-lipped about all this, so I’m glad to see things are going well, judging by the whole cooking dinner at her house thing, and whatever other shenanigans we just interrupted.” Uncas grinned. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t talk to me about shenanigans,” Nathaniel snickered, opening the oven to check on the pie. “I don’t even want to know how you really split your head open.”

“Well, it was pretty much like Alice said, except - ”

“Stop right there, seriously. I don’t need to know.”

In the bedroom, Cora turned to a slyly grinning Alice with the supplies to suture Uncas’s wound in her hands.

“What? Why do you keep looking at me like that?” she asked.

“Oh, maybe I’m just laughing to myself about how you came to the door sounding like you just ran four miles, with your shirt buttoned all cockeyed. It would seem we interrupted more than cooking dinner. And is that beard burn on your neck?”

Cora looked away and blushed again. “Uh… well, maybe. Hold these.” Cora shoved the supplies into Alice’s hands so she could fix the buttons on her shirt.

“You haven’t said that much about how things were going. So everything’s good? You guys are okay?”

“Yeah.” Cora smiled amorously. “It’s actually really good. We’re just kind of taking things slow, not making a huge deal out of it.”

“Judging by that goofy face of yours, he’s keeping you happy. But no sex yet?” Alice raised a brow.

“No, no sex yet. We didn’t want to rush it. But God, Al, he’s so sweet and patient, and so fucking sexy. I can’t stop kissing him. I’ve never felt like this in my life! You were so right!” she sighed.

“Believe me, it runs in the family, I know. But I’m so proud of you!” Alice threw her arms around Cora. “Just make sure you let him put you out of your misery soon.”

Cora rolled her eyes and laughed. “I’m far from miserable right now. Come on, I need to sew up your boyfriend, and don’t think you aren’t going to tell me this entire story later.”

“What do you guys think? Drama? Comedy?” Cora flipped through her movie collection,
looking for something they could all agree on. She and Nathaniel had invited Uncas and Alice to stay for dinner, and everyone was gathered on the living room couch with loaded plates.

“How about this one?” She held up a DVD case. “It’s a drama set during the French and Indian War, about two Mohican guys and their father who rescue a British officer’s daughters.”

“Eeeehhh, I don’t know,” Uncas said. “I heard the end of that one is really depressing, the brother and sister both die or something. Let’s watch something a little lighter.”

After a little more debate, they all finally decided on *The Princess Bride* and settled in to eat and watch the movie. Halfway through, Cora and Alice were on the couch with Monty sprawled on his chaise, and Scout was curled up in Nathaniel’s lap on the floor, where he and Uncas had moved to sit in front of the sisters. Alice absently stroked Uncas’ hair, careful to avoid the sutured spot at the top of his scalp, and Cora followed suit on Nathaniel when he leaned his head back against her lap. Alice looked over at her with a wicked gleam in her eyes, communicating with a series of winks and silent gestures to which Cora snickered silently and nodded. Both enjoying the attention, Nathaniel and Uncas kept watching the movie, oblivious to what the girls were doing except for the fact that it felt nice. By the time the credits rolled and Cora reached over to switch on a lamp, Uncas was half asleep on Alice’s leg, startled fully awake when he heard Nathaniel start laughing.

“Hey, that’s a good look for you, Uncas. You should come to work like that on Monday.”

“Huh?” Uncas reached up and patted his hair, suddenly realizing that Alice had done it up in two neat French braids. “Well, you’re looking kind of pretty yourself there, bro,” he chuckled, observing the fancy side braid Nathaniel was sporting. Cora and Alice had dissolved into peals of laughter on the couch behind them.

“Smile!” Cora yelled, snapping a quick photo of them with her phone.

“Oh, hell no. You better delete that!” Nathaniel got up laughing, putting Scout on the chaise next to Monty, and made a grab for Cora.

“No way, I’m going to print it out and put it on the comm board at work so Brian and Jack can see!” She dodged him and escaped into the kitchen, shrieking with laughter when he caught her and threw her over his shoulder, carrying her back to the living room with a huge grin plastered across his face.

“You think it’s funny *now*, but you have to sleep sometime,” Uncas joked, tickling Alice and making her laugh even harder.

“It’s true.” Nathaniel smiled devilishly at Cora, depositing her on the couch next to her partner in crime. “I’ll have to think of some creative way to exact revenge.” He cocked a brow at her, and she blushed.

“We’ll take them out,” Alice gulped, sitting up. “We were just messing with you guys. It was too easy. But you do look adorable.” She and Cora undid the braids, still tittering to themselves.

“We should get going, I’m wiped,” Uncas said when they were done, standing up to stretch and gingerly touching his scalp. “Will you be home later, Nathaniel?”

“Nah, if you guys are staying at the house tonight I’ll leave you alone and just crash here in the guest room. If you guys don’t have plans in the morning, Cora and I were going to go visit Alexandra and the kids, if you want to come.”

“I’m taking Alice to Mom and Dad’s for dinner so they can meet her and then we’ll probably
spend the night back at her place, but I don’t think we have anything planned before that. We can do that, right babe?” He looked to Alice for confirmation. “Maybe you could talk to Alex about getting Susan into your kids’ yoga class? She’d probably love it.”

“Oh yeah, I will! I’m sure I’d love to have her.” She gathered her purse and Uncas’s truck keys, and Cora and Nathaniel walked them to the door. On their way out, Alice hugged Nathaniel and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you for being nice to my sister and making her happy. I’m glad you didn’t give up.”

Back at Uncas’ house, Alice brought a mug of one of his mother’s herbal teas out onto the back porch, where he was waiting for her on the wide swing after changing into black sweatpants and a t-shirt printed with a red tomahawk that said ‘Custer Had it Coming’. It was cool and dark, and the soothing sounds of the night forest beyond the porch made the whole place a refuge compared to downtown. It was a nice change.

“Thanks,” he smiled at her, taking the mug of tea.

“You take care of me, I take care of you. Besides, I still feel bad since it was technically my fault you got hurt in the first place.” She sat down beside him, and he put his arm around her shoulders, drawing her in for a kiss.

“Don’t feel bad. It wasn’t your fault. And the Spider-Man underwear was still worth it. You’ll be putting that on again later, right?”

“Yes, when you’re sitting somewhere safe,” she giggled. “Hey, what’s the deal with this rock?” She picked up a hand-sized smooth river rock off the porch railing beside her.

“It’s an Indian Weather Rock,” he replied. “It’s an ancient weather prediction method, passed down by my people for thousands of years. That one belonged to my great-great grandfather.” His voice took on a mystical air and his face was dead serious as he gauged her response. Alice looked down at the rock, reading the words painted in white on its surface.

Rock wet…RAIN

Rock dry…CLOUDY

Makes shadow…SUNNY

White…SNOW

Jumping…EARTHQUAKE

Gone…TORNADO

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You are so full of crap right now.”

“I totally am,” he guffawed. “I’m kidding, it’s just a silly thing I made as a joke when I was in high school, I gave one to my mom and dad too.”

“You’re such a dork,” Alice laughed, kissing him. “I’m really looking forward to meeting your parents tomorrow.”

“They’re looking forward to it, too. My mom’s been driving me nuts for the last three days
about what she should cook. I don’t know what she’s fussing about, everything she makes is good, and she grows all her own vegetables and herbs, like her mother did.”

“Were your parents raised around here?”

“No, they grew up in Wisconsin, on the Stockbridge-Munsee reservation there. Their people were Munsee Delaware and Mohicans who were displaced from a community in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in the eighteenth century. My mom’s people, the Lenni Lenape or Delaware, were originally from an area about fifty miles south of Albany, in Dutchess County, and my dad’s Mohican people traditionally lived right in and around the Albany area. As a matter of fact, Albany was a sacred place for them – the Mohican name for it is Paupautanwuthyauk, which means ‘praying place’, or ‘council-fire place’.

“I remember learning something about that in a Native Cultures of New York class I took to fulfill an anthropology credit for school,” Alice said. “But they sure don’t teach that stuff in public school history.”

“Nope,” Uncas replied with a wry smile.

“Of course, why would they. I always wonder how different things would look if your people wrote the history books.”

“It’s all about perspective, for sure, and my folks did pretty well for themselves as First Nations people. My dad started out with the tribal police in Wisconsin, and after he married my mom, they came out here to settle down close to their people’s original home when my mom decided to go to school to become a naturopath. All the women in her family are nentpikes, it’s like a holy person who practices herbal medicine and heals people. They stayed here so she could open her practice. Then they adopted Nathaniel and I came along a while after, and we grew up here.”

“Do they still have family out in Wisconsin?”

“Oh yeah. Their parents are gone now, but my mom has a sister and a brother there, so I’ve got a bunch of cousins. We visit now and then. Maybe next time we go out you can come along, if you want to see what it’s like. It’s a different world from this one, and it’s not all sunshine and roses for sure, but it’s what they’ve got.”

“I’d love to. Those are your people and they’re part of who you are, and I’d like to know all those parts and know your family’s culture.”

She tucked her legs up and snuggled against him, and he wrapped his arm tighter around her. “You’re so worth getting stitched up for,” he murmured, kissing her hair and loving the sound of her musical laugh as she leaned her head on his shoulder.

Nathaniel woke with a start from a deep sleep when something nudged him. He rolled over to find Monty standing by the bed, prancing nervously, his tail thumping against the side of the mattress. He shoved his face against Nathaniel again, licking his arm and whining plaintively. Something wasn’t right.

“What’s going on, boy?” He sat up groggily and squinted at the clock. 2:37 a.m. He threw his t-shirt on over his flannel pajama pants and followed the dog down the hall until he stopped at Cora’s half-open bedroom door and whined again. Nathaniel paused beside him and listened as a low, distressed moaning sound came from inside.
“No… I’m coming with you… goddammit, let go of me…” Nathaniel entered the room cautiously to find Cora asleep, but clearly in the grip of a nightmare. She moaned and thrashed as if struggling with someone, her face and hairline damp with sweat in the moonlight cutting across her through the window. “Duncan! Nooooo!” she wailed quietly, sobbing in her sleep. That was enough for Nathaniel; he couldn’t bear her misery, couldn’t let her stay like that. He moved to the end of her bed and touched her foot beneath the quilt.

“Cora,” he spoke softly, so as not to jar her awake and scare her, and rubbed her ankle. “Cora, wake up. It’s Nathaniel.” She sat up with a panicked gasp. He sat down on the edge of the mattress next to her and when she looked at him, her eyes were wide with fear and confusion, still half in the dream. He drew her gently against him, feeling the frantic pounding of her heart and her rapid, shallow breathing.

“The whole world’s on fire,” she whispered brokenly.

His heart ached for her, and he held her tighter. “Ssshhhh. You’re safe, honey. You’re at home in Sand Lake, New York, and I’m here, and you’re safe with me.” He pressed his lips against her damp forehead and stroked her hair until she stopped shaking and her breathing evened out.

“All right now?” he murmured a few minutes later, looking down at her and caressing her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

“Yes. I’m so sorry, Nathaniel,” she said, her eyes mournful in the dim moonlight. “I don’t want to burden you with this kind of thing.”

“Hey, none of that. Don’t be sorry. It’s part of you, and it isn’t a problem for me. It happens to me sometimes, too. I’m glad I was here.”

She let out a shaky sigh and pressed her face against his neck, her arms wrapped around him. “Please don’t go. I don’t want you to leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he whispered, holding her close. “I’ll be right here with you.” He got into bed beside her and she laid back down with him, curling up against him with her head tucked beneath his chin and her arm looped around his waist. His fingers traced lazy circles at the nape of her neck until she relaxed enough to fall back asleep, and once he was satisfied that she was settled, he went back to sleep with her.

When he woke to the rising sun several hours later, he was alone in Cora’s bed, with Monty snoozing on the rug beside him. He got up and went back to the guest room for his jeans and boots, and once he had dressed and run a brush through his hair, he went in search of her. The house was silent, but the coffee pot was on and hot, and when he glanced out the window, he saw that the barn door was open and knew she’d probably gone out to feed the horses. He went out the back door and walked down to the pretty red barn, dew still heavy on the grass at this early hour. As he approached, he could hear music coming from inside, and he stopped in the open doorway when he saw that she was not feeding horses at the moment; dressed in dark floral-print leggings and a black leotard, she was working out her bad dream on her silks, like she had told him she often did. He had not seen her do this yet, and he watched her, utterly hypnotized. Limbs wrapped in the teal fabric high above, muscle worked beneath skin as she flipped and twisted slowly to the rhythm of the song; upside down, right side up, spinning, wrapping and climbing, then falling downward again in the most enthralling capability of the human body he’d ever witnessed. The music and her movements were full of beautiful, raw emotion that tugged at his heart, expressing what was inside her head the way mere words never could.

“Ouch, I have lost myself again
Lost myself and I am nowhere to be found,
Yeah I think that I might break
Lost myself again, and I feel unsafe

Be my friend, hold me
Wrap me up, unfold me
I am small, and needy
Warm me up, and breathe me…”

He came forward slowly to stand beneath her as the song ended. When she saw him there, she loosened the silk wrapped around her legs and let herself drop, stopping level with him and still suspended, swinging slightly and gazing at him in silence. He reached for her, taking her into his arms as she wound her silk-draped arms and legs around him, kissing his face, and then his lips. He kissed her back deeply, tumultuously, holding her tight and swaying from side to side with her wrapped up in his embrace. There was heat and desire in the fevered caress of their lips, in the silken tangle of her limbs holding him to her, but there was also gratitude and comfort, and something else that bloomed within them both, secret and unspoken, that neither dared consciously acknowledge just yet.

The daylight was growing dusky outside, fading into the gray clouds that had been gathering the last few hours. The smell of a looming evening rain was in the air, and in the waning light, fireflies blinked like lazy floating starlight in the woods behind Nathaniel’s cabin.

“I can’t believe I’m thirty years old and this is the first time in my life I’ve ever sat up in a treehouse holding hands with a boy.” Cora laughed softly, perched beside Nathaniel with their legs dangling off the edge of the platform treehouse in the big maple tree behind the cabin. They had spent the morning visiting the Camerons along with Uncas and Alice, and she had been pleased to see how well James was doing with his broken arm – it wouldn’t be much longer until the rod came out, and the cut she had stitched had healed very well. She had enjoyed getting to know Alexandra better outside of a stressful hospital visit, and she had informed Cora privately that she couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen Nathaniel look so happy. Both children had been thrilled to see Nathaniel and Uncas, and seemed very attached to them both. James was curious about both her and Alice, and asked Cora a lot of questions about being in the military and being a nurse, while Susan had immediately fallen in love with Alice. She had begged Alexandra to let her take the kids’ aerial yoga class, which she had gotten her way with. After leaving there, they had gone back to Cora’s house to set up the animals for the night and for her to fetch her fly rod, waders, and an overnight bag. The rest of the afternoon had been spent here, fishing for rainbow trout in the stream that ran through behind the cabin. The resulting haul had been cleaned and grilled for dinner, and now they were just enjoying the quiet evening.

“Well, I’m glad to be the first,” Nathaniel chuckled, squeezing the hand he was holding. “I can’t say I’ve done it either, at least not in this treehouse.”

“Hmmm… what else have you done in a treehouse?” she teased, smiling over at him and stretching her bare legs out in front of her. Damn, the woman gave him butterflies when she smiled like that. All day he’d felt like this, since finding her in the barn that morning. Something about that moment, that kiss, had ‘to be continued’ written all over it, and he couldn’t stop thinking about it. Neither could he stop staring at her. He felt like a lovesick puppy, but he couldn’t help it. Even the sight of her in muddy hip waders with fish scales and guts smeared on her jeans was sexy to him. They had since cleaned up and she had changed into an airy, faded teal cotton dress with a small
white floral print. It was knee length and sleeveless, with a deep-cut crossover front and a gauzy underdress beneath it. She looked beautiful in it, barefoot with her long hair loose, but all he wanted to do was take it off her.

“Not much else. It seemed unfortunate before, but now I think I’m glad I reserved all other treehouse shenanigans for you.” He leaned over and kissed her soundly. Just as she was leaning into him and sliding an arm around his neck, it began to rain in big, fat, wet drops. “We better get out of this tree,” he said, breaking away to help her onto the ladder. They climbed down and ran hand in hand across the grassy yard, both dampened by the rain when they reached the cover of the wide back porch.

“This is nice,” Cora said, listening to the soothing sound of the rain on the porch roof. “I’ll go make a pot of coffee and we can sit out here for a while.”

While she waited inside for the coffee to brew, she roamed around. They weren’t here too often since Cora’s house afforded more privacy, but it was a beautiful place; all wood floors and walls, with a completely open kitchen and living room typical of a cabin, and a stone fireplace in the living area. The furniture and décor was simple and rustic, and the long table behind the couch held framed photos of Nathaniel and Uncas at various ages with Sidney and Yvette, and there was a frame with photos of Nathaniel’s birth parents and sisters as well. He looked very much like his mother in many ways, but with his father’s eyes and strong features. The police academy graduation photo and the one of him and John beside their APD cruiser always made her smile; it was so odd to see him with such short hair, but he looked damn good in uniform. It was almost as sexy as the black flight suit… almost. The coffee pot alarmed its completion, and she wandered back to the kitchen for coffee cups. Out on the porch, she could hear Nathaniel messing around on the guitar that was usually parked in its case just inside the door. She knew both he and Uncas played, but she hadn’t heard it before. He was good, and though she had assumed they both must be with the way Sidney played the banjo, it was still a nice surprise. She carried the two cups of coffee out and set them on the wooden table beside the swing where he was sitting with the guitar, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He smiled at her as she sat down beside him, listening quietly. He stopped and kept looking at her, thinking for a moment, and then began to play something different. After the relaxing intro, the lyrics he sang softly to her curled around her heart like a lullaby over the sound of the rain around them.

“Baby, I see this world has made you sad
Some people can be bad
The things they do, the things they say
But baby, I'll wipe away those bitter tears
I'll chase away those restless fears
That turn your blue skies into gray

Why worry
There should be laughter after pain
There should be sunshine after rain
These things have always been the same
So why worry now
Why worry now

Baby, when I get down I turn to you
And you make sense of what I do
And though it isn't hard to say
But baby, just when this world seems mean and cold
Our love comes shining red and gold
And all the rest is by the way

Why worry
There should be laughter after pain
There should be sunshine after rain
These things have always been the same
So why worry now
Why worry now?”

Cora just stared at him, completely mesmerized by the perfection of what he was doing, of the way he always seemed to understand exactly what to do or say to make her feel like everything about him was so right. After last night when he had stayed with her after the nightmare, and this morning in the barn, she knew something had changed between them. It had hung in the air all day, an invisible yet almost palpable charge. Every time she’d looked at him she could see in him that he felt it, too, and she saw it there still as he finished the song and met her gaze. He carefully set the guitar back in its case, and they both sat for a long moment, her heartbeat slamming in her ears. She didn’t want to wait any more. Slowly, her movement rocking the swing a little, she rose to her knees beside him and climbed across his lap, her dress riding up her thighs as her hips settled against his. Her hands framed his face, stroking his hair for a moment while she looked at him and watched his eyes grow darker with the heat that flashed across them. He leaned forward and took her mouth with his, his arms coming around her and his hands spreading on her back to bring her closer. Her fingers dug into his damp hair, and she could still taste the rain on his lips as her tongue licked against them before he met it with his, each adamant stroke stealing all her senses except the fire of need burning through her body.

“God, I could kiss you for days,” his voice rumbled against her mouth.

A delicious quivering sensation passed through her lower belly at his statement. She wanted him to do a lot more than just kiss her, but right now she’d let him do anything he wanted for as long as he wanted. His hands plunged into her hair, a mass of wild waves from the rain, easing her head back to grant him access to her soft skin. He worked his way downward with lips, teeth, and tongue, over her throat, and down her chest to where the front of her dress crossed between her breasts, and she heard his soft hum of pleasure when he realized she wasn’t wearing a bra. She whimpered quietly as he nuzzled across the soft swell of her breast with his lips, crying out when he reached her nipple and caressed it with a slow stroke of his tongue through the thin cotton. His hands dragged down her back and to the hem of her dress, pushing it upward as his palms grazed over her thighs and gently gripped her hips, his fingers teasing along the lacy edge of her panties. Wet heat spread between her legs, and she could feel him hard against her there, the pressure sending her further into the madness he incited in her. She frantically sought his mouth again, every nerve in her body screaming for his touch, and wanting to touch him back.

“I want you,” he muttered between kisses.

“I want you, too,” she replied breathlessly, her mouth skating along his jaw and down the side of his neck. He groaned when her teeth nipped the juncture of his neck and shoulder and her tongue laved over the spot in sensual apology, sending a white-hot bolt of longing through him. He could barely breathe or think straight, but he found his senses again enough to stop for a moment, cupping her flushed cheek and searching her eyes for affirmation.

“Are you sure? I need to know you’re sure about this.”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” she breathed, her lips brushing across his and making him tingle all over. “Please, Nathaniel… just take me to bed.”
He needed no further encouragement. He rose from the swing, gripping the backs of her thighs to hold her in place, her legs hooked around his waist as he made his way into the house with her. He could hardly see where he was going trying to navigate toward the bedroom with her wrapped around him, kissing him all over, her hands raking over his shoulders while she held on for dear life. She giggled against his lips when he bumped into the table behind the couch, sending two photo frames onto their faces and another falling onto the couch cushions. He righted himself and kept going, until he collided with the entryway table at the corner of the hallway and the wooden lamp on top of it went crashing to the floor, rolling to one side and shining its cockeyed light into the dim hall.

“Should we pick that up?” she whispered with a soft laugh as he continued down toward the bedroom.

“Fuck it, I’ll get it in the morning,” he muttered. She gasped sharply as she slipped a little and he turned and backed her up against the wall, lifting her back up and pressing his pelvis against hers to hold her there. Her hips arched forward and he kissed her, his tongue delving into her mouth while he pulled the hem of her dress up and worked it up her back and over her head, leaving only the gauzy white underdress and her mint green panties underneath. He looked at her, her eyes like liquid chocolate, her petal-soft lips parted, and her chest rising and falling rapidly. He could see almost all of her through the gossamer-thin cotton slip – the flush on her warm skin that made her scars stand out white in contrast, and the rounded swells of her small breasts, the rose-colored nipples hard and pushing against the fabric with each ragged breath. His mouth slanted over hers again, his fingers circling over one nipple. She arched against him again, moaning, and he could feel the damp heat of her center against his groin even through his clothes.

“So damn beautiful,” he murmured. “I’ve waited so long to have you like this.”

“Please…” she gasped, writhing against him as he continued to tease her nipple.

He kissed behind her jaw, his warm breath tickling her ear. “I’m going to make love to you until you’re trembling and you can’t remember your own name,” he whispered, his hushed, silky tone rendering her nearly mindless with arousal.

“Oh God, yes… I want that. Please, Nathaniel…”

She was already trembling. This was so different from anything she’d ever felt, this desperation to be with him fully, unable to think of anything else but the need that coursed through her like fire in her veins, and it was plain that he felt it, too. He cupped her backside and pulled away from the wall, lifting her back up and pressing his pelvis against hers to hold her there. Her hips arched forward and he kissed her, his tongue delving into her mouth while he pulled the hem of her dress up and worked it up her back and over her head, leaving only the gauzy white underdress and her mint green panties underneath. He looked at her, her eyes like liquid chocolate, her petal-soft lips parted, and her chest rising and falling rapidly. He could see almost all of her through the gossamer-thin cotton slip – the flush on her warm skin that made her scars stand out white in contrast, and the rounded swells of her small breasts, the rose-colored nipples hard and pushing against the fabric with each ragged breath. His mouth slanted over hers again, his fingers circling over one nipple. She arched against him again, moaning, and he could feel the damp heat of her center against his groin even through his clothes.

“So damn beautiful,” he murmured. “I’ve waited so long to have you like this.”

“Please…” she gasped, writhing against him as he continued to tease her nipple.

He kissed behind her jaw, his warm breath tickling her ear. “I’m going to make love to you until you’re trembling and you can’t remember your own name,” he whispered, his hushed, silky tone rendering her nearly mindless with arousal.

“Oh God, yes… I want that. Please, Nathaniel…”

She was already trembling. This was so different from anything she’d ever felt, this desperation to be with him fully, unable to think of anything else but the need that coursed through her like fire in her veins, and it was plain that he felt it, too. He cupped her backside and pulled away from the wall, finally making it to his bedroom a short distance away. He set her down on the log-framed bed, and she barely gave him time to switch on the lamp before she grabbed the bottom of his t-shirt and yanked it over his head, determined to see and touch him everywhere. She gazed at him, marveling at the raw beauty of him as her hands moved worshipfully over every detail; the hard, lean planes of muscle beneath his skin, the simple, primitive hawk designs tattooed on his chest beneath each clavicle, and the sparse, dark hair that ran from the hollow of his throat, partway across his pectorals, and down his svelte abdomen in a thin trail that disappeared into the low-slung waistband of his jeans. She hooked her fingers into his belt loops, urging him toward her further. He reached for her, drawing the underdress over her head and tossing it behind him, then pulling her into his arms, his hands stroking the naked skin of her back. She sucked in a sharp breath and held it as one hand grazed over the burn scar on her left arm, raising her elbow slowly upward. He pressed his lips against the uneven surface of the tight, pearly skin, moving all along the length of it and up her arm, continuing his reverent attention over the long surgical scar across her shoulder, and then the smaller one on her collarbone. He pulled back and looked down at her, still holding her breath, her eyes glittering with tears in the lamplight.
You’re beautiful, Cora. All of you.” Swallowing hard at the intensity of what she saw in the aquamarine depths of his eyes, she took his face in her hands, releasing her breath in a rush as her mouth melded with his. Her nipples brushed against his chest, sending a rush of delicious sensation through her. Losing patience by the second, she undid his belt and the button at his waist, unzipping his fly and pushing his pants and boxers down until they pooled at his feet and he kicked them away. He got onto the bed with her, smiling with satisfaction at her urgency when she pushed him down on his back and moved over him, her silken hair brushing over his skin and her lips following it. She began at the hollow of his throat, kissing and licking at his skin across his collarbones, over each tattoo, then down the dark line of hair on his abdomen, his muscles tightening beneath the caress of her lips. She kissed the divot of muscle along the crest of his right hip, her fingers teasing along the silky length of his erection. He inhaled sharply when she traced her index finger over the sensitive tip, and again when she reached the heavy scarring on his right thigh. She had never seen it before, and she stopped for a brief second, her heart aching when she saw that it was much worse than he had ever let on. The ravaged skin was shiny and puckered around where the bullet had entered, slightly sunken with a long, Y-shaped surgical scar extending partly above and well below it.

“Oh, Nathaniel,” she sighed softly, touching her lips to it, placing delicate kisses along the length of it and then back upward. Her tenderness nearly undid him right then and there, and he could hardly stand the waiting anymore. When she came back to him, her lithe form pressed along his side, he flipped her onto her back beneath him. He took her nipple into his mouth, relishing her blissful mewl as he circled his tongue over it, then moved to the other breast and over her belly as he worked her panties down over her hips. She kicked them off, throwing one leg around his waist, and he could feel the slick heat at her center gliding along the sensitized length of him. A rough sound of pleasure emitting from his throat, his fingers slid between her legs, stroking along her wet folds to find the right spot. A keening sound broke from her when he reached it, her hips bucking against his hand and her breath coming in fevered pants.

“Enough… I need you, now,” she moaned. His mouth sought hers again briefly as he reached into the night table for a condom. She twined her legs around his hips, the tip of him resting against her sensitized flesh. He pulled back and gazed down at her, leaning on his elbows to cup her jaw in his hands. She inhaled sharply as he entered her, and he watched her face as her body settled around him, her eyes closed and a tiny smile curving her lips. He buried his face against her neck, quaking with the rush of this moment.

“Christ, you feel so damn good,” he breathed, splaying one hand on her hip as he began to move inside her in slow, languorous strokes. His other arm slid behind her shoulders, her head falling back over it and exposing the delicate arch of her throat. Her eyes opened then and met his, smoky and dark with arousal and the sensation building inside her, and she began to move with him. Her hands roamed over his back, her fingers pressing into his bare skin as her body rocked against his. It had been a long time for them both, but she couldn’t remember a single time before that had ever felt like this – so in tune with him, and so completely fulfilled, like all the scattered parts of her were suddenly drawn together again when he moved inside her, pulling together tighter and tighter into a dense, gloriously burning ache in her core. It sent blooming tendrils of ecstasy into every nerve in her body until at last that aching mass burst apart again, her climax shattering her world into a million points of light. Overpowered by the sheer force of it, a hot rush of tears pricked at her eyes and she helplessly cried out his name, holding tight to him.

Nathaniel drew in a ragged breath as Cora suddenly arched beneath him and called out his name, her body pulsing around his as she came apart at the seams in his arms. He’d never seen anything like her in his life; she was utterly exquisite this way, all aglow with euphoria, and knowing he was the cause of it made him want to roar with triumph. He threw his head back with a low growl, chasing his own release in the wake of hers, hurtling over the edge into the celestial oblivion of it. Afterward, he collapsed beside her and pulled her into his embrace, both of them shaking and
They lay there for a while, getting their bearing back as he stroked her damp hair off her face. His lips caught hers in a slow, gentle caress before she settled next to him, tucking herself against his side and gazing at him thoughtfully while her fingertips grazed over the muscular swell of his shoulder.

“What are you thinking so hard about?” he murmured, resting his forehead against hers and touching her cheek tenderly, his thumb tracing over the faint lines at the corners of her eyes.

“Just… this feels so good. It feels right to me. Not just right now, all of it. You, and the way you take all the messed up parts of me and make me feel like even the ugly things are beautiful.”

He smiled, placing tiny kisses on her nose, lips, and the little cleft in her chin. “Because they are. There isn’t one thing about you that isn’t beautiful to me, Cora.”

Her eyes softened and she pressed her lips to his again. “You’re beautiful to me, too, you know,” she whispered, her hand resting on his scarred leg. “All of you.”

Author’s Note:

Maluwe: “Damn it” (Delaware/Lenape)

I love so many things in this chapter, and I hope you do, too. I felt bad for Uncas falling off the lyra and needing stitches, but it’s also kind of funny, and it was a great excuse for him and Alice to go hang out with Nathaniel and Cora for a while. The entire reason Alice ever had a metal staircase in her apartment was so that scene could happen (sorry, Uncas!). And naturally, Alice does not freak out about all the blood, because her father is a Marine, her boyfriend is a paramedic, and her sister is a nurse, and she is a dispatcher who hears all kinds of awful things on the phone. Alice is tough. Meanwhile, Cora and Nathaniel are finally relaxing, and it…ahem…looks like they’re having a nice time. Nathaniel clearly has the patience of a saint, which is lovely. Cora is working on her stuff, and I felt it would be realistic and responsible for her to decide to see a counselor like Ed suggested in chapter 5 – she needs to be healthy in order to have a healthy relationship, and she knows this. And of course, once Uncas and Alice realize exactly what’s going on when they arrive, they are thrilled to see that things are working out for their siblings, especially Alice, who was about to strangle Cora if she did one more stupid thing to poor Nathaniel. The movie-watching scene was fun, not just for the reference to LOTM, but also because Alice and Cora got to be silly together, and most importantly, Nathaniel and Cora got to loosen up and have some fun laughing too – they need that, they’ve been WAY too uptight up till now.

I enjoyed letting Uncas give Alice some family background too, since the Greatsnakes’ culture hasn’t been brought up much yet. MohawkWoman said something a while back about how it would be funny if Uncas had one of those silly Indian Weather Rocks, and that’s where the idea for that came from – and he got his own brand of smartass t-shirt too, since Nathaniel has a bunch of them. I didn’t want to get too crazy with the culture discussion, because let’s face it, I’m a white girl, and while in my past I have spent significant time on reservations in the southwest, I am by no means an expert. I do not know what life as a First Nations person is like, so it’s difficult and inappropriate for me to write about it as if I do. I try very hard to represent culture accurately and sympathetically, and if I ever don’t, I hope you will tell me. At any rate, I thought some Greatsnake family background was in order, and by the way, TOTALLY jealous of Nathaniel and Uncas’s cabin.

Cora’s nightmare was important because it was another strong bonding moment for her and Nathaniel, and a way for her to see that Nathaniel understands and accepts that her traumatic
experience is part of her (just as his is a part of him), and that he doesn’t mind the messy stuff because he cares about her. He is, as always, so careful and tender with her, even in the way he wakes her from her bad dream. When he finds her on her silks in the barn the next morning, he understands that she’s working out the stuff in her head her own way; this gift from her sister is her therapy, she’s taking something ugly and making it beautiful, and he loves that about her. Their silent moment and embrace is powerful to me, because she is recognizing that she is simply grateful to him for his ability to empathize and for being willing to be there for her in her weakest moments—and most importantly, she is letting him. That’s a big step for her.

Which brings us to the final scene. It’s been a long time for both Nathaniel and Cora, and they are experiencing something together that puts all else they’ve ever known to shame. She’s tired of waiting now, and so is he. She knows without a doubt after everything that happened in this chapter that she is ready to take the next step with him, so clearly she grabbed that bull by the horns, and Nathaniel was only too happy to oblige (he was practically doing backflips in my brain). This love scene is long, yes, but seriously, they totally deserved all that passion and furniture-whacking frenzy after the last six chapters, am I right? And, by the way, I do feel I should address one detail: Nathaniel has chest hair in this story. Here’s why: LOTM/1757 Nathaniel, as we all know, was quite thoroughly manscaped (poor Daniel Day-Lewis, seriously, and poor Eric Schweig, because he’s got some body hair too). I don’t know specifically why Michael Mann requested Nathaniel be manscaped for the film, but historically this would have been the case. Indian cultures found facial and body hair very unattractive, and as a white guy being raised in this culture, Nathaniel’s body hair would have been consistently plucked by women in the village until it stopped growing back. OUCH. That being said, modern-day Nathaniel is a man with thick, dark hair, and there is just about no way in hell a guy with his hair and coloring would not possess at least some chest hair—and Nathaniel is definitely NOT the type to manscape. So he got a perfectly acceptable, very sexy dusting of chest hair in this story. Good? Good. Cora says she likes it.

The theme song for this chapter is “The Story” by Brandi Carlisle. I love that song so damn much, and it is absolutely perfect for Cora and Nathaniel. They were definitely made for each other. During the lyra/apartment scene before Uncas gets injured, I like “You’re My Thrill” by Billie Holiday (especially when Alice flashes her sexy new undies). Cora’s underlying theme song for her getting her shit together in any chapter is “Sunny Came Home” by Shawn Colvin. The song she’s singing along to in the kitchen scene is the very sexy “Close to My Fire” by Beth Hart, with Joe Bonamassa on guitar. They are fucking amazing together. When Uncas and Alice are out on his back porch talking, it’s “The Way I Am” by Ingrid Michaelson for Alice, and “Not Just for the Weekend” by Damien Leith for Uncas. When Cora is on the silks, the song she’s using is “Breathe Me” by Sia. The song Nathaniel plays for her on the back porch is “Why Worry” by Dire Straits, and I LOVE LOVE LOVE that song, both personally and for them. I thought it was a perfect way for him to express to her how he feels and that he will be there for her, and that she does him good, too. Last of all, when they make love, it’s “Never Let Me Go” by Florence and the Machine. Fabulous, beautiful song.

That’s it for this chapter. Thank you for reading, reviewing, PMing, etc. And, by the way, some of you guys leave reviews that make me laugh so hard that I want to be friends with you, so thank you. And thank you to MohawkWoman and BlueSaffire for all the brainstorming, especially my personal debate about chest hair, XD. Stay tuned!
Let it Breathe

Chapter Summary

Things get cozier for both couples, and a good time is had by all on a family and friends gathering at Lake George.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 8 – Let it Breathe

“The's a room inside my heart
Where no one ever goes
It's been boarded up and locked for years
And everything is gone
Then you come along and cut yourself a key
Swept the floors and opened all the windows
And said 'baby, let it breathe'

When I wake in the morning will you kiss my face
With a smile no one has ever seen
When I wake in the morning will you kiss my eyes
And say 'It's you I have loved all these years
It is you I have loved all these years'

There's a place inside your heart
Baby I believe
It's been raining there so long, sometimes
You can't hardly see
Then I come along and clear up everything
Get it right, get it right, get it right
Baby, come with me

When you wake in the morning I will kiss your face
With a smile no one has ever seen
When you wake in the morning I will kiss your eyes
And say 'It's you I have loved all these years
It is you I have loved all these years'
Yes, it is you I have loved all these years
It is you I have loved all these years'."

-Justin Kinkel-Schuster-

Early the next morning, Cora woke gradually, drawing a deep breath and stretching her slightly achy muscles. She turned over to look at Nathaniel, who was still asleep beside her, one arm flung out over his head, breathing soft and even through parted lips. His disheveled hair fell across his forehead and onto his pillow, and she knew hers must be a mess too, but sore muscles and mussed hair were worth every blessed second of the previous night. He had more than made good on his
promise to make her forget her own name - not just the first time, but twice more after that, taking her to heights she had never even known were possible before now. She smiled to herself, feeling her insides go all warm and quivery at the mere memory of the things he had done to her with his hands, body and mouth… things she most definitely wanted him to do again. She snuggled against him with a soft sigh, sliding a hand over his chest.

“Mmmmm. Good morning,” Nathaniel rumbled sleepily, turning to his side and snaking an arm around Cora’s waist to bring her closer. He opened his eyes to find her gazing intently at him with a gratified little smile on her lips, her big brown eyes luminous in the morning light and her dark hair all tangled in curls and waves around her face. The sight of her like that made his heart skip a beat and scrambled his brain for a moment. God, I’m in so much trouble now. He’d been half gone for her all this time anyway, but now… now there was no hope for him at all, not after the last few weeks, and especially not after last night. He was thoroughly ruined by her, and he couldn’t be happier about it.

“You have freckles in your right eye,” she said softly, leaning on one elbow above him to look at the tiny brown flecks scattered over the lower half of one pale green iris. He gave her an adorably crooked grin as she leaned down, raining kisses over his face.

“And you’re beautiful in the morning.” He pulled her back down onto the pillow beside him, brushing his lips over her forehead and cheeks. “Especially when you’re naked and in my bed.” His grin widened as she blushed, his hand slipping around the nape of her neck to bring her mouth to his. She sighed into him, returning the slow, achingly sweet caress of his lips and the gentle flick of his tongue. God, the man could rock her world with nothing but his mouth. She would have had more regret about what she’d been missing for the last six years, except she knew better than to think anyone else could have ever made her burn like Nathaniel did. He was so worth every minute of the wait, and anything else in between would have just been a waste of time compared to this. “Hmmm,” he murmured, tracing a fingertip over her flushed skin from her cheek down to the tops of her breasts. “I used to wonder if you blushed like that everywhere. Now I know.” He pulled the sheet away from her to peek beneath it while she giggled and blushed more. He kissed between her collarbones, then settled back beside her with a sigh. “It’s a damn shame I have to work tonight and you’re on at the hospital for the next three days.”

“It is. But you could come and have breakfast with me on Wednesday morning after I get off night shift.” She nestled along his side with her head on his shoulder, tracing the dark lines of his hawk tattoos with her fingertips.

“As long as you promise not to throw pancakes at me again,” he teased.

“Smartass,” she laughed, nipping his shoulder playfully and settling back to look around the room in the morning light. Like the rest of the house, it had wood floors and walls with exposed log rafters in the ceiling, tall windows that let in lots of natural light, and an en-suite bathroom through a wooden door on one wall. A neutral toned geometric-patterned rug with a border of elk and bear designs covered part of the floorboards, and the log-framed bed was covered with a beautiful multicolored star quilt. “I’d have expected you to be more of a model helicopter guy,” she said, pointing up at the little red and silver biplane hanging from the rafter above the bed. “Did you build that when you were a kid?”

He smiled fondly. “Kind of. Mostly my dad did, and I helped some. I told you my birth father was a small aircraft pilot - I don’t consciously remember much of the car wreck that killed my family, but I had pretty bad nightmares about it for years. So when I was maybe four or five, my dad got that plane and we built it together, and he hung it over my bed so that whenever I had a bad dream, I’d see it when I woke up and remember that my birth family was watching over me, and not be so
“Your family really is amazing. I’m so glad you had them,” she said quietly.

“Me too. I was so lucky. Without them, I’d have gone into the foster care system and probably just bounced around from home to home until I turned eighteen, or went to jail, or ran away and lived on the streets, like a lot of foster kids end up doing. Instead I had people who adopted me, loved me, and taught me good things, and made me a part of them. Not saying everything was perfect all the time. I had some run of the mill childhood trauma issues, and I was a little hard on them in my adolescent years, but they got me help when I needed it and I turned out all right. Once I got into the whole police gig as a teenager and decided I wanted to do air support, I got really focused, so I guess that was good. Maybe made me a little too serious and kind of boring, but it helped me stay out of trouble.

“You? Serious and boring? I don’t believe it.” Cora laughed.

“I was. I started working on my pilot license as soon as I was old enough to drive, and between that and getting through high school I didn’t do much of anything else. Once I graduated I spent time logging hours and flying skiers up and down mountains, and learning the search and rescue ropes from the pilots my dad worked with when he helped start that gig up with the Sheriff’s Department. Then I went to the academy, and it was all working toward air support from there. When John got killed and I got hurt, times were kind of rough for me after that, so… yeah, I wasn’t much fun. I took shit way too seriously for a long time. At some point I just had to pull myself out of that, learn to lighten up, have a sense of humor and enjoy life a little more, you know?”

“So is that what the smartass t-shirts are all about?”

“Yeah, I guess it started off as just a visual reminder to myself to remember to have a good time and be happy, and not let the bad stuff get in the way. Now it’s just habit because they’re funny and I have so many.”

“I like your silly shirts.” She paused for a moment while her hand touched the scars on his leg, her fingertips grazing softly over the dents in the muscle tissue. “Nathaniel, when you talk about getting shot… you never told me how bad it was. This… it looks like it was a lot more than just a cut-and-dry bullet through the skin. I’ve seen enough gunshot wounds to know the difference.”

He shrugged slightly. “I was still luckier than John. It missed the artery, but it did a lot of damage anyway. It tore up some other blood vessels and took a chunk out of my femur. I had surgery to remove bone and bullet fragments, and repair the muscle and other tissue damage. I developed a pretty nasty infection, and for a little while they really thought I might lose the leg. That wasn’t a good time for me. It finally got better, though, and I started to heal up, but my head wasn’t in a great place for a long time, especially after Judith left me. I don’t know what I would have done through all of it without my family.”

Knowing how bad his injury had really been made Cora’s heart break for him, made her want to hold him, to erase it somehow, even though she knew all too well there was nothing that could take away the fact that it had occurred. Part of her hated Judith for what she had done just on principle, but in the same right she was also glad for it, because otherwise he wouldn’t be here with her now. She continued to touch the scars on his thigh, thinking about how oddly things worked out sometimes. No doubt he’d been devastated by what had happened to him, as much as she had been by what happened to her; yet it made them who they were now, and made them relate to each other in a way most people could not, and that was the oddest sort of gift to come out of something so terrible. She had never expected to find someone like him; someone who understood and didn’t shy away from her baggage, someone who shone light into all the dark places inside her, made her laugh
and gave her a sense of wholeness that she hadn’t thought she could ever feel after the loss of her mother and then the trauma of the helicopter crash. What had happened to them both had carved pieces out of them that corresponded like a puzzle and made him fit with her, and she wanted to give him the same light and wholeness he gave her. She didn’t know how to tell him what was in her head yet, and there were no words she could say to him that would make the past any better. Instead she pressed her face against his neck, nuzzling the warm skin beneath his jaw in a gesture of comfort, closing her eyes for a moment as he ran his hand over her spine and through her hair in slow, lazy strokes, making her skin tingle pleasantly under his touch. Her hand cupped his face and her lips sought his, putting the things she could not say to him into soft, fervid caresses that he took and then gave back to her in return, his hands skimming over her bare skin.

“I love how good you make me feel,” she sighed between kisses, her thumb stroking over the thrumming pulse at his throat. “I want to make you feel good, too.”

“Oh, beautiful, you do. You have no idea.” He wrapped his arms around her, tumbling her beneath him and sliding a hand up her side, feeling her rise to him and the surge of aching response in his own body. His mouth lowered to hers once more, and he proceeded to tell her without words just exactly what she did to him. He would make her feel good every chance he got, and if she let him, he’d keep doing it for the rest of his life, because she already felt like forever to him. But she didn’t need to know that just yet.

“Hey, sleepyhead.” Uncas woke to Alice trailing kisses over his bare shoulder, lying half on top of him and wearing his t-shirt from the day before. “I have to get ready for work soon, do you want breakfast?”

He rolled over and threw his arm around her, yanking her on top of him while she giggled. “That depends. Do you mean breakfast in the literal sense, or breakfast in the euphemism sense? Because if you’re on the menu, I’m so there.”

She leaned down and kissed him, shivering when he ran his hands underneath the t-shirt. “Mmmm. As if last night counts for nothing,” she laughed. “I’d so love to indulge you on that, but I really do need to get ready for work, it’s getting late.”

Uncas sighed regretfully and sat up with her still draped across his lap. “Damn, and I have to work tonight. More to look forward to when I get off tomorrow evening, that’s all.” He captured her lips briefly again, absorbing the sigh and a low purr she emitted as he nipped her lower lip and his tongue stroked hers.

“If you keep that up, I’ll definitely be in trouble.” She broke away reluctantly and got up to go to the kitchen, and Uncas followed behind after putting on the clothes he’d brought with him the day before. Once coffee was ready and she had made them each an omelet, they sat down at her little bistro table together.

“How does your head feel today?” she asked.

“It’s still a little sore, but it feels better than yesterday. Cora did a great job.”

“Oh, good. At least it wasn’t worse and we didn’t have to cancel our plans. I had such a
good time with your parents last night, make sure you tell them thank you again for dinner. They’re so wonderful.” Alice smiled, taking a bite of her omelet. She could clearly see now exactly where their sons came from. Sidney was a very even-tempered man with a dry sense of humor that struck when you least expected it, and while he was gentle and funny, there was also a capable power to him running just below the surface that likely made him very good at his job. Both Uncas and Nathaniel were very much like him that way, though Uncas looked more like Yvette and had her more outgoing sense of humor. Yvette was delightful, immediately welcoming with her lovely smile and her kind, motherly doting. She had wanted to hear all about Alice’s yoga and aerial performance, and had been happy to answer all Alice’s questions about her practice as a naturopath, sending her away with a bag of several of her herbal tea blends and a jar of her muscle and joint liniment. This family had a way of working themselves right into your heart, just the way Uncas had done to her from the moment they’d met. Falling in love with him was entirely too easy, and there wasn’t a thing she could do to stop it, nor did she have any desire to. Everything about him felt like home to her.

“They loved you,” Uncas chuckled, leaning over to pet Sweet Potato when she wove herself between his feet. “My mom texted me at least four times after we left telling me how happy they were to meet you, and she wants you to come back, and Nathaniel better bring your sister over soon, the whole bit.”

“I loved meeting them too, especially your mom. I love my dad to pieces, but I was really close to my mother and it’s been a long time since I had anyone mom-like around. She’s really awesome, you’re lucky.”

Uncas sobered a little. Alice didn’t bring her mother up too often, but he knew it was because she still missed her terribly. Her long illness and death at such a formative age for Alice had been very difficult for her to process, and for Cora and their father as well. She had told him about those things, and how grateful she was for the hospice team and grief counselor who had cared for all of them during that time. He couldn’t even imagine going through that kind of thing. Worrying about Sidney being hurt or killed in the line of duty and almost losing his brother the same way was heart-rending to think of the profound loss Alice had experienced at just thirteen years old. He could certainly see why she was so close to her dad and Cora now, especially after what she’d helped see her sister through five years ago. That part he could deeply empathize with, having gone through something so similar himself with Nathaniel. He was thrilled that his parents and brother liked her and that she liked them, because he was head over heels for her, and wanted nothing more than to share his life and his family with her.

“You can borrow my family anytime you want,” he murmured, reaching over to hug her close. “And I know they’ll be happy to have you around.”

“Do you think your mom would teach me to make fry bread? Because I’d love her forever if she did.”

Uncas laughed and kissed her. “I think she’d love that. She’d probably teach you everything you wanted to know, and don’t be surprised if her and my dad insist I drag you to a powwow with us in the spring the minute you let on you’re interested.”

“Oh we should! I’d love to go, can we?”

“Sure! We usually go every year anyway. Both my parents dance, and I do some years too. Even Nathaniel learned, since he was adopted into our family and raised as one of our people.”

“Oooh, you should tell Cora that. I bet she’d love to come with us.” Alice smiled happily, glancing at the clock while Uncas cleared the table and put their plates in the dishwasher. “All right, I need to get dressed, I’m going to be late for work if I don’t get moving.”
“I’ll get out of here as soon as I get my boots on, assuming Mrs. Niblets didn’t eat the laces again.”

Alice laughed at the apropos nickname he’d given the guinea pig due to her chewing habit, following him to the living room where he found his boots unmolested by rodent teeth. “Well, I guess it’s better than the holes she chewed in your underwear the first time you stayed over. That’ll teach me to forget to put her back in her cage.”

“Yeah, well, we were a little… preoccupied that time,” he snickered, tying his laces and picking up his truck keys. “All right, I’m out. I need to head home to shower and get some stuff done before work tonight, and make sure Nathaniel’s still alive. He hasn’t answered any of my messages since last night, and we’re supposed to go grocery shopping.”

“I hope he’s all right.” Alice looked mildly chagrined.

Uncas paused on his way out the door to give her a lingering kiss goodbye, and grinned devilishly. “Don’t worry. Your sister spent the night. If she’s there and he’s incommunicado, I’m pretty sure he’s probably better than all right by now.”

“Good point. I hope for both their sakes you’re right,” she replied, kissing him one last time and sending him out the door with an affectionate swat on the rear end, thoroughly enjoying every second of watching him walk away.

“Haha! Victory!” Nathaniel yelled as Cora finally managed to topple Alice from Uncas’s shoulders into the water. He exchanged a backward high five with Cora before she climbed down off his shoulders and splashed into the lake. Alice came up sputtering and laughing beside Brian and Ashley, who had been the first couple out in the current game of Chicken Fight. On the lake shore, Alexandra Cameron sat on a beach towel chatting with Jack Winthrop, while his son Ryan played in the shallows with James, who was now cast-free, and Susan built witch castles in the wet sand. Yvette stirred a pot of beans on top of a camp stove, while Sidney co-manned the barbecue and meat prep with Ed, who sported a red t-shirt with ‘GRILL SERGEANT’ printed across the front beneath a Marine Corps logo. Tomorrow would be the Fourth of July, and Nathaniel’s birthday. This year he had decided to do a group campout with family and close friends at Lake George’s Battlefield campground, to celebrate and to watch tomorrow’s impressive fireworks display that would be put on by the Fort William Henry Museum just a short distance away.

“Man, you Munro girls are freaking brutal! You don’t mess around!” Brian laughed, shaking his head.

“Blame our dad,” Cora said, pushing her wet hair off her face. “He made us learn all the McNinja defense tactics they teach in the Marine Corps. That plus the aerial stuff – we can stay put pretty well!”

“Re-match, or are we done here?” Uncas asked.

“Hell no, I want a re-match, we’re gonna kick Cora and Nathaniel’s asses this time!” Alice grinned ferociously, adjusting her yellow floral-print bikini top.
“We’re out, we wanted to go for a little hike before it gets too late,” Ashley said. “You guys have fun, we’ll be back by dinnertime.”

“They’re cute,” Cora mused as the couple swam back to the lake shore together and walked off hand in hand toward their campsite to get dressed. “I’m glad I introduced them.”

“Yeah, me too. He’s not nearly as much of a pain in the ass now that he’s got a girlfriend,” Uncas laughed.

“They’re fun to hang out with, I’m glad you invited them. Now, about that re-match. Let’s go!” Alice hopped onto Uncas’s back and climbed effortlessly onto his shoulders, while Nathaniel ducked underwater and Cora resumed her fighting position. Uncas and Nathaniel both let loose a shrill war-whoop, and the game was on.

“Look at them. They’re like a bunch of damn teenagers down there,” Ed chuckled, arranging charcoal briquettes in the campsite’s grill.

“Well, they’re certainly all having a good time together. Too bad we’re too old to give them a run for their money,” Sidney replied, winking at Yvette.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Yvette said, switching off the propane flame on the stove and coming to put her arm around Sidney. “I haven’t seen our boys this happy… well, I don’t know that I ever have! Ed, your girls are just extraordinary, really.”

“I happen to agree, mostly because they’re so much like their mother.” Ed smiled. “They’ve been my whole world since Maureen passed, and I can’t tell you how happy it makes me to see them having so much fun, especially Cora. Nathaniel has made such a difference for her, I never thought I’d see it. She had a hard time there for a while.”

“She’s been good for him, too,” Yvette said, her dark eyes softening. “They’ve both been through so much, I think fate just has a way of bringing people together when they can help each other heal.”

“Yes, and who would have ever thought her sister would turn out to be ‘The Voice’?” Sidney chuckled. “We just thought Uncas was a little… different.”

“Now that was definitely meant to be!” Ed laughed along with him, having been let in on the Dispatcher Girl story weeks ago. “At least now I can breathe easy and hope my days of scaring off boyfriends are over. They’re outstanding men, both of them, and I hope they stick around.”

Once Alice and Uncas claimed the second Chicken Fight victory, the couples waded back to shore to dry off and get dressed to help with dinner. Nathaniel handed Cora her towel and she wrapped it around the waist of her navy blue tank suit, looking down-shore where Alexandra was smiling behind her sunglasses while she watched Jack give dolphin rides to Ryan, James and Susan in the water.

“They seem to be getting along,” she observed.

Nathaniel stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pulling her back against his bare chest. “Yeah, I thought James and Ryan might both enjoy having a buddy for the weekend – they’re only a few months apart.”

“I meant Alexandra and Jack. They’ve been talking all afternoon.”

“Huh. You’re right. I guess I should have introduced them before now.”
“Well, I can see where fixing her up with someone would be a little weird for you, having been John’s partner and all. Has she dated at all since he’s been gone?”

“Not that I ever knew. She’s had her hands pretty full. Jack hasn’t much either, being alone with Ryan. That and work are generally his primary focus, like Alex.” Jack was a single father, raising Ryan on his own since his ex-wife had left abruptly to move across the country six years before, and had wanted nothing to do with either of them since. “He’s a decent guy, at least I wouldn’t worry about her and the kids with him.”

“Well, who knows… I guess we’ll see what happens.” Cora smiled. Jack seemed to be a great father, he was genuine and funny, clean-cut and handsome with blond hair, strikingly blue eyes and a fantastic smile, and he had a steady pilot job that paid well. Not a whole lot for anyone to complain about there, so she couldn’t understand his wife just abandoning them like she had – some people just didn’t know how lucky they were. Alexandra would definitely know the value of a good man, especially when losing John would never have been her choice. “Let’s go get dressed. I’m getting cold, and I have a small birthday present for you.”

“Does it involve me taking that swimsuit off you?” he raised an eyebrow, sliding his arm around her and pulling her close for a quick kiss as they walked.

“Behave, our parents are right over there. I want your mom and dad to keep liking me, and my dad to keep liking you.”

“My parents love you, and your sister. Trust me, you can do no wrong. Just wait till tonight when they’re all asleep, far away from us…”

“You have a one-track mind these days,” she laughed softly, kissing his cheek.

“All your fault, and I haven’t heard you complaining.” He grinned broadly and kept his arm around her as they walked to their tent, pitched in a secluded spot near the surrounding trees. On their way they passed Brian and Ashley coming back from their walk, holding hands and wearing wide, sly smiles.

“Hey guys!” Brian said cheerfully. “We’re just on our way to see if your folks need help with dinner. See you in a bit?”

“Yeah, we’ll be right up.” Nathaniel replied.

“Hang on, you have stuff in your hair.” Cora reached out and plucked several pine needles and a couple of leaves from Ashley’s long black hair, her lips quirking as she tried not to giggle out loud.

“Uh, thanks.” Ashley mumbled, her cheeks turning pink beneath her copper skin. She and Brian went on their way, the sounds of their quiet laughter carrying back.

“See, I’m not the only one with a one-track mind around here,” Nathaniel said with a wink, unzipping the tent door.

That evening after dinner was eaten and most everything was cleared and put away, Cora helped Yvette wash the few dishes that remained. Ed, Sidney and Nathaniel were down on the dock with Jack, Alexandra and the kids catching lake trout in the fading daylight. Ashley and Brian were walking along the shore holding hands. Alice and Uncas sat at one of the nearby picnic tables, talking animatedly over an informational brochure on local hiking trails, looking for a good, challenging one to come back and hike together later. Cora stood drying the last pot, an amorous
smile on her lips as she watched Nathaniel help Susan reel in a small trout. He was wearing the funny shirt she had given him earlier, a tan one with a picture of Bigfoot walking in the forest that said, ‘Bigfoot saw me, but no one believes him’. He and Susan were laughing, and her heart skittered a little when he glanced up at her and waved, flashing her that gorgeous smile of his that always made her a little breathless. She waved back, her smile widening, and turned to put the pot away.

“I’m really glad you’re here,” Yvette said, coming over to stand beside Cora.

Cora smiled shyly at her. “I’m glad too, this has been a lot of fun, and having everyone together like this is nice.”

“It is. But I meant that I’m glad you’re here in the sense of with Nathaniel, in his life. I know things were a little rocky for you at first.”

“They were, yes. That was mostly my fault, though, I just had to… well, get my head straight I guess. There were things to sort out.”

“I know. And there isn’t an overnight solution to those things, but I like how happy he is now that you two have figured things out some.”

“I do, too. I was… I was afraid at first, that’s all. Of a lot of things. I wish it could have been better, and I’m sorry.”

“Oh, honey, you have nothing to be sorry for.” Yvette sighed, putting an affectionate arm around Cora. “You can’t help what happened to you. Look at most of the people here, you’ve all survived terrible things and come out stronger. You and your sweet sister, Nathaniel, Alexandra and the kids, even Jack. We all have a little darkness in us, it’s just life. Your dark side makes you whole. Not letting it rule you is the important part, and you know by now that Nathaniel understands that better than most.”

“I do. And he makes me happy, too. I’m glad he’s so patient, or I’d have run him off a long time ago.” Cora smiled wryly.

Yvette chuckled. “Those two boys are stubborn as all hell, just like we raised them to be. They’re not afraid of anything, and they’ll wait for what they know is right. Uncas knew it was Alice all along, even when we all thought he was crazy, and now look at them. And Nathaniel knew it was you, too. He needed you as much as you needed him.” She put her dish towel down and grinned. “Now, it’s getting dark, and I think it’s about time for a campfire. Sidney brought his banjo, I’ve got my autoharp, and the boys brought their guitars, and we are in dire need of some hokey camping music, don’t you think?”

The next day, the entire crew spent the afternoon exploring the Fort William Henry museum on a self-guided tour. Shortly after their arrival, a military demo was set to begin, so they filed onto the parade ground to meet their guide, a young man dressed in full 18th century British Army uniform. He and several other reenactors dressed as soldiers or Indian allies gave the onlookers background and history about the fort’s construction, and the siege in August of 1757 that saw the fort surrendered by the British to the French.
“I’d hate to be the poor bastard who lost a position this important to the French!” Ed remarked quietly to his daughters. The guide went on to describe the massacre that had occurred after the fort’s surrender, when Huron and other French-allied tribes had attacked as the British troops, militia, Mohawk allies, and women and children were leaving, killing many and taking a fair number of prisoners before raiding the original fort and burning it to the ground.

“I don’t know, Pop, but the massacre sounds even worse! How scary to be taken prisoner and just hauled off to who knows where!” Alice shuddered, holding Uncas’s hand a little tighter. They watched the weapons and battle tactics lecture next, and afterward the reenactor guides demonstrated the period muskets, flintlock pistols, and even the cannons.

“Hey, are you all right?” Nathaniel whispered to Cora after the cannon’s loud boom had subsided. Her trembling hand held his in a death grip, and she looked unsettled and a little pale.

“Yeah, I’m okay. It’s just the explosion, it… it bugs me a little. Auditory triggers are a problem sometimes.”

“Do we need to go somewhere else? We can go if you don’t want to stay here.”

She shook her head and relaxed her grip on his hand. “No, it’s fine, I promise. This is neat, and they’re done with the cannon now anyway. Besides, I want to see the rest of the fort, they even rebuilt the hospital part.”

He looped his arm around her and kissed the top of her head. “Okay.”

After the demo was over, the kids in the crowd were invited to participate in the “Join the King’s Army” activities. Jack and Alexandra elected to stay with James, Susan and Ryan while they did that, and the rest of the group went to see more of the fort and the exhibits. Ed, Sidney and Yvette perused the informative exhibits about the various indigenous tribes allied to the British and French, while the three couples went to check out the reconstructed fort surgery.

“It’s crazy to think how little they had to work with back then,” Brian said. “We’re spoiled nowadays.”

“Seriously,” Ashley replied. “Cora, can you imagine trying to handle battle trauma and smallpox in a place like this, with no real medications or clean supplies?”

“No thanks! Field medicine in Afghanistan was hard enough, and we were way better equipped. This would be insane, with nothing but these wooden tables and oil lamps to see by. Geez, this place doesn’t even have windows, can you imagine the smell and the heat in August?” She stepped into a small side room that had a couple of wooden table-beds and shelving for medical supplies. Uncas went through the doorway behind her and hopped onto a wooden table.

“You could do it, Cora! You stitched me up in your kitchen, I bet you could stitch me up in here too.” He grinned at her.

“I’m sure I could, the question is would you want me to?” She turned to the doorway to see Nathaniel standing there staring at her, smiling. “What?”

“Nothing. You’re just pretty. Want to meet me on the parade ground later and we’ll go make out on the bastion?”

“It’s a date,” she replied with a wicked grin.

“God, and I thought we were bad,” Uncas jumped off the table, rolling his eyes at Alice, who
“Ignore him, Nathaniel,” she said, “he’s probably just jealous he didn’t think of that first!” They filed out of the surgery area. Brian and Ashley went to check out the soldiers’ quarters while the others moved on to the stockade, where guides dressed as soldiers offered to mock-arrest one of them. Nathaniel volunteered, allowing the reenactors to put iron shackles on his wrists and put him in one of the small cells. Cora held his hands through the bars and they posed dramatically while Alice snapped photos with her phone.

“You know what’s ironic, is he used to be a cop,” Uncas snickered to one of the costumed guards.

“Really?” the young man laughed, breaking character for a moment. “Well, it’s awesome of you to be such a good sport, sir. I can let you out now, if you’d like.”

“No way, leave him in there for a while!” Ed called out as he, Sidney and Yvette descended the stairs to join the party. “So, what’d you do, Nathaniel? Sedition? Desertion?” he guffawed.

“Maybe he kissed the wrong girl,” Sidney added, nudging Ed with his elbow while everyone laughed.

“Hey, he’s still a cop, maybe you can put him in here next,” Nathaniel told the guard with a grin as he opened the cell door and unlocked the shackles.

“I’m retiring soon, no thanks!” Sidney replied.

“Anybody seen Jack and Alex and the kids?” Nathaniel asked.

“Yeah, they’re out there messing around on the ramparts,” Sidney answered. “They picked up some of those toy guns that shoot rubber bands in the gift shop, and the kids are having a field day.”

“Kids? Hell, I want one! Let’s go hit the gift shop!” Uncas said to Alice.

“Hell yeah, let’s do this!” Nathaniel replied, grabbing Cora’s hand as they all headed back up the stairs. A short while later, the entire group invaded the parade ground in search of their other friends, armed with an assortment of wooden muskets and trapper pistols.

“Nathaniel!” Jack yelled, waving at them from one of the bastions, just before James popped up a few feet away and shot him with a rubber band. They split into teams, Ed, Yvette and Sidney joining Alexandra, James and Susan on the ground while Nathaniel, Uncas, Alice, and Cora joined Jack and Ryan on the curtain wall.

“Hey, here come Brian and Ashley!” Uncas whispered to Nathaniel as they ducked behind the bastion for cover. Below, their unsuspecting friends stepped onto the parade ground, in search of them. Once they got close enough, Nathaniel took aim.

“They didn’t call me Hawkeye for nothing!” he grinned and let a rubber band fly from his rifle, hitting Brian on the backside. Uncas fired a second shot and hit his leg.

“Oh, I see how it is!” Brian hollered up at them, laughing. “You guys suck!”

“Hey, man, you’re Huron! You’re the enemy!” Uncas yelled back, letting another rubber band fly. Brian ducked and it hit Ashley.
“Hey, don’t shoot me, I’m Mohawk!” she giggled.

“You’re fraternizing with the enemy!” Nathaniel teased.

“Here take these!” Yvette called out below, tossing two extra toy guns to them. Brian took aim and shot back at Uncas, hitting his arm. He aimed again, but Alice shot him and he missed.

“MOM! You’re a traitor!” Nathaniel yelled over his laughter. Brian let loose another shot and hit him in the shoulder.

“Oh, hell no!” Cora stood up and aimed her pistol, hitting Brian square in the chest, and Ashley shot back at her. Soon it was an all-out war between the two parties, everyone laughing and shouting and having the time of their lives. Eventually they had to stop when they all ran out of rubber bands and it was time to head out for dinner, but everyone was happy, and Nathaniel couldn’t remember the last time his birthday had been this much fun.

When the last dusky remnants of light had disappeared on the western horizon, campers and spectators began to gather on the battleground for the fort museum’s Fourth of July fireworks display. Nathaniel and Cora had walked up a little trail near the campsite to a spot that was above the lake looking across to the fort. Below they could see the rest of their group sitting in chairs around the campfire, and Uncas and Alice seated alone together on the dock nearby. The display began at last with a cheer from the crowd and a booming series of aerial mortars, exploding in the clear, dark sky in a rainbow shower of light. From their vantage point on the ridge, they could see the entire sky reflected in the glassy surface of the lake, making the show even more dazzling. Cora sat in front of Nathaniel on their blanket, leaning back against his chest with his arms around her, marveling a little at how comfortable it had become to be like this with him and how much she missed his warmth when they were apart.

“You’re okay with the noise?” Nathaniel asked.

“Yeah. It’s not too loud from up here, and I know to expect it. And the fireworks are so beautiful on the lake, too.” She settled into him with a little sigh, laying her head back against the cradle of his neck and shoulder.

“They are. Coming up here was definitely a good idea. The perfect end to a day like today.” He held her a little tighter, pressing his lips underneath her jaw and breathing in the scent of her that was so familiar to him now. He had worried after her reaction to the cannon fire that she wouldn’t enjoy the fireworks, but she seemed relaxed and comfortable in his arms, and he was relieved. Having her here with him like this, happy and content, was all he could have wanted for this day – for any day.

Cora turned around, scooting onto his lap to loop her arms around his neck and cuddle closer to him. “It really was fun. I’m so glad you had a good day.” She gazed into his eyes, mesmerized by the glittering sparks of the fireworks reflected in them in the dark, perfectly illustrating the magic of what he made her feel inside. She leaned in to gently nuzzle his neck and whisper in his ear. “Did you make a birthday wish yet?”

He shook his head slowly and cupped her cheek, leaning his forehead against hers. She was so beautiful in this moment, illuminated against the backdrop of the sky behind her, her dark hair...
backlit and glowing like a halo around her face. Everything he wanted, and so much more than he ever could have wished for. “I don’t need to. What I’m interested in is right here.”

“Happy birthday, Nathaniel.” She smiled softly as her lips met his in a slow, sweet kiss, the sky and the lake below them on fire with bursts of light that cast colored beams across them where they sat.

Down on the dock below, Alice snuggled against Uncas’s side with her head on his shoulder, watching the fireworks light the sky above. Everything felt perfect right now, surrounded by their families and friends, her sister finally happy, and being here with Uncas. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had such a good time with anyone, or when her heart had felt so full.

“I could definitely get used to this,” she sighed, nestling closer beneath the weight of his arm around her.

“Well, I can’t promise you literal fireworks every day, but I do try.”

Alice laughed. “Nathaniel is definitely not the only smartass in your family. I meant all of this. It’s beautiful here, and your family is amazing, and I’m really happy my dad is getting along with them.”

“It has been a lot of fun. I like your dad, he’s funny.”

“That’s just because he likes you. If he didn’t like you, he’d be a lot scarier.”

“Well, he was a little scary the first time I met him, but I guess I was lucky Nathaniel accidentally met him first and kind of broke him in a little bit for me.” His laughter rumbled in his chest under her ear. “But don’t worry, even if he didn’t like me, I’d still be around. I don’t give up that easily.”

“Well, good, because I kind of like having you around.” She sat up to look at him, her fingers caressing the angle of his jaw and tracing his cheekbone.

“I like being around you. And your fish, your horse, your cat… even your shoe-eating guinea pig.”

Alice laughed. “Well, it’s a good thing, because not being able to handle the guinea pig would be a deal-breaker.”

“Every little thing about you makes me happy, Alice, and the more I’m with you, the more I want.” He leaned across and wove his fingers into her hair, his onyx eyes full of the moon and stars and flashes of light from the fireworks. His mouth slanted across hers, stealing her very breath with the tender caress of his lips and the velvet stroke of his tongue against hers. She didn’t think she could ever get tired of the way it felt to be in his arms, or to just have the loving steadfastness of his presence in her life, and his amazing family was the icing on the cake. She’d never had anything even close to this before, and now that she did, nothing else would ever compare to it.

Breaking away, Uncas gazed at her, this perfect, beautiful woman who was everything good in his world, and he thought that his heart could burst with everything she made him feel, everything he could never seem to find enough words for when he longed to tell her. He was still in awe of how things had turned out, how it had started with the sound of her voice and ended with her here in his embrace, real and wonderful. Another volley of mortars fired into the air above, showering gold over the sky and lake. Gold like her hair, falling over his hand like a honeyed river, and gold like her eyes, the sky lighting them on fire in a moment of exquisite glory.
“Nkali,” He murmured, running his fingers through the silken strands of her hair and watching it shimmer as it fell back onto her shoulders.

“What does that mean?” she whispered.

“Made of gold.” He smiled softly. “The first time I saw you, that was all I could think, was that you couldn’t possibly be real because you were like gold all over. Your hair, your eyes, your beautiful smile. And here.” He laid a hand over her heart. “Here most of all. But even before I saw you, all I had to do was hear your voice. You went straight to my heart even then, so I’m glad you like having me around, because I don’t plan on going anywhere. You make the world a better place, Alice, and I love you.”

Her eyes filled with tears, her hands reaching out to frame his face. “I love you back. So, so much.” She kissed him over and over, her arms twining around his neck. “How do you say ‘I love you’ in your language?”

“Ktaholél,” he replied, kissing her back.

She cupped his jaw, touching her nose to his. “Ktaholél, Uncas.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:

This update is later than usual for a few reasons, but it’s been less than two weeks so really it’s not that bad. Between classwork, family time, a sick toddler home from preschool, and a sick cat that had to go to the vet, writing time just did not happen this past week. I can’t promise much better for the next update since my niece is graduating from Army AIT training next week and we will be headed to Texas for that (she’s a Practical Nurse Specialist and I’m so fucking proud, you guys). I’m still shooting for two weeks or less and I might be able to surprise you, so just keep checking in.

So this chapter… well, Nathaniel and Cora are happy, and further establishing their emotional connection as she finds out more about his past in the first section, and subsequently learns that he probably had an injury recovery period about as awful as hers. No picnic for either of them, clearly, but they are good for each other. Uncas and Alice are doing just fine, and of course the Greatsnakes love her, because why wouldn’t they? The camping trip was fun to write. Lake George does have a Battlefield campground by the lake, very close to the Fort William Henry Museum and the town of Lake George. It’s always good to see these characters having so much fun, and all of them hanging out together for Nathaniel’s birthday/the Fourth of July gave a chance to see how things are going with Brian and Ashley, and for the two families to interact with each other. Even Jack and Alexandra made a connection, and Cora had a nice chat with Yvette. The Fort William Henry visit was a lot of fun, too (thank you MohawkWoman for the rubber band gun suggestion, which snowballed in my head into a good time for all). The real Fort William Henry Museum does do the history and weaponry/battle tactics demos. I waffled a little about Cora having a slightly poor reaction to the cannon fire, but it stayed because it’s realistic. She has mentioned before that explosions are what bother her, and given that her helicopter was hit by a surface to air missile and then subsequently exploded after it crashed, that makes perfect sense. That moment also illustrates that Nathaniel is mindful of her comfort while not being
overly oppressive about it, furthering the beneficial dynamic of their relationship. While I do know that the FWH Museum is the entire fort reconstructed, I don’t know if it is exactly like I described it because 1. I haven’t been there, and 2. I take some creative license for purposes of the story. In reality, the characters probably wouldn’t be allowed to hop up on surgery tables or have a rubber band musket war on the parade ground (unless they wanted to get kicked out), but this is just a story and it was fun to do. That whole part of the story at the fort presented great opportunities for some movie-related humor with a modern twist, and I hope it works! And of course in this modern setting, rather than the fort being under attack and shelled and hit with cannonballs, they get a lovely fireworks display instead (I have no idea if the FWH Museum actually does this, but it was a fun idea for the story), providing a backdrop for Nathaniel and Cora to have a sweet moment together, and for Uncas to say the “L” word, opening a whole new can of worms for him and Alice. They’re so cute together, all of them.

The theme song for this chapter is “Let it Breathe” by the Water Liars. Beautiful song, particularly for Nathaniel and Cora, but I think it does nicely for Uncas and Alice too. The first scene between Nathaniel and Cora brought to mind not only “Let it Breathe”, but also “Arms” by Christina Perri, and a little of “Such Great Heights” by Iron & Wine. The next scene between Uncas and Alice had “Sunday Kind of Love” by Beth Hart and “The Fear You Won’t Fall” by Joshua Radin. The beginning of the lake scene when they are all having fun in the water had me thinking of Van Morrison’s “Brown-Eyed Girl”. At the end of the chapter when Nathaniel and Cora are up on the ridge watching the fireworks together, I like “Half Asleep” by Hem, and for Uncas and Alice I think of “Calling You” by Blue October, and for sure Beth Hart’s “By Her” (That’s just how Uncas sees Alice).

That’s about it. I hope you’re all still enjoying the story. Thank you so much for reading, and stay tuned for more!
Hearts Don’t Break Around Here

Chapter Summary

A trip west for work brings Cora some unexpected but much-needed closure and grace, and the two couples continue to move forward with life and love.

Chapter Notes

Author's note in end of chapter text due to length.

Chapter 9 – Hearts Don’t Break Around Here

“She is the sweetest thing that I know
You should see the way she holds me when the lights go low
Shakes my soul like a pot hole, every time
Took my heart upon a one-way trip
Guess she went wandering off with it
Unlike most women I know
This one will bring it back whole
Daisies, daisies perched upon your forehead
Oh my baby, lately I know

That every night I'll kiss you you'll say in my ear
Oh we're in love, aren't we?
Hands in your hair, fingers and thumbs baby
I feel safe when you're holding me near
Love the way that you conquer your fear
You know hearts don't break around here

She is the river flow in Orwell
And tin wind chimes used for doorbells
Fields and trees and her smell, fill my lungs
Spent my summer time beside her
And the rest of the year the same
She is the flint that sparks the lighter
And the fuel that will hold the flame
Oh roses, roses laid upon your bed spread
Oh my, oh this, oh this, I know

That every night I'll kiss you you'll say in my ear
Oh we're in love, aren't we?
Hands in your hair, fingers and thumbs baby
I feel safe when you're holding me near
Love the way that you conquer your fear
You know hearts don't break around here

Well I found love in the inside
The arms of a woman I know
She is the lighthouse in the night that will safely guide me home
And I'm not scared of passing over
Or the thought of growing old
'Cause from now until I go

Every night I'll kiss you you'll say in my ear
Oh we're in love, aren't we?
Hands in your hair, fingers and thumbs baby
I feel safe when you're holding me near
Love the way that you conquer your fear
You know hearts don't break around here

Every night I'll kiss you you'll say in my ear
Oh we're in love, aren't we?
Hands in your hair, fingers and thumbs baby
I feel safe when you're holding me near
Love the way that you conquer your fear
You know hearts don't break around here
You know hearts don't break around here”

-Ed Sheeran & Johnny McDaid-

Nathaniel pulled his motorcycle into the AirMedic lot, angling into a parking space beside Uncas’s bike to shut off the engine and drop the kickstand. Behind him, Cora slid her arms from around his waist and climbed off, pulling off her helmet and unzipping her gray and black leather jacket. Noting the happy smile that was on her face, just as it was every time she rode with him, he grinned back at her and took her hand as they walked toward the building.

“You love riding,” he said, somewhat thoughtful.

“Yeah, you know I do.”

“Do you miss having your own bike?”

“Sometimes. I love riding with you, but it does make me miss my Nighthawk. Especially when you let me take the Triumph for a spin on my own. You’re an enabler,” she laughed.

Nathaniel held the door open for her and they walked into the front room, where Uncas was setting up a pot of coffee to brew. “Well... maybe it’s time to start shopping around for a new bike for you. What do you think?”

Cora paused for a moment, looking at him with an excited little smile. “I’ve kind of been thinking about it. There’s no reason not to – really, I should have done it a while ago, but I was busy with work and getting started here, and then we happened, and it just got put on a back burner I guess.”

“Well then, you should do it. Start thinking about what you want to look at, and if you want company, I’ll be happy to shop around with you.”
“Gonna take the plunge and get another motorcycle, Cora?” Uncas asked, hitting the start button on the coffee machine.

“I guess I am!” she replied, walking over to the comm board to see what was posted.

“I’ve tried to talk Alice into learning to ride and getting her own bike, but she doesn’t want to. She says she’d rather ride with me, so I can’t really be too sorry about her reasoning, anyway,” he chuckled.

“Yeah, we all know Alice likes riding with you,” Nathaniel laughed. “Especially after you two soiled the hayloft in Cora’s barn the other day.”

Cora slapped her hands over her eyes and groaned. “Did you have to bring that up? My brain is still recovering! I can’t believe you guys, in my barn.”

“Well, in our defense, it started off with an innocent trail ride. And it’s a nice hayloft. And we didn’t really expect you two to walk in on us…”

Cora snorted and smacked Uncas on the arm. “We were just seeing if you needed any help putting the horses up. Little did we know. Now my hayloft is ruined.”

Nathaniel slid his arm casually around her shoulders. “But you should know, we already broke it in anyway,” he laughed evilly while Uncas grimaced and plugged his ears with his fingers.

“Who did what in a hayloft?” Dave asked, shoving his glasses up as he came out of the dispatch office to see if the coffee was done yet.

They were saved from having to answer him when Owen walked through on his way out for the day. “Hey, I wanted to talk to you guys,” he said, pointing at one of the flyers posted on the comm board. “The annual Air Medical Services conference is the first week in August, and I need some people to go, preferably an entire transport team so we can get seminar attendance for each type of employee. Jack can’t go because of his kid, Jonathan has his other job on weekends, and Brian has some family thing going on so he can’t. Anyone here interested?”

Cora looked closer at the flyer. “Oh, wow. It’s in San Diego. I grew up there. Well, technically in Carlsbad, but same difference.”

“Is that a yes?” Owen asked.

“It sounds cool, I’d go,” Uncas said. “Dad’s retirement thing isn’t till a couple of weeks after that, so we’re free. Nathaniel?”

“I’d be willing to go too, I’ve never been out to California. Could be fun, right? What do you think?” Nathaniel looked at Cora. He knew her history there was more complicated, but he didn’t know if she had any opposition to visiting because of it.

“Well… it probably would be an interesting conference, and since you guys have never been out there, it would be fun to do some extra stuff in the evenings. Why not? I’m in, too.” She rolled out her answer before she could second guess herself. She hadn’t been out that way in years, and the last time had not been a time for great memories. Her burns and her shoulder injury had landed her at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland for long enough that she hadn’t been able to fly out to San Diego for Duncan’s funeral, which had upset her terribly. Alice had elected to stay with her in Bethesda while Ed went to the funeral. Afterward, Charlie and Lenore Heyward had come out to see her in the hospital. Lenore had given her a shell casing from the 21-gun salute, but it didn’t help her feel any better that she’d missed being there to bury her best friend and say that final
goodbye. When she’d been well enough, she and Alice had gone out to California to see the Heywards and to see where Duncan had been buried, and the trip had been an emotional one to say the least. Cora thought maybe it was time to go back for something positive, and to share some of her life there with Nathaniel, and she knew that her counselor Virginia would likely agree.

“Great!” Owen smiled. “Now I don’t have to worry about that anymore, anyway. I’ll look at available flights and get you guys set up at the hotel when I come in tomorrow, and I’ll arrange for this shift to be covered so you can fly out on Wednesday, since the conference runs Thursday through Saturday.”

Dave came out of the dispatch office again. “Sorry to interrupt, you guys, but I just got a call from Moses Ludington Hospital in Ticonderoga – you’re on standby for a critical patient transport to Albany Medical Center. They should be calling back in the next hour.”

“I’ll put in for that Wednesday off at the hospital,” Cora said to Owen. “Let’s get squared away, guys, we need to get pre-shift checks done before we get that liftoff call.”

Several hours later, Cora lay on one of the beds in the bunk room off the locker area curled up beside Nathaniel, resting after the first call. The patient they had gone to pick up had been an absolute train wreck, an emergency heart attack case who had most definitely needed more advanced care than the small rural hospital in Ticonderoga was able to provide. All told, it had been a busy and stressful trip for her and Uncas, trying to keep the patient stable after shocking him out of ventricular tachycardia once during the flight. They had all breathed a sigh of relief when they had arrived at AMC with the patient alive and conscious, and had transferred him into the care of the highly capable cardiology staff there. Now that they were back at headquarters, Cora was not particularly sleepy, just glad for the quiet time, and Nathaniel there with her. Three months ago, she never could have imagined being this comfortable cuddling on a bed with a coworker, but she and Nathaniel had been together long enough now that things blended a little easier. They weren’t in the habit of being gratuitously affectionate at work, but resting together between calls had become a fairly regular practice, since they spent most nights together outside of work anyway, and no one here cared.

“Are you good going to San Diego for this conference?” Nathaniel asked, his spine tingling pleasantly as Cora ran her fingertips up and down his forearm where it lay across her waist.

“Yeah, I am. I think it’ll be good to go for a better reason than last time, and I think it would be awesome if Alice came with us like Uncas suggested. She’ll probably have friends she wants to see while we’re attending seminars, and there’s a ton to do around there anyway, or just spending all day at the beach like we used to.”

“Okay, good. I didn’t want you to feel like you had to go just because Uncas and I wanted to, it was kind of a fast decision and we didn’t get to talk about it together first.”

“No, it’ll be fun. It’s a lot different than here, but the weather is gorgeous and the ocean is beautiful, and Alice and I’ll make sure you guys see some good stuff when we can fit it in. And you know, the conference is over Saturday evening and none of us have to go back to work till Monday night…”

“True. What are you thinking?”

“That it might be good to stay an extra day and fly out Monday morning. Do a few extra things, and… I’d really like to try to visit Duncan’s parents, they still live in Carlsbad, and Alice and
I haven’t seen them since a few months after everything happened. I mean, I don’t expect you and Uncas to go or anything, but - ”

“Why wouldn’t we?” Nathaniel propped himself up on one elbow, looking down at her quizzically. “They’re your best friend’s parents, and they’re very important to you and Alice. I’d love to meet them, and I’m sure Uncas would, too.”

Cora’s eyes went soft, and she smiled gratefully up at him. “All right. I’d like you to meet them, and I think they’d like to meet you, too. I just didn’t want to assume or make that decision for you. It’s a little weird considering their son was in love with me.”

Nathaniel was tempted to tell her that he couldn’t really blame Duncan for being in love with her, but that was dangerous territory this soon. Instead he leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose. “If it’s important to you, it’s important to me, too. We’ll stay the extra day, and it’ll be great.”

Cora sighed contentedly as he kissed her forehead, and resumed running her fingers gently along his forearm and the back of his hand, feeling the crisp hair, corded muscle, and the prominent blood vessels beneath the tanned skin.

“Your arm veins are amazing,” she whispered, lifting his forearm into the soft lamplight, her index finger tracing his cephalic vein. “You’re pretty much every nurse’s wildest dream, you know.”

“Yeah, they never had a problem getting an IV when I was in the hospital, though after a while I just had a PICC line, after the infection set in.”

“Seriously. I could throw an IV catheter like a dart and get a good stick on you,” she giggled, her fingertip moving down the median antebrachial vein.

Nathaniel chuckled at the gleam in her eyes and took his arm back. “Hey, now, don’t go getting any wild ideas.”

She sat up and grinned wickedly down at him. “Hmmm. Wild ideas about throwing sharp objects… or wild ideas in general?”

“Uh… that depends on exactly what you mean by ‘wild ideas in general’, ” he replied, suddenly feeling warm. He watched her curiously as she got up from the bed, going to the bunk room door to close it and calmly throw the lock. She turned to come back toward him, one brow raised and a naughty half-smile on her lips, and slowly began to unbutton her uniform shirt, exposing a sheer pink and black lace bra that was in no way utilitarian or what she typically wore at work. Had she planned this?! His pulse raced, her sudden and unexpected brazenness incredibly arousing, but also confusing. “Cora… what the hell are you doing?” he asked in a mildly strangled voice.

“What’s it look like?” she murmured silkily, dropping her shirt to the floor and then shedding her cargo pants, revealing panties that matched her bra. She crawled back onto the bed with her knees on either side of his hips and unzipped the front of his flight suit, laughing softly at the highly appropriate t-shirt he wore underneath that said ‘I meant to behave, but there were too many other options’.

Nathaniel stared incredulously at her, poised above him in nothing but pink and black lace, while she slipped her hands seductively beneath his shirt. “But…we’re at work? I mean, you always said before - ”

Cora shrugged. “Virginia says I should find new ways of stepping outside my comfort zone.” She leaned down, her lips bare millimeters from his. “So I’m trying to engage in a little professional
misconduct before we get another call. Unless you don’t want to, that is.” Her tongue darted over his lips. He groaned and sat up, yanking her down onto his lap and kissing her deeply.

“Somehow, I don’t think this is quite what she meant,” he murmured with a devilish grin, “but I have to say, I like Virginia more and more as time goes on.” He slid his hands over her smooth skin to bring her against him, letting her newfound audaciousness have free rein.

A couple of hours later, Uncas walked into the locker area to let Nathaniel and Cora know about another standby call that had just come in. He saw that the bunk room door was shut, which was unusual, but he figured they had probably just wanted it dark in there so they could sleep for a while. He knocked lightly on the door and tried the knob, but it was locked. *What the hell?*

“Hey, are you guys awake in there?” He called out, knocking again. “We’re on standby!” This time he heard some rustling, a light thump, and a giggle. A moment later, the lock tumbled and Nathaniel threw the door open. Cora sat behind him on one of the beds, hastily pulling her boots on, her cheeks pink.

“Sorry, we were asleep.” Nathaniel said.

“Uh-huh. Since when do you need to lock the door to sleep here?” Uncas cocked a brow and crossed his arms over his chest.

Nathaniel grinned at him. “Oh, we locked the door before that. We just forgot to *unlock* it before we fell asleep.”

“That’s it, I’m sleeping on the couch in the lounge forever now,” Uncas groaned as they filed out past him. “You guys are un-fucking-believable. What is this, retribution for the hayloft?”

Cora tapped his shoulder as she passed. “Tag, you’re it,” she whispered, snickering softly. She caught up to Nathaniel, grabbing his hand on their way out.

“I don’t get paid enough for this,” Uncas muttered, shaking his head and laughing as he followed behind them.

“So where’s everyone headed for educational fun today?” Uncas asked as the four of them congregated in the hotel elevator on the first morning of the conference in San Diego.

“You and I will be together for most of the morning, I think,” Cora told him, looking at the itinerary. “First on the list is *Considerations for Transporting the Cardiopulmonary Support System Patient*. After that there’s one on managing blood pressure in head injury patients.”

“I’ve got a thing on flight safety for pilots, and then a session on the new flight data monitoring system requirements for next year. I wonder if I could convince Owen we need a new helicopter after this,” Nathaniel joked.

“Hey, you’re in the right place to schmooze, there’s probably more than one sales rep here,” Uncas replied as they exited in the ballroom hallway on the first floor, where conference attendees milled around in groups.

“I’m heading off to Balboa Park while you guys are doing your thing,” Alice said, her arm around Uncas’ waist. “I’d like to go to the botanical gardens and maybe the zoo. They have tree kangaroos, and they’re so adorable!” She bounced with excitement.

“It takes so little to please you,” Uncas said with an affectionate smile. “Don’t bring one
home, ‘Tato would never get over it.”

Alice giggled and gave him a kiss. “You guys better get going before you’re late. I’ll see you this afternoon, and I’ll find something fun for us to do when you’re all done today.” She commandeered the rental car keys from him and headed out.

“I’ll see you for lunch, hopefully, unless I get tied up with all the pilot stuff. If not, I’m still taking you out to dinner tonight,” Nathaniel said, kissing Cora goodbye and walking toward his assigned ballroom. She watched him go with a crooked smile, deeply appreciating the rear view of him in khaki slacks and a crisp slate-blue shirt.

“Have fun at your Catalina Wine Mixer, flyboy!” Uncas called after him.

“POW!” Nathaniel replied, throwing a fist in the air.

Cora laughed and rolled her eyes. “You two are such goofballs.”

“Takes one to know one,” Uncas teased back.

Cora punched his arm affectionately. “You’re just lucky my sister loves you. Come on, let’s get in there before all the good seats are gone, I hate sitting in the back.” They went into the ballroom together to kick off the day of classes, grabbing coffee at the refreshment table before they sat down a few rows back from the lecture podium.

After the seminars had ended that afternoon, Alice suggested that the four of them visit the Self-Realization Fellowship Meditation Gardens in Encinitas, several miles north of their hotel. After the busy day around so many people, they had all readily agreed, craving a little peace and quiet. The gardens were the perfect place for it, serene and full of winding paths, colorful tropical vegetation and flowers, mini-creeks and waterfalls, and koi ponds, with seating in various locations to encourage people to sit and meditate. Located on a cliff above Swami’s Beach, the edges of the gardens boasted beautiful ocean overlooks, and a steep wooden stairway at the south end led down the rocky cliff to the beach.

“This place is amazing,” Uncas whispered. “I’m so glad we were done early enough to make it over here before they closed it for the day.”

“Our mother loved to come here,” Alice replied quietly. “She used to bring us here all the time when we were growing up.”

“The plants here are so different from New York,” Nathaniel mused as they walked. He and Uncas were, of course, more accustomed to the eastern woodland environment they’d grown up in, and this little paradise was something else altogether; much like the rest of California. It was pretty here with all the big, green foliage and bright hibiscus bushes along the streets, and the Pacific Ocean had a much different look and feel than the places he’d been on the Atlantic coast. Nathaniel watched Cora walking with Alice a little ahead of them, beautiful in a deep red sundress, her creamy skin glowing and her dark hair pulled half up, curling in the salty sea air. He kept trying to imagine her living around here at this point in her life, or being anything like most of the tanned, glamorously made-up women who were all over the place in this city, but he couldn’t. All he could conjure up was images of her in shorts and muddy rubber boots in her garden; lying on a blanket up in the cabin’s treehouse looking at the stars, fly fishing in the kill with wild purple daisies in her hair and Monty splashing in the water next to her, or sitting on her porch swing snuggled against him, smelling like sunshine, lavender, and alfalfa hay. All the places she really belonged. Home. But really, everywhere she was with him felt like that, even here where everything was different, because she had once lived here and she was sharing it with him. What he felt with Cora transcended
anything he could put into words, and though it scared him sometimes to admit it, he knew he’d fallen completely in love with her. He just couldn’t bring himself to tell her yet because he wanted to give her time to be sure she felt the same way. He trusted her implicitly with his heart, and he wanted the same trust from her, wanted her to know without a doubt that if she let him love her, let him hold her heart, he would never break it.

Nathaniel looked over at Uncas and the way he stared at Alice like there was nothing and no one else in the world, and smiled. He finally understood that look on his brother’s face, and the simple joy he took in everything that he loved about Alice. Catching up to Cora, he took her hand in his and kissed the top of her head. The four of them continued through the gardens, breathing in the scent of the lush vegetation and watching the bright koi fish swim in their ponds while a maintenance worker fed them cut up oranges, explaining when Uncas asked him about it that it helped brighten their golden coloring. When they had made a complete circuit of the gardens and came out at the south end by the stairs to the beach, Nathaniel glanced at his watch.

“We better get going, I made us a dinner reservation,” he said to Cora.

“Where are you guys going?” Alice asked.

“He’s taking me to Chart House,” Cora replied with a smile.

“Oooh, fancy. Good choice, Captain Hawkeye, you’re winning.” Alice winked at Nathaniel. The beachfront restaurant in nearby Cardiff was a popular spot for a romantic dinner, with floor to ceiling glass walls that provided a spectacular ocean view.

“Well, I figured as long as we’re here, I’d take advantage of the opportunity to take her out on a date somewhere nice,” Nathaniel said. “What are you guys going to do, head back to the hotel?”

“I think we’ll stick around here for a bit, maybe watch the sunset and take a walk on the beach before we go grab dinner and head back,” Uncas replied. “You guys have fun on your date, we’ll see you in the morning.”

Nathaniel and Cora made their exit toward the east end of the gardens where they had parked on the street. Uncas and Alice headed down the long cliff-side staircase onto the picturesque beach, removing their shoes to walk barefoot on the narrow strip of damp sand between the cliffs and the waves that gently rolled in. Uncas marveled at how time fell away in a place like this, how you could just lose yourself in the peaceful sound of the ocean. The beach was deserted at this hour on a weeknight, leaving him and Alice walking alone together with the gardens and palm trees waving in the salty breeze on the cliff above. Their feet left prints in the wet sand that washed away as the waves lapped at the shore, swirling around their feet and ankles before retreating back. Hand in hand, they walked for a while and then sat back on the smooth boulders near the cliffs to watch the sun set over the ocean. Being from the opposite coast, Uncas had only ever seen photos of a Pacific sunset, and there was no comparison to the real thing. The thin clouds in the sky were streaked with a glorious array of gold, orange and pink, blinding ribbons of rose-gold light stretching toward them on the water from the sun that seemed to be sinking right into it.

Alice sat there beside him in all her radiance in her olive-green jersey dress, suffused with the glow of the setting sun that made her hazel eyes look like they were on fire. He loved her so much, this beautiful golden woman. He wanted to spend his life with her, no matter where they were, make a home and a family with her, and make her part of his family. He recalled telling Nathaniel months ago after hearing her on the radio that one day he would find her and marry her. Back then, he had been determined to find the girl with the beautiful voice, but he’d been half joking, never realizing that just a few weeks later he really would find Alice. And now he really did want to marry her. He
didn’t care that they had only been together a few months; he knew she was it for him, and he was pretty sure she felt the same way. He felt like he’d spent his whole life just waiting for the glory of that first glimpse of her, that shy smile in the light of a setting sun on the other side of the country. Now she was here, smiling lovingly at him in this setting sun with nothing but the fading light and the sound of the ocean around them, and he thought surely this must be a little bit of what heaven was like, because there couldn’t be anything better in this world than loving her.

“I wish I could just stop time right now,” he murmured, his fingertips stroking her cheek. “Just freeze this forever, being here with you.” His arms slid around her and he pulled her close. “I love you, Alice.”

“I love you, too,” she whispered, tipping her face up to meet his.

He held her close as he kissed her in the gloaming, breathing her scent and the smell of the salt water. It wasn’t quite time yet, but someday soon, he would ask Alice Munro to marry him.

 Damn, I forgot how good this place is after all this time,” Alice sighed, taking another bite of a garlic shrimp taco. “There is no such thing as legit street tacos in upstate New York!”

“This definitely knocks sushi out of the park, we should have just come here in the first place,” Uncas said, polishing off his second pollo asado taco.

Cora rolled her eyes and laughed. “God, that sushi place just had ‘Hell No’ written all over it, but in my defense, it looked perfectly normal from the outside!”

Nathaniel grinned, spooning pico de gallo onto a carne asada taco. “Hey, if nothing else, we’ll never forget the experience. Hell, I’ve arrested people in places calmer than that.”

They all laughed at this. Driving around earlier trying to pick out a place to stop for dinner, Cora had chosen a sushi restaurant that was unassuming from the outside. Walking in, they had all been taken aback to discover it was more of a club than a restaurant, with neon lights running under the bar area that was crawling with trendy-looking patrons, and loud club music pulsing at a headache-inducing volume so that they could barely hear one another over the commotion. Immediately realizing their mistake and having no desire to try to sit down and eat a nice meal together in such a place after a busy last day of the Air Medical conference, they had walked right back out. Alice and Cora had elected to drive the distance from Cardiff to Oceanside near Camp Pendleton to take Uncas and Nathaniel to Los Tacos instead. The little hole-in-the-wall restaurant didn’t look like much at first glance, but they had excellent food. It was a favorite hangout for Oceanside residents, especially Marines, and the girls had loved it when they had lived here. Since the conference had ended this afternoon, tomorrow would be their extra day to have fun and visit with Charlie and Lenore Heyward. They had been very excited to hear that Cora and Alice were coming for a visit, and that they would get to meet Uncas and Nathaniel. Cora had felt a little odd telling Lenore that she had met someone; Duncan’s feelings for her had been well known by his parents, and Cora had always felt badly about her lack of reciprocation. Lenore had assured her that they loved her like a daughter no matter what, and that her being Duncan’s friend mattered more than anything, even to Duncan. When she had called to tell them about the impending visit and had informed Lenore that she would be bringing Nathaniel along, the other woman had actually choked up for a moment, expressing how happy she was that Cora had finally decided to move forward with her life and had met someone good for her. Cora smiled and leaned against Nathaniel, tapping her foot to the beat of Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers’ American Girl playing over the radio. This whole trip had been so much happier than her last visit so far, and it pleased her and Alice both to share all their favorite California haunts with Nathaniel and Uncas. They seemed to be enjoying it equally, getting to see things that were different from home, and where the girls had lived most of
their young lives before moving to Albany.

“Holy shit.” A shocked male voice said behind her. “Munro, is that you?”

That voice… Cora turned around in her chair and her heart leapt into her throat at the sight of the handsome, bronze-skinned man standing there holding a loaded tray of food. Frejo. His black hair was still cut high and tight, though his muscular forearms sported an array of tattoos that she didn’t remember him having before. He looked like he didn’t know whether to smile or cry, and Cora felt the same. The last time she’d seen him had been the worst day of her life, when he’d helped Duncan pull her out of the Osprey wreckage, and he’d kept her from going after Duncan before the explosion. After that she’d been sent to the hospital in Bethesda, he had finished out his tour at Bagram, and she’d been med-boarded out of the Navy the following year. She’d talked to him and some of her other crewmates here and there over the years, but hadn’t seen anyone since that day.

“Frejo!” she exclaimed, jumping up out of her chair and nearly knocking it over. He set his tray down on the empty table next to him, grabbing her in a crushing bear hug, lifting her off her feet.

“What the fuck are you doing here, man?! The last time I saw you… Christ it’s good to see you!” He put her down and backed off to look at her.

“It’s good to see you too! I’m here with my boyfriend and his brother, we’re in town for a conference for work, and my sister came with us,” Cora explained breathlessly, gesturing at Nathaniel, Uncas and Alice. Frejo glanced behind her, taking notice of the rest of her party.

“Hey, sorry if I startled you guys,” he apologized to them. “I’m Gabe Frejo. Cora and I served together in Afghanistan.”

Alice got up from the table and came up to him. “I’m Alice Munro, Cora’s sister. We grew up with Duncan Heyward.” She reached out to hug him. “I know who you are. You and Duncan saved my sister’s life. Thank you.” She sniffled a little, and Frejo smiled nervously and shrugged. Nathaniel stood up and Cora introduced him and Uncas to her crewmate. A moment later he was joined by a short, curvy, very pretty Hispanic woman with long dark hair, golden-brown skin and almond-shaped brown eyes. He introduced her as his wife, Serena, to whom he’d been married for two years now, and he proudly announced that they were expecting a baby after the new year. After congratulations and full introductions for Serena, Cora invited them to sit down with them, and Nathaniel and Uncas dragged another small table over to join up with theirs for the extra guests.

“So what are you doing in San Diego, Frejo?” Cora asked. “Last I talked to you, you were getting ready to do a tour at Landstuhl, but that was three years ago.”

“Well, I guess I was kind of inspired by you to further my career. I finally finished my Bachelor’s in Nursing and got promoted, so now I’m a permanent party RN here at National Naval Medical Center Balboa. Livin’ the high life, getting ready to be a dad, you know?” He grinned at her and put his arm around Serena.

“Good for you!” Cora smiled. The last time they had talked, neither of them had been in a very good place mentally, and it was great to see him doing so well and moving forward with life. They chatted for a while about his work at Balboa and life in general, and she talked with Serena some, finding out that she was from Los Angeles, and worked as a physical therapist at the VA hospital in La Jolla. Cora told him about life after being discharged from the Navy, and starting work at Albany Medical Center.

“So now you’re here for what, some kind of medical conference, you said?” Frejo inquired, taking a swig of iced tea.
“It’s a conference for MedEvac teams, actually. I didn’t get to tell you yet, but I took a part
time job with a MedEvac company back in April, which was how Nathaniel and I, and Uncas and
Alice, met. Alice is a dispatcher in Albany, but the rest of us are all on the same flight team. Uncas is
a paramedic, and Nathaniel is a helicopter pilot.”

“No shit?” Frejo grinned broadly. “Working MedEvac and dating the pilot, huh? You
civilians,” he snickered. “But seriously. Never in a million years did I think the last time I talked to
you that you’d ever get back in the air. That’s fucking awesome, Munro, I’m really glad to hear it.
You always were a damn good flight nurse.”

“Yeah, well… I kind of missed it after a while, you know?"

“No, I hear you. Sometimes I do too, but I’ve got everything going for me here now, so I’m
happy where I’m at. And you seem happy, too.”

Cora smiled and squeezed Nathaniel’s hand. “I am. Took me a while to get there, but I really
am.”

They sat and talked for a while longer, sharing some happier deployment stories with the rest
of the group, what they knew of their other teammates and how they were doing, and catching up on
the last few years of what they had both been doing outside of work, and how Cora liked working
civilian MedEvac. Frejo chatted with the others quite a bit as well about their jobs and interests, and
he and Uncas got along great. He seemed very interested in Nathaniel, especially once he found out
more about his past as a police officer and air support pilot. After a while other restaurant patrons
began to filter out the doors, and Cora looked down at her watch, shocked to find that it was getting
close to closing time. They got up to leave, congregating out front in the parking lot to say final
goodbyes. Frejo turned to shake hands with Uncas and accept another tearful hug from Alice, then
shook Nathaniel’s hand, speaking quietly to him off to the side.

“I’m glad she met you. You kind of get where we’ve been, and she needs that.” He gave
Nathaniel a one-armed hug, thumping him on the back. “You better take good care of my sister-in-
arms, man. Don’t break her heart, or I’ll come looking for you,” he joked.

“No chance of that, don’t worry. It was really good to meet you, and for what it’s worth, I do
really want to thank you.”

“For what?”

“Making sure she got out of that desert alive. She’s the best thing that ever happened to me. I
owe you big-time for that.”

number, Munro, don’t be a stranger now.”

“I won’t. And you guys better keep in touch too, I want to see that baby!” she replied, giving
Serena and him a last hug.

“I’m proud of you for getting back in the air. Heyward would be proud of you, too, you
know? Tell his parents I said hi, and maybe I’ll come see them soon too.”

“Yeah. I will. Thanks, Frejo, it was really good to see you again. I’m proud of you, too,
you’ve done well for yourself.” Her eyes glittered with tears as she watched him and Serena get into
their car and leave, waving out the windows as they pulled into the street.
“You were not kidding about those pancakes being the size of manhole covers. I may never need to eat again,” Uncas said as the two couples left The Potato Shack Café. They had started their last day here with breakfast at the café, famous for its giant pancakes, which had been another favorite family dining spot for the Munros when they had lived in the area.

“Don’t worry, we can walk some of it off while we play tourist, and then we’ll hit the beach,” Alice said, grabbing his hand.

Making good on Alice’s plan, they spent a couple of hours walking down the 101 into Leucadia, checking out the array of surf shops and quirky little gift stores. It was a clear, sunny day, the ocean air warm and humid, perfect for spending time outdoors. The sidewalk was crowded with people – residents, tourists, and beachgoers, dressed in bright summer colors, and the vibrant hibiscus bushes along the street stood out in the bright sun with their dark green leaves and bright pink and yellow blooms. Nathaniel plucked a flower off one as they passed it, stopping for a moment to tuck it behind Cora’s ear, the deep fuschia color a perfect match to the flowy tank top she was wearing with her shorts and sandals. He kissed her cheek and grinned down at her, adoring the way she still blushed when he touched her.

“You guys are so fucking cute, it’s disgusting,” Alice giggled.

“I thought that was us?” Uncas interjected, hooking his arm around her neck and drawing her in for a kiss.

“In my opinion, you and Uncas definitely win the puke-factor,” Cora replied to Alice with a wide smile, sliding her hand into Nathaniel’s back pocket as they walked on. Uncas urged them into another shop that sold wood carvings and other tropical décor, citing that he and Nathaniel needed to take home a Tiki mask for the cabin. The shop was owned by a native Hawaiian man, and in talking with him about the various hand-carved and hand-painted masks in the shop, they discovered that he had made many of them himself, and others had been made by his family members, who had been wood carvers for generations. This resulted in a long and very interesting conversation between him, Uncas, and Nathaniel about both Hawaiian culture and Stockbridge/Munsee culture, and Uncas’ interest in the traditional carving methods used by the man and his family members. When their visit concluded, they left with a beautiful mask that the owner had carefully helped them choose, explaining that it represented Kane, the Hawaiian deity of light and life. He sent them off with a smile and a hearty Aloha, handing Uncas a shop card along with the wrapped mask and telling them all to visit anytime they were in town again.

Leaving the shop, they headed back toward where the rental car was parked to stow the mask and grab their suits and towels to spend a few hours at the beach before they headed to the Heywards’ in Carlsbad. On their way, they passed a college-age guy busking outside a small sidewalk café with his guitar. The foursome stopped to listen and drop some cash into the open guitar case, and Uncas and Nathaniel exchanged a sly grin, grabbing Alice and Cora for an impromptu sidewalk dance when the musician began playing a popular Ed Sheeran song. Café patrons and passersby smiled at the two couples, who were clearly enjoying themselves and each other. Cora giggled as Nathaniel dipped her backward and brought her back to him with a broad grin. She smiled up at him, the crowded sidewalk around them melting away as she looked into his brilliant eyes, the song’s lyrics speaking to her through his soul-baring gaze, telling her things he had never yet put into words; things that had frightened her when he’d first let her see them there because she had known he could make her feel them back.

“…And I’m thinking ’bout how people fall in love in mysterious ways
Maybe just the touch of a hand
Oh me, I fall in love with you every single day
And I just wanna tell you I am

So honey now
Take me into your loving arms
Kiss me under the light of a thousand stars
Place your head on my beating heart
I’m thinking out loud
Maybe we found love right where we are…”

And maybe they had. Cora was momentarily stunned by the sudden revelation that she no longer feared what she saw in Nathaniel, what he silently expressed to her with every touch, every kiss, every sweet, gentle little thing that he did. She was no longer afraid of what he felt, because she felt it back, and she at last let go and allowed herself to consciously think it: *I love him*. There was a breathless vulnerability to her silent admission, and though part of her brain longed to blurt it out right then and there, she could not verbalize it just yet. It was too new, like a fragile bud opening to the sun for the first time. She was still just a little wary of it, still needed to keep it safe inside her for just a little longer. Give it time to open fully, give herself time to wrap her head around it and know just what to do with it. For now, she simply let herself absorb this moment of realization, and the quiet, delicate wonder of giving herself permission to love the man who held her in his arms.

Cora couldn’t help feeling a little shaky as she pulled the rental car into the Heywards’ driveway late that afternoon. The modest little white stucco home with its red Spanish-tiled roof and brown front window shutters and garage door was exactly as she remembered from all the years she and Alice had lived one street over. The last time they had come here more than four years ago, everything had still been so fresh and painful, and the rawness of her guilt and regret for not being there with them to see their only child buried had hurt almost as much as helplessly watching that Osprey explode and knowing there was no saving any of those men. Before making their way over to the house, the four of them had gone out to Miramar National Cemetery so she and Alice could leave flowers on Duncan’s grave; they had not wanted to leave without doing so. Nathaniel and Uncas had been quiet during the visit, letting the women have their space to pay their respects to their friend. The first time they had gone to see the grave, Cora had felt a hollow, morbid despondence standing there in front of the white marble marker, unable to push away the macabre thought that all that remained of her childhood friend on this earth was now buried in the well-manicured ground beneath her feet. This time she had laid her armful of his favorite purple heather before the stone, knowing that there was far more of him left in this world than what lay here, and it served his memory better to spend time with his parents, and remember everything they had all loved about him that would be with them forever.

As they exited the car and started up the walkway to the Heywards’ front door, it flew open, and Lenore ran to Cora and Alice, throwing her arms around them both. She was still the same, just a little older, her short strawberry-blonde hair streaked with a little grey, and her blue eyes full of happy tears. Charlie came out behind her, shouting out a greeting, ever the drill instructor just like Ed Munro. It still gave Cora a nostalgic pang to see how much Duncan looked like him. He’d had Lenore’s red hair, but his square chin, low, straight brows and sharp, dark brown eyes were all Charlie.
“Oh, girls, I’m so happy to see you both! You’re just beautiful, look at you!” Lenore cried, holding each of them out in front of her while Charlie introduced himself and shook hands with Nathaniel and Uncas. When she was done fawning over them, Charlie gave them each a warm hug, and Lenore went to the men. “I’ve heard so much about you both, it’s lovely to meet you. You must be Uncas,” she said, grasping his hand in hers and talking with him for a moment. Nathaniel smiled; she couldn’t have been more than five feet tall, and he and Uncas looked giant next to her, but he got the distinct feeling that she could hold her own despite her size. She turned to him next, and he sobered a little, still somewhat jittery about meeting the woman who had once aspired to be Cora’s mother-in-law. “And this must be Nathaniel.” She took both his hands in hers and stared up at him. “So you’re the one who finally stole our Cora’s heart. You must be something special to accomplish that feat.”

Nathaniel didn’t know what to say to that. “Well, ma’am, I don’t know that I’m anything special, but she is. Me, I’m just lucky, I guess.”

Lenore’s serious face broke into a wide grin, her blue eyes sparkling. “I like you already, you’re a smart man!” She patted Nathaniel’s hand. “Come on in the house, everyone, I’ve been cooking all afternoon, and there’s a pitcher of iced tea ready to go so we can sit on the back patio and visit.”

Following the Heywards inside, the house was a comforting haven of familiarity to Cora. The furniture was different than what they’d had when she was younger, but it still smelled the same, fresh and bright and welcoming. Her eyes rested solemnly for a moment on the living room mantel, where Duncan’s casket flag was displayed in a triangular wooden case that had a shadowbox at the base that held his photo and all his patches and medals, including his Purple Heart. Her own Purple Heart remained in its box at home, tucked away in a drawer with the other things from her uniform. They all sat down together out on the Saltillo-tiled back patio, settling into conversation. Lenore and Charlie talked more with Uncas and Nathaniel about their family and backgrounds, curious about the Greatsnakes and their culture, and what had taken them from Wisconsin to New York. While neither man had a military background, Charlie seemed satisfied with their career choices, and both Heywards were solemn with empathy when Nathaniel explained what had taken him from law enforcement to MedEvac. Over a delicious dinner of pesto chicken and pasta, the conversation shifted to what everyone had been up to the last several months. The Heywards talked about the road trip they had taken together on Charlie’s touring motorcycle back in June, having ridden to Yosemite National park for a few days, and then touring through Oregon and Washington, and finally returning home down the coastal highways. Charlie asked Cora if she was still riding, and she excitedly told him about the new bike she had bought just the week before, a sleek midnight blue Honda Shadow Phantom. This got Nathaniel and Uncas talking to Charlie about motorcycles, and when Charlie found out Nathaniel also owned a Triumph bike, he dragged them both out to the garage to show them his, which he’d had since Cora and Duncan were kids.

While the men hung out, Cora and Alice helped Lenore clear the table and clean up the dishes, while Lenore gushed to them about how much she liked Uncas and Nathaniel. When they were done, they sat back out on the patio for a while to talk more.

“I’m so glad you girls came out to visit,” Lenore said to them, plopping down on the wicker loveseat beside Cora and pouring them each a glass of red wine. “We sure have missed you. And I’m so thrilled that you brought Nathaniel and Uncas along. Nothing makes me happier than seeing you both with someone who’s good to you. Your mother would have just loved them. So of course, I have to ask – how serious is it? Alice, I can tell that you and Uncas are head over heels in love, but what about you and Nathaniel, Cora?”

“Well, we’re on a little slower track, I guess,” Cora replied. “It’s only been a couple of
months, and it took me a while to pull my head out of the sand about him in the first place.”

“Yes, you told me all about that, and I’m glad you came to your senses, especially now that I’ve met him. Honey, Duncan loved you so much, and he never would have wanted you to do that to yourself. I know he’d have wanted this for you, even at his own expense, because you’re happy. Nathaniel seems like good people.”

“He is,” Cora replied softly.

“Do you love him?”

“Yes,” she whispered, glancing at Alice’s shocked face. “I think that I do.”

“You didn’t tell me,” Alice said to her.

“Well, I kind of just came to grips with it, so I haven’t even said it out loud to myself yet. I just need to get used to it. I’m not ready to tell him yet, you know?” Cora wrung her trembling hands in her lap.

“Well, that’s grand.” Lenore smiled gently and put an arm around her. “You’ve come such a long way in the last five years, and I’m so very glad you’re finding happiness again. That we all are. Hell, it’s about damn time!” At this they all laughed in agreement, shedding happy tears together.

The men came back in a short while later, thoroughly bonded over bike talk and laughing like old friends. Conversation continued late into the evening, until finally it was time to head back to the hotel to get some sleep before their early flight home in the morning. The Heywards saw them out to the car, and reluctant goodbyes commenced.

“I’m glad you two came over with the girls,” Charlie said, shaking hands firmly with Uncas and Nathaniel. “They’re like family to us, and it’s good to know they’re well cared for.” He looked Nathaniel in the eye, a silent approval passing between them.

“You just keep letting that sweet man love you, because I can see that he does,” Lenore whispered to Cora, hugging her tight. “And don’t wait too long to tell him that you love him, too. Life’s too short to wait on things like that.” She hugged and kissed Alice and then let Charlie say goodbye to everyone before she gave Uncas and Nathaniel each a big hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“You take care of our girls, now, you hear me?”

Driving away, Cora watched them grow smaller in the rearview mirror, waving and smiling. She swiped a tear from her cheek as the car turned down the next street and they passed the little white house with blue trim that had once been her and Alice’s home. She glanced over at Nathaniel in the driver’s seat beside her, and he wordlessly reached one hand over to grasp hers, bringing it to his lips. She was glad she had not second-guessed the decision to come here and find healing grace instead of pain. Tomorrow they would leave this old home behind again with all its memories, and it would be time to fly back to New York, the place that was home now, where there were new memories and all the things that made her feel complete. And most of all, there would be Nathaniel, and the calming peace that they gave each other after the years of storms they had both weathered, hearts stretching clipped wings to learn to fly again.

Author’s Note:

I am so sorry it took me so much longer than usual to update! It’s only been three weeks, but
that’s atypical for me. As you know, I’m in the last couple of classes for my Bachelor’s in Nursing, and they are significantly more time-consuming than the last few had been. The good news is, I’m almost half done with my last “real” class, and at the end of the month I go into my seven-week Capstone course (basically a seven week research project), and in mid-December I’ll finally be done and I can go back to work early next year! In addition to tons of coursework, I simply had a hard time getting going with this chapter. We had traveled to see my niece graduate AIT at Fort Sam Houston, and then this class started and my poor husband totaled our truck on a tree when he swerved to miss a dog in the road (he’s fine, the dog is fine, and no one else was involved thank goodness), so I was mentally and physically exhausted and didn’t even start writing till the following week. I hit some mental roadblocks, and it was often hard to be in a good frame of mind while consumed by school and all the bad stuff going on in the world this past week.

So this is a big closure chapter for Cora, and a moving forward chapter too. In the beginning of the chapter it’s humorous and different to see her engaging in sexy shenanigans with Nathaniel at work, but she’s shedding her former lines and rules and learning to let go of things that don’t serve her well, and that’s good (Nathaniel agrees, LOL). Probably not something they should do often given the nature of their job, but hey. Originally when planning this story, I almost didn’t include the trip to San Diego, but ultimately I felt like it was important for all of them, especially her. The MedEvac conference seemed like a good way to get them out there (as for Uncas’ remark to Nathaniel about the “Catalina Wine Mixer”, that was a silly reference to the helicopter sales event in the ridiculous movie “Stepbrothers”, and I’m sorry if you haven’t seen it, it just seemed like the type of silly comment Uncas would make to Nathaniel the way they tease each other).

It was good for Alice and Cora to be able to share the much different environment they grew up in, and for all of them to have a good time together in a place that doesn’t exactly hold great recent memories for Cora. Running into Frejo was important for her to see someone else she suffered with moving forward with life as she begins to give herself permission to do the same. Seeing Duncan’s parents and having them approve of Nathaniel is also important, because she had so much guilt and pain wrapped up in Duncan. Knowing that they support her and want her to be happy gives her a lot of closure, too. And of course, the further development of relationships and emotions is important here, too. Uncas knows Alice is his forever, and she knows it, too. Those two know exactly what they want, and they have no fear of it. Nathaniel knows he’s in love with Cora, but he’s patient and he’s not going to do anything to make her feel rushed. She has finally let herself admit she’s fallen in love with him, too, and letting go of her fears is a great step forward for her – now she just has to tell him and put him out of his misery wondering if she feels the same way he does.

All the places they went are real places. Those meditation gardens in Encinitas are so beautiful! The exception was the tiki shop – I’ve been in a similar shop, but the rest of that was made up, and was a small fictional nod to Eric Schweig’s woodcarving talents in real life – his masks are pretty amazing. Though the scene is short, rather than just have them buy a tiki mask in some random tourist shop that strips these items of their cultural significance, I wanted it to be something that involved the traditions and meaning behind it, and genuine appreciation for the culture it comes from, because that is important to me. I think it would be to them too, since Uncas and Nathaniel grew up in a First Nations family.

The theme song for this chapter is Ed Sheeran’s “Hearts Don’t Break Around Here”. It’s great for both couples, knowing more and more that they want to do life together, and that they will never break each other’s hearts, but heal them. At the beginning of the chapter when Cora initiates sexy shenanigans with Nathaniel at work, I was hearing Sia’s “House on Fire”. The part with the meditation gardens and when Uncas and Alice are walking on the beach, and when both guys are having all those deep inner thoughts about Cora and Alice, I hear this beautiful bluegrass instrumental called “Grace”, written by Duke Weddington of Higher Ground Bluegrass – a local group, so unfortunately that’s not a track you’ll be able to go find (sorry!). But trust me, it’s just
lovely. I liked “Thinking Out Loud” by Ed Sheeran for the sidewalk musician to be playing. It’s sweet and romantic, and it seemed to fit that moment. “American Girl” by Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers seemed appropriate for the scene where Cora runs into Frejo, and I couldn’t resist putting it there because I loved Tom Petty, and he passed way early this week. In the same vein, I keep hearing his song “Learning to Fly” at the end of the chapter. “After the Storm” by Mumford & Sons kept running through my head in various parts of this chapter, too.

That’s about it here. I’m really hoping chapter 10 will come faster than this one did. I don’t like to take too long, and I know you guys are waiting, it’s just harder for me to have definite timelines right now. Keep checking back weekly, and I will do my best to update within a 1-3 week timeframe as often as I can. Thank you so much for reading, and stay tuned for more!
Flying and Falling

Chapter Summary

Alice and Cora accompany Uncas and Nathaniel to Sidney’s retirement ceremony for a fancy evening out. Nathaniel and Cora reach the most important hurdle in their developing relationship, and Uncas and Alice take a challenging hiking trip together that ends unexpectedly, meeting a new friend along the way.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 10 – Flying and Falling

“I’ve never felt this way before
I have seen so many islands
I’ve never felt this way before
In this song here I describe him

The chariots rise
Up high in the sky
What grace have I
To fall so in love
What a wonderful dream
It seems to be
’Cause I love him

I took the notes of past excursions
And I read them through once more
Only to find them all diversions
From the one true love in store

The chariots rise
Up high in the sky
What grace have I
To fall so in love
What a wonderful dream
It seems to be
’Cause I love him

Though I have waited long
And they have all been wrong
Now I find in the end
With him I need not pretend

The chariots
They rise up high in the sky
What grace have I
Alice and Cora exited a well-known Albany formalwear boutique, carrying the fruits of their long and grueling morning attempting to find the perfect dresses for the following weekend. Sidney would be officially retiring from the Albany County Sheriff’s Department after thirty-five years of service, and his retirement celebration would be included in the annual law enforcement awards banquet, a formal dinner-and-dancing affair that would be held at one of the premier hotel ballrooms in downtown Albany.

“Thank God that’s finally over! I thought we’d never find anything good!” Alice said, hanging her plastic-covered gown from the backseat hook in Cora’s Tribeca. After no success at the first two stores, they had finally had good luck at this one.

Cora stowed her gown on the opposite side and got into the driver’s seat. “Me too, and I hate dress shopping. I haven’t had to buy a formal dress since the last time I went to the Navy Ball, and that was years ago. But I think we finally hit the jackpot, that dress you got is pretty show-stopping. You’re going to have to hire a janitor to follow Uncas around with a mop and bucket for all his drool.”

Alice burst out laughing. “That’s a little dramatic, but I do love it. And yours, too! I can’t wait to see Nathaniel’s face when he gets a look at you. We should make an appointment to get our hair done and everything, just go all-out! It’ll be fun!”

“Well, Ashley’s actually really good at doing hair and makeup, she went to cosmetology school before she decided to become a nurse. We could ask her to come and help us get ready, if she’s free.”

“Oh yeah! That would be even better, I love hanging out with her! Okay, now we just need to go find shoes, and of course we can’t neglect the sexy underwear factor. Crossgates Mall?”

“Good plan,” Cora replied, pulling the car out of the lot to head toward the mall in Guilderland. “We just have to make sure we’re home in time to start getting ready for dinner with Pop and the Greatsnakes. OH!” she exclaimed, laughing and turning up the radio when Paul Simon’s “You Can Call Me Al” came on.

“Must be Mom saying hi to us,” Alice said, grinning and singing along with Cora. She thought to herself how fun this was, to spend a day going shopping with her sister and to see her having such a good time in general. The last time they had done anything like this was when Cora had been home on leave before her first deployment, and she had taken Alice shopping for her senior prom dress, since their mother had no longer been there to do so. She had really missed this fun, carefree side of Cora, and she loved Nathaniel for helping to bring it back. The idea of getting all dressed up together and spending an evening celebrating with Cora, Uncas, and his family made her giddy with excitement, and she almost felt like a teenager all over again.

When they arrived back at Cora’s house with all their purchases, Uncas was in the driveway with Nathaniel’s dark green Blazer, unloading groceries he’d picked up for the family barbecue Cora was hosting for dinner that evening. After giving Alice a kiss hello, he informed Cora that Nathaniel
had taken his truck and Monty to the feed store to pick up hay for the horses. Cora and Alice took their things inside and stowed them in the guest room closet, wanting to keep them a surprise for next weekend, then went to the kitchen to put groceries away and get the back deck and grill ready before Ed and the Greatsnakes arrived. Cora was out on the deck dusting off the cushions on the porch swing when Nathaniel got home, pulling the truck around to the barn. Prepping burger fixings at the kitchen counter with Uncas, Alice peered through the window, watching Cora smiling and waving at Nathaniel as he got out of the truck and headed toward her, Monty bounding out of the seat behind him with a bark. Cora stepped off the deck and met him halfway, and Alice could hear the faint sound of her laughing as Nathaniel lifted her into his arms and kissed her.

“Look at her,” Alice sighed. “She’s so happy with him.”

“Yeah… he doesn’t look too miserable himself,” Uncas grinned beside her.

“I wish she’d just tell him she’s in love with him and get it over with. Or that he’d tell her so she’ll admit it. I mean, look at them. They’re so stupid for each other It’s not even funny.”

Uncas shrugged. “They’re on their own program, and they’ll figure it out soon enough. I know you want things to happen for her, but let them do their own thing. They look just fine to me.”

“You’re right, as usual.” Alice wrinkled her nose at him. “I guess I’m just impatient, and I want them to be as happy and in love as we are.”

He set his knife down and wiped his hands on a towel, taking her in his arms. “I’m not sure that’s possible, welisit awèn.” He kissed her tenderly. “I’m gonna go help him unload that hay. Be right back.”

Soon enough, Ed arrived, announcing he was ready for cook duty in his ‘GRILL SERGEANT’ t-shirt. While he and Nathaniel were making burger patties in the kitchen, Yvette and Sidney came in, bearing a tray of ribs Sidney had smoked that morning, and a caprese salad made with fresh basil and tomatoes from Yvette’s vegetable garden. She hugged and kissed Alice and Cora, inquiring as to how their shopping trip had gone that morning, and they talked excitedly about the upcoming banquet while they got the table on the deck set up with all the fixings and sides for dinner.

“So, tell me about this hiking trip you two are taking in a few weeks,” Ed said to Uncas later when they were all sitting together eating on the deck. “Alice said you’re going up to Lake Placid?”

“Yeah, we decided to try doing another hiking challenge in the High Peaks Wilderness. We already did the Saranac Six there back in July, so this time we’ll be doing the Great Range Trail. It’s a total of twelve peaks in one day, and when you’re done, you get a commemorative patch, and you get to ring the victory bell at the visitor center in Keene.”

“Twelve peaks!” Yvette exclaimed. “That’s an awful lot of hiking in one day.”

“Well, we did the Twelvester Challenge at Lake George over two days, and that was around forty miles total. This one is around twenty-five miles of total distance, so it’s shorter, but the trails are tougher, especially around Saddleback Mountain,” Alice replied. “We’re heading up early on Thursday and staying at the lodge to acclimate and get a good night’s sleep before we start hiking the trail early Friday morning. And we’ll take camping gear with us in case we can’t do it all in one day for some reason.”

“That sounds like a good, safe plan,” Ed nodded. “You’ll do great!”
“Make sure you sign in at all the trailheads,” Sidney told Uncas. “That way you’re covered and rangers will know where you are if anything happens.”

“Dad, they know. They’ll be fine, they’ve been hiking all over the place all summer. He’s just overly cautious from all these years doing search and rescue,” Nathaniel said to Alice.

“Well, you can’t ever be too careful,” Cora intoned. “But you guys are experienced enough. And there should be other hikers on the trails, so you’ll have company too. I’m excited for you!”

“Are you sure you and Nathaniel don’t want to come with?” Alice asked her. “You still could, you know.”

“No, it’ll be a nice trip for you two to take together, and besides, we’d have to get coverage for the whole flight team if we did that – Nathaniel and I will be working Thursday to Friday, and I think Brian is covering for Uncas that shift.”

“Yeah, somebody’s got to pick up your slack,” Nathaniel teased his brother. Uncas laughed at him, catching Alice’s eye and returning her loving smile. He was as excited about the upcoming trip as her, and he smiled to himself as he raised her hand to his lips. This was going to be their best hiking challenge yet.

The following Saturday, Cora sat patiently at the table in her kitchen while Ashley put the finishing touches on her hair for the law enforcement banquet. Alice was already done, sitting across from her while they all chatted. They had decided to spend the remainder of the morning after their long run and breakfast with Ed getting manicures and pedicures together before Ashley came over to do their hair and makeup. Nathaniel and Uncas would get ready at their place, and then come to pick them up for the banquet, making a formal date night of it.

“This is so much fun,” Alice gushed. “It’s like adult prom night!”

Cora laughed. “It kind of is. Except now we have way better dates. I can’t wait to see that dress on you with your hair and makeup, you’re going to look amazing.” Ashley had done Alice’s golden hair in a beautiful vintage style, French-braided along the right side and swept loosely back into a braided chignon at the nape of her neck, with a red rose pinned at the back and little curled wisps escaping here and there. Her eye makeup was dark and dramatic with faint gold highlight at the inner corners. The expertly smudged black liner made her hazel eyes stand out beautifully, and she wore deep cherry-red lipstick.

“Well, I hate to toot my own horn, but you’re looking drop-dead friggin’ gorgeous yourself,” Ashley said with a satisfied smile, pinning a deep purple calla lily at the back of Cora’s hair. “There, you’re all done! Have a look!” Ashley handed her a mirror.

“Wow, Ashley, she looks fantastic!” Alice breathed. Cora’s dark hair was done with loose French braids on both sides, pulled back into a cascade of curls gathered low at the back of her head and falling between her shoulders, with curly tendrils softly framing her face. Her eye makeup was smoky with precise black liner and slightly shimmery deep plum eyeshadow that gave her brown eyes a coppery cast, and she had opted for mauve lipstick.

“I absolutely love it! Thank you so much for coming over here to do this for us.” Cora smiled at her friend. “I owe you big time, are you sure you won’t let me pay you?”

“You can pay me in coffee at work. Besides, it was really fun! I haven’t gotten to do anything like this in ages. You’ll love that lipstick, too, it doesn’t come off for anything. You can
make out with your man as much as you want, and it’ll still look perfect!” She laughed.

“No doubt there might be some of that going on later,” Alice giggled. “And then some. I mean, we’ll be dressed to the nines, and we’ll have gorgeous men in tuxes who will definitely appreciate this level of sexy bombshell.” She gave a sweeping gesture over herself and then Cora.

“No sense in letting those nice hotel suites we’re staying in go to waste,” Cora agreed with a sly grin.

Alice laughed out loud. “Whoa, listen to you! See, this is what happens now that Nathaniel has corrupted you and you’re finally getting laid properly!”

Cora shrugged. “Hey, I’m just stating the facts. It’s a really nice hotel.”

“Mmmhmm. So, tell me… does Officer Poe still have his handcuffs?” Alice wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Cora’s cheeks colored. “I’m telling you nothing. I plead the Fifth.” She turned to Ashley, who was laughing with Alice. “Speaking of the boys, what are you up to after this? Got plans with Brian tonight after he gets off work?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact. We’re going out to a late dinner with Jack and Alexandra, since he and Brian are on shift together.”

Cora smiled. After hitting it off on the Fourth of July trip to Lake George, Jack had eventually convinced Alexandra to go out on a date with him, and while they were taking it very slow, things seemed to be going nicely for them.

“Come on, Cora, we better go get dressed,” Alice said, looking at the kitchen clock. “They’re going to be here in thirty minutes, and it’ll be twenty if Nathaniel is driving, he’s always early.”

Twenty-two minutes later, the doorbell rang. Ashley answered it, eager to present her efforts and see the guys’ reactions before she left to get ready for her own evening plans. Nathaniel and Uncas stepped into the entryway while Ashley called out down the hallway that they had arrived. Alice came down the hall first, and Uncas stood there agog, completely stunned by the sight of her. She was complete and utter perfection to look at. The dress she had picked out was wine-red satin, hugging her figure snugly from shoulder to knee and then flaring out to a split-front mermaid-style skirt above her strappy gold satin heels. The sweetheart neckline and basic tank straps in front gave way to a dramatic scoop in the back, framed by soft drapes of fabric. Her jewelry was simple, deep red almandine garnet drop earrings and a pendant set in yellow gold, perfectly setting off her red lips and the color of her dress.

“Wow,” Uncas whispered, getting ahold of himself and taking her hand. “You look incredible. I don’t even have words right now, Alice.”

Alice smiled coyly, taking in the equally glorious image of him. His long, glossy hair was pulled half back with a small braid at the back that held a beaded eagle feather. He wore a black tuxedo with a black cummerbund and jacket, but in place of a bowtie, wore a Nehru-collared white shirt with a wide choker woven from glass and shell wampum beads in black, white, and red.

“You look pretty damn stunning yourself,” she whispered back, clasping his hand and feathering a kiss across his lips.

Nathaniel smiled briefly at Alice in greeting, but soon lost track of everything but Cora when she emerged behind her sister, a shy smile parting her lips. The only jewelry she wore was a pair of
earrings, delicate silver filigree dangles with raven’s wing pearl drops. Her slim figure was flattered perfectly by the subtle, classic trumpet cut of her floor-length gown, the hem falling over the toes of her simple black satin stiletto heels. The gown was deep eggplant purple with an overlay of elaborately embroidered tulle lace. The low, contoured V neckline connected to silk ribbon straps that extended down her bare back and crisscrossed over the bottom of the deep-cut V that ended at the small of her back, tied there in a silky cascading bow. The plum color was exquisite with her creamy skin, dark hair, and the coppery brown of her ebony-lined eyes. Nathaniel had never seen her so made up before, and the effect combined with her hair and the elegance of her dress was mentally annihilating. And I get to have her by my side all night, he thought, his lips curving in a crooked smile as he stared at her in wonder.

“Hey, beautiful,” he murmured, his hand resting gently on her hip as he leaned in to kiss her softly and whisper in her ear. “You are an absolute vision.”

“So are you. You know, in a devastatingly sexy, manly way.” She laughed softly and kissed his cheek, leaning back to get another look at him. His hair was pulled back in a smooth ponytail, and his long, lean form looked heart-stopping in a modern-cut tux with black pinstriped pants and a black, peaked-lapel jacket with a charcoal-grey waistcoat and white shirt. His diagonally-striped grey silk ascot tie was held in place by a sterling silver and purple quahog shell pin in the shape of a Lenape turtle, the Greatsnake family’s clan symbol. Devastatingly sexy was a gross understatement.

“You guys all look gorgeous!” Ashley exclaimed, clapping her hands together. She gathered them all in front of Cora’s living room fireplace to take the obligatory photos before she doled out hugs all around and left to prepare for her evening with Brian. The two couples exited the house behind her, ready for what already promised to be a wonderful evening together.

The entire affair was indeed a great success. The upscale Albany hotel was the pinnacle of class, not overly opulent, but with a beautiful historic flair to the décor and furnishings, especially in the suites. The four of them had checked in before the event to leave their things in the rooms, impressed by the tasteful, elegant furnishings. The banquet in the large ballroom kicked off with a perfect formal dinner followed by the awards ceremony, which recognized local law enforcement from all over Albany County for accomplishments and honors earned throughout the year. Since Sidney’s retirement date coincided with the timing of the annual banquet, he was publicly honored at the event for his thirty-five years of service to Albany County as a deputy, and was awarded for his work with the regional search and rescue committee over the last ten years. He cut a very sharp picture in his formal black Sheriff’s Department uniform, the gold buttons polished to a high shine and his gold embroidered Lieutenant’s bars glinting on the sleeves. He smiled proudly with Yvette at his side, who looked breathtaking in a simple dark green cap-sleeved gown, her long black hair pulled half up in a beaded clip. She wore a buckskin bandolier that popped against the dark green of her dress, covered in intricate, brightly colored traditional Lenape bead and quillwork that she had done herself. In lieu of dress shoes she wore moccasins heavily beaded and quilled with vibrant floral designs. The entire Greatsnake/Munro party together made quite a picture, and heads turned all evening to look appreciatively at them.

After dinner, dancing commenced, and couples filed on and off the ballroom floor between songs. Cora and Alice stood with Nathaniel and Uncas for a little while, taking photos with Sidney and Yvette and then chatting with them and Nathaniel’s Albany PD Field Training Officer Ben, who had received recognition for his exemplary training of new officers. He remembered meeting Cora and Alice when Alice’s Jeep had broken down a few months before, and introduced them to his wife Jennifer. After talking for a bit, Uncas felt compelled to pull Alice onto the dance floor when the DJ decided to throw back a few decades and play Chris DeBurgh’s very apropos “Lady in Red”. He gazed down at her in rapt adoration as they moved slowly to the music.
“I know this song is old and corny as hell, but I can’t help feeling like the guy singing it tonight,” he confessed with a smile and an incredulous little shake of his head. “You really are so beautiful that I hardly know what to do with myself next to you. I feel like the luckiest man on earth right now.”

Alice leaned in to brush her cheek against his. “I just want to be with you – the rest of this is just smoke and mirrors. But I can definitely appreciate it.” Her lips curved in a little grin, and his hand splayed warmly on her skin at the scooped back of her dress, holding her close, her soft curves pressed against him while they continued to dance into the next song.

“Hmm,” he whispered in her ear, “you know, there’s a part of me that really wants to get out of here and do very naughty things to you in that beautiful dress.”

“Well, I’ll tell you a secret… I might have thought the same thing a time or two,” Alice breathed, her lips brushing under his earlobe. “And you don’t even know what I’m wearing underneath this dress… yet.”

Uncas laughed, the deep, rich tone sending shivers down her spine. “Bring it on. There’s an elevator out there with your name on it.” No one seemed to notice when they quietly left the dance floor a moment later, exiting the ballroom hand in hand.

Across the room, Nathaniel tightened his hold on Cora’s waist, catching her gazing at him while they danced. “You keep looking at me,” he said softly, giving her that sexy, crooked half-smile that made her heart flutter.

“I can’t help it,” she replied. “You look damn good all dressed up like that.”

“Don’t let the tux fool you,” he murmured, leaning in closer. “I’m wearing a sassy t-shirt underneath this getup.”

“Of course you are.” Cora laughed softly, her hand resting on his chest, fingers sliding under the collar of his jacket.

“Besides, I don’t hold a candle to you tonight, and you know it,” he said, his lips brushing her jaw, the subtle, heady scent of her perfume invading his senses.

Cora closed her eyes, a little electric tremor running through her as his fingertips traced circles on the bare skin at the small of her back while they swayed slowly to the soft, bluesy ballad.

“The world is cold tonight
But everything will be alright
She walks into the room
Stars to know her light

When she dances
I see where my only chance is
I feel my whole life start, babe
When she loves me
You know she really loves me
She takes it to the heart...”

They gradually moved off the dance floor, still swaying gently together as he led her out the ballroom’s open French doors onto one of the unoccupied balconies. The August night was cool and balmy, the dark sky clear, and even in the downtown lights the stars still shone down on them, half in
shadows and half illuminated by the dim ballroom lights on the other side of the doors.

“The club is closing down
But will we still hang around
To hear another tune
And feel this love we found

When she dances
I see where my only chance is
I feel my whole life start, babe
When she loves me
You know she really loves me
She takes it to the heart…”

Cora listened to the song, her eyes closed, warmth radiating between her and Nathaniel. His proximity was intoxicating, not quite touching, their bodies brushing intermittently as they danced. Everything was wonderful tonight, everyone was happy, and she felt like nothing could touch the perfection of this, right here, right now. She opened her eyes and met Nathaniel’s shadowed gaze, her pulse thrumming. She could no longer hide what she felt when he looked at her like that, the storm of his emotions un concealed, so raw and real that it took her breath away. That fragile bud in her heart was open and strong now; she knew without a doubt that she was his as much as he was hers, and all she wanted now was to give herself over to him completely, take the leap once and for all and fly into that heavenly fire.

“The night's so fine
The rose is mine

She's dancing just for me
I see with every move she makes
How good it's gonna be…”

Nathaniel could feel the rapid beating of Cora’s heart as she pressed closer to him, her dark eyes gleaming in the shadowed starlight of the balcony. She was so beautiful tonight, and she was looking at him like there was nowhere else she’d rather be than here in his arms. The longing to tell her everything he felt for her was almost painful; he knew it was written all over his face and he didn’t care anymore. He had once thought he knew what love was, but he’d been a fool then to think that could even compare to what he felt now. He’d known since the moment he’d touched her in that locker room that Cora would shake his world to the very foundation if he let her, and for the first time in seven years, he had been astonished to find that he wanted to let her. She lit an unquenchable fire in him, and he wanted to let it burn.

“When she dances
I see where my only chance is
I feel my whole life start, babe
When she loves me
You know she really loves me
She takes it to the heart

She takes it to the heart.”

His breathing grew shallow as she pressed her face against his neck and sighed, still swaying with him to the music.

“Nathaniel…” she whispered, “I love you.”
His breath caught, and he pulled back to look down at her in momentary disbelief, his mind not quite trusting that he’d heard her correctly, but hoping with every fiber of his being that he had. “Say that again,” he murmured.

“I’ve fallen in love with you,” she repeated, tears glistening in her eyes and a tiny, nervous tremor in her hushed voice. “I’ve been wanting to tell you, I just -”

He took her face in his hands, releasing the breath he’d been holding in a ragged sigh as he kissed her with hungry desperation, with a yearning that rose from deep within to take the words he had so longed to hear from her lips and nourish his aching soul with them.

“Cora…” he rasped, touching his forehead to hers, “I love you, too. God, I’ve wanted to say it so many times, but I wanted to wait for you, I was trying to be patient…” He kissed her again, still absently rocking to the music as he held her. She kissed him back, her arms wrapping around his neck, lost to the exhilarating high of truly loving someone for the first time in her life, and being loved in return; lost to the inebriating scent and feel of him, his hands in her hair, sliding down her bare back, over her hips, the aching, ever-present flame between them exploding to a full-blown blaze.

“Are we still dancing?” she breathed against his mouth.

“No. We’re leaving.”

Gripping her hand in his, he wordlessly led her back through the ballroom and toward the elevators in the hallway, waiting impatiently for one to descend to their level. The bell finally chimed, the door opening to reveal Uncas and Alice. Alice’s cheeks were bright pink and her hair was not quite as sleek as it had been earlier. Uncas grinned at them as he stepped out, looking as sly as the fox he was named for. Alice exited behind him with a wickedly guilty, gratified smile on her still-perfect red lips, smoothing down the skirt of her dress and winking silently at Cora, mouthing “have fun”. Cora thought fleetingly that Ashley hadn’t been kidding about the lipstick’s staying power, and would have laughed if it weren’t for the savage, heated look in Nathaniel’s eyes that made her breathless with anticipation as he pulled her into the elevator car with him. As soon as the doors shut and they were alone, he hauled her against his chest, crushing his mouth to hers, their tongues tangling wildly.

“When I get you upstairs, this is all coming off,” he said, his hands stroking down the sides of her gown. “One piece at a time.” She shivered at his arousing promise as his mouth covered hers again, and his fingertips dipped inside the V of her dress at the small of her back, caressing the sensitive skin below the strap of her backless longline bra. The elevator dinged for their floor, and they hurried down the hallway to their suite. Nathaniel hung the DO NOT DISTURB placard from the outside knob before shutting the door firmly and pulling Cora to him, backing her slowly into the room.

“Now… I believe I said something about taking all this pretty clothing off you one piece at a time,” he whispered, his lips brushing down her neck to the swell of her shoulder.

“I do seem to remember you saying that,” she breathed, her hands moving to unbutton his waistcoat. “What else did you have in mind?”

He untied the bow at the small of her back, releasing the straps of her dress to hang loose. “Well… telling you that I love you is one thing, but now… I think I’d like to spend some time showing you.” His mouth skimmed across her collarbone.

“Mmm, I like that idea.” Her lips curved in knowing anticipation as she removed the turtle
pin from his ascot tie and loosened it to hang free, then released the top two buttons on his shirt. Nuzzling the hollow of his throat, she pushed his jacket off his shoulders. One piece at a time… two could play at this game. The jacket fell to the floor, and she smoothed her hands over his shirt beneath the waistcoat, feeling the hard planes of muscle and the heat of his skin through the fabric. He shrugged off the waistcoat and tossed it down with the jacket, then gently pushed her backward until her legs bumped the edge of the elegant wingback chair by the window and she sat down on it with a breathy laugh.

“What are you doing?” she whispered as he knelt in front of her and removed her shoes, his eyes now a bright, pale green with the heat of desire that burned in them.

“Taking advantage of all this fancy damn furniture,” he growled. “Now come here.” She leaned toward him, her lips parted in a seductive half-smile. His hands tangled into her hair, pulling the pins from the back and letting the soft curls cascade over her shoulders as he ran the tip of his tongue across her lips, making her tremble with the wanton flames that licked at her insides. She darted her own tongue forward against his, their mouths crashing together in a gratifying, ravenous kiss. Once his fingers had worked her hair free, he nudged her head back, his lips making their way down her throat and along the line of the gown’s bodice, falling so low with the straps untied that it barely contained the tempting swell of her breasts. Hooking his fingers behind the fabric, he pulled downward just enough to expose the lacy, black mesh cups of her longline bustier where they met the dark purple floral satin of the body of the garment. With an appreciative sound of approval, he pulled the sheer fabric down along with the bodice to free her breasts, brushing his fingertips and then his tongue over each nipple. They reacted instantly to his touch, hardening as she cried out softly, damp heat spreading at the apex of her thighs. He leaned in against her, pressing her into the chair’s back, his mouth against her ear and the starched fabric of his shirt rubbing against her naked, tingling skin, making her ache for him to do more.

“Do you know, Cora…how much I love the way you respond to me touching you like this?” he murmured silkily. “Here…” She gasped as his teeth nipped her neck. “Here…” The pad of his thumb stroked the tight bud of her nipple and she whimpered softly. “And here…” His hand stole beneath the hem of her dress, sliding up the soft skin of her thighs, his fingers slipping beneath her panties to probe the wet, slick heat between them. She moaned helplessly as he claimed her lips, thrusting his tongue against hers, his touch reducing her to a quivering mass of desire. He pushed the gown’s skirt up into the seat of the chair around her, exposing her legs clad in silk thigh-high stockings, then grasped her hips and eased her toward the front edge. He leaned down, his lips feathering over her belly at the edge of the panties that matched her bustier, before he swiftly removed them and tossed them over his shoulder. Gently pushing her thighs apart, opening her to him, he lowered his head between them. His tongue traced her skin above the lacy bands of her stockings before moving slowly upward to stroke over her center.

“Nathaniel…oh, holy God…” Cora moaned and gripped the upholstery on the arms of the chair, waves of heat rippling through her with each slow, intimate caress. She felt as if she was floating, rising higher and higher on a column of flames, her body wound tight and balancing on that precarious, glorious edge just briefly before she crashed back down as her climax detonated through her. It stole the breath from her lungs, her head thrown back as she rode out the pleasure of it.

He came away to look at her, her eyes burning, her skin flushed, her breasts bared above the gown’s displaced neckline rising and falling with her quickened breathing. He rose and pulled her to her feet. Still reeling, she grasped the front of his shirt for balance, pulling him down by his loosened tie to seek his lips.

“Too many clothes,” Cora whispered between fervent kisses, tugging the shirt hem out of his pants and going to work on the buttons.
“Don’t worry…we aren’t finished yet,” he said with a wicked grin, kicking off his shoes and pulling her back to him. “One piece at a time, remember…” He released the zipper at the back of her gown, pushing it off her hips onto the floor in a puddle of fabric. She got his shirt off and pulled the undershirt over his head to send it after the gown, her hands running down his torso while he reached behind her and undid the hooks on her bustier strap. She reached between them to unbutton his pants, shoving them downward along with his boxer briefs, and he deftly rid himself of them. Her mouth trailed across his chest, her fingers traveling over the taut muscles of his abdomen to wrap around the hard, smooth length of his erection, stroking and teasing before her palms flattened on his sides to smooth back upward. He made a sound deep in his throat, his hands roaming over her bare skin while he savored the thrill of her touch. He wrapped his arms around her, bringing her flush with him and lifting her feet off the floor as he moved toward the bedstead in front of them.

“My stockings?” she half laughed and half gasped as he tumbled her onto the suite’s plush four-poster bed.

“Leave them,” he growled, coming up onto the bed with her. His eyes raked over every inch of her lying beneath him, the curled tresses of her hair spread out like a dark swath of silk on the decadent bedding, her body rising to his reverent touch as his hands followed his gaze. “I can’t even begin to tell you how I love you, Cora,” he whispered, his breath warm against her neck as he kissed her there and she drew in a shaky breath. “You are so very beautiful to me in so many ways…” He kissed her chest where her heart pounded erratically beneath her ribs. “And so impatient,” he smiled and moved purposefully against her tender flesh once more.

“Now you’re teasing me,” she panted with a soft laugh.

“I’m loving you. And enjoying every second.” He flicked his tongue over a nipple and drew it into his mouth. She moaned in pleasure, her hips bucking against him. Her fingers wove into his hair, pulling the tie from his ponytail at the back to release it, letting the length of it free to brush over her skin as he worked his way back up to capture her lips with his. She wrapped her legs around his hips, drawing the sensitive tip of him to her. Unable to hold back any longer, he thrust inside her with a low groan. Her hands cupped his jaw, her dark eyes flaming with her now unfettered adoration as she stroked his cheeks with her thumbs.

“I love you, Nathaniel.” She held his gaze, their breath hitching as they moved together, gradually losing themselves to one another and slowly rising on the wild tide of pleasure and emotion that swept them into its blissful abyss. His mouth found hers again, urgent in its claim. Their movements slowed at the last as release overtook them together with an impassioned cry, absorbed by fevered kisses that gentled to soft, slow caresses as they came down into the heavy, languid afterglow.

“You are everything, do you know that?” Nathaniel murmured huskily, laying his hand against her cheek. Cora turned her face into his palm to press her lips there.

“You make me feel like it,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around him and planting a gentle kiss on his lips. “But I may need more convincing later.”

“We’ve got all night, ehôlënt,” he said, smiling softly and kissing her back. “We’ve got every day after this, too, for as long as you’ll have me. I’m not going anywhere if I can help it, I promise you that.”

She laid her head on his chest and curled against him with a happy little sigh. She would never again be young or naïve enough to think that everything would be perfect all the time, no matter how magical or invincible it felt, and neither would he; they both knew better than that. But
just for this moment, it was untouchable, and she felt completely safe with him. From here they could try to make every day count. They could spend as much of the time they were granted making sure each knew the other was loved, and appreciating the grace they had been given to find each other in all the convoluted mess of life.

Alice woke to the smell of rain and the still darkness just before dawn, nestled in the cocoon of Uncas’ arms as he lay beside her in their bed at the lodge in Lake Placid. She cuddled closer to him, not ready to leave his warmth yet to start the long day ahead.

“Is it morning already?” Uncas’ voice rumbled behind her and he wrapped his arm tighter around her as she rolled over to face him with a smile. “You’re my favorite thing to wake up to,” he said, leaning across to kiss her. He lifted the edge of the covers and peeked inside with a devilish grin. “Definitely my favorite thing to wake up to.”

Alice laughed and wound her arms around his neck as he kissed along the top of her bare shoulder. “Don’t we need to get up soon? We’re going to need to make good time today to make up for the wet trails since it rained yesterday.”

They had gotten here and checked in the previous day ready to start the challenge this morning, so had been dismayed when it had started to rain late in the afternoon. The wetness would slow them down in places, and that would mean a hard push today to complete all twelve peaks before sunset. They could do it, but they would have to work at as rigorous a pace as the weather would allow, and the trails would be more dangerous with the mud and slippery shale surfaces. Hopefully the sun would come out and dry it up some.

“We’ll get it done, even if we have to take another unplanned day. But for now, the sun isn’t even starting to come up yet...” His deep, sleepy voice and the tantalizing feel of his lips on her neck and shoulder did away with her cares about making good trail time for the moment. She pressed closer to him with a little smile, his bare skin smooth and warm against hers.

“In that case, I’ll let you lead me astray for just a little while,” she murmured, sliding her palms over the sleek musculature of his torso. “Because I love you.”

“I love you, too, Alice. ‘til the wheels come off.” He smiled as their mouths melded and she snaked one leg around his hip. He couldn’t wait to top that last peak, whether it was today or tomorrow, and ring that victory bell. If all went as planned, it would be a victory in far more ways than one. For now, he turned his attention to loving Alice.

Not long after sunrise, they arrived at the Roostercomb Trailhead lot where their challenge would begin. There was only one other vehicle there; weekdays were less crowded on any public trail, and the rain had likely discouraged other local hikers. After parking, they crossed the bridge over the beaver marsh to the trailhead, where they met a lone hiker who was signing in ahead of them.

“Morning!” he greeted them with a smile, slinging his backpack on over a blue windbreaker. He was lean and fit but older than Uncas and Alice, maybe forty or more, and American Indian. His black hair was cut short, and his keen dark eyes peered at them from beneath low, heavy black brows in a rugged, strong-featured face. “Nice to see some other hikers out today. I figured with the rain nobody’d be out.”

“We’re doing the Great Range Dozen Challenge,” Alice told him. “We traveled to be here, rain or shine, so we’re trying our best to finish today by sunset.”
“Excellent! I’m doing the challenge myself!”

“You’re hiking all twelve peaks alone?” Uncas said, surprised. “Hey, if you don’t mind the company, you’re welcome to stick with us. There’s safety in numbers – you can’t be too careful.”

“Well, I think I’ll take you up on that offer. I certainly wouldn’t mind having someone to talk to besides myself,” the man grinned and stuck out a hand toward Uncas. “I’m Magua Renard.”

“Uncas Greatsnake, and this is my girlfriend, Alice Munro.” Uncas shook the offered hand, and then Magua shook Alice’s hand.

“Nice to meet you both. Well, if you guys are ready, what say we get this show on the road? We’ll need to keep a good pace to finish by sunset.”

The party headed out after Uncas signed himself and Alice into the trailhead log. As they worked through the first couple of peaks, they chatted about themselves. Magua told them that he was Huron, and hailed from a little further north close to the Canadian border, where he worked as a buyer for a major outdoor and recreation chain store. He was a very personable, pleasant man with a dry sense of humor. He revealed that he was completing the hiking challenge in celebration of twelve years of sobriety – one peak for each year. His son had planned to come with him, but had gotten sick and was unable to, so Magua had decided to make the trip alone because it was important to him to follow through.

“I started hiking regularly the first year I got sober,” he told them. “My Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor at the time was into that kind of stuff, and he was always inviting me to come out with him and his buddies, so I finally gave in. Turned out I loved it, so I just kept going, even when he moved away a few years later. Now I’m working in that industry, and I’m healthier than I’ve ever been, and happier, too. It’s been a good twelve years, a lot better than the years before that, and my relationship with my ex-wife and my kids is a whole lot better, too.”

“That’s awesome, congratulations. You’ll get a well-earned ring on that victory bell for sure!” Alice said with a smile.

“So, the name Renard… that’s French, isn’t it?” Uncas asked.

“Sure is. It means “Fox”. When I played hockey in high school, the guys used to call me ‘Le Renard Subtil’ – The Wily Fox – because I could get past just about any player in the district, and a lot of goalies too,” he chuckled.

“Hey, what do you know? My name is Mohican, but it means ‘Fox’, too!” Uncas laughed. “I guess we foxes are supposed to stick together.”

“Damn straight,” Magua replied. “Hell, two hundred and fifty years ago we might have been enemies, chasing each other through these mountains trying to kill each other, but times have sure changed, haven’t they?”

“For sure. One of my best buddies, Brian, is Huron, too – a fellow flight paramedic I work with. His girlfriend Ashley is Mohawk, and we always make jokes about that tribal enemy stuff. And my adopted brother is white, so that just makes the whole mix even more fun.”

Magua laughed. “No doubt! So, you’re a flight paramedic, and Alice here is a dispatcher? You guys must have a lot to talk about!”

“It makes life interesting, for sure,” Alice said. “Plus, my sister is a nurse on their flight team and in the ER with Brian’s girlfriend, and Uncas’ brother is their helicopter pilot and used to be a
cop, and their dad just retired from the Sheriff’s department a couple of weeks ago.”

“Man, you all must have some really interesting stories to tell around the dinner table. If you don’t mind me asking, what’s the most hilarious thing you’ve ever seen on the job? I mean, we all know bad stuff happens, but there’s good stuff too, right? People are crazy.”

Uncas and Alice launched into a barrage of their best first responder stories, all of them talking and laughing through a brief rest stop for lunch, and then keeping the momentum going through the afternoon as they worked their way up the peak trails. It was only September, so too early for the leaves to be changing into their glorious fall colors, but even so, the still-green forest was fragrant and beautiful, and the panoramic views of the Adirondacks from the pinnacle of each mountain were breathtaking, worthy of every photo they took along the way to document their progress on the challenge. Magua was great to have along with them, and he kept their pace well without tiring, and good-naturedly volunteered to get photos of them together at each summit. Alice and Uncas were buzzing with excitement despite being tired, because it seemed they would be able to finish the challenge as planned. It started to drizzle as they were descending the Cable Route between the Gothics and Saddleback Mountain, but it wasn’t a heavy enough rainfall to stop them at this point. Uncas was enormously satisfied with their progress so far. Saddleback was the ninth peak, and it was still early enough that they would have adequate daylight to make it back down to the lodge once they had finished at Mount Marcy, and that meant they’d get to ring the victory bell this evening. Everything was going perfectly, in spite of the unexpected rain.

The route to the top of Saddleback Mountain was every bit as steep and demanding as their research had promised, more so than most of the others, especially in the damp weather. The slight rainfall had stopped by the time they reached the summit, but it was muddy, and the wet rock was slick. The view from the top was amazing, however, and they took the time to enjoy it and take photos, resting and snacking before the descent into the col to make their way up Basin Mountain.

“We’re still making good time,” Alice said, pushing back the hood on her rain jacket. “Three more summits and we’ll be done!”

“At least it stopped drizzling,” Magua replied. “But the descent from here down Saddleback Cliffs will be tricky, and we need to be cautious going down.”

Uncas knew he was right. “Well, no time like the present. Let’s get ‘er done,” he said, standing up.

They secured their packs and made their way to the drop off the back side of Saddleback. This descent was one of the toughest on the Great Range Trail. The cliffs weren’t incredibly high and didn’t require extra equipment, but they could be harrowing to the less experienced hiker due to the wind and exposure on the climb. The three of them had enough experience to not be afraid of it, but they also knew that caution was necessary even without damp weather. They decided to go down staggered, one at a time. Uncas went down first, and Alice a little after him. They moved cautiously, Alice waiting for Uncas to get a little way down and taking a deep breath before she started to descend. Magua waited on the cliff’s top edge just above her.

Alice looked down to check Uncas’ position. He looked up at her and smiled. Suddenly a gust of wind hit him, and his boot slipped on the slick rock where it rested. A brief look of horrified panic crossed over his face as he realized what was happening. Alice looked on in frozen disbelief, the world seeming to go into slow motion as he lost his grip completely. It sounded like someone else screaming with her voice as he fell and struck the rock face below him, his body sliding off the rounded edge to hit the bottom of the cliff.

“UNAAAASSSSS!” Alice wailed. “Uncas! Oh my God, please, no… Uncas, can you hear
“We have phones, hopefully we’ll have enough service, but Alice, please come back up here, we’ve got to get you safe!” Magua looked at her imploringly, holding a hand out to her.

“No! I can’t leave him down there alone, I have to assess his injuries and do what I can to stabilize him!” Alice tried to swallow the bitter panic that rose in her throat, her body trembling with it.

“Please, Alice, it isn’t safe!” Magua reached further toward her, beckoning for her to come back up. She looked down to where Uncas lay still on the rocky ground below, then up at Magua, her eyes full of tears and doubt. She shook her head and moved downward. There was not even one moment to second guess her choice before she, too, slipped on the smooth, wet rock and went down after Uncas. Magua cried out desperately, still reaching for her, but it was futile. She was gone, too, and there was nothing he could do now except call for help.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:

Ehôlënt: “Beloved” (Lenape)

If you were getting bored, you’re not bored anymore (I hope). This chapter started out innocently enough, didn’t it? A lovely fun shopping day for the sisters, some cute moments back at the farm, a nice family get-together. I do like Alice and Cora’s random memories of stuff from when they were younger. It drives home how close they are, especially after they lost their mother. Clearly there was some foreshadowing as the family discussed the upcoming hiking trip, and you may or may not have caught that. Sidney’s retirement celebration at the law enforcement banquet was fun to do. I wanted a couple of things from that. One, to give them all a lovely evening before I twisted the plot, and two, obviously to create a scenario for Nathaniel and Cora to finally come to the last hurdle in their relationship and admit out loud that they love each other. And really, honestly, the third thing was just that I could not resist the chance to dress them all up and make them look so gorgeous, Sidney and Yvette included. They all looked absolutely smashing in my head (and I gave Alice a braid in the right side of her hair, heehee)!

I’m sorry for being so mean to Uncas and Alice in the end, but we all know these stories must have these highly dramatic elements. I was glad to be able to play out that fall scene with a good nod to the LOTM film, but with Magua being genuinely nice and just trying to help. I gave him the last name Renard, because, as you may know, in the J.F. Cooper book Magua’s nickname was Le Renard Subtil (the wily fox), and if I remember right he mentioned it once in the film too. I hope that whole Magua thing worked for you, his part was fun to devise. You’ll find out exactly what happens regarding this terrible accident in the next chapter or two, of course, and I promise I’ll try my best not to leave you hanging for too long with this, as much as my coursework and personal life will allow.

Interesting notes: The Saranac Six and the Lake George 12ster are both real hiking challenges in the Adirondacks. There is not an official hiking challenge for the twelve peaks on the Great Range Trail to my knowledge, I just made that up because
Saddleback Mountain’s short but intense back-face cliffs were exactly what I needed to set the scene for a good fall while hiking (I know, I’m such a jerk), and you all know how much I love to use real-world stuff as much as possible for authenticity. The victory bell I mentioned is actually part of the Saranac Six challenge, and the bell itself is located in downtown Lake Saranac. I liked the idea, so I borrowed it for the challenge Uncas and Alice are doing here.

The theme song for this chapter is Lizzie West’s “Chariots Rise” (I prefer the version she recorded with Baba Buffalo because the lyrics in that one say, ‘what grace have I to fall so in love’ instead of ‘what a fool am I to fall so in love’). And that song is pretty much solely Nathaniel and Cora’s since they reached the whole ‘I love you’ point.

During the shopping trip, the girls of course heard “You Can Call Me Al” by Paul Simon, which is their silly little thing from when they were kids and their mom loved Paul Simon (I think I mentioned that and the Betty/Al nicknames in chapter five). When the guys pick up the girls for the banquet and are stunned (as well they should be!), I hear Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers’ “Here Comes My Girl”. At the banquet, Uncas and Alice are first dancing to “Lady in Red” by Chris DeBurgh (thanks for that fun and adorably cheesy suggestion MohawkWoman), which was too perfect for Alice’s gorgeous red dress. Though I didn’t mention it in the text, the song I imagined playing right after that before they sneak off (those two are naughty!) and the scene flips to Nathaniel and Cora is “Angel Eyes” by The Jeff Healey Band (yes, I’m dating myself, but I love Jeff Healey). The song Nathaniel and Cora are dancing to during their big moment is “When She Dances” by Joe Bonamassa. That is a gorgeously slow, romantic song and it makes me le sigh, so it was perfect for how that whole bit between them played out. At the end when Cora finally tells Nathaniel she loves him and they take off together, that whole scene finishes out with Martika’s “Love, Thy Will be Done” (a fabulous and beautiful collaboration with Prince that again dates me but who cares). When Alice and Uncas wake up at the lodge before their hike, the song there is “Picture in a Frame” by Tom Waits (I love that song so much). And of course, the rigorous hiking of Uncas, Alice, and Magua would not be complete without Joe Bonamassa’s “Mountain Climbing”!

That’s about it, y’all. Stay tuned for whatever happens next, and thank you so much for reading!
Chapter Summary

The AirMedic team gets their most difficult rescue call yet when they must be the ones to save Uncas and Alice. Nathaniel and Cora struggle with balancing emotions, and the Greatsnake and Munro families must band together to face the unknown, and the possibility of many struggles to come.

Chapter Notes

Author note included in chapter text due to length.

Chapter 11 – Hang On, Stay Strong

“Calm down
Deep breaths
And get yourself dressed instead
Of running around
And pulling on your threads
And breaking yourself up

If it's a broken part, replace it
If it's a broken arm then brace it
If it's a broken heart then face it

And hold your own
Know your name
And go your own way

Hold your own
Know your name
And go your own way
And everything will be fine

Hang on
Help is on the way
Stay strong
I'm doing everything

Hold your own
Know your name
And go your own way
Hold your own
Know your name
And go your own way
And everything, everything will be fine
Everything

Are the details in the fabric
Are the things that make you panic
Are your thoughts results of static cling?

Are the things that make you blow
Hell, no reason, go on and scream
If you're shocked it's just the fault
Of faulty manufacturing

Everything will be fine
Everything in no time at all
Everything

Hold your own
And know your name
Go your own way

Are the details in the fabric
Are the things that make you panic
Are your thoughts results of static cling?

Are the details in the fabric
Are the things that make you panic
Is it Mother Nature's sewing machine?

Are the things that make you blow
Hell no reason go on and scream
If you're shocked it's just the fault
Of faulty manufacturing

Everything will be fine
Everything in no time at all
Hearts will hold”

-Daniel Wilson & Jason Mraz-

“Hey, have you guys heard from Uncas and Alice today?” Brian asked on Friday afternoon, flopping down on a chair in the front lounge at AirMedic headquarters. “I was wondering how they’re doing on their big hike.”

“Yeah, I got a text from Alice when they started at the main trailhead early this morning,” Cora replied. “She said they got out there on time, but it rained last night and was still cloudy.”

Nathaniel sat down beside Cora on the couch, casually laying his arm around her shoulders. “I heard from Uncas a few hours in, too, he said they’d gotten through the first several peaks without an issue, and they were hiking with some Huron guy they met at the trailhead, Magua something-or-other. He said service was getting pretty spotty, but they’d try to let us know once they topped Mount Marcy and headed back to the lodge.”
“Hey, cool, another Huron in the friend collection!” Brian laughed. “Good, though, I’m glad they got a decent start anyway. Better them than me, I like to hike and all, but I’m nowhere near that adventurous.”

“That’s not what Ashley said,” Cora snickered.

“Daaaaamn,” Brian guffawed. “I do not need to know what gets said when I’m not around. Am I right, Nathaniel? But wait – it was all good, right?”

“Maybe,” Cora grinned mischievously at him and stood up to stretch, looking down at Nathaniel. “We were up half the night on calls, I’m going to take a nap. Are you in, or are you staying out here?”

“I’m in.” Nathaniel got up and they walked off down the hall toward the locker room together.

“Hey! No shenanigans in there!” Brian called after them. “At least put a sock on the doorknob first to warn the innocent!”

“No shenanigans, just sleeping! Scout’s honor!” Nathaniel laughed, throwing up a hand in promise. He and Cora both stopped in their tracks when they heard the dispatch line ring in Dave’s office.

“Well, I guess the nap is out,” Cora said as Dave picked up the call.

They went back to the lobby to wait with Brian for the call details. When Dave came out of the office, his face was ashen, his eyes darting around the room behind his glasses like he didn’t know where to look.

“That was central dispatch for Keene in Essex County,” he croaked. “They’re calling for a technical rescue team for two hikers in the High Peaks Wilderness.”

Nathaniel’s blood ran cold. “Where?” he grated out. Cora’s hand slid into his, holding his fingers in a bone-crushing grip. He barely noticed.

“Saddleback Mountain. One male, one female, late twenties, both seriously injured. Apparently, they fell trying to descend the cliffs.” Dave’s face bore a pained, almost apologetic expression. “There’s a ground team on their way from Keene, but they need a flight rescue to get them out of there, and Albany Medical Center is the nearest level one trauma center.”

“Fuck,” Brian hissed. Cora swallowed a strangled moan, unaware that she was crushing Nathaniel’s hand. She would not let herself think the worst. Could not let herself. They had a job to do, no matter who it turned out to be.

“The on-call flight crew is already on their way here,” Dave said. “You’ll need them for the Sikorsky.”

Nathaniel nodded numbly. He’d never thought his experience working with Sidney and the Sheriff’s Department on search and rescue would come in handy quite like this. The Bell Long Ranger he usually flew didn’t have the capacity for two stretchered patients plus the four-man medical crew required to manage them, nor was it equipped for mountain rescue. In cases like this, AirMedic staff utilized a Sikorsky S-76, a larger capacity helicopter that could carry the needed crew, and was equipped with a winch for lifting litters off the ground in places it could not land. It required both a pilot and copilot as well, so they would need the entire call team.
Cora, Brian and Nathaniel busied themselves double checking all the equipment and supplies on the S-76 while they waited for Jack, Jonathan and Ian, one of the other staff paramedics, to arrive. It seemed like hours to Cora, though it was really only about ten minutes’ time before all three had pulled into the lot, already suited up and ready to take off as soon as they had all the call information. Jack agreed to copilot alongside Nathaniel, because Nathaniel had more rescue flying experience than he did. Though somewhat reluctant due to his worry about the potential emotional complications of the situation, he knew Nathaniel, and trusted that he would not fly if he thought it was a risk. Without wasting another second, the crew climbed aboard to prepare for liftoff. Inside the helicopter cabin, Cora put her flight helmet on and buckled her harness with trembling hands.

“Lots of people hike that trail,” she said, trying to repress the tremor in her voice. “It could just be a coincidence. We don’t know until we get there. This is just a rescue call right now.” She looked at Brian and the other crew members, her face grim and her eyes hard. The look on Nathaniel’s face beneath the visor of his helmet almost undid her; he knew as well as she did that her words were a futile attempt to mask what they were all really thinking, and though he was doing his best to hide it, she saw the fear in him, and she knew he saw it in her, too. It rose in her chest and threatened to crush her from the inside out, but she could not let it, not when lives depended on them now. She couldn’t lose herself to it like she had when Duncan had run to his death, she couldn’t let herself become emotional and therefore careless.

Nathaniel set his jaw, thankful for the decent weather that would allow him to push the S-76 as fast as it was capable of flying. Even at a top speed of a hundred and fifty-five knots, it didn’t seem fast enough to him. He flew in silence for most of the trip, talking only when he and Jack needed to communicate. Like Cora, he was doing his level best to call up all his previous training to keep his emotions in check, but it was hard. Not knowing for sure who or what they would find when they arrived at the scene was worse than anything. A call that potentially involved a loved one was every first responder’s worst nightmare, and he had never expected it to come at this point in his life. He wanted to scream from the anxiety bubbling up inside him, but instead he prayed silently that Cora was somehow right; that it was just a coincidence, that it wasn’t Uncas and Alice. And if it was, then the job they had to do was just that much more important, and it was that much more critical for them to keep their shit together. It would never be ideal to send a rescue crew potentially related to victims, but Nathaniel knew damn well he wouldn’t trust anyone else to do this anyway, and neither would Cora. Everyone on this crew was emotionally involved, because they all knew and cared for one another as colleagues and friends. They just had to keep a level head and do what they had to do, like every other call. He could not be Uncas’ brother, Cora could not be Alice’s sister, and Brian and the others could not be their friends. They had to be a rescue team, and nothing else.

“We’re going to be there soon, and we need to have an action plan for arrival,” he said to the crew through his headset mic. “It’s going to be impossible for me to land this thing anywhere near the scene, so we’ll need to stay in the air and send litters down with two of you, while the others stay on board to receive them.”

Brian appeared calm, but his dark eyes betrayed the worry he shared with Cora and Nathaniel. “I think Cora and I should go down with the litters,” he said without hesitation, looking at Cora.

“Agreed,” Ian replied, his grey-blue eyes shifting between Brian and Cora. “You both have the most comprehensive technical rescue training, especially her with her military background.”

Cora nodded affirmatively. “Dave said there was a ground rescue team on their way up the mountain, but they may or may not be there yet when we arrive. If they are, they’ll be a big help, too.”
“Cora, you know I hate to be the devil’s advocate here, but are you going to be able to do this if it really is your sister and Uncas?” Jonathan asked, pushing his light brown hair off his forehead.

“Yes,” she replied. “This is my job, first and foremost. I have the training and the ability, and if it is them, it won’t matter whether I’m up here or down there, will it? I’m here, either way.”

Jonathan agreed, and they continued to hash out their plan and discuss what supplies should be immediately available as each victim was hoisted up. This was all second nature to them, but talking and planning out loud helped them stay focused on the job and able to tamp down their uneasiness. When Nathaniel announced their approach to Saddleback Mountain, Cora steeled herself for what was to come. As he lowered the helicopter as close as he could get to the ground, she and Brian opened the side door to prepare for the rappel down, and to assess what was below on scene. There was a lone man in a blue jacket standing to signal the helicopter. Looking at the two victims lying on the ground, she couldn’t tell yet how badly they were injured, but she had to swallow the wave of nausea when she recognized the jackets they wore, and Uncas’ long black hair.

“It’s them,” she said woodenly. You knew it all along, she told herself. You can’t panic, you have to get them out of here. Cora and Brian attached the rappel rigging to their harnesses while Ian and Jonathan lowered the litters. As Cora did a final rigging safety check on her line, she took a deep breath and allowed herself to look at Nathaniel in the cockpit, all his concentration on keeping the helicopter where it needed to be, with Jack’s assistance.

“Remember who you are,” his voice came through her headset as the litter was lowered down to the ground. “Remember your training. You’re a nurse. You’re a Corpsman. You’re not her sister until you can be. Just get them up here safe, and yourself, too.” He glanced at her briefly. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she replied. With a last signal to the rest of the team, she and Brian rappelled down after the litters, the wash from the helicopter’s rotor buffeting them and whipping stray strands of hair into Cora’s face. Hang on, guys, help is on the way. When their feet hit the ground at the bottom of Saddleback Cliffs, they detached the carabiners from their harnesses. Brian ran to Uncas while she ran to Alice. As she passed Uncas, she could see that he was unconscious, his right shoulder in an unnatural position. Alice lay a little further away, the man who had waved at the helicopter now saying something to her before swiftly heading toward Cora. She’s awake…she’s alive…thank God. The man reached her as she approached, running alongside her back to Alice.

“Ma’am, I’m Magua Renard, I was hiking with these two. Is there anything I can do to help you?” he shouted over the noise from the helicopter circling above.

“I don’t know yet. Are you hurt?” she shouted back.

“No, ma’am, not a bit, but I was here with these two when they fell, and I called for help. I’m pretty sure the girl, Alice, has some broken ribs, and her left leg is broken bad. I used my first aid kit to try to stop some of the bleeding on her leg. She was unconscious for a little while, but she woke up. Her boyfriend woke up for a little bit, too, but he’s been out again for a while now.”

“Thank you for the information, Mr. Renard, and for your help!”

“Cora!” Alice gasped in agony, turning her head toward the sound of her sister’s voice, crying out in pain when she accidentally put pressure on her leg.

“I’m here, Al. Don’t try to talk too much or move!” Cora instructed. She threw her medical supply pack down and fell to her knees beside Alice to begin assessing her injuries. She had a
bloody contusion near her left temple where she had apparently hit her head during the fall, and what Cora suspected were a couple of badly broken ribs on her left side. She couldn’t hear anything in the lower lobe of that lung, and she swore silently in her head, knowing it had likely been punctured by one of the fractured ribs and was leaking air into her pleural cavity.

“Uncas…” Alice sobbed, her breathing shallow and fast. “Is he all right?”

“I don’t know yet, but Brian is with him, okay? We need to get you guys out of here fast.” She placed an oxygen mask over Alice’s face. “Don’t move around, and just keep breathing as deeply as you can. I think your left lung is starting to collapse, and I don’t want it to get worse if we can help it. Your left leg is hurt?”

“Yes,” Alice moaned, her teeth chattering. “It hurts, it hurts so bad.”

Cora pulled out her trauma shears to cut away Alice’s trail pants around where Magua had applied a muslin bandage, now stained with blood. Even with the bandage, she could tell Alice’s leg was a mess, the skin beneath torn open by a compound fracture. She left it in place, not wanting to increase the chances of infection in the wound. Jesus Christ, she could lose her leg, she thought inwardly, masking her reaction as best she could for her sister’s benefit.

“It’s broken pretty bad, Al. I need to stabilize it, and then we have to get you and Uncas in the helicopter. I’m here, and so are Nathaniel and Brian and everyone. Just hang on, and we’ll get you off this mountain as fast as we can.”

“Okay,” Alice whimpered, tears cutting through the muddy streaks on her face.

Cora pushed herself through getting Alice’s leg taken care of, gritting her teeth at the agonized sounds of her sister’s pain, trying to keep herself numb to who it was and just do what she needed to do to help her, talking her through it like she did all her patients. While she was finishing, shouts sounded nearby as the ground crew from Keene Fire Rescue arrived at last. She breathed a sigh of relief for the extra hands and gave them the information they needed to assist. A man and a woman stayed with Alice while she went to find out Uncas’ condition. Brian reported that he was unconscious, but breathing with normal lung sounds. There was a severe contusion and swelling on the right side of his head with some external bleeding from broken skin, and Brian had applied a C-collar in case of a neck injury. His shoulder was in bad shape, and with the closed head injury a brain hemorrhage was highly suspect, especially because he was not conscious. He would need to go up first. She helped Brian get him strapped into the litter while the other team members rushed to get Alice ready be hoisted up next, one of them going to Magua to check him out. The winch line dropped from the helicopter now hovering above them, and Brian reconnected all the rigging with help from a ground crewman, going back up with Uncas to where Jonathan and Ian waited to help him angle the litter back inside the helicopter. Once they had him safely in, the operation was repeated for Cora. Magua stayed with the ground team to hike out with them, and as Cora rode up the rigging line with Alice to where the others waited, she thought with fleeting regret that she wished she had been able to properly thank the man who had helped save her sister and Uncas. But there was no more time to think of anything but Uncas and Alice once they were secure inside the cabin.

Nathaniel lifted the helicopter back into the open sky, the medical crew working together behind him to keep their patients stable for the trip back to Albany. He said nothing to them that did not need to be said, trusting them to do the jobs he knew they were all capable of doing. His brother and Alice were both alive, and that was the best he could ask for under the circumstances; his only concern now was to get them to their destination safely, and as fast as he could fly. Jack contacted Dave via the COM radio so he could connect him with Albany Medical Center, letting them know
that they were en route, with details and an approximate arrival time. Nathaniel left the communication off between his headset and the crews’ for now. The distraction of hearing what was going on back there could be dangerous during flight, and even though it broke his heart not to know what was happening to his brother, he couldn’t risk the safety of everyone on board. He could switch it on and check in periodically if he needed to, and he could still hear a little with the door closed for flight.

“How’s he doing, guys?” Cora asked Brian and Jonathan, looking at Uncas’ monitor as she secured Alice’s newly placed IV catheter with tape and a clear dressing.

“Stable for now,” Brian answered. “We’ve got IV access, too. I’m worried about his intracranial pressure with the head injury, especially if there’s a bleed, but his head is elevated thirty degrees and his blood pressure’s holding steady.” Cora had a fleeting memory of the seminar she and Uncas had attended at the conference in San Diego on managing blood pressure in head injury patients in flight. Really fucking ironic now, she thought bitterly.

“He’s okay?” Alice asked weakly, lifting her oxygen mask a little.

“Yeah, as much as he can be,” Cora answered, watching Alice’s monitor. Her oxygen saturation was a little low, even with the mask she was wearing, and Cora didn’t like it. “How are you feeling?”

“A little better with the pain meds Ian gave me. But I can’t take deep enough breaths, it hurts.”

“It’s your ribs, and that punctured lung. Don’t try to move, and leave that oxygen mask on, okay? Nathaniel and Jack will have us at the hospital soon.”

“Shit, Brian, he’s seizing!” Jonathan barked suddenly. Uncas’ monitor started to alarm, his oxygen saturation dropping as his body went rigid from the seizure, likely caused by increased pressure on his brain from the injury.

Brian grabbed a bottle of IV lorazepam and saline flushes out of the supply drawers beneath the stretcher, wasting no time administering the drug to stop the seizure. “Fuckin’ A, this isn’t good,” Brian growled. “He must be bleeding fast. We need to get his intracranial pressure down before this causes permanent injury to his brain.”

“Hypertonic saline,” Jonathan replied hastily, making sure Uncas’ airway stayed open. “That’ll pull fluid away from his brain and get his ICP down.”

“Already on it,” Brian said, pulling a bag of 7.5% saline and an IV tubing set.

“Uncas!” Alice gasped, trying to turn to her side to see what was happening. “Cora, what’s wrong with him?”

“Alice, no, don’t move!” Cora reached out to stop her. Suddenly Alice’s hand flew to her chest and she began to gasp desperately, her monitor starting to alarm as her oxygen saturation plummeted.

“Lay back,” Ian told her, easing her down and cranking up the oxygen.

Cora tore her helmet off to put on her digitally amplified stethoscope. She listened for lung sounds that were no longer present anywhere on the left side, while Alice struggled for breath. “Goddammit,” she spat, tearing the stethoscope off. “The lung collapsed completely, now she’s progressed to a tension pneumothorax!” Alice was losing consciousness, and there was no time to
debate about what to do. “Ian, I need a catheter for a needle decompression.” Ian bent over, opening a supply drawer and pulling out the long 14-gauge needle. Alice had passed out, and her O2 sat was in the toilet, her monitor alarm beeping frantically. You did this all the time for chest trauma cases in the desert, Cora reminded herself, taking the catheter from Ian. Not as many of those people survived because their blast injuries were so severe, but Alice would not live, either, if she didn’t do this. Nathaniel’s last words to her before she had hit the ground earlier came back. Remember who you are. Remember your training.

She breathed deeply as she pulled the shock blanket away to cut Alice’s shirt open and donned new gloves, giving her chest a quick scrub with a betadine swab. She located the second intercostal space at the mid-clavicular line with her fingers, and before she could second guess what she knew to be the only intervention that could save her sister right now, she swiftly and carefully inserted the catheter at a 90-degree angle at the top margin of the lower rib. She gave a silent prayer of thanks as air rushed out through the open end of the needle, effectively decompressing Alice’s pleural cavity so her lung could re-expand and relieve the pressure on her heart. Her oxygen saturation began to rise steadily again as Cora pulled the needle out of its sheath to leave the plastic catheter in place, securing it with the tape Ian tore off and handed her. She would need a chest tube placed when they got to the hospital, but this would keep her alive and stable enough until they arrived. Thankfully, things calmed down after that, and the crew could breathe and try to relax a little with both patients as stable as they could get them in a prehospital setting.

“Hey guys, we’re about fifteen minutes out, Jack will be notifying the hospital again in a few minutes.” Nathaniel’s strained voice crackled over the headset. “How are things back there?”

“As good as they can be, man,” Brian replied. “I’ve got his back, don’t worry.”

“Alice is all right for now, too,” Cora told him. She fought to keep her voice from shaking as she filled him in on both patients, thankful they were almost at the hospital where the trauma team she knew and trusted would be waiting. Where once they took over, she could be Alice’s sister, and Nathaniel could be Uncas’ brother, and they would be able to notify Ed and the Greatsnakes. For the moment, she tried not to think about telling her father, or how he would react, because she didn’t have the luxury of being able to lose her shit yet. When they finally landed on the rooftop helipad at Albany Medical Center, the trauma team met them there. Nathaniel had to stay with the helicopter, so he would take that opportunity to call Sidney and Yvette once he’d shut down the engine. Cora and Brian went with the stretchers and the trauma team to give them report, and Cora had never been so relieved to see Ashley.

“I already paged neurosurgery, orthopedics, and pulmonology,” Ashley told Cora when she’d finished the rundown and they were arriving at the trauma room. “Neuro has an OR ready to go for Uncas, and ortho and pulmonology won’t be far behind for Alice.”

“Thank you,” Cora met her friend’s dark eyes and reluctantly left to join Brian in the hall, where they ran into Kate, Cora’s usual charge nurse and friend. Kate saw the look on her face and immediately went to her, her eyes questioning.

“Kate… it’s my sister, and her boyfriend,” Cora blurted, her voice breaking helplessly as she explained about the hiking accident.

“Oh, God, and you brought them? Oh, honey, what a nightmare. I’ll do whatever I can to help,” the older woman said, hugging Cora. “Have you even been able to call your families yet?”

“Nathaniel was calling his parents, and I’m going to call my dad now, but we have to go back with the helicopter, so we have to leave them,” Cora replied, sniffling and dashing a tear away. You can’t lose it yet, she admonished herself. You can’t be like that when you call Pop.
“We’ll take good care of them, I promise,” Kate said. “Come here when you get back, and I’ll let you know where they are.” Cora nodded, taking off at a run with Brian back to the roof as she pulled out her cell phone to call Ed.

When the crew got back to AirMedic headquarters, everything seemed rushed and oddly surreal. Since Brian had switched his Saturday shift to cover for Uncas, he offered to drive Cora and Nathaniel back to the hospital, since they had ridden motorcycles to work the day before. Everyone kept talking around them, and all Nathaniel really wanted was for everyone to just lay off and let him have a few minutes alone with Cora. She’d been sheet-white since calling Ed before they had taken off from the hospital roof, and he knew he wasn’t faring much better after hearing Yvette’s frightened sobs and the heavily controlled panic in Sidney’s voice when he had called them. He selfishly just wanted to hold Cora now and feel her arms around him, if only for a little while before they had to rush back to that hospital and face their parents, face the reality of everything that had happened. Most of all, he wanted this all to be a bad dream that he would wake up from.

He finally got his first wish after they had retrieved their things from their lockers, when Brian and the others let them be as they left the building. They went together back to the helicopter so they could get Uncas and Alice’s jackets from the cabin, where they still lay on the floor with the rest of the mess that Ian and Jonathan had assured them would be taken care of. Cora climbed down with Alice’s red jacket in her hands, as Nathaniel held Uncas’ green and yellow one in his. They both turned back to look around the cabin at the used and discarded items on the floor around the stretchers, the blood smears on the floor; all the evidence of what had happened the last several hours impossible to ignore, the raw memory of it refusing to be pushed away anymore now that it was safe to fall apart. Cora’s entire body began to shake uncontrollably as her legs buckled beneath her and she sank to the ground with an anguished cry, unable to stand any longer. Nathaniel fell to his knees beside her, taking her into his arms.

“You did good,” he rasped, burying his face in her hair. “You did everything right. You did good. You did good. We all did.” He held her tight against his own trembling body, both clinging to one another for dear life as they sobbed out the chaotic storm of horror and fear they were at last allowed to feel. Letting it out felt no better at this point, though, not with the anxiety of being away from the hospital, away from knowing what was going on with Uncas and Alice. They collected themselves after a few minutes, and went to the parking lot where Brian was waiting for them next to his 4Runner.

“You guys ready to head out?” he asked as he took in the pale, shaky pair approaching him.

“Yeah,” Nathaniel answered quietly. He could tell that Brian was badly shaken, too, and rightly so – the three of them had been close for a long time.

“Here, I thought these might come in handy on the ride over,” Brian said, handing them each a blanket he had swiped from the bunk room.

“Thanks, man.” Nathaniel took them and draped one around Cora’s shoulders, helping her into the back seat.

“Eh. Helps me feel like I’m doing something.” Brian shrugged and looked away, his dark eyes betraying his worry and the effects of the harrowing day. “I’m sorry, Nathaniel, Cora, I wish there was something more I could do.”

Nathaniel hugged their friend fiercely. “You’ve done plenty. I wouldn’t trust anybody else with my brother’s life, and you know it. He’d feel the same.”

“You guys are my best friends. I’ve got your back, man. All of you,” Brian replied thickly,
swiping at his wet face. “Now let’s get the hell out of here, you need to be there when those two wake up.”

Nathaniel got into the back seat next to Cora. He couldn’t stop the cold dread that spread through him when all he could think in reply was ‘Yeah, if nothing else goes wrong, and they actually DO wake up’. He could see the same fear on Cora’s face as she rode silently beside him, pressed against his side, her hand gripping his with white knuckles. The stark reality was that the nightmare had only just begun, and they were still going to have to walk into that hospital to face everything else that was coming.

“CAN SOMEBODY PLEASE JUST TELL ME WHERE THE HELL MY DAUGHTER IS?!” Ed’s terror-inducing drill instructor voice boomed across the ER waiting room. He stood at the front counter, where a flustered unit secretary was desperately trying to calm him.

“I’m trying to look her up, sir, I’m sorry -”

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry! Move like you have a damn purpose!” he yelled, snapping a knife-hand at the mortified young man.

“Excuse me! Sir! What is the meaning of this?” Ed looked up to see a female nurse of about fifty with short red hair stalking toward him, her brown eyes flashing with annoyance over her purple-framed reading glasses.

“I’m trying to find my daughter and her boyfriend! They were airlifted in about a half hour ago, and nobody seems to be able to tell me anything useful!” he snapped furiously.

“Well, sir, that’s how it’s going to stay if you continue to yell. I understand that you’re worried and upset, but you can’t do this. You’re frightening other patients and causing a disturbance.” She gestured at the other people in the waiting room. “So you can calm yourself down and talk in a normal tone, because this is unacceptable.” She raised an auburn brow, challenging him to try and argue. “Now, tell me your name, and who you’re looking for.”

“Edmund Munro, and I’m looking for my daughter, Alice.”

“Oh…” Kate paled a little. “You’re Cora’s father?”

“Pop! Kate!” Cora called out as she, Nathaniel and Brian ran through the automatic doors at the main entrance.

“Cora! Thank God!” Ed exclaimed as Cora launched herself into his arms.

“What’s going on here?” Cora asked, realizing that something was wrong.

“I was just explaining to your… father that he needs to simmer down and behave constructively so we can help him,” Kate replied.

“Oh, no… I’m so sorry,” Cora apologized tearfully. “Was he knife-handing people? I should have just told him to ask for you, I thought I’d be here first.”

“It’s fine, I understand. No harm done.”

“Nathaniel!” Yvette cried, running through the doors a moment later with Sidney at her side. Nathaniel wrapped his arms around them both. “Where is your brother? How is he?” she asked frantically, looking to Kate. “Are you the nurse? We’re looking for Uncas Greatsnake and Alice
Munro.”

“Yes, I’m Kate, I’m the charge nurse for ER and trauma. Please come with me, all of you, and I can give you more information.”

They followed her down the hallway to a small conference room. Cora felt nauseated, and her head spun. She hated this room - it was where they sat families down privately to give them bad news. She thought about all the times she had sat in this very room as the one having to break people’s hearts, imagining how it must have felt to them. That was heart-wrenching enough, but being on the receiving end of this was indescribably horrific. Her father’s arm tightened around her as they sat down. He might act full of piss and vinegar, but she’d heard him break down on the phone earlier, and she knew he was scared to death, just like she was. She wondered briefly if this was how he and Alice must have felt when she’d been in that helicopter crash in Afghanistan. It must have been worse, really – she knew they had been told nothing definitive about her condition until they had arrived at the Naval hospital in Bethesda. She leaned against Ed on her left, still clutching Nathaniel’s hand like a lifeline on her right, where he sat beside his parents and Brian. Kate explained that both Uncas and Alice were currently in operating rooms, and that she would call in to the circulating nurses to let the OR teams know that their families were here waiting for an update. Both were alive, and she assured the group that the surgeons would do everything possible to ensure the best outcomes for them. Beyond that, definitive diagnoses and test results would need to be given by the doctors and surgeons treating them. Cora knew this, and at this point it was nothing new to the rest of the family members either, given their past experiences, but it was nevertheless frustrating to be told they would need to wait yet again for more information.

“Thank you for your help. I’m, ah… sorry I was a little out of hand out there,” Ed apologized to Kate as they were leaving the small room.

“It’s all right, Mr. Munro. This is a very stressful situation.” She patted his arm compassionately, then turned to Cora. “Your shifts are all covered for next week, so don’t worry about work. Come down and see me once things even out a little and we’ll talk about leave options if you need that, okay?”

“Thank you,” Cora sighed, giving her a hug.

“Ashley’s on a break, so I’m going to check in with her for a bit,” Brian said. “I’ll come and find you guys upstairs in a little while and see how things are going.”

“Brian, thank you so much for taking good care of my baby, and for driving Nathaniel and Cora here,” Yvette sniffled, hugging him.

“Thanks for being here, Brian,” Cora murmured, squeezing his hand in hers. “And tell Ashley thank you, too, and I’ll see her later if I can.” She slid her hand back into the comforting warmth of Nathaniel’s, both still clutching Alice and Uncas’ jackets like security blankets as the lot of them filed into an elevator to make their way up to the Surgical Services area, where they would be updated when possible. The waiting room was empty, the silence heavy and suffocating as they took turns alternately sitting and then standing to pace restlessly, hoping for news.

“It was bad enough when it was Maureen, and we knew how bad things were with her,” Ed said quietly to Sidney they stared out of a dark window. “Then there was the helicopter crash with Cora, and running down to Maryland to find out God knew what, and I thought I’d lose my mind then, and I might have if not for Alice. Now… I’ll tell you, I never thought I’d have to face this again. I never thought… both my children… Goddammit, my whole family.” Ed’s voice broke in sorrow as he pressed his hands over his eyes.
Sidney’s head bowed, trying to hold back his own tears that threatened to come. “I thought the same,” he said thickly, placing a comforting hand on Ed’s shoulder. “I thought nothing could be worse than almost losing Nathaniel seven years ago, and now here we are again with Uncas, not knowing what’s to come, not knowing how he’ll come out of this, sitting here going out of my mind with worry…”

Yvette went to him and wrapped her arms around him and Ed, the three of them standing together in the solidarity of that singular, unique terror that only parents can know when their children are hurt or in danger. Nathaniel and Cora went to them and were enfolded in the bundle of arms, both feeling for a moment like small children who just needed their parents to comfort them.

“Mom’s watching over her, Pop,” Cora whispered, squeezing Ed close.

“I know she is,” he sobbed, “I just wish she was here. I don’t want to do this without her again.” He held his daughter fiercely when she began to cry in his arms. “She would be so proud of what you did today, Cora. You saved Alice’s life. All of you did.” He looked at Nathaniel gratefully through his tears.

The elevator dinged, snapping the families out of their grief for a moment. Brian stepped out when the doors opened, bearing a cardboard caddy holding several cups from the coffee shop downstairs. “I brought up some coffee, and hot water with tea bags,” he said when he reached them. “Have you heard anything yet?”

“No, nothing yet,” Nathaniel replied as Brian set the caddy down on an end table and sat down on a chair beside the loveseat he and Cora occupied.

“This fucking blows,” Cora muttered miserably, grabbing a tissue out of the box on the table and blowing her nose. She felt impotent and helpless in this position, stuck in a hellish limbo of being where she worked, but not being at work, and there was nothing she could do to control this, or help it, or move it along. She didn’t really blame Ed for coming in yelling and screaming, because part of her felt like doing it, too. He’d been just as bad in Bethesda, though the staff there had been good at dealing with a mean old Drill Instructor, and Alice was good at keeping him calm. Alice was good at keeping everybody calm. Cora wanted her mother, like Ed did. She wanted her peace and her calm and her humor, so much like Alice. And she wanted Alice, and she wanted Alice to be all right, not back in a cold operating room having to be fixed because she was broken. They had had enough being broken. Broken hearts and broken lives when Maureen had suffered and died. Broken parts and broken minds and broken everything after the helicopter crash, fractured by distance in all their suffering and grief, and Alice selflessly giving up parts of her life to stay with Cora and help her recover. This wasn’t fair. Why should Alice have to go through this now, when she’d already done so much time in hell, when she’d lost her teen years to Maureen’s death, and her formative adult years to her war-battered sister? It had made them all so close, but the cost had been so high, and she could not understand the weaving of this fucked-up tapestry at all now. “I can’t even log into the system and look at their charts for test results, imaging, anything. We know nothing right now, and I fucking hate this.” She angrily tossed the balled-up tissue at a small trash can, missing the rim and watching it bounce off onto the floor. Nathaniel pulled her close and sighed in empathy, kissing her hair. Cora wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder, grateful for his comfort, at least.

“Maybe it’s better that way,” Brian intoned. “Knowing that stuff without hearing from the OR team yet might make it worse, you know?”

“Maybe so,” Nathaniel murmured, watching his parents. Sidney’s quiet distress and Yvette’s tears were tearing him apart. They had spent so many years doing everything they could to make
things better for him, to be the best parents they could be after the loss of his biological family, to take that terrible thing and turn it around into a good life for him against all odds. Seeing them in pain like this was the worst kind of torture. He wanted to be able to fix this, to take it from them, and he couldn’t. When he and John had been shot, it was awful then, too, but he’d been in such bad shape he barely remembered the first week, and hadn’t seen the worst of what his parents and Uncas had gone through. Then there had been Alexandra, widowed with a toddler and a baby, and some of their focus had gone to helping her, too, which had given them some purpose and somewhere to direct all that terrible energy. Now he was stuck here, conscious of everything, sharing their fears and terrified of what would be said when the surgeon came out. Now he could deeply understand where Uncas had stood seven years ago, going through this at just twenty-two years old, and relentlessly pushing Nathaniel through the worst months of his entire life. I’ll do whatever it takes for you, little brother, he thought gravely. Just be all right. Just come out of this okay so I can kick your ass back into shape like you kicked mine, and we’ll get through this together, again. Just be all right, please just be all right.

All heads perked up anxiously when the double doors to the OR clicked and opened on their automatic hinges to reveal a slightly heavyset man in green scrubs with a surgical cap covering his half-gray hair, and a mask hanging haphazardly under his chin. A younger woman with sandy hair and brown eyes, dressed the same way, was with him. Both were familiar faces to Cora.

“Family for Alice?” The man’s watery blue eyes scanned the waiting room.

“Here!” Ed barked, standing up with Cora.

The doctors approached, introducing themselves to Ed and sympathetically greeting Cora, since they both knew her. The man was Dr. Coleman, one of the hospital’s orthopedic surgeons, who Cora saw often in the ER when he consulted ortho cases that came in. The woman was Dr. Travis, an anesthesiologist in the OR. Cora didn’t know her quite as well, but she had done two of the intubation skills checkoffs that Cora was required to complete every six months for her paramedic licensure. She was kind, intelligent, and extremely competent; Cora liked both her and Dr. Coleman very much, and she was relieved that Alice had been in their care.

“How is she?” Cora asked them, clutching Ed’s hand.

“She pulled through the surgery all right, but there are some complications that we need to discuss, too,” Dr. Coleman replied. He explained that Alice had only a minor concussion from hitting her head as she fell, but that her lower leg fracture was a grade 3A compound fracture of both her tibia and fibula bones. This meant that the traumatic break along with the bones coming through her skin had caused dangerous exposure to the outside environment that posed a major infection risk, as well as some soft tissue damage that complicated things a little. He had been able to clean and debride the wound without much trouble, and the leg had been placed in an external fixator, a metal device around the outside with pins that extended into the broken bones to hold them in place so they could start to heal. “If all goes as we hope, and no infection develops, I should be able to remove the ex-fix in two weeks or so, maybe a little longer, and we can go back in and do internal fixation. We’ll know more in the next week or so. She’s been given IV antibiotics, and we’ll keep her on them prophylactically, plus she has a special dressing with antibiotic beads on the leg wound itself, so we’ve taken every precaution to give her the best outcome. Even with good results, she’s going to have a long recovery road ahead of her, but she’s young and strong and healthy, and I’ll do my level best to make that road as short as possible while she’s in my care. She’s going to need a lot of help and physical therapy, so it’s fortunate that she has family in the medical field.”

“That brings us to the next issue, which is her lung, and some airway issues we experienced as a result,” Dr. Travis said carefully. “I didn’t have any issues intubating her when we initiated
anesthesia, she did well. Her left lung was punctured by a fractured rib, as was suspected, and Dr. Joshi, the on-call pulmonologist, placed a chest tube to keep it inflated. All of that went without issue, but her airway has been irritated and traumatized due to the damaged lung and the tension pneumothorax, and she did have a laryngospasm when I was attempting to extubate her after surgery.”

“What does that mean?” Ed asked in a strangled tone.

“So basically that means her vocal cords spontaneously squeezed shut, blocking off her airway for a period of time, which can of course be very dangerous because the patient can’t breathe while that’s happening. I was able to get it resolved pretty quickly by putting her back under with some Propofol, but to make sure that airway stays clear of fluid to avoid pneumonia, Dr. Joshi and I have agreed that the best course of action is to keep her intubated and sedated for a little while to let things calm down a little. If she’s doing well we can look at extubating her tomorrow sometime. Dr. Joshi will ideally want her breathing on her own as soon as possible. He’s with her now, and we’ll be transferring her directly to ICU as soon as they have the necessary equipment ready for her up there. Either I or the circulating nurse will come and let you know when she’s being transferred so you can head that way. Do you have any questions for us before we go back?” Cora shook her head. She knew far too much about everything they had been told, and it was overwhelming to even think about. Ed shook his head numbly, his eyes glazed with worry and disbelief.

“I know this is a lot to process right now, but Dr. Joshi will be here all night, and Dr. Coleman and I are both reachable by cell phone, even if we aren’t here physically. Please don’t hesitate to ask any of us for help, and the ICU staff here is wonderful.” Dr. Travis placed a comforting hand on Ed’s shoulder, and she and Dr. Coleman went back through the OR doors, passing another scrub-clad surgeon on his way out.

“Family for Greatsnake?” he said. He was tall and lanky, about sixty or so with hazel eyes and mostly grey hair. “I’m Dr. Navelli, I’m a neurosurgeon.” He sat down with Sidney, Yvette, and Nathaniel after introductions had been made. “I’ll get right down to business here. The CT scan showed a pretty significant epidural hematoma on the right side of Uncas’ head – that means that when he hit his head falling, it caused enough shear to rupture an artery, and that caused bleeding between his skull and the dura mater, which is the tough outer layer of his brain. The swelling and pressure from that was what caused him to have a seizure on the flight here. When that kind of thing happens, we have to remove the blood mass, or hematoma, and simultaneously repair the damaged blood vessel so the bleeding stops. Thankfully, he was brought here quickly enough post-injury that I was able to get all that done by drilling a couple of burr holes in his skull and placing a shunt to drain fluid, rather than having to do a craniotomy and take out a portion of his skull that would have to be replaced later. As long as the swelling stays under control, we won’t have to do anything more, but right now is a very critical time.”

“So what will happen now?” Sidney asked, his face ashen. Yvette sat beside him gripping his arm, her other hand pressed over her mouth as if to stifle a scream. Nathaniel sat woodenly beside them while Cora, Ed, and Brian listened in silence.

“Now we just have to wait, honestly. I’d love to be able to tell you for sure that his prognosis is good, but brain injuries can be a very individual thing, and there’s no way I can predict how fast he’ll recover or what long-term issues he may have as a result of this. Overall, his brain is in good shape thanks to the speed and skill of the MedEvac crew, and him having a brief lucid period after the injury is promising too, but we’ll know a lot more in the coming days. He sustained some pretty significant damage to his right shoulder, some soft tissue trauma and I believe a fracture. Right now that’s being stabilized by an orthopedic shoulder specialist, and once he’s done, Uncas will be transferred from the OR to the neurology ICU. He’ll stay sedated on a ventilator for at least a few
days, while we give him medications and let his body rest so the swelling in his brain has time to go down. After that, we’ll try waking him up gradually, and we’ll see how he’s doing. I’ll be following him every step of the way, and I’ll be here for you if you have questions or concerns.”

“What kind of issues could he have related to the brain injury?” Nathaniel asked.

“Well, due to the specific cranial nerves that this type of bleed puts pressure on, he could have some temporary or permanent vision problems, and he may exhibit some weakness on the opposite side of his body. We won’t know for sure until he’s awake, but I can tell you that because he was brought in very quickly for treatment, I have high hopes for him. We just have to see.” There were no more questions for the moment, so Dr. Navelli took his leave, once again leaving the two families to themselves to absorb everything they had just learned. Brian bowed out as well, wanting to give them all privacy to process things, and needing to get some sleep. After he left, Sidney and Nathaniel took turns holding Yvette while she sobbed.

“I don’t even know if I’m crying because I’m relieved or upset!” she wailed. “I don’t know what to think right now! We have no idea if he’s going to be okay yet, and now we have to wait days to find out! I just want to see my son!”

“I know, ntwëhëm,” Sidney murmured, tears streaking silently down his cheeks. “But it’s just a waiting game now. We’ll get to see him soon.”

“I think I’m in the same boat as Yvette,” Ed said to Cora, his voice raw and pained. “I mean, we know she’s okay, sort of, but she’s also not, and I don’t know what to do with that. Either way, it’ll be a while before either of them is out of the woods, and I feel so goddamn helpless.” He raked his hands through his close-shorn hair, blinking back the tears in his already reddened eyes.

“I do too, Pop,” Cora sniffled, hugging him. “I’m used to being the nurse, I’m used to being able to do something, anything, and I can’t now. I just want her to be okay, I just want to talk to her.”

Once things had settled down a bit, they continued to sit restlessly, waiting for the shoulder surgeon and notification of Alice’s transfer to the ICU. Nathaniel and Cora sat on their loveseat huddled together, Ed and the Greatsnakes directly across from them. Cora had Alice’s jacket wrapped around her, nervously toying with the zipper. Agitated, overtired, and far too anxious to even think about dozing off, Nathaniel started going through the pockets of Uncas’ jacket to keep himself busy. The left breast pocket held a small compass and a GPS for use in areas without cell service. *Always prepared, aren’t you?* he thought. The left hip pocket held his truck keys with the silly bendable Spider-Man figure keychain Nathaniel had given him a few years ago when he’d bought the red and blue Harley.

“What the…” he muttered as he stuck his hand in the right hip pocket. He pulled out a small, square black leather box with a gold foil embellishment stamped around the edges. Cora straightened beside him when she saw it. Fingers trembling, he opened the box. Inside, an antique art nouveau diamond ring rested on the black velvet lining, the rectangular cushion-cut diamond set in delicate white gold filigree, with yellow gold flowers flanking the setting on each side of the band, a golden topaz set in the center of each one. His heart sank like an iron weight, the breath crushed from him by it.

“What is it, nkwis?” Yvette asked. Nathaniel looked at her, shaking his head helplessly, his eyes full of tears.

“It’s my mother’s engagement ring,” Cora whispered, blinking as a single tear streaked down her face. Her questioning gaze met Ed’s across from her, and his face was so grief stricken, she could hardly stand to see it.
“Oh God,” he said on a gasping sob, lowering his face into his hands. “He came to me right after you got back from California, and asked for permission to propose to her when he was ready. I gave him Maureen’s ring, she would have wanted that… I didn’t know when he was going to ask her, I didn’t know…”

“I guess he was planning to propose when they finished that hiking challenge.” Sidney said raggedly. “He didn’t tell us.” Yvette began to cry again.

Cora sat there next to Nathaniel, tears falling silently as she watched the tremor in his hands holding the box. He looked up at his parents and Ed, and then at Cora. “Everyone’s always talking about destiny with them,” he said, his voice heavy and raw with anguish. “How it was meant to be, when he heard her voice, when he finally met her. Destiny from the start, right? So what the fuck is this now? Is this destiny too? Was this meant to be? Because I’d really like to know what the purpose of this is, what place this bullshit has in the Master Plan, because it’s not fucking fair!” Tears spilled over and ran down his face.

Cora threw her arms around him, and he sagged against her. “I don’t know, Nathaniel,” she whispered. “I don’t have the answer to that. All we can do is be here for them, with them, and love each other through it. I don’t want to have to do this any more than you do, but we know we can, because we’ve gotten through enough already, and it wasn’t fair to us, either.”

“This makes all of us family now,” Yvette said quietly through her tears. “All of us. We will all get through this together, because it’s the only thing we can do.”

“Cold is the water
It freezes your already cold mind
Already cold, cold mind
And death is at your doorstep
And it will steal your innocence
But it will not steal your substance
But you are not alone in this
And you are not alone in this
As brothers we will stand and we’ll hold your hand
Hold your hand
And you are the mother
The mother of your baby child
The one to whom you gave life
And you have your choices
And these are what make man great
His ladder to the stars
But you are not alone in this
And you are not alone in this
As brothers we will stand and we’ll hold your hand
Hold your hand
And I will tell the night
Whisper, "Lose your sight"
But I can’t move the mountains for you”

-Edward Dwane, Benjamin Lovett, Winston Marshall & Marcus Mumford-
Well. This chapter was insane. First we have the rescue. I really felt for Nathaniel and Cora through all of that, and Brian too. I can’t even imagine being in a situation like that. When an emergency call comes through, you don’t get names or identifying details from dispatch, so there is no way to know who you’re rescuing until you get there, just like Nathaniel and Cora didn’t know for sure – but they did, you know? It took a lot to get all that right logistically, and to make it as realistic as possible. Yes, this is fiction, and it’s my own little world, but you know how I like to be correct, especially with this kind of thing (I’m a nurse, I try hard not to write medical drama I can’t back up). I had the very fortuitous opportunity while I was writing this chapter to actually meet and speak at length with two different local MedEvac crews, and to snoop around in their helicopters. Up till now, all my research has been done online by reading, watching technical rescue videos, and looking at interior photos of air ambulance helicopters. Seeing them in person and talking to the crews and pilots taught me so much more, seriously. This experience especially hammered home how EPICALLY LITTLE ROOM flight nurses and paramedics really have inside those helicopters. In the best interior configuration I saw, the crew are harnessed to a tiny little jump seat, one of them at each end of a stretcher on top of a short platform that has supply drawers underneath it and monitors oxygen, etc. mounted above it. You can’t stand up. Everything they do is from their seat, or kneeling on the tiny floor space by the stretcher between the two seats. There are of course, larger helicopters that can carry more crew and two patients and can be better equipped for an involved rescue, as you saw in this chapter when the crew used a different helicopter for this call. Regulation requires at least one nurse on board, and at least two caregivers per patient.

All right, so crazy rescue, with Cora, Brian and Nathaniel being total badasses (especially Cora and Brian, hot damn, guys!), a little Ian cameo (bit part in the film), and some pretty serious injuries (I’m sorry, Uncas and Alice, please don’t hate me!). Uncas had a right shoulder injury specifically because he did in the film. FYI, 7.5% hypertonic saline, which Uncas was given in flight, is a hyperosmolar agent that draws fluid away from the brain. It works quickly, so it is used in brain injuries to decrease swelling, and therefore intracranial pressure (ICP), because increased ICP is what really destroys brain tissue and can cause major brain damage or even death if the pressure and mass of the hemorrhage increase enough. Needless to say, poor Uncas and Alice are going to have a lot of recovery ahead of them, and how the tables have turned for Nathaniel and Cora, who are now on the flip side of where they once were as the injured parties. The aftermath of the rescue is very emotional. Nathaniel and Cora are having all these odd thoughts and reflections on the past, and they are just generally in this state of shock and helplessness, especially once they have to step out of their helper roles and become only the frightened family members of critically injured people. That is a gargantuan struggle for them.

As far as the medical stuff goes, I tried to explain things in layman’s terms to be reader-friendly. I am not a trauma nurse, I am a surgical nurse (specifically I’m usually the one people wake up to post-surgery), so my field is only semi-critical care. However, due to my responsibility for airway management in post-anesthesia care, I am intimately familiar with the dangers and results of laryngospasm during anesthesia, as well as orthopedic surgeries like Alice’s leg and Uncas’ shoulder (nothing like going in on call at 2 in the morning for someone who literally broke their leg in half, let me tell you). I spent clinical time in school managing chest tubes on some of my patients, and a whole semester on a neurological unit caring for patients who had strokes and brain bleeds similar to Uncas (I’m sorry, Uncas!). Most applicable, my husband is a combat veteran who survived a traumatic brain injury that should have been catastrophic and somehow was not (he’s a walking miracle, missing damn near half his skull replaced by plastic, and he managed recover well enough to become a nurse – the bastard is invincible). So I have some really good information about that kind
of thing, which is helpful. I tried to make it nice and dramatic but still medically realistic.

And the last part... Oh man. If you ever noticed, or wondered in chapter 10 why the hell Uncas was so obsessed with ringing that damn victory bell at the end of the hiking challenge, now you know why. He was going to propose to Alice! (Are you crying yet?) At that point both families were just making me all weepy. Like good God, as if things weren’t awful enough already, and then Nathaniel finds that ring and everyone starts with the emotions again. How will THAT pan out now? We shall see.

The theme song for this chapter is “Details in the Fabric” by Jason Mraz. It seems to apply so well to a lot of the events in this chapter, and the feelings that everyone is having over the course of everything. That song is playing in my head a lot in many of these scenes. When Nathaniel and Cora both finally lose it on the helicopter pad before Brian drives them to the hospital (Brian is so sweet, by the way, what a great friend!), I kept hearing “One Last Breath” by Creed (not a big Creed fan, but I do love that song). When Nathaniel is thinking about when he and John were shot, and what his family went through, and willing Uncas to be all right, I kept hearing the Guns N’ Roses recording of “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door”. For Nathaniel as well as all the family members going through this mess together, “Timshel” by Mumford & Sons seemed perfect for all that, for each one of them in different ways, and I felt compelled to include the lyrics at the end of the chapter, which I don’t usually do in this story.

I think that’s about it. Thank you for reading, for your patience with these slightly longer updates (seven more weeks and I’m DONE with my BSN and I can go back to work!), and for your reviews and kind words. MohawkWoman, BlueSaffire, you’re the bomb as usual. Stay tuned, y’all, I’ll try to update again in the next 2-3 weeks – this last course is basically a giant research project so we’ll see how writing inbetween goes.
When the Morning Comes

Chapter Summary

The day after Uncas and Alice's accident, their families begin to face the difficulties to come, and Alice must face what happened when she wakes up.

Chapter 12 - When the Morning Comes

“When the weight of the night is upon you
And you feel that the dawn's gone astray
When the stars have been blown out like candles
And the fair-weather moon's sailed away

When hope like a friend says he'll guide you
But he leaves you alone in the dark
With the weight of an empty promise
That was stowing away in your heart

Don't waste your tears on the sadness
They're only clouds in your eyes
Don't look too far and you'll find me
And I'll bring you peace of mind

For the night is the day only sleeping
And the moon will return as the sun
I'll be here while the weight is upon you
I'll be here when the morning comes
I'll be here when the morning comes”

-Amy Smith & Jon Allen-

The next morning, Cora woke on the cramped couch in Alice’s ICU room with a pounding headache, the dull pain of it starting in her bad left shoulder and throbbing up her neck to the back of her skull. Sheer exhaustion had finally knocked her out sometime in the wee hours, after the hubbub of getting Alice transferred and settled. She had managed to convince Ed that he needed to go home to sleep and let her stay with Alice, and Nathaniel had talked his parents into going with him while he spent the night in Uncas’ room. The sheet the night nurse had brought Cora to cover the vinyl couch cushions had shifted, and her sweaty, sore arm was now stuck to the surface. She groaned at sat up, squinting against the morning light that pierced torturously through the open blinds.

“Evil, life-giving sun…” she muttered, almost laughing at her random recall of Duncan’s often-used intonation regarding the unforgiving Afghani sun that had always left him burned with his fair skin and ginger hair, no matter how much sunscreen he’d worn. Her watch read 7:23 a.m. The nurses would be in the midst of report for change of shift, and visiting hours would start soon. She got up and went over to the bed where Alice lay in her cyborg-like nest of monitor wires and tubes, the ventilator pumping its wheezy rhythm at the bedside. Her left leg was elevated in the cage of the external fixator, resting on pillows. The double lumen of her chest tube connected to the digital
drainage system placed below the bed, clear red fluid collecting in the chamber. It all seemed so unreal, even now. Cora sighed wearily. She had so hoped to wake up at home, or in one of the bunks at AirMedic, all of this having been a terrible nightmare. How could this happen to her baby sister? To Uncas, so strong and capable? She quickly wiped tears from her eyes and looked up as the room’s glass door slid open and a tall, thin woman with long, grey-streaked brown hair walked in.

“Well, good morning, Miss Cora. I’d certainly rather be seeing you working down in the ER and bringing me a patient, than up here like this.” Her deep blue eyes were sympathetic behind her bifocal glasses.

“Hey, Dawn. Yeah… It’s been a hell of a night. I’m sure you heard it all during morning report.” Cora wasn’t sure at this point if it was a blessing or a curse to know at least half the damn staff at this hospital. On one hand, it was comforting to know who she could trust to take good care of Alice, but on the other it was awfully hard to hide herself and just be a patient’s family member.

Dawn seemed to read her mind, likely due to her many years of experience. “I’m just here to do a morning assessment and see what’s needed. Don’t you worry about anybody else but her, and you.” She squeezed Cora’s arm gently and got started with her assessment. Cora moved out of her way and sat back on the couch. Once Dawn had pronounced everything as good as could be expected, she and Cora talked for a few minutes about Alice’s care plan while she charted and sent a note to Dr. Joshi, and Cora splashed her face with water and braided her hair as best she could without a brush. As Dawn was leaving, the charge nurse poked her head in.

“Miss Munro, there’s a Mr. Poe here to visit. Is it all right to buzz him in?”

“Yes, please,” Cora replied with a tired, grateful smile. A moment later, Nathaniel came in and slid the door closed behind him, looking as haggard as Cora felt, both still wearing flight suits from the day before. She sighed and folded into his arms. “You’re limping,” she said softly, laying her head on his chest and holding him tight.

“It’s just my bad leg, I must have slept on it funny. These couches aren’t exactly the pinnacle of comfort.”

“Tell me about it. I slept on my bad shoulder and I’ve got a splitting headache. How is Uncas, did he do all right overnight?”

“Yeah. He’s uh… he’s doing okay. His ICP is staying down, and there were no more seizures or anything, but they’re running a bunch of meds to keep him stable. My mom is in there with him now, and your dad and my dad are downstairs getting coffee for us. I just wanted to come and see you for a little while and make sure you and Alice are all right. How’s she doing?” He left out that he’d needed to get out of the room because looking at Uncas still made him feel like screaming with helpless rage at whatever force of nature allowed this kind of shit to happen to good people. Seeing his little brother like that, talking to him with no answer, was damn near unbearable; but when Yvette had sat down and started singing to him in Lenape, Nathaniel had come here to check on Cora and Alice before he lost it entirely.

“She’s doing well, I guess,” Cora said lamely, standing at the bedside with him and stroking Alice’s hair off her cheek to adjust the band holding her endotracheal tube. “Her leg looks good, and there are no signs of compartment syndrome or anything. The docs should be rounding soon. I’m hoping Dr. Travis will say they can extubate her today. I just want her awake so I know she’s really okay.”

“I know,” Nathaniel murmured. He tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear, his thumbs stroking the delicate skin under her eyes where faint bluish shadows displayed her exhaustion. “I
want the same thing. If I could just talk to him… they can tell me all day that everything looks good, but as long as he’s asleep like that I can’t know for sure. I hate this. I just want my brother back.”

They held onto each other in silence for a few minutes before Ed came in with a cup of hot coffee and a breakfast sandwich for each of them. Cora greeted him with a long hug before she and Nathaniel moved back to sit on the couch together. They forced themselves to slowly eat the food Ed had brought, both of them hungry yet stressed and tired to the point of nausea. Cora filled Ed in on Alice while he stood at her side holding her hand, and he and Nathaniel talked quietly about Uncas afterward. When they had eaten and felt slightly more human, Nathaniel’s fingers worked at the stiff muscles in Cora’s neck and shoulder, relieving her headache a little, and she gently rubbed his aching leg while they talked with Ed.

Nathaniel’s phone chimed in the breast pocket of his flight suit, and he pulled it out, standing abruptly when he read the message. “It’s Mom. Dr. Navelli is in to see Uncas and talk to us, I gotta go.”

“Go on,” Cora replied, standing up with him. “Let me know what he says. I’ll come up and see you guys in a while, after the doctors round on Alice.” She knew Alice would want her to go see Uncas for herself, and she wanted to see him, too, because she cared deeply for him as a friend, and really, as a family member at this point.

Nathaniel leaned in and gave her a kiss. “Will do. I love you. Ed, try to take it easy.” He gave Ed a quick one-armed hug and rushed out of the room back to Neurology ICU one floor up.

Ed watched him leave and looked back to Cora. “Did either of you even get any sleep after I left?”

Cora shrugged. “After a while, but not much. These couches suck, and so do the circumstances, so I don’t think it would have mattered whether I was here or somewhere else. I needed to be here with her, Pop.”

“I know. I didn’t sleep much either, I don’t think any of us did. And I just… I couldn’t stop thinking about Nathaniel finding that ring last night. A million other things I could fixate on, but that’s what I couldn’t get out of my mind. I know there was no control over the way this happened to them, but… Nathaniel’s right, it’s so unfair. I never meant for you to find out like this that I’d given him your mother’s ring for Alice, and I hope you’re not upset with me for not telling you.” Ed sighed, his bloodshot eyes brimming with tears.

“Of course I’m not upset!” Cora threw her arms around him. “You shouldn’t even worry about that right now, Pop. You and I both know Mom always meant for Alice to have it, she always loved it so much. Besides, you were right to keep it a secret for Uncas, I would have been too excited to hide it from her if I had known. But now… we can’t tell her, it would break her heart. I don’t think she should know anything about it until Uncas… until he can just ask her like he intended.”

“I think that would be the best thing to do,” Ed agreed quietly, gazing sadly down at Alice and stroking her hair. “God willing, he’ll be awake sooner than later, and he’ll be in… in good enough shape to even think about it again when he’s ready. I can’t stand to think otherwise, for his sake or your sister’s.” His thoughts ended there for the moment, as Dr. Coleman entered the room to check on Alice.

“Everything is looking good so far,” he announced after a thorough assessment of her leg. “It’s early yet, of course, but there are no signs of infection or any other complications from the surgery. If she stays this way, my hope is to get her back to the OR within a couple of weeks to
switch her to internal fixation, and at that point we’ll have a plan for the future as far as her physical therapy options, too.”

Cora thanked him quietly while Ed asked a few more questions. She didn’t want to ask Dr. Coleman yet about Alice’s yoga classes and aerial acrobatics in general; he wouldn’t be able to give any definite answers right now, and even the speculation of how long it would be before she’d be well enough to do any of it seemed too upsetting to think about right now. Dr. Joshi and Dr. Travis came in together a short while after Dr. Coleman had gone.

“What do you think about getting her extubated today?” Cora asked hopefully as they both checked Alice over.

Dr. Joshi looked up from his assessment of the chest tube drainage and the insertion site beneath the clean dressing over her ribs, his wavy black hair falling over his forehead a little. His eyes were kind and riveting behind his glasses, an atypical greenish yellow color that was even more startling with the deep brown tone of his skin. His East Indian accent gave his voice a pleasant, calming lilt. “In my opinion, she’s done well overnight, and my recommendation would always be to get her off the ventilator as soon as possible to avoid any further risk of respiratory complications. Providing Dr. Travis agrees, I’d like to try for waking her up sometime today.”

“I think that’s a good plan,” Dr. Travis agreed. “Her airway is clear, and things sound good, so I second the opinion that getting her breathing and awake is best. We’ll give her a little more time for things to settle and run a T-piece breathing test later this morning, and if that goes well, when we come back for rounds after lunch we’ll try getting her extubated. I’ll have Dawn set up a Patient-Controlled Analgesia pump for her before we do that, so that once she’s awake she can stay comfortable as far as her pain levels with her ribs and her leg.”

Ed gave a rough sigh of relief. “And how long does she need to have the chest tube there?” he asked.

“Typically, it takes around two weeks in a healthy person for the lung tissue to heal well enough to stay inflated on its own, so at this juncture that is about what I expect for Alice.” He gestured toward the device by the bed to show it to Ed in detail. “You see here that I’ve opted for a digital chest tube system, and of course, the idea behind the newer digital setup is to get her as mobile as we can right away once she’s awake. This system has its own internal suction motor to keep that constant negative pressure she needs for her lung to stay inflated, so she won’t be confined to her bed all the time in order to stay hooked up to wall suction. She won’t be walking for some time, as you know, but once she’s doing better, she should be able to sit up in a recliner, or perhaps even leave the room in a wheelchair after a little while.”

“Will she be here in the ICU the whole time?” Ed inquired.

“Oh, no,” Dr. Travis answered. “As long as she’s doing well for a day or so once she’s awake, she’ll be transferred to the medical-surgical unit.”

“That is correct,” Dr. Joshi said. “She will stay there for the remainder of the time she’s here, unless there are complications somewhere down the line. I don’t expect any given how healthy Alice is, but of course one cannot predict these things.”

They talked for a bit longer before both doctors left the room to move on to other patients. Cora let out a shaky breath and leaned over close to Alice.

“Hear that, Al? You’ll be awake soon, don’t worry. I’m going to go see Uncas now too, so I can tell you how he’s doing. Don’t give Pop or Dawn any trouble while I’m gone, okay? I love
“Give the kid my best when you see him,” he said roughly, clearing his throat as he hugged Cora and handed her his truck keys with a watery-eyed half-grin. “When you’re done up there, take Nathaniel home with you for a while. You can’t stay here forever, and your animals need looking after. And for God’s sake, make sure you get a shower and a change of clothes. You both look like hell, Sailor.”

Cora snorted in amusement. “Yes, Master Sergeant,” she replied, kissing his cheek before she headed for the elevators.

“Well, I have to say, I’m more than pleased with how things look for Uncas so far,” Dr. Navelli said to Sidney, Yvette and Nathaniel. “His vital signs are great, his intracranial pressure is holding steady with the external drain and the medications he’s gotten. He’s showing no signs of any further bleeding, though we may still get more imaging to confirm that, and his neurological function is as good as I could expect at this point while he’s still sedated.”

“So what does that mean?” Yvette asked hopefully, clutching Sidney’s hand. “Do you think you’ll be able to wake him up soon?”

Dr. Navelli nodded. “That would be ideal. I’d like to give him another day or two to let things settle down some more. His pressure is good, but of course there is still some swelling in his brain, as you can see by the fluid in his drain. I think a little more time would be beneficial, because waking him up this soon could be too stressful for his body and we don’t want that.”

“Okay, so what’s the plan from here?” Sidney asked, scrubbing a hand over his fatigued face. “We just wait, or what?”

“Yes, we wait and keep a close eye on him.” The doctor pulled a wheeled stool from beside Uncas’ bed and sat down at eye level with the family. “If he stays as he is, or, hopefully, begins to improve, then the next step will be to get him back to the OR as soon as possible so that the damage to his shoulder can be repaired properly, since for now it’s only stabilized. Once that’s done, if he comes out of surgery well, I’d like to extubate him and try letting him wake up on his own.”

“Okay, yeah, I remember that orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Robinson, saying something about that last night.” Nathaniel said.

“Correct,” Dr. Navelli replied. “Dr. Robinson is one of our best orthopedic surgeons, and he’s very well known for being one of the top shoulder docs in the state. Uncas will fare very well in his care. Once we can get him awake, then we’ll start making a really solid plan for both physical and occupational therapy, as he’s going to need both – for the shoulder, as well as for any motor or other issues he may have from the brain injury. We’ll be able to talk more about that once Dr. Robinson can operate and we can get this young man conscious.”

Nathaniel sighed and nodded, pinching the bridge of his nose. Yvette’s warm hand rested on his back, giving him a comforting rub. Sidney stood up as Dr. Navelli rose, shaking his hand firmly.

“Thank you for being so thorough. It’s comforting to have competent, kind people helping my son, and helping us, too. It makes a hard thing a little easier.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Greatsnake. If you need anything at all, please have his nurse page me and I’ll try to help however I can.” Dr. Navelli smiled and took his leave to continue his morning
rounds.

“Nathaniel, you look done in,” Yvette clucked her tongue, brushing a loose strand of hair off his face. “You need to get some sleep.”

“Easier said than done,” he grunted wryly. “They don’t make it easy here with those godawful couches.”

“Go home for a little while, nkwis. We can stay with your brother. You’re still in your work clothes, for heaven’s sake, at least go shower and change into something more comfortable so you feel better.” She patted his unshaven cheek.

“Déjà vu,” Cora said as she came into the room. “I literally just had this same conversation with my dad.”

“That’s because your dad is a smart man,” Yvette replied, getting up to give Cora a long, tight hug. “How are you, honey? And how is our Alice?”

“I’m okay, just tired and worried. Alice is doing all right. Her leg is stable, and they want to try to wake her up this afternoon.” She filled them in on what Dr. Joshi and Dr. Coleman had both said. When she had finished she went to the bedside, looking anxiously at Uncas, and then up at Nathaniel as he came to her side. “How is he? What did Dr. Navelli say?”

Nathaniel repeated the conversation they had just had with the neurosurgeon. Cora listened, her eyes traveling over her dear friend, and the man her sister loved more than anything. She felt like bursting into tears all over again at the nearly unrecognizable sight of him. He lay there unmoving, tubed and ventilated in his chemically-induced coma, the external ventricular drain Dr. Navelli had placed collecting fluid from around his brain in a clear bag hanging from the unit beside his IV pole. His right eye and cheek were swollen and bruised from the temporal head trauma, and the underside of his long black hair had been clipped on that side to well above his ear, to allow for the burr-holes drilled to evacuate the epidural hematoma. They’re going to wake Alice up, and what will I say to her? She thought wretchedly. How am I going to tell her about this, when she can’t even come to see him, can’t even talk to him? Tears were rolling down her face now, and she barely realized she was crying until Nathaniel put his arms around her. She sobbed quietly against his shoulder.

“The ring…” she choked out. “Say nothing to Alice.”

“We won’t,” Nathaniel promised. “That’s between them, and God willing, he’ll get his chance to sort it out on his own when he can.”

“That’s right,” Yvette said, sniffling and wiping her face. “And he will. We didn’t raise two stubborn-ass boys for nothing, did we, Sidney?”

“That’s a fact,” Sidney replied, standing up with a weary, sad smile. “Now speaking of stubborn-ass kids, will you two please get out of here for a while and go take care of yourselves?”

Cora laughed through her tears, extracting Ed’s keys from the pocket of her flight suit. “He’s right, we better go while we can. I need to get back before the doctor comes back to extubate Alice, and we need to stop by her place while we’re out.”

They said a quick goodbye to Sidney and Yvette, and Nathaniel gave Uncas’ hand a squeeze before they headed out, leaning close to him for a moment. “I’ll be back later. Ktaholël, xáta,” he whispered.

After leaving the hospital, they went to Alice’s apartment first, since it was closest. Nathaniel
fed the fish and Sweet Potato, petting her as she wove between his ankles and left ginger fur on the legs of his black flight suit. Cora cleaned Mrs. Nesbit’s cage and laid fresh hay bedding, then fed her and changed her water bottle. Afterward she spent some time in Alice’s room, packing a small duffel bag of toiletries and comfortable pajamas and clothes she would be able to wear with the fixator on her leg. The lyra suspended from the ceiling by the stairs kept reminding her of the night Uncas had fallen off of it and she had sutured his head in her kitchen. She wished to God that could have been the worst head injury he would ever have to deal with. What would happen now? What would he be like when he woke up? There was no telling. How long until Alice would be able to get on that lyra again, and for that matter, how the hell would she manage living here with that metal staircase? These thoughts kept flying at her, and she couldn’t stop them. As she and Nathaniel left, Cora locked the door feeling tearful and weary. From there she drove them to her house, anxious over how late the horses were going to be fed, and what havoc Monty might have wreaked in her absence since she’d left for AirMedic on Thursday evening. She had an arrangement with her neighbors’ oldest daughter, who always came early on Friday mornings to take care of the animals while Cora was at work, so hopefully things wouldn’t be too bad. She would likely need to make further arrangements with the girl for the next couple of weeks, since her schedule was going to be unpredictable with Alice and Uncas in the hospital, but hopefully between her and Ed she could manage without too much extra help.

They arrived to find the huge wolfhound whining and barking by the front door, but the house was thankfully no worse for the wear except for a dog toy whose stuffing was gutted out on the living room rug. After Monty had tackled and licked them both half to death, Nathaniel fed him, but he ignored the food in favor of following them down to the barn. He stuck close to their heels, periodically butting against Cora and whining plaintively while they fed Ranger and Blue Feather and cleaned their stalls. *He knows something’s wrong*, she thought, taking a moment to pet him and scratch his ears. He dogged them back up to the house, finally settling down to eat after Scout was taken care of and let out to play. While the ferret was busy stealing chunks of dog kibble out of Monty’s bowl, Cora and Nathaniel finally had a chance to take a long, hot shower. The water felt absolutely sanctifying, washing away two days of sweat, stress, and the pervasive smell of the hospital. Thankful that he stayed here enough now to keep several changes of clothes in Cora’s dresser, Nathaniel put on clean jeans and a t-shirt while Cora did the same, packing an overnight bag to take back with her.

Once Scout had had some play time and was settled back in his multi-level cage, the two of them made their last stop at the cabin a few miles away, so that Nathaniel could pack himself some necessary items, and get some of Uncas’ things as well. In his brother’s bedroom, Nathaniel looked around, somewhat lost as to what he should bring when Uncas would not be awake for at least a few days yet. The green and blue plaid window curtains were open, particles dancing in the sunbeams filtering in as he moved around the room, taking a few things from the adjoining Jack-and-Jill bathroom, and the Pendleton wool throw blanket folded across the foot of the log-framed bed, where Nathaniel sat down for a minute to make himself breathe. He could hardly stand to be in here, surrounded by his brother’s things. Being at Alice’s had been hard enough. She was always so happy and vivacious and funny, and thinking about her lying there pale and unmoving in her hospital bed just like Uncas made him feel like he could implode from the cruelty of this whole damn situation. He could feel it rolling off Cora in waves, too, and he knew she was worried about what she would say to Alice about Uncas. He had already decided he would stay with her when Alice woke up, if the nurse would let him. He felt like Uncas would want someone there in his stead, and like Cora, he was worried about how she would take the news of the current state of things. It might help Alice for him to be there, at least he hoped, anyway. There wasn’t much that could help any of it, really, and this was only the beginning of a long journey he knew entirely too well already. He got up and left the bedroom to find Cora in the living room, where she had dozed off on the couch waiting for him. He woke her with a gentle kiss, and they were off once again, picking up lunch for
everyone on the way back to the hospital.

When they had returned to Albany Medical Center, Cora driving Ed’s truck and Nathaniel taking his Blazer from the cabin, Nathaniel went back up to Uncas’ room for a little while to take the things he had brought from the house and eat with his parents, while Cora remained with her father in Alice’s room. Ed informed her that he had called Charlie and Lenore Heyward to let them know what had happened, much to Cora’s intense relief – as much as she loved them, she didn’t think she could have stood to make that phone call right now. Nathaniel came back down a little later, unsure of when Alice’s doctor would come in and wanting to make sure he was there with Cora, since she had agreed that she’d like him to be. Ed took the opportunity to go upstairs to see Uncas and visit with Sidney and Yvette, leaving Cora and Nathaniel to sit and rest for a while with the promise to let him know as soon as anything happened. The room was quiet except for the noise of Alice’s machinery. Before long their complete and utter burnout caught up with them, and they fell asleep, huddled together on the couch by the window. An hour or so later, they woke with a start when Alice’s day nurse rapped lightly on the door before sliding it open to come in with an armful of supplies.

“Hi, Dawn,” Cora yawned groggily and rubbed her eyes. “Long time no see.”

“Hi there,” Dawn said quietly. “I’m really sorry to wake you guys when you’re finally getting some sleep, but Dr. Travis put in Alice’s PCA pump orders, and I wanted to go ahead and get that set up for her before they come up to extubate her. She did great on her T-piece test this morning, did your dad tell you?”

“Yes, he did, right after they did it. Don’t worry about waking us, we need to be up anyway, if it’s almost time.” Cora sat up straight beside Nathaniel as he stretched his long limbs, and they watched as Dawn set up the pump with the cartridge full of Dilaudid and programmed it to deliver the prescribed measured doses when Alice pushed the remote button connected to it with a thin cord. Cora sent Ed a text message to let him know what was going on, and he came back to the room in time for Dawn to go through all the ins and outs of the pump’s operation with them, explaining that only Alice should push the button when she felt she needed the pain medication. Cora and Nathaniel knew all this, of course, but Ed hadn’t seen a PCA pump since Maureen had been on Hospice, and Alice would need to have it explained to her once she was awake enough, too. As Dawn was finishing up, Dr. Travis came in with a respiratory therapist.

“Oh, great, you’ve already got her PCA going!” She smiled at Dawn, then looked to Ed and Cora. “Well, I think we’re ready to do this. The process should be relatively quick and uninvolved. I’ll have you all step out briefly while we get her taken care of, and as soon as we know for certain how she’s doing, you can come back in and sit with her. Once I shut off her Propofol drip she’ll start to wake up a little and respond to stimuli, but as you probably know it may still be a little while before she’s coherent enough to talk or understand what’s going on – just like most people who are waking up from surgery anesthesia.”

Thanking her quietly, the trio filed out the door and down the hall, exiting the ICU doors into the waiting room just beyond. Cora checked her watch repeatedly as if that could make time move faster. Nathaniel held her other hand and drummed a boot heel on the floor, leaning back in his chair next to Ed, who kept clearing his throat and staring between the digital clock on the wall and the trendy cooking show on the television, his fingers tapping the arm of his chair nervously. At long last, Dr. Travis came out of the double doors, a triumphant smile on her face.

“How did it go?” Cora asked, springing to her feet along with the others.

“Couldn’t have gone better,” Dr. Travis replied. “She’s likely to have a sore throat, and be
pretty hoarse for a day or two, but she’s breathing great and she’ll be awake soon. Dawn is with her, and you’re welcome to go back into the room now.”

Cora gave her a quick hug and the three of them rushed back to Alice’s room, where the respiratory therapist was coming out pushing the ventilator in front of her. Cora almost cried with the relief of seeing at least some of that nest of tubes gone, leaving behind the telltale pink marks on Alice’s face from where the endotracheal tube had been strapped and taped. She was still asleep, but her chest rose and fell with normal respirations, and her facial muscles twitched here and there as her body slowly began to awaken.

“She’s had some Fentanyl to help with pain as she wakes up, until she can start using her PCA,” Dawn said, lifting her stethoscope from Alice’s chest. “Her breath sounds are good, nothing out of the ordinary for what she’s been through.” She went to the computer to chart while Nathaniel sat down on the couch. Ed stood on one side of the bed, and Cora pulled a chair over to sit on the other side, taking Alice’s hand in hers and resting her cheek against it. Dawn left the room to give them some time, promising she would be right outside if anything was amiss. It seemed like ages before Alice began to stir a little more, her fingers curling around Cora’s. She made a little whimpering sound in her throat, and Cora leaned in closer and began to sing softly to her.

“A man walks down the street
He says, why am I soft in the middle now?
Why am I soft in the middle?
When the rest of my life is so hard!
I need a photo-opportunity
I want a shot at redemption
Don't want to end up a cartoon
In a cartoon graveyard…

If you'll be my bodyguard
I can be your long-lost pal

I can call you Betty
And Betty, when you call me
You can call me Al…”

Slowly, Alice became aware of a voice singing. It sounded far away and a little tinny at first, gradually becoming clearer until it was right beside her. Where was she? Was that Mom singing? No, that couldn’t be. Mom was dead. Am I dead? She felt heavy, and her leg and left side hurt. Why did it hurt? If it hurts I’m not dead, right? Ah, the voice was Cora, singing their nickname song, the way she’d woken her up sometimes when they were kids. Why in the world was Cora in bed with her? She felt her lips start to smile a little as Cora kept going.

“He looks around, around
He sees angels in the architecture
Spinning into infinity

He says, Amen! and Hallelujah!

If you'll be my bodyguard
I can be your long-lost pal…”
Alice cracked an eyelid open, squinting at the blurry image of Cora backlit by sunlight from the window, and softly croaked out the last line in reply.

“I can call you Betty
And Betty, when you call me
You can call me Al…”

It confused her when Cora let out a small sob, and Alice realized that she was crying. Why was Cora crying? What had happened? She struggled to sweep away the cobwebby feeling in her brain, trying to remember where she was and what was going on, but it wasn’t coming to her yet. She winced as her awareness of her pain increased.

“How are you feeling, sweetheart?” her father’s voice rose suddenly on her other side. What the hell is going on?

“Mmmm… throat hurts. Leg too… Where am I? What the hell happened?” She was confused, and she began to have a terrible sinking feeling that something was really wrong, especially when the sound of a hospital monitor registered in her ears as her level of consciousness heightened. She looked up at the monitor above her and then at Cora, and she could see her clearly now. She was definitely crying; her eyes were all red and puffy and she looked like she hadn’t slept in a year. Ed looked just as bad, with bags under his own reddened eyes, looking like he was ready to fall apart.

“You and Uncas had an accident when you were hiking yesterday,” Cora said quietly. “You got hurt. Do you remember anything at all?”

Alice closed her eyes to think, memories starting to return in little flashes like short moving pictures. Hiking… yes, that sounded right. She could remember waking up at the lodge now, and Uncas with her… meeting that nice Magua man and inviting him along… It had rained a little, and they had been so close to the end, when… Oh, God, Saddleback Cliffs. Everything came back in a sudden rush – the look on Uncas’ face as he’d lost his footing on the rock face, her screams as she had helplessly watched him fall, and Magua’s horrified face when she had tried to go after Uncas and had fallen, too. Then pain, so much pain, and Cora there like an angel out of nowhere, talking gently to her, and Brian and Nathaniel in the helicopter… and then something bad had happened to Uncas, and she couldn’t remember anything else. She heard a despairing sob, and realized it was coming from her as she began to cry.

“What happened to Uncas?” she moaned in her wretched, hoarse voice. “Where is he? Please, God… Cora, is he…?”

“He’s here, too, Al, he’s just on a different unit, one floor up, okay? He’s here.” Cora stroked her hair gently, her voice thick with tears. “Nathaniel is right here though, he wanted to see you when you woke up, and tell you about how Uncas is doing. Is that all right?” Alice nodded weakly, tears dribbling into her hairline and wetting her ears. She looked at Nathaniel as he got up from the couch and came over to stand beside Cora. He looked exhausted like her father and sister. What were they not telling her? What was wrong with Uncas?

“Hey, Captain Hawkeye,” she whispered. He smiled a little at that, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.
“Hey, Mary Jane,” he countered. Hearing him call her that made her cry all over again, and he knelt down beside her bed, looking brokenhearted as he took her hand in his. “Hey, it’s all right, Alice. He’s gonna be all right.”

Alice closed her eyes and drew a shaky breath, her ribs throbbing at the effort. “I don’t remember anything after being in the helicopter, and something happened to him. I don’t even really know what’s wrong with me.” She looked at the three of them, dreading what was to come, but she had to know. “Can one of you just tell me all of it, one thing at a time?”

Ed looked at Cora, his face distraught and pleading. “Cora, can you… you know all this stuff better than I do.”

Cora nodded. She slowly explained everything to Alice about her injuries; the collapsed lung due to the broken ribs, the chest tube, her broken leg, the surgery to fix it all, and the laryngospasm that had caused her to remain sedated until now. She showed her the PCA pump and the button she could push every ten minutes if she needed pain medication. Alice was too overwhelmed with the details to even start to think of any questions to ask in the wake of her prolonged anesthesia fog. She just nodded numbly. Cora went on to explain about Uncas having a brain hemorrhage from hitting his head, and having a badly injured shoulder that still needed surgery. Nathaniel took over at some point, carefully telling her everything that the doctor had told them this morning about how Uncas was doing, and what was to come. She knew she’d have to ask him again later, she could never remember all this. Her brain was swirling with the sea of words, and all that she could really comprehend was the horrible, gut-punching things like traumatic brain injury and more surgery and they can’t wake him up yet. She lifted a sluggish hand to cover her eyes, the IV tubing dangling from where it was taped against her arm and falling against her cheek with a faint slapping sound. She began to cry in devastated, gulping sobs, every one setting her chest on fire with renewed agony. She pushed the button on her PCA for a dose of Dilaudid, wishing there was a medication that could numb the pain in her aching heart, too.

“I want to see him,” she managed to get out as Cora tried to soothe her.

“You can’t right now, Al. You’re not well enough, and you’re not allowed out of the ICU yet. I’m so sorry,” Cora said tearfully. “But I went to see him earlier, and so did Pop, and I made sure to tell him you’d be waiting. He knows, okay?”

“That’s right,” Nathaniel said, looking like he wanted to cry right along with her. “And Mom and Dad will come down and see you as soon as you feel like you’re ready.” Alice tried to stop crying so the medication could work and her ribs and leg would stop hurting, and so Cora would stop looking so worried every time she took a gasping breath; she knew it wasn’t good for her to cry like this with her injuries. “He’s fighting hard, Alice, you know he is,” Nathaniel continued. “He loves you so much, and he’s not going anywhere. He’d never leave you.”

“I just want so see him for myself. I need to,” she said miserably. “I love him, and I need him, and he needs me, too.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Ed said gruffly, stroking her tangled hair. “As soon as you’re moved to the medical unit and the doctor says it’s okay, we’ll make sure you get to see him. I promise. I don’t care who I have to manhandle to make it happen.”

Alice let out a strangled half-laugh. Leave it to her father to instigate trouble Marine Corps style. “You would, too,” she rasped. “Crazy old man.”

Ed leaned down to kiss her forehead, and she wrapped her arm around his neck as best she could, clinging to him, needing the comfort of her father so she could forget she was an adult and just
cry like the frightened little girl she felt like.

“It’ll be all right, girl. It’ll be all right,” he said, as he always had when one of his precious daughters was hurting or scared. Alice wanted desperately to believe him, but right now she just didn’t know. All she wanted was to be with Uncas, to stay by his side until someone could promise her he would be all right again, until he could be awake and promise her himself in his beautiful voice that they could have their life back the way it had been up until now. Her entire world had turned upside down in the instant he had slipped on that cliff, and she’d woken here to the cruel reality of yet another nightmare. She had thought this was all done with, that she’d had her share already in this life between her mother and her sister, but clearly that wasn’t the case, and she didn’t know what to believe or hope for anymore.

“When the old day
That the world has known
I will meet you in the place we share
And it's not okay
But you're not alone
I will find a way and meet you there
And all the ships are lost on the river
I'll swing a light on the safest shore
And it's not okay
But it's not too late
'Cause we're not alone anymore.”

-Dan Messe/Hem-

Author’s Note:

Ktaholël, xàta: “I love you, little (younger) brother” (Delaware/Lenape)

Sorry again for the later than usual update! I’ve got four weeks left before I graduate with my BSN, so my Capstone project has been keeping me pretty busy and I haven’t had as much time to write. This chapter is not terribly exciting, I know, but it gives a lot of necessary medical details about Uncas and Alice, and it gets the ball rolling forward. Right off the bat, we can see the complicated stress both families are experiencing, and I think a lot of us have probably spent at least one crappy night on a hospital room couch so we can easily identify with Cora and Nathaniel waking up feeling (and looking) like they’ve seen better days. At least they got to go home for a little while, even if they felt sad and worried the whole time.

Medical things. Another reason chapters are taking longer is that I have to verify that the details I’m writing are correct. I will mention off the bat that in all honesty, it is entirely likely that with an epidural hematoma large enough to cause a seizure in flight, Uncas would have had at least a small craniotomy rather than the surgeon doing burr-holes. However, that can also depend on the
location of the bleed and how easily he can get to it, and with the increase in the effort for minimally invasive measures in recent years, burr holes are not beyond the realm of possibility, especially because Uncas was rescued and treated so quickly. I also didn’t want to completely shave off his beautiful hair because that’s just sad (SuchGoodLuck, I’m looking at you). Instead he got a one-side-shave, and according to at least one of my LOTM set photos, he had the underside of his hair shaved in the film anyway. Now he might just have to have it evened out. I hope that makes it hurt less to read about him being injured. While I’m talking about Uncas, I want to touch on something from Chapter 11, too, that MedicineWoman brought up in a review – regarding whether or not Uncas would/should have been intubated and hyperventilated in flight to decrease intracranial pressure. I’m glad you mentioned that, because I actually had considered that as an intervention, so let me tell you why I ultimately didn’t. When I was doing research on that, the most recent evidence-based recommendation is not to hyperventilate, especially in a setting with limited monitoring (like flight). This is apparently because hyperventilation, while very effective in decreasing ICP, can also lead to cerebral ischemia (brain damage due to lack of oxygen for the laypeople). Now, book research still doesn’t always dictate what will actually be done in the field, so that comment got me thinking after the chapter was published. Since I was burning with curiosity, I also asked a nurse I used to work with who was a helicopter flight nurse until very recently, and still works on fixed-wing flights. His answer was that no, hyperventilation is no longer a first line treatment for a TBI patient (this may still vary from region to region and even crew to crew). First line intervention now is hypertonic saline, or mannitol if available (though in flight it will almost always be hypertonic saline because it works and it’s more practical to keep on board). So MedicineWoman, that’s why Uncas was not hyperventilated, and thank you for giving me a reason to look into that further, because it was kind of fun and very educational! I love my readers, I truly do. You guys are so awesome, and it’s been amazing to see some input from other medical personnel, because that’s what ultimately really tells me if I’m doing a good job with this stuff.

Back to this chapter. So while Uncas has a lot going on, so does Alice. Compound fractures are serious business, and she isn’t going to be able to bear weight on that leg for quite a while. We’ll revisit that in upcoming chapters as future plans are made for the recovery of these two. Her chest tube is a really cool new thing I was researching, too – digital systems are becoming more and more common because patients get better faster when they can get up and move around. When I was doing chest tubes several years back, we still used the older two or three-chambered systems that had to go on wall suction, but since this story is my little world, Alice and Uncas get the best things available! Fun fact – one of the more popular digital chest tube systems is manufactured by Medela, the company known for its high-quality breast pumps. Makes sense, since it’s an internal suction pump that makes the chest tube work without the need for wall suction.

Uncas is still in limbo in this chapter, and I am sorry to do that to you, but it’s a necessary evil, because I needed to focus on Alice and her waking up. He’s doing all right, and he’s not in any particular danger that we know of, so just keep hanging on and you’ll get more on him in Chapter 13. Also, google “external ventricular drain” if you’re curious about his little setup – it’s pretty intimidating to look at, so you can understand why no one feels a whole lot better yet, despite reassurance from the doctor that he’s doing all right. And this stuff is a little near and dear to me, since my husband was that chemically-induced TBI coma patient once upon a time. We were not together when he was injured, but his family was there, and I can’t even imagine what was going through their heads before they woke him up. Like Uncas, he had to go back to the OR at least once for other surgery before they could get him fully awake, and his injury was VASTLY more severe than Uncas’ is. I’ll tell you every time I mention this that the man is a walking miracle. I have read his entire medical record (several inches thick), chart notes included, and it is harrowing, to say the least – and we still do live with some of the effects, even though he’s doing tons better than he ever should have. Needless to say, Uncas is my little pet patient in this story, and the personal experience and help from my husband with small details really makes a difference.
And then we have poor Alice, waking up to find out just how bad everything is. I can assure her it can always be worse, but she’s feeling pretty upset and scared, and rightfully so. Being unable to go see Uncas makes it worse, of course, and she would definitely not be allowed to at this juncture. There were a lot of emotions going on at that point, and I wondered off and on if Nathaniel should be there, but I really felt that he would want to be, and that Alice would appreciate him being there to tell her some of these very difficult things about Uncas. Aside from her, Nathaniel is the person Uncas is closest to in the world, so I could imagine his presence would be a small comfort if she can’t see Uncas just yet. Plus, Nathaniel is sweet and caring, and he knows Uncas would want him there since he can’t be.

The theme song for this chapter is “When the Morning Comes” by Jon Allen and Amy Smith. It’s a really pretty song, and it fit well with this chapter, since it begins the morning after the accident – plus there are a couple of wake-ups happening here, and lots of people being there for each other in many ways. In general when everyone is having all their thoughts and feelings through the chapter, especially in the beginning when Cora is alone with Alice, when Nathaniel comes to her for a little while, and when she goes to see Uncas and is so upset to see him the way he is and asks Nathaniel not to say anything about the engagement ring, I was hearing threads of Peter Gabriel’s “Blood of Eden”. When Cora and Nathaniel are both thinking so much during their trip between houses and are gathering things to take back to the hospital, I kept hearing “The Daylight Here” by My Terrible Friend – particularly the lines “And now I’m negotiating with the fear/That something’s wrong with the daylight here/And I can’t fix it” and “When gone I have sworn that I will worry not/Of satisfaction, justice or the will of God/I’m not sure there’s any difference in the three”. It has this odd dreamlike quality to it that feels like that detached-from-reality sense that you have when something bad happens and you’re just kind of doing what you know you have to do. They both want so badly for this not to be happening to Uncas and Alice, and Nathaniel is especially struggling with the justice of it all, and he can’t make sense of it. At the end, the little song I listed there is “The Meeting Place” by Hem. It’s a short but beautiful one, and I remember listening to it a lot after my sister’s husband died several years back. It speaks of love and support in the hardest of times, and I felt like it was very appropriate to what Alice is feeling at that moment, both in her desire to be there for Uncas, and her need for her family’s strength as she faces a very difficult time.

That’s pretty much it here. I’ll try to get Chapter 13 done in the next few weeks, and once I graduate I’m hoping to finish the story before I go back to work early next year. Thank you so much to everyone reading and reviewing, I love to hear from you, and I really appreciate all your input. There are so many of you I’d love to sit and talk with! Stay tuned for more!
Chapter Summary

Stress reaches a high point as Uncas goes back into the operating room, and is finally ready to come out of sedation. But when he does, he, like Alice, must face what has happened to change everything in his world, including his plans for a future with Alice.

Chapter Notes

Author note included in text due to length.

Chapter 13 – I'll Stay With You

“Close your eyes and I'll hold you here
It's all right if you're feeling scared
It's just the sound of your aching heart
You've hurt for so long inside the dark
Now you can cry for the world out there
Come inside and I'll kiss your tears
It's still the sound tearing you apart
Loving out loud with only half a heart

I'll stay with you
I'll stay with you
I won't leave you alone
I'll stay with you, yes I want to

Make your pain my own
And if you need me all night or until I grow old
No you don't have to ask me to
I'm gonna take good care of you
Yes I'm gonna stay with you

I'll be right at your fingertips
Hold on tight and we'll get through this
Angels are calling from all around
Lifting what's broken, comforting what is bound
Now you can rest in your time of need
I am here when it's hard to breathe
If you can't remember what is good anymore
I will surrender and kick down heaven's door

I'll stay with you
"I'll stay with you
I won't leave you alone
I'll stay with you, yes I want to

Make your pain my own
And if you need me all night or until I grow old
No you don't have to ask me to
I'm gonna take good care of you
Yes I'm gonna stay with you."

-Beth Hart-

"Unit 106 to dispatch, I repeat, shots fired, two officers down, suspect down! We need a fucking bus out here, NOW!"

"Copy, 106, help is on the way, just stay with me!"

Nathaniel’s breath came in short gasps as he leaned his head back against the house’s siding, trying to ignore the blinding pain in his thigh, trying to staunch the flow of blood from John’s neck with his hand, coming too fast, too fast, his life draining away between Nathaniel’s fingers. With John’s head in his lap, he could no longer tell how much of the spreading pool beneath him was his own blood and how much was his partner’s, and he couldn’t take his hand off John’s neck long enough to try to tie anything around his own leg. He pressed the palm of his hand harder against the bullet wound, listening for the sound of approaching sirens that would never come quickly enough.

"Hold on, John, for fuck’s sake…” he moaned as the man in his lap struggled for each quick, shallow breath, growing weaker by the second.

"Nathaniel…” he gurgled. “Tell her… I love her… tell them all…”

At last, the wail of sirens in the distance. Nathaniel looked down to reply to John, to tell him to hold on just a little bit longer, but something was wrong. It was no longer John he held in his lap, but Uncas. He stared in horrified disbelief, unable to catch his breath now, unable to let out the scream that rose from deep within him.

"Tell her I love her… tell them all…”

Nathaniel sat up with a sharp cry, his chest heaving with the effort to draw breath in the wake of the nightmare. He trembled all over, his skin damp with sweat. Monty whined beside the bed, poking his head up and laying his hairy chin on top of the quilt.

“Hey,” Cora whispered from where she had risen to her knees on the mattress beside him. “Nathaniel? It’s all right. I’m here with you.” Her arms slid around him and he bowed his head against her shoulder as he held her close to him, warm and soft and comforting in the dark. Not real… not real. Thank God.

“Fuck,” he panted. “God, I hate that shit.”

“Want to tell me about it?” Her hand smoothed up and down his back, her touch calming the tremors running through him, her body absorbing them as if to take all the turmoil from him. He
shook his head silently, burying his face in her hair. He couldn’t tell her, couldn’t repeat out loud what he’d dreamed any more than she ever could when it happened to her. “Okay,” she murmured, cupping his jaw and touching her nose to his. “There’s been so much going on, this was bound to happen to at least one of us. You’re probably just nervous about the surgery today.” Dr. Navelli had told them during rounds yesterday that Uncas was doing well enough to go back into the OR so Dr. Robinson could fix his shoulder; the surgery was scheduled for early afternoon.

“Maybe so. I haven’t… it’s been a long time since I had trouble with nightmares, so I guess I was due. What time is it?”

“Almost five,” she replied, glancing at the clock on the nightstand. “We might as well just get up, if nothing else we’ll have time for coffee and not have to rush through chores before we head to the hospital for visiting hours.”

They rose from the bed, throwing on clothes to go down to the barn to see to the horses after Cora fed Monty and started the coffee pot. When they were finished and Monty was out running around in the pasture with his equine siblings, they sat at the kitchen table for coffee and a light breakfast, while Scout scooted around between the living room and kitchen, hunting for things to steal and nipping at their ankles beneath the table. Cora watched Nathaniel over the rim of her cup. He looked uneasy, but a little less drawn today, thanks to them finally getting some quality sleep. Having done well for more than twenty-four hours, Alice had been moved down to the medical-surgical unit late in the afternoon the day before. Cora had been prepared to stay the night with her again, but Alice and Ed had done everything short of having her thrown out by the nurses to make her go home and sleep in her own bed. The Greatsnakes had booted Nathaniel out along with her, insisting that they both go get a decent night’s rest before they made themselves sick. She had to admit, though they’d hated to be away from Uncas and Alice, it had been a huge relief for them both to be in her comfortable bed, and even more so to sleep in the solace of one another’s arms after days of juggling back-and-forth visits between rooms, short trips away to shower and feed animals, and two nights alone on those awful vinyl couches. It helped return a little normalcy to the psyche, at any rate.

After breakfast and a shower, Cora locked up the house once again and the two of them headed back to the hospital, arriving later than they had intended to since they had stopped in at Alice’s on the way. Going to Alice’s new room first, they found her awake with the head of her bed elevated, and Ed sitting on the couch chatting with Brian and Ashley.

“Hey, there they are!” Brian said, him and Ashley standing up to hug them.

“We brought everyone breakfast from Bruegger’s Bagels. Hospital food doesn’t compare,” Ashley said, pointing to the paper bags on the counter behind her chair.

“Thanks, guys, you’re amazing. Cora and I would normally have been here, but we got thrown out last night,” Nathaniel said with a wink at Ed and Alice.

“Well, do you at least feel more human?” Alice asked from the bed, setting her half-eaten bagel down on the bedside table. “Because you both look a lot better than you did yesterday.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t a bad idea,” Nathaniel said, going over to the bed and handing her the gift bag he was carrying.

“How are you feeling today?” Cora asked, sitting down beside the bed to spread cream cheese on her bagel.

“I’m okay, just didn’t sleep great with all this crap attached to me. What’s this for?” she
asked, taking the gift bag from Nathaniel and pulling the tissue paper out.

Nathaniel shrugged. “Just something I found in the gift shop downstairs that I thought you should have. You know, just until you can have the real one.”

She took a cuddly stuffed fox out of the bag and smiled up at him, her eyes filling with tears. “Uncas. Aw, Nathaniel, that’s so sweet. Thank you.” He leaned down to give her a gentle hug and she kissed his cheek. Cora’s mouth curved in a wobbly little smile as she looked from him to Alice.

Nathaniel straightened and looked at his phone when it chimed. “Speaking of, I’m gonna jet upstairs, Dad says Dr. Robinson is there. When he’s done I’ll stay and hang out with him and relieve my folks for a bit so they can come down to see you and eat.”

“We’ll come up after little bit and see Uncas, too,” Brian said. “We can keep you company, and it’ll get some of the crowd out of Alice’s hair.”

“You’re not crowding me, I’m glad you’re here to distract me,” Alice replied. “Tell him I love him, Nathaniel, and that I miss him. I really wish I could see him before his surgery today. I know he wouldn’t really know I was there, but… you know.” She shrugged helplessly, her lip trembling.

“I will,” he promised softly. “You know he loves you, too, Alice.” Tell her I love her… tell them all… He mentally shook off the ghost of his nightmare and left the room.


“Don’t you sweet-talk and bat them pretty green eyes at me, Nathaniel Poe. Save it for that girlfriend of yours, ‘cause it doesn’t work on me, and you know it.”

“I can’t believe this. After all we’ve been through together? Don’t deny me this. It’s not even about me, it’s about her. Please?”

The handsome African-American woman leaned forward to rest her elbows on the nurses’ station counter that separated her from Nathaniel, sighing as she removed her reading glasses and shook her head. “I can’t allow it. Dr. Joshi already said she’s not ready to be out of bed yet. Maybe tomorrow, but - ”

“He’s going to surgery today, Florence. Just let us take her up to see him, just for a few minutes.”

“No.” She pointed a finger at him. “And don’t look at me like I just kicked your dog. This isn’t up to me, you know I’d let her go if it was.”

“Still a stickler for the rules,” Nathaniel said, then grinned at her. “But that’s also what made you the best hard-ass nurse I ever had.” He’d spent a long time in her care seven years ago while recovering from his gunshot wound, and she hadn’t changed a bit except for a few more grey hairs and even more sass, if possible.

“That’s right, and don’t you forget it.” She swatted his arm with a folder. “And now I’m the best hard-ass nurse your brother’s girlfriend ever had, because I’m not gonna risk her hurting herself trying to be out of bed before her body’s ready. It’s for her own good, so don’t go making me feel guilty.”
Nathaniel sighed, defeated. “All right, fine. I had to at least try.” He turned to go back to Alice’s room to deliver the disappointing but not surprising results of his attempt to get her upstairs to see Uncas before he was taken to surgery. “I still love you, Florence,” he called out over his shoulder.

“Damn right you do,” she chuckled, heading toward another patient’s room where the call light was buzzing.

Back in the room, Cora stood behind the head of Alice’s bed French braiding her hair while they watched the copy of *Goonies* Cora had brought in this morning, per family recovery tradition. Ed had gone home for a bit, and Brian and Ashley were upstairs in Uncas’ room while Sidney and Yvette took a break. Nathaniel hated the crestfallen look on Alice’s face when he told her she wasn’t going to be able to see Uncas before surgery.

“I’m really sorry,” he said. “I tried. She did say maybe tomorrow though. And who knows, he might even be awake by then, depending on how things go.”

“It’s okay,” she replied sadly. “I figured it was a long shot, just… dammit, this is like the worst torture in the world.” She swiped at the tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Well, we can still use FaceTime,” Nathaniel said regretfully, handing her a tissue. “I know it isn’t the same as being there with him, but at least you can see him and talk to him.” At Cora’s suggestion, they had been using the app on their phones the last couple of days as a way for Alice to have brief ‘visits’ with Uncas. The first time had been difficult, because even though they had tried to prepare her for it, seeing him the way he was right now had shattered her. After the initial shock had worn off, it had been better, though, and it seemed to help Alice feel less upset knowing she could talk to and see Uncas in some capacity.

“Yeah, we can still do that.” Alice blew her nose. “Thanks for trying, anyway. That was sweet of you.”

Nathaniel shrugged. “It’s for him as much as it’s for you. You guys need each other, I get it.”

“Well, then, at least I can be confident that you’re not just being nice to me because you’re boffing my sister.” Alice gave him a teary-eyed wink, and they all started laughing. If nothing else, at least there was always inappropriate humor to fall back on.

Brian and Ashley came back down a little while later to stay with Alice while Uncas was in surgery. Cora had wanted to stay with her, but Alice wanted her to go with Nathaniel and his parents so that she could hear what Dr. Robinson and Dr. Navelli had to say as soon as everything was done. When it was time and the nurses from surgical came up to transport him, Nathaniel couldn’t help the fear he felt watching them take his brother away after he, Sidney and Yvette had said a brief goodbye with the promise to see him soon. Down in the surgery waiting room he couldn’t seem to keep still, the memory of his nightmare still haunting him and making him feel on edge. He knew he wouldn’t feel any better until one of those doctors came out to tell them Uncas was all right, but that was a while away yet, with the shape his shoulder was in. He had a fracture that needed internal fixation, as well as a fair amount of soft tissue damage around it to repair. Dr. Navelli had been having the nurses run clamping trials on the external ventricular drain to see if Uncas could do without it, and he had told them that morning that he would be able to remove it in the operating room today, so that would add time on as well. Since it was daytime, the OR doors were much more active than they had been on Friday night, doctors emerging with news for the other people waiting on scheduled surgeries. The surge of adrenaline every time the doors opened was driving Nathaniel into fits.
“You doing all right, son?” Sidney asked, standing beside him at the window after he’d gotten up to pace for at least the fifth time. “You’re jumpy as hell.”

“Yeah, I just…” Nathaniel glanced over his shoulder to where Yvette and Cora sat, talking quietly. “I had a really messed up nightmare, and it’s freaking me out.”

“About your brother?”

“Kind of. And John, and… I don’t know, it’s just my head, and all this stuff playing games with me, but it sure as hell doesn’t help any of this.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Sidney sighed and put his arm around Nathaniel. “I was a cop for a long time. Everything I’ve seen… you know how it is, too, you’ve been there. It all gets wound up in your brain sometimes, and then something like this happens, and it’s ten times worse. I know, it happened to me all the time when you were hurt, and it’s been happening again now. We’re all mentally exhausted.”

“Don’t tell Mom. I don’t want to scare her.”

“I never do,” he replied quietly. They leaned on the shallow windowsill for a little while, silently watching cars go in and out of the parking lot a couple of floors down and listening to the low voices of the other families in the waiting area. When they went back to the chairs to sit again, Yvette was in the middle of telling Cora that Alice needed probiotic supplementation to replenish her gut flora after all those antibiotics from surgery.

“There goes Dr. Mom with the probiotics,” Nathaniel chuckled, remembering how she had force-fed him all kinds of pills and fermented vegetables from her garden when he’d been recovering from the infection in his leg.

“This is my job, and it’s how I cope,” Yvette said indignantly. “I need to care for people. Cora understands this, she’s a nurse. Besides, Alice needs her body balanced and healthy to heal. You know it works, it did wonders for you.”

“It really did. I’m just teasing, Mom.” He smiled at his mother and took Cora’s hand in his, pushing off his worry for the moment.

At last, the OR doors clicked open and the familiar figures of Uncas’ doctors emerged. The entire family sprang to their feet to meet them, and Dr. Robinson stepped forward first. He was African American and not a large man at all, perhaps five feet tall at most. His vertically challenged status was emphasized even more by Dr. Navelli’s height combined with Sidney and Nathaniel, both towering over him at slightly more than six feet tall. Even Cora and Yvette had several inches on him. What he lacked in height, however, he made up for in both presence and intelligence, and he had an air that almost dared one to question his competence. Nathaniel thought in most people that would come off as arrogance, but with Dr. Robinson it fostered an odd sense of trust, and he liked it.

“Everything went smoothly.” he stated, pulling his surgical mask down off of his face. I was able to repair the humeral head fracture with wires using a deltoid-splitting approach – meaning I got to it by peeling the muscle off the back of the acromion, that bony process on his shoulder blade, instead of taking it off the front and having to alter the bone. That’s better because it won’t weaken the deltoid muscle and he’ll do better in the long run with physical therapy. I repaired several rotator cuff tears as well, and he’s got some anchors in there from that, and a small plate holding that broken collarbone together. I don’t know how in the world he managed to avoid a labral tear, but he did, so I didn’t have to cut that biceps tendon and reattach it elsewhere like I initially thought I might need to. That will make his life slightly less miserable in recovery, anyway. He does have some nerve injury
from the fracture and the swelling, but nothing that won’t get better over time.”

Sidney blew out a sigh. “So what are we looking at as far as recovery?”

“Well, once the tissues have healed enough for movement to be safe, it will be several months of physical and occupational therapy. We’ll talk about that in more detail as we move forward and I see how he heals.”

“Some of that may be complicated by the head injury, too,” Dr. Navelli interjected. We have to see how things are when he wakes up, and I’m sorry to have to keep telling you that.”

“How did your part of things go?” Nathaniel asked him, holding Cora’s hand tight.

“Just fine,” the neurosurgeon answered. “The drain is out with no issues, and he’s very stable. The best thing I have to tell you is that he was successfully extubated, and he is breathing on his own.”

Yvette had been holding her breath, and she let it out with a sob, sagging against Sidney as he wrapped an arm around her. “So now what, we just wait for him to wake up?

Dr. Navelli nodded. “He could wake in as little as a few hours, or it could be up to a few days. He appears neurologically sound at this time, and he may respond to stimuli before he’s fully awake, so I’d encourage touching him and talking to him. It might help ease him back into consciousness without stressing him too much. We’re going to go ahead and get him ready to go back up to the neuro ICU, so if you all want to head up there, he’ll be back with you soon.”

“You go ahead, Alice is waiting for news. I’ll run and tell her everything and maybe come up in a little while when he’s settled. Keep me posted,” Cora said, hugging the Greatsnakes and giving Nathaniel a kiss as they went their separate ways. He held onto her for a long moment. It felt silly, how badly he wanted to ask her not to leave him just yet. He knew by the way she held him back that she felt it too, but he also knew that Alice needed her more right now, and there was nothing to do about it. Stepping into the elevator, Nathaniel felt lightheaded and a little weak in the knees with the wave of anxiety that kept spreading across his chest. His stress about how Uncas would come through the surgery was over now, but the next door was about to open, and his guess was as good as anyone’s about what lay beyond it for his brother. Just wake up, Uncas… he thought silently. Just wake up, come back to us, and we’ll all figure it out from there.

His first awareness was the singing. An old man’s voice, strong and resonant, singing in Lenape. Some of the song he recognized; words that were ancient and pulled at his heart and mind, bringing him out of the darkness into somewhere inbetween. A curing ceremony, like the one Mom and Dad had arranged for Nathaniel seven years ago when they had worried he would die. Who was dying now? When the singing stopped, the darkness returned for a time, until he heard people speaking again.

“He’s still not waking up, Dr. Navelli. Is something wrong?”

“These things can take time, Mrs. Greatsnake. He’s responding well to physical stimuli, it’s only a matter of time…” Another strange man’s voice, and Mom’s worried tones. Was he the one dying? Something bad had happened to him, he could tell. He tried to say something, but he couldn’t seem to move, and everything was dark. Well, not completely – now and then there were those odd flashes of faint light, but they came and went. Why couldn’t he wake up from this limbo?

“Verbal stimuli too,” Nathaniel’s voice cut in. “He responds to us talking to him. And he
definitely knows Alice’s voice.

Of course I do, he wanted to reply. I always did, before I ever saw her. Wasn’t she here? He vaguely remembered hearing her, maybe not too long ago. He couldn’t tell how much time was going by, and he seemed to go in and out of awareness. He knew he could hear her sometimes, but he couldn’t see her, and he couldn’t feel her there. Why? Why didn’t she stay with him? Where was she, and where was he? It felt so strange, like he was in some dimension where nothing existed but sounds, and sometimes he could feel people touching him or holding his hands, and he tried to squeeze them back. He was tired now. He wanted to fight it, to push past the void, but he couldn’t yet. The grey light faded out to black again, and the worried voices faded out too, as he sank back into oblivion.

Alice tried to calm her breathing as Cora pushed the wheelchair down the hall to the elevators. Dr. Joshi and Dr. Coleman had agreed to allow her out of bed to a recliner in her room yesterday, and had promised that if she tolerated it well, they would clear her to leave the unit in a wheelchair and see Uncas for the first time since the accident, as long as she didn’t stay away too long or push herself too hard. Uncas’ surgery had been two days ago now. Yvette and Sidney had arranged for a Lenape wèlathakèt, or medicine man, to come and do a curing ceremony for him the day before, and while his responses to the outside environment were getting stronger, he still wasn’t awake yet. She glanced at Nathaniel walking at her elbow and pushing her loaded IV pole, and smiled a little to herself. She’d swear he was equally excited that she was finally allowed to visit his brother. He had practically come down running to help Cora get her set up in the wheelchair, along with Florence, her poor nurse who he had relentlessly hounded the last few days about letting her off the unit. They had gotten her slowly but safely transferred from her bed to the wheelchair, a stiff binder around her torso keeping her ribs stable for the trip, and her leg elevated on one of the padded leg extensions attached to the front of the chair. Her chest tube unit sat in a metal basket at the back of the wheelchair along with a portable oxygen tank hooked up to her nasal cannula, since she wasn’t quite on room air yet. Cora, Ed, and the nurses were keeping after her about using an incentive spirometer for deep breathing and coughing to avoid pneumonia, but her broken ribs hurt like hell and made it much more of a challenge.

Her hands shook as Cora angled the wheelchair into Uncas’ room in the Neurology ICU, the tremor intensifying as she parked her next to his lowered bed where she could see and touch him.

“I’m here, Uncas,” she said softly, slipping a hand beneath the blanket and laying it on his chest over his heart. She couldn’t help the hot tears that spilled down her cheeks as she reached out and stroked his hair above the bandage that covered the right side of his head, his right arm encased in an immobilizing sling that kept it strapped against his torso. In a way, she was almost glad she had never seen him in person before. It was such a relief to see him as he was now, free of the ventilator and the endotracheal tube that had made everything seem so much worse. The swelling around his right eye had gone down, leaving only the bruising that was starting to turn yellow and green around the edges of the dark purple that marred his smooth copper skin. His eyelids fluttered as she touched him and spoke to him.

“That’s good, Al, look at his eyes,” Cora encouraged her.

“I’m here with you now, and I love you, and I’m going to stay with you for a little while until they make me go back to my room. I’ve missed you so much.” Alice’s voice sobbed a little at that, and she took his left hand in hers, her fingers twining with his. “I’ve missed you so much, and we’re all ready for you to wake up. Can you hear me?” His hand contracted, squeezing her fingers just a little. She sucked in a breath, looking up at Cora, Nathaniel, and the Greatsnakes. Yvette and Cora
were both crying, and Sidney and Nathaniel didn’t look like they were too far behind.

“Keep talking to him, Alice,” Nathaniel said from his chair beside Cora, the barest hint of a smile on his lips. “I think he needs to hear your magic Dispatcher Girl voice.” She both laughed and cried at that, pressing Uncas’ hand to her cheek.

“Maybe you should read to him,” Yvette said, handing her a well-loved hardcover copy of Margery Williams’ *The Velveteen Rabbit* off the rolling side table. “I’ve been doing that. This one was one of the boys’ favorite books when they were little.”

“Okay,” Alice said softly, opening the book and running her fingers over the dog-eared, stained pages before she started to read, her voice rising and falling in gentle, soothing cadence, stopping here and there to catch her breath due to her own injuries.

“’Real isn’t how you are made,’ said the Skin Horse. ‘It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.’”

Real… Alice. Her voice again, her reading that old book to him this time instead of Mom. He smiled in whatever consciousness he was in here. How many times had he and Nathaniel begged Mom to read that book growing up? More than he could count. She had read it to Nathaniel when he was hurt. Hurt… was any of this Real, or was it just in his head?

“’Does it hurt?’ asked the Rabbit.
‘Sometimes,’ said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. ’When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.’”

Maybe it was Real. For the first time, he was aware that things hurt. His head. His arm. His body didn’t feel disconnected like it had, and it did hurt. Did that mean he was becoming Real again?

“’Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,’ he asked, ’or bit by bit?’”

How long had he been in the void this time? He didn’t know. Alice sounded clearer now, and he could feel the warmth of her hand on his as she read to him, when he hadn’t been able to feel her before the way he could feel Mom and Dad and Nathaniel. He wanted out of here, wanted to see Alice, to see his family.

“’It doesn't happen all at once,’ said the Skin Horse. ’You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.’”

REAL. Alice felt Real, sounded Real now. Where had she been all this time? Where had HE been, that everything was so disconnected and dark? The Skin Horse he could imagine spoke with the voices of his father, his mother, with all their wisdom. His brother, the little boy who loved him. Alice, her voice, her touch, the fairy who had the power to make him Real. Don’t leave me, Alice, he pleaded silently. Don’t let go.
He wanted to be Real again, too, like the rabbit.

“I want to be Real,” he tried to say, tried to make it come out of his mouth, tried to move his lips and breathe the words. “I want to be Real. Make me Real again…”
“Want… to be Real… Make me… Real again…” It was barely a whisper, but everyone in the room stopped dead when they heard the sound. Alice held Uncas’ hand tighter, and everyone else got up and came to the bedside. His eyes were moving rapidly now behind his closed lids, and his fingers twitched against hers. “I want… to be Real…” he rasped again, his voice hoarse but a little stronger now.

“You are Real, mimëntët,” Yvette said, reaching down to stroke his hair.

Uncas willed his eyes to open, his body to move. When he finally got them to, he shut them again briefly against the blinding light. He’d been in the dark so long that it hurt, and with the light came the rush of awareness of the world. Pain. Odd, clinical smells. More noise. Beeping. The muffled sounds of people trying not to cry and failing. A warm hand clutching his, the thumb stroking his knuckles. Alice.

“Youngs?” her voice again, a benediction. “Uncas, please open your eyes.”

“Tukihëla, Uncas. Can you hear us?” his father’s voice said from above him.

He cracked his eyelids again, just a little at a time. “Kpëntul,” he croaked. He tried to focus on Alice. She was right there, but he couldn’t see her clearly. She was blurry, like standing too close to a Monet painting, her golden hair backlit by the brightness and glowing around her face. “Nkuli,” he said, trying to lift his hand toward her face. “Knewël, welsit awèn.” He could see her a little more clearly now that his eyes were adjusting to the light, but not perfect. Everything looked out of focus. He looked beyond Alice to the others. Mom, Dad, Nathaniel, even Cora was here. “Kuwahélumo,” he whispered, a little smile lifting the corners of his mouth.

“Of course you do, nkwis,” Yvette said, leaning closer. “We’ve all been here waiting for you to wake up.” She was crying. It looked like Sidney was, too. His smile faded, replaced with confusion and worry.

“I’m pretty damn happy to hear your voice, little brother,” Nathaniel said thickly. Even with blurry vision, it wasn’t hard to see the exhaustion and stress on his brother’s face.

“I’ll go get his nurse and have them page Dr. Navelli,” Cora said softly, turning to leave. Uncas started to panic a little more when he realized Alice was crying too, her head bowed over his hand, and that she was sitting in a wheelchair and had what looked like an oxygen cannula on her face.

“Alice… what’s wrong? Are we in the hospital? What the fuck happened to us?” He looked at his brother and his parents, confused by just about everything at this point.

“You are in the hospital, at Albany Medical Center,” Nathaniel answered gently. “There was an accident, when you and Alice were hiking last week. You fell off Saddleback Cliffs.”

“Last week? What… I don’t remember anything.”

“We both got hurt,” Alice told him tearfully. “You have a head injury, so you’ve been unconscious, and that might be why you don’t remember what happened.”

“Your neuro doc ought to be here pretty soon,” Nathaniel said. “You want to wait for him and wake up a little more before we tell you everything?”

“Yeah, maybe, I just… I’m foggy, and I hurt everywhere, and I can’t see real well… am I all
right? Are you?” He reached out to touch Alice again, his hand shaking now from the shock of everything dawning on him like this.

“We’re, um... well, we’re not so great right now,” she said, her voice cracking again. “But we will be. And you’re awake now, and that’s a good start. I love you, and I’ve missed you so much.”

“I love you too,” he replied quietly, his mind reeling from trying to comprehend what felt like everything rushing in at once now that he was forced to face it. If nothing else, for this moment, his family was here, and Alice was here.

She kissed his hand, her lips warm and soft on his skin. “I’m staying right here with you, and we’re going to get through all of this together, whatever it ends up being. I promise you that.”

What it ended up being for Uncas, at least for right now, was completely overwhelming. The next several days were a blur of what seemed like nonstop activity. Moving from Neuro ICU to the regular Neuro unit down the hall. His family in and out, and brief visits from Ed Munro, Brian and Ashley, and Alexandra Cameron, without Jack and the kids until he was more settled. Nurses and doctors and physical therapists coming and going, poking prodding, examining. The term traumatic brain injury was a big, bitter pill to swallow, and it wasn’t setting well with him yet. Dr. Navelli explained that his blurry vision was a side effect of cranial nerve swelling from the pressure the epidural hematoma had put on it. It might be temporary, and it might not. They’d have to see. The slight weakness and ataxia on his left side, the doctor said, was also a result of a right-side brain injury. It should get better over time with physical therapy, which he’d be needing a lot of. Dr. Navelli said they would talk about a plan for the future, maybe inpatient rehab for a little while if he needed it, and meanwhile physical therapy would come daily to work with him on walking and left hand coordination. As trivial and silly as it seemed, he also couldn’t help being pissed to find out they’d shaved half the underside of his hair off in the OR, too. It would take at least two years to get it all the same length again. But, he thought, at least it hadn’t been all of it. At least he just had a few burr holes instead of a craniotomy. At least he was alive, and a lot better off than he could have been. He tried to remember that. It could always be worse. He’d seen it a lot worse many times in his line of work.

Then there was his right shoulder. It hurt all the time, even with the pain medication, and he couldn’t move his fingers very well yet. Dr. Robinson said there was some nerve injury, and it would take time to regain some of his fine motor function. Uncas tried not to worry about how this would all affect work, and all the things he wouldn’t be able to do for an undetermined amount of time – weeks? Months? There was no way to know how long it would be before he’d be able to see clearly, to walk straight, to start an IV or intubate or play the guitar, or hell, even write his own name. He tried to focus on the day-to-day of things, because thinking about what any of this meant for getting back to a normal life was too much, especially when it was combined with Alice’s injuries and the road she would have ahead of her, too. He felt better when she was allowed to come and see him for short visits, usually in the morning when she had rested and therefore had the fortitude to stay longer; sitting up in the wheelchair hurt her ribs and made it harder for her to breathe well. As much as he loved her and wanted her there, it broke his heart to look at her with that chest tube and the ex-fix on her leg. She wanted so badly to be able to take care of him, and he wanted to take care of her, and neither of them could do anything but love the other right now. He still couldn’t remember everything that had happened the day of the accident, though it was starting to come back. There were some memories of the hike, and that Magua guy they had met, but it was incomplete, and he didn’t remember slipping trying to descend Saddleback Cliffs. Alice did remember, and the look on
her face when she’d pieced the rest of the story together for him was enough to make him never ask her again. He hadn’t even known how to begin to express his gratitude to Nathaniel and the others for flying them out of there. For saving their lives. None of them said too much about it, and he understood. The thought of riding the ambulance that had responded when Nathaniel and John were shot… he couldn’t even go there. But he would have, if he’d had to, and it would have mattered more than anything he’d ever done in his life.

Nathaniel stayed in his room with him most nights, as Cora stayed with Alice. Uncas was grateful. Being alone with all the jumbled thoughts about all this stuff was still too much, and Nathaniel understood that without saying so – he’d been in that boat, too, and in a really fucked up way, Uncas was almost glad. He needed that. The empathy, yes, but also the way Nathaniel didn’t sugarcoat anything, and the way he knew when to talk about things and when to shut up. And he needed his brother’s dark sense of humor and his smartass remarks and his stupid T-shirts, too, because it made things feel more normal. Cora’s friendship and empathy was helpful, too; her shoulder injury hadn’t been too much different from his, and she knew what lay ahead for him on that therapy road, kind of the same way Nathaniel had solidarity in the bad leg department with Alice.

“Hey, I need to talk to you about something,” Nathaniel said to him late one afternoon. Sidney and Yvette had left to run a few errands before going home for the night, and the nurse had finally vacated the room, leaving the two men alone.

“You sound serious,” Uncas replied with a small grin. “It couldn’t be anything I did, I’m too incapacitated to make mischief. What’s up?”

“So, I’ve been kind of hesitant to bring this up because everything else going on has taken precedence, but I, uh… I just wanted you to know that when I had your stuff with me, the night you… when you were in surgery that night, I found this in your jacket pocket.” He set a black leather ring box on the bedside table, sliding it close enough for Uncas to see it fairly well.


“All of us. I found it in the waiting room. It just sort of happened, and we were all sitting there, and –”

“Does Alice know?” Uncas cut a glance back at Nathaniel, trying to fight the blur and focus on his face.

“No. We all agreed it was best not to tell her.”

“Good. Don’t, okay? I don’t… I wouldn’t want her to know, not now.”

“I wasn’t sure if I should even say anything. I honestly didn’t know if you would even remember that you’d had it, but I figured I better just ask you, before Mom did.”

Uncas groaned a little. “Tell me she didn’t go all wedding freak while I was unconscious and helpless.”

“Nah. She was way too worried about you to even think about that. We all were. It seemed pretty small in comparison, but… it is kind of a big deal. And you never told me you were going to propose to her. I mean, unless you count all those times you said, ‘one day I’ll find her and marry her’ after she dispatched a bus.” He grinned.

“I was going to ask her. I didn’t tell anyone, I was afraid she’d suspect something if you guys
knew. I had this whole thing planned for when we rang the victory bell at the end of the challenge, and it was so perfect... but nothing’s perfect now. I can’t ask her to marry me anymore, Nathaniel. Not now.”

“Why not? She would, you know.” Nathaniel’s voice sobered. “And she’d never think twice, not even now. You know she wouldn’t.”

“I know,” Uncas replied tightly. “But this isn’t what I wanted for her. Or for me. For *us*. Shit wasn’t supposed to go down like this, and now all I can think about is how long it’s gonna be until she can walk again, or I can even put my arms around her, until either of us is in any kind of shape to even try to make a life together. It wouldn’t be fair to ask her now. She deserves better.”

“Not better than you. Don’t say that.”

“No, but better than *this*.” Uncas wanted to cry. “Look, dude, everything in my life went from zero to completely fucked in the space of a second. I don’t know what I want to do about that ring right now, okay? Can you just... I don’t know, hang onto it for me? I can’t do this right now. I can’t even think about it.”

“All right,” Nathaniel said quietly, taking the box off the table. “Just... don’t do anything stupid.”

Uncas rolled his eyes. “I’m not gonna break up with her, dipshit. I’m not that far down, and I want to be with her. I’m just feeling a little drowned at the moment.”

Nathaniel nodded. “I hear you. But you know I’ll tread water with you for as long as it takes. You did it for me, too.”

“Thanks. You suck a lot less than many other brothers Mom and Dad could have adopted. And thanks for keeping an eye on Alice when I couldn’t.”

Nathaniel shrugged. “I knew you’d want that. Besides, I care about her. After all, she might be my sister-in-law someday.”

“Yeah, whether it’s through me or Cora, right?”

Nathaniel chuckled. “Well played, bro. She’s not ready for that, and neither am I.”

Uncas looked at him thoughtfully before speaking again. “Why’d you propose to Judith, anyway? She was never like Cora is for you.”

“I don’t really know.” Nathaniel sighed. “I guess... we’d been together a while, and I guess I just thought that’s what you did when you’ve stuck with someone long enough. I was young, and ignorant, and I didn’t understand what real love was back then. Clearly neither did she, when she took off as soon as things got too hard and she couldn’t hack it.”

“Yeah. She was no Cora, that’s for sure.”

“She was no Alice either, but you already know that. Alice would hobble to the ends of the earth for you. Look at her coming down here in that wheelchair every damn day, with broken ribs and her leg all fucked up. That’s real love.” He was interrupted by the ringing of a cell phone. “That’s not my ringtone.”

“It’s mine,” Uncas said, puzzled. “Though I have no idea who’d be calling me, everyone I know knows I can’t answer the damn thing right now since my hands don’t work right. Can you get
Nathaniel dug around on the couch and found the phone, the number on the screen out of area and not one from Uncas’ contacts. He swiped to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Yes, hello, I’m looking for Uncas Greatsnake?” a man’s voice said hesitantly.

“He’s indisposed, but this is his brother, how can I help you?”

“Well, I apologize if this is a bad time to call, but you see, I have his backpack, you know, that he was hiking with, and I have his girlfriend’s too, and I got this number off the I.D. tag on the inside, so I thought I’d better call and try to see if they were okay, and get their things back to them, if possible.”

Nathaniel sat up straight, holding up a finger at Uncas’ questioning look. “Yeah, okay, that’s great, but who is this?”

“Geez, I’m sorry, I guess I could have started off with that. My name is Magua Renard. I was hiking the Great Range dozen with Uncas and Alice. Are they… can you tell me if they’re doing all right?”

Author’s Note:

Lenape words:

Mimëntët: “Baby”

Tukihëla: “Wake up!”

Kpëntul: “I hear you; I understand you”

Nkuli: “Made of gold”

Knewël: “I see you”

Welsit awèn: “Beautiful person”

Kuwahëlumo: “I know you (three or more people)”

Nkwis: “My son”

I really wanted to be done with this chapter sooner, but my life has been crazy between these last few weeks of my BSN program, getting my Capstone project finished and turned in, arranging to present it at the hospital where I’m hoping to work, and all the other sundry insanity the Holiday season tends to bring. At long last, poor Uncas is finally awake, and his shoulder is repaired. Nathaniel was kind of killing me softly with the cute there in the beginning, between the stuffed fox and trying to sweet-talk Alice’s nurse who used to be his nurse. I wanted to show that he cares about Alice, because he genuinely likes her, but also Uncas and Cora love her very much, and so she is also very important to him. He also has a nice moment with Sidney during Uncas’ surgery, which
was great because Sidney is not always a very vocal character. As for Uncas, I didn’t want to make the effects of his brain injury too extreme, so all in all he’s really doing quite well. In reality, he was rescued and treated quickly, so his prognosis was always pretty good. I can tell you that my husband’s brain injury was far worse (almost half his shattered skull was removed by docs at Balad Airbase to relieve ICP), and while he had a lot more confusion than Uncas at first (he was also unconscious for quite a bit longer), he also fared far better than was ever expected. I want Uncas to have some issues that complicate recovery, but not anything that makes him intrinsically different than he was before; that wasn’t ever where I wanted to go with this story. Uncas has to stay his awesome self, right? With, of course, some natural doubts and fears about the future, which Alice has too, and we’ll go back to Alice’s experience a little more in the next chapter.

MedicineWoman: I really wish I could PM back and forth with you! Oh, the medical conversations and valuable input! To answer your question in your last chapter review about intubation, that’s a situation by situation thing. My flight nurse friend said they will usually not intubate unless the airway cannot be protected or retained. In Uncas’ case, he had a seizure, but the postictal period is relatively short unless he was in status epilepticus, which he was not. In that case, his airway needed a little help, but would likely become patent again within a few minutes (my husband has seizures occasionally due to his injury and this is always the case with him). At most they might consider an oropharyngeal airway just to keep the tissues from collapsing until the postictal period passed. Even a simple jaw thrust can alleviate that issue. This is remarkably similar to airway management in many patients who are coming out of anesthesia – which is my field of nursing practice. I didn’t feel like it was necessary to intubate him at that time since he was generally breathing fine on his own.

I think the stress for all these poor family members is going to wind down a little – at least from this very acute phase into the whole “what’s in store and what does it all mean” recovery phase. Between Nathaniel having awful nightmares from worrying about Uncas and everybody trying to manage time and visits, and surgeries and everything else, I think they all deserve a little break (and probably a shot of that expensive whisky Nathaniel left at Cora’s house in chapter 4). I wasn’t sure until very recently how I was going to approach the whole angle of Uncas waking up. Once he was no longer chemically comatose I wanted him to be semi-aware, but in a dreamlike state. I thought that his family would have a medicine man visit at some point because that is part of their culture and would be important to them. I wanted Uncas to be aware of it when it happened, almost as if the curing ceremony might have been what initially pulled him into consciousness. And naturally it was Alice’s voice that ultimately stirred him to life, because, as Nathaniel said, Alice’s Dispatcher Girl voice is magic to Uncas.

There is still a long road ahead for Uncas and Alice and their families. Uncas is naturally experiencing a lot of stress about this, and about the current state of things. So much so that he’s doubting his plan to propose to Alice. I think this is a very normal reaction for him, and I personally think that if I were Uncas I would probably want to put that on a back burner for a while too, until things evened out some. We’ll see how that all plays out as the rest of the story unfolds. And last but not least, the chapter closes out with a surprise phone call from Magua. I definitely wasn’t ready for the story to have seen the last of him, so let’s see what happens with all this in chapter 14. I have two weeks of school left, so I expect to have chapter 14 done within the same 2-3 week time frame I’ve been hustling to keep. After that I hope to go back to 1-2 week postings, but we’ll see what life does. This story has long chapters, four main characters, and an involved plot, so it does take time to do that justice so that I can put forth the best story possible for you to read!

This chapter’s theme song is “I’ll Stay With You” by Beth Hart. I love this song, and it’s so applicable not only to Uncas and Alice, but to Nathaniel and Cora and both families, and how they all love and support each other during this very difficult time, through pain, stress, fear, grief and nightmares. When Uncas is in his half-conscious state, Breaking Benjamin’s “Ashes of Eden” was
what I kept thinking of. When Uncas wakes up and there’s all the narrative about how he’s feeling, and his conversation with Nathaniel, the song there was “Wait Out the Rain” by Paul Gross (that entire New Beginning album of his is pretty great, and several songs are working into this story in the future). I think that “Wait Out the Rain” will generally be a recovery theme song for Uncas, so it may reappear in later chapters. Right now, I think he has to wait out the rain to see how his future with Alice will turn out, because he doesn’t know yet, and I think he’s scared but he wants to fight for it.

That’s about it for now. Stay tuned, and as always, thank you for reading!
Wait For Me to Come Home

Chapter Summary

Magua pays a little visit, Alice has an unpleasant interaction with a staff member, and it becomes plain that the future is going to be difficult for both couples as Uncas and Alice and their families must face the recovery realities ahead of them.

Chapter Notes

Author note included at the end of chapter text.

Chapter 14 – Wait for Me to Come Home

“Loving can hurt, loving can hurt sometimes
But it's the only thing that I know
When it gets hard, you know it can get hard sometimes
It is the only thing that makes us feel alive

We keep this love in a photograph
We made these memories for ourselves
Where our eyes are never closing
Hearts are never broken
And time's forever frozen still

So you can keep me
Inside the pocket of your ripped jeans
Holding me closer 'til our eyes meet
You won't ever be alone, wait for me to come home

Loving can heal, loving can mend your soul
And it's the only thing that I know
I swear it will get easier,
Remember that with every piece of you
And it's the only thing we take with us when we die

We keep this love in this photograph
We made these memories for ourselves
Where our eyes are never closing
Hearts were never broken
And time's forever frozen still

So you can keep me
Inside the pocket of your ripped jeans
Holding me closer 'til our eyes meet
You won't ever be alone
And if you hurt me
That’s okay baby, only words bleed
Inside these pages you just hold me
And I won’t ever let you go
Wait for me to come home
Wait for me to come home
Wait for me to come home
Wait for me to come home

You can fit me
Inside the necklace you got when you were sixteen
Next to your heartbeat where I should be
Keep it deep within your soul

And if you hurt me
Well, that’s okay baby, only words bleed
Inside these pages you just hold me
And I won’t ever let you go

When I’m away, I will remember how you kissed me
Under the lamppost back on Sixth Street
Hearing you whisper through the phone,
‘Wait for me to come home’.

-Ed Sheeran & Johnny McDaid-

A few days later, Uncas and Alice sat at a window table in the hospital’s cafeteria, finishing lunch while surrounded by their families and Magua, who had driven down to visit them and return their backpacks. Uncas was able to sit beside Alice in a regular chair since all he had to contend with was the complicated-looking immobilizer sling on his right arm, but Alice remained in her wheelchair with the support for her leg, and her chest tube unit sitting in the back basket. Her oxygen cannula was gone now, since she had progressed to holding an adequate oxygen saturation on room air, and the nurse had been able to start disconnecting her IV and capping the line now that she was off her PCA pump and most of the other medications, just receiving doses of IV or oral pain medications every four hours. Uncas, too, was able to go most of the time without his IV pole, which made physical therapy a lot easier for him, especially walking practice since his ataxia still made that hard enough. Yvette had been bringing them both probiotic and omega-3 supplements and all kinds of medicinal herb concoctions. Uncas got things like ginkgo-biloba, chamomile, and vincristine to boost brain function and circulation, and for Alice she brought comfrey, horsetail and fenugreek tea to aid in bone and tissue healing. She often brought them healthy meals from home that contained all the essential nutrients that would help their injuries heal, too. The doctors and nurses had been supportive of Yvette’s efforts and did not stand in her way; though even if they had, Alice knew that much like her sons, Yvette would find a way to do what she knew was best anyway.

“It’s been so good to see you two,” Magua said, looking at Uncas and Alice with sincerity. “I know we don’t know each other well, but… I mean, after what happened I was really worried about how you were doing.”

“Are you kidding?” Uncas replied. “You pretty much saved our lives by calling for help, so I’d say that puts you up pretty high in the ‘friend for life’ category.”

“Seriously, I think you can stick around at this point.” Alice laughed.

“Well, I don’t know about saving any lives, I think you all took care of all that pretty well,”
Magua said to Nathaniel and Cora. He had been amazed to discover on his arrival that the rescue crew had been comprised of the very siblings and friends Uncas and Alice had been telling him all about during the course of their hike.

“We wouldn’t have been able to get there as fast as we did without you being there,” Cora said adamantly, placing a hand over his. “And I’m so glad you got in touch and came down, because we’ve all wanted so much to thank you properly for everything you did to help them.”

Magua looked a little choked up for a moment. “I’m just glad everything turned out as well as it could. The injuries aren’t the best thing, I know, and that’s regrettable, but I was pretty scared for you, and I’ll tell you it’s just a huge relief to see you guys alive and on the road to recovery.”

“It is for us too,” Nathaniel said gruffly. “We owe a lot to you, Magua, and I’m grateful that you were all on the trail at the same time, or things might have been… a whole lot different.”

“Fate is a funny thing, for sure,” Magua said with a small smile. “When my son got sick and couldn’t make the trip with me, I came so close to postponing it. I’m awfully glad now that I didn’t do that.” Suddenly an alarm went off on Nathaniel’s phone, and he pulled it out to switch it off.

“That’s the afternoon physical therapy alarm,” he said to Uncas, who groaned and rolled his eyes as Nathaniel stood up to help him back into a waiting wheelchair. He was still too unsteady to walk on his own without the help of a therapist, so the wheelchair was the approved mode of travel until PT showed up with a gait belt to help him walk. His blurry vision was much improved with the further decrease in swelling, though, so at least there was that.

“We better get going too, you’re due for afternoon rounds with your docs, and it’s almost time for your meds. You know Florence will get jumpy if you’re gone too long,” Cora said to Alice.

“Magua, are you staying in Albany overnight?” Yvette asked as they all stood from the table.

“Yeah, I was going to get a motel room, maybe pop in for a short visit tomorrow before I head home if that’s all right with everyone.”

“A motel? Bullshit!” Ed proclaimed. “Why don’t you stay with me? I’ve got two extra bedrooms, and I’d love the company. And while we’re at it, let me take you out to dinner this evening, it’s the least I can do after all you’ve done for the kids.”

“Well, if you really don’t mind…”

“Of course not!” Sidney chimed in. “As a matter of fact, we’d love to join you, Ed.”

“The more, the merrier, I always say.” Ed clapped Magua on the back. “What do you say, Renard?”

“Well, all right then!” Magua grinned, changing his craggy features quite pleasantly. After the round of hugs and goodbyes that followed, he left with the parents. Nathaniel and Cora went the opposite direction pushing Uncas and Alice, who held hands as their siblings pushed their wheelchairs back to the elevators. After separating to return to their respective units, Cora helped Florence get Alice settled back in her freshly made bed, after which the nurse gave Alice her pain medication.

“I can’t wait till I’m healed enough to get off this stuff,” Alice said with a grimace. “I know I need it right now, but I hate the prospect of being on narcotics for so long. Especially because I’ll be due for internal fixation surgery soon, and that’ll start this whole deal over again.”
“You’ll be all right, honey,” Florence assured her. “Once you’ve got a plate in there instead of that external fixator, you might find you’re more comfortable than you are now, and you’ll be able to take less and less of this stuff after that.” She pulled up Alice’s chart on the wall computer to record the dose of medication, and then left to see her next patient, passing a youngish, brown-haired man in a white coat on her way out. He came into the room, glancing at the clipboard in his hand.

“Alice Munro?” he questioned for confirmation, his pale blue eyes fixing on her.

“That would be me,” Alice replied. “And you are?”

“Chip Peterson. I’m a senior ortho resident here, I work with Dr. Coleman.”

Cora eyed him reticently. She was familiar with him, and she wasn’t a fan. He was a mouthy jerk with zero bedside manner, and most of the nurses who dealt with him wanted to knock him out and leave him locked in the supply closet. She didn’t like the idea of him laying a finger on Alice for any reason, but it was just rounds and a brief exam, so she tried to settle herself.

“Oh,” Alice replied, a little disappointed. “I thought I’d be seeing Dr. Coleman. We were going to discuss internal fixation and a rehab plan.”

“Well, he’s held up in the OR on an emergency case, so he asked me to round on his patients this afternoon. He may want to come talk to you later, but I’m who you’ve got for now.” He smirked a little, no warmth in his soulless eyes at all, and Cora already wanted to punch him.

Alice narrowed her eyes a little. “Yeah, okay, fine,” she replied, exchanging a wary look with Cora, but allowing him to begin examining her leg around the external fixator after a brief general assessment.

“Quite a number you did on this leg,” he said after he’d finished, making a few notes on his clipboard and pointedly raising a brow at Alice. “That’ll keep you off the hiking trails for a while, at any rate.”

Alice glared at him with an expression that screamed thank you, Captain Obvious. “Well, I know it will take some time to heal, but I’m hoping that within a couple months I’ll at least be able to get back into a regular yoga routine.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t get my hopes up about a two-month time frame,” Chip interrupted with a careless wave of his hand. “You’ll be lucky to be out of inpatient rehab by then, and you sure won’t be bearing much weight on that leg even after that.”

Cora bristled in her chair as she watched Alice’s face fall. Who the hell did this little puke think he was? Dr. Coleman had barely discussed any of this with Alice yet because he wanted to see how things were going before he told her anything concrete, yet this narcissistic punk thought he had the right to speak decisively about Alice’s recovery when he wasn’t even her attending?

“I’m aware of the weight-bearing issues,” Alice said a little shakily, “but Dr. Coleman - ”

“Then you know how much tissue damage a fracture like this causes? Because it’s not just your bones. It’s your muscles and everything that are a mess. You’ve got a lot of therapy ahead of you, I hope you know that.”

Alice frowned, her hazel eyes blazing. Cora could tell she was getting upset, and while she wanted to run to her sister’s defense and choke-slam the arrogant jerk, she also knew Alice was the patient and she could hold her own without needing Cora to cape for her. Still, it took all her resolve to keep her mouth shut. She was so busy keeping herself in check while simultaneously hating Chip
Peterson’s face that she didn’t notice Nathaniel standing outside the doorframe in the hall.

“Of course I know that,” Alice retorted. “I’m not an idiot. All I’m saying is that I’d like to try to get back to some low-key exercising that makes me feel normal again as soon as possible.”

Chip sniffed, smirking again as he made more notes on his clipboard. “Well, you probably should have considered that before you went down a cliff after your boyfriend.”

Alice’s jaw dropped and her eyes filled with tears, too aghast and angry to even say anything back to such an appallingly insensitive comment. Making her sister cry was the last straw for Cora. Buckle up, Chipper, because you just flipped the Munro bitch switch. She sprang out of her chair and marched right up to him.

“Just who the fucking hell do you think you are, exactly?” she asked him. She didn’t yell, and somehow that was more fear-inducing than if she had; her brand as a nurse and commanding officer was a little different than Ed’s as a drill instructor.

“Excuse me?” Chip replied, looking annoyed.

“I think you heard me the first time. I just want to know what or who the fuck exactly makes you think you can speak to a patient like that. Because the last time I checked, you are still a resident. A subordinate. Yet you come in here with your superior goddamn attitude like you have the right to say anything definitive about Alice’s recovery, let alone spout that kind of utter horseshit to her.”

Cora’s voice was still calm and icy, and she was still oblivious to Nathaniel, who stood watching the entire exchange from the corner of the doorway. Part of him wanted to walk in there and smash his fist into that smug little bastard’s teeth, especially after his heartless comment to Alice about following Uncas off a cliff. But Cora seemed to have it under control, and watching her dress the son of a bitch down was a beautiful thing, indeed. He remained out of view for the moment.

“For starters, I’m Alice’s sister, so I’ll be damned if you get to talk to her like that in my presence on any given day. But the part you need to be concerned about is that I am a nurse, and an employee at this hospital, you pompous little prick, and if you had shit for common sense you’d try a little harder to do your fucking job like a decent human being, especially around people like me.”

The resident looked at her almost as if she had amused him. “Huh. I thought you looked familiar. I’m not exactly sure why I should care about you working here, but has anyone ever told you that your language is really unprofessional? You cuss too much.”

Cora’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah? Well, you breathe too much, asshole! Now I suggest you get the hell out of my sister’s room before you give me anything else to add to that formal complaint I’ll be filing against you.”

That’s my girl. Damn, I love her. Nathaniel grinned with devilish pride as the color drained from the cocky resident’s face in the wake of realizing that he’d royally screwed up.

“That would be why you should care that she works here, and as the offended patient, I can make your professional life hell even more than she can,” Alice added, angrily swiping at her wet cheeks. “I’ll second the ‘get the hell out’ part, too.”

“Now hold on, Miss Munro.” Chip laughed nervously, reaching out a hand to place it on Cora’s arm. “I don’t think - ”
“I’ll tell you what I do think,” Nathaniel said as he calmly stepped into the room, the former cop rising to life in him. He knew Cora had it handled, but he just couldn’t resist scaring the guy a little more, especially since Uncas wasn’t here to kill him for what he’d said to Alice. “I think they both told you to get out, and I think you’d better do that, or you and I are gonna have a serious disagreement.” His eyes flicked down to where the little worm’s hand rested on Cora’s arm. “I also think you had better get your hand off her, or I’ll be mailing it back to you.” Chip gulped and snatched his hand back as if he’d been burned. Without another word, he turned to leave the room.

“Don’t let the door hit you in the ass on your way out,” Alice called after him.

“So, Cora told me that Dr. Coleman asked for Chip Peterson to be removed from his service until he can treat patients with more sensitivity,” Ashley snickered. She stood behind Uncas while he sat on a chair in his room, her electric clippers in hand. Now that his head didn’t need to be bandaged, she had promised to even out the half-shaved underside of his hair for him, so she’d come up after the end of her night shift in the ER to make good on it.

“Yeah,” Alice confirmed. “Dr. Coleman told us that himself when he came to see me the next morning. I guess Cora didn’t even wait for the paper report to get to administration, she paged Dr. Coleman too. Whatever, at least I never have to deal with that Peterson dickhead again.”

Uncas grunted, tipping his head forward so Ashley could clip the rest of his long hair on top of his head. “Fortunate for you, and for him, that weasely little fucker. He’s lucky I was in physical therapy that day, because even without my hands working at full capacity right now, being off Coleman’s service isn’t the worst thing he’d be facing if I’d been in that room.” Uncas had calmed down quite a bit by now, but he’d been livid when Alice had told him how the resident had spoken to her, and the guilt he felt over not having been there to support her had made him even angrier.

Alice tittered. “I can’t even imagine how much more awesome that would have been. You should have seen his face already, between Cora ripping him a new one and Nathaniel coming in with his smart Super-Cop mouth at the end. I thought Peterson was going to piss himself, it was absolutely glorious.”

Uncas chuckled. “I always did tell Nathaniel when he was a cop that he was wasting his verbal talent flying a ghetto bird instead of staying on patrol.”

“No shit,” Brian replied with a laugh from the couch, rising to hand Alice the water bottle she was reaching for on the counter so she wouldn’t hurt her ribs. “I’d have loved to be a fly on the wall in that room right then.”

“Where are Nathaniel and Cora and your folks, anyway?” Ashley asked, going to work on Uncas’ hair.

“The folks are out having breakfast together,” Alice replied. “Nathaniel and Cora will be here in a while I’m sure, they slept at Cora’s last night, and they’ll probably stop at my apartment on the way back like they usually do.” She sighed, wishing she could go home for just a little while. She missed her own bed, and most of all she missed Sweet Potato and Mrs. Nesbit, and even the silent fish. Mostly she just missed life before all this. It felt like they’d been in the hospital for months already, even though it hadn’t even been two weeks yet. The stress and worry about the future was looming bigger every day, too. Uncas was doing really well considering his injuries, and Dr. Navelli was already talking about discharging him to a skilled rehab facility in the very near future. He didn’t really need to be here in the hospital for much longer, but he wasn’t doing quite well enough to go home yet. There was a medical rehab hospital in Schenectady where Dr. Navelli often sent his patients after a hospital stay, and he felt that this would be best for Uncas so that he could continue to
work on physical and occupational therapy for his left-sided weakness, and could also begin to work with a therapist for his shoulder once he was healed enough from the surgery.

Alice, on the other hand, would not be able to go anywhere until her lung had healed enough to get her chest tube out. Dr. Coleman hadn’t discussed an exact therapy plan yet, but they were supposed to have a meeting with him and Dr. Joshi this afternoon, because in a few more days she would likely be going back to the OR for Dr. Coleman to trade her ex-fix for a plate and screws, and she was hoping for good news from Dr. Joshi too. She wanted a little more freedom from tubes. She wanted a real shower. She wanted alone time with Uncas, something they hadn’t had at all thus far and weren’t likely to get. Nothing felt normal, and they tried to make the best of it, but she still hated it. She envied Cora, being able to leave and sleep at home with Nathaniel sometimes. She loved her sister for sticking by her so faithfully and for keeping her from going nuts here, but it bugged her that she and Uncas had to prod Cora and Nathaniel so hard to get them to take time away, when they would both sell their souls at this point for a night alone together outside the hospital. Especially since even after the hospital neither of them would be going home very soon. How much worse would this all get before it got better?

“All done!” Ashley proclaimed proudly, brushing the stray hairs from Uncas’ neck and removing the towel around his shoulders. “Check it out, Alice! I gave him a fancy undercut complete with a special design!”

“You didn’t shave ‘Kick Me’ into my hair, did you?” Uncas joked as Ashley helped him stand up and turn so Alice could see. “Nathaniel and Brian would be all over that one, and I need that about as much as I need these holes in my head.”

Alice grinned excitedly as she saw what Ashley had done. “Oh my gosh, that looks amazing, Ashley!”

“That’s pretty spectacular, baby,” Brian agreed. “I think you’ll like it, bro!”

“Okay, now I have to see this,” Uncas said. “At least I can see well enough to get a good look now. Help me over to the bathroom mirror, would you?” Ashley held onto his waist to steady him as he went slowly into the bathroom, holding up the hand mirror she had brought with her so he could see. Careful to steer clear of the healing sutures around the burr-holes, she had buzzed down the whole underside of his hair to match what had been taken off the right side, and had then shaved a spider web design into the undercut. The top she had left long, so that it covered most of the underside when it hung loose, or could be pulled back to show off the web design.

“Now you have Spider-Man hair!” Alice exclaimed gleefully from outside the door.

“Dude, that looks great, Ashley. Thank you so much for salvaging my hair ego,” Uncas smiled and gave her the best hug he could manage.

“What’s this about Spider-Man hair?” Nathaniel’s voice sounded from the main doorway to the room. “And here’s Mary Jane, too. Perfect, this is perfect.” He walked in wearing a mischievous grin and a navy-blue t-shirt that proclaimed ‘Good morning, world! Your little ray of sarcastic sunshine has arrived.’ After high-fiving Brian and dropping a brotherly kiss on top of Alice’s head, he peered into the bathroom. “Damn, look at you! That’s definitely some Spider-Man hair. Nice job, Ash! It goes great with the pants.” He gestured at the Marvel comic-print lounge pants Uncas was sporting with the black t-shirt Nathaniel had bought him that said, ‘It’s ok – I’m on 500mg of Fukitol’.

“Heh. I could have used some web-shooting Spider-Man powers when I fell off a cliff,” Uncas smiled wryly, slowly making his way back out with Ashley to sit down on the edge of the bed
near Alice’s wheelchair.

Cora walked in a second later, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks a little pink. “Thirty seconds,” she said to Nathaniel, leaning over to give him a kiss and a sappy grin.

“Thirty seconds what?” Alice asked, confused.

“You’ll find out in - ” Nathaniel looked at his watch and smiled again. “Eighteenish seconds.” It was more like ten, but it finally became clear what was going on when a group of very well-costumed superheroes filed in the door, filling the small room to capacity.

“I hear there’s a big fan of mine in this room!” Spider-Man proclaimed, raising his arms. “So naturally we had to come and say hello.”

“Holy crap!” Alice started laughing, bracing her injured side. “And Batman, too! Uncas loves you, Spider-Man, but I love Batman more, sorry!”

“Ah, music to my ears!” Batman guffawed, shaking Alice’s hand.

“Leave it to you to orchestrate something like this,” Uncas said to Nathaniel, shaking his head with amusement. “What did he do, bribe you?” he asked Spider-Man.

“Eh, we were already here to make rounds on the pediatric unit, so we figured we might as well come and see you guys, too,” he replied.

“We ran into them in the elevator on the way up,” Cora explained. “Nathaniel asked if they’d be willing to make a big-kid visit, too.”

“We don’t usually get asked to visit adults, so we took a detour before we hit peds,” Wonder Woman said with a wink.

“Well, between stuffed foxes and superheroes, I think we can safely say you have a pretty kickass brother,” Alice said with a giggle, leaning over to kiss Uncas on the cheek.

He grinned and patted Nathaniel’s hand that rested affectionately on his uninjured shoulder. “Yeah, I guess I do. You didn’t fare too bad in the sister department, either.” No matter how shitty things got, their families and friends definitely knew how to throw in a good pick-me-up, and that made them both feel lucky – and really happy – for the first time since all this had happened.

The good mood from the fun of Ashley’s haircut and the superhero visit carried them all into the afternoon, when it was time for the meeting with Alice’s doctors to discuss a plan for her future. Nathaniel brought Uncas to the family meeting room in a wheelchair after he was done with physical therapy so that he wouldn’t miss it; Alice wanted him there, and he wanted to be there for her and know firsthand what was being decided. They sat at the conference table along with Alice, Cora, and Ed to wait for the doctors. Ed was telling them that he and the Greatsnakes had run into Cora’s charge nurse Kate that morning on their way out for breakfast, as she was getting off night shift.

“Ah, she’s a real pistol, that one,” Ed chuckled. “No wonder you get along so well with her, lining out your old man like she did,” he said to Cora, who laughed. Dr. Joshi came in then, dressed in neat slacks, shirt and white coat as usual. Dr. Coleman followed a short while later, dressed in his OR scrubs and apologizing for the late-running case that had contributed to his tardiness to the meeting.

“So I will start today, Alice,” Dr. Joshi said, adjusting his glasses. “Overall, your lung is doing well as far as the puncture healing, and I think we can still plan to remove your chest tube in a
few days when you are scheduled to go back to the operating room with Dr. Coleman. What I am not happy with is your deep-breathing ability. Your nurses are still reporting barely satisfactory spirometry scores and diminished lower lobe sounds in your lungs, and I feel that this is due to the pain you tell me that you are still experiencing from the fractured ribs. My concern is that you will develop pneumonia if this doesn’t get better soon enough.”

“Yeah. It’s really hard to take deep breaths, and coughing just about kills me,” Alice agreed. “I want to do better too, but what can be done except just waiting for the ribs to heal?”

“That is something I’ve been discussing with Dr. Coleman. Your rib fractures were quite bad and displaced, and they may not heal very well or very quickly left on their own. That won’t do well for getting you mobile or using crutches later. He and I have agreed that you might be a good candidate for a newer type of fixation surgery. This could help diminish the pain almost immediately, and help the fractures heal faster as well.”

Alice sat straighter. “Sign me up. What exactly will you do?”

“We’ll make small incisions by the fractures and affix a small, low-profile plate across the breaks to stabilize the ribs,” Dr. Coleman said, holding up a sample of the plate he was talking about and passing it around for them to look at. “As you can see, it follows the natural curve of the rib, and the procedure itself is minimally invasive. Surveys have shown almost immediate pain relief and respiratory improvement, and much faster and more effective healing in patients who’ve had this done.”

“It’s a good idea, Al,” Cora said, meeting her eyes. “You’ll be able to cut down on pain meds like you wanted, too.”

“I want to do it,” Alice said, looking at Uncas and squeezing his hand. “I want to get better as fast as I can.”

Dr. Coleman nodded, pleased with her answer. “I don’t think you’ll be sorry.”

“What about her leg, then, Doc? And everything that comes along with that?” Ed interjected.

“So that’s where we really need to buckle down and have a serious talk,” Dr. Coleman said, passing a hand over his face. “The plan is to get that ex-fix off of you and replace it with internal plates and screws, or a tibia rod if I get in there and feel that’s the better option. The challenge after that is healing and rehab. You know, of course, that you have damage to muscle and surrounding tissue in addition to the fracture, and that’s going to keep you non-weight bearing for a while until the bones heal. You can work with a therapist in the meantime on passive and active exercises to help those soft tissues get where they need to be for when you’re ready to bear weight again. You have some choices about that, but either way I want you discharged to an inpatient rehab hospital for intensive daily therapy, because this type of trauma requires that for the best outcome – which is, of course, what we all want for you, Alice.”

“Okay, so what kind of options are we talking? Like as far as where I go? Can I go to the same place as Uncas?”

“Unfortunately, no. Sunnyview is geared toward neurological issues like brain and spinal cord injuries, strokes and the like. There are one or two facilities around Albany that deal with ortho rehab that I feel would be satisfactory, but if I had to suggest the best thing for you, the place that can get you where you need and want to be to get back to your normal activities like teaching yoga and aerial acrobatics… that place isn’t here. In that case, I’d send you over to Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital in Boston.”
“Boston? As in Massachusetts?” Alice raised her brows.

“Yes. I’ve sent a lot of patients over there. They have one of the top-rated trauma rehab programs in the nation, and they work in conjunction with Harvard University’s Physical Medicine and Rehab department as a teaching hospital. That means they’re at the forefront of all the latest technology and treatment – ultrasound therapy to heal bones and tissues more quickly, the best PT equipment and therapists, among many other things. You can get care quality there that you just can’t get around here, and in the long run you’ll be likely to get back to normal faster and better than you would if I sent you somewhere local.”

“Like how much of a difference are we talking?” Her voice shook a little. She wanted to do what would ultimately get her home faster, but this was freaking her out.

“Weeks, at least, if not months. It could mean functioning at full capacity earlier – say, the difference between being able to hike in nine to twelve months instead of eighteen or more. Less chance of long-term complications like chronic swelling. None of it is a hundred percent guarantee, but I like the Spaulding odds best. All my patients who get to go there have superior results in recovery. I’d like that for you, if we can get you there. We have case managers who can work it all out with your insurance company.”

Alice laid a hand over her eyes, her head reeling. There were too many things to think about. Not just going a hundred and fifty miles away for a while, but things she hadn’t even begun to think about. Insurance coverage. Copays for two weeks in the hospital here, and then what the hell would it cost to go somewhere like this Spaulding place, and for how long? Weeks? Months? She looked at Uncas helplessly, whose return gaze was equally overwhelmed.

“I… I don’t…” She looked around the table at Cora, and then Ed, shaking her head. *What the hell am I going to do?*

Cora reached over and touched her hand. “Al, you don’t have to decide right this minute. Take some time to think about it and talk about it, and then make a decision.”

“Cora’s right,” Ed said gently, looking to Dr. Coleman. “She’s got some time to think, doesn’t she?”

“Of course,” the surgeon replied. “I’ll arrange for the case manager to visit with you tomorrow, and she can discuss the ins and outs a little better with you. I know this is a big deal, and I’m sorry it can’t be easier for all of you.” He continued to discuss the details of Spaulding versus a local rehab hospital, answering the family’s questions as they came up so that Alice could make an informed decision. She felt mildly better by the time the meeting concluded, but she was full of a sinking sadness, too. Nathaniel took Uncas back to his room after they said a brief goodbye, while Cora went with her back to med-surg. Ed ran home for a little while to wash some laundry for Alice and peek in on her animals, and she was grateful for a little quiet time with Cora. She wanted to talk to Uncas more, but she didn’t know what to say yet, and that made her feel even worse. Settled back on her bed, she rested against the elevated head of the bed for a few minutes, holding the stuffed fox from Nathaniel on her lap and worrying one of its ears.

“This is a lot to think about,” she said wanly to Cora, who pulled up the chair to the bedside and sat down, leaning her arms on the mattress and resting her chin on top of them.

“Yeah. This is about when shit gets pretty real – when you start having to look at time frames and therapy and stuff. It hits you like a freight train. I understand.” *Of course she does,* Alice thought. This had been her once upon a time, too. And she hadn’t had a boyfriend and a gaggle of friends and parents to help her. Just a little sister who was barely an adult, and a father who still had a
responsibility to the Marine Corps.

“I don’t know what to do, Cora. I mean, I know what’s best for me, and that sounds like this Spaulding place, and I want what they can offer, but… it’s so scary. I don’t know how I’m going to do any of this financially, let alone the time it’s going to take for all this therapy…”

“Al, don’t worry about that part. We’ll figure out finances. I make good money, more than I need, and I can help you. I want what’s best for you. The rest… well, it’s just one day at a time. You know that, you did this with me.”

“It’s not only the whole prospect of mountains of bills and weeks or months in another city, it’s just… Uncas has to go somewhere else, and I don’t know when he’ll be out, or when I’ll be out, and I swear he feels farther away sometimes already. He barely said anything after that meeting just now, and I’m scared for us. I know that’s stupid to say. We survived this horrible accident, but I wonder if our relationship can survive what it will take to recover from it.”

Cora nodded slowly, her eyes growing sad. “I think I know what you mean. And maybe you’ll just have to see how things go before you make any hasty decisions about each other, you know?”

“I don’t mean it like that! I don’t want to break up with him,” Alice said miserably, starting to cry. “I don’t care if I have to go a thousand miles away, I don’t want that. It’s not me, I feel like it’s him, like there’s something he’s not saying. I know he’s so overwhelmed too, and he has been with all this brain injury stuff and worrying about when he can go back to work and, God, it’s just so much, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Cora sighed. “Remember, I lost a career to crap like this.”

Alice nodded. “Yeah. I was there with you for a lot of that, but even so, I don’t really think I understood then the way I do now that I’m wearing the shoes. I guess I just hate how upside-down everything is right now, and I know it’s not going to get better real soon. Everything was so good, you know? We were really, really happy, and I know we’ve really only been together five months, but I have no doubt he’s the one I want to be with forever, and I know he feels the same way… at least he did. We were headed for that, and now I don’t know what we’re headed for anymore.”

Cora’s eyes filled with tears, and she sat down on the edge of the bed to put her arms around Alice. “Oh, Al. It’s going to be all right. He loves you the same, he really does. It’s just that you’re right, you both have a lot to think about and work through. But we’re all here for you both, whatever you need. If you want to stay here, we’ll do that. If you want to go to Boston, you know I’ll go with you. And you know he’ll wait for you, and he’ll still love you. This is awful, all of it, but it will never change who either of you are fundamentally. It won’t change what you love about each other. Do you love Uncas any less because of any of this?”

“No,” Alice sobbed. “I love him more. I think that’s why I’m so scared. But I want to do what’s best, too, and what’s best is in Boston. I’d have to risk going away so that I can have a better shot at a faster normal… so I can come home and try to have this relationship at all. I want him, but I want myself, too. I want my life and the things I love to do, and I don’t want to sell myself short any more than I want to damage things with Uncas.”

“Yeah. This part is all different for me. When I had to recover I didn’t have these choices to make. I didn’t have a boyfriend who loved me, or any of that. It was just whatever the docs and the Navy decided was next for me, and that’s what I did. You have a choice, and I think you and Uncas need to talk about this, too. Let him tell you how he really feels before you worry about it too much, and work this out between the two of you.”
“Everything is so fucked up right now, Cora. I just want some kind of normal back, even for five minutes.”

Cora held onto Alice, her heart breaking. She wished she didn’t know about the stupid engagement ring. Telling Alice now wouldn’t help, anyway, because that was then and this was now, and she already knew Uncas and Nathaniel had discussed it. It wasn’t her place to tell Alice how he was feeling, it was Uncas’. She sighed and swallowed the lump in her throat. This was going to be a long, bumpy road for all of them. They’d all made it through in the past, but it seemed like there was so much more at stake now. Could they all make it one more time?

The following evening, Alice and Uncas requested that their families take respite and go home, leaving no one to stay overnight at the hospital with either of them. They wanted and needed the solitude, and even more than that they needed time alone together without being hovered over, especially with Alice’s second surgery coming up the day after tomorrow, and Uncas’ discharge looming. Dr. Navelli and Dr. Robinson had agreed he would be discharged to Sunnyview Rehabilitation Hospital the day after her fixation surgery, and as long as she did well enough, Alice would be discharged in the week following, possibly even just a few days later.

“I wrote my name legibly today in therapy,” he told her, his left hand fumbling a little as he stroked her hair. After they had lovingly kicked out their families, Uncas’ nurse Tom had brought him down to spend some uninterrupted time in Alice’s room for the evening, and would be back to get him before change of shift at seven. He was currently sitting stretched out on her bed beside her, and they cuddled as best they could on the small mattress, around her chest tube and his shoulder sling. Even with all that it felt good just to be there together, all by themselves for once.

“Hey, that’s a real accomplishment, considering you’re having to do it left-handed for now until that sling is off.” Alice laughed softly. “How is your right hand doing?”

“Okay. This little squeezy ball attached to the sling is actually helping me get some strength back, and the pins and needles from the nerve injury are starting to get a little better. Mostly I hate being immobilized. I just want to stretch my damn arm sometimes, even though it’ll hurt like hell when I finally can.”

“Yeah, Cora could tell you all about that. It drove her nuts, too, and her burns made it a lot worse.”

They were both quiet for a bit. Talk was trivial right now, but their thoughts were not. Alice had met with the caseworker this morning to talk about her going to Boston or staying here, and she hadn’t told Uncas what she’d decided to do yet – or if she had decided. He didn’t know what to say but he had to say something.

“What are you going to do about your rehab deal?” He asked quietly. Her hand stilled on his chest.

“I don’t know. I need to know, but I don’t yet. It’s not a cut and dry choice. I want what’s best, but not just for me. For us. I feel like we were just getting started, and then this happened, and I don’t want to leave you now. I’m afraid of ruining everything if I decide to go. So much is screwed up already.”

Uncas sighed gently and looked down at her. She looked so sad and so scared, and he couldn’t stand it. They hadn’t had too much time to really talk about things, and he felt like he’d been withdrawn and her feeling this way was partially his fault. He couldn’t help it, but neither did he like it much. Nobody could wave a wand and make this un-happen, and nobody knew with any certainty
what the future would bring. But he’d be gone in a couple of days, and he didn’t want to leave her like this. He couldn’t, because looking at her now, in this moment, there was no hospital room, and the sounds in the hall outside the closed door ceased to exist. For now it was just them, her face filling his field of vision. Just her face. No chest tubes or broken legs or messed up shoulders or holes in the head. She wasn’t a patient. She was nothing right now except what she always had been to him – his golden girl, everything he needed to remember, everything that he still loved about the world with her in it. And not a damn thing that happened could ever touch that, at least.

“Okay,” he murmured. “All right. So what if the tables were turned? What if it was me who had to make this choice? What would you say, what would you want for me?”

She answered without hesitation. “I’d want you to go. I’d want you to go to the best possible place, and get better as soon as possible so you could come back to me and we could just get on with life.”

“Then I think you know what you ought to do, don’t you? Because you know that’s what I want for you too, Alice.” He cupped her cheek in the palm of his better hand, his thumb trembling a little as he wiped away the tear that fell against it.

“Are we okay? We’re going to be okay, right?” She let out a little sob and closed her eyes, leaning into him with her face pressed to his neck.

“Yes. We’re gonna be okay. No matter how messed up this gets, I still love you, Alice, and I still want you, if you want me. I’m just feeling like shit because there’s so much I can’t do for you right now. I wasn’t there when that asshole doctor laid into you, and it just makes me realize how much I’m missing. How much I’m not here for you now, how much I’m not going to be there for you in the next few months. I want to be with you, I really do, but I’m not much good for anything right now.”

“Stop it. You’re everything good for me, and I love you, too. You being hurt doesn’t change that. Just because we can’t always be there with each other, doesn’t mean we can’t be there for each other. Right?”

He nodded and smiled a little. “All right. So you go to Spaulding. We’re stuck in separate places for a while anyway, whether it’s here or there doesn’t matter. Boston is the best place for you, and I want you to have the best, so we’ll do this, and it’ll be all right. Maybe it’ll be good for us. Kind of like long-distance dating, right? It’ll work out.”

Alice felt hope spring to life a little. “Okay. It’s not perfect, but it’s what we’ve got. We’ll talk every day, we’ll have pictures and FaceTime, and maybe I can read you bedtime stories at night,” she offered with a tiny giggle.

“I would let you. The sound of your voice is enough to get me through anything. That’s the first thing I ever loved about you, remember?”

He drew her to him and kissed her then, soft and gentle. Taking his time, since they had a little time to take now. Before long they wouldn’t. There was enough to be unsure of that he didn’t always know what to say to her with words, but like this… like this, he could tell her how much he loved her and she would know without a doubt. Like this, she could tell him back, and he would know, too, and they could each hold onto that memory like a lifeline in the time ahead.

“I’ll go,” she whispered softly. “As long as you promise me you’ll be here when I come home to you.”
“I’ll be here,” he promised. “I waited for you before we ever met, and I’ll wait for you again, as long as it takes.”

Nathaniel lay next to Cora in her bed, the room beginning to grey with the light of the coming dawn. They were both awake, and had been for a little while now, unable to sleep any more. This would be the last morning she would wake with him for a while, and both felt the weight of it hanging over them. He drew her closer and she settled into him with a sigh, her breath warm on his neck and her bare skin soft against his with her lying along the length of him.

“You’ll let me know where to meet you when she’s ready to go?” he said softly.

“Yeah. I’m glad they were willing to let you take him for a while. It will make it easier for both of them, I think. If it’s possible for any of this to be called easy.”

“Mmm,” he nodded in agreement, kissing her forehead. “I put all your bags by the door last night so you wouldn’t forget anything.”

“Thank you.” She pressed her face against his shoulder, and he could feel her tears on his skin as they started to fall. He buried his face in her hair, breathing her, the scent of her making him ache with the knowledge that she’d be gone soon and he didn’t know quite when she’d be back yet – and that made him want to cry, too.

Alice’s fixation procedure had gone well, and the rib plates had done her a world of good already. Her chest tube was gone, and as soon as her ribs were healed a little more and she could tolerate it, she’d be able to start working on crutches. Uncas was settled in at Sunnyview, a name that had invoked at least a hundred sarcastic jokes between him and Nathaniel, but it was really a nice place, and the staff were specially trained to help patients like Uncas recover. Now the day had come for Alice to be discharged from Albany Medical Center. A special transport ambulance had been arranged by the hospital caseworker to take her to Spaulding in Boston, and Sunnyview had agreed to let Nathaniel take Uncas for a couple of hours this morning so he could come and see Alice off. Cora would go with her, having arranged to stay in the limited lodging the hospital had available for the family members of out-of-area patients. She had made arrangements through Kate and the ER director to utilize the significant amount of paid leave she had accumulated at the hospital since she had hardly ever taken any time off work. Her extended leave from both AMC and AirMedic would be covered under the Family Medical Leave Act for up to six months, so she was all set. Nathaniel and his parents would go back and forth to Schenectady while Uncas was at Sunnyview, and Nathaniel would stay here at Cora’s most of the time to take care of things, alternating with Ed or Ashley and Brian when he needed to be with Uncas. Uncas wanted him to go back to work at least one day a week, and he could, but he hadn’t done it yet. Maybe next week. The cabin was weird enough without Uncas there; Nathaniel wasn’t quite ready to face work without him yet, even though Brian had said he’d switch shifts indefinitely with Ian to make it easier on him.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he whispered, his hand caressing Cora’s back as he held her and let her cry. “You’ll be back. Everything will be fine. We’re losing time, but we aren’t losing each other.” He said this as much for himself as for her, so that he might believe it. And at least this time he could say it with confidence. Like Uncas had said, she wasn’t like Judith. They could handle this together, and she would come back to him when it was all over.

“I know this is the best way, but it doesn’t make me want to leave you. I’ve never had to do this before. There was no one when I deployed, no one after… I feel like I wasted so much time before, when I could have let myself love you sooner. I just never thought things would be like this, I didn’t…”
“Ssshhh. Cora, we’ll be fine. Alice and Uncas will be fine, too. You’re not going away forever, and it’s not like deployment. You can come home now and then, or I can try to drive out there for a couple of days when I can get away. We’ll work it out. I love you, you know that I do.”

She nodded and touched his shadowed jaw, his beautiful, sad eyes moss-colored in the half-light of the rising sun. There wasn’t much they could be certain of now or even when things were normal, but the only thing she did know was that she loved Nathaniel with all her heart and soul. Was it enough to sustain them when all else fell away? She could see the same unspoken questions there in his gaze, but there was no answer for that except to move forward and find out. Her hands moved from his face, her fingers pushing into his hair to hold him there.

“I love you,” she whispered adamantly, her dark eyes glittering in the dim light. “Wait for me to come home.”

He wrapped her in his arms and kissed her, hands in each other’s hair, skin against skin, the ardent caress of his lips chasing at the heels of her worry and sadness until she was too breathless to think of anything but him, and this last bit of precious time they would have together before they had to say goodbye.

Author’s Note:

This update took longer than planned, but there was a lot going on. My grandmother passed away unexpectedly on December 5, so there was traveling and funerals and all that to deal with, and of course that’s never easy. The happier news is that I am done with school, and now have a Bachelor of Science in Nursing and another shiny set of letters to stick at the end of my name. That also means I’m going back to work soon, so I need to finish this story!

This chapter feels like an emotional roller coaster. There was so much that needed to happen, and so many feelings involved for all the characters. It was nice to see Magua for a bit and to have him loved by all for once. I’d have liked to extend his visit a little more, but it didn’t feel necessary. The interaction between him and Ed and Sidney did make me chuckle, because it’s so opposite of the film. Magua’s all “Sure I’ll stay with you, Ed… I promise not to cut your heart out while you’re sleeping!” At any rate, we will likely see him again here and there, and it was more important to me to focus on Uncas and Alice, especially Alice and what’s coming for both of them as far as recovery. And for some reason I felt compelled to have that section with the awful resident, because so far all the staff at AMC have been so nice, and we all know there has to be that one jerk. I’ve worked with a similar type, and there’s a little of him inspiring Chip Peterson, so it was nice to let Cora tear him up, have Nathaniel finish him off, and Alice send him out the door with the last word. Patient self-advocacy at its finest, XD! It also presented some of the least pleasant aspects of Alice’s leg injury. Compound fractures wreck soft tissues and take a long time to heal, and while Chip isn’t very nice in the way he tells her, he also isn’t wrong, so that gets the worry ball rolling. I mostly wanted Cora to tell him off, but even though Alice was shocked into muteness briefly I didn’t want her completely helpless either, because she isn’t. Nathaniel stepping in was just the cherry on top, because Nathaniel. No way in hell was he going to stand there and not make a smart-mouthed comment, am I right? Initially I almost had Uncas present for that, but I really wanted his absence at physical therapy during that incident to play into his worries about how much he isn’t and won’t be able to be there for Alice in the coming weeks/months due to his own injuries and needs.

I also totally love Ashley for giving Uncas Spider-Man hair to make him feel better about the shaving. I had planned for her to fix his hair and do a neat undercut, and it was MohawkWoman
who suggested the spider web design, which is perfect for him as a Spider-Man fan! The visit from the pediatric superheroes was probably my favorite part of this chapter outside of Chip getting his ass handed to him by Cora. We have a group of people locally who dress up and visit hospitalized kids, and I just love it. That was a fun thing to include, and I think Uncas really needed that. Nathaniel really is a pretty kickass big brother. That was unfortunately followed by the saddest part of the chapter, which is facing the fact that Alice and Uncas are going to have to spend some time apart – as are Nathaniel and Cora – but it is necessary for their recovery and the best interest of both of them healing and regaining physical function so they can have a normal life again one day. Plus, where would the story drama be without stuff like this?! Cora and Alice were due for a good heart-to-heart, too, so they got that here, and I definitely wanted that alone time for Uncas and Alice. They’ve been watched over and poked and prodded for almost two weeks, and it was high time they kicked everyone out and had a little hospital date. All this stuff can feel like such a whirlwind, and it all happens so fast when you’re in the middle of it all like these families are. There is a lot coming up for both couples before this story comes to an end. Fun facts: Both the rehab hospitals that Alice and Uncas are going to are real places, as is Albany Medical Center. Obviously I make up the rest of the details, and those don’t speak for the facilities. The rib fixation that Alice ends up getting is a thing. There are a few different companies that deal in these, but the one I had in mind is DePuy’s MatrixRIB system, which is what Dr. Coleman showed them in the meeting. When there is a long treatment road ahead for a patient, medical teams will often have those types of family meetings, so I wanted that to be realistic, as well as Alice’s worries about the financial burden, because I think we can all understand that aspect of it to some degree.

The theme song for this chapter is “Photograph” by Ed Sheeran. It’s kind of perfect for the situation, and it’s a really great song. The only other song I heard in this chapter was when Uncas and Alice are talking, and then Cora and Nathaniel at the end, and that was the acoustic version of A-Ha’s “Take on Me”. Don’t think of the original 1985 version, it sounds nothing like it. If you haven’t heard the acoustic recording, stop what you are doing right now and go listen to it, because you won’t be one bit sorry that you did. It is so achingly beautiful, and it was so perfect for that part of the chapter that I may or may not have cried a little (don’t judge me, you know by now how much I love music in context).

That’s all I have to say for now. Stay tuned for Chapter 15, I’ll try to get that done as soon as I can! Thank you all so much for reading, PMing, following, and especially for reviewing so that I know how I’m doing. You all really help make writing even more fun for me, and I really love to hear from you.
The Contents of Our Heads

Chapter Summary

Uncas and Alice are trying to make the best of their separation, but there are things left unsaid. Cora finally heads home for a visit, but something goes terribly wrong, setting things in motion for some major soul-searching and difficult truths for all four main characters.

Chapter Notes

Author note included in text due to length.

Chapter 15 – The Contents of Our Heads

How many times do I have to try to tell you
That I'm sorry for the things I've done
But when I start to try to tell you
That's when you have to tell me
Hey, this kind of trouble's only just begun
I tell myself too many times
Why don't you ever learn to keep your big mouth shut
That's why it hurts so bad to hear the words
That keep on falling from your mouth
Falling from your mouth
Falling from your mouth
Tell me

Why
Why

I may be mad
I may be blind
I may be viciously unkind
But I can still read what you're thinking
And I've heard it said too many times
That you'd be better off
Besides

Why can't you see this boat is sinking
Let's go down to the water's edge
And we can cast away those doubts
Some things are better left unsaid
But they still turn me inside out
Turning inside out turning inside out
Tell me
Why
Tell me
Why

This is the book I never read
These are the words I never said
This is the path I'll never tread
These are the dreams I'll dream instead
This is the joy that's seldom spread
These are the tears
The tears we shed
This is the fear
This is the dread
These are the contents of my head
And these are the years that we have spent
And this is what they represent
And this is how I feel
Do you know how I feel?
'Cause I don't think you know how I feel
I don't think you know what I feel
I don't think you know what I feel
You don't know what I feel

-Calvin E. Taylor (for Annie Lennox)-

“She’s driving me crazy. I love her, but I swear I’m going to lose it if she doesn’t get over
this overzealous motivational weirdness during physical therapy. I think someone’s been spiking her
coffee with amphetamines.” Alice glanced surreptitiously over one shoulder, making sure Cora had
really left back to family lodging for the evening and couldn’t hear her.

Uncas raised a brow on the FaceTime screen. “What’s she doing, screaming profanities and
calling cadence like your dad did when you guys used to run?”

“Hell, I wish it was that normal. No, it’s way worse. She’s like my personal cheerleading
squad, complete with music. I swear to God, if I hear ‘Unstoppable’ by Sia one more time, I’m not
going to be responsible for what I do to her.” Uncas burst out laughing, his face disappearing for a
moment when he almost dropped his phone trying to catch his breath. “It’s not funny!” Alice
insisted, starting to laugh, too. “Okay, it’s a little bit funny. But not every single day!”

“No, no, you don’t understand,” Uncas gasped. “It’s funny because you’re so not alone. I
think they’re in cahoots. Today Nathaniel had ‘Won’t Back Down’ by Tom Petty on a continuous
loop, and when I complained he threatened me with ‘Eye of the Tiger.’ I’m going to have to tell him
about this, they’re perfect for each other.”

“Oh, God, this is so bad,” Alice groaned, laughing to the point that she snorted a little,
making Uncas start all over again.

If nothing else, it was good to really laugh for once, and for Alice it was far less painful lately
than it had been in the beginning. Her ribs were healing very well thanks to the plates Dr. Coleman
had given her, and after a little more than three weeks at Spaulding, she was now able to get around on crutches for short periods. She was undergoing LIPUS, or low-intensity pulsed ultrasound therapy, on her leg to help heal the fractures in her tibia and fibula faster. LIPUS wasn’t a common thing, and not used clinically except in certain cases, which had been part of the reason Dr. Coleman had wanted her to come here; no facility in Albany did it, and it really seemed to be helping. She also worked with a physical therapist daily on gentle muscle exercises for her leg and ankle, and a low-key regimen to keep her upper body from going too soft, without upsetting her healing ribs. Uncas’ blurry vision had completely resolved, and he was walking a lot steadier too, having graduated from needing to use a gait belt, to being able to walk on his own with a therapist just following behind him to monitor. Dr. Robinson had cleared him for very light shoulder exercises, mostly just passive dangling and similar small movements that would start getting the joint mobile and gently work the soft tissues without damaging the surgical repairs. The harder range of motion and strength stuff would come later. He also worked with an occupational therapist every day to get his fine motor function up to par in his left hand, and now that his shoulder was in a regular sling that he could remove for therapy, they were working on his right hand as well.

“We need to do something about them,” Uncas said. “Nathaniel went back to work just for the Monday to Tuesday shift last week, but otherwise he’s here most days when it’s not Mom or Dad. But I can’t fault him too much, I was all over him the same way when he was recovering.”

“Hmmm. I was with Cora, too. Either way, you’re right. It’s been three weeks of this. I told her today that she needs to get out of here and go home for a bit. She argues with me about it every time I say something, but at this point it’s not like she needs to be here all the time. She knows the staff now, and she knows I’ll be in good hands, so I don’t know what’s stopping her.”

“She just loves you, and she’s worried you’ll be lonely. Don’t be too hard on her.”

“I know. I love her too, and I’m not saying I wouldn’t miss her, but she really needs a break. It would do them both a world of good if she went and distracted Nathaniel for a few days.”

“It’d be way better if you could come home and distract me,” he murmured with a wicked grin.

“Threaten me with a good time. But alas, I’m too crippled to make much of an escape, and you can’t drive. But dammit, I really do miss you.” She sighed heavily.

“I miss you, too, welsit awèn.” His face sobered on the screen. “Three weeks down, who knows how many more to go.”

“One day at a time, right?”

“Yeah. And hey, maybe by Halloween they’ll start letting me try to move my shoulder more. As it stands right now I’ll be dressing up like a T. Rex, since I’m doing a pretty good impression of one lately.” He demonstrated his limited range of motion in a humorous impression of the short-armed dinosaur, making Alice laugh again.

“I love you, you goof. All right, are you ready for story time?” She reached over and picked up the copy of Jane Eyre she’d gotten from the hospital library while he settled back to listen. Every night she read to him, and sometimes she asked him to sing to her too, wanting the beautiful resonance of his voice even if he couldn’t play the guitar right now. He always obliged.

“’Are you anything akin to me, do you think, Jane?’

I could risk no sort of answer by this time; my heart was full.
‘Because,’ he said, ‘I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you – especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous Channel, and two hundred miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapt; and then I’ve a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly…”

She read on, the soft, lulling cadence of her voice settling him until he relaxed and got sleepy, and she set the book down with a soft sigh, disconnecting the call after they had said goodnight. She lay awake for some time after that, the ache of longing stabbing at her chest as it always did, and making her feel every one of Mr. Rochester’s words in the passage she had read to Uncas.

Sometimes she felt lost at sea, just floating through the days until she could be home again. Even though Cora was making her crazy with all the motivation, she knew it was out of love and was still glad not to be all alone here every day. If she was, she thought she might really go crazy in the calmer moments between ultrasound treatments and physical therapy and visits from the doctor assigned to her here. Every day, the same thing, every day, crawling and fumbling toward the hope of going home, but even then, she’d still have to learn to live with a new normal. That much she knew from seeing Cora through it. She wouldn’t have a physical problem going back to work at Central Dispatch, and regular yoga would be okay too, but what she really longed for was the ground-and-center of her aerialism, and she wouldn’t have that for a long time yet. Sometimes at night she dreamed of it, the feel of the silks wrapped around her, tumbling and climbing in the artful tangle of fabric; or the lyra, suspended high in the void of her dream, the hard, familiar comfort of the hoop against her limbs. She kept it to herself, but it was always there. Like Uncas was always there, too. Missing him, and knowing that in the same breath in which he joked, she could feel even at this distance that he was floating just like she was, and they did not speak of it out loud because if they did, it might shatter the careful, fragile mental scaffolding that just allowed them to get through each day right now.

While she lay awake in her room, sleep eluded Uncas equally in his own bed many miles away, despite his exhaustion from the day’s therapy. He’d known this would be hard. In some ways knowing they were now actively working toward the future made it a little easier, as did the busy days, getting better in tiny increments day by day. He was glad, at least, that he was close enough to home that he could still occupy time with his parents, and visits from friends like Brian and Ashley, and Alexandra and Jack and the kids. That part made him feel almost guilty, because Alice didn’t even have that option unless visitors wanted to make a three-hour drive. Ed did now and then, of course, but only briefly since he was also taking care of Alice’s apartment and pets, and helping Nathaniel at Cora’s. The Heywards had come out for a short visit too, and that had been nice for her. But it didn’t make the rest any easier – the nights alone wishing he could just lie with her and hold her, the longing to touch her, smell her familiar scent, in this hospital where there was nothing of her around except her voice on the phone every night. He loved their talks at night and looked forward to them, but aside from that and therapy, his days were filled with the quiet, insidious despair of the injured: being unable to work, unable to be at home, unable to be with or help Alice, or like he was doing anything that did a damn bit of good anywhere. The kiss of death for someone who had made a career out of helping in the worst of times, and it ate away at him slowly, even as he tried his damnest to find the silver lining and keep Alice laughing through it. He sighed restlessly, eventually drifting off in the heavy silence.

Miles away in West Sand Lake, Nathaniel wasn’t faring much better. He sat on the porch swing on Cora’s back deck, rocking gently back and forth in the dark. The nights were getting cold now that it was a week into October, and the leaves on the trees were a firestorm of color in the daylight. He had looked forward to days spent with Cora this time of year, and now he was just missing her while she watched the leaves change in Boston, her house as empty and sad without her
as the cabin was without Uncas. The only thing that made him spend more time at the farm than at home was that here, at least, he had the company of the animals who loved and missed her as much as he did. He looked down when Monty plopped his wild, wiry head onto his lap and let out a long, snuffly canine sigh, his amber eyes gazing up dejectedly.

“I know, boy. I miss her, too.” He scratched the wolfhound’s ears, then leaned back to look up at the clear sky, the waxing autumn moon rising above the treetops amid the fields of stars. By this time of night, she’d be back in her room in the lodging house getting ready for bed, and they usually talked before going to sleep. He pulled his phone out and dialed, not wanting to wait any longer to hear her voice.

“Hey, stranger.” Cora picked up with a smile, despite how tired she was. She couldn’t sleep without talking to Nathaniel, anyway. “Are you in bed yet?”

“No, I’m out on the deck with Monty. The stars are beautiful tonight, and I was just wishing you were here to look at them with me.” There was a powerful longing in his voice that tugged at her heart, and she was overwhelmed with the ache of wanting to be with him. The days here were busy, and she exhausted herself trying to keep up an energetic front, for herself as much as for Alice. But when she let herself, she missed everything about home, and she craved Nathaniel’s presence in the silence of the long, lonely nights when there was too much time to think.

“I wish I was, too. It’s cloudy here tonight, and you can’t see the stars too well from here in any case, since we’re in the city.” She paused for a beat and closed her eyes. “I miss you so much.”

“I miss you, too,” he murmured. “So do Monty and Scout. Even the horses are upset that you’ve been gone so long.”

Cora laughed softly. “Alice keeps telling me to get out of here for a little bit. I feel bad, though, she’ll be by herself if I leave, but at this point I think she’s ready to kill me, anyway. It’s been a long three weeks for all of us.”

“It has. But she’s right, you need a break. I probably do, too.” He waited a moment before he spoke again. “Come home, Cora. Just for a few days.”

“I don’t know… there’s so much going on right now. I want to, but…”

“Then just do it. It’ll be fine. I don’t have to work again until Monday night, and I just want you here for a little while.”

She heard Monty let out a plaintive yelp in the background, as if to make his own plea. How could she even try to argue when she wanted so much to be there, too? “All right,” she whispered. “I’ll let Alice know in the morning. If I leave sometime after lunch, I’ll be there by dinnertime.”

“I’ll be here waiting for you.”

Nathaniel tossed the dish towel he was holding aside when he heard the crunch of tires in the carport out front, his heart fluttering with the knowledge that Cora was finally here, having left Boston mid-afternoon. Monty scrambled in from the backyard through the dog door with a joyful bark, running pell-mell through the kitchen. Nathaniel followed, completely understanding how the dog felt. He threw open the front door with a grin and stepped out as Monty barreled past him toward his mistress, who barely made it out of the driver’s seat before the dog attempted to tackle her in a blur of hairy limbs, barking and licking her face gleefully. She laughed, the first real laugh
Nathaniel had heard out of her in over a month, and the sound made his heart swell. Said heart subsequently stopped for a few seconds when Monty finally released her and she saw him coming toward her, their eyes meeting. She ran at him then and leapt into his arms, wrapping her legs around him as he scrambled to hold onto her. Her lips traveled all over his face before he cupped the back of her head in one hand and kissed her senseless right there in the driveway, with Monty jumping like a maniac beside them.

“Hey, beautiful. God, it’s good to see you,” he said gruffly, letting her slide back to the ground with another long kiss.

“Mmm. You’re definitely a sight for sore eyes, too,” she replied, holding him tighter and kissing him back.

“Come on, let’s get you inside before Monty loses his mind,” Nathaniel chuckled, opening the Tribeca’s back hatch to retrieve her backpack and sea bag. They went into the house together, and he set her things down in the foyer while she went to Scout’s cage to take him out and cuddle him, accepting his squeaky ferret kisses while petting his soft fur. Nathaniel stood casually by the kitchen door taking in every blessed detail of her, dressed for the colder weather and car travel in boots, slouchy knee socks over gray leggings, and a long, comfy, blue cable-knit sweater with her hair spilling down her back. Totally innocent, but to him incredibly beautiful, alluring, and so very right.

“Something smells good,” Cora said happily, turning back to Nathaniel after she'd settled Scout back in his hammock. Her heart skipped a few beats at the welcome sight of him, his lips curved in a faint, crooked smile and his hair pulled halfway back as usual, falling softly against his shoulders. He leaned against the doorway in his casual, sexy way, dressed in jeans and a lightweight sweater with the sleeves pushed partway up his sinewy forearms, the soft wool a shade of green that echoed the color of his eyes. Eyes that were currently fixed on her with unmistakable yearning, which stole her breath and made her heart start beating again at a full-out gallop. Three weeks had felt like three years under the circumstances.

“I made a chicken pot pie while I was waiting for you,” he replied with a shrug of one shoulder. “It’s your favorite, and I figured you’d be hungry when you got here.”

She nodded, taking several steps toward him with a loving smile. He reached out for her and pulled her close, drawing a sharp breath as her arms encircled his waist, her hands sliding under the hem of his sweater and the t-shirt he wore beneath it.

“You’re wonderful. But we can eat later.”

“Thank God,” he rumbled, lifting her against him, his mouth claiming hers with a driving hunger that she answered with earnest. Just for now, it was only the two of them in a stolen piece of time, and while they lost themselves in loving each other, they could put aside the why and how of everything else that had led to this.

Late into the evening, the two of them sat on the porch swing together, sharing a blanket. It was another clear, cold, starry night, and both had wanted to enjoy it together while they could. Monty lay next to the swing, as close as he could get to them, his tail thumping on the wooden deck. Cora sighed and snuggled closer against Nathaniel, his warmth and comforting scent enveloping her.

“We can go to bed if you want,” he murmured. “You’ve had a long day, and it's late. I know how tired you must be.”

“I don’t want to go to bed yet,” she replied softly, nuzzling his neck. “I just want to sit here
with you. I feel good here.” Truthfully, she was tired, exhausted both mentally and physically. Aside from grabbing a quick shower or the nights she spent alone in the lodging house, she had barely taken a moment to herself in over three weeks, and now that she was here with Nathaniel and the world had stopped spinning so fast, she felt her fatigue to the bone. The next few days would fly by and she’d be back in the fray soon enough; all she wanted to do was just stay here in Nathaniel’s arms beneath the stars for as long as she could, listening to the sound of his heart beating steadily beneath her ear. Here she felt more relaxed than she had in a long time, and she could almost forget the press of anxiety she felt every other day – almost. They sat quietly and talked in hushed voices here and there. When they finally did give in and go to bed, both fell into a hard, dreamless sleep born of unmitigated weariness of both body and soul, relieved at least for a time while they could be together.

The following days did indeed pass quickly. Uncas had told Nathaniel not to worry about coming out to see him right away and that their parents could handle anything he needed. He’d made it very clear that he wanted Nathaniel and Cora to just enjoy their time together, as had Alice before Cora left Boston, so on Friday they did just that and not much else, with the exception of coming up for air to have dinner at Sidney and Yvette’s house. On Saturday morning, they took the horses out for a ride and did some fall work in Cora’s garden. Nathaniel had been leaving the Triumph parked at the farm next to Cora’s Honda Shadow, since he spent most of his home-time there, so after they were done in the garden they took the bikes over to Alice’s for a little while so Cora could call her on FaceTime and let her see Sweet Potato, Mrs. Nesbit, and the fish, and grab a few things she had asked for. Afterward they elected to stay in at Cora’s and cook dinner together, and the rest of the evening was spent on the couch with Monty and Scout, watching movies and cuddling. On Sunday Ed met them for breakfast at Jack’s Diner, and afterward Nathaniel took Cora out to Sunnyview to visit Uncas. He had a few things to send back with her for Alice, and Cora wanted to see him for her own peace of mind as well as Alice’s. She was happy to see how well his physical recovery was going, and hopeful that he wouldn’t have to spend too much longer as an inpatient before he could be released home to just attend outpatient therapy. With his walking and left-sided weakness making so much improvement, his right shoulder was rapidly becoming the bigger of his problems to focus on, and he would still need quite a bit of therapy in the weeks ahead. He and Cora had a great deal to talk about in that arena, since her own recovery for her shoulder injury had been very similar.

“I think it’s good for him to talk to you,” Nathaniel told her on their way back to her house later that afternoon. “You understand his injury, and he seemed to perk up a lot. I worry about him sometimes. Being out of commission is depressing, and I know he tries to hide it, but he’s got a lot going on that he isn’t talking about.”

“He hasn’t said anything to Alice that I know of, but then I think the same thing about her sometimes, and she doesn’t tell anyone either,” Cora replied. “I don’t know what’s going on in her head, and some days it just feels like we’re all going through the motions.”

“Maybe she just needs some time to figure stuff out.”

“Maybe. I try to keep her going. I remember how awful and lonely it was for me being far away and isolated, I’d do anything to keep her from feeling like that. I feel so bad about taking off and leaving her there right now, when it’s obvious there’s more going on with her than she’s saying.”

Nathaniel sighed. “I know you do. But you also know that ‘lonely’ and ‘alone’ aren’t always the same thing. She’s still got a good support system, even if you’re not always with her, and you can’t fix everything for her, no matter how badly you want to. Maybe she needs some breathing room. I have no doubt that’s why Uncas told me to get out of his face for a few days.”
“I guess…”

Nathaniel shook his head. “Don’t do that. Your being here is not a bad thing, Cora, for her or for you. You shouldn’t make yourself feel guilty for wanting some respite. Alice is an adult perfectly capable of making her own decisions.”

“I never said she wasn’t,” Cora said, sounding a little affronted. “But I think I’m justified in worrying when she’s all by herself out there.”

“I get that, Cora, and I’m not saying you’re wrong to feel like that. But I don’t think she’d have encouraged you to come home this weekend if she really needed you there as much as you worry that she does. She’ll be all right, and the world won’t fall apart if you’re not there for a few days.”

Cora crossed her arms at that, her mouth pressed in a straight line. Nathaniel glanced at her warily. He hadn’t meant to upset her. She was tired and on edge just like he was, and maybe he ought to just quit while he was ahead. He was quiet for the short remainder of the trip, and she spent it equally silent. When he pulled into her carport, she got out of the Blazer before he’d shut off the engine, stalking into the house. He sighed, pulling the keys out of the ignition, and followed her inside to the living room. He had wanted to drop the whole thing before it went somewhere unpleasant, but she was obviously not done with it, so he wanted to try to talk it out since he’d made her mad in the first place.

“Cora,” he started, “I didn’t mean - ”

She put up a hand, cutting him off. “You said you get how I feel, but I don’t think you do get it. You and Uncas are here, close enough to home to have family and friends who can rotate so you get a break. Close enough to go home and sleep, enough to go back to work and back to some kind of normal.”

“It’s not normal, Cora. It’s just what I have to do to keep myself sane. Work sucks without you and Uncas. I still have to juggle time between me being here and Mom trying to keep up with her practice, and Dad trying to fill in the gaps. And I don’t go home to sleep. I haven’t been home for more than a few minutes at a time since you left. When I’m not with my brother or at work, I’m here, because you’re not and someone has to be.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Well, I’m sorry to burden you further, I don’t really have too much choice right now. If it’s such a problem for you to be here, I can make other arrangements!”

Nathaniel closed his eyes, trying to stay levelheaded. Why was she being so sensitive right now? “Jesus, Cora, that’s not what I meant, don’t be ridiculous. I don’t mind being here, and you know that. Just stop. I only want you to understand that things aren’t easy around here, either.”

She shook her head and sniffed. “It’s better than what I’ve got. Alice doesn’t see anyone she knows except me, and sometimes our father when he comes to see her. I’m all she has out there, so no, I don’t feel good about leaving her. It’s fine for you to take a few guilt-free days off right now because someone else can be there, but Alice and I don’t have that luxury!”

Nathaniel was growing increasingly frustrated with her narrow view of her situation, as if she were the sole party responsible for Alice’s well-being. They were both exhausted and stretched to the limits of patience on their best day, and he tried to remind himself that she was overreacting because of that, not because she wanted a fight. “Cora, you don’t have to do what you’re doing, why can’t you see what I’m trying to tell you? You’re out there exhausting yourself, and you’re burning out, and you’re not taking care of yourself.”
“I’m doing the best I can! I don’t know what you want from me, Nathaniel, why are you doing this? I don’t need this right now!” She let out an exasperated growl and stormed from the living room into the kitchen. Nathaniel followed her.

“I’m not criticizing you,” he bit out. “I just… dammit, this is hard on you, and ever since you got here, you’ve been like a different person. You’re happier, and you’re not constantly freaking out about physical therapy and ultrasound therapy and x-rays and which doctor said what, and we’re having a nice time together for the first time in I don’t know how long.”

Her eyes glittered in angry indignation. “Well, I’m sorry I’ve been such a killjoy the last few weeks. Maybe I should have just stayed in Boston so I could freak out some more about all these things you know nothing about, because you aren’t there!”

“No, I’m not there!” his voice raised at last, his irritation winning out. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t see what you’re doing to yourself! You don’t take any time to yourself, and that’s my point! You don’t go anywhere or do anything except live and breathe Spaulding. You’re as alone as Alice is, you’re not sleeping well, you haven’t even tried to come home until now, you haven’t seen or talked to your counselor, nothing. And you need to, Cora! I may not be there with you, but I’ll be damned if I want to watch you destroy yourself needlessly!”

“Needlessly?! What I am doing for Alice is not needless! Fuck, Nathaniel!!! So I’m not fucking perfect! Neither are you, and I don’t need you chewing my ass about everything I’m doing wrong!”

Nathaniel let out a frustrated roar, shoving his hands through his hair. She wasn’t listening to a damn thing he was saying, they weren’t getting anywhere like this, and he was too tired and pissed off to be delicate anymore. “Goddammit, Cora, I’m not trying to do that! Stop demonizing me and listen! It’s not a crime to love you and want to see you taken care of, too! You need help before you drown in caregiver strain, you’re a nurse for Christ’s sake, you know what this shit does to people!”

“I am not demonizing you, don’t be so dramatic! All I want to do is be there for my sister, and I just can’t figure out what the hell it is exactly that you think I should be doing different, since you apparently know what’s best for me!”

“Your dad is retired, for the love of God, ask him to take over sometimes so you can come home and get a break, because I know he would gladly do it! Or, oh! Here’s a wild thought! Why don’t you ask Alice what she wants or needs? Have you ever even asked her? She’s a big girl, and both her and Uncas have a ton of shit to figure out without other people trying to control every aspect of their recovery!”

Cora threw her hands up in the air. “I am not trying to control her recovery, dammit! I’m just trying to make sure she has what she needs to get through this!”

“What about what YOU need to get through this? It’s not just Alice! You fucking matter too, Cora! So maybe you ought to spend some time finding a balance that involves you getting what you need too, instead of spending every fucking waking moment trying be Alice’s damn MOTHER!”

Cora blinked and reeled back as if Nathaniel had slapped her, the color draining from her face except for the livid flush on her cheeks. Her eyes were a storm of defensive fury, but as soon as the last words left his mouth, something else flashed across them - a pain that he could not comprehend, and it made his blood run cold to know that he had somehow put it there. The anger returned full force along with it, and her eyes filled with tears.

“Get out.” Her voice was dead calm now, sending another chill through him.
“Cora, I -”

“Please just leave. This was all a mistake, and I want you out of my house right now.” Her voice shook and a tear spilled from one eye, its track glinting on her face in the afternoon sunlight.

Nathaniel closed his eyes and swallowed hard against the crushing sensation in his chest.

“Fine.”

Without another word, he turned and walked out of the house, trying not to let himself hear Monty’s heartbroken whine as he passed him sitting in the foyer, confused and frightened by their fighting. He got into the Blazer and sat there for a moment with his forehead against the steering wheel, wishing to God he could just hit a rewind button. He blew out a long breath and started the engine, feeling like all nine circles of hell as he drove away. Part of him didn’t want to walk out, wanted to try harder, to attempt to understand what the hell had just happened, but the less obtuse part of him knew this would only make things much worse than they already were. It still didn’t stop him from feeling like he couldn’t breathe at the sound of her words, though. This was all a mistake… Yeah, he’d heard that once before, when Judith was trying to explain why she was leaving him for the guy she’d been sleeping with on the side for months, long before he was injured. This wasn’t the same thing by far, he knew it, but it still felt like a punch in the gut to hear those words fall from Cora’s mouth. This was all a mistake. Maybe she was right. Maybe he shouldn’t have asked her to come home. Maybe he shouldn’t have ever said anything to her about Alice, when they were both stressed and exhausted and irrational. Maybe they both just needed some time to calm down. She wasn’t going back to Boston until tomorrow afternoon, so maybe they could work it out. Or not. He didn’t know anymore.

“Dude, weren’t you just here a little while ago?” Uncas looked confused when Nathaniel walked back into his room at Sunnyview a short while later. He hadn’t known what else to do, so he’d come back here, hoping to talk to Uncas or Sidney.

“Where’s Dad? I thought he was coming this afternoon?”

“He’s not here yet, you didn’t leave that long ago. Now what gives, you look awful. And where’s Cora?”

Nathaniel averted his eyes. “She’s at home. We, uh… we had a fight.”

“Shit. You’re supposed to be having a good time together, now what happened?”

Nathaniel launched into an explanation of the argument. “I don’t know what happened,” he said at the conclusion. “It got bad really fast, and then she told me to get out. I didn’t want to upset her more, so I left.”

Uncas frowned, confused. “She threw you out? What exactly did you say to her before that?”

He listened as Nathaniel told him the last thing he’d said about her trying to be Alice’s mother.

“Jesus Christ, dude. I don’t mean to make this any worse for you, but that was really stupid. You don’t ever say something like that to a woman whose mother died. What were you thinking?”

“I guess I wasn’t.” Nathaniel sat down with a defeated sigh. “I didn’t think about it like that, I was just trying to… I don’t know what I was trying to do. Get her to listen to reason, maybe. She’s killing herself, and I hate watching her do it. She’s gonna go back there tomorrow and get right back to it, too, because she has no idea what’s good for her and she doesn’t know when to quit.”
“She’s a nurse, dumbass,” Uncas snorted. “They’re all like that.”

“It’s more than that, it’s whatever fucking guilt complex she has from her past that’s driving all this. And then she boots me out and tells me ‘this was all a mistake’, and of all the things she could have said right then, she picked that.” He shook his head.

Uncas rolled his eyes. “Seriously? You’re choosing to focus on that? You’re a fucking jackass sometimes, you know that? And then you have the nerve to talk about how Cora’s past is driving her!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’re sitting here losing your mind over her choice of words just because that happens to be what fucking Judith said to you once upon a time when she left. Cora’s not taking off with some other dude, she’s just pissed at you for taking a dig at her having to be Alice’s mother figure for the last thirteen years, and that’s probably what you ought to be thinking about so you can go fix your shit with her. Because if you fuck this up, I’m gonna kick your ass.”

“I did not intend to make that stupid comment in reference to Maureen, and I never said Cora was Judith. Don’t be such a shithead.” Nathaniel shot his brother an angry glare.

“You’re the one being a shithead. You walk around acting like Cora’s the one with her past haunting her all the time, when clearly you have way more baggage surrounding that worthless relationship with Judith than you think you do. Case in point.”

“Oh, please!” Nathaniel jumped up from his chair to face Uncas, angry and defensive. “You should talk! You’re so quick to tell me about all my problems, when you can’t even talk about yours? Give me a break!”

Uncas stood, putting himself just a few inches from Nathaniel, his onyx eyes flashing dangerously. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re fucking depressed!” Nathaniel shot at him angrily. “And you won’t even talk about everything that’s bothering you or ask for help! You think you can hide it, but you can’t hide it from me. I’ve been there, remember? So don’t sit here and tell me about all the things I’m doing wrong with Cora until you can man the fuck up and talk to Alice about all this, instead of pretending everything’s fine all the time!”

“Hey, fuck you, man!” Uncas shouted, shoving Nathaniel with his left hand.

“Fuck you back!” Nathaniel retorted.

“Just what the hell is going on in here?” Sidney barked from the doorway. Nathaniel and Uncas stopped, their heads whipping to the side when they heard their father’s stern voice.

“Nothing,” Nathaniel growled, grabbing his keys. I’m fucking batting a thousand with everybody today, aren’t I? “I’m out of here.” He pushed past Sidney, who watched him go with a raised brow before he looked back at his younger son.

“You want to tell me what that was all about?”

“Not really, but you’re gonna look at me with your cop glare until I do, so I might as well.” Uncas replied. He explained the gist of his conversation with Nathaniel, from the fight with Cora up to the part about Nathaniel still having Judith issues.
“Uh-huh.” Sidney nodded. “You left out that last part, though, when he called you out about the way you’ve been feeling. As uncalled for as that argument may have been, he’s not wrong. Sit down, son.” He gestured at the recliner. “I think it’s time we talked some.”

“Come on, Dad…” Uncas looked away.

“Sit your ass down, Uncas.” Uncas glared at him, but did what he said. Sidney pulled up another chair to sit directly across from him. “I haven’t said anything because you’ve got plenty to worry about, but Nathaniel isn’t the only one who notices that you’re not yourself. And it’s understandable that you wouldn’t be, under these circumstances. But you can’t hold that all inside you, son, because it’s gonna cause a lot of problems later if you don’t start letting it out. And if you don’t talk to Alice about it, I assure you it’ll wreck your relationship.”

Uncas sighed, looking around the room at everything but Sidney. “I don’t know what to say about it, Dad. How can I say anything to Alice when she’s not any better off than I am? How can I put my feelings on her when she’s already got enough on her plate from day to day? When she has more reason than I do to feel depressed, because she still won’t be able to walk until… shit, sometime next year?”

Sidney shook his head. “Situational depression is what it is. It’s not a competition about whose situation is worse. You both have legitimate feelings, and you can’t keep talking to each other every day and act like this isn’t happening. You were going to ask her to marry you, Uncas. If you want a life partner out of her, you’re going to have to give her all of you. Not just the fun stuff. The ugly stuff, too. She loves you, and you love her, and she needs for you to be honest with her, even when it isn’t pretty.”

“I just feel like can’t burden her with this on top of her own stuff.”

“You’re not asking her to take it from you, son. You’re asking her to share it. Just like she needs to share hers with you. You take half of hers, she takes half of yours, and you’re sharing the load equally. That’s how love works. And don’t forget that the rest of us are here, too. You ought to be talking to your brother about this. He does know a thing or two about depression post-injury.”

“He’s got his own problems at the moment.”

“And he needs to work that out between him and Cora. But that doesn’t mean he isn’t here for you, too. I had a similar conversation with him seven years ago, because, you know, he got pretty low there for a while. You remember?”

“Yeah. I mean I knew, but I was twenty-two, and maybe I didn’t really get it.”

“There’s no shame in asking for help from the people who care about you, Uncas. Or from a professional, if that’s what you need to climb out of the hole. But if you do nothing else right now, talk to Alice about this. I have a feeling she’ll have a few things to say back to you if you just open that door.”

Cora dropped the things for Alice into her backpack and zipped it, then went to her dresser to finish packing her sea bag. She kept running over and over the fight with Nathaniel in her head, trying to make sense out of what had happened. One minute things had been fine, and then suddenly everything had just exploded, and he’d said all those things she didn’t even want to think about right now, especially the part about her trying to be Alice’s mother. He didn’t understand, no matter how
much he tried to say he knew how she felt. Cora had been the only mother Alice had since age thirteen, and Nathaniel didn’t get that, he couldn’t possibly know what that was like. He’d never really known his biological mother, and he was blessed with Yvette and fortunate enough to have never faced losing her. She opened the top drawer of the dresser to pull a few things out, unearthing a flat, hand-sized black leather box with United States of America stamped on it in gold. She picked it up and opened it, running her finger over the ribbon and corresponding medal that rested on the grey velvet. Her Purple Heart, like the one in Duncan’s casket flag case on the Heywards’ mantle. She could still hear his voice in her head, clear as day.

“You’re still my best friend, and I wouldn’t trade that for anything. I hope one day you meet a guy who’s everything you deserve.”

She had thought that was Nathaniel. Had she been wrong? She didn’t think so, but everything felt so messed up right now, and she was so damn tired. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. Maybe this really was all a huge mistake… These thoughts began another wave of hurt, angry tears that had been coming and going since she’d thrown Nathaniel out of the house that afternoon. She had thought he might try to call or come back, but he hadn’t, and she didn’t know how to feel about that. On one hand it crushed her, and on the other hand she didn’t even really know if she wanted him to try right now. She sat down on the bed and stared at the Purple Heart. Stupid reminder of that fucking helicopter crash and everything that had followed. Months of recovery feeling isolated and cut off from her unit and her crewmates, and then having her Navy service yanked out from under her to top it off. Alice had been there, even at great cost to herself, and for the first time since Maureen had died, the sisters’ roles had been reversed, and it had been Alice who took care of Cora all the time. Dropped out of school, gave up her whole life to hang out in Maryland with her wounded sister while she wallowed in despondence over Duncan and everything she’d lost, and then when she’d come home to New York and Alice had helped her put her life back together. She had thought Nathaniel would at least understand that part, with what had happened to him and John. She gave an angry cry and threw the leather box across the room, sobbing. Fuck this. Fuck it all. She sprang to her feet and shoved the last items from the drawer into her sea bag, yanking the top string shut, and slung it and her backpack over her shoulder. After making sure the animals had food and water for the night, she grabbed her keys and left, heading to the interstate and back to Boston. There was no reason to stay here any longer and let this hurt more than it had to, there were too many other things to worry about.

Driving down the highway as the sun set, her bitter thoughts and the things Nathaniel had said still swirled in her memory as she tried harder than ever to push them away, some doubt beginning to creep in past her anger. She was further convicted by the dulcet tones of Robert Plant over the rock station on the car radio, settling into her overtaxed brain as she sped along.

“My love is in league with the freeway
Its passion will ride, as the cities fly by
And the tail-lights dissolve in the coming of night
And the questions in thousands take flight

My love is a-miles in the waiting
The eyes that just stare and the glance at the clock
And the secret that burns and the pain that grows dark
And it’s you once again

Leading me on
Leading me down the road
Driving me on
Driving me down the road
My love is exceeding the limit
Red-eyed and fevered with the hum of the miles
Distance and longing, my thoughts do provide
Should I rest for a while at the side?

Your love is cradled in knowing
Eyes in the mirror, still expecting they'll come
Sensing too well when the journey is done
There is no turning back, no
There is no turning back, on the run...”

She laughed bitterly and switched off the radio. “Thanks, Robert, but I don’t need your sage advice any more than I need Nathaniel’s,” she said out loud, trying to convince herself that she was doing what was best. But in her head, she had begun to wonder if she even knew that that was anymore. Too tired to think about it any further, she fixed her eyes on the darkening highway as it rolled beneath her tires, not noticing the screen on her phone lighting up in the console beside her.

Nathaniel slowed down as he approached Cora’s house on the gravel road. It was getting dark, and he knew he shouldn’t be here unannounced, but he was worried about her. After leaving Sunnyview he’d gone back to the cabin and spent some time alone stewing over their fight and his subsequent argument with Uncas. His brother hadn’t been wrong that he’d picked a really bad time to bring up Cora’s self-care issues, and he felt awful about the last bit about her trying to mother Alice, which he had let fall carelessly out of his mouth in anger, without realizing the impact of what he was saying and how it would sound to her. He’d finally given in and tried to call her to see if they could work things out, but she hadn’t picked up, nor had she answered the text message he’d followed up with, in case she hadn’t felt like actually speaking to him. He was concerned now, having thought she’d at least answer the text, but she hadn’t. He couldn’t stop thinking about that heartbroken look in her eyes just before she’d told him to leave, and he needed to know she was all right, needed to tell her he was sorry.

He skipped her driveway and pulled right up in front of the gated fence instead. Standing at the cheery, red front door he’d come to know so well, he rang the bell twice and then knocked, but there was no answer. The porch light was on and there were a few lights on inside. He could hear Monty at the door, yelping and barking, and his cop brain kicked into high gear. Jesus, what if something happened to her? He threw his reservations aside and unlocked the door, opening it carefully and calling out her name as he entered in case she was around. No one answered. He walked around with Monty trailing behind him, flipping on a few more lights, but there was no sign of her. The kitchen was as it had been when he’d left her earlier, and nothing was amiss in the living room. He had a growing sense of dread in the pit of his stomach, and he tried to shove it away as he went down the hall to her bedroom, but it came crashing to the forefront the second he pushed the door open and looked in. Her bags were gone. She was gone, nothing left of her but the lingering scent of lavender. A single dresser drawer stood open, and as he looked around the room, he saw her Purple Heart lying on the floor in its open box near one wall. His hand trembled as he picked it up, closing the lid gently and setting it back in the drawer. He walked back down the hallway with Monty following at his heels, going back out the front door to look in the driveway. He hadn’t noticed that her car wasn’t there in the dark shadow of the carport when he’d pulled up, but seeing its absence now was the final swing of the hammer. He sank to the ground, his head in his hands. She had left. For now or forever, he didn’t know, and maybe it didn’t matter so much as the simple fact that she hadn’t waited for him to work things out, it hadn’t mattered enough to her to stick around and try. She was just gone, leaving him with nothing but regret and the stab of pain that felt like his
heart fracturing into pieces all over again.

Author’s Note:

A merry (or not so merry) holiday update, brought to you by I’m Not in School Anymore! This chapter kind of sucked to write, for obvious reasons. It was really heavy on a lot of emotions, and I generally don’t like writing conflict, but sometimes it’s necessary for things to get better. I had initially planned for all the stuff in this chapter to resolve by the end of it, but it quickly became obvious that there was WAY too much going on for that to happen, and it needed to be two chapters, so it will continue into 16. First of all, I’d just like to say that I love the dog in this chapter. Monty is the best, and he said he wanted some good cameos, so he got a few. So, in the beginning, we see a little of how Uncas and Alice are doing with their separation, and at least the chapter starts out on a somewhat humorous note as the two of them laugh about Cora and Nathaniel’s dorky motivational techniques. I could totally see Nathaniel threatening Uncas with “Eye of the Tiger”, too. Maybe this story needs a physical therapy montage a la Rocky. But once the humor passes, we see that these two are doing the best they can to just hold it together and keep each other in good spirits. I love that Alice reads to Uncas at night – remember in Chapter 1 when she dispatched the cops to that B&E call and he said “I just want her to read to me”? Now she does. Both of them are feeling depressed, and who wouldn’t in their situation, but they aren’t really saying much about it for the sake of the other.

Then there’s Cora and Nathaniel. Oh, boy. They started out pleasantly enough, and Cora finally took a trip home, which seemed so wonderful for both of them. They love each other so much, they’ve had a lot of stress, and they really needed a few days together. Unfortunately, when people are exhausted and completely stressed out like they are, seemingly innocent things can also get blown way out of proportion, and what should have been at most a heated discussion for them turned into an awful fight. I hated making them fight like that, but it needed to happen because there is a lot set in motion for all the characters by this incident. It’s hard to be mad at either one of them for anything that was said. This wasn’t meant to be about name calling or anyone genuinely being an asshole. Cora is very stubborn and doesn’t see things the way Nathaniel does from the outside looking in, and bless her heart, she just wants to take care of Alice and she’s doing what she’s wired for – many of us know (or are) nurses or care providers, and we know they’re not so great at self-care sometimes. I know I’m terrible at it. There is also a lot more to that than was talked about in this chapter, so you’ll get a little more insight on her part of this and why she is so difficult about caring for Alice at her own expense in the next chapter. And poor Nathaniel! He just loves Cora so much and wants to take care of her, and he is so frustrated watching her struggle and wear herself to the bone – as anyone would be when they love someone. I don’t think he’s wrong about anything he said to Cora, and his intentions are completely noble, his timing was just poor and he seemed to say all the wrong things once they both started getting angry – which was what he tried to avoid at first when he dropped the subject in the car initially, but Cora clearly didn’t get that memo.

The trying to be Alice’s mother comment was strategically placed. I needed Nathaniel to say something that would upset Cora enough to make her throw him out, but something he initially would not see as all that upsetting, so he wouldn’t understand what happened. Uncas shed a little light on that when he took Nathaniel to task later on, Cora’s subsequent thoughts shed a little more, and you’ll get the rest of the explanation in chapter 16. And speaking of Uncas, Nathaniel really is batting a thousand in this chapter with getting into fights. Of course, he initially went back to Sunnyview because he needed someone to talk to, but that turned sour too in his emotional state – although Uncas wasn’t really gentle with him either, so they both got upset pretty fast with all the truth-hurling going on in that room. Again, neither one is wrong, but they aren’t being very nice
because they’re all just way too stressed out about other things. And that brought about a much-needed father-son talk between Uncas and Sidney, which is definitely not a bad thing. Sidney is so awesome, and I think he gives some pretty good advice. There are going to be a whole mess of Come-to-Jesus meetings before this situation resolves, so get ready.

Finally, Cora leaves and goes back to Boston. Sigh. We all know running away from our problems doesn’t solve them, and she’s running from her fight with Nathaniel right back into the very problems they were fighting about (wait, she’s flying into the fire, LOL!!!!) What a mess. Cora is stubborn to the point of ridiculousness sometimes. It’s easy to understand why she’d be upset right now and not want to stick around, but it makes things so much worse for Nathaniel when he shows up to apologize and finds out she’s left him. I think we’ve established that Nathaniel is going to have a really bad reaction to something like that. So now we just have to see how this all goes, and if everything will turn out all right in the end.

This chapter has a lot of songs, because I had this situation planned out for a long time and I had a lot of inspiration from the playlist. The theme song for this chapter is “Why” by Annie Lennox – not a song I ever had in mind initially, and then it popped into my head one day this week when I was thinking about Nathaniel and Cora’s fight before I wrote it (and I was dreading it so I put it off for days). It ended up being absolutely perfect mostly for the fight, but also for all the other things that are going on and starting to come to the surface in this chapter. In the beginning when things are a little funnier, it starts with Beth Hart’s “World Without You”, which has an upbeat sound but it’s really about missing someone terribly. Iron and Wine’s cover of “Time After Time” (God it’s beautiful) was what I heard through the parts where Alice was reading to Uncas, they are lying awake after they talk, and when Nathaniel is sitting there alone missing Cora while he’s looking at the stars. During their conversation when he asks her to come home and she is missing him back, and once she’s there curled up on the swing with him and thinking about all her stress, it made me think of “Troubled Mind” by Catie Curtis, which has been a favorite of mine for a long time and really reminds me of these two characters. When Nathaniel and Cora are fighting, I was hearing “Sundrenched World” by Joshua Radin, another absolutely perfect song for what went on there. That song probably continues into Nathaniel’s argument with Uncas, with a little bit of “Why” running there too when he’s thinking about the fight after he leaves Cora’s. When Cora is packing up her stuff and crying in the bedroom, that whole bit and her leaving was the DHT/Edmee unplugged cover of Roxette’s “Listen to Your Heart” (love love love), and in the car the Robert Plant song she was hearing is weirdly named “Big Log” (it’s a reference to driving a tractor trailer rig, but it’s still weird since it’s nowhere in the lyrics). I like that song, and I liked it for Cora being “on the run” there. The last part when Nathaniel goes back to Cora’s and finds her gone (and it breaks his poor heart) I hear “Winter Song” by Ingrid Michaelson and Sara Bareilles.

That’s all for Chapter 15. Thank you for reading, supporting, PMing, and reviewing, and please stay tuned for the next installment!
The Part Where You Let Go

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of serious conflict, some difficult truths come to light for all four main characters. Whether they like it or not, things must change. They face resolution no matter how painful or difficult it may be to do so, and decide how to move forward.

Chapter Notes

Author note included in text due to length.

Chapter 16 – The Part Where You Let Go

“When the rain breaks the road
Are you holding on, are you holding on
To your last good day
When the stone breaks the wheel
Are you holding on, are you holding on
Til the stone rolls away

And I don't know
Is this the part where you let go
And tumbling out of a window
Is this the part where you find out
I'm there for you

When the sun leaves the field
Are you holding on, are you holding on
To the last sweet light
When the flame leaves your eyes
I still see you there, I still see you there
On your darkest night

And I don't know
Is this the part where you let go
In sinking under a shadow
Is this the part where you find out
I'm there for you now

As your hand's breaking free
I am holding on, I am holding on
As you held on to me

And I don't know
Is this the part where we let go
Tumbling out of a window
Is this the part you're there for me

And I don't know
Is this the part where you let go
In sinking under a shadow
Is this the part where you find out
I'm there for you

You find out I'm there for you
You find out I'm there for you

-Daniel R. Messe-

Nathaniel woke with a start the next morning when he heard the lock tumble on the front door and Monty snap to attention, letting out a low bark. He hadn’t been able to make himself go home to the empty, dark cabin, where there would be nothing but silence too loud to deal with after the blow of Cora being gone, so he and Monty had sat on the couch together in mutual misery, and eventually he’d fallen asleep. He sat up and rubbed his eyes as the door swung open and Ed Munro walked in, greeting Monty heartily and then jumping in shock when Nathaniel stood up from the couch, his hand flying to his chest.

“Holy hell! Damn near gave me a coronary, boy! I didn’t expect to find you here.”

“Yeah, uh, sorry,” Nathaniel replied. “I wasn’t really expecting to be here myself. I fell asleep I guess.” He glanced at the older man warily. Did he know about the fight?

Ed grunted. “Huh. Well, Cora sent me a text message in the middle of the night last night saying she’d had to go back to Boston, and could I come by this morning to feed the animals and see to the horses, because you wouldn’t be around.”

Nathaniel looked at him quizzically. “She didn’t say anything else?”

“Not in so many words, no, and I didn’t press her, but I’ve been her father long enough to know when there’s something amiss. I didn’t think she’d take off early for no reason, at any rate. You care to tell me what’s really going on here?” He crossed his arms over his chest and raised a greying brow expectantly.

Nathaniel sighed deeply, scrubbing a hand over his face. Facing the music with Ed was a little intimidating, considering the whole rabid drill instructor bit combined with upsetting his beloved daughter, but he supposed there were worse ways to die. Keeping a healthy distance between them, he explained the fight between him and Cora the previous day, sparing no detail.

“So then I tried to call her last night to apologize, but she didn’t pick up and I was worried, so I came over to see if things were okay, and…” he waved his hand around to indicate the empty house, pushing down the helpless lump rising in his throat. “I’m sorry, sir, I never meant to do or say anything to hurt her,” he finished miserably, sitting down on the couch to await Ed’s reaction. He had expected the old Marine to be at least a little angry with him, so it bewildered him when Ed’s face fell, and he looked so sad that Nathaniel thought he might actually cry for a second or two. He walked across the living room and sat down next to Nathaniel, shaking his head morosely.

“I suppose it was only a matter of time before something like this happened, with all the stress and runaround just taking everything we’ve got right now, especially Cora. And in a way, this is partially my fault, too.”
“How so, sir?” Nathaniel asked, confused.

“I should have said or done something about all this before. I’m not blind either, and I know she’s taking on too much by herself. But you know Cora, she’s stubborn and she wants to take care of everyone, and there’s no convincing her different when she’s got it in her head how she thinks things ought to be done.”

“Yeah, I kind of get that by now,” Nathaniel said with a wry smile.

“Maureen was just the same, and damn, I loved her for it, but sometimes it infuriated me to no end, too. But then, I didn’t always help, because I had my own ways of driving her crazy. I remember the last time I was coming up for reenlistment at Pendleton. I swear to God, I thought she was going to kill or divorce me when I wanted to sign another service contract. She’d been asking me for a while to go inactive reserve so we could move out here, and I just couldn’t let go. But she’d spent all the years of our marriage doing what I wanted or had to do, and she was ready for what she wanted. And boy, did she let me know it. We fought and fought, but I had a few months to decide, and she got what she wanted in the end.”

“So what happened to convince you?”

“A few weeks later she found a lump in her breast, and not long after that, she was diagnosed with cancer. It was aggressive, and it had already metastasized to her chest wall. It all happened so fast… so at that point it wasn’t about me or my career anymore. It was about quality time for all of us, for her and the girls, and for me to slow down and smell the flowers with her while I still could.” Ed was quiet for a moment, then looked candidly at Nathaniel, tears in his bright blue eyes. “I think there are some things you need to understand a little better about Cora and Alice. They’re not like you and Uncas, their dynamic is different from you two because their lives have been different. If you want any hope of fixing this, and of really understanding Cora and being the man she needs, then you need to hear what I’m saying.”

Nathaniel nodded. “I’m listening.”

“For years, Cora and Alice watched their mother die slowly. Chemotherapy, aggressive surgeries, the whole bit. It wasn’t always so bad. She went into remission briefly once, but it didn’t last, and when it came back it was worse than before. When it got into her liver, that was the beginning of the end, and Nathaniel, I don’t know if there is a way to ever make you fully understand what it was like, for me or for the girls. When the liver becomes involved… what it does to the mind and body is devastating. Those last few months… I’d have rather had the heart ripped right out of my chest than ever see her suffer like that, and thank God for hospice.” His voice trembled. “At any rate, when she finally passed, Cora was seventeen. Alice was thirteen, and she took it very hard. We all did, just in different ways. Alice grieved very openly, maybe because of her age, and I think she might have been better for it in the long run. Cora… I think she grieved by trying to step into Maureen’s shoes for Alice. It started when Maureen was getting too sick to do all the things she normally did, and I’m afraid I was such a mess for a while after she died that I needed Cora’s help even more. She made sure Alice got up and got ready on time every morning. She drove her to school, didn’t want her to have to take the bus by herself because Alice never wanted to be alone at that time. She took her clothes shopping, she cooked, she did everything Maureen would have done. She was Alice’s mother, and they had a bond that couldn’t be broken.”

Nathaniel’s heart sank in guilt-ridden grief. Cora had never gone into such detail before about her mother’s death or the aftermath. He steeled himself to keep tears at bay as Ed continued.

“Cora almost didn’t join the Navy. She’d wanted to and planned to since she was old enough to think about what she wanted to do when she grew up, but the thought of leaving Alice at that
point, just a year after Maureen left us... she wasn’t so sure anymore. When Alice found out she was thinking about staying home and just going to nursing school here, she wouldn’t hear of it. Alice has a slower burn than Cora, but when she gets going she’s just as formidable, even when she was fourteen. I swear they must have fought for a month straight before Cora finally gave in and went down to the recruiter’s office. But she felt terribly guilty about it, about the leaving and the separation from Alice to do for herself. She was always selfless like that, you know, always taking care of something. Pets, toys, other kids, you name it, she was a nurse from day one,” Ed chuckled fondly. “Over time it got easier for both of them. Alice got more into her aerial acrobatics and made some good friends there, Cora started working on going from Corpsman to Nurse. But she called Alice every chance she got, helped her with homework over the phone, came home on leave before her first deployment and did the whole senior prom thing, all of it. When that helicopter crash happened and Cora was hurt, it was devastating for her on so many levels. Losing Duncan, her teammates, her physical functionality, and then her Navy career. I think it chapped her so bad because she lost it after she’d had to make up her mind to leave Alice behind to have it, and then having even her mother-figure role snatched out from under her when it was Alice who took care of her while she recovered… well, you know about all that at least, your brother did the same for you. And you know about everything Alice sacrificed to be there for Cora the way Cora had always been there for her. So, I think you can understand now why Cora got upset enough to put you out on your ass yesterday.”

Nathaniel leaned forward and covered his face with his hands. He hadn’t thought last night that he could feel any worse about all this, but now he found that indeed, he could and did feel much worse, especially since everything he had just heard about Cora made him love and appreciate her tenfold. Now he fully understood the magnitude of her strength and resilience, the extent of her ability to love and sacrifice, and why his last rebuke had cut her so deeply.

“I never intended for what I said to hurt her like that, it wasn’t meant that way,” he groaned. “I wasn’t thinking straight, and I just wanted her to stop arguing and listen to what I was saying. I wasn’t ever trying to fight with her, but she got mad, and I just… God, Ed, she can’t keep going like this, she’s going to collapse, and it won’t be any better for Alice than it will be for her.”

“I know you didn’t mean it, son,” Ed sighed sympathetically and laid a hand on Nathaniel’s shoulder. “You’re certainly not the first man to say something he regretted in the heat of the moment, and your plate is just as full as hers. And like I said, I’m a guilty party, too. I should have put my foot down weeks ago and not given her a choice about accepting help. I thought I was doing the right thing letting her take care of Alice the way she wanted to, but I didn’t think she’d exhaust herself like this, I thought she was old enough to know better by now. But almost losing Alice and your brother, that’s been hard on us all, and I guess no one is thinking clearly these days.”

Nathaniel’s hands raked through his hair. “I just hope she’ll stop being so angry with me long enough to let me try to talk to her about this. I love her more than anything, and I’d do anything to take this all back.”

“Well, now, I’m her father and I love her, too, but I do think there’s plenty of truth in what you were trying to tell her. She could stand to think about that for a little while, and I hope that’s what she’s doing. Now come on, get up and help me feed the damn horses. I’ll buy breakfast when we’re done with chores, and after that you can go undo whatever dimmed your shine and just try your damnedest to fix this shit, because that’s all you can do in the end.”

“Wait, what the hell are you doing here?” Alice asked when Cora came into her room at
Spaulding after breakfast. “You weren’t even supposed to leave New York until this afternoon!”

Cora shrugged as if trying to appear nonchalant, and set her backpack down on a chair. “I decided to come back last night so I could settle in and get a full night’s sleep before I came to hang out with you today.”

“Uh-huh. And you couldn’t have done that in your own bed with your nice, warm, sexy boyfriend, you had to come back here to your cold lonely bed in lodging? You’re so full of shit. What are you not telling me?” Alice eyed her suspiciously.

“Nothing,” Cora replied indignantly, not looking at Alice while she unzipped her backpack and started taking things out. “I brought you the stuff from your house that you asked for. And Yvette sent you more Boneset tea.” She set the clothes she’d fetched from Alice’s apartment on the counter by the sink. “Oh, and Uncas sent some things for you, too. Here.”

Alice perked up at this, and took the little bag from Cora with an excited smile, forgetting for the moment about Cora’s shoddy explanation for her early return. She opened the bag and squealed with delight as she removed two river stones painted in slightly wobbly strokes, one made to look like a striped ginger cat, and one a guinea pig with grey and brown spots. “It’s Sweet Potato and Mrs. Nesbit! Oh, I love them!”

Cora smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Yeah, he said that’s so you won’t miss them so much. He did them in occupational therapy since the painting helps his fine motor skills.”

“He’s so amazing,” Alice gushed, overcome by the thoughtfulness of the gift; even in therapy Uncas could still find a way to do something sweet for her.

“Now, where did I put that tea from Yvette…” Cora muttered, digging around in the backpack. “Huh. What’s this?” she pulled out a soft package wrapped in plain brown paper with ‘Cora & Alice’ written on the paper in Nathaniel’s precise, slanted hand. Cora sat down on the foot of the bed, looking at the package as if she were almost afraid of it. “He must have snuck this in my bag over the weekend when I wasn’t looking.” She opened it slowly, and then stared down at the contents.

“Well? What is it, silly?” Alice prodded.

Cora handed it to her and she took it, holding up one of two matching T-shirts, one for Cora and one for her. They were printed with a cartoon image of a Tyrannosaurus Rex, leaping in victory with mechanical reach extenders clutched in the claws of its tiny arms, and the word ‘UNSTOPPABLE!’ printed boldly across the top. She looked at the note that had fluttered out from beneath the shirt and laughed out loud, then gave the note to Cora so she could read it, too.

“Hey Beautiful,

A little fox told me this was your favorite physical therapy song, so here’s a little more motivation for Alice and Coach Cora. Go forth and be unstoppable like you Munro girls always are.

All my heart and soul,

Nathaniel”

Cora let the note fall into her lap and without warning, dropped her face into her hands and burst into tears. What the hell? Alice thought, totally taken aback as she carefully slid across the mattress to sit beside Cora and put her arms around her. She let her cry until she had calmed down enough to reach for a box of tissues, and then Alice looked at her sternly.
“All right, dammit, something is going on and you need to stop bullshitting me and tell me why you’re back a day early and dripping snot all over my blankets.”

“You’re such a salty bitch,” Cora half-laughed, half-sobbed, dabbing her red eyes and blowing her nose.

“Takes one to know one. Now stop changing the subject, what the hell happened?”

“Nathaniel and I had a fight, and it was awful!” Cora wailed, starting to cry again as she sobbed and gulped her way through the entire story, finishing with her decision to leave and come back to Boston ahead of schedule.

Alice groaned and slapped the palm of her hand to her forehead. “Dammit, Cora!” she hollered in frustration, glaring at her older sister. “I send you home to see Nathaniel and this is what you guys do?! Do you know what I would do if I could see my boyfriend right now?! I’ll give you a hint: it starts with an ‘F’, and it’s not ‘Fighting’!”

“Well, it’s not like I went home expecting it to happen,” Cora sniffled, wiping her nose with the tissue again. “And the first couple of days really were good, until he started in on me about all that other stuff.”

Alice shook her head in disappointment. “I can’t believe you, Cora. Really. I thought you were done with this running away crap. This has got to be the absolute worst thing you could have done to Nathaniel right now, considering his last girlfriend up and left him in the middle of everything going to shit, too!”

“I didn’t leave him, Alice. I just…left... dammit, stop being right.”

“Well, as long as I’m being right, may I just point out that while his timing may have been shitty, I agree with Nathaniel.”

Cora stared back at Alice in shock. “What do you mean?”

“He’s right, Cora. You’re not taking good care of yourself, and believe me when I say I’m the first person to notice, because I see you every day. Just because I’m stuck here doesn’t mean you deserve to be, too. I’m really glad you’re here, but there are obviously other people who love you and need you, too, and it’s not fair for you to neglect your own wants and needs because I fell off a cliff. Not any more than it’s fair for you to get so mad about Nathaniel saying you’re trying to be my mother when you know damn well he didn’t mean it maliciously. He loves you, Cora, and he’s such a good man. He would never be that cruel on purpose.”

“I don’t think he would, either. Just… in the moment we were both already so upset, and when he said that, I… I reacted really badly, because all I’ve thought about since you got hurt was how things were when Mom died, and how much I hated to leave you for the Navy, and then how you just dropped everything and gave up school and all the things you wanted to do when I got hurt in Afghanistan. I just want to do the best I can to take care of you, Alice, I love you.” Cora dissolved into tears again, and Alice began to cry, too, her heart breaking as she embraced her sister.

“I love you, too, but Cora, I was only twenty when you got hurt,” she sobbed. “My life then was totally different than yours is right now. I still lived with Pop, I didn’t have a boyfriend, and I wasn’t even really sure what I wanted to do with my life yet. You’re thirty, and you have a nursing career and a house and a boyfriend who loves you.”

“So?” Cora gulped through her tears. “You dropped out of school and quit your job to be
Alice cried harder. “What about all the stuff you did for me before that? Why do you think I wanted to help you? What would I have ever done without you after Mom died? What would Pop have ever done without you to help? Cora, you’re selfless to a fault. You try so hard to take care of me, and your patients, and everything, and there’s never anything left for you, when you deserve to be happy more than anyone I know. I don’t want it to be so hard for you to ask for what you need. You can’t give up your life and career for this, it wasn’t fair when you had to for your own injuries. And you sure as hell can’t give up being happy with Nathaniel. I won’t let you do that. Duncan would haunt me for the rest of my life!”

Cora gave a tearful little laugh. “He probably would, too.” She sighed shakily and reached for another tissue after handing one to Alice. “Nathaniel said I should ask you what you want instead of just assuming I’m doing what you need. I didn’t mean to do that, and I’m sorry if I’m stepping on your toes or not giving you space when you need it. It’s okay to tell me if I’m being a control freak.”

“I won’t deny that space is nice and you drive me nuts sometimes, but I do need you. I’d have drowned in misery by now without you. I miss Uncas, and I miss my pets and my house and my bed, and I want to walk, and kiss my boyfriend, and goddammit, I want my silks and lyra so bad I can’t stand it. I just feel like shit all the time because when I’m not having nightmares about falling off a cliff, I’m dreaming about all the things I can’t do for God knows how long! But you can’t fix that part, and I can’t, either, so I don’t know what to do,” she sobbed into her tissue.

“I wish to God I could fix it, Al.”

“But you know, it wasn’t so bad with you taking a break, either. I made friends with the girl down the hall, she had a car accident and lost her leg.”

“Well, that’s good that you made a friend,” Cora sniffled. “You probably need someone to talk to besides me and your doctor and nurses, right?” Alice nodded. “And maybe now that you’re getting around on crutches we can sign you out of here sometimes to go do something fun for a few hours, that might help, too. But Al… if you’re feeling depressed maybe you need a little more than that, huh? Have you talked to Uncas about any of this?”

“No,” Alice admitted, her face crumpling again. “I can’t, he’s got so much to deal with too, how could I complain to him? And I’m afraid. Everything feels so fragile, like if we do anything to upset the balance it’ll all just fall apart.”

Cora hugged her. “Al, maybe it’s time to get some help with this. There’s an injury support group that meets every couple of days, I saw a flyer in the hallway. You’re not alone, everyone here is here because of something bad that happened to them. Maybe it would help to talk to some of them.”

“I’ve thought about it…”

“Okay, think about it more. As for Uncas, you have to talk to him. I don’t think he’s doing much better, and I think it would be helpful for both of you to talk to each other instead of trying to put it out of the way until it builds up enough to explode, and you end up like me and Nathaniel, right? Or worse.” Her voice broke a little at that.

“Okay,” Alice replied, wiping her wet, blotchy face. “But you have stop killing yourself over all this, too, Cora. Nathaniel only said that stuff because he loves you just as much as I do, and he wants you to be happy. Please don’t feel like you have to spend all your time here. Go run in the
fucking park, or visit the science museum, or whatever. And for the love of God, if you want or need to go home sometimes, do it. If you need to work a shift at the hospital to feel like yourself again, do it. Go love on your dog and your ferret and let Nathaniel love you and spoil you rotten, because you fucking deserve it, and he deserves for you to love him back.”

Cora nodded. “Okay. I’ll try to figure it out. I do want to go home sometimes, I miss him so much sometimes I can’t think straight. It’s just hard when I know you want to go home, too, and you can’t.”

“I know, but stop with the guilt. I’ll be out of here soon enough, and then it won’t matter anymore. Please, just don’t ruin your life over this, I couldn’t stand it.”

They wrapped their arms around each other and sat there in silence for a few minutes, until Cora smiled a little and started to sing.

“If you’ll be my bodyguard, I can be your long-lost pal…”

Alice sniffled and smiled, too. “I can call you Betty, and Betty when you call me, you can call me Al…”

After eating breakfast with Ed, Nathaniel went back to the cabin to rest and think. Still feeling exhausted, he managed to fall asleep and get a decent pre-work nap, rising in the late afternoon to shower and change into a flight suit before calling Sidney to apologize for running out after arguing with Uncas the day before. After they had talked for a while and Sidney had filled him in on some of what had happened after his abrupt departure, Nathaniel decided to drive out to Sunnyview, since he still had time before he needed to be at work. He found Uncas alone in his room, doing some of the shoulder exercises his physical therapist had given him as “homework”. He straightened when Nathaniel walked in.

“Hey,” he said cautiously.

“Hey,” Nathaniel replied. There was a somewhat awkward silence before he continued. “Look, I’m really sorry about yesterday. I was overreacting, and you were right about pretty much everything you said anyway. I was just upset and I didn’t want to hear it.”

Uncas sighed deeply. “I’m sorry, too, man. I started it by being a belligerent asshole. I could have been nicer about the stuff I said, considering you were already in a state about Cora. I was having trouble hearing what you were saying, too, but as Dad so aptly pointed out after you left, you weren’t wrong, either.” He sat down, and Nathaniel sat beside him.

“Yeah, he told me he talked to you some. Uncas… I wish you’d have said something all along about the depression. I want to help, and it’s not like I wouldn’t have understood, you know that.”

“I do know, it’s just… when you’re up to your ears in it it’s easy to feel like nobody else understands. And it just sucks, you know? I already feel so out of commission. I’m a paramedic, it’s my job to make a difference, to be a helper. Now I can’t work, and I don’t know when I’ll be able to go back. I can’t be at home, I can’t be with Alice, I still need all this help and I can’t do anything to help anyone else right now. All things considered, it’s really damn hard to admit that I’m depressed on top of it, and now I need help with that, too. Just one more thing I can’t handle on my own. As if it wasn’t shitty enough, right?” He smiled bitterly.
“You can’t let it fester, though. It gets so much worse if you don’t handle it. If I know nothing else, I know that, because it happened to me. I felt the same way. I was a cop, a first responder, and then in an instant I lost my partner, I almost lost my leg, I was out of work, and everything was just… it was so bad. Post-traumatic stress, surgeries and pain and not knowing how things would turn out, and watching Alex and the kids grieve for John and struggle on top of it. I felt totally impotent, and I was drowning, and I didn’t know how to ask for help, because like you said, I was up to my ears in it. And then Judith left. I think by then I was so far gone I was just numb.”

“Yeah, you weren’t yourself at all,” Uncas agreed. “We all knew it, I just don’t think I understood the implications back then. I was young, and I was just doing what I could to help you get your life back on track.”

“You did way more for me than you ever knew. You and Mom and Dad never left me alone, and then after Judith moved out you moved in with me, prodded me and kept me going. I’ll tell you now because I’ve never told you before, you saved my life being such a motivational pain in my ass. If you hadn’t been there in my face all the time, I think I might have eaten a bullet on more than one occasion.”

Uncas stared at him painfully. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. I don’t know if I’d have really done it, but I thought about it sometimes. I was lucky to have family and friends to remind me of why I wanted to stay and fight.”

Uncas looked away, blinking as a tear rolled down one cheek. “I had no idea it went that far. I’m sorry, Nathaniel. I wish you’d said something to me.”

Nathaniel shrugged. “We’ve already established that it’s hard to admit when you’re feeling that bad. Dad could tell, though. I think he’d just seen enough cops with PTSD and depression in his time, or maybe enough distress calls, or both… he sat me down one day when you were at work and got it out of me, and then he made me call the police department and make an appointment with one of their counselors. He wouldn’t leave until I did.”

Uncas laughed a little. “Sounds like Dad. I remember you starting counseling, but I didn’t know that was why.”

“Yeah. It took some time, and finding the right therapist and treatment plan, but things obviously got better. They will for you, too, and getting out of this place will help.” Tears pricked at Nathaniel’s eyes as he reached over to hug his brother. “I’m here for you. Always. You know that, right? I said I’d tread water with you as long as it took, and I meant that. I love you.”

“Thanks. I love you, too, and I’m really glad you’re here, even when you’re a pain in the ass,” Uncas replied thickly, hugging him back.

“It’s the least I can do.” Nathaniel settled back in his chair with a chuckle.

Uncas nodded. “And just so you know, I’m not feeling bad enough… not like you were. Maybe if things were different, if I didn’t have you, and Mom and Dad, and Alice… I don’t know how I’d feel. But it’s not that bad right now.”

“You still need to talk to Alice, though. You know that.”

“Yeah. And maybe a therapist too. I don’t want to mess up with her, and I want to be better for her when this is all said and done. Everything else is screwed up enough. I love her. I need her.”

Nathaniel sighed. “Yeah. Okay, good.”
“Speaking of – did you go smooth things over with Cora yet?”

He shook his head dejectedly. “No. She left before I had a chance.”

Uncas frowned in disbelief. “She left? Back to Boston, or what?”

“Yeah. I went back to her house last night to try to talk to her, and she was gone.”

“Holy shit… I’m sorry, Nathaniel. I didn’t think she’d do anything like that. You don’t think she’s gone for good, do you?” Uncas looked like he wanted to cry.

“I don’t know for sure. I hope not.”

“Well, what are you gonna do? I mean, you can’t just give up and let her go. This isn’t like last time, not like Judith. She’s a million times better person than Judith, and you deserve that. She loves you, you love her, and it’s worth fighting for. Right?”

Nathaniel thought about all the things he loved about Cora, and everything Ed had told him about her this morning. His iron-willed, hard-loving Cora, who got scared sometimes, but never, ever gave up. So maybe she hadn’t given up on him, either.

“No, definitely not a damn thing like Judith,” he said to Uncas with conviction. “And yes, absolutely worth fighting for.”

Uncas smiled. “Then what the hell are you doing here? Go call her and talk to her, do whatever you have to. Just get her back.”

Cora had dinner with Alice in her room that evening, as she often did after the long days of therapy came to an end. While they ate, they continued their earlier discussion, this time talking frankly about each of their wants and needs, and a tentative plan for the remainder of Alice’s stay at Spaulding. It was still raw and a little uncomfortable to Cora to speak of her own needs that Alice had been subtly trying to prod her to acknowledge since she’d been at Albany Medical Center, and even before that. She had been alone for so long before Nathaniel that she’d never had to think about meeting in the middle on things like this to be happy and make a relationship work. The fight with Nathaniel had simply brought her issues flying out into the open where she would have to face them – and as terrible as she still felt, she had to admit, too, that his typical forthrightness had been necessary for something to change. Nathaniel might be gentle, but he didn’t really do anything subtly, and she loved him for it most of the time. Even now she did, though she still hadn’t had a chance to talk to him. She set the remainder of her dinner aside, finished, and Alice picked up her phone from the table when it buzzed with an incoming text.

“It’s Uncas,” she said, typing a quick reply. “He wants to know if he can call now. That’s odd, he usually waits till bedtime so we can read. But he did miss our call last night, so maybe that’s why.”

“Maybe he just needs to talk. You wanted to, anyway, right?” Cora gave her a pointed look, and Alice sighed.

“Yeah. And speaking of that, maybe you ought to think about doing the same.”

“I’m heading back to my room, I’ll try when I get there. You talk to Uncas and I’ll see you in the morning. Call me if you need anything.” Cora bent to hug Alice, then gathered her things,
slinging her backpack on as she walked out the door. Once she was gone, Alice pulled up Uncas’ number and hit the FaceTime icon. She’d thought fleetingly about just making it a regular call, but if they had something this serious to discuss, she figured they ought to be able to do it as face to face as they could get.

“Hi,” she said softly when his face appeared on the screen.

“Hey. How was your day today?”

“Busy, as usual. Yours too?”

“Yeah. Regular stuff, and a few other things too. That’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. I’m really sorry I didn’t do our regular call last night, I wasn’t feeling great, and there was kind of a lot going on around here.”

“So I hear,” Alice replied. “Cora just left for the night.”

“Is she… uh, is she all right? I mean, her and Nathaniel…”

“I think they have a lot to talk about, but they’ll be okay if they just don’t do anything else rash or stupid.” She offered a soft smile.

Uncas chuckled. “Yeah, let’s hope so.” After a pause, his face grew serious again. “Listen, Alice… it wasn’t just all that. I talked to my dad some, and Nathaniel, and I have to come clean about some things that I haven’t been honest with you about. I think I need to, or we’ll be in trouble later.”

“Oh,” Alice said weakly. Fear sprang to life in the pit of her stomach, and she felt a little sick. What was going on?

“I haven’t been feeling too great since all this happened, and I’m sure you haven’t, either, but it’s not normal blues anymore, and it’s getting worse. I feel less and less like myself as the days go by, and I don’t want to feel like this anymore. And I don’t want to keep up this charade of ‘everything is fine’ with you, because I’m afraid I’ll lose you if I don’t do something about this soon. I don’t want that. I love you, Alice, and I want us to be able to get through this being honest with each other.”

Alice let out a sob of relief, unable to help the tears that started falling. “Is that all?” she cried. “You scared me, I thought something was really wrong. I mean, it is, but… I’m so glad you told me. I haven’t been honest with you either. I’m feeling pretty bad, too, and this is all so hard. I wanted to tell you, but I was scared to because I didn’t want to make it worse for either of us.”

“Oh, Alice… I’m so sorry, babe. I never want you to feel like you can’t talk to me if you’re feeling down.”

“I love you back, and I don’t want you to feel that way, either,” she sniffled. “So what do we do now?”

“Well, I was hoping we could keep talking for now. Maybe about options for dealing with all this, stuff that might help us. Therapy or medication or support groups. And then maybe you can still read me Jane Eyre, because I missed it last night, and I love it when you read to me.”

Alice smiled. “Do I get a song, too, then?”

“ Anything you want.” He smiled back at her. She sighed and settled back against her
pillows. This conversation wouldn’t be easy, but nothing about any of this was easy. Hopefully all of this heartache would be worth it in the long run, because she was really looking forward to better days ahead. For now, it was enough that they could admit there was a problem, and be there for each other while they looked for a solution.

Across the street, Cora headed up the sidewalk toward the family lodging building. If she hurried, she might be able to catch Nathaniel before he went to work, but she wasn’t sure now if he would even want to talk to her anymore. He hadn’t tried to call or even text again, and now she was terribly afraid she’d screwed things up monumentally by leaving the night before. Every time she thought about it, she just felt like crying all over again. Lost in her thoughts, she nearly jumped out of her skin when her phone rang as she was unlocking her door in the dim hallway. She looked down at the screen. Nathaniel. Hands trembling, she went into her room, shut the door, and picked up the call, terrified of what he might say.

“How?”

“Cora. Thank God.”

“Nathaniel, I - ”

“Just listen to me, okay? Please? I know you’re angry at me, and you don’t have to say anything right now if you don’t want to, but I need you to hear me out. I’m sorry about yesterday. I’m sorry for the way I handled it, the things I said, and I’m so, so damn sorry I hurt you. I never meant to, you have to know that. I love you, Cora, and I just want you to have what you need to be happy. Whatever that is. Just… dammit, I have to leave for work, so I don’t have much time right now, but I want us to talk about this.”

“I do, too,” Cora replied, her heart ready to explode in her chest from the sheer relief of knowing things weren’t beyond repair.

He let out a ragged sigh. “That’s a good start, then. Can we talk after I get off shift tomorrow night?”

“All right. We can do that.”

“Good. Get some sleep, and I’ll call you when I get home tomorrow night. I have to go now, before I’m late.”

After they had said goodbye and the call disconnected, Cora leaned her back against the closed door, sliding down it with a slow exhale until she sat on the floor. He didn’t hate her for leaving, and he was sorry… but she had plenty to apologize to him for, too. Tomorrow night would be a long wait, but at least she might be able to sleep tonight now that he’d called. But before she even tried to go to bed, there was one more thing she needed to do. She pulled up her recent calls list and touched a number.

“Hello, sweetheart,” Ed said when he picked up. “I’ve been wondering when you’d give me a call. I had a little chat with Nathaniel this morning, and I was worried about you. So is he. I think we had better talk, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Cora started to cry then, unsure anymore if everything was still unraveling, or if this was the start of putting it all back together again. All she knew was that she wanted to make everything work somehow, and she couldn’t keep trying to do it on her own. “I need your help, Pop.”
Nathaniel lay on his back up in the treehouse behind the cabin after work on Tuesday evening, waiting. Cora had sent him a text earlier saying she was a little busy with something and she would let him know when he could call. He passed the time in silence looking up at the night sky, a velvety-black veil sparkling with a million tiny points of light. The fall air was cold and crisp, and he could smell wood smoke from the chimney of one of the neighboring houses. There was something deeply comforting to him about that smell, especially in winter when everything was snowy and you could smell the snow with it, too. Uncas would likely be home by the time the snow came, and maybe Alice and Cora wouldn’t be too far behind. He liked the idea of winter with Cora; cold nights snuggled up out on the swing or in front of their own fire, playing in the snow with Monty, all the hokey Christmas-card type stuff he’d never really thought about or wanted until now. He watched a shooting star streak its shimmering path across the heavens, gone in the blink of an eye. He chided his own sentimental silliness when he made a silent, futile wish on it to erase the last few days and have her by his side here, sharing the treehouse and the view.

He sighed quietly, his breath making a faint plume of mist in the air. Would everything be all right? He had never experienced a relationship like this, or loved anyone the way he loved Cora. He and Judith had fought, but over things that seemed petty and trivial now, because they had been young and hadn’t known how to pick their battles. There had been no fight at the end of it all; he’d been too tired and too depressed, and there was no point in fighting her, not even about the other guy – not when she’d treated him as if his injuries were an unwelcome disturbance to her well-kept universe, and not when she so clearly lacked the fortitude to stand by him. But Cora, she was different. She always had been, and he knew it more than ever. Fighting with her seemed to bear so much more weight, because they hadn’t argued about trivial things, but things that could tear them apart if they let them get big enough. And he couldn’t – wouldn’t – let that happen, not as long as he could help it. They were both survivors, both tough enough to weather this storm. He glanced at his phone when it buzzed with a message from Cora.

“Are you home?”

“Yeah, I’m up in the treehouse, just waiting to call you,” he replied.

She didn’t answer back, and he started to get nervous after a few minutes. Had she changed her mind about talking? He went back and forth with himself for a moment before sending another message.

“Cora? Are you free to talk now?”

“That depends,” a familiar voice called out from below, startling him. “Are girls allowed up in your treehouse?”

Nathaniel sucked in a breath. Cora? He sat up and scrambled to the edge of the platform to find her standing at the base of the tree in the shadows, illuminated like an apparition by the light of the full moon above. He stared down at her in disbelief, not quite trusting his own eyes and ears.

“Get up here,” he replied softly, needing to make sure she was real.

Cora climbed the ladder carefully, her whole body trembling with anxious energy that the drive from Boston had done nothing to dissipate. She crawled onto the platform and sat down across from him, her cheeks suffused with a nervous flush as he gazed at her, his eyes glimmering in the bright moonlight filtering through the ancient maple’s spreading branches.

“I meant to be here when you got home,” she offered, not knowing how else to begin. “It just
took me longer to get here than I planned for.”

Nathaniel gave a crooked half-smile at that. “Considering all I was planning was a phone
call, this is quite a surprise, late or not. What are you doing here?”

Cora glanced down at her hands in her lap, then looked back at him. “I guess… I just thought
that if we were going to talk, try to work things out, we shouldn’t do it a hundred and fifty miles
apart. Besides, I kind of messed up the last day we were supposed to have together.” Her eyes filled
with tears. “I couldn’t do this over the phone. I needed to come back. To tell you that I’m sorry, too,
Nathaniel. I shouldn’t have gotten so angry at you when you only had my best interests at heart. And
you were right about all of it. I’m just really bad at meeting my own needs.”

Nathaniel shook his head gently. “You’re not bad at anything, Cora, and I wasn’t right about
all of it. I never should have said what I did about your mothering Alice. It was insensitive, and I
wasn’t thinking about everything that might have meant to you, after all you guys have been through
together. Even though our experiences are different, I do understand some, because I love Uncas just
as much, and I know what it’s like to want to do everything you can for the people you love most.”
His eyes took on a sad, pleading look. “Ehölënt, I don’t ever want you to think that I don’t see you,
that I don’t see and appreciate how much you love your sister, and how amazing you are for doing
everything that you’re doing for her. That I don’t love you for that just as much as I want you taken
care of, too.”

He reached out as if to touch her, then stopped as if he’d thought better of it. Cora couldn’t
bear his hesitation, not after the way they’d always been, the way he had loved her all this time. She
put her hand out and caught his wrist, her fingers gliding upward over his palm to lace with his.
Their eyes met, all the fear and uncertainty suddenly melting away as he pulled her to him with a
sobbing breath and buried his face in the crook of her neck, their arms twining desperately around
each other.

“You left, and I thought I’d lost you for good,” he rasped.

“Oh, no, no, Nathaniel,” she whispered, her tears spilling over as she stroked his hair and
held him close. “I love you so much, and I’m so sorry. I never should have left like that, not before
we had a chance to talk. I was upset about fighting with you, and I wasn’t thinking rationally. I’m
still learning how to do all this, and I messed up.”

“We’re both learning, and I messed up too. We will from time to time.” He leaned back to
look at her, stroking her wet cheek with the backs of his fingers. “We both lost people we loved
because of things we had no control over, but this is stuff we can control. I love you more than
anything, Cora, and I refuse to give up, to lose you over something we can damn well call the shots
on. We can work on this, we can find a balance together.”

She nodded, her hand coming up to cover his on her cheek. “I talked with Alice and my
father before I left to come back here. I’m staying for a week this time. Alice wanted a couple of
days to herself to deal with some things, and then Pop is going out to stay with her until I go back.
We’ll alternate like that so I get to come home and be with you every other week. Rest, and hang out
with Uncas, and go see Virginia when I need to. Maybe work a little too, but I haven’t decided about
that yet.”

“I’m good with all of that. Especially the ‘home for a week’ part.” Nathaniel traced the pad of
his thumb across her lower lip. “We’re going to be all right, aren’t we?”

“Yeah,” she murmured, closing her eyes as his delicate touch sent little shivers coursing
through her. “No more running away, I promise.”
“Good,” he said with a relieved smile. “No giving up. Ever. I love you, and your stubborn, self-sacrificing, beautiful soul.”

Cora smiled back. “I’m glad you love it, because it belongs to you anyway.”

He leaned over and kissed her then at last, the world setting to rights again as she sank into him with a little sigh and kissed him back, her arms wrapping around his shoulders and her fingers sliding into his hair to hold him closer. There was nothing better in the universe to either of them right now than this, her in his arms again beneath the night sky just as he had wished for, releasing all the turmoil of the past two days in favor of hope. They paused for a breathless moment, gazing into one another’s eyes. The fields of stars above them glittered there in reflection, and each could discern the heart and soul of the other laid bare; everywhere they had been, and everywhere they had yet to go, hopefully together from here on out.

“How do we save this night
And bottle up the full moon light
I’d keep it locked up in a safe like a piece of frozen time
How do we hold this moment
And keep it etched inside our minds
To symbolize, always remind us of why we sacrifice

For every scar upon my heart
You pull me closer, help let down my guard
For every part of me I see as a fault, you see differently
There’s no mistaking, I can’t deny
When you’re beside me I never feel more alive
So alive

I wanna lie down
I wanna hold you in my arms
Under the stars, let’s disregard
All the things that make us scared and torn apart
I wanna stay here
I wanna feel you next to me
I’m gonna keep my word tonight
As long as I can breathe

I’m gonna keep my word tonight
As long as I can breathe

How do we find this place
We disappear without a trace
We’ve stumbled onto something strong
Was it chance or simple fate?

For every scar upon my heart
You pull me closer, help let down my guard
For every part of me I see as a fault, you see differently
There’s no mistaking, I can’t deny
When you’re beside me I never feel more alive
Alive, so alive

I wanna lie down
I wanna hold you in my arms
Under the stars, let’s disregard
All the things that make us scared and torn apart
I wanna stay here
I wanna feel you next to me
I’m gonna keep my word tonight
As long as I can breathe
I’m gonna keep my word tonight
As long as I can breathe”

-Paul Gross-

Author’s Note:

Ehòlënt: “Beloved” (Delaware/Lenape)

Giant sighs of relief abound in this chapter as things are set straight. Getting that done was a little painful for all the characters, though. I promised you a whole series of “Come to Jesus” meetings before this was all resolved, so here they were. I have to say that as hard as it was to write Nathaniel and Cora’s fight in chapter 15, writing this chapter was equally, if not more painful, just in a different way. The first section between Ed and Nathaniel I had to walk away from for a while and come back to, because it made me very emotional due to some personal experiences, and I had to do it in small doses. Life is hard, and cancer fucking sucks. Lots of us have experienced something similar enough that you can probably understand. I just want that reality aspect. It was especially important in that section, because that is where all of Cora’s past experience gets laid out, and you finally get the complete picture of why she has such a hard time relinquishing control where Alice is concerned. That helps Nathaniel understand her better, too, of course, which is important for the future of their relationship and resolving their fight.

The scene between Alice and Cora was pretty emotional to write, too. I have two sisters of my own, and we’ve had some rough times that we’ve had to motivate and kick each other’s asses through. I really loved this part of the chapter too, because I feel like through this whole story Cora hasn’t been very good about looking to her own needs when Alice tries to encourage her to, and this is the first time she really starts to put aside her stubbornness and hear what is being said to her. And that helps her understand that Nathaniel wasn’t being a jerk, he was telling the truth because he loves her. I so love Alice in this story, she’s so plucky, and she’s as funny in this section as much as she made me cry. She had a lot to say here, and she’s been waiting for this chapter in the corner of my head for weeks!

Next came Nathaniel and Uncas, who were also now subdued and ready to talk and listen to each other. We found out some more important things about Nathaniel there too, mostly just how much he understands where Uncas is mentally right now, and just how much Uncas really helped him when he was recovering from his ordeal and Uncas never even knew. I wasn’t sure if I should include the part about Nathaniel having had suicidal ideation at his lowest point, but given the situation I feel like he really might have. Here is a police officer who went through something very traumatic, had a long recovery because of the complications he suffered, probably had major survivor guilt because John was killed and he wasn’t, and then his fiancée left. That’s a lot to handle. Combat veterans have many of the same issues, and ultimately I felt that the things this talk between Nathaniel and Uncas revealed were realistic and accomplished a better connection and understanding for the brothers.

Then there is addressing the depression issue with Uncas and Alice. Something else that is a
reality with injury and recovery, as well as with chronic pain. It is often situational and doesn’t last forever, but not always (especially after a traumatic experience like these two had), and it is very important to acknowledge it when it’s happening before things snowball. So Uncas and Alice have to come to a point where they know that they have to talk to each other and risk shattering the protective bubble they’ve been trying to maintain around one another. They aren’t really protecting each other by hiding their real feelings, and ultimately, they accept that and talk about it. I didn’t drag that out because I didn’t want their conversation to be redundant – we know from them talking to other people what’s going on, in this scene I just wanted to show that they’re taking a positive step and talking about it together. I know a few of you were worried after chapter 15 that these two were “next”, but I have never planned for them to have big fights or break up. It just doesn’t seem to fit them. Nathaniel and Cora have most of the major emotional baggage because of their traumas, and their personalities are more outwardly passionate and fiery, so they are more likely to fight the way they did. Uncas and Alice are very passionate too, but theirs is quieter and runs more under the surface, and they aren’t as hotheaded so they are going to handle their problems differently than Nathaniel and Cora do. And that’s fine, because they are all individuals and I love them all the way they are. Especially because even when they’re approaching a major issue, Uncas and Alice still need their relationship comforts like story-time and phone-singing (when I imagine Uncas singing songs to Alice over the phone, I think he sings stuff like ‘How Can I Tell You’ by Cat Stevens, heehee), and Nathaniel and Cora still need their nighttime stargazing.

Which brings up the last section, where Cora finally gives in and asks for help from Ed, and that is a great step forward for her. All the characters are growing from this hardship, and that is possibly the one good thing that always comes out of tragedy and trauma. If you don’t let it destroy you, you become mighty. And of course, I couldn’t just let Nathaniel and Cora work out their issues over the phone, so Cora went back home and very sweetly surprised Nathaniel while he was musing in the treehouse (still jealous of that damn treehouse). All the characters are breathing a little easier now. Things still aren’t perfect, but now they all know where they stand, and it’s time to start working their way back to the top for some better times.

This chapter’s theme song is “The Part Where You Let Go” by Hem. One of my very favorite songs, and very inspirational throughout this chapter for all the breakthrough between characters. During the talk between Alice and Cora, I was hearing “Fix You” by Coldplay, and Sting’s “Shape of my Heart” when Nathaniel and Uncas are having their conversation. When Alice and Uncas start talking about their problems and then Nathaniel calls Cora and she then calls Ed, the song there was “Be Here” by Paul Gross. When Nathaniel is lying alone in the treehouse watching the sky and thinking, it was Bob Dylan’s “Shooting Star”. When Cora shows up and they start to talk and apologize, that was “I Won’t Give Up” by Jason Mraz (that beautiful song inspired basically that entire scene months ago), and them kissing and making up finishes out the chapter with another Paul Gross song called “Lie Down”, which was too perfect for that part not to include at the end. I was conflicted about which lyrics to print at the end, but Paul Gross won out because he’s awesome and deserves the attention. (Aside: Paul Gross is an independent artist from Houston, TX, and I think I said once before that his music from the New Beginning album is all over this story, and it will be in the future too. It’s great stuff!) My smartass husband beta-read and said the last song should have been “Everything I Do (I Do it for You)” by Bryan Adams. Inspired by Alice and Cora, I rolled my eyes and told him he was a salty bastard.

Oh, and MedicineWoman, I did give that John Legend song a listen, and uh, definitely a different message than Winter Song (my jaw may have dropped at some of the lyrics, LOL). It’s not bad though! Also, I remember you mentioning in chapter 14 that the USS Constitution is usually berthed in Charlestown, MA, and I did know that! My grandfather spent 26 years in the Navy, part of that in Boston, and I spent some time there several years back too, visiting a friend who lived in Waltham, and saw lots of interesting things, including being there to attend the First Night
celebration on New Year's Eve. I’d love to visit again one day.

So that’s about it for this chapter, y’all. Thank you all so much for reading and reviewing, as always, and thanks to MohawkWoman and BlueSaffire for your constant support and feedback when I’m questioning things while writing, and for cute and fuzzy little inspirations. :)
Farewell to the Old Me

Chapter Summary

Alice faces a sudden and critical life decision, Uncas gets some good news, Alice and Cora get a big surprise, and all the characters deal with important personal changes brewing in their lives.

Chapter Notes

Author's note included in text due to length

Chapter 17 – Farewell to the Old Me

“How can I ask love to hold the mystery
When just look at me
It's all push and pull collateral
I don't want to be the one who gets the next surprise
I'll plan it out this time
Though I used to think that things were meant to be

So farewell to the old me
Farewell to the old me
My life is working better now
It's always changing anyhow

I danced a lot of nights until the grass was wet
It wasn't over yet
'Round 'bout 3 a.m. you made a friend
And I followed a lot of vital crazy thoughts
Because it's where the meaning was
And I tried to find it every other way

So farewell to the old me
Farewell to the old me
My life is getting better now
But always changing anyhow

But I can turn on the charm
Show them nothing more
Than what I've done before
It's nothing much new
But it'll do

'Cause I don't want to be the one who makes you laugh out loud
I want to make you proud
And you always said you knew what I could be

So farewell to the old me
Farewell to the old me
Farewell to the old me
My life is working better now
But always changing anyhow
Time
And the old me
Farewell to the old me
Farewell...

-Dar Williams-

“Come on, Alice, one more set, and then you get a break for ultrasound therapy. You can do it,” Cora encouraged, watching Alice complete the resistance band exercises assigned by her therapist as her last effort for today’s session. “Come on, don’t half-ass it. Always use your full ass.”

Alice shot her a killing glare. “Speaking of asses, you’re being a real pain in mine right now.” She stuck her tongue out at her sister, but pushed a little harder, grimacing through the muscle fatigue in her calf on the last few.

“All done?” inquired Garrett, Alice’s physical therapist. She and Cora had not been sure of him at first; he was young and way too pretty with his blond, blue-eyed model good looks and matching gym-sculpted physique, but he had quickly proven to be intelligent, effective, and not at all soft - just what Alice needed. She often jokingly referred to him as her physical terrorist because he worked her so hard. “Great job today. You’re doing fantastic all around, and further along than I thought you’d be by now. Dr. Coleman will be happy when I give him a progress report this week.”

“Hey, awesome,” Alice remarked. “Maybe he’ll let me blow this joint before Thanksgiving! No offense, I love you guys and all, but home sounds pretty good right about now.”

Garrett laughed and patted her shoulder. “None taken, I don’t blame you one bit! I think we can all agree that healthcare is a field where you can say ‘I hope I don’t see you again’ and mean it in the nicest way possible. Am I right?” He winked at Cora, who agreed wholeheartedly as she helped Alice put her knee-high cast boot back on and handed over her crutches so they could make their way back up to her room.

It was now approaching the end of October, and Alice was getting around like a pro on her crutches, her ribs were almost completely healed, and she was starting to feel more like herself again. She’d been attending the injury support group once or twice a week, and making friends with some of the other patients had been good for her morale and feelings of isolation, as had checking out of Spaulding with Cora or Ed for a few hours here and there for extracurricular activities or just to get a breath of fresh air off hospital grounds. Dr. Coleman had also cleared her for very mild yoga practice, as long as she stuck to floor work that didn’t bear weight on her injured leg. Cora’s bi-weekly arrangement with Ed seemed to be working out well, too; it gave Ed a chance to be actively involved in Alice’s recovery, and Cora was a lot more relaxed and happy, which made Alice happier, too. Cora would be going back to her Thursday-to-Friday shift at AirMedic soon, and Nathaniel was getting ready to pick that shift back up as well, which would put him back on his normal work schedule. Once Alice was home, Cora would go back to the ER at Albany Medical Center, too, but for now she’d elected to only do the AirMedic shift since that would put her in Nathaniel and Brian’s company for the duration, and the rest of her visits could be spent on quality time with him, family, and friends, and taking care of herself.
Alice plopped down on the edge of her bed when they got back to her room, leaning her crutches against the wall and picking up her phone to listen to a voicemail from a call that had come in while she was in therapy.

“Shit,” she breathed as the message ended. “Shit, shit, double shit.”

“What’s wrong? Who was that?” Cora asked.

“My landlord. With all this insanity the last couple of months, I completely forgot that my lease on the apartment expires at the end of November. She was just calling to remind me, since I have to let them know by the end of this week if I’m going to renew or not.”

“Oh, crap. I hadn’t thought about any of that for a while either. It’s going to be hard to go back there with those metal stairs, Al…”

“I know,” Alice heaved a sigh and lay back on the mattress, her hands covering her eyes. “I can’t imagine hobbling up and down on crutches, it’ll be impossible, and the bathroom is up there too. Maybe I could just stay with you or Pop for a little while, huh? Just until I can be home to hunt down a place without stairs?”

Cora nodded. “Yeah, that would be fine. I might be able to look at places for you while I’m at home, too, if that would help. I can FaceTime you so you can tour with me, or send you pictures.”

“Maybe. Dammit, I really don’t want to have to worry about this right now. And then there’d be the task of moving all my stuff, and the animals, and… uuuggghhh, it just makes me feel like shit all over again because this is one more way my life is going to change that I can’t even be present for! And I have to uproot ‘Tato and Mrs. Nesbit, and they’re going to be all alone without me!” She sniffled a little, visibly upset.

“Well, we can do this however you need to,” Cora said sympathetically. This was something she had not had to deal with herself, since she hadn’t had a home other than barracks waiting for her after she’d left Bethesda. “The best control you yourself have is making a decision between keeping your place, me helping you get a new one, or staying with one of us until you can be home and have a little more say in things. No matter what, you know Nathaniel and I can take care of packing up and moving your stuff with Pop and the Greatsnakes, and I’m sure Brian and Ashley and even Alex and Jack would throw in a hand, too, if we needed it. And we’ll make sure the fur-babies get plenty of love and reassurance. They’re pretty used to having all the rest of us around by now.”

“Okay,” she agreed, feeling only slightly better. “I’ll think about what I want to do so I can tell the leasing office by Friday.”

Alice spent the rest of the day ruminating over the issue. She didn’t like having to make a decision so quickly, but in reality, the worry about going home to an apartment that would be physically impossible to navigate safely had been in the back of her mind for weeks, and she knew she couldn’t stay there. Maybe it was just time to rip off the band-aid and let it go, but it hurt because she loved her little loft. She’d lived there for almost five years, and it had been her first place all to herself after she had moved out of Ed’s house. It was close to the yoga studio, it was home to her, and it was the first place she and Uncas had kissed, and the first place they had made love. Did that make it home, though, or just a place she had sentimental attachment to? Maybe it was just memories there that made it special. Maybe home was really just being where all the people and things she loved were, and maybe it was just her time to find that out. This whole hiking accident ordeal had caused so much change, so many things she had never thought about or planned for even after what she’d seen Cora through. It felt like some giant looming cycle of life and death, with the person she had been before melting away and going through a paradigm shift that set her whole world on its
side every time she was presented with one more change in the wake of it. It had felt something like this when their mother had died, too, but now she was older, and her life was affected in totally different ways than it had been then. Maybe this was all just part of life, part of becoming who they were all meant to be. Everything changed all the time, she knew that even she changed all the time, just sometimes it was more disruptive and scary than others, and this felt like more upheaval than she’d ever had to deal with before. Even so, in the overwhelming chaos of it there was a stillness, too, like the eye of a hurricane, and that was where everything that mattered lived. Her fundamental self. Her family. Uncas. Her memories of her mother. The chance to start over because she was alive. Those were the things that held the same meaning to her no matter what else changed, and those were the things that no amount of disruption in her life could take from her.

Uncas concentrated hard on the red dot at the center of the wall target, willing his arm to remain steady as he aimed at it with the long, thin electric fencing foil in his hand. Once again, he missed it by a couple of inches, his failure emphasized by a loud buzzing sound. He muttered a curse.

“Oh! So close this time! You’ll be hitting that red dot in no time, man!” His therapist Gene exclaimed with a broad grin, crinkling the coffee-colored skin at the corners of his dark eyes.

“I still think this is a crazy form of therapy,” Uncas said.

“Crazy awesome!” Nathaniel butted in, picking up a foil and swishing it around. “Come on, Gene, teach me to fence while Uncas pokes the wall. I’ve always wanted to learn.”

Gene chuckled. “I do teach outside of therapy, you know. But for right now, we’re done for today, and I need to get going for my outpatient appointments in Albany. Hopefully soon enough I’ll be seeing you there instead of out here.”

Nathaniel grinned and handed him back the foil so he could pack up to leave. While Uncas was sometimes taken aback at Gene’s atypical and inventive exercises, it made things fun and kept Uncas on his toes, and he and Nathaniel both really liked him. In his youth Gene had held a high ranking nationally in competitive fencing; no small feat for a poor black kid from New York City, and it had earned him college scholarships. After a knee injury had landed him in surgery and months of recovery, he had decided to add specialization in physical and occupational therapy to his kinesiology degree. Now he coached fencing privately in Albany, and incorporated his love of the sport into therapy sessions, using light training and agility exercises like poking the wall targets to hone and improve Uncas’ fine motor skills and strength on both arms. While there was no actual fencing going on, or anything that would overdo his repaired shoulder, it was interesting and entertaining when added in with the normal range of motion exercises he was now doing for the right shoulder, and Uncas was happy to finally be making some marked progress with movement.

The brothers said goodbye to Gene and headed back to Uncas’ room. They were expecting Dr. Navelli soon for one of his regular visits to check on his patients at Sunnyview. At this point Uncas was walking fine by himself, his balance having returned to nearly normal with only a very slight difference on his left side. He had asked to talk with one of the counselors available to patients here as well, and he had also attended a support group a few times. For now, they were holding off on medication to see how Uncas did with counseling and support, and he had agreed to let Yvette try some natural depression remedies along with that. He was feeling better overall, and they could re-evaluate in a couple of weeks to see where he was, and if he needed an extra boost he could agree to medication then.
Dr. Navelli arrived just as they were finishing with lunch, beginning the visit by running through his regular series of neurological checks, strength tests, and going over progress notes from Gene and any other on-site therapists who worked with Uncas.

“I’m really, really pleased with your progress,” he said with a satisfied smile. “You’ve come a long way here in the last seven weeks. You’re walking great, you’re almost totally independent except for your shoulder restrictions, and you’re making great strides with your PT. How are you feeling otherwise?”

“Not too bad. Physically I’ve got the shoulder pain of course, but mentally I’m feeling a little more squared away than I was a few weeks ago. I’m hoping that getting some more things back to normal will help later on, too.”

Dr. Navelli nodded. “Good. Good. Well, as long as we’re on the subject of getting back to normal, what do you think about getting out of this place and heading home?”

Uncas looked wide-eyed at a grinning Nathaniel, then back to the neurologist. “Uh, I’d say sign me up, and when can that happen?”

“As long as you’ve got adequate support at home and someone to drive you to appointments until you’re cleared, Dr. Robinson and I can coordinate continuing your therapy on an outpatient basis, and we can get you out of here in the next forty-eight hours, probably Wednesday morning. What do you think?”

“That would be fantastic, doc!”

“I have to go to work tonight, but by the time you’re discharged I’ll be off to come and take you home, and Mom and Dad wouldn’t miss it anyway,” Nathaniel told him. “I can start being around the house more if you’re going to be home, and I can take you to Cora’s with me when I need to be there – that would be good for you anyway.”

“Getting back to the things you normally do outside of work is a great idea, as long as you don’t overdo it,” Dr. Navelli agreed. “We’ll start working on getting you scheduled with Gene for outpatient therapy, and we’ll continue you with the counseling too, so we can see where you’re at after you settle in at home.”

“I can’t wait to tell Alice tonight,” he said, feeling more excited than he could remember since before the accident. “Hey, Nathaniel, do you think we could just bring ‘Tato Cat and Mrs. Nesbit and the fish to stay with us at the cabin until Alice comes home?”

“Sure, as long as that’s cool with Alice,” Nathaniel replied, glad to see how happy Uncas was right now, and excited himself at the prospect of finally having his brother at home so things would feel right there again instead of empty and lonely.

The next two days passed quickly, and after an entire morning of discharge assessments, paperwork, instructions, and a list of pre-scheduled outpatient appointments on Wednesday, Nathaniel, Sidney, and Yvette loaded Uncas into Nathaniel’s car and took him home to the cabin. It all happened so quickly that he almost didn’t feel ready for things to change again, and even though it was all he’d wanted for weeks, coming home to his own house felt much more emotional than he had expected it to be. He had missed it, but had been so preoccupied with everything else that he hadn’t realized just how much until he stepped through the door and smelled the familiar scent of the wood walls and floors, saw the photos on the wall and the table behind the couch, and stood in his bedroom, which Nathaniel had made sure was clean and tidy for his arrival. It was there that Nathaniel left him alone for a little while to join their parents in the kitchen, sensing that he needed
some solitude. It was there that he walked through the Jack-and-Jill bathroom, slowly putting his own things back, and finding little touches of Alice along the way; her soap and shampoo in the shower, the big fluffy dark green towels she had bought, insisting that his were too small and rough, her pajamas in his dresser drawer.

He sat down on the edge of his own bed for the first time in over two months, and a wave of longing sadness struck him hard enough to bring him to tears. It felt like so much longer than two months since he’d been here, and he found that he felt almost as if he was intruding on a stranger’s territory. He had thought coming home would make him feel more like his old self again, but instead it made him realize that he wasn’t really that person anymore, and he never would be again. How much everything had changed with a gust of wind, the slip of a boot on a slick rock ledge. The foundation of him was still the same, where he came from and the people he loved who helped shape him, but life and its events shaped people, too. Whether he liked it or not, this trauma was reworking him, and it wasn’t done yet. Neither was it done with Alice, but he’d rather have her by his side for this fight than ever be without her. Now he was finally home, but he wanted Alice to be home, too; there was still a great, gaping emptiness where she was physically missing from all this. She had been thrilled for him when he’d told her he was being discharged, but she had also cried because it was killing her to miss being there for it, and to know she still had time yet at Spaulding before she could come home, too. Any moment of happiness now always seemed tainted by the pang of separation, of missing out on each other’s milestones and changes, and it made them both sad. Uncas felt even worse knowing that Alice was now also saddled with a major decision about whether or not to renew her apartment lease, one more thing she wasn’t here to handle herself. Then inbetween all these big changes were so many agonizing baby steps, and sometimes all he wanted to do was yank himself out of the slow clutches of prescribed progress and just run, run as fast as he could forward, away from it, into a time when things wouldn’t feel like this anymore. Well, I hit rock bottom both literally and figuratively, so there’s nowhere to go but up, right? He told himself, calling to mind conversations with his counselor. One day at a time, one foot in front of the other. He sighed and stood up to go join his family. If nothing else, at least he was back home. One more step forward, on to the next thing.

The next couple of days were better as Uncas and Nathaniel started to settle into a new routine full of daily physical therapy exercises, appointments, bringing Alice’s pets to the cabin with her approval, and hanging out at Cora’s while Nathaniel took care of things there, still concluding the busy days with their regular evening calls to Alice and Cora in Boston. It made Uncas feel good to be getting out and about again, despite wishing Alice could be there too. He helped with what he was able to do at Cora’s, most of which consisted of practicing throwing a ball for Monty with his left arm, or playing with Scout and giving him adequate out-of-cage time while Nathaniel took care of the horses. He enjoyed the ferret’s antics, and felt bad having to put him back and leave him alone until the following day, as did Nathaniel, who had become rather attached to Cora’s menagerie since he’d practically been living at her house the past six weeks. Well intended ideas are often born of such feelings, but the best intentions also yield small disasters, as was the case the evening before Halloween, when Uncas called Alice on FaceTime in a slight panic.

“Uh, so… we have a little problem here,” he said, glancing over his shoulder.

“Is that Nathaniel back there? Why is he trying to crawl under the couch?” Alice asked, peering at the odd scene behind him in the cabin living room.

“Oh, yeah… he’s trying to get Mrs. Nesbit. She’s hiding under there and she won’t come out.”

“What? Why, what happened?” Cora interjected, her face poking into view beside Alice’s. At the sound of her voice, Nathaniel appeared beside Uncas, looking flustered.
“It’s my fault,” he confessed. “We felt kind of bad leaving Scout alone at the farmhouse, so I decided to bring him home to play with Mrs. Nesbit. She, uh, doesn’t seem to think that’s as great as we thought it would be.”

Cora clapped a hand over her face, horrified. “Oh, dear God, Nathaniel, NO!”

“Ferrets are a natural predator to guinea pigs,” Alice explained further. “Scout won’t hurt her, he’s domesticated, but Mrs. Nesbit doesn’t know that! Oh, God, my poor fur ball! It’s not funny, but it is!” She started to laugh, and so did Cora.

“This would be why you’ve never seen Mrs. Nesbit and Scout in the same room together before now,” Cora told them, trying to stifle her giggles.

“That might have been good to know before… I guess we should have asked. I’m sorry we accidentally traumatized your guinea pig, Alice,” Nathaniel said sheepishly, then disappeared again to try to retrieve the frightened animal.

“It’s all right, she’ll be okay,” Alice assured an equally guilty Uncas. “Just get Scout away from her and give her some lettuce and lots of cuddles.”

“Yeah, he’s currently sequestered in the spare room with ‘Tato Cat – she loves him,” Uncas replied with a chuckle. “They’re tackling and tossing all over the place.”

“Got her!” Nathaniel’s triumphant voice called out from the background amid Mrs. Nesbit’s soft weep weep noises. He came back beside Uncas and held her up cradled in his hands, so Alice could see that she was unharmed. “Sorry again. I’ll pack up the Fluffy Burrito of Doom and take him back to your house before anything else happens,” he told Cora.

“Good plan,” Cora laughed. “Monty would have missed him anyway. I’m heading back to my room now, call me when you’re done with that.” They said goodbye, and after Nathaniel had gone back to Cora’s with Scout, Uncas and Alice continued with their normal nightly talk, discussing how he was adjusting to being home, and what kind of hokey Halloween fun was being planned by the nurses and patients on Alice’s floor for the next evening. By the time Nathaniel returned, they were just concluding their chapter of The Little Prince, since they had already finished Jane Eyre. Uncas put the phone down with a long sigh after they had said goodnight and disconnected.

“Well, that was a little more excitement than we planned for,” he said to Nathaniel when he flopped down on the couch next to him.

“Heh. Just a little. It could have been worse. At least it turned out funny in the end, and we all got a laugh out of it, right?”

“Yeah,” Uncas smiled fondly. It had been nice to laugh and feel like they were all together again, even if it was only via FaceTime.

“So what did Alice decide to do about her apartment, anyway?”

“She’s not going to renew the lease, it’ll be too hard for her to live there with the stairs. I guess for now she’ll stay at Cora’s or Ed’s when she gets home, until she finds a new place.”


Uncas sighed again and groaned pitifully, leaning his head against the back of the couch. “Dammit, I really fucking miss her, dude.”
“I know you do,” Nathaniel replied quietly. “I hate it every time Cora has to go back, too. Not the same, but still.” Suddenly his lips curved in a devilish smile, and he looked over at Uncas. “But you’re not in the hospital anymore.”

Uncas was confused for a second, and then caught on, grinning broadly back at his brother. “You’re right. I’m not.”

“There, you look awesome!” Cora declared the next afternoon as she helped Alice put on her red wig, topping off her slightly sexy girl-next-door outfit of a form-fitting purple top and snug capri pants to complete her Mary Jane Watson costume for Halloween. Not wanting to wallow in loneliness and injury, she and some of her support group friends had decided to dress up as best they could and have a small Halloween party in the common room, with a little help from some of the nurses and techs.

“I don’t know, I think my cast boot messes with the aesthetic a little, but it’ll have to do, and it’s better than those anti-embolism stockings I had to wear for a while.” Alice laughed, pointing at her leg. She had decided to be Mary Jane, since Uncas had been planning to dress up as Spider-Man for the trick-or-treaters at home. In keeping with the couple’s costume theme, Cora was dressed in a blonde wig and a vintage olive-drab Army uniform as M.A.S.H.’s Margaret ‘Hotlips’ Houlihan, going along with Nathaniel’s Captain Hawkeye Pierce getup. Alice had laughed for hours over it when Cora had told her what they were planning.

“What’s the matter?” Cora asked when Alice’s smile faded for a moment.

“I just wish we could all be together for this. It seems like such a waste of perfectly awesome costumes to be apart, and it’s our first Halloween together – all four of us. It just sucks. You should have gone home so you could be with Nathaniel.”

“And leave you here? No way! I don’t like being away for this any more than you do, but we’re still going to have fun, and I’ll get to go home and see Nathaniel and Uncas next week. Plus, I don’t want to miss seeing what the other patients come up with for costumes. Speaking of which, we better get down there, we don’t want to be the last ones to the party.”

She handed Alice her crutches so they could head down to the patient lounge, where the staff and some of the patients’ family members had decorated and brought in snacks for the occasion. Alice soon felt less sad among her new friends, talking and appreciating one another’s creative costume ideas, and how some had even managed to incorporate their injuries into their outfits. Tara, the car crash amputee from down the hall, wore a diver costume with a stuffed shark attached to what was left of her leg below the knee. Alice loved her morbid sense of humor, and how she tried so hard to make the best of her situation and help other patients do the same. She thought that the little party had been a great idea for a pick-me-up for everyone, even the staff, who dropped in for a few minutes at a time when they could. Standing by the snack table near the door during a social lull, Cora craned her neck over Alice’s shoulder.

“Hey, check them out, I wonder who’s in there?” She mused curiously. Alice turned to see two people shuffle into the lounge wearing the inflatable Tyrannosaurus Rex costumes that were so ubiquitous in humorous internet media, their faces obscured by the one-way windows in the necks.

“Huh, I don’t know,” Alice said. “Everyone who said they were coming is here, so they’re either family members or extra patients who decided to show up.”
The two dinosaurs stopped, taking a moment to turn awkwardly and look around the room, and then headed in their direction, stopping beside them to wave their comically short arms.

Cora burst out laughing. “Hey, who are you guys? Are you party-crashing?” The T. Rex on the left shrugged silently as if to say ‘maybe’.

“All right, who’s in there?” Alice asked with a giggle, trying to peer through the grey mesh window in the dinosaur’s neck. “At least say hi or something!”

She and Cora both yelped in surprised confusion when the two air-filled dinosaurs reached out and grabbed them in an incredibly awkward hug, Alice nearly dropping her crutches. Suddenly, familiar laughter bubbled up from inside the dinosaurs, and they let the sisters go to unzip the fronts and take the costumes off, revealing Uncas in a Spider-Man suit with his spandex mask pulled up onto his forehead, and Nathaniel in a vintage Army outfit similar to Cora’s. Both men wore wide, boyish grins.

“Oh my GOD! UNCAS!” Alice shrieked, unable to help herself. Her crutches clattered to the floor as she threw her arms around him and kissed him with abandon, not caring that every eye in the room was on the four of them now. He didn’t seem to care, either. After more than six weeks apart, being in the same room together was all either of them cared about right now.

“Alice… I’m so damn glad to see you,” Uncas whispered, holding her as tight as he could manage. “I missed you so much.”

“Me too!” she cried, sniffling through her happy tears. “I can’t believe you’re here! You didn’t say anything about coming out!”

“It was kind of a spontaneous decision last night, and Uncas wanted to surprise you,” Nathaniel said, his arm tight around Cora. “Spider-Man needed his Mary Jane, and I needed my Hotlips Houlihan, so here we are.” He grinned and gave Cora a kiss. Alice reached out to hug him next, balancing on her good leg.

“Thanks, Captain Hawkeye. You’re the best. It’s good to see you in person.” She squeezed him and kissed his cheek.

“It’s great to see you too, especially up and around and feeling better than the last time I saw you. You look great.”

“Of course she does,” Uncas smiled, handing her back her crutches and wrapping an arm around her for support. “She’s the best Mary Jane ever. I guess I should put my mask on, huh?” He started to pull it downward, then stopped. “Or maybe I’ll wait so I can meet everyone here,” he leaned a little closer to whisper in Alice’s ear, “and kiss my beautiful girlfriend.”

Alice beamed happily and leaned against him. Everything felt a hundred times better now that he was here with her. “By all means. But for now, we’ll play nice and introduce you guys to everyone.”

Since Uncas wasn’t scheduled for physical therapy over the weekend and Nathaniel didn’t have to work, they had decided to get a hotel room close to Spaulding and stay until Sunday evening, when Cora would go back to New York along with them and switch out for the next week with Ed. Uncas and Alice spent as much time together as they could, both visiting at the hospital, and signing her out for a few hours so the four of them could go do things together. Circumstances and
environment didn’t give them a lot of privacy, but Alice didn’t care. Him being here was enough, and she had missed everyone at home so much that she was just glad to have the four of them together for a little while, and to see Uncas so much happier. He smiled more than she’d seen in two months, and it rubbed off on her, too. Even Nathaniel and Cora seemed to feel a weight lift at seeing them reunited, if only for a short visit.

“That’s one hell of a wind chill coming off the harbor,” Uncas remarked with a little shiver, zipping up his jacket as he and Alice sat together on a rock near the shoreline, her crutches leaning nearby while she rested. They had all come down to the harbor to relax and enjoy the view after visiting the USS Constitution at the Boston Navy Yard on the Mystic River nearby; Cora had been wanting to go see it, and it was a fun thing for them all to do as a group.

“Yeah, it’s getting colder by the day, and you definitely notice it more by the water. It’s hard to believe it’s November already,” Alice replied, squinting against the sunlight to locate Nathaniel and Cora, their distant figures walking hand in hand down the shore with Cora’s bright scarf blowing to one side.

“These things are cool. They’re all over the place.” Uncas poured a handful of tiny snail shells he’d picked up into Alice’s palm, varied in color from cream to grey to brown, some plain and some marbled or striated. They could be found by the hundreds in the rough, pebbly sand along the harbor beach. “I should take some home to Mom, she’d probably make jewelry or something else pretty out of them.”

“Oh, I bet she’d love that.” Alice smiled, touching the delicate shells and snuggling into his warmth. She unzipped his jacket pocket and stowed the snail shells inside. “I wish you didn’t have to go home tomorrow. Time was going by so slowly until the minute you got here, and now the whole weekend is flying.”

Uncas embraced her, basking in the simple pleasure of just being able to hold her somewhat comfortably again with both arms. “I wish I could stay with you longer, *welsit awèn,*” he said forlornly, “but I’ve got therapy scheduled on Monday, and you’ll be back to your busy days too. Besides, you won’t have to be here too much longer. Just a few more weeks, and then you can come home to me.”

“I can’t wait,” she sighed, slipping a hand around the back of his neck to pet the velvety, close-shorn hair of the undercut Ashley had given him in September. “Of course, I won’t really have my own home to come back to anymore by then, but I’ll be back with you, and with my family, so at least there’s that, right?”

“Well, that depends.”

“On what?” She pulled back at looked at him quizzically.

“On you. Nathaniel and I were talking on the drive out here, and we wondered what you’d think about... about maybe coming home to the cabin. We could get all your stuff moved out of the apartment before you come back, and talk about what furniture to store and what can go in the house, and there aren’t any stairs, so - ”

“Hold on,” Alice held up a hand to pause him, her eyes wide. “Are you asking me to move in with you? Like live together?”

“Yeah...” he replied nervously, second guessing the idea for the first time. Would she want to? Were they ready? He felt like he was doing all this ass-backward, since he’d planned to propose to her first, but the last couple of months had given him enough time to realize that while he wanted
forever with Alice, he’d been a little too eager after only four months together, and at this point he still felt like he wanted to be in a better place life-wise when he made the decision to really ask her. But she was about to lose her apartment thanks to her broken leg, and engagement or not, he didn’t want her or her pets to be homeless, or anywhere else but with him.

“Nathaniel is good with that?” She asked. “I mean, it’s his house too, and you guys have only ever lived there together.” She loved the cabin, and the idea of living there with Uncas. It was such a serene, beautiful place, and it was so close to Cora, too, which would be great for both having her sister nearby and for having better access to Blue Feather when she could ride again. It certainly made up for losing her apartment, but she didn’t want to intrude on personal space or step on any toes. She had spent a lot of time over there before and Nathaniel had never once made her feel like she was doing that then, but moving in and bringing her stuff with her, changing their environment, that was a whole different ballgame.

Uncas shrugged. “He’s totally on board, he actually said he was already thinking about it when I brought it up. He spends most of his time at Cora’s now anyway, and he wants you to have a home to come back to, just like I do. And not a temporary thing. I mean permanent, as long that’s what you want, too, Alice. I just… I love you, and I don’t want to miss anything else with you. I want us to be there for each other, I want to be able to take care of you the way I haven’t been able to all this time. So much else has changed, and I know this is a big change for us, too, but I really want this to be one for the better.”

Alice’s eyes filled with tears, and she cupped his chilly face in her hands. “I want that, too. I want all of that. I just want to be with you and work at getting back to normal, together.”

“So is that a yes?” He smiled a little. “Because ‘Tato Cat and Mrs. Nesbit are already settled in and all, so…”

“Yes,” she replied, laughing softly. “We have a lot more to talk about before you leave if this is going to happen, but of course it’s a yes.”

His grin widened as he pulled her gently onto his lap and kissed her over and over again until they were both breathless, both savoring the feel, the scent of one another, the raven-black strands of his hair mingling with the honey-gold strands of hers in the cold harbor breeze, brushing softly across their hands as each held the other close. Finally, there was a light at the end of this tunnel, they just had to keep reaching, and keep remembering all the things that were most important.

The following week while Cora was home, she spent most of the first part of it starting to pack things up at Alice’s apartment in preparation to move her into the cabin. While Nathaniel was at work on Tuesday, she and Uncas picked up boxes and took care of the bedroom and bathroom upstairs. On Wednesday, Nathaniel went over with her to pack up the kitchen and small things in the living room while Uncas stayed home to rearrange a few things he could manage alone, and make more plans with Alice by phone for what furniture and household items would go to the cabin, and what would go in storage until they decided what to do with it. Cora would be going back for her first shift at AirMedic the next evening, and she felt more apprehensive getting back in the saddle after the hiking accident and rescue than she had on her first shift since the helicopter crash. She was glad to be able to throw herself into the packing effort to distract her from her anxiety about it.

“Do you want me to just stack full boxes in the corner over here?” Nathaniel called into the living room, finished with the cabinet by the stove.
“Yeah, that’s perfect,” Cora replied, setting the last armful of movie discs in a small carton and closing it. “Then Ashley and I can just grab them and go while you and Brian and Pop load furniture.” Ed would be home on Friday night instead of Sunday, and they had arranged to rent a truck over the weekend to move as much of Alice’s apartment as they could with help from their friends. The final sweep could be done later, but this way they would have plenty of time to sort and settle by the time Alice came home. Nathaniel had decided to switch rooms with Uncas at the cabin and give him and Alice the master suite, citing that it made more sense for them to have it since he and Cora didn’t stay there that often anyway. Sidney and Yvette would help Uncas rearrange things there along with Jack and Alexandra, while the rest of them handled the apartment in Albany and putting things in storage.

Cora stood up to stretch her legs, then set up another box to start packing the photos on the walls and side tables. Her previously enthusiastic momentum stumbled as she picked the frames up one by one. Used to the photos in her own home, she hadn’t really looked at any of these in a long time. There were family ones from before Maureen’s death, of course, and then there were ones from later, too. Her and Alice on Alice’s first day of high school. The two of them with Ed on the night of Alice’s senior prom, both Cora and Ed standing in full dress uniform with Alice in the gown she and Cora had picked out together. Alice’s high school graduation, posing only with Ed because much to her grief, Cora had had to miss it due to being deployed. There were others of them together later; on aerial silks together when Alice had taught her as therapy after she’d come home to New York. Them and Ed smudged with dirt and paint from working on the farmhouse after Cora had bought it. Her and Alice perched on Ranger and Blue Feather right after they had brought them to live at the farm – that had been about when Cora had finally settled into her new life outside the Navy. The photos held a lot of reminders of how she had taken care of Alice, but also of how Alice had taken care of her, too, with Ed there to support them both when they needed it.

For thirteen years, everything had seemed so black and white to Cora. Either she could care for Alice or she couldn’t, or then Alice was caring for her, and now this had all happened and she was back to caring for Alice. Their roles had shifted and changed as time and circumstance required it, but the lines seemed more blurred now. There had certainly been times when one or the other of them had been a primary caregiver, but she understood now that even in those times, and especially inbetween, she and Alice had simply taken care of each other, in subtle ways she had never realized until now. They had grown together, changed and become together through everything. They weren’t teenagers anymore, they were adults, and with that came the need for Cora to let go of the rigidity of her past convictions, and to see the grey areas that existed in all those years. To acknowledge that neither she or Alice were the people they had been thirteen years ago, or six years ago, or even six months ago. Her counseling sessions with Virginia had helped her understand the fear she had always felt whenever something changed in a big way, because in the past, change had often presented with something terrible. Maureen’s death, the helicopter crash and losing Duncan, the loss of her Navy career, and Uncas and Alice’s accident. But inbetween those times, change didn’t always happen that way, even though her first instinct had often still been to get scared and run from it - like when she had met Nathaniel, and even a few weeks ago when she’d had to face relinquishing some control over caring for Alice. But at the end of the day, Alice and Nathaniel had both been right. They were getting on with life, and she and Alice now both had other people who loved them and wanted to care for them. So now here she was, packing up all these memories, helping Alice to move forward into this new uncharted territory of life with Uncas, just as she herself was doing in her own world. Just as they would all continue to do for the rest of their lives, because that was just how life worked, and understanding that without fighting it made life work a little better.

“You okay?” Nathaniel murmured, coming into the room and sitting down on the couch next to her. “You got awfully quiet in here.”
“Yeah,” she replied. “Just thinking about things. Everything keeps changing.” He listened quietly as she explained a little of what she’d been mulling over. “I’m nervous about going back to work tomorrow night, too,” she added. “It’s the first time since all this happened, since…” she shrugged helplessly and looked away, a wave of emotion breaking her voice. Nathaniel sighed and put his arms around her as she curled up against him, seeking his solid reassurance.

“I get it. The first shift back was hard for me, too, and it’s still weird without Uncas. But I’ll be there with you, and so will Brian. As for everything else, things will keep changing, and we’ll just have to roll with it, like we’ve all been doing. This move will be okay, and it’ll be good to have Alice around. And hey, now she’ll just be a few miles away from you, right?”

Cora smiled softly. “Yeah, I like that part. I wouldn’t have minded her staying with me, but I don’t think that’s what she wanted, not really. She has her own life now, and she needs a solid place to land when this is done, not to stay in limbo.”

“Hmmm. Yeah. It’ll be good for Uncas, too. It’s a perfect win-win, they’ll be together, Alice will be closer to you, and I can still have you all to myself at your place,” he teased with a grin.

“I knew you had ulterior motives,” she laughed, planting a kiss on his lips. Her face grew serious again as she placed her hand on his cheek, fixing his attention for a moment with her earnest gaze. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being amazing. For helping your brother make sure my sister has a place to come home to. And taking care of my home, too, while I run back and forth to Boston. But mostly for calling me on my bullshit and loving me even when I’m full of it.”

“I’m proud of you for the way you’ve come through everything in your life, Cora, and I wouldn’t take you any other way,” he said softly, his thumb stroking down the side of her face.

“You make my life better, and I just want to do the same for you.”


“There's the wind and the rain,
And the mercy of the fallen,
Who say they have no claim to know what's right.
There's the weak and the strong and the beds that have no answer,
And that's where I may rest my head tonight.”

-Dar Williams-

Author’s Note:

I don’t know about you, but I’m really glad that things are starting to look up for Uncas, Alice, Nathaniel, and Cora. On the surface when I first started it, this chapter didn’t feel very eventful, but it is – just not the same way the last several were. This one is all about changes. Cora faces going back to work and some major personal reflection, and Nathaniel is right beside her. Uncas faces going home and the realization of how much he’s changed while he has been away, and just like he is with Cora, Nathaniel is with Uncas for this, too. Alice faces having to give up her apartment, and what
she will come home to when she leaves Spaulding in a few weeks, and Cora, Uncas, and Nathaniel all have a hand in helping her deal with that. Cora’s previous instinct would have been to step in and handle everything for Alice, but in this chapter, she’s getting to a place where she understands that it is best to let Alice make her own choices, and for her to just be there to help however she can. That’s a big step for Cora.<br />

In the beginning, we get to see a little bit of the recovery work for Uncas and Alice, and meet their physical therapists. Does that part count as the physical therapy montage I joked about? Alice’s PT guy is cool, but Uncas’ therapist Gene is my favorite! I sort of hijacked him - he was totally inspired by Daniel Day-Lewis’ fencing partner in Stars and Bars, played by Keith David (that movie is so ridiculously outlandish, but it’s also rather entertaining as it is the only frank comedy I have ever seen Daniel Day-Lewis do, and he looked pretty cute in fencing knickers). I fenced in college and for a while after. It is a lot of fun and a lot of hard work, and I liked the idea of a therapist using some fencing exercises to spice up Uncas’ routine – nothing risky to him, of course. Making up interesting characters is always fun, anyway.<br />

Best of all, Nathaniel and Uncas got to orchestrate a surprise visit to Boston after their comical ferret/guinea pig adventure (this is a thing – guinea pigs and rabbits are, in most cases, terrified of ferrets, but of course there are always exceptions. Mrs. Nesbit is not one). A trip to Boston for the guys was really nice to give to all of them, especially Uncas and Alice. They won’t ever totally get their old lives back, but things like this give them some genuine happiness, and a chance to be together and feel a little more normal. That included getting Alice out to go do something fun, which most rehab hospitals do allow for noncritical patients. I chose a visit to the Constitution since MedicineWoman planted that seed earlier, and it suited well because the harbor afterward was a good setting for Uncas and Alice to talk privately. Little details are always fun to include, and those tiny snail shells Uncas picked up are all over the place on parts of the Boston Harbor shoreline, I have a little bag of them from when I was there years ago. Halloween was a perfect setup for Nathaniel and Uncas to show up unannounced, since Uncas had joked before about dressing up as a T. Rex with his bad shoulder, and those costumes were a fun way for the guys to disguise themselves and really catch Alice and Cora off guard. Did you like the Halloween costumes? Uncas and Alice were always destined to dress as Spider-Man and Mary Jane Watson, of course. I initially almost had Cora and Nathaniel keep the comic book theme and dress as Hawkeye and Mockingbird from the Marvel Avengers, but dressing them as Captain Benjamin ‘Hawkeye’ Pierce and nurse Margaret ‘Hotlips’ Houlihan from M.A.S.H., made more sense to me, since Nathaniel has always been Captain Hawkeye to Alice and Cora in this story. I thought it would be nice all around for the patients at the hospital to have some Halloween fun, and I like Alice’s friend Tara - I know someone like her.<br />

On a serious note, I wanted the visit to happen mostly because I didn’t want Uncas to bring up Alice moving in with him over the phone, just like I didn’t want Cora and Nathaniel to fix their big fight over the phone in the last chapter. This is a MAJOR life decision, coming at a time when everything is in upheaval for these two anyway, and they needed an opportunity to discuss it in person. They have both had some very somber and important revelations in this chapter, so this isn’t a decision that is made lightly, or one that just magically fixes everything. They know they still have a long way to go, but this is a positive step in their relationship to move forward and commit to healing together as a team. They probably wouldn’t have done this so quickly if it hadn’t been for Alice’s lease ending and the very real issue of her not being able to use the stairs at her place safely, but sometimes people just have to make the best of a crazy situation. So that all wraps up with Cora’s personal musings and realizations as she and Nathaniel are helping pack up Alice’s apartment. Big changes can cause a lot of panic in people like Cora, but there does come a time when you have to accept that it will always happen, because nothing and no one ever stays the same. The best thing Cora can do now is honor the past, but let it go in the recognition that it is a rung on a ladder she’s going to be climbing till the day she dies. Not all change is bad and scary, and she is starting to be more comfortable with that, with Nathaniel and her family there to lift her up and give her a nudge here and there.<br />

The theme song for this chapter is “Farewell to the Old Me” by Dar Williams. Her music and her
poignant lyrics have been instrumental for me in so many situations. That particular song was a perfect fit for the bittersweet changes and epiphanies happening in this chapter, and it’s kind of threaded through everyone’s thoughtful scenes along with other songs. In the physical therapy scenes in the beginning I had in mind the song (not Eye of the Tiger, Nathaniel!) “Hard Love” by NeedToBreathe (I like the version with Lauren Daigle). It’s a great motivational song, and it also echoes the chapter’s theme of working through hard times and getting stronger in the process. When Alice is thinking after the apartment issue, her song is “Breathe It Out” by Paul Gross (yeah that guy again!). When Uncas goes home and he’s alone in his room thinking, and again when he and Alice are talking by the harbor, I was hearing “She’s the One” by World Party. Through the guys having their pet adventure and missing the girls, and the girls missing them at the start of Halloween, I like “So Far Away” by Dire Straits. The Proclaimers’ “I’m Gonna Be (500 Miles)” was perfect for when Nathaniel and Uncas showed up at Spaulding to surprise Cora and Alice. At the beginning of the last scene when Cora is packing up Alice’s stuff, “Sunny Came Home” by Shawn Colvin was my song of choice, and the second half of that where she’s coming to terms with all her realizations about her and Alice, and she and Nathaniel are talking, another Dar Williams song called “Mercy of the Fallen” was perfect for that.<br />

That’s it for chapter 17, so stay tuned for more! I’ll try to update again as soon as I can – being done with school and not back to work just yet helps with that. Thank you all so much for reading, reviewing, following, and supporting. I truly appreciate the time readers take to comment. This story doesn’t have a lot further to go, which is always a sad realization, but there is time yet for lots more to happen before it’s officially over!
A New Beginning

Chapter Summary

Alice finally comes home, and the two families enjoy some wonderful holiday time together amidst some very important events.

Chapter Notes

Author's note included in chapter text.

Chapter 18 – A New Beginning

“Open up my eyes, everything has changed
Nothing stays the same, nothing stays the same
Look into the sky, the sun is shining bright
Everything’s all right, everything’s all right

And don’t ask me to surrender
Don’t ask me to retreat
And don’t ask if I remember, yeah
‘Cause you know that I believe

The more I look, the more I find
It’s getting better all the time
The more I see, the more I try
To understand, to understand

So let me run, let me fly
Look into my soul tonight
I’m ready for some peace of mind
I’m on my way, it’s in my sight
So let me run, let me fly
Look into my soul tonight
I’m ready for, I’m ready for
A new beginning

There’s something in my mind, I keep it all inside
I need to open wide, I need to feel alive
And if you see me cry, don’t worry, I’m all right
‘Cause I can see the light, yes I can see it

And don’t ask me to surrender
Don’t ask me to retreat, no, no, no
And don’t ask if I remember, yeah
‘Cause you know that I believe
The more I look, the more I find
It’s getting better all the time
The more I see, the more I try
To understand, to understand

So let me run, let me fly
Look into my soul tonight
I’m ready for some peace of mind
I’m on my way, it’s in my sight
So let me run, let me fly
Look into my soul tonight
I’m ready for, I’m ready for
A new beginning
A new beginning
A new beginning...”
As the next few weeks passed, sections of the time seemed to flow with agonizing slowness, and then suddenly days would fly by as if they held no hours at all – it depended only upon who was living the day, and how it was being lived. Cora’s time in Boston passed far more slowly than her time in New York. She and Nathaniel tended to divide their time more equally between her house and the cabin now that Uncas was home from Sunnyview and Alice’s pets were there, and moving Alice’s apartment and rearranging the cabin took up the time she didn’t spend on other things that needed doing. After her initial anxiety about returning to work at AirMedic, she was settling back into it and feeling comfortable, and found herself looking forward to coming home for good so that she could get back on a regular weekly work schedule at the hospital, too. Nathaniel stayed busy with work, spending time with Cora either on necessary tasks or making time to do things they enjoyed, and switching off driving duty with Sidney, shuttling Uncas to physical therapy and doctor or counseling appointments. Uncas’ recovery was still going very well, with his manual dexterity and strength improving slowly but steadily, and his shoulder range of motion increasing. With the fracture and the soft tissues healing up well, Dr. Robinson had given Gene the go-ahead to start him on mild strength exercises for his arm and shoulder, with a program to stick to at home between appointments. Where at first Uncas had worked with a therapist almost every day, now he had the home routine down well enough to drop down to just two appointments per week with Gene, to add new exercises and monitor his progress. Once he was able to steer a vehicle comfortably and safely, he would be cleared to drive again. While he still longed to go back to paramedic work, now that he was home and had some breathing room along with his therapy goals and Alice’s impending homecoming to look forward to, the depression had lifted enough that he felt more like himself most of the time.

For Alice, it was much the same as it had always been for her at Spaulding, with days full of physical therapy that was growing more intense as her leg improved. The broken bones were healing well thanks to the LIPUS therapy, and the painful, hard work she’d done over the past two months with Garrett had done well to recondition her lower leg muscles and tissues. Even so, she still got some swelling from the damage to her lymphatic tissue the open fracture had caused, so she had to wear a support stocking on her left leg most of the time, and would be sent home with an intermittent compression device to wear at night. She continued to practice yoga to keep her body and mind balanced and in shape, and that normalcy combined with her support group and the general support of her family and friends kept her feeling positive as she looked forward to going home. Dr. Harding, her orthopedic specialist at Spaulding, had her begin a mild weight bearing trial on her leg in mid-November. She started by utilizing the hospital’s therapy pool, and then had her try it with her crutches supporting most of her weight for now. Dr. Harding was pleased when the trial succeeded with no issues, so she and Dr. Coleman agreed that Alice could be discharged the following week, just a few days before Thanksgiving. Once she was home, Dr. Coleman would resume caring for her, and get her scheduled with a physical therapist in Albany to continue working on her recovery. She would be able to go back to work at the dispatch center as soon as she felt settled and ready, and she had been told that she could help out with floor classes at the yoga studio if she wanted to, until she was cleared to resume teaching her aerial classes.

The last week in Boston seemed to crawl by more slowly than any of the time Alice had spent there already. Cora was equally antsy, having stayed over her normal week since Alice would be discharged on Monday, and she wanted to be there to help her pack up her things and drive her home. Cora’s impatience was partially born of missing Nathaniel, as she always did, but she was also entirely too ready to just have Alice back in New York again so that she could settle down into her
new home at the cabin, and there would be no more missing her - or Alice missing all of them. Most importantly, as Cora knew too well, that would be when Alice could finally start to rebuild her life and get herself back the way she hadn’t been able to while she was far away from everything familiar to her. Alice knew all this just as well, and she thought for sure she would go mad waiting out the last couple of days of her stay at Spaulding. She couldn’t wait to just be free of all this inpatient business and get on with moving forward; to see Uncas again and be at home with him for good, and to see Sidney and Yvette and her pets, and all their friends. She would miss the friends she’d made here, but they all had to be discharged eventually, and they had all agreed to keep in touch as they went home one by one.

Finally, Alice’s homecoming day arrived. She was discharged in the morning with a heartfelt send-off from the unit staff, her physical therapist, and her remaining fellow patients. Cora loaded their bags into her car and got Alice situated in the front passenger seat, moving it back all the way so she could stretch out her legs for better circulation and comfort on the trip. Alice nodded off a short while into the drive and slept all the way until Cora exited Interstate 90 onto the toll road toward Albany; despite the fact that she was practically vibrating with excitement over being free of hospitals at last, she hadn’t slept very well the night before in anticipation of it, and she had stayed up late talking to Uncas. He was as thrilled as she was about her finally coming home, and all their family and friends would be there to greet her when she and Cora arrived. Nathaniel had even taken his Monday shift off so he wouldn’t have to miss out on welcoming her to her new home at the cabin – though she suspected privately that it had just as much to do with him wanting to give Cora a proper welcome home, too.

At the cabin in Wynantskill, Nathaniel and Ed were helping Sidney and Yvette with food prep in the kitchen; Yvette had decided to cook some of Alice’s favorite foods, and was currently making fry bread at the stove. Brian and Ashley would be here any minute with Jack, Ryan, James, and Susan not far behind them, and Alexandra would be along a little later once she was off work at the school. Nathaniel turned from the kitchen counter to find Uncas staring longingly out the window by the front door for about the thousandth time in the last half hour.

“If you had a tail, you’d be thumping it on the floor just like Monty does when he knows Cora’s coming home,” he chuckled.

“Sorry,” Uncas replied with a little smile. “I just want her to be here already.”

“I get it, you don’t have to apologize. I’m just messing with you.”

“Come and help your father cut up this squash, nkwis. It’ll keep you busy,” Yvette said, waving a floury hand at the cutting board on the counter.

“Uh, probably not the best job for me, Mom, my grip is still kind of off kilter, remember?” Uncas held up his right hand, which still wasn’t operating at full capacity after his shoulder injury. “I don’t think Cora’s going to feel like stitching my finger back on as soon as she pulls in the driveway.”

“T’m standing right here,” Sidney countered. “The practice will be good for you, come on. I won’t let you cut your fingers off, just go slow.”

Uncas shrugged. “Knives, swords, whatever. Gene would approve, anyway. All right, Dad.” He picked up a knife to get started.

“Uh-oh,” Yvette said, picking something up off the counter as she moved the flour canister closer to her. “Who lost a button?” She held up a small, pearly grey disc.
“Not me,” Uncas replied, glancing at Nathaniel. “You?”

“Uh… yeah, it might be…,” he mumbled, a mild blush creeping up his face. He took the button from Yvette and averted his eyes, having brief flashbacks of the night Cora had come home after their fight several weeks ago, and the button-down shirt she had been wearing that he’d been a little too eager to get off of her as they had come into the house from out back. They hadn’t made it past the living room, which was likely how the flying button had ended up where Yvette had found it.

Nathaniel shoved the button in his back pocket and went back to what he was doing to the tune of Uncas quietly snickering behind him, stopping again a few minutes later to get the door when Brian, Ashley, Jack and the kids arrived. The adults headed into the kitchen to help while as usual, the kids made a beeline for Uncas and Nathaniel, ending knife activity for Uncas in favor of roughhousing in the living room. It wasn’t long before Alexandra showed up as well, giving Jack a kiss hello and laughing at the scene of Nathaniel with James over one shoulder and Ryan tucked under his arm, both boys howling with excitement, and Susan screeching with laughter on the couch as Uncas tickled her ribs. When a car horn honked out front a few minutes later, the children went silent and both men stopped dead, looking at each other for half a second.

“They’re here!” Uncas yelled as he sprang to his feet and ran to the front door. Nathaniel set the boys down and followed him, the children clamoring along not far behind. In the driveway, Cora was helping Alice get out of the passenger seat with her crutches, and Uncas stopped short distance away, grinning like a schoolboy. She stood up straight and smiled radiantly back at him, and he started toward her, stopping again when he saw that she had begun walking toward him with slow determination. Her weight was supported heavily by the crutches, but she was walking to him, looking at him with those beautiful hazel eyes, and tears welled in his own eyes along with the pride that swelled in his heart. When she reached him, she went straight into his waiting arms, the crutches falling at her sides as she wrapped him in a fierce embrace and he kissed her thoroughly, holding her tight.

“It’s so good to be back,” Alice said, pressing her face against the warm crook of Uncas’ neck. “I’ve been dreaming of this.”

“Me too. Welcome home, welsit awèn,” he sighed, amid the children’s happy shouts as they ran to Alice and Cora for hugs.

“What’s all this?” Alice laughed and grinned at the boisterous crew coming at her. “Am I moving into a zoo here, or what?”

“It’s a testament to how much we all missed you,” Uncas replied, kissing her on top of her head. “Let’s get your stuff unloaded and go inside, everyone’s here and they’re all dying to see you, and Mom’s been cooking for hours.”

Between Cora, Nathaniel and the kids, Alice’s bags were removed and taken indoors, and she walked carefully to the house with her crutches.

“I’m sorry I can’t carry you over the threshold into your new home,” Uncas apologized ruefully when they approached the front door. “I’m not quite there yet with my shoulder.”

“That’s okay. You can just help me walk inside so I can show everyone my mad new bipedal skills.” Alice kissed him and held onto his left arm, holding the crutches in her other hand so she could lean on him for support. He helped her step into the cabin, where she was immediately surrounded and greeted with happy shouts and tears of joy from Ed, Yvette, Sidney, and all their friends. The cabin’s open floor plan was perfect for enjoying all the company she had missed so
much, since there was nothing separating the kitchen from the living area; this way she could settle onto the couch with Uncas, leaning back against him while she rested her booted leg across the cushions. Sweet Potato leapt up to butt her ginger head against Alice’s neck and lay on her lap, purring loudly, and Cora brought Mrs. Nesbit in so Alice could cuddle the guinea pig on her chest, letting the kids take turns holding her after she’d had a chance to give her plenty of love. The rest of the afternoon and evening were spent celebrating, with everyone catching up and laughing, talking a little about the future, and eating Yvette’s delicious cooking. Alice even got an official tour of the cabin after dinner, so that Uncas could show her how he and Nathaniel and Cora had rearranged the bedrooms and incorporated some of Alice’s things into the décor. She hadn’t quite known how she would feel coming home to the cabin and never seeing her apartment again as she had left it, but she was relieved and happy to find that there was a sense of rightness to seeing her things here in the cabin meshed with Uncas and Nathaniel’s world to make it feel like it was her world now too, and she was deeply touched by the care that had obviously gone into choosing what went where when she had left it up to them to decide on some of it.

After a while, their guests began to bow out, Brian and Jack taking off first since they were both working at AirMedic tonight, followed by Ashley, who was headed to work at the hospital. Ed left Alice and Cora with hugs and kisses and a plan to take them all to breakfast at Jack’s Diner on Wednesday morning, and Yvette and Sidney left behind him with promises to see them on Thursday for the big family gathering Yvette had planned for Thanksgiving – “to be together, and be thankful for each other, and our Alice coming home,” she said with a teary-eyed smile as they made their exit, making Alice choke up a little, too.

“We’ll get out of your hair now too, let you guys enjoy some time alone for once,” Nathaniel said, putting on his coat while Cora fussed nervously over Alice and Uncas.

“You guys will be okay alone?” she asked.

“We’ll be fine, Cora,” Alice assured her.

“I’ll take good care of her, I promise,” Uncas winked. “And you’re only a few miles away anyway. Don’t sweat it.”

“Okay,” Cora replied, stepping back beside Nathaniel to take her coat from him and put it on. “If you’re sure. But if you guys need anything at all, just call, or - ”

Nathaniel exchanged a good-natured eye-roll with Alice as he gently took Cora by the shoulders and pulled her toward him. “Cora, they’re fine.” He kissed her soundly, then leaned close to her ear and whispered something. A flaming blush rose on her cheeks, and her lips curved in a dreamy little smile as he finished whispering and brushed his lips across her cheek. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

When they had gone, Uncas shut the front door firmly behind them and locked it, then turned back to Alice where she stood behind him.

“Alone at last.” His deep voice resonated in the silence. The corner of his mouth lifted in a little smile, but it didn’t rid his dark eyes of the smoldering intent she saw there. Though she had seen it many times before, there was a newness to it after everything that had happened since the last time they had been together, after months of yearning for this moment, and it made her stomach flutter and her heart pound with heady anticipation as if it were the very first time. There had been no place or opportunity for intimacy when Uncas had visited her in Boston, and both of them had felt the slow-burning torment of waiting out the last few weeks before she came home. Now they were completely alone, and there was nothing standing in their way. Alice’s breath quickened when he slowly reached out to touch her cheek, the slight nervous tremor in his hand belying the intense, steady
hunger in his gaze as his fingertips trailed down her cheek and then the side of her neck. She closed her eyes, her lips parting with a tiny gasp at the thrilling promise of his touch on her skin, his hands coming back to cup her jaw as he ran his thumbs gently across her bottom lip.

“Uncas…” she breathed, her crutches clattering to the wood floor as she leaned into him, her arms sliding around his neck, her fingers threading into the silky length of his hair hanging loose down his back. He shuddered slightly, drawing a shaky breath and pulling her flush against him, her soft curves pressing into the harder planes of him. His lips touched the thrumming pulse in her neck before he looked back down at her, his dark eyes flashing in the dim lamplight.

“I can’t tell you how much I’ve wanted this, Alice.” The rich baritone of his voice vibrated against her chest where they were pressed together, sending a wave of yearning through her. She gazed up at him, her eyes hooded.

“You and me both,” she whispered. “So what are we waiting for?”

“Not a damn thing, anymore,” he replied, his mouth covering hers before she could even draw another breath. Her lips parted beneath his to admit the fervent stroke of his tongue across hers, and she moaned softly as his hand stole beneath the hem of her sweater, grazing over her ribcage and caressing the soft side of her breast where it was pressed tight against his body. Still holding her close to support her, he guided her down the hallway toward their new bedroom, stopping for a moment when she stumbled a little.

“I’m all right,” Alice assured him when he pulled back from her with a worried expression, her hands grasping the front of his henley shirt to pull him back to her waiting mouth. Losing himself a little to the baser part of his mind, he grabbed the hem of her sweater and yanked it over her head, tossing it to the floor and leaving her in just the bra she wore beneath it, the Spider-Man one she’d been wearing the night he’d fallen off the lyra at her apartment. He laughed with soft appreciation.

“Did you wear that just for me?” he asked, then nudged her head backward, nipping her collarbone and running his tongue along the sensitive skin of her breasts at the edges of the bra cups.

“Mmmhmmm,” she answered breathlessly, her body in overdrive, impatient and desperate to touch and be touched. “The panties, too.”

He made a low sound of pleasure and continued up her sternum, then from the hollow of her throat to her chin. His hands cupped her breasts, thumbs grazing over her nipples, eliciting another slightly louder moan from her that set him on fire inside. She reached out and pulled his shirt off over his head, exposing the expanse of coppery skin and muscle that she so longed to touch, marred by the still-pink surgery scars cutting across his right shoulder and collarbone, but somehow more beautiful to her because of them. Hands roaming across his back, her lips touched the swell of one shoulder and traveled across the tattoo on his chest to the other side, her tongue softly flicking over his scars. He groaned, and she could feel how hard he was against her belly.

“We need to keep moving before I lay you down and take you right here in this hallway,” he growled, his words rippling straight to her core where she ached for him. She let him pull her along, shuffling carefully with her cast boot thumping on the wood floor until finally they got to the bed. He sat her down on the edge of the mattress and knelt in front of her, removing her shoe and sock on her right foot, then the boot on her left leg. Lying back, she lifted her hips as he leaned down over her to remove her pants, his mouth skating over her tingling skin as he worked them off, his fingers running just beneath the edge of her panties – just enough to make her draw a little gasp. He knelt again to peel off the support stocking she wore on her injured leg, seeing for the first time the dented, purple scarring from her surgeries and where the fracture had torn her skin. She drew a sharp breath and sat up to look down at him.
“It’s so ugly, I know,” she whispered painfully. His eyes grew soft and sad.

“No,” he countered, pressing his lips softly against it. “Not ugly, Alice, never. You’re strong. Beautiful. I love you just the way you are.” He rose and kissed her, his fingertips finding the tiny raised scars on her ribs where the plates had gone in, and he loved her there with his hands and mouth before unhooking her bra to pay the same reverent attention to her breasts, working his way down her belly. Before she knew it he had removed her panties as well, and she cried out when he pressed his lips against the tender flesh at the apex of her thighs, his tongue darting between the folds as she moaned at the intense, aching pleasure of him loving her this way. When he had taken her over that glorious edge and she lay there blissfully panting in the aftermath, he shed the rest of his clothing and shifted her fully onto the bed so he could lie beside her on his uninjured shoulder, his hand skimming over her hip and up her side.

“I’ve missed you so much, Uncas,” she sighed, closing her eyes as she ran the palm of her hand over his heated skin. “You’re all I ever want now, all I need…” Her touch continued down his back, over the muscular curve of his buttock, and along the hard, velvety length of his erection, sending a violent jolt of sensation through him that increased his need for her tenfold. His mouth closed over hers once again, and he drew her leg up over his hip, taking her swiftly, desperately, breathing her breath as her body surrounded him fully.

“No more waiting,” he murmured against her lips. “No more. Tonight, we start over together.”

“Yes… I’m home now, home with you.” Alice kissed him back, holding him flush against her as he moved inside her, both lost to the growing frenzy of their passion and the completeness of finally being together again. At last the ecstasy of release washed over them, and a flood of tears with the rush of emotion that came with it. They lay there quietly for some time, just holding one another close and taking comfort in the knowledge that now they could stay like that for as long as they wanted to, and nothing more would interfere with the start of this new journey down a path they would at last be able to walk together.

“Duck and cover, Alice!” Cora shouted, lobbing a snowball behind her toward where Uncas was hiding with Ryan, James, and Susan. Nathaniel started running a little faster with the toboggan he was pulling Alice on to try to avoid the snowballs flying toward them from behind the red barn. He wasn’t fast enough, though. Alice squealed as an icy missile made contact with her shoulder and sprayed snow over her face and neck, her ducking motion causing her to pitch sideways off the toboggan and right into a snowbank.

“Oh no! We’re disarmed!” she cried as the arsenal of snowballs piled in front of her rolled off as well. Monty ran up to her with a bark and started licking the snow off her left cheek while she giggled.

“Alice! Are you all right?” Uncas called out, plowing through the snow toward them from his hiding place behind the barn.

“We win! We win! James and Ryan shouted gleefully, high-fiving each other as they ran out behind him, Susan jumping up and down with them.

“I’m sorry,” Uncas apologized breathlessly, reaching down to help Alice up. “I didn’t mean to hit you like that. My aim isn’t as good with my left arm, and my right isn’t quite ready for throwing yet.”
“It’s a snowball fight, silly, you’re supposed to hit me,” Alice laughed, melting flakes of snow glinting on her hair. She brushed snow off her backside and gave him a kiss. “Don’t worry, I’m okay. My leg just aches from the cold.”

“Yeah, my shoulder is screaming pretty good right about now, too,” he agreed.

“We should probably head inside anyway, there’s plenty of baking and dinner prep left to do before tomorrow, and I’m freezing,” Cora said, bending over to flip the toboggan back to rights.

Nathaniel leaned over and helped her. “You’re right, your nose is like an icicle,” he told her with a grin, kissing the reddened tip and tugging her purple knitted beanie down over her ears. “Besides, Alex and the kids are going to have to take off soon, it’s getting late and Jack will be off work at seven. Alice, your chariot awaits.” Alice sat back down on the toboggan and Susan climbed on with her. Monty ran ahead with the boys through the snow while Uncas helped Nathaniel pull the loaded toboggan back across the meadow to Cora’s house, where their families and a warm fire awaited them.

It was Christmas Eve, and Alice had been home for a month now. Things were starting to settle into a somewhat normal rhythm again. Cora was back to work at both AirMedic and Albany Medical Center. Alice had gone back to work at Central Dispatch just the previous week, and would be starting non-aerial classes back at the yoga studio after the new year. She was walking fairly well, using just a cane for support now and quite relieved to be rid of her crutches, especially with snow on the ground. Uncas was doing well too, his shoulder getting stronger all the time, but the nerve injury in that arm was still causing him some dexterity issues with his dominant right hand. The results of his most recent electromyogram showed that the muscle innervation was recovering steadily, it would just take patience for a little while longer before he would be able to perform the fine motor tasks that would allow him to return to work as a paramedic, along with his shoulder being in good enough shape for the physical labor required by the job. For now, he kept himself busy at home and with therapy, and he spent a few days a week helping Yvette at her naturopathic practice, keeping her records in order and taking patient calls when she was busy, since her regular administrative assistant was currently out on maternity leave.

A few hours later, Alexandra and the kids had gone home, promising to see them all the next afternoon for Christmas dinner, which they had done together every year since John had been gone. Monty lay snoozing on the living room rug by Scout’s cage, and the Greatsnakes and Munros were now congregated in the kitchen, where Yvette had set about cooking dinner and preparing a few things for the following day. Alice and Cora were busy making pies and cookies with Nathaniel and Uncas helping. They talked and joked back and forth while they worked, and a fire roared in the kitchen fireplace.

“Damn, it smells fantastic in here!” Ed exclaimed, coming in the back door with Sidney, each with an armload of firewood and snow dusting the shoulders of their coats. “What’s cooking?”

“Sausage stuffing for the turkey tomorrow, and apple cider beef stew for dinner tonight. It’s Uncas’ favorite.” Yvette smiled at her younger son, who was seated next to Alice at the kitchen island, stirring spices into a bowl of diced pears and apples for the pie Alice was making.

“That sounds delicious,” he replied, both men removing their coats after setting the firewood down in the steel basket by the kitchen hearth. Sidney sat down at the long farm table after giving Yvette a kiss, and Ed peeked over Cora’s shoulder at the counter, where she was measuring out ingredients for Scottish shortbread.

“Ah, shortbread, my favorite. And you make it just like your mother did.” He sighed fondly and enlisted Sidney to help him set the table for dinner.
“So Cora, you got Christmas off from the hospital, then?” Yvette asked.

“I did. Kate offered to cover me, she wanted me to be able to spend it at home with you guys, with everything that’s gone on the last few months, so I’m going to cover her when she takes her vacation in January.”

“What a great lady,” Ed said. “You make sure you tell her thank you from me, that was really nice of her. You’re lucky to have a caring supervisor like that.”

Cora smiled in agreement. “Yeah, she’s pretty good to all of us.”

“And Alice, how do you like being back at work?” Yvette continued. “Are you getting settled in well?”

“It’s good,” Alice replied, kneading a ball of freshly made pie dough. “But it can be hard if it’s a busy shift and we have a lot of calls coming in, because I can’t get up to move around as often and my ankle gets swollen sometimes if I don’t do that. Those compression socks definitely help, but they’re ugly.”

“I’ve got you covered, don’t worry,” Nathaniel quipped, leaning on the opposite counter where Cora stood mixing powdered sugar into the cookie dough. “I bought you a whole pack of tie-dyed support socks and a fancy new cane for Christmas. You’ll be the height of fashion!” He winked at Alice, then ducked as she laughed and pitched a piece of pie dough at him. Living at the cabin the last month had resulted in the development of an entire repertoire of silly jokes between her and Nathaniel. The slightly inappropriate humor tended to lighten the burden of recovery for Alice, and Nathaniel understood that, having been through a similar recovery himself.

“Stop it, you goofball.” Cora tweaked his nose, leaving a white smear of sugar near his top lip.

“You’d better be nice to Alice, Nathaniel.” Yvette chuckled, wiping her hands on a dish towel. “You have to sleep in the same house with her now, remember?”

Uncas laughed and kissed Alice’s forehead. “Don’t listen to him, babe. I think your support socks are sexy.”

“So does this new cane have a bedazzled handle?” Alice asked, raising an eyebrow and grinning. “Because the one I’ve got now is pretty boring. As a matter of fact, maybe you should have just foregone the cane and bought me one of those Power Wheels toy cars. I could just drive that all over the house and it would be way more fun!”

Nathaniel grinned. “Oh, yeah! How about a pink Barbie Jeep like the one Jack got Susan Cameron for Christmas? I bet she’d share it with you!”

Alice threw him a thumbs-up. “See, now that’s what I’m talking about.”

Cora smiled up at Nathaniel and pointed at the smear of sugar on his face, leaning toward him. “You’ve got something right there.” She kissed the corner of his mouth, effectively removing it and leaving him with a slightly dopey grin. Uncas groaned and rolled his eyes.

“All right, everyone, the stew is ready, eat up!” Yvette called out.

“Nathaniel had one of those Power Wheel things when we were kids,” Uncas said as they all sat down at the table for dinner.
“Was it a Barbie Jeep?” Alice snickered, taking a bite of her stew.

“No, it was a John Deere tractor,” Nathaniel answered. “I got it for Christmas when I was five. It even had a little trailer it could pull.”

“I remember that thing,” Sidney grinned. “Uncas wasn’t quite two yet back then, so Nathaniel used to put him in that trailer and haul him around all over the neighborhood. They did that for a couple of years, until Uncas got too big for the trailer and ended up getting dumped in the creek one day when it toppled over.”

“As I recall, we both got dumped in the creek,” Uncas interjected. “That was pretty much the end of the tractor, anyway. We graduated to more dangerous things after that, like taking the wheels off our skateboards in winter and sliding downhill on the ice and snow. One time we did that, and Nathaniel built up so much speed going down the hill out back that he ran over Mom’s blueberry bushes and went right into the creek. Cracked the ice and everything! Somehow one of us always ended up getting dumped in that damn creek.”

“I don’t know how I survived these two,” Yvette laughed. “It’s a wonder they didn’t get killed, though we saw the inside of the ER enough for stitches.”

Sidney put his hands in the air. “And don’t even get me started about the time they decided to shoot bottle rockets up the chimney of an empty house down the street – a gas fireplace, mind you! And here I was a deputy, and I get a nuisance complaint for my own kids!”

“You might think it’s just boys, but I’ll tell you, Cora and Alice were just as wild sometimes,” Ed said pointedly. “We didn’t get snow in California, of course, but I remember the Christmas Maureen and I got them skateboards. Duncan got one that year, too, as I recall, and the three of them had the bright idea to lie on them and ride them down the steepest hill in the neighborhood. That didn’t end well.”

“We were having a luge competition!” Alice said. “Like at the winter Olympics.”

“It was really fun until Duncan lost control of his board and went flying into the Martins’ mailbox,” Cora mused. “Then it wasn’t so great.”

“Poor little bastard,” Ed chuckled. “Broke his arm in two places, and scraped himself to ribbons. Blood everywhere, and the mailbox was wrecked. Alice ran to get me and Maureen while Cora tried to patch Duncan up right there on the lawn, and nearly gave Cathy Martin a heart attack when she saw what was going on out there.”

Cora laughed. “That’s right, I remember that. I had this backpack I carried everywhere, and it was filled with bandages and all kinds of random stuff I pilfered from the medicine cabinet, and sometimes from the doctor’s office when no one was looking. I wanted to splint his arm with sticks, but he wouldn’t let me, and then Mrs. Martin called an ambulance and that was that.”

Ed grinned and shook his head. “There was never any doubt about Cora’s future career, that’s for sure. Ever since she was a toddler, she was always like that. Putting bandages and casts on dolls and stuffed animals, playing hospital, all of it. Poor Alice always got stuck being the patient.”

“I thought it was fun,” Alice giggled.

“Yeah, and I always let her be the veterinarian when she wanted to play Animal Clinic with her stuffed animals,” Cora pointed out. “It was an even trade.”

Ed laughed. “Between the two of them, I don’t think there was a toy in our house that didn’t
receive medical attention or some kind of surgery. Alice even tried to call 911 when the neighbors’
dog got hit by a car. I guess they were both destined to become helpers, and they’re great at it now,
so all the practice was worth it.”

“Uncas and Nathaniel were the same,” Yvette said. “Always playing pilots, cops or fire
department.”

Well, we never argued about who played who,” Nathaniel said with a fond grin. Besides,
whenever we played fire rescue, that meant I always got to have the hose, because Uncas wanted to
be the paramedic.”

“Which also meant I usually ended up in handcuffs when we played cops, and ours weren’t
toys because Nathaniel stole Dad’s spare set,” Uncas told them, and everyone laughed.

Cora looked around the table as the storytelling continued, watching everyone’s animated
faces and breathing a satisfied sigh. She had always loved her house, but right now she loved it more
than ever, because all the people who were most important to her were gathered here together. She
watched Alice and Uncas across the table, laughing and holding hands. She wondered briefly about
Maureen’s ring, and if or when Uncas might actually propose to Alice, but she supposed it would
happen when the time was right for them. For now, it was enough to Cora that Alice was smiling
radiantly again, and that he was the reason. It was enough that her sister was home and that she and
Uncas were both happy and doing so much better than they had been. It was enough to see the relief
on all their parents’ faces as they settled back into life. And there was Nathaniel, sitting beside her
with his hand over hers and all his strength and gentleness and humor combined. Her rock, her voice
of reason in a smartass t-shirt, her stubborn, witty, beautiful Nathaniel. She loved him for all that he
was, for the way he had changed her life, and the way they learned from each other. At this moment,
she felt happier and more complete than she could remember in many years, and by the looks of
everyone else in the room, it seemed she wasn’t the only one who felt that way. She couldn’t have
asked for more than this.

“What are you thinking about?” Nathaniel whispered in her ear, putting an arm around her to
draw her closer to him on the table’s long bench.

“Christmas gifts,” she replied, leaning into his warmth with a soft smile.

The next morning, everyone gathered at the cabin to exchange Christmas presents and have
breakfast. Since Cora was hosting the big Christmas dinner at her house later on, Alice had wanted
to do the morning activities at the cabin, both to lighten the load on Cora and to celebrate her first
Christmas in her new home with Uncas.

“I should put some of this in my coffee,” Ed joked, holding up the 23-year-old bottle of
limited edition Battlehill Scotch whisky Nathaniel had given him, along with a Christmas t-shirt that
said ‘The tree isn’t the only thing getting lit this Christmas’. “Then I might be able to live up to this
shirt.”

“Hey, I live up to mine every day,” Nathaniel snickered into his coffee cup. His shirt was
white with empty check boxes next to the phrases ‘Naughty’ and ‘Nice’, with a check mark in the
bottom box beside ‘I tried’. He had given them all funny Christmas shirts as gag gifts, and naturally
had not left himself out of the equation. Cora’s said ‘Will trade little sister for presents’, and Uncas
wore one that stated ‘Dear Santa, it’s my brother’s fault’.
“Sure, Pop, and Cora’s house is only four miles away, so if you’re not fit to drive you can just take a nice brisk walk in the snow.” Alice laughed, sitting on the rug by the Christmas tree. Uncas and Nathaniel had cut the week before, wearing a red shirt with candy canes and ‘Dear Santa, my sister is the naughty one, trust me!’ printed on it.

“Nah, I can drive you. It’s Christmas, after all,” Sidney interjected from the couch. His shirt was blue with ‘Police Navidad’ printed above a graphic of snowflakes and police cars.

“Anyone need more coffee?” Yvette asked, coming into the living room from the hall. Her shirt was printed with Santa’s sleigh crashed on top of an outhouse, and Santa yelling ‘I said the SCHMIDT HOUSE!’ at the reindeer.

“I’ll take some, thanks, ntèhëm.” Sidney held out his cup as Yvette bent over to pick something up off the rug near the couch.

“Whose is this?” she asked, holding up a white button.

“Um, I think it might be mine.” Alice blushed furiously and got up to retrieve it, casting a guilty half-smile at Uncas, who also turned a bit pink.

“People sure lose a lot of buttons in this house,” Yvette mused with a raised eyebrow, taking Sidney’s mug and heading toward the coffee pot.

Uncas cleared his throat, and Nathaniel and Cora tried not to laugh, hiding behind their coffee mugs. When Yvette came back in, she sat down beside Sidney on the couch.

“These last couple of days have been great,” Ed mused. “Busy, sure, but really and truly enjoyable. I’m so glad we could do this.”

“It really has been nice,” Yvette agreed. “What a wonderful Christmas gift, to have Uncas and Alice home, and all of us together as one big family.”

Nathaniel stood up, looking a little nervous. “Uh… so speaking of that, there’s one last thing, before we’re all done with gifts.” He went to the mantle above the fireplace and pulled a red envelope from behind the clock, then handed it to Uncas. “This is for you and Alice.”

Cora stared at him, incredulous. “What did you do? You gave them the house?”

“Well… yeah. I paid it off back in October, I just didn’t say anything,” he explained while everyone absorbed the magnitude of what he was saying. “There was a lot going on, and I just figured what’s the use of having a trust fund from my birth family if I couldn’t do something good with it for my family now, you know? I didn’t want Uncas to have to worry about his half of the mortgage while he was recovering. And then we moved Alice in, and… well, you guys should have a place that’s yours, free and clear, and be able to move forward from all this crap you’ve gone through without worrying about a house payment. I want you both to have this place. You belong
By this point there wasn’t a dry eye in the room. Uncas helped Alice up and threw his arms around his brother.

“I can’t fucking believe you, man,” he choked. “You lost your family, and that’s your money. Why would you do this?”

“Because I love you, and I can. I know it was kind of high-handed, but I wanted it to be a surprise. I hope you’re not mad.”

“I’m not, I’m just blown away. I don’t even know what to do with this right now.”

“Just take it. Be happy and get better. That’s all I want you to do.”

“Nathaniel, you’re amazing,” Alice sobbed, hugging him when Uncas let him go. “If Cora doesn’t marry you someday, I will!” she laughed through her tears.

“No need for that,” Nathaniel told her with a grin. “I’m pretty partial to your sister. Just don’t kick me out of the house yet. You’ll have to be stuck with me as a roommate for now.”

Alice kissed his cheek affectionately. “No worries, Captain Hawkeye, I think we can definitely accommodate you on that.”

Late that night, when Christmas dinner was eaten, leftover food packed away and sent home with guests, and the bustle of the day was over, Cora lay in Nathaniel’s arms with her head on his chest, drowsy and content as his fingers combed through her hair and traced circles on her scalp. She sighed and kissed the hawk tattoo beneath his collarbone, then rose onto one elbow to kiss his lips, looking down at him in the dim lamplight of her bedroom.

“I love you,” she said softly.

“I love you, too. More than I could ever say.” Nathaniel traced his index finger down her cheek and beneath her chin. “What is it?” he asked, noting the look in her eyes, as if she wanted to say something but didn’t quite know how. Her hand came up to stroke his hair as she thought for a moment.

“You gave your house to your brother and my sister.”

He toyed with the strap on her festive red nightie. “I did. Well, technically it was my house and Uncas’, since we bought it together. I just paid it off and signed it over to him, at least in simple terms. It was more complicated than that, but the result is, it’s theirs now. But nothing much will change otherwise, we’ll all still live there.”

Cora nodded. “But what if you didn’t live there?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean do you want to live with me?”

“Cora… I know I spend a lot of time here, but you aren’t obligated to ask me that just because of the cabin thing. Moving in together is a big deal, and that wasn’t my aim with all this.”
“Maybe not, but I didn’t ask you if that was your aim. I asked you if you want to.” She smiled at him, and he looked at her cautiously.

“Is that what you want?”

“Yeah, it is. I love you, and I love you being here with me, sharing time with me. I like going to sleep with you, and waking up with you, and sitting on the porch swing under the stars with you. And my dog and ferret love you, too, so there’s that.”

Nathaniel’s eyes grew soft. “I love all those things, too.”

“You’re not bad at mucking stalls and pitching hay, either.”

“Now who’s a smartass?” He laughed and pulled her back down to the mattress, rolling her partially under him. She was laughing too, her cheeks pink and her eyes shining as she looked up at him and cupped his jaw in her hand.

“Do you want to move in with me, Nathaniel?” she whispered.

He leaned down to press his forehead to hers, their noses touching and his hand buried in the softness of her hair. “Yes, I do. Very much.”

“Merry Christmas,” she murmured.

“Merry Christmas, Cora. Time with you is the best gift I could ever get.” He pulled her close, placing light kisses along her hairline.

“Nathaniel?”

“Hmmm?”

“Will you build us a treehouse here?” She gazed lovingly at him as his face broke out in the beautiful smile she so adored.

“I’ll build you anything you want, beautiful.” His lips covered hers, her arms twining around his neck as she returned each tender, devout caress with one of her own. This would be a new beginning for all of them.

Author’s Note:

First of all, this update took forever compared to my average timing, and I’m sorry! The last few weeks have been insane here. I inherited some very lovely furniture and décor from my grandmother’s house, and moving that stuff up here resulted in a massive tornado of redecorating and finally getting to do a complete inventory and purge of all the crap that got shoved into closets when we moved into our house almost four years ago. It took me more than two weeks just to get the house presentable again, but I feel so much better. That being said, obviously this chapter sat on a back burner for a while because it deserved my full attention and I couldn’t give that with my house in such disarray. It’s much better now, and I think my grandma would be happy.

I always enjoy when things start going well again for my characters, and this chapter was no exception. I loved letting them all have so much fun, and I’m so glad that Alice finally got to come home and be with Uncas again, and Cora doesn’t have to split herself between places anymore.
either. This chapter was all about the happy for both families. Snowball fights, missing buttons (heehee), goofy jokes and teasing, fun childhood stories, and ridiculous Christmas shirts for all, amid some really important things happening – Alice coming home (and Uncas pouring the coals to her), Nathaniel giving the cabin to Uncas and Alice (what a man), and Cora subsequently asking him to move in with her (we all saw that coming, Cora). I wasn’t sure if she would do that in this chapter or a future one, but sometimes I have to kind of let the characters dictate that stuff in my head, and ultimately that’s what happened. I’m going to guess that at least some of you were hoping Uncas would finally propose to Alice, but that wasn’t destined for this point in the story.

I’ll mention that I only briefly touched on Thanksgiving, and decided to spin it as more of a family-centered celebration thing. The Greatsnakes are a First Nations family, and they may not be likely to celebrate Thanksgiving in the way most non-Indian Americans do, for obvious reasons, but they would be likely to have a nice day together just appreciating the people they love and the good things they have – that’s something we can all do on Thanksgiving. Christmas was more the focus anyway, because they had so much fun in that section. The childhood stories were really fun to write, and are partially made up, and partially inspired by stupid shit I or my friends may or may not have done as kids (you guess which ones are which, LOL). Nathaniel wanted to be indulged on the giving of funny t-shirts (my mother actually had Yvette’s shirt, and just in case you’re not familiar, Sidney’s shirt is a play on José Feliciano’s hit song “Feliz Navidad”, which is Spanish for “Merry Christmas”). Most of all, Christmas was important because of what Nathaniel did with the cabin. I think I established way back in chapter one that Nathaniel has an investment account that was set up for him with his birth family’s life insurance money in it, and that was how he paid for flight school. Well, not only is he secretly loaded, but he’s also nice enough to pay off the house and give it to his brother, no strings attached. So maybe now he’s not as loaded as he was before, but it sure made him happy to be able to do that for his brother and Alice. And bonus, now he gets to move in with Cora, which we all knew was going to happen eventually anyway since he already practically lives there.

Aside from the story, I have some LOTM Crazy FanGirl excitement going on right now, because I recently commissioned two paintings of Nathaniel and Cora from an amazing maker of fan art (Panda Capuccino via Tumblr). I saw a beautiful set of Uncas/Alice sketches she did for another FF author, and I couldn’t resist doing this. One of them is of Nathaniel and Cora in Flying Into the Fire, and the other is of them in Where We Start Again. I’m hoping they’ll be done soon, as the preliminary sketches were just gorgeous, and I’m so stoked to see the finals! I’ll probably use them as story cover images when they’re done. In the meantime, I am dying of excitement over here while I wait. And speaking of this, I now have a Tumblr blog under BrynnaRaven, where I occasionally post story updates (like right now when it took me forever to finish this damn chapter), links to other fics, and random LOTM stuff.

Lastly, music: this chapter’s theme song is the highly appropriate “New Beginning” by Paul Gross. Yes, him again. I think that album is so great for this story, and I loved that song for Uncas and Alice in this chapter. At the beginning of the chapter during all the narrative and when Alice gets discharged, Hem’s “Home Again” seemed really perfect for that. When she and Uncas make love after she comes home, the song I had in mind for that was “Love Me Like You Do” by Ellie Goulding, and I was hearing “New Beginning” at the last part of that love scene. During the snowball fight and some of the kitchen Christmas fun, I liked the upbeat “Let it Snow” recording by Dean Martin. During Cora’s reverie at the Christmas Eve dinner table and moving into the Christmas Day scene at the cabin, I really liked the sound of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” as recorded by Frank Sinatra. The lyrics really seem to fit how happy they all are spending time together, and the hope they all have for the future ahead. In the last scene when Nathaniel and Cora talk about him moving in, I chose “Let’s Be Still” by The Head and the Heart.

That’s it for this chapter. I don’t think the next one will take as long now that my period of upheaval is mostly over. I’m hoping to have this finished by the time I go back to work, which will
hopefully be in the next month, we’ll see. Thank you so much to BlueSaffire and MohawkWoman, who gave me some valuable assistance on one of the scenes in this chapter when I was stressing about the content. And thank you all for reading, reviewing, and supporting this story. You are wonderful! Stay tuned!
Feel the Fall

Chapter Summary

Spring has sprung, bringing with it more positive changes for both couples and their families. Uncas and Alice both face major milestones in their recovery, Ed has some surprising news, and Uncas makes a very important decision.

Chapter Notes

Author's note included in chapter text.

Chapter 19 – Feel the Fall

“Well every now and then I feel like breaking down
When I can feel the walls are closing in
I wanna take my senses to a higher ground
And to a different place I’ve never been
We’re standing at the end

Take a breath, don’t look down
Jump right out and feel the sound
Rushing over, speeding ‘round
And it’s flashing before me

Feel the fall, open your eyes
Like a thousand miles an hour through the sky
And I’m waking up again
I’m resuscitating who I am
I’m seeing my life
Feel it tonight
I had a dream the other night, it seemed so real
Like I could almost touch the atmosphere
I heard a little voice whisper into my ear
‘Don’t hesitate, just let go of your fear’
We’re standing at the end

Take a breath, don’t look down
Jump right out and feel the sound
Rushing over, speeding ‘round
And it’s flashing before me

Feel the fall, open your eyes
Like a thousand miles an hour through the sky
And I’m waking up again
I’m resuscitating who I am
I’m seeing my life
Feel it tonight

We’re standing at the end
We’re standing at the end
We’re standing at the end

And I feel the fall, open your eyes
Like a thousand miles an hour through the sky
And I’m waking up again
I’m resuscitating who I am
I’m seeing my life
Feel it tonight
Uncas dropped his Harley’s kickstand and shut off the engine, turning the front tire to the left a little to balance it while it was parked. He took a deep breath and let his nerves out in a long sigh while his face was still hidden behind the visor of his motorcycle helmet. *Moment of truth*, he thought to himself. *Time to get this damn show on the road.* Nathaniel and Cora climbed off their bikes on either side of him.

“You ready for this?” Nathaniel asked, grinning at him as he pulled his helmet off.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Uncas replied, lifting the face shield of his modular helmet to remove it, then unzipping his black leather jacket.

“You’ll be fine,” Cora reassured him with a smile, squeezing his arm. “It’ll be great to have us all working together again.”

The three of them headed across the AirMedic lot toward the building. Uncas glanced off toward the helipads, the Bell and the Sikorsky resting there in the fading daylight of the cool spring evening, and a shiver passed down his spine. Strange to think that the last time he’d been in one of those helicopters, he’d been a patient – and he didn’t even remember it. In some ways he envied Alice her consciousness, because having no memory past falling off Saddleback Cliffs had made it harder to accept at first. But most of the time he was glad he didn’t remember. Especially now on his first shift back in the air, when he needed his wits about him more than anything, and all he needed to remember was how to do his job again.

It was March now, and while everyone else had mostly gone back to the normal they’d known before, he and Alice were still getting to their new normal one step at a time. Both of them had been cleared to drive after the new year, and Uncas had gotten back on the Harley for the first time in February. Alice had been released from the use of her cast boot the third week of January and was walking better all the time, rarely using her cane anymore. She still needed her compression sock and probably would for a long time, but her progress was admirable nonetheless. She worked diligently on her therapy exercises, hoping to be able to at least go on short hikes by summer. Her floor classes at the yoga studio a couple of days a week were a nice contrast when she wasn’t working at Central Dispatch, and she was just about ready to get back to her aerial equipment. Uncas’ shoulder was almost back to normal, and now he worked daily on his strength therapy to rebuild muscle mass and prevent future injury to the weakened tissues. His nerve injury had finally resolved enough that his fine motor function was near normal, allowing him to perform the skills necessary to return to work. He was even starting to be able to play the guitar again without too much fumbling, though he just practiced by himself for now. At this point, he only saw Gene for progress checks every few weeks and would soon be released from therapy appointments altogether.
and would just have to do the home exercises. He would miss Gene, but he was also happy to close out another chapter in his recovery.

Things were going well on other fronts as well; he and Alice were happy at the cabin together, and eternally grateful for Nathaniel’s gift. After all the events of the fall, they were finally able to enjoy life together again in a home that was theirs, and it felt wonderful. Nathaniel had moved out and settled in at Cora’s place a little over a month ago. Sometimes it was odd to not have him officially living at the cabin anymore, but with him and Cora only a few miles away they all still saw plenty of each other. He and Alice agreed that this was about as fulfilled and happy as they’d ever seen either of their older siblings, so life at the little farmhouse seemed to be a good arrangement for them. All in all, even though a lot had changed over the last six months, there wasn’t much to complain about these days, and things had turned out pretty well considering where they’d all been back in September.

“Hey, there he is, the man of the hour!” Brian called out as the three of them walked in the door, followed by clapping and a few whistles from the previous shift’s crew of Jack and Jonathan, Dave, and even Owen had stayed over to welcome Uncas back.

“I didn’t expect the royal welcome,” Uncas laughed away a sudden wave of emotion as Brian hugged him and clapped him on the back. “But thanks, guys. It’s really, really good to finally be here.”

“It’s great to have you back,” Owen said, placing a sincere hand on Uncas’ shoulder. “It sure hasn’t been the same around here without you. You ready to get out there again?”

Uncas grinned. “Sure am, Boss.”

After socializing briefly with the welcoming committee, Uncas, Cora and Nathaniel headed for the locker room while Jack and the others took off for home, and Dave retreated to the dispatch desk.

“So Alice told me today that you might switch up your hours at the hospital, Cora?” Uncas inquired as they stowed their things in their lockers.

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about dropping to two shifts instead of three, and maybe switching to days. Nights are harder to do now that life is a little different at home. I’d rather not sleep all day after work, now that I’ve got better things to do.” She smiled at Nathaniel, and he gave her one in return. “Besides, if Pop is going to keep dropping in to visit me at work, day shift would be easier on him, too,” she laughed. Since she had gone back to work after coming home from Boston with Alice, Ed had taken to dropping in at the hospital at least once a week, bringing her dinner or sometimes coffee and bagels for all the ER staff. Naturally all her coworkers loved him for that, and Cora thought it was sweet, too. She suspected that after all the time he’d spent with Alice in hospitals, he was bored now that he was back to being a retired man living alone, and it made him feel good to show his appreciation for some of the people who had helped Alice and Uncas when they were injured. When he wasn’t doing that, he and Sidney often spent time together on various projects while Yvette was busy at her office, and the two of them had even gotten together with Magua a couple of times to go ice fishing over the winter, when he came down for visits to see how everyone was doing. He had become a good friend to all of them, and Cora was still very grateful for his part in helping Alice and Uncas the day of their accident.

Finished in the locker room, the crew filed out to the helipad to do all their pre-shift checks before transport calls started rolling in. The night started off busy, barely leaving Uncas any room to let nerves take hold. By the time things slowed down, he was feeling pretty good. He had enough years under his belt that he hadn’t forgotten anything, and once Cora had backed him up on his first
couple of IV starts, his confidence lifted, and he was completely on his own after that. By the time their shift was over he felt exhausted but high on the endorphin rush of success, Nathaniel and Cora feeling the buzz right along with him. When they diverged from him on the ride home to head for the farmhouse, he rode the rest of the way to the cabin alone, the cold evening wind whipping at his neck between his helmet and the collar of his leather jacket. He sped up a little, eager to get home to Alice and still coasting on adrenaline, his eye on the rising moon pale in the sunset-streaked sky. Alice threw the front door open and came out to him as soon as she heard the rumble of the Harley in the drive, demanding to know how everything had gone. He grinned and pulled her into his arms for a long kiss before telling her all about it; yet another perk of going back to work was the delight of coming home to her waiting for him when the day was done.

“I’m so glad you had a good first shift,” she murmured to him later, the smooth skin of her leg sliding along his thigh as she snuggled against him in bed, her lips grazing his jaw. He sighed contentedly and wrapped his arm around her, his fingers playing gently over her shoulder.

“Me too. I was nervous, and it was a little weird when I first got there,” he confessed. “You know, seeing the helicopter, remembering but not remembering…”

“Yeah, I can imagine. But I’m so proud of you, jumping right back in.”

He kissed her forehead. “I was glad to have your sister and Nathaniel there. It would have been harder without them.”

Alice smiled softly. “I’m glad they were with you, too. Speaking of which, are you and Nathaniel still planning to hang out together tomorrow? Pop wants to go to breakfast with me and Cora at Jack’s Diner, minus the five-mile run for me, of course.”

“Yeah, we are. The weather’s supposed to be really nice, and since the snow is mostly gone, I kind of thought… um, well, I’d kind of like to get out for a hike, but I feel really bad going without you.” He glanced at her, his dark eyes overcast with guilt in the dim lamplight. Alice rose onto her elbow, placing her hand on his chest.

“Please don’t feel bad, Uncas. You should go, and me not being able to hike yet shouldn’t stop you from having a nice day out with your brother. You guys need that. Besides, Cora and I can take the horses out for a ride after breakfast. Dr. Coleman said I’m fine to ride again as long as I’m careful, so I can just let Blue Feather do my hiking for me.” She leaned down and dropped a kiss on his lips.

“Okay, that sounds like a great idea,” Uncas replied, somewhat relieved. “And we’re still on to help Nathaniel and Cora get that treehouse started at the farm tomorrow, too.”

“That’s right. I’ll be confined to ground labor, but I’m not bad with a radial arm saw,” Alice said with a grin.

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me,” Uncas chuckled. “But next weekend won’t be as busy, and we’ll get to stay at home and have a good time with everyone for your birthday.”

“Mmmm. Yeah, that will be nice. I’ve never been much for hardcore birthday activities, I’d rather just spend it with my family.” She lay back down beside him and settled into his embrace again, and he softly stroked her hair. He had been hesitant to mention his plans with Nathaniel, worried that Alice would be sad about not being able to hike with him for a while yet, but he couldn’t help wanting to go. All the healing time and the cold winter months not working had left him feeling cooped up and a little desperate to get out and enjoy a day on the trails again, so he’d asked Nathaniel to come with him. Still, he felt a sense of penitence for it in light of Alice’s inability,
but he was grateful for her sweetness and her understanding that it was something he needed to do. He was grateful for so many things about her; most of all how they grounded each other so easily when things got overwhelming. The last few months had felt so much easier just having her back here, being together, being able to reach out to each other for support or just a calm, quiet embrace when it was needed. Loving her had always been almost too easy, so much so that after the accident he had been terrified that somehow it would get harder or even impossible with all that had been thrown at them. But it hadn’t, despite everything else getting so much more difficult. He thought about what she’d just said, about spending her birthday with her family, and how easily she lumped his parents and brother into that term, too. How easy it was for him to do the same with Ed and Cora. Alice was and always would be his one constant through it all, as he was hers too, and at last the peace of understanding that sense of permanence had begun to take root in his soul.

“Have you decided what you’re going to do about your schedule at the hospital yet, Cora?” Ed asked, poking at the remains of his breakfast across the table from her and Alice. He had seemed off this morning to Cora, distracted and slower than usual on the short run they had taken together before meeting Alice, and Alice seemed to notice it too, throwing Cora an occasional curious look.

“I’m going to make the switch. It’s not a hundred percent just yet, I still need to sit down with Kate and talk more with her about it, and I’ll have to go through human resources to get officially moved into that part-time day shift position. But I think it’ll be best to be on a day schedule again, all things considered.”

“Agreed,” Ed replied, appearing thoughtful and perhaps slightly uncomfortable.

“Pop, is something wrong?” Alice inquired. “You look… bothered, and you’re not acting like your normal self.”

Ed set his fork down and looked up at Alice and Cora with a sigh. “Well… there’s something I’d like to talk to you both about, I’m just not quite sure how to approach it after all this time, I don’t… I suppose I ought to just rip off the Band-Aid and get it over with. I think I’ve met someone, and I’d like to pursue seeing her.”

“You met someone?” Cora’s eyebrows shot up as she and Alice glanced at each other. In thirteen years their father had never broached this subject with them, mostly because he had never really dated anyone except a random dinner here and there that never went any further, when some well-meaning friend would try to fix him up.

“Yeah,” he said nervously. “I didn’t really expect it to happen, not like it did, but the fact is, I like her very much, and it appears to be mutual… but it’s been hard to know what to say to you girls, because it’s just new for us all, I guess, and there’s been so much to work through lately as it is. I didn’t want it to upset you.”

“Pop, why would we be upset?” Alice asked, her eyes filling with tears. “We miss Mom, and we know you do too, but it’s been thirteen years, almost fourteen now. You deserve to meet someone nice.”

“Alice is right,” Cora agreed, reaching across the table for Ed’s hand. “Mom would want you to be happy, and so do we. So, who is this mystery woman?”

“Ah… that’s where it may get a little difficult, especially for you, sweetheart.”
“Me?” Cora looked confused. “What are you talking about, Pop?”

“It’s Kate,” Ed blurted out, his face turning bright red.

Cora was silent for a moment as she absorbed this information. Kate… her charge nurse on nights. She thought backward to that night in the ER when the accident had happened, when Kate had admonished Ed for his aggressive behavior and then he had actually apologized to her. The few times after that when she’d come by Alice’s room to see Cora and ask how Alice and Uncas were doing, or Ed had mentioned running into her while Alice was in the hospital… “she’s a real pistol,” he’d always chuckled. In fact, every time he’d mentioned her, he’d complimented her somehow, and had a smile on his face. Suddenly his visits to the ER lately made a lot more sense, because nearly every single time he’d spent at least a few minutes chatting with Kate, especially when she would express her gratitude for his kindness in bringing things in for the staff. She hadn’t thought anything of it then, but Kate always seemed to be in a better mood after one of his visits.

“Well. And here all this time I thought you were coming to the hospital during my shifts just because you love me. Sneaky devil.” Cora sniffed and raised a brow at Ed. He looked worried for a moment, but then he caught the twinkle in her eye just before she started to laugh.

“You’re not mad, then?”

“No, Pop, I’m not mad. I don’t know how I could be, when I think the world of Kate, so I guess I’m not terribly surprised to find out that you’re interested in her. And it goes without saying that I can understand why she’d be interested in you, because you’re kind of awesome. Although, it’s probably best that I’m switching to days and I’ll work under a different supervisor – that part could be a little awkward if this works out for you guys.”

Ed smiled in relief. “That’s partially why I was asking if you’d decided yet. I thought it might be better to wait. And she wouldn’t agree to a proper date until I’d talked to you about her.”

“Smart of her,” Alice said. “And I hear she’s not afraid of you in Drill Instructor mode, so we already know she can handle you.” She grinned at Ed. “You should have just said something all along, if you liked her. I thought she was really nice.”

“Ah, come on, it’s not like I’ve done this kind of thing before. She was Cora’s charge nurse, and I didn’t want to make trouble for either of them over that. And even aside from that I feel like… I don’t know, like I’m a bumbling teenager all over again. I’m not sure I was ever any good at asking girls out, I just got lucky with your mother.” He smiled a little sadly, and Cora squeezed his hand.

“Well, I don’t know how much sage advice I can give you, since I screwed up with Nathaniel plenty in the beginning, but I know Kate, and I think she’ll understand. Alice might be a little better at relationship advice that doesn’t involve freaking out and running away.”

“Oh, stop,” Alice laughed. “You and Nathaniel are fine now. But Pop, we can take you shopping if you need date clothes!”

“Oh, now there’s an idea,” Ed chuckled. “But nothing too crazy, I like the basics. And I’m definitely not wearing jeans with rhinestones on the ass.”

They all laughed at that, and Ed finally began to relax as he talked with his daughters more seriously about the situation. While both Alice and Cora felt an odd feeling slightly akin to sadness about the conversation, it wasn’t because their father wanted to date someone - it was more just that old twinge of being reminded that Maureen was gone and would never be back. That had certainly diminished over the years, but it never really went away, and neither of them were foolish enough to
think that it did for Ed, either. It was just one more change to roll with, one more way things that had lain dormant were waking up again. Spring was definitely well on its way.

Nathaniel and Uncas walked side by side on the hiking trail at Plotter Kill Preserve. Neither had felt the need to talk much today, they were simply enjoying the time outdoors together, and the sounds of nature coming to life again now that the weather was warming up. It hadn’t been a winter with a lot of heavy snows, so there wasn’t too much mud yet like there was some years, and it was still cold enough that a layer of snow remained on the ground in the shadier places in the preserve’s forest. They kept a slow pace, in no real hurry to get anywhere. Melting snow on branches caught the sunlight filtering through the trees and glinted like crystal shards, the sound of the droplets falling making a steady, wet tapping on the ground below, marking the snow with tiny holes. Somewhere off the trail nearby, a raven croaked from its perch on a pine bough, its mate answering from somewhere further off.

“This is where I brought Alice on our first date,” Uncas spoke suddenly, his voice quiet as he kept walking, watching a squirrel clamber up a tree trunk. He thought about that day; it seemed like so long ago, but it hadn’t even been a year yet. How she’d looked sitting there by the stream at the top of the falls, peeling off those goofy toe socks of hers to dip her bare feet in the water. How many times he’d caught her staring at him and it had made his heart do backflips.

“I remember,” Nathaniel replied, glancing at his brother’s shuttered expression. He wanted to ask him if there was a reason he’d picked this particular location to hike today, but he also figured that if Uncas wanted to talk about that, he would. His decision to stay quiet and not push paid off.

“I think I already knew I loved her then.”

“I don’t doubt it. You were gone for her before you ever even saw her.” Nathaniel’s lips quirked. “Sometimes, your heart just knows, even when your brain hasn’t quite caught up yet. Though I think you and Alice figured it out pretty quick. Me and Cora, not so much. Well, maybe me, but either way it’s all good now. Right?”

“Yeah…” Uncas was quiet for a moment, his train of thought drifting elsewhere before he continued to speak. “We were hiking down from the top of Plotter Kill Falls that day, and she slipped once on the trail where it was wet. I caught her. If I hadn’t, she’d have fallen into the gorge… it just makes me think, you know? What was so different about that day? I could stop her from falling then, but then there was Saddleback Cliffs, and I couldn’t stop myself from falling. And then I think, what if we had just left well enough alone with all these stupid hiking challenges? What if we’d just never done it, or what if I’d been smart enough to throw in the towel and finish later when it wasn’t fucking raining?”

Nathaniel understood exactly where Uncas’ thoughts were taking him, as he’d been there so many times himself. What if? The list of ‘what ifs’ could drive a person insane sometimes, and it never changed the fact that bad things couldn’t un-happen. Or that sometimes they happened for a reason, but that reason could take years to make itself plain, the way it had for him and Cora.

“You can’t change it, Uncas. And you didn’t… you didn’t do anything wrong. Sometimes shit just happens, and with all your years as a first responder, you know that. You can’t reconcile this stuff, you can’t make trades, because you’ll never come out even anyway. What if my family hadn’t died? I’d have never had you, or Mom and Dad, or been exactly where I was supposed to be to have the life, the family I was supposed to have. And Jesus, if I had a dime for every time I’ve thought about what John and I could have done differently that night… but we didn’t. And it was a fucking
awful road to walk down after that, you know it because you were there with me. But that road led to AirMedic, to Cora, to a place where we could understand each other… to more of the best things I’ve ever had, even though I couldn’t know it back then. It took seven years to get where I am, to be this happy, but here I am, and it’s fucking glorious to look back and see that it was all worth it. That it wasn’t for no reason. And you know what makes you luckier than I ever was? You have part of that now. You have Alice right beside you through all of this, wading through the thick of it with you. You have her to wake up to every damn day, so you can remember how lucky you are to have her, and how lucky she is to have you.”

Uncas nodded slowly as they walked on in silence again, rolling Nathaniel’s speech around in his mind, processing it, knowing he was right. He caught a flash of movement in the corner of his eye, and he and Nathaniel both stilled as a white-tail buck made its way out of the forest and onto the trail ahead of them. It paused when it saw them, and neither man breathed while time suspended for an indeterminate number of seconds, them and the buck less than thirty feet apart. Then, the crack of a twig breaking beneath a hiking boot splintered the silence, and the buck startled and wheeled off back the way it had come. Something broke free inside of Uncas then, something that had been struggling that he had no name for, only feeling and the compulsion to move, and so he did. He took off sprinting up the embankment into the woods, following the deer and the sound of its hooves. His feet swished through the damp underbrush as he tried to catch up to it, the white flash of its tail ahead of him. He was dimly aware of Nathaniel, behind him at first and then running beside him, with him. No questioning looks or asking why, because Nathaniel remembered a feeling like this when he had healed enough and could finally run again, and he knew. He knew that this was more than just a wild whim. It was a reckoning that he had once faced, too, and therefore recognized in his younger brother now; a moment of realization that something that had been dead inside was now coming back to life, that what he had thought was lost was now standing before him, and he had only to choose to reach out and grasp it and take it back. And so Uncas ran to push through that open door, and Nathaniel ran beside him, until the buck abruptly turned another way and disappeared from their sight, and they came to a rocky ledge near the top of the falls that allowed them to run no further. Uncas looked out over the expanse of the forest and the dark shale face where Plotter Kill Falls dropped down below where they stood, panting with exertion and feeling more alive than he’d felt in months. He drew a breath and let out a shrill war-whoop that echoed across the gorge, daring the world to try to push him down again, asserting that he was back and would not shrink away from the flames. There was no answer but the primal sound of his own voice coming back at him, and Nathaniel grinning beside him as he placed a hand on his shoulder.

Back in West Sand Lake, Cora and Alice guided Ranger and Blue Feather back along the trail toward Cora’s house. Monty lumbered along beside Ranger and Cora, his paws muddy and his fur damp from splashing in the thawed creek. The afternoon sun was warm, a contrast to the crisp, cool breeze in the air, but it had been a lovely day for a nice, slow ride. They had spent most of the first half of the ride talking intermittently about their breakfast conversation with Ed and how they felt now that it was all sinking in. Both women had to admit that after thirteen years it felt a little strange for their father to finally meet someone he was genuinely interested in. They had never faced the possibility of another woman in Ed’s life before now, and even though they both supported his happiness, it would still take time to get used to the idea. There wasn’t too much else to say until things started to play out for Ed and Kate, so the rest of the ride the two of them had just enjoyed the day as the horses plodded along. Alice felt a sense of gratification being able to get outdoors and spend time with Blue Feather doing something besides visiting him or grooming him. She closed her eyes, placated by the gentle rock of his gait and the feel of his muscles moving beneath the grip of her legs on the leather fenders of her saddle.

“Feels good to be doing this again, doesn’t it?” Cora mused beside her.

“Yeah. It’s been so long. I’m really glad Nathaniel has been around to ride Blue Feather so
he gets exercise, but man, I’ve missed this. I’ve missed so many things.”

“I’ve missed having you with me, too, but it’s getting better all the time, and now that the weather’s warming up, you’ll be able to do even more without the cold bothering your leg so much.”

“God, I hope so. I’m so over all this, and I’m so ready for more.” Alice looked at her sister and smiled, suddenly feeling impulsive and a little reckless. Without warning, she clucked her tongue at Blue Feather and tapped his sides with her heels, letting him take off down the trail at a canter, and then a full-out gallop once the trees thinned out closer to the house. She urged him on through the wide, open gate at the rear of the meadow behind the farmhouse, laughing out loud as the bracing wind numbed her cheeks, the sound of Monty barking and Ranger’s thundering hooves catching up to them echoing behind. She pulled back on the reins to slow Blue Feather down, Cora pulling up next to her with wild hair and pink cheeks.

“Damn, that was fun!” Alice exclaimed, grinning broadly.

“It was,” Cora agreed, loving the delighted expression on Alice’s flushed face that she had missed so much. “I promise I won’t tell Dr. Coleman or your physical therapist.”

“Definitely not. I don’t want to hear the safety speech.” Alice giggled.

They led the horses into the barn after walking them around the meadow a little to cool down, removing their tack and blankets to give them a brushing and clean the mud out of their hooves. Cora got Ranger settled into his stall and closed the bottom half of the wooden door, glancing over at Alice. She was quiet, staring pensively at the teal silks and the lyra suspended from the center beam of the barn roof. There hadn’t been much time over the fall for even Cora to spend on them, though she had sought the solace of practice a few times when she’d been home visiting, and lately she’d been making an effort to use them more often. It just weighed on her conscience and made it less fun when Alice had been wanting to get back to it so badly all this time, and she missed their partnered routines and practices together.

“Dr. Coleman said I could try again when I saw him yesterday,” Alice said quietly.

“He did? Why didn’t you tell me?”

She shrugged a little. “You were at work. And my stuff isn’t set up anymore, so I couldn’t do a test run. He said silks are best for now, and maybe some lyra as long as I’m not using my left leg to wrap or hang.”

“Do it, Al,” Cora said softly. “I’ll spot you until you know you’re okay.”

Alice looked at her, almost frightened for a brief moment before she shook it off and determination took its place. She held onto Cora’s arm and pulled off her paddock boots and her socks, then shucked off her light jacket, leaving her in her t-shirt and snug cotton breeches. She heaved a shaky sigh; this was the moment of truth, and she’d been waiting so long for it. Somehow it had seemed like something that would be more ceremonious when she’d imagined it before, but the reality of it was quiet and calm in the dim, dusty light of the barn, and it had come like any other thing in the midst of everything else changing and moving forward, too. It seemed right, though, to do this now with Cora her only company, her sister to whom she had given this art as part of her own recovery, and who had given so much of herself to Alice all this time.

She took hold of the silk, soft and strong in her hands as she wrapped it around them and pulled her body upward. Her feet and legs fumbled for a moment trying to wind the fabric for a foothold to climb upward, but little by little her body remembered, and her uncertainty was replaced
by elation as she got braver in her movements, her muscle memory taking over. Thighs wrapped snugly and hands holding on, she let the silk pull her gently through the twisting, turning dance she still knew so well, bold enough now to lose her fear to the rush of adrenaline as she turned herself upside down, her hands still holding on to be sure of her safety. Cora smiled proudly up at her, tears in her eyes, and then she toed off her own boots to hoist herself onto the lyra beside Alice. Hanging by her knees, she reached out her hands, and Alice swung carefully toward her to take them, shaking a little until her sister’s strong, warm grip assured her wordlessly, I’ve got you. They moved together into the familiarity of partnership, hesitantly at first and mindful of Alice’s limitations, then growing more confident together as Alice figured out what she was capable of for now. A laugh bubbled up and escaped her throat, bouncing off the roof above. She didn’t even care anymore that she wasn’t at full capacity, it just felt so incredible to be up here again, and her heart was flying right along with her body.

Uncas parked his truck in the farmhouse driveway, and he and Nathaniel got out as Monty ran barking up to the back gate. Nathaniel opened it to greet the dog, motioning for Uncas to follow him through it.

“Come on, we can go take a look at the treehouse stuff while you’re here. I’ve got all the wood in the barn for now.”

“Looks like Cora and Alice are back from their ride,” Uncas said as they walked down the slope to the barn, nodding toward the horses sunning in the outdoor pens adjacent to their stalls.

As they approached the large open doorway, they heard music playing inside, and a laugh that sounded like Alice. Stepping inside, eyes adjusting to the dimmer light, Uncas saw the reason for Alice’s happiness. Both men stood in rapt quietude to observe Cora and Alice’s coordinated movements between the lyra and silks.

“You ever feel so lucky that you think you might be dreaming?” Nathaniel whispered beside him, gazing upward with deep adoration at Cora on the lyra. Uncas thought about what Nathaniel had said earlier. “You have Alice right beside you through all of this, wading through the thick of it with you. You have her to wake up to every damn day, so you can remember how lucky you are to have her”. She smiled beatifically, radiant to him in her long-awaited joy. Watching her work with her sister so elegantly after all this time, imperfections and all, made him feel like his heart could burst open with exultation. Lucky didn’t even begin to cover how he felt right now. Tears sprang to his eyes without warning, falling silently down his face as he watched Alice fly once more.

“Uncas tells me you’ll start teaching your aerial yoga classes again next week,” Yvette said to Alice the following Sunday. Everyone was sitting on the back porch at the cabin, finishing an early dinner to celebrate Alice’s birthday, with the exception of the Cameron children and Ryan Winthrop, who had abandoned the remainder of their food in favor of climbing around in the treehouse.

“Yes, I will! I’m really excited about it. It’s been so good being able to practice again, and now that my equipment is back up, I’m all set!” Alice beamed at Uncas and squeezed his hand, looking out to where he had mounted hardware under the high platform of the treehouse, and hung her red silks and her lyra there as part of her birthday present.

“Susan is certainly excited that you’ll be coming back to teach. That other girl is very sweet, but Susan has really missed you at class.” Alexandra smiled, and in the next breath stood up and stalked off the porch yelling, “James and Ryan! Do NOT play Tarzan on Alice’s equipment!”

“Heh. Reminds me of two little boys I once knew.” Sidney chuckled fondly to Ed and Jack.
“As if we ever outgrew it. Who do you think tested that stuff after we hung it up?” Nathaniel deadpanned, laughing with Uncas and Brian when their father rolled his eyes at Yvette.

“So, this week is going to be your last week on nights, Cora? We’re going to miss you,” Ashley lamented. “It’ll be weird without you there.”

“You’ll still see me at shift change, and it’s not like we don’t hang out all the time anyway. Besides, in light of the situation with Kate, it’s better anyway.”

Yvette looked up. “How is that going, anyway, Ed, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Oh, well, it’s early yet.” Ed replied a little shyly. “I’ve only seen her the one time so far, but we’ve got plans again later this coming week. She’s a very nice person, and a lot of fun to be around.”

“That’s wonderful to hear, Ed.” Alexandra sat back down next to Jack and took his hand. “Dating can be challenging when you’ve lost a spouse to death. It’s not like divorce, because it’s not like you stopped loving them, so it takes a special person to understand and honor that.” She squeezed Jack’s hand appreciatively.

Alice and Cora both smiled. Ed had seemed very happy after his first date with Kate a few days ago, and they were glad for him. Aside from Ashley, no one else at the hospital knew anything about it, and Cora wanted to keep it that way, at least until she was off the night shift. She and Kate had talked privately about it, and Kate had been relieved to find out that Cora really wasn’t upset with her and was supportive of whatever she and Ed decided was right for them.

When dinner was finished and birthday cake eaten, Yvette, Cora, and Nathaniel took on dish duty while Sidney and Ed cleaned the countertops. The children wound down in the living area watching a movie with Alexandra and Jack. Ashley and Brian stayed out on the back porch with Uncas and Alice for a while before joining the rest of the group inside, leaving the two of them alone out on the porch swing.

“This was such a good birthday,” Alice said softly, cuddling up to Uncas and laying her head on his shoulder. He turned his head to kiss her nose.

“I’m glad. Did you get everything you wanted?”

“I have everything I want every day. But there is one thing…”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“I want to hear you play the guitar again. I know you practice, but you’ve never played for me since your hand has been better. And I don’t care if it’s not perfect, I just want to hear you.”

“Right now?”

“You can wait till everyone’s gone if you don’t feel comfortable.”

He chuckled softly. “Go big or go home, right? Now is as good a time as any I guess. What do you want to hear?”

“Whatever you want, as long as you sing to me, too.” She smiled sweetly up at him, her eyes a warm gold in the evening light.

He thought about what to play for her now, what could possibly do her justice. He thought
about how they had danced together the first time they'd met at his parents’ concert, and again in the
parking lot of the Blue Ribbon Diner on their first date. He thought about how he had sung to her on
the phone almost every night while she was away in Boston at Spaulding, and how she had read
books to him, chapter by chapter. She still did, sometimes. Suddenly he knew what he was going to
do. He got up from the swing and went into the house to the room that had been his, and then
Nathaniel’s before he had moved out in January. Picking up what he had come in for, he carried his
guitar back out to the porch where Alice was waiting, not even hearing Nathaniel ask him what he
was doing as he passed by the kitchen. He watched Alice briefly as he tuned the strings, an excited
little grin on her lips. He had thought he would feel more nervous about this, but looking at her he
felt an unflinching calm, her eyes and her smile reassuring him. He started to pluck out the intro to the
song he had chosen, a simple one by The Magnetic Fields that was exactly what he wanted to give to
Alice.

“The book of love is long and boring
No one can lift the damn thing
It's full of charts and facts and figures
And instructions for dancing

But I
I love it when you read to me
And you
You can read me anything

The book of love has music in it
In fact that's where music comes from
Some of it is just transcendental
Some of it is just really dumb”

Alice gave a breathless little laugh, catching on enough to sing the next chorus with him as
her eyes filled with sentimental tears.

“But I
I love it when you sing to me
And you
You can sing me anything”

Uncas took a breath and continued with the next verse by himself again.

“The book of love is long and boring
And written very long ago

It's full of flowers and heart-shaped boxes

And things we're all too young to know

But I

I love it when you give me things

And you

You ought to give me wedding rings"

He got up off the swing to kneel down in front of her, his eyes glimmering as he looked up at her. She stared back at him in disbelief as he finished the song, unable to help the tears that began to course down her face.

“And I

I love it when you give me things

And you

You ought to give me wedding rings

You ought to give me wedding rings.”

He set the guitar down beside him and took out the ring he had kept hidden in the dresser in his old room. Nathaniel had left it there for him after he’d gotten out of the rehab hospital, and it had stayed there waiting for the moment he felt ready to do this. By now everyone in the house was crowded around the porch doorway, either staring expectantly or crying, all of them waiting for the next move, so it was now or never.

“Marry me, Alice?” he whispered, holding the ring up. Her mother’s ring. She looked at him, tears still falling freely as she held out her trembling hand and allowed him to slip the delicate setting onto her finger, then leaned forward to cup his face, the antique diamond glittering under the incandescent porch light.

“Yes. Broken or whole, I’d choose you every time, Uncas. Yes.” She kissed him, her tears wet against his cheeks. He wrapped her in a crushing embrace, nearly pulling her off the swing as they laughed between kisses, and everyone erupted into clapping and cheering behind them. “Now I have everything I could ever want,” Alice murmured, her heart beating against his as she held him close to her.

Author's Note:

I was slow to start on this chapter because I got sick (thank you, preschool germs), but all in all it didn't take too long. So spring is in the air now, and bringing with it even more exciting things for our friends. Uncas finally gets to go back to work, which is a big deal for him. Even a non-catastrophic nerve injury can take months or even years to heal, so I had Uncas on about a six-month
timeline overall for regaining his fine motor function well enough to perform all his paramedic duties, and now he's ready to hit the skies again with Nathaniel and Cora. Ed had some pretty wild news for Alice and Cora, too. I tried to be subtle about that, just sticking in a comment here and there, but I had a plan to hook up Ed with Kate eventually. I think that with everything going on in this story, Ed deserves to find happiness too, and it's about time.

Everyone is kind of waking up after a long winter in this chapter, doing things they haven't been able to do in a long time. Uncas and Nathaniel went hiking solely to have that moment when Uncas takes off running. When I thought of that a while back, both Nathaniel and Uncas (in my head) really wanted that to happen. It reminded me of the two of them at the beginning of the film, chasing down that bull elk, running side by side like a well-oiled machine, almost reading each other's minds. What better way to give them a moment like that in this AU, than when Uncas reaches this point of just feeling alive again, and Nathaniel understands and can celebrate that with him. In the same vein, Alice has her own moment of glory, a little bit when she takes off on Blue Feather, but most of all when she gets back on the aerial silks. Again, something her sibling can share and celebrate with her, because they have a mutual understanding about this art being therapy for them. I reference flying a lot through this story, because I think all of these characters have figuratively or literally learned to fly again in one way or another, which is why this story is titled with that word. Life is very often all about "Flying Into the Fire" - and coming out the other side somewhat scorched, but alive and a little better for it.

And last, but not least, you had to know Uncas would finally propose to Alice before this story was over. I had to think about this scene a lot, as to how and under what circumstances Uncas would propose; what was right for him and Alice. He isn't a grand public gestures kind of guy. He and Alice are relatively peaceful people and enjoy time with those they love, so I felt like a smaller, intimate setting either alone or with a small group of people close to them would be about as far as he'd go (his original plan, of course, was to do it at the victory bell in Keene, after they finished the Great Range Dozen hike). Ever since I really started thinking about how he would eventually propose, I could not get The Magnetic Fields' "Book of Love" out of my head for that (Peter Gabriel's version is beautiful, too, but I felt like the original version was more Uncas' style, especially the simple guitar and him singing with that deep voice). I hope I was able to do them justice with that, for all you Uncas-Alice die-hards out there. Now as to what will happen next, you'll have to see, because there is still a little of this story left to tell, so it isn't quite over yet! My plan is one more chapter and an epilogue, which means that the next update will very likely be the last (cries, grabs box of tissues, not ready for this story to end).

The theme song for this chapter is Paul Gross' "Feel the Fall". I loved this song for all the big, happy leaps forward in this chapter, and it fit really well. That played in my head through the whole first scene when Uncas goes back to work, and I could definitely hear it when I imagined them taking off together in the helicopter on their first call of the shift. When Uncas and Alice are together later after he gets home from work, all his thoughts about her made me think of "Feet Upon the Ground" by Paul Gross (You guys should just buy the album at this point, LOL). During the scene where Uncas and Nathaniel run off into the forest after the deer, I was hearing "Breathe" by Midge Ure, especially when Uncas stops on the ledge and lets out that war-cry. That scene was also fighting my brain a little bit for Live's "Run to the Water", mostly when Nathaniel and Uncas are talking right before the deer shows up, but I also liked that song for Alice and Cora, when Alice takes off galloping on Blue Feather. All I could think of when Alice so quietly gets back on the aerial silks with Cora's encouragement was Sarah McLachlan's recording of The Beatles' "Blackbird", because Alice has waited so long to fly again, and because I always tend to think of Alice as a raven if she was a bird,
ever since Where We Start Again. It dies hard.

Oh! And I got the freaking gorgeous digital paintings of Nathaniel and Cora I was telling you about in my Chapter 18 note, and Panda-Capuccino did an outstanding job on them. Those of you following me on Tumblr have seen them, of course - Panda's work is just fabulous, and I can't say enough nice things about her. She sent me every step of the process from preliminary sketches to line art, and I was even able to watch the live stream of her painting them, which was amazing to see! That's about it for Chapter 19, folks. Chapter 20 will bring some more good things for our favorite families and friends, so stay tuned, and as always, thank you so much for all your support and wonderful commentary!
After All

Chapter Summary

Alice and Uncas celebrate a major victory, followed by their wedding day, and Nathaniel and Cora reach a major conclusion as well.

Chapter Notes

Author's note included in chapter text.

Chapter 20 – After All

“Go ahead, push your luck
Find out how much love the world can hold
Once upon a time I had control
And reined my soul in tight

Well the whole truth
Is like the story of a wave unfurled
But I held the evil of the world
So I stopped the tide
Froze it up from inside

And it felt like a winter machine
That you go through and then
You catch your breath and winter starts again
And everyone else is spring bound

And when I chose to live
There was no joy, it's just a line I crossed
It wasn’t worth the pain my death would cost

So I was not lost or found

And if I was to sleep

I knew my family had more truth to tell

And so I traveled down a whispering well

To know myself through them

Growing up, my mom had a room full of books

And hid away in there

Her father raging down a spiral stair

Till he found someone

Most days his son

And sometimes I think

My father, too, was a refugee

I know they tried to keep their pain from me

They could not see what it was for

But now I’m sleeping fine

Sometimes the truth is like a second chance

I am the daughter of a great romance

And they are the children of the war

Well the sun rose with so many colors

It nearly broke my heart

And worked me over like a work of art

And I was a part of all that
So go ahead, push your luck
Say what it is you've got to say to me
We will push on into that mystery
And it'll push right back
And there are worse things than that

Cause for every price
And every penance that I could think of
It's better to have fallen in love
Than never to have fallen at all

Cause when you live in a world
Well it gets into who you thought you'd be
And now I laugh at how the world changed me
I think life chose me after all.”

-Dar Williams-

Alice stood beside Uncas at the summit of Saddleback Mountain, where their lives had changed forever the previous September. This was her first long hike since the accident, and only her third outing since she had been cleared for mild to moderate hikes by Dr. Coleman. The June weather was perfect, warm and breezy without a cloud in the sky, and she was thankful for that ease on her mind. Hopefully it would hold for tomorrow as well – the forecast promised it would. Today she and Uncas were hiking the last four peaks of the Great Range Trail, starting with Saddleback Mountain, in order to finally complete the challenge. This time they were accompanied not only by Magua, but by Nathaniel and Cora too. Tomorrow they would be married in front of the victory bell in Keene, and they would finally get to ring it.


“A little bit,” Alice admitted. “But it’s par for the course. I’m just nervous.”

Uncas took her hand. “I am, too. But we don’t have to do this if it feels like too much. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, and I want to do this. We can do this.”

“We’re all right here with you,” Nathaniel assured them. “We’re all here together, and
“Everyone harnessed up?” Magua asked. This time he had brought safety equipment along for each hiker, as extra insurance that everyone would make it down the cliffs with no injury, especially Alice.

“Let’s do it,” Uncas said, setting his jaw with grim determination, still gripping Alice’s hand firmly in his.

One by one they descended the hundred-foot drop into the col below. Cora went down after Nathaniel, with Magua belaying each climber from the top, and then it was Alice’s turn. Uncas had wanted her to go first, to make sure he was there to assist Magua as she made her descent. She swallowed the lump in her throat, taking deep breaths as Uncas gave her a comforting kiss and kept his eyes on her while she started down the face. She cautiously felt for each foothold, almost nauseated at first but gaining a little more confidence the further down she went. Her left leg was a little shaky, so she moved slowly and kept her mind on her task, reminding herself over and over that she was safe with the harness and rope. Cora and Nathaniel waited for her at the bottom, but she didn’t let herself look down, or anywhere except where she needed to put her hands and feet. This whole experience was harder for her because she remembered so much of the day they had fallen, but she and Uncas wanted to prove together that they could overcome what had happened to them and finish this challenge. It wasn’t about the patch, or the bell, or being able to say they had done it. It was now more like a final step in putting it all behind them, especially on the day before they would start another new journey as husband and wife.

After their engagement in March, Uncas had finally divulged his original plan to propose when they rang the victory bell on the original hike. After some thought, Alice and expressed the idea of getting married in front of the bell, which Uncas had liked. Once she had been cleared to hike and her first couple of outings had gone well, they had talked themselves hoarse about the pros and cons of attempting to finish the trail as a precursor to the ceremony. Both had worried about it, and so had their families, but in dry conditions the danger was far less, and ultimately it felt like doing this was somehow necessary to just put the cap on the last nine months and take a good memory out of here this time. That was something they had both wanted equally, and that was also why they had decided to get married here. As Maid of Honor and Best Man, Cora and Nathaniel had agreed to come with them, as had Magua.

Uncas watched Alice all the way down the slanted cliff face, barely breathing. Cora and Nathaniel mirrored him at the foot of the cliffs, Cora holding tight to Nathaniel’s arm, looking proud and frightened at the same time. Nathaniel’s expression was unreadable behind his sunglasses, but none of the group had any particularly good memories associated with this place, and it hung in the air around all of them, thick and weighty. Uncas questioned this decision for at least the millionth time, worried about Alice’s leg, but she was holding her own, and he reminded himself why they were doing this. He let out mighty breath when Alice reached the bottom of the cliffs safely, met by hugs from her sister and Nathaniel.

“You did it!” he called down to her, smiling proudly as she looked upward at him.

“It’s your turn now, skenhchio. Are you ready to go?” Magua put a hand on his shoulder, and Uncas grinned at the use of the nickname their friend had given him – the Huron word for ‘fox’. He clipped his harness to the belay rope.

“I don’t know if ‘ready’ is the word, but I can’t stay up here forever, so down I go.”

“Just take it slow. I’ve got your back from here, you’ve got nothing to worry about.” Magua would be the last to go down, bringing the rope down with him.
Uncas moved methodically, feeling out the rock beneath his feet as he went. The breeze picking up combined with the exposure made his insides tremble, and he paused for a moment when the rope shook a little, pushing away the only memory he had of falling – that gust of wind hitting him and making him slip. But this time the rocks were bone-dry, and he was protected by the harness if something went wrong. He kept going, pep-talking himself inside his head until he reached the base. He breathed a sigh of relief as he disconnected the carabiner on his harness and jumped to the ground off the last short ledge. Alice flew straight into his arms, and Nathaniel and Cora huddled around him too. Magua packed up the rigging into his backpack and made the climb down to join them before they headed up the steep slope to the peak of Basin Mountain.

By the time they had made it through the deep col off Basin and up the rocky shoulder to the Haystack peak, Alice was slowing down quite a bit and starting to limp a little, so they stopped to rest, eat, and enjoy the beautiful views off the small spur trail. Uncas and Cora both worried over Alice’s leg, which was getting a little swollen even with her compression sock and causing her some pain after all the steep climbing. But Alice knew what she was capable of, and Dr. Coleman had told her what to look out for to know if she needed to throw in the towel. Not ready to give up, she assured them it was just minor discomfort, and reminded them that the hike to the final peak from here wasn’t going to be nearly as hard. She felt better after sitting for a while, so the group kept moving, taking the trail back over Little Haystack, over the spine and down to the trail that would take them to Mount Marcy, the highest peak in the state and the last one on the Great Range Dozen challenge. From there, it would be a short trip back to the trail between Haystack and Mount Marcy and down to the lodge, where their families and friends would be waiting for them. When they reached the last summit, the end-of-trail celebration commenced with victorious yells from all five of them echoing into the open sky and the valleys below them. Uncas picked Alice up and swung her around, both of them laughing, giddy with success and relief.

“We made it,” he said quietly.

“We did.” Alice smiled back at him. “Though I think I’m probably going to need a piggyback ride back to the lodge. My leg is about done, and I still have an aisle to walk down tomorrow.”

The next afternoon, Alice sat in front of the mirror in the room she had been sharing with Cora at the Adirondack Lodge, almost ready for her wedding, and waiting for Yvette to bring the last few things she needed. Once Ed arrived, they could all head down to the gazebo that housed the Great Range Dozen victory bell, where the ceremony would take place. A reception would follow back here at the lodge’s recreation hall.

“I’ve got all our flowers ready to go in that box over there, and Nathaniel took the boutonnieres to his and Uncas’ room,” Cora said, coming out of the bathroom with Ashley, where they had been dressing after Ashley finished everyone’s hair and subtle, natural makeup. “My stuff is all packed up, too, so I can switch places with Uncas later on.”

Alice turned and smiled at them. “You both look beautiful!” she exclaimed. Both wore their hair in a loose up-do, and sage green chiffon dresses in different styles. Cora’s had straps, a gathered sweetheart bodice and a fluttery, long skirt, and Ashley’s had a simple strapless bodice with a tea-length skirt. The color was very flattering on both of them and complemented the flowers perfectly – instead of real blooms, Cora, Ashley and Yvette had helped Alice make paper flowers from pages out of copies of all the books she had read to Uncas while she was hospitalized in Boston. These made up the focal point of the bouquets and boutonnieres, with accents of green china berries and delicate fern leaves.
“This is going to be the best day, I’m so excited for you and Uncas!” Ashley said, fussing with Alice’s hair to make sure it was perfect. A knock sounded at the door, and Cora opened it to admit Yvette, who was smiling happily and clutching a bag that contained things she had made for Alice to wear today.

“Good morning!” She chirped, setting the bag down on the dresser to dole out hugs. “Cora, Ashley, you both look lovely. And here’s our Alice! Are you ready to get dressed, honey? It’s almost time.”

“Yes,” Alice replied, returning Yvette’s hug. “Cora was just going to help me. Give us just a few minutes, and I’ll be ready.” The sisters disappeared into the bathroom, Cora bearing the zipped garment bag that held Alice’s wedding dress. Alice took off her robe and put on a long slip over her lacy ivory underwear, and Cora helped her into the dress. It was simple but stunning on her, sleeveless with a V-neck and back, the bodice made with an overlay of creamy, pale gold lace, and the A-line skirt of matching layers of chiffon that fell in soft folds to the floor. Cora zipped up the back and then tied the beaded buckskin sash Yvette had given her around the waist, and they emerged back into the main part of the room so that Yvette could finish helping Alice get ready. Alice sat on a chair and put on the moccasins her mother-in-law had made for her. The ankle flaps were heavily beaded in pale green with a white and light pink border, and the vamps bore a stunning turtle design with pink and yellow flowers and green vines decorating the shell, the colors matching the beaded sash on her gown. Yvette then brought out the jewelry, delicate earrings and a triple-strand necklace strung with creamy oyster shell wampum, interspersed with green aventurine chips, and the tiny snail shells she and Uncas had picked up on the shore at Boston Harbor. Alice touched the necklace and looked at herself in the mirror. The jewelry and beadwork items were a perfect complement to her dress and her hair, which Ashley had curled and pinned up in a loose, romantic up-do with silky sections framing her face, crowned by a single braid that held tiny paper flowers and green leaves like the ones in her bouquet.

“These things are all so beautiful,” she whispered to her almost-mother-in-law, feeling tears spring to her eyes as she stood up to face them all.

“Oh, Al, you look absolutely gorgeous,” Cora breathed, her voice breaking with emotion. She put her arms around Alice and held her for a moment. “I’m so happy for you, and so proud of you. I wish Mom could be here to see you.”

“Me, too,” Alice sniffled. “But I’m so glad you’re here, and Pop and Kate too. Now don’t make me cry more, or we’ll both screw up our makeup.” She let go of Cora to kiss Yvette’s cheek. “Thank you for all this.”

“It’s my pleasure, naxêm, to welcome you into our family. I could not imagine anyone worthier of my son.” She smiled lovingly, and another smart knock sounded at the door.

“Alice?” Ed’s muffled voice called from the other side. “It’s time, sweetheart, are you ready?” Cora opened the door to him, sharp and handsome in his Marine dress blues and a fresh haircut, and he entered the room with Kate, who looked lovely in a purple floral-print dress that flattered her dark red hair. Alice had come to love Kate over the last several months, both because she genuinely like her as a person, and because she made Ed happier than she’d seen him in a very long time.

“You look stunning, Alice.” Kate kissed her cheek and released her. She turned to her father, who stood there staring at her with tears in his eyes.

“You really do,” he said, embracing his younger daughter. “Breathtaking. And so much like your mother. Thank God you’re marrying a man who knows exactly what a treasure he’s got.”
“Thank you, Pop.” She dabbed at her eyes carefully with a tissue. “Now, before we all start crying again, I think we had better go. I’ve got a gorgeous, wonderful man waiting to marry me.”

“It’s almost time,” Nathaniel said quietly, pushing up the sleeve of his suit jacket to check his watch. “They should be ready to start any minute now.” He grinned at Uncas, who stood beside him and Brian by the victory bell, waiting for the wedding to start. At Uncas and Alice’s request, Magua had obtained a minister certificate from the Universal Life Church so that he could be the legal officiant, and once the ceremony concluded, the couple would receive a blessing from Sidney, Yvette, and the Lenape holy man who had come to sing for Uncas in the hospital. Guests were taking their seats in the chairs set up in front of the gazebo, among them friends from work and Alice’s yoga studio, Charlie and Lenore Heyward, and several of Uncas and Nathaniel’s aunts, uncles, and cousins who had come out from the Stockbridge-Munsee reservation in Wisconsin. Even a couple of Alice’s friends from Spaulding had been able to come, including her friend Tara, who had recently been fitted with a prosthetic leg.

“Are you nervous?” Brian asked, leaning over a little and adjusting his tie. He and Nathaniel wore basic black suits with sage green shirts and black ties, and the paper flower boutonnieres the women had made.

“About spending the rest of my life with Alice? Not a bit,” Uncas replied with a smile. “I’ve always known she was it for me, you know that.” He stood tall and regal in black slacks and a sage shirt, along with a black wool breechcloth apron beautifully beaded and quilled with a turtle design. Over his shirt he wore a traditional Lenape wedding coat, black wool with heavy floral beadwork all around the collar and sleeve cuffs, with silver shield conchos and cones decorating the breast beneath the beadwork. That and the breechcloth had been worn by Sidney when he and Yvette had married. His hair was loose except for a small braid at the back, decorated with feathers. The four of them straightened to attention when Magua walked down the aisle to join them, followed by Sidney, Yvette, and the holy man, who took their reserved seats in the front row of chairs.

“The ladies are here and ready to begin.” Magua grinned and patted Uncas’ shoulder. “Let’s have a wedding, shall we?”

Uncas nodded, and Nathaniel and Brian left them to take their places with Cora and Ashley. The last guests seated themselves at Magua’s direction, and at his signal, Jack cued up Peter Gabriel’s ‘Book of Love’ to begin the ceremony. Nathaniel and Cora came down the aisle first, Cora giving Uncas a broad smile and a wink as she and Nathaniel separated to stand on their respective sides. Ashley and Brian followed, and once they were in place, Ed appeared at the back of the short aisle with Alice by his side. As they started toward him, Uncas’ eyes welled, and he felt as if all the air had been sucked right out of his lungs at the sight of his bride approaching. She was every inch his ethereal golden woman today, from the hem of her gown to her golden hazel eyes and honey-gold hair, and even more a dream come true at this moment than she had been the first time he’d finally seen her and matched her to the voice he had always known he was meant to hear for a lifetime.

Alice reminded herself to breathe as she held onto her father’s arm and approached the victory bell where the man who would shortly be her husband awaited her, gazing at her as if she were the only living thing on earth. She was dimly aware of the guests beaming and tearing up as she passed them, and of the wedding party standing with Uncas and Magua. Cora and Nathaniel watched her approach with emotion-laden smiles. Alice was smiling too, but she only had eyes for the man she was about to marry. He looked so exquisitely majestic in his attire that it made her heart flutter even more, but even without it she knew she would feel the same; beneath the beautiful regalia he was simply the man she had always been waiting for, the man she had known was hers from the
very first moment they had met. They reached him at last, and Ed kissed her cheek and held her fiercely for a moment.

“I love you, sweetheart,” he whispered gruffly before taking Uncas’ hand to join with hers and looking intently at him. “I know you’ll take good care of my baby girl.” He turned away to take his seat beside Kate, and Magua began the short ceremony. When it came time to recite their vows, Uncas took both of Alice’s hands in his, looking down at her with overwhelming love in his beautiful dark eyes.

“Alice… I vow that I will always be a faithful husband to you in every way. I will be your family and share my family with you. I will build a life with you wherever we are. I will stand by you as you grow and change, and I will always support you in all that you do. I vow to laugh with you, and to comfort you when you are downhearted. I will take time to spend with you, indoors or out, and I will delight in our many adventures and challenges. And I think it goes without saying that I will be by your side in sickness, since we’ve already gotten that part down pat long before today.” He paused as Alice and their guests laughed softly, and he reached out to brush a tear from her cheek as he continued. “Now I vow that I will be by your side in every time of sickness and health, in every difficulty and triumph we will face together, and I promise that even if I can’t stop you from falling, I will always be a soft place for you to land when you do fall. I will love you until we are loose in the joints and very shabby, because you will always be Real to me. And I will always sing to you, until the day my voice should fail me.”

Alice’s beautiful smile widened through her tears of joy, and she grasped his hands more tightly as she began to speak her vows.

“Uncas, I vow that I will always be a faithful wife to you in every way. I will be your family and share my family with you. I will build a life with you wherever we are. I will stand by you as you grow and change, and I will always support you in all that you do. I vow to laugh with you, and to comfort you when you are downhearted. I will take time to spend with you, indoors or out, and I will delight in our many adventures and challenges. I vow that I will be by your side in every time of sickness and health, in every difficulty and triumph we will face together, and I promise that even if I can’t stop you from falling, I will always be a soft place for you to land when you do fall. I will love you until we are loose in the joints and very shabby, because you will always be Real to me. And I will always read to you, until the day my voice should fail me.”

As she finished, they each turned to Cora and Nathaniel to retrieve the wedding bands, Alice’s a delicate white gold one that fit against her engagement ring, and Uncas’ a simple titanium band with a gold stripe running along the middle of it. After they had exchanged rings and recited the standard script that went along with it, their parents and siblings stood around them as the holy man sang a blessing for their marriage and a good life together. When this had concluded, Magua grinned at them.

“My dear friends, by the power vested in me by the state of New York, I now happily pronounce you husband and wife. You may now ring the victory bell and kiss your bride, for both are well-deserved.” He stepped aside so they could approach the big brass bell. Together they gave it a good, loud ring, and cheering erupted as Uncas then dipped Alice backward and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around him to hold on, laughing and kissing him back. In the fading clang of that bell was the sound of every fight they had won in the past ten months, and now it was to signal the start of the rest of their lives together; a monumental victory indeed.

Once the wedding party and family members had posed for the requisite photographs at the victory bell, Cora and Nathaniel rushed ahead to the lodge to make sure the recreation area and food
was all set to go for the reception, and that the cake had been delivered and set up. It was a lovely cake, simple with minimal frosting, decorated with green leaves here and there, and a little hiking trail lined with fondant stones leading to the top where the bride and groom figures stood. Cora had to laugh upon catching Nathaniel in the act of adding a Spider-Man action figure climbing up the back of the cake – he always knew what subtle humor would amuse Uncas most, and likely Alice as well. Sidney and Yvette arrived behind them, along with the rest of the members of The Thin Bluegrass Line, who would be providing musical entertainment for part of the reception. Nathaniel helped them set up equipment while Cora met Ed, Kate, Ashley and Brian on their way in, directing them to what they could help her with before the other guests got there. He watched her bustle around in her pretty green dress like a dutiful Maid of Honor, a dark curl escaping from her up-do and falling against her flushed cheek before she tucked it behind her ear.

“Nathaniel, Frank needs those cables you’re holding,” Yvette said, observing her older son’s distracted, dreamy expression as he looked at Cora. He came back to the present, clearing his throat and acknowledging his mother with a small smile before he handed the cables over to the dobro player. She patted his cheek and gave him a knowing look. “You’ve got something heavy on your mind, nkwis.”

Nathaniel shrugged. “It’s kind of a big day, Mom. There’s a lot to think about.”

Yvette smiled at him, her eyes sliding to where Cora stood with Charlie and Lenore Heyward before returning to her son. “Of course there is,” she replied quietly. “We’ll get the rest of this set up. Go help Cora, guests are arriving, and your brother and Alice will be here soon.”

Nathaniel hopped off the stage to join the others by the door to greet the small crowd of wedding guests when they began to trickle in and sit down at the tables. Before long the reception area was full of life, with people mingling and the band tuning up, everyone eagerly awaiting the arrival of the bride and groom to officially kick off the celebration. Voices died down when Cora announced that they were outside, and all the guests and family members lined up to greet them on their way in. As the couple stood in the doorway together with radiant smiles, the holy man began to play a water drum and sing to signal the start of the wedding dance, led by Uncas and Alice. Their families organized in a line behind them once they had made their way into the hall, followed by the other guests, forming a slow, steadily moving circle. The voices of the Greatsnake family joined in singing the song, and the Munros’ did as well, having learned it from Sidney and Yvette beforehand so they could participate in this celebration of the union.

When the dance had ended, Alice and Uncas took their places at the head table along with the wedding party and their parents so that dinner could be served.

“Everything is perfect! Thank you guys so much for getting all this set up for us.” Alice said gratefully, giving Cora a loving squeeze as she sat down beside her.

“You’re both so welcome,” Cora replied. “We’re just so happy for you. The ceremony was beautiful, and you both look amazing.”

“So how does it feel to know you’re stuck with my brother for eternity?” Nathaniel grinned and winked at Alice. She smiled adoringly back at her new husband.

“You know there’s no one else I’d rather be stuck with, Captain Hawkeye. Besides, you’re the enabler who gave us a house.”

“Oooh, she’s got you there,” Uncas chuckled, taking his wife’s hand. “But you didn’t end up too bad on that end yourself, all things considered.” He nodded at Cora, his eyes twinkling.
“That I didn’t,” Nathaniel agreed. “If things keep up the way they are, I think we may need to consider taking on a couple more horses so all of us don’t have to share.”

“Hey, now, that’s some serious talk right there,” Alice deadpanned. “First treehouses, then horses… watch out, Cora!”

Cora laughed and a pretty blush suffused her cheeks, but before she could reply dinner was served. They all ate while they had a chance, chatting with the others at the table and the guests who wandered by to congratulate the bride and groom and talk a little. After dinner, Nathaniel and Cora rose to make the obligatory Best Man and Maid of Honor speeches, bringing everyone to tears talking about how Uncas and Alice had taken care of them in the past, and how much it meant to them both to see their younger siblings so happy and full of life on their wedding day. Once dinner was over and the cake had been cut, Sidney and Yvette joined the rest of their band onstage, playing “The House in Rose Valley” for Uncas and Alice’s first dance together as husband and wife; the same song they had danced to the night they’d met at the folk music festival the year before. After Alice had danced with Ed and Uncas with Yvette, the floor opened up for everyone to enjoy the music. The band played for a couple of hours, and once they were finished, Alice tossed her bouquet, after which Brian set up his laptop computer to assume DJ duty and shuffle a playlist he had compiled with the bride and groom’s approval.

“Come and dance with me, nusheyëm,” Uncas whispered in Alice’s ear, coming up behind her to gently steal her away from where she was standing with a group including Ashley, Jack, Alexandra, and her friend Tara, who was deep in animated conversation with Jonathan. Alice smiled and let Uncas pull her into his arms to the tune of ‘Kiss to Build a Dream On’. She closed her eyes as they moved together.

“I remember this song,” she murmured. “We were in the parking lot at the Blue Ribbon Diner, and I thought for sure you’d kiss me after that.”

“I was trying to be a gentleman. It only worked for a little while,” he teased back. “And now you’re my wife, so all bets are off.”

Alice laughed and kissed him slowly, her arms twining around his neck. “Thank goodness. So how much longer do you think we have to stick around before you can carry me off into the night? Or up to our room, at least.”

“Hmmmm… well, it’s after dark and you’ve already tossed your bouquet, so I bet we could make our getaway pretty soon.” He kissed her neck softly.

“That part was easy. I was aiming right for Cora’s head,” she laughed.

“Still trying to push those two along, huh?” Uncas grinned.

“You know me. I’m never satisfied.”

“Never?” he cocked a brow wickedly. “You sure about that?”

“Well,” Alice gazed up at him with hooded eyes, “I could never be satisfied without having forever with you. Every day with you only makes me want one more.”

“You have all my days now, Alice. Every single one.” He pressed her to him with a sigh and kissed her, reveling in the perfection and beauty of her, of this day, of another new adventure to share with her, thankful for even the worst moments that had gotten them to this. When the song had ended, they said a quick round of goodnights to everyone, and there was a loud chorus of cheers and
catcalls as Uncas swept his laughing bride up into his arms and made off toward the exit with her, letting out a loud whoop as he went.

Later when things were starting to settle down, Nathaniel sat on one of the benches out on the wide porch behind the recreation hall with Cora beside him. She had kicked off her strappy heels, and she was settled warmly against his side with her bare feet tucked under her, gazing at the night sky with him.

“Some quiet time at last,” she murmured.

“Mmm,” he replied softly. “This is always nice with you. My favorite stargazing partner.” He kissed the top of her head, and she smiled secretly to herself at his comment, thinking about the gift she had stowed at Uncas and Alice’s house for Nathaniel’s upcoming birthday – a high-powered telescope, with a stand that could be mounted on the deck of the new treehouse at the farm. She turned her head on his shoulder to look at the dwindling crowd inside, spotting her father and Kate with the Greatsnakes, talking to Yvette’s sister and two of Nathaniel’s cousins.

“I like your family. And I’m glad they like Alice,” she said with a little smile.

“Me too. There isn’t anything not to like, really. She’s a good person, she makes him insanely happy, and she stuck by him through the hard stuff. That’s a pretty good reason for anyone to love her. Besides, they really like you, too.”

Cora was quiet for a moment. “I keep thinking about when I was recovering, after the helicopter crash… there was this Navy chaplain, Captain Foster, who used to visit some of us and lead support groups for the wounded. I remember this one time, he talked about how the people we served with are like a tribe to us, because we banded together to survive, to fight for each other, to take care of each other. How when we get hurt in combat, we get pulled away, we sort of lose our tribe, and that was how I felt. I lost the Navy, I lost my friends, my brothers, I lost my tribe. So I used to talk to Captain Foster a lot about that before I came home, and sometimes even after. He said I’d have to learn to find my tribe again in other ways. Now I just keep thinking that I’m so grateful Alice and Uncas didn’t have to go through that. They didn’t lose their tribe, because they had one all along to carry them through, and they always will as long as we’re all together.”

Nathaniel looked at her, her skin luminous in the moonlight and her big, dark eyes sparkling up at him. “What about your tribe?” he asked, tracing his index finger gently over her features. “Did you learn to find it again?”

Her lips parted in a tiny smile as his fingertip outlined their soft fullness. “It took a long time, but I think I finally did.” She leaned forward and brushed her mouth across his briefly, before he got up and guided her to her feet, wrapping his arms around her and holding her close while they danced to the Bob Dylan song drifting through the open doors and windows.

“When the rain is blowing in your face
And the whole world is on your case
I could offer you a warm embrace
To make you feel my love
When the evening shadows and the stars appear
And there is no one there to dry your tears
I could hold you for a million years
To make you feel my love

I know you haven't made your mind up yet
But I will never do you wrong
I've known it from the moment that we met
There's no doubt in my mind where you belong

I'd go hungry; I'd go black and blue
I'd go crawling down the avenue
No, there's nothing that I wouldn't do
To make you feel my love

The storms are raging on the rolling sea
And on the highway of regret
The winds of change are blowing wild and free
You ain't seen nothing like me yet

I could make you happy, make your dreams come true
Nothing that I wouldn't do
Go to the ends of the Earth for you
To make you feel my love
To make you feel my love.”

Nathaniel’s voice resonated faintly where Cora rested her cheek against his shoulder, quietly singing to her. She closed her eyes and snuggled closer. In his arms, under the night sky, she was exactly where she belonged.

“I could definitely stay here for a million years,” she whispered, nuzzling the hollow of his
throat. “You’re my tribe, Nathaniel.”

His lips captured hers in a slow, reverent kiss. “You’re mine, too,” he murmured, the pad of his thumb stroking along her jaw and chin as he gazed at her. From the moment he had decided to live again after the shooting, it had felt like he was just waiting for something, and his soul had known her the first time he’d laid eyes on her. She was his tribe, his forever, and he wanted to be hers, too. “If I could reach up to the heavens and give you every star in that sky, I would.”

Cora slid her arms around his neck. “If you did that, there would be none left to look at together. We can’t have that, now, can we?”

“Definitely not,” he replied with a smile, his lips meeting hers once more.

“Good luck, Mr. Johnson, I hope you get to feeling better soon!” Cora squeezed her elderly patient’s hand as the transporter released the brake on the bed to transfer him up to the floor where he would be admitted. His wife gave her a warm hug, expressing her thanks before following her husband down the hallway. Cora sighed with a tired smile and set about finishing her charting and getting the room cleaned for the next patient, since she had the time. The busy day was at a rare lull, her Tuesday shift would be over in a couple of hours, and she was looking forward to heading home and spending the evening with Nathaniel. They had celebrated his birthday two days before, and since he’d had to work Monday through today, this would be the first time they would get to try out the telescope she’d given him. He had predictably loved it, affectionately remarking that she’d given him a way to get closer to heaven, at which she had laughed and agreed.

“Kate, it’s only five-thirty, what are you doing here so early?” Cora asked, surprised to see the other woman when she entered the staff lounge to grab a snack.

“Oh, Nancy needed to leave early, so I came in to cover charge for the rest of her shift,” Kate answered.

“Huh, she didn’t say anything to us.” Cora shrugged and smiled. “Oh well, it’ll be nice to be here with you for a little bit, anyway.” They chatted for a few minutes, and then both went back out to the ER to resume working. Since Cora didn’t have another patient yet, she helped a newer nurse with one of hers, noticing periodically that Kate kept glancing furtively at her from the nurses’ station. It was a little odd, and it made her wonder if something was going on with Ed, but she didn’t want to ask about it at work so she kept to her own business. A short while later, Kate rushed over to her after a phone call came in.

“Cora, heads up, there’s a trauma case flying in, so you’ll be needed with the rest of the team. They’re about ten minutes out.” Cora headed off to ready herself for the incoming patient with the other members of the trauma team. Everyone seemed especially relaxed about it, which was a little weird to her, but day shift was different from night shift anyway. She shrugged it off and headed up to the roof with them. When they arrived at the helicopter pad, Ashley was there waiting, too.

“Ash, what are you doing here?” Cora asked, confused.

“Oh, I’m just here to help.” Ashley smiled and said nothing else. Cora frowned and was about to inquire further, but the sound of the approaching AirMedic helicopter and then the propeller wash as it prepared to land denied her the opportunity. She pushed her questions away for the moment to focus on the case, waiting for the helicopter door to open and Uncas and Jonathan to give them report.
“What the hell are they doing…” she muttered to herself when the door didn’t open and the prop engine whined to a slow stop. At this point it was all just too out of the ordinary to be comfortable anymore. Cora started looking around at the rest of the team, who didn’t look concerned at all, and she couldn’t figure out why. She turned further to see the roof access door swing wide, and Kate came through it, followed by Ed, Alice, Brian, the Greatsnakes, and the Cameron/Winthrop crew, all of them grinning mischievously at her. Alice waved and pulled out her phone to start recording video. *What in God’s name is going on here?* Cora thought incredulously, turning back to the helicopter as the door finally opened. Uncas and Jonathan hopped out but didn’t unload a stretcher. Instead they both stood flanking the door on either side with wide smiles, waiting as Nathaniel got out of the pilot’s seat and ducked out of the cabin to jump down between them.

At this point Cora had finally begun to suspect what was happening, and she just stared at him in shock as he came toward her wearing that adorable crooked grin she loved. He stopped in front of her, looking a little unnerved behind his smile. She had no idea what else to do and her hands were shaking, so she smiled back at him as he unzipped his flight suit and peeled the top portion off to expose the black t-shirt he was wearing underneath. Her smile faltered for a moment, and her eyes widened when she read the bright white print: ‘WILL YOU MARRY ME?’ She gasped a little when he went down on one knee before her, his eyes clear green in the summer evening sun and silently mirroring the question on his shirt as he presented a small black box. It held a simple, white gold setting with a flush-set round diamond. The band was inlaid with iron-infused chondrite meteorite, the silvery, metallic specks glittering in the dark grey matrix like a starry night.

“This might be as close as I can ever come to giving you the stars in the sky,” he said softly. “But I can promise I’ll love you for as long as they shine. Walk through life with me, Cora. Trip and fall with me. Get back up with me.”

Cora sank to her knees in front of him, tears streaming down her face, and released a quiet sob as she threw her arms around him and buried her face against his neck. “Of course I will. There is nothing else I would rather do with the rest of my life than spend it with you, Nathaniel.”

After allowing him to slide the ring onto her finger, she lifted her hand to cup his cheek. He let out a rough sigh and wrapped her in a crushing embrace, his mouth finding hers as everyone on the roof behind them started clapping and hollering encouragement. Both Nathaniel and Cora thought there might be nothing more satisfying than this; than knowing without a doubt that they were exactly where they were always meant to be. After all the pain and suffering they had endured, every loss, every moment of grief and fear on that broken, winding road of life, every single one of those events had led them to right here, right now, where they might finally find a purpose in all of it, and in everyone and everything else they loved in this perfect mess. Through all the things to come, they would always have their tribe, they would always have each other, and neither would ever regret the chance they had taken on letting themselves fall in love.

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**Author’s Note:**

*Naxëm*: “My daughter in law” (Delaware/Lenape)

*Nusheýem*: “My wife” (Delaware/Lenape)

Holy smokes, this chapter is finally done. This is probably the longest I’ve ever gone between updates, and I’m sorry for that! Just when you think life is settling down it goes nuts again, and that’s exactly what happened over here. My husband and I flew out to a big reunion thing with a bunch of other wounded warrior couples, and just before we left I found myself with two job
interviews scheduled back to back that I had to prepare for. Both ended in on-the-spot offers, and the place I chose to accept is an orthopaedic surgery center where I’ve always wanted to work, so I am REALLY excited about starting over there in a little over a week (LOL I’m going back to work in the surgery). Which also means I’ll be wrapping up this story before then, too, because two weeks of full time training won’t leave me time to write. This is the last formal chapter, and there is an epilogue coming shortly as well. I had originally intended to publish all of it together, but it felt like too much to throw out there to readers at once. There are events in both this chapter and the epilogue that I want readers to really be able to focus on individually, so I decided to publish them separately and give you all just one more piece of FITF to look forward to.

So in this chapter we really get to see how far Uncas and Alice have come, in that they have physically healed to the point that they are ready to complete the Great Range Dozen, and they have mentally healed enough to take that leap as well. For anyone who has experienced a traumatic accident, you know this is a very big deal for them. Since Uncas had originally wanted to propose at the victory bell once the hiking challenge was completed, I could not imagine a better place for him and Alice to have their wedding, and finally get to ring that damn bell when they said “I do”. And Magua officiating was just too much fun to not do. I didn’t focus on all the small details and words of the wedding ceremony itself, because that is pretty universal and we all know what gets said. To me it was more important to focus on how everyone was feeling, describing all the beautiful details, and how Uncas and Alice see each other. I really hope you all enjoyed the wedding, I picked every detail very carefully and even made Pinterest boards with my inspirations so I wouldn’t forget a single detail! If you are interested in seeing some of the photos that inspired wedding details, you can find the photo collage on my Tumblr blog at https://www.tumblr.com/blog/brynnaraven. It was important to me to have traditional elements of the Greatsnakes’ culture involved. Historically the Lenape didn’t throw huge wedding ceremonies – the families exchanged jewelry or wampum to agree on the marriage, and the bride was simply dressed and subsequently delivered to her husband. SO here they just had a very simple ceremony to make it legal, and then a blessing and a wedding dance. I don’t know about you all, but imagining Uncas and Alice in their wedding clothes just makes me sigh. They are so beautiful in my head!

The last part of the reception scene shifts back to focus on Nathaniel and Cora, since Uncas and Alice have at this point reached the lovely conclusion of their story. Nathaniel clearly has marriage on the brain, and I think Cora probably does too. Nathaniel and Cora have always taken a little more time, because they generally tend to be cautious about these things due to their pasts. At this point they know what they want, though, and it doesn’t scare them anymore. They’ve come a long way, and they’re ready to go a little further, and so that takes us into Nathaniel’s mildly epic proposal. While Nathaniel is relatively laid back, I feel like he’s a little more the grand-gesture type as compared to Uncas, hence the deal with the helicopter. I thought of that ages ago, and I absolutely HAD to give him the t-shirt, because that’s just his thing. In my head it was absolutely adorable and seemed like the perfect way for him to propose, and Cora had absolutely no clue what was going on, which always makes it more fun. Clearly Kate and Ashley are excellent coconspirators, heehee. Cora’s ring is one of my favorite details, too. The meteorite inlay was just too perfect – a piece of a falling star. SIGH!

The theme song for this chapter is ‘After All’ by Dar Williams. This is one of my favorite songs about life moving forward after hard times, and I thought it was a good theme song to express how everyone has come out of all the hardship they’ve endured in this story. During the part where they are all completing the hiking challenge together the song is ‘Tightrope’ by The Silent Comedy – it’s a bit forlorn, but I think it conveys pain of the past and hope for the future, and the part about dancing in the aisle is kind of perfect for Uncas and Alice getting married the next day. And of course they had to walk down the aisle to ‘Book of Love’! During the ceremony I was hearing a song called ‘Kiss You Till You Weep’, and the singer is Paul Gross – but not the same guy as a lot
of the other songs in this story, this one is actually the actor from Due South. The recording is only available on YouTube, but it’s a sweet song and I liked it for that part. At the reception we revisited the songs Uncas and Alice danced to in the very beginning of their relationship too, which seemed fitting, and I really loved Bob Dylan’s ‘Make You Feel My Love’ for Nathaniel and Cora. It seemed really right for them, and for the moment Nathaniel knows that he wants to ask Cora to marry him. And when he does that, the theme song ‘After All’ seemed particularly appropriate for that moment. I also can’t help hearing a little of the GooGooDolls’ ‘Come to Me’ in that part, too, because that song has always been one that makes me think of Nathaniel and Cora.

That’s about it for now. I expect to have the epilogue written and published within the week so I can have this story finished before my first day at the new job, so be on the lookout. I really hope you guys enjoyed this chapter full of happiness. Thank you so much for reading, and thank you to all the readers who take the time to comment – I don’t need big long reviews to feel satisfied, I love even the shortest comments just letting me know what you think or how you liked it (or didn’t), or even just that you’re still reading. I treasure every one, and I value your opinions and the time you spend reading my work. Stay tuned for the epilogue and final conclusion of Flying Into the Fire!
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

The story comes to a lovely conclusion, with a happy day and some good news along with it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Epilogue

“You look good, son,” Sidney said proudly, smiling as he fastened the silver and quahog turtle pin to Nathaniel’s dark purple ascot tie, then tucked it into the elaborately beaded buckskin vest he wore with a white shirt, his hair pulled halfway back and secured with a wide beaded strip of buckskin. When Sidney was done, he placed his hands on Nathaniel’s shoulders. “I’m proud of you. You’ve found a woman who makes you as happy as your mother has made me all these years, and I can’t tell you how that eases my mind after everything you went through before.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Nathaniel replied quietly, hugging his father. He turned to the mirror above the guest room dresser to make final adjustments, tugging at the bottom of the vest and then donning the dark charcoal grey suit jacket to finish off his wedding attire. “In retrospect I’m glad things turned out the way they did. Cora was worth all of it, for sure.”

“Hey, man, looking sharp!” Brian grinned as he and Uncas walked into the room, wearing lighter grey suits with lavender shirts and deep purple ties. “Jack’s dressed too, and he said Alexandra has our boutonnières and to see her when we’re done here. He’s out there wrangling the chaplain and laying out details like he does best.”

Nathaniel laughed and looked at Uncas. “Isn’t that your job as Best Man?”

“Jack’s better at that stuff than me. Besides, I’m here to wrangle you.”

“As if you need to twist my arm to stand up there and marry Cora,” Nathaniel replied. “I go very willingly to my fate.”

“I’ll see you boys out there,” Sidney interrupted. “I’m going to go check on the food in the kitchen and make sure everything’s in order for the reception.”

“That’s code for ‘I’m going to sample the food,’” Uncas joked.

“I’ll leave you two alone for a bit, too,” Brian said. “Cora’s buddy Frejo got here a little bit ago and he’s going to help me finish setting stuff up out back. He’s a pretty cool guy, I like him!”

Nathaniel smiled. “Yeah, he is. I’m glad they could come out for this.” Gabe Frejo, his wife Serena, and their now almost ten-month-old baby girl Anisa had flown in from San Diego the day before, and the Heywards had arrived earlier in the week to help with preparations at Cora and Nathaniel’s house, where the wedding was being held. It would be a relatively small and simple
affair with close friends, coworkers, and family, and they had been granted the gift of mild, sunny weather this first week of October. It made today perfect for an outdoor celebration, especially with the leaves beginning to change colors in the woods along the back of the meadow in a picturesque sweep of red and gold. Rows of rented white chairs had been set up along the pathway to the red barn, and Alice, Cora, and the other women had decorated the open doorway with an artful drape of lavender and cream fabric, and a garland of greenery and purple flowers. Tables were being set up on the expanse of backyard by the meadow, and Brian, Uncas, and Nathaniel had moved the furniture off the big deck to make it into a stage and dance floor for the reception. All in all, it promised to be a perfect day.

“So, how’s wedded bliss on your part?” Nathaniel asked Uncas when they were alone. “Everything still rosy?”

Uncas grinned sappily. “Yeah. I mean not a lot changed except making it official, but we’re definitely happy. I hope you and Cora will be, too, man.”

“I think it’s safe to say that we will. We’ve had enough ups and downs over the last year to know we’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, we all have.” Uncas’ face grew serious. “I’m really glad for you, Nathaniel. This hasn’t been easy for any of us, and with all the stuff before, you know, after John, and Judith…”

“Yeah, we’re not talking about her. She’s irrelevant now, like you always said. Cora is all that matters to me, especially today.”

“I know, but I just want you to understand that I’m really proud of you for working past that. You and Cora had a lot going against you from the beginning, and you’ve both worked really hard to be happy. I can’t think of two people who deserve what you’ve got now more than you guys. John would be glad for you, too.”

“Thanks, Uncas.” Nathaniel swallowed hard. “We feel the same way about you and Alice, and we love you guys. But shouldn’t you be saving all this for your Best Man speech later?”

Uncas chuckled. “Probably, but I wanted to tell you privately, too. And I, uh… have a little pre-wedding gift for you, so sit down.”

Nathaniel sat on the bed and took the bag Uncas handed him. He pulled out the paper and removed a folded t-shirt. “You bought me a smartass shirt for my wedding?”

“Uncle

(un·kuhl) – noun

Like a dad, just way cooler

[see also handsome, exceptional]

Nathaniel stopped breathing for a moment and dropped the shirt into his lap, his gaze
shooting to his younger brother. “Wait… does this mean what I think it means?”

Uncas nodded with a nervous smile. “It’s early, and we haven’t told anyone else yet, but I wanted you to be the first to know. Alice is going to tell Cora, too.”

Nathaniel sprang to his feet and bear-hugged Uncas, lifting him a few inches off the floor. “I’m going to be an uncle!”

“Yes, you are. Now put me down and stop squeezing me so hard,” Uncas groaned painfully.

“Dude. Mom and Dad are gonna flip, after all their talk about having grandchildren someday, continuing the family line and all that. And they’re going to kill you for telling me before you told them.”

Uncas shrugged. “They’ll all find out soon enough. We just wanted you and Cora to know now, since you guys have been there for us so much and all. It seemed like the right thing, you know?”

“Just when I thought today couldn’t get any better. Congratulations, man.”

“Thanks, we’re pretty excited even though it was a little unexpected. Now… you know you and Cora are going to have to catch up soon, right? Because I’m kind of jealous of that shirt, and this kid needs a playmate.”

“Not so fast,” Nathaniel held up a hand. “Can I at least marry her first?”

Uncas laughed. “Well, since we’re here I guess you probably better. Come on, let’s go. It’s getting close to time, and Alice will freak out if you’re anywhere near Cora before she comes down the aisle.”

Cora lifted her arms and turned around as Alice fastened the last button at the back of her wedding gown, allowing her younger sister to see her from the front.

“It’s so beautiful,” Alice breathed. “Wait till Nathaniel sees you!” She reached out and adjusted a stray lock of Cora’s dark hair, pulled loosely back from her temples with strands framing her face, the rest of it worked into a relaxed cascade of soft waves down the middle of her back.

“Now for your flowers, gorgeous bride,” Ashley smiled, standing behind Cora to tuck delicate white starflowers and English lavender from the garden along the length of her hairstyle. “And no peeking yet, you still need your moccasins and jewelry when I’m done with you.”

“I feel so incredibly doted on,” Cora laughed. “I wish I’d had you guys to get me ready for uniform inspections in the Navy!”

“Oh, that reminds me!” Alexandra interjected from where she sat on Cora’s bed with Susan. “Lenore introduced me and Jack to your friend Gabe Frejo last night at the rehearsal. He’s darling, and so is his wife! And that baby! She’s precious!”

“Oh, I know! I’m so glad they could make it all the way out here for the wedding. And Chaps, too.” Cora replied, smiling happily. ‘Chaps’ was an often-used nickname for many military chaplains, in this case for Captain Foster, the Navy chaplain she had met during her recovery after the helicopter crash. Cora had gotten in touch him a few months earlier after she and Nathaniel had gotten engaged, and to her delight, he had agreed to come and officiate the wedding.
When Ashley finished with the flowers, Yvette took over putting the finishing touches on Cora. As she had done for Alice, Nathaniel’s mother had made Cora a pair of moccasins and a set of bridal jewelry. The moccasins were creamy white buckskin, the vamps encrusted with deep purple beaded flowers on a lavender-pink background outlined in white, and the ankle flaps had fine pink embellishment against a dark purple background. Her earrings were simple dangles of purple quahog wampum beads with silver turtles hanging from the bottom, and the necklace was made of several delicate strands of the same tube-shaped wampum beads, interspersed with silver spacers and a section on one side of creamy round whelk beads that stood out beautifully with all the purple. Rather than a beaded sash, Yvette had taken Cora’s wedding gown and done beadwork across the silk band at the waistline, with a purple and white turtle at the center and delicate little vines and purple flowers extending out from either side.

“All right, naxêm, now you can look in the mirror!” Yvette smiled and clasped Cora’s hands before she made her way over to the cheval mirror in the corner of the room to see how she looked. She felt a little overcome as she smoothed her hands down the front of the creamy ivory gown Alice had helped her choose. The solid sweetheart bodice was overlaid with delicately embroidered sheer lace that formed a V-neckline with three-quarter length sleeves and extended down over her hips where the A-line chiffon-over-silk skirt fell to the floor.

“Miss Cora, you look like a real princess!” Susan exclaimed.

“She’s right. That dress is absolutely perfect,” Alice said, standing beside her. Her Maid of Honor gown was deep plum with a satin bodice and long chiffon skirt, and Ashley and Alexandra wore different styles in the same color. Susan would be the flower girl, and wore a pretty dusty lavender dress with a dark plum sash. Everyone’s hair was worn half-up, with loose curls and a single burgundy stargazer lily pinned at the back, to match the wedding flowers. Cora’s bouquet and the bridesmaids’ nosegays were made up of the very apropos stargazer lilies, deep purple dahlias, lavender ranunculus, ivory chrysanthemums, and sprays of lavender and greenery.

“You look so beautiful, love,” Yvette told her, giving her a hug and rocking her a little. “I must be the luckiest mother-in-law in the world to have Alice, and now you. You girls are worth every minute of six solid months of wedding beadwork!”

“You and Sidney raised the man of my dreams,” Cora said softly. “I don’t even know where to begin to thank you for that, or for everything else you’ve done.”

Yvette touched her cheek. “And I should thank you just as much for loving him the way you do, and for making him so happy again. Now I’m going to go make sure Sidney is staying out of that brisket I cooked for the reception. I’ll see you soon.” She kissed Cora’s cheek and bustled out of the room, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief.

“Alex and I are going to make sure everything’s ready for the ceremony, and get the guys squared away with boutonnières.” Ashley stood up and picked up her flowers.

“And that James and Ryan aren’t wreaking havoc somewhere.” Alexandra added, handing Susan her basket of petals as they left.

“Almost ready,” Alice smiled wanly, a light sheen of perspiration visible on her forehead as she handed Cora her bouquet and adjusted the drape of her necklace.

“Al, are you okay?” Cora touched her shoulder. “You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine, just queasy and a little nervous.”
Cora laughed. “Wait, I’m the one getting married, isn’t that my job?”

Alice sat down on the bed, shifting her gaze. “It’s not that… I… um… I have something to tell you. I wanted to wait, but Uncas wanted to tell Nathaniel now, so I figured you both ought to know that your wedding today won’t just result in ‘Mr. and Mrs.’, it will also make you ‘Auntie and Uncle’.

Cora’s jaw dropped. “Wait… what? Al, you’re pregnant?”

Alice nodded sheepishly. “We just found out last week. We weren’t planning for it to be so soon, but sometimes we don’t get what we plan for, as we all well know. Hence the queasiness. I’m about six weeks along, but not feeling too bad so far.”

“I’m going to assume Sidney and Yvette don’t know. And you haven’t told Pop yet either?”

“Not yet, but soon. I wanted to tell you first.”

“You have to tell them after the wedding! Surprise them during the reception.”

“But I don’t want to horn in on your special day!” Alice protested.

“Screw that! You’ll just make it ten times more special! Oh my God!” Cora burst into tears and grabbed Alice in a tight embrace. “You’re going to have a BABY! I’m going to be an Aunt! This is amazing!”

“And you’re getting married!” Alice started to cry, too. “And then someday we’ll have Tiny Uncas and Tiny Nathaniel running around!”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Cora laughed and sobbed simultaneously. “Oh God, we have to stop crying or we’re going to ruin all Ashley’s hard work.” She grabbed a box of tissues and dabbed at her face, handing one to Alice, too.

“The pregnancy hormones sure don’t help any,” Alice joked with a snuffle.

Cora hugged her again. “Hormones or not, this is going to be the best day of my entire life. I’m so glad you’re here to share it with me.”

Cora stood with Ed as the rest of the wedding party began to make their way up the aisle toward the barn and took their places on either side of Nathaniel and Captain Foster, clad in a black minister’s robe and a rainbow-hued stole, reading glasses perched on his nose. Susan brought up the rear with her basket of petals, guests laughing softly at Monty walking next to her with the wedding rings tied around his neck on a purple ribbon—Cora’s diamond band with the meteorite inlay, and Nathaniel’s matching one, plain with the same inlay. Cora giggled quietly, watching the massive, friendly wolfhound stopping to get a pat on the head here and there, and Susan having to urge him onward.

“Ready, Pop?” she whispered, reaching up to brush something off the shoulder of Ed’s uniform jacket before taking his arm, clutching her bouquet in her other hand.

“I should ask you that, sweetheart, but I know you are.” He looked over at her and covered her hand on his arm with his own. “I love you so much, and I’m so glad I never have to worry about you or Alice being happy. Nathaniel is a fine man.”

“I love you too,” she replied, holding back tears as they began to walk forward together. She
hadn’t expected to feel quite so emotional, but between Alice’s news earlier and the awestruck, worshipful look on Nathaniel’s face as she came toward him on Ed’s arm, she couldn’t help the tears that welled in her eyes. She saw nothing and no one else but him, enthralled by the sight of him looking so striking as he waited for her, and hit with the sudden feeling that she couldn’t reach her intended fast enough. After what seemed like an eternity of slow motion, they arrived at the arbor over the barn doors, and Ed left her with a kiss on the forehead as she handed her bouquet to Alice. Nathaniel picked up her hands and smiled down at her, the corners of his eyes crinkling. After all this time it still made her insides go to mush when he looked at her like that, and she loved it.

“Hey, beautiful,” Nathaniel murmured, his thumbs stroking the backs of Cora’s hands, lifting the left one to gently kiss the bare finger that awaited her wedding ring. Her lips curved in a radiant smile back at him as Captain Foster began the ceremony. He could hardly focus on anything but her; beautiful was a woefully inadequate word to describe everything that this woman was to him, let alone how she looked today. The chaplain’s words barely registered with him until Uncas covertly nudged him a little to indicate that it was time to recite the initial vows and expression of intent. Once Captain Foster had guided them through the words and they had said their “I do’s”, he asked for the rings, which Alice and Uncas gave to him.

“These rings are an external and visible sign of the internal and spiritual bond of love which unites these two hearts in the holy covenant of marriage,” the chaplain said, placing his other hand over the bands. “May they serve as a seal of the vows Nathaniel and Cora make to one another today. May God bless these rings, symbols of eternity, beauty and strength. May God bless the couple who give them and wear them - may they ever live in harmony, unity, love, and happiness from this day forward.”

Nathaniel took Cora’s hands in his to recite the vows they had written together, mostly their own with a small quote from one of their favorite books, David Jones’ *Love and Space Dust*. “I, Nathaniel, take you, Cora, as my wife today and for as long as we both live, with the promise that when I do so, I take every part of you; your perfections and your flaws, your past, present, and future. All that is mine and all that I am is yours, body and soul. I give you my family, and I take your family as my own - ” Monty interrupted with a loud bark from where he sat in the front row at Ed’s feet. “And I take your dog as my dog,” Nathaniel added with a grin, laughter breaking out around them. “I promise that I will always make sure you are taken care of. I will make you soup and hot toddies when you’re sick, I will hug you when you have bad dreams, and I will build you treehouses. I will celebrate joys with you and love you through every sorrow and time of despair. I will trust, honor, and respect you, and I will always tell you the truth, even if it means showing you parts of myself that are imperfect, because we can only be fully loved when we are fully known.” He took Cora’s ring and placed it on her left ring finger, then pressed her hand against his heart. “Take this ring as a symbol of the infinite bond of love between us. My heart beats for you as eternally as the light of the stars pulses in the heavens, and in the end, I will seek you out amongst the stars. The space dust of me will whisper ‘I love you’ into the infinity of the universe; for in the end, we are nothing more than love and space dust.”

Cora looked up at him, too overcome for a moment to even breathe. She had practiced these vows to herself at least a thousand times, but their magnitude in this moment felt indescribable to her. All she could think was how different things had been a year and a half ago, how scared she had been to let this man into her heart, even though he had placed enormous trust in her with his own from the start. How she had at last laid that guarded heart at his feet, and he in turn held it with so much faith and devotion that she hadn’t believed it possible but for the proof of it standing before her now. She stepped closer to him and gently took his face in her hands.

“I, Cora, take you, Nathaniel as my husband today and for as long as we both live, with the promise that when I do so, I take every part of you; your perfections and your flaws, your past,
present, and future. All that is mine and all that I am is yours, body and soul. I give you my family, and I take your family as my own. I promise that I will always see that you are taken care of. I will hug you when you have bad dreams, I will cook you pancakes for breakfast, and I will always be your stargazing partner. I will celebrate joys with you and love you through every sorrow and time of despair, and I will never, ever leave you to face darkness alone. I will trust, honor, and respect you, and I will always tell you the truth, even if it means showing you parts of myself that are imperfect, because we can only be fully loved when we are fully known.” She reached downward to slide his wedding band on and in turn placed his hand over her racing heart, covering it with hers. “Take this ring as a symbol of the infinite bond of love between us. My heart beats for you as eternally as the light of the stars pulses in the heavens, and in the end, I will seek you out amongst the stars. The space dust of me will whisper ‘I love you’ into the infinity of the universe; for in the end, we are nothing more than love and space dust.”

Captain Foster smiled, his kind eyes twinkling behind his reading glasses. “Nathaniel and Cora, I remind you that marriage is a precious gift, a lifelong dedication to love and a daily challenge to love one another more fully and more freely. As the writer Richard Bach has so beautifully stated, ‘A soul mate is someone who has locks that fit our keys, and keys to fit our locks. When we feel safe enough to open the locks, our truest selves step out and we can be completely and honestly who we are; we can be loved for who we are and not for who we’re pretending to be. Each unveils the best part of the other. No matter what else goes wrong around us, with that one person we’re safe in our own paradise. Our soul mate is someone who shares our deepest longings, our sense of direction… Our soul mate is the one who makes life come to life.’ Today you acknowledge the gift you have been given in the form of one another. Enfolded in joy, inhabited by hope, bathed in the eternal light that is love, may you always be infused with it and beautifully illuminated by it. May God bless you both, may every desire you have for your love be fulfilled, and may you be given the vision with which to clearly behold one another, the listening with which to perceive one another most genuinely, and the endless generosity of spirit with which to nourish one another’s soul and sweetly keep the promises you have made here today. Therefore, by the power vested in me by God the Father, the United States Navy, and the state of New York, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Nathaniel, kiss your bride.”

Cora’s arms twined around her husband’s shoulders as he slipped one hand around the nape of her neck to draw her to him, his fingers tangling in the softness of her hair and his thumb resting on her cheek. She smiled softly as his lips touched hers, gentle and reserved at first, then gathering her against him as she yielded to him, taking the joy and silent promises from him and giving her own in return.

Rather than have the Lenape marriage blessing included in their formal ceremony as Uncas and Alice had done, Nathaniel and Cora chose to begin the reception with it, with their wedding dance immediately following. The reception itself was fun and fairly informal given the setting, with a long buffet table full of delicious food the two families and some friends had prepared over the last two days. Uncas and Alice both made beautiful, emotional toasts to their brother and sister, with a few others including Ed and the Heywards chiming in afterward to express their pride and happiness. Cora and Nathaniel finally managed to convince Alice and Uncas to announce their happy news once the initial toasts were over, and their parents’ reactions did not disappoint. Ed and Sidney were both too overcome in the moment to say very much, but Yvette let out a whoop and started jumping up and down, grabbing Kate to hug her while hollering “I’m going to be a Gramma!” Once that second round of congratulations had settled down, Yvette and Sidney’s band played a short set while everyone finished eating and mingling, stopping when it was time to cut the cake.

“I see it wasn’t a mistake to put Alice and your brother in charge of the cake topper,” Cora laughed as she and Nathaniel stood together to cut the first piece. It was almost too pretty to eat,
nadejedly decorated with the frosting scraped thin over the layers of browned cake to mimic the texture of a tree. Their initials were carved into a heart at the bottom, a direct copy of what Nathaniel had done on the trunk of the tree he had built their treehouse in. On top, looking mildly out of place on the pristine cake, stood little M.A.S.H. action figures of Hawkeye Pierce and Hot Lips Houlihan, placed beside a model helicopter.

“This is probably Uncas’ way of getting me back for the Spider-Man I stuck on their cake,” Nathaniel chuckled, angling the cake knife to deposit the piece they had cut onto a small plate.

“Maybe, but I have no doubt Alice helped. Either way, I think it’s adorable – we should keep it on the fireplace mantel.” She broke off a chunk of cake and fed it to him per tradition.

“Deal.” He returned the gesture, smearing a little icing on her top lip with a mischievous grin and then kissing it off before Alice and Alexandra moved in to help cut and serve the rest.

As the sun was starting to get low in the sky, Nathaniel claimed Cora for their first dance on the wooden deck, the rails draped with soft white twinkle lights to resemble stars. They had chosen Dire Straits’ ‘Why Worry’ as their song – the first one Nathaniel had ever played for her on the guitar. She let him go reluctantly afterward, sharing her dance with Ed while Nathaniel had his with Yvette. Uncas took a turn next, using the opportunity to tell her how thankful he was that she had made his brother so happy. He passed her off to Sidney afterward, taking Alice back from Nathaniel with a grin.

“You’re popular tonight,” Charlie Heyward joked after he had stolen Cora from her father-in-law. Lenore had likewise taken Nathaniel from Kate.

“Hey, I take it where I can get it,” she laughed. “I’m so glad you and Lenore could be here today.”

“We’d have never missed it, not for you or Alice, but especially for you. We’re so happy for you, Cora, and I mean that.” He looked at her sincerely, “Duncan would be, too, and I hope you know that. I think he would have liked Nathaniel a lot.”

“Thank you, Charlie,” Cora said softly, her eyes swimming with tears. “I think Nathaniel would have liked him, too.”

Nathaniel approached a moment later to tap Charlie on the shoulder with a smile. “May I cut in?”

“By all means!” Charlie laughed and handed her over to him, leaving them to locate Lenore where she stood with Yvette, Ed, Kate, and Magua.

“Sorry if I interrupted, I just wanted my wife back.” Nathaniel grinned, pulling her into his arms. “Hmmm. I love the sound of that. My wife.” He leaned down and brushed his lips over hers.

“I have to admit, husband has a pretty nice ring to it, too.” Cora kissed him back.

“Well, I’ll tell you a secret, Mrs. Poe,” he whispered close to her ear, “There’s a bottle of champagne on ice and a pile of blankets waiting for us up in that treehouse, and I can’t wait to have my wife all to myself when this party is over.”

“Well, if that’s the case, I shouldn’t have to worry about getting cold,” she whispered back, laughing softly and letting him lead her back out for a dance to one of her favorite Adam Ezra Group songs. “What a day,” she sighed as she settled into him.
“What a life,” Nathaniel mused in return, holding her closer with a gratified smile. With the optimistic strains of the music playing in the background, they looked around at their family and friends, who had shared so much of this journey with them. The Heywards, like a second set of parents to Cora and Alice. Alexandra and Jack, blending their families and sharing different bonds of loss. Brian and Ashley, loyal and giving and supportive in every way they could be. Ed with his arm around Kate, secure in his newfound happiness. Sidney and Yvette, who had chosen so long ago to love Nathaniel as their own son, and who had given him the brother he loved so fiercely. Uncas and Alice, dancing together nearby and so radiant in their joy and love for each other, starting out on another new road to being their own little family. And through it all, everyone here would continue to love one another and see each other through, just as they always had.

“Look,” Cora said softly, pointing up at the darkening sky. “It’s the first star. You have to make a wish.”

Nathaniel shook his head and smiled gently, touching his forehead to hers. “It’s all yours. Mine already came true.”

“You’ve got a style
That come on like a hurricane wind
You’ve got a spark
That lights the fire that never ends
And in the times when hope is gone
You give me the strength to carry on
I know the path is long
But I believe

You’ve got a light
That rise up like the dawning, restless day
You’ve got a voice
When there are no words to say
And through everything you do
You know I’ll be watching out for you
I know your path is true
‘Cause I believe

Yeah I believe in the strength of one
I believe in the change to come

I believe that there’s never been an easy way

And I will walk through the wind and the rain

And I know you will do the same

‘Cause I believe

Yeah I’ll stand with you now

When your heart beats in a crowd

And I’ll stand with you now

When your soul it screams out loud

And through everything you do

You know I’ll be watching out for you

I know your path is true

‘Cause I believe

Yeah I believe in the strength of one

I believe in the change to come

I believe that there’s never been an easy way

And I will walk through the wind and the rain

And I know you will do the same

‘Cause I believe

Yeah I will stand on the top of the mountain

I will raise my hand to the fire

I will not back out under cover

I will not back down from the fire

I will make my voice a hurricane

Set my soul alight

I will not stop, I will not stop, I will not, I will not stop
‘Cause I believe, yeah I believe

I believe in the strength of one

I believe in the change to come

I believe that there’s never been an easy way

And I will walk through the wind and the rain

And I know you will do the same

‘Cause I believe

Yeah, I believe.”

-Adam Ezra-

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:

Well… this is it, guys, I can hardly believe it’s the finale of Flying Into the Fire. And what a rollercoaster it has been. I’ve been so happy to see readers enjoying it as much as I have enjoyed writing it. I have loved not only giving Nathaniel and Cora a wonderful, deep story in a modern setting, but adding Uncas and Alice to the mix and getting to know them and give them so much life and determination, too. Not to mention both of these amazing families and all their friends who have shared this story with them as well. I can’t begin to tell you how much I’ve grown to love all these characters even more than I already did. Magua too! It was so nice to let him be a good guy for once. So, not just one, but TWO weddings in this story. No way were Nathaniel and Cora getting off the hook without getting hitched. The farm seemed like the perfect place for everyone to gather (and the dog had to be there), and like Uncas and Alice, they found a good officiant. Since Nathaniel was raised in a Delaware family it stood to reason that some of that culture would be a part of their special day as well, but maybe a little differently in parts than Uncas and Alice. And Yvette had to get in a crack about doing wedding beadwork for six months with both these weddings being fairly close together, XD. She is seriously the best mother-in-law in the world. I’ve really enjoyed writing individualized vows for both couples, and I really love Nathaniel and Cora’s. As mentioned in text, the line “And in the end, I will seek you out amongst the stars. The space dust of me will whisper ‘I love you’ into the infinity of the universe; for in the end, we are nothing more than love and space dust” is a quote from David Jones’ book Love and Space Dust, which contains all manner of beautiful little things like that, and it was entirely too perfect not to use as part of Nathaniel and Cora’s wedding. All in all, I felt like it was a really nice affair, and it tied everything up in a neat package in the end - including Uncas and Alice and their little impending bundle of joy! Like I did for Uncas and Alice, I will post collages of the inspiration photos for Nathaniel and Cora’s
wedding on my Tumblr page: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/brynnaraven. I’m not sure what else to say here. In a way it’s always a triumph to finish a story, especially one this long, but it’s sad too, because I’ll miss the characters in this incarnation. I suspect there might have to be a one-shot or two down the road for this gang – I’m just not going to be able to let them all go that easily.

Since this was the epilogue it didn’t really have a theme song, per se, or a title. When the wedding starts and Cora is walking down the aisle, and all through the ceremony, I couldn’t get ‘Crystal’ by Stevie Nicks out of my head (for the entire three days I spent writing the wedding, seriously). It seemed so appropriate for them, as well as their first dance being ‘Why Worry’ (the song Nathaniel played for Cora in Chapter 7). The Adam Ezra song I refer to at the end is ‘I Believe’ from the album Hurricane Wind, and those are the lyrics I closed out with. I have to thank BlueSaffire for suggesting that song ages ago. She saw the Adam Ezra Group perform a few months ago and told me that when she heard that song it just seemed like a really good song for Nathaniel and Cora, and I completely agree! I knew I wanted to use it somewhere in the last part of the story, but I couldn’t figure out where until last week when I decided it was really perfect to end the entire story with. It’s a happy, hopeful, and loving song, and that seemed like the right place for it.

That’s about all, my lovely readers. I posted an idea on Tumblr about a 19th century AU for one of my next stories, and given the positive feedback, I think that one will definitely get written. I’m going to take a break for a few weeks so I can settle into my new job and get used to working as a nurse again (I’m so excited), and then hopefully you’ll see some new material soon after that. I can say with certainty that I won’t be as quick with updates as I have been thus far, but I will enjoy writing just as much. You are all wonderful, and I so appreciate your support, PMs, forum participation, Tumblr follows, and commentary. I appreciate every comment no matter how long or short, whether English is your first language or not, etc. It means the world to me to know how you feel about what you’ve read, and this story has been such a great experience. So much love to you people, and to MohawkWoman and BlueSaffire, my ride-or-dies, I could never laugh my way through this mess without you.

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