Fireflies

by Greywhale

Summary

It's been five years since they saw each other. They moved on and they're good. This is about to change.
Chapter 1

Today is a beautiful day. One of those days where everything is supposed to go well. The woods seem to be alive, the air smells of resin and flowers, the summer has just begun and the heat is still bearable.

And I'm fine. Really good. I have my cup of steaming coffee in my hands, I am sitting on the fence looking at the lake whose water does not move an inch and I breathe.

My lungs fill with air, the cool morning air. I exhale and relax my shoulders, my muscles relax. Even the fucking birds are singing. And I, Elizabeth Piper Chapman, am happy. Here, at this very moment, in this forest, with light filtering through the trees, I'm happy.

I realize that there's nothing I want more in the world, how many people can say that they are so happy on a Monday morning before starting to work? I'm so fucking lucky.

I let my mind wander, I'm no longer afraid of anything. I think about the new guests that are coming, how they will be so happy to spend 15 days in this paradise, I think of my Cal, that little dog-wagging brother, I’m so proud of him, of us, for making this possible.

It all started five years ago, that day in November when I was released. Cal was waiting outside the prison. Cal and a giant cold cheeseburger, but I still remember it as the most delicious thing I've ever eaten in my life.

Only toward the fifth bite I started crying. At first I did not even realize that the tears had started to flow, but when I nearly strangled after a sigh, I simply put aside the burger and I started to cry. I cried for an hour, Cal, poor guy, he did not know what to do. He kept driving, and tell me that everything would be fine, that I will stay for a while in the apartment that Grandma had in New York. He had it renovated and our parents, probably full of guilt, had agreed to let me stay there at least until I returned to be"the normal Piper".

But what Cal had not realized was that I wasn’t crying because I was afraid that I would not be “the normal Piper” again. No, I was crying from gratitude. I was crying because, fucking irony, now I was really me. And the thing that changed me and set me free was the prison.

The normal Piper had never existed. It was just the most comfortable mask I had worn for a lifetime. Blonde, young, college graduate, good daughter, girlfriend and with a career perfectly acceptable. All very nice, and all very very fake.

I didn’t know who I really was. I didn’t know it even in those years with Alex. Oh, Alex.

Of course, I followed my heart, and that, at least, it was something genuine, but my true nature, my very being, was hidden. Hidden by the mask of the perfect girlfriend. Hidden when I pretended not to understand the job of the person I said to love. Hidden when I was faking naivety. And I liked wearing those masks.

"I do not wanna go there" I mumbled through the tears. "What?" My brother said clearly confused. "I do not want to see people. I just want to go home "

"Home where Pipes? Do you want me to call Larry? ". That got me one of the biggest laughter of my life. Then I started to cry again because ... what was home for me? My bunk, Nichols making stupid jokes, Yoga Jones’s reassuring smile, Red's vegetables. That was home. That was the only place I was being myself and being comfortable. The real me, the real Piper. The angry, stupid,
confusing, bossy, but fucking honest Piper. And the real Piper swore a lot.

"I do not know." And I did not really know.

But, in that moment, that sweet sweet teddy bear who's my brother, turned the car around and started driving. And he brought me here. In his cabin in the woods. He gave me food, water, wood for the fire, blankets and a laptop with a hard drive full of all the TV shows and the movies in the world. He was living with his wife in the house next to the cabin, and they came "watching" me twice a day.

And that's how I ended up here. Sort of. It took me two weeks of binge-watching before I decided to go outside. Another week of long walks before I called my parents. Another week to call Polly (and briefly Larry) and one last long week to decide that I was ready to face the world as “The New Piper”. The real one. I started to live in NY, but this place was already in my heart.

The rest is history. I took grandma's flat in the city. Polly and me, we made peace, made Popi areality and we are now the proud owners of a very successful shop. But the thing I'm most proud is this. Camp Clearwaters. I know, stupid name. But I love it anyway.

It's our creature, mine and Cal's. We started to rent the cabin two years ago, after some New York hipsters, clients of mine asked me if I knew a place to "get away from the stress." And then we tried to invest and buy new cabins, new land and that's how we ended up with Camp Clearwaters.

Seven cabins in the woods. Each one with all the comfort you can get in a cabin in the woods. Bathroom, wifi, bugs and all the nature you want. Each year we are open from June till September, Cal takes July and August. Josephine, AKA Yoga Jones, uses September for a yoga retreat. But June, June is all mine.

Polly can handle PoPi alone for a month, she still feels like she own me after the whole "Larry thing". I really do not care anymore about it, about him, but I really enjoy my month here. I need it like I need the air that I breath. It gives me strength, peace, and other good feelings.

Yes, I have to work here, help the clients, take them for walks, fix the water pipes, clean, prepare the night bonfire, cooking meals, but most of the times I just stay here, breathing and enjoying being alive, being mature and being a successful and serene human being.

Today are arriving the last clients. A couple from Chicago who are staying at cabin 6 for two weeks. It's the first time they're here, and, like all the new guests, they're going to fall in love with the place. It is magical, invigorating, I know it, I've been here, I've been healed here.

A warm breeze flows through my messy hair. When I'm here I do not need to comb my hair, they still have the fingerprints of Martha's hands from last night, When she was scratching my scalp while my head was between her legs. I always love it when we have sex in our cabin the woods. It's wild, freeing, intimate and the orgasms are always bigger. She does not mind, and I do not mind.

A little smile appears in my face at the thought of my beautiful lady. She's already back in the city, she's got work to do today, but tomorrow she's gonna be here for the weekend. If you would tell me five years ago that I would be happily engaged, with a girl, a shared flat and a dog, I would have laugh at your face.

And not just because my last engagement did not go as planned at all, but because I though that She destroyed me for good. I'm talking about Alex, my Alex, my own personal hell and paradise, all rolled into a big scary hot drug dealer.

What we had was insane, was bigger than us, was twisted and sweet and overwhelming. It was too
much, too soon and too little too late. But now I'm at peace with whatever that was. It took me so much. So, so much. But I know now what it was. It was exactly what I needed to wake up.

I still remember the last time I saw her. I just got me that infinity tattoo on my ribcage who hurt like hell. And I was full of hatred. For Stella, for Alex, for the lack of freedom, but mostly for me. I was a crazy pinball ball with no direction and no purpose. The tattoo seemed like the only good thing to do, to remind myself that I was still alive, still me, still capable of being something permanent, constant, like a tattoo.

I heard the commotion in the yard, everybody was running like crazy. I got out, just out of curiosity and that's when I saw the ambulance at the greenhouse. I did not need to ask. I already knew. Well, there was not anyone to ask anyway. The terror, the sensation that I could not breath, got me paralyzed. I needed air, but I was already outside, I needed to run, but I was in a fucking prison. And that's when I saw her. A dead piece of meat on a stretcher. She was taken away from me. She did not move, she did not smile, she did not look at me. She was pale, perfect as always, but her face ... her face was red. It was blood. So much blood. And, in that moment the guilt was dropped on me like a fucking iron blanket. It was my fault. I did not believe her. I turned away from her. I brought her here. I killed her.

What happened next changed my life forever. For a week I did not talk to anyone. I did not eat, I just did not function anymore. I did not even cry. Sometimes Lorna, Yoga and even Red came to me. To talk to me. But I just did not function. I made the worst mistake of my life and there was not no going back. I just was broken. Forever. No turning back. I killed Alex, I killed my love.

It was a Friday when everything changed. I still remember it as it was yesterday. Eight days after the "incident". A van parked in the yard, and out of it came Nicky Nichols. The Mighty Nicky directly from Max. Everyone was so happy to see her. I was happy to see her. They threw a party in five minutes for her. The CO pretended not to see what was going on. Red was hugging the shit out of Nicky, everyone was cheering, I remember I even smiled a little when she came to say hi. An almost honest smile.

And then, she dropped the bomb. "By the way, Vause says hi!"

The silence in the room was absolute. Everyone was looking at me. They were looking at the ghost of the girl who once was Piper. I did not think my heart could stand the emotion I was feeling. For the first time in 8 days something entered my heart. It was hope, and it was dangerous.

I wanted to run away, to smash my head into the wall, I just wanted to feel numb again, but my legs were not collaborating. And my heart was just exploding.

"What do you mean? Alex is ... good? "Said someone.

Nicky was completely taken aback. She started looking around confused

"Well, as good as you can get when they try to kill you with a shovel. But ... why? "

Someone started to explain that we did not know anything and we though she was dead, but I could not hear anything, could not understand anything. I run in the chapel, I lied down behind the altar, the place we used for making out and making other stuff. And I started to cry. I finally let myself ... feel. I felt relief, love, hate, guilt, happiness, sadness, everything. All at once. And that's how I began to take away my masks forever. No more bullshit. And I became me. Purified and certificated Piper Elizabeth Chapman original. And all thanks to her.

In that moment I knew the reason why she felt so inevitable to me. Why I felt a pull to her. I was not
just admiration, it was not just the thrill, it was not just love. It was need. I needed her. I needed her to dig me out of my hole. The hole of lies and fake smiles and expectations that I lived on. She freed me. She showed me who I was. And I did not like it. I fought it with all my power. I hated her for that. But right there, in that moment. I made peace. I made peace with myself. I got a second chance. I did not kill anyone. I was reborn.

From that day on everything fell into the right place. I dropped the panty business. I even tried to get Stella out of Max (and partially succeed). I just kept myself out of troubles and I tried to make something out of the 13 months I still had of my sentence.

I tried to write to Alex. Like she did when she was out of prison last year. A thousand letters, just to say hi, and to say thanks, mostly, to say how sorry I was. I did not want to see her or talk to her. I did not want to become friends again, we were never friends. I just wanted to let her know that I was glad she was alive, I was glad that she has been part of my life and I was an asshole, and she was right all the time. Well, maybe not all the time, but she was right when she was talking about me. She always saw right through me. She knew me better than I knew myself. What a fuckin cheesy thing to say.

But I never got an answer. I do not even know if she got them, I wrote her at the infirmary at max and at her address in Queens. After a few months, Nicky received a letter from Alex. She never told me what was written on it, but she let me read the last sentence. "Tell everybody I'm good, I'm okay and I'm happy." That was my clue. I stopped writing to her. And, I let her go.

Now I can say that I'm good, I'm okay and I'm happy too. I've made peace with my demons. I do not think about Alex a lot, and when to I do, like right now, I'm doing it with a smile, with no hard feelings, no regrets. I'm happy to think that she's happy somewhere. I know Nicky sometimes calls her, but I do not anymore ask her how she's doing, how's life outside prison. I do not really care about it. Sometimes, like when I hear a song that reminds me of her, I just wish I could see her one last time. Just to erase the last image I have of her. Her pale face with a bright red mask. I do not need to talk to her, clearly she does not want to, otherwise she would have asked Nicky. But I really do not need it. I just wish I could get a better closure. But I'm living happily without it. I'm good, I'm okay, and I'm happy. With my amazing and loving fiancé who knows and loves the real Piper, with new friendships and old ones, with my job, working with Polly in Popi, with my dog Ralph who's licking my feet in this exact moment and with this piece of paradise, Camp Clearwaters.

Speaking of which, I hear the car approaching, so I jump down from the fence and from my thoughts and I put up my best smile. This one is honest. These are the last guests of my month, in ten days I'll be back in the city, so let's just hope they are some decent human beings.

I walk to the cabin, with Ralph on my side, my little bitch, so ready to be pet by strangers. I spoke to Sandy on the phone, she and her boyfriend wanted to get away from the city for two weeks, they have read good reviews online and blah blah blah.

"I already love this place!" Says someone on my left. 
"And that's a good start," I reply turning around with a big smile.

Woah! Sandy is nothing like I imagined. She's tall, for a start. And she's really really beautiful, with long brown hair, green eyes, freckles and a really genuine smile. And boobs. I know, I'm shallow, but she has them. And I like art.

"Hi! I'm Sandy, you must be Piper? "She says with an extended hand.
"Yes I am! Please to meet you Sandy. Did you get here easily? "I ask politely while opening the cabin and showing her the inside.
"Oh, the fuck not. The third time we passed the same tree, my girlfriend started to hit the wheel and I
I like this girl. This could be funny. And then it hit me. Girlfriend. "Oh!" I say. Maybe too loud? I do not know. But her reaction is sudden. The smile goes off from her face, "Is that a problem, Piper?" And the tone of the voice is pure ice in my veins. You do not mess with her. She bites.

Judging by her eyes maybe I wait too much for the reply but "No, no, not at all. My fiancé Martha is coming tomorrow too."

And in two seconds the smirk is back in her face. "Seriously?"

"Why, is there a problem, Sandy?" And we start to laugh. That's how you make new friends.

"By the way" she adds "my girlfriend's name is Martha too. Let's hope that it's just a curious coincidence! Speaking of which, where is she?"

As we exit the cabin, I can see some movement in the brown car parked just outside. There's a girl trying to take out a gigantic baggage, while Ralph, obviously, is jumping on her long legs making it close to impossible. The thing that I immediately notice is the hair. Long, curly and deep red. There's something about her. Probably she's just as hot as her girlfriend. I feel a little threatened by them. Yes, I know me and Martha are a pretty couple, but, well, they look just like something else.

Without thinking I'm going there, as I approach the car I'm focused on Ralph, so I do not see how her muscles stiffen the moment I speak

"Ralph! Down! Sorry he's just very very friendly. You must be Martha, I'm Piper"

I'm still looking at Ralph while I extend my hand. And at that precise moment, I swear it, I know it. So when our eyes meet and she says "Fuck!" I already know it. It's not Martha, it's Alex. And my heart just screams "Fuck!".
Chapter 2

So when our eyes meet and she says "Fuck!" I already know it. It's not Martha, it's Alex. And my heart just screams "Fuck!".

I have no recollection of what happened in the next two minutes. Or was it a minute? 30 seconds? A year? Nothing. I just stayed there, paralyzed. My brain was short-circuiting, and thank god, it did.

Just one word entered my torpor. Run. Run run run and run. But the more I thought about it, the more my muscles couldn't move. So I just stayed there. Looking at her, but not seeing her. Overwhelmed by her, but not thinking about her. Just there, still, with my hand extended.

"So, not the same Martha, right?" said someone behind me laughing. But I still didn't function, so for me it was just background noise. I kept my position, like a brave soldier. My hand now tangled in my hair.

"Honey! Let me help you with the luggage" said Sandy, passing between us and entering the car.

And the spell broke. Suddenly I was again in the real world and, honestly, it didn't feel so good. Overwhelmed. There was no other word to describe how I felt in that moment. Overwhelmed. Too much for me to take in. Sandie was still inside the car and I realized that Alex was still in front of me, frozen in the same spot she was when I walked to her. I kind of forgot about her, I was so shocked by her that I forgot that she was there. Oh, the irony.

So I took a deep breath and I raised my eyes, looking for something, anything, a sign of recognition, a smile, a look of hatred, but what I saw was... nothing. She was looking at the ground, avoiding my stare, avoiding me. I just couldn't even start to think about the fact that she was real, she was there, so close. Then I saw it. Her head started to move, still fixated on the ground. It was a small movement, almost imperceptible. From left to right. And then from right to left. And then again. Almost like she was trying to say something...something like..."no"? Was she telling me "no"? What for?

"No", we do not know each other? "No", I don't want to acknowledge your existence? "No" I don't want Sandy to know who you are? "No", I can't believe I was so unlucky to meet you again?

Why wouldn't she raise her eyes and look at me? I would have known everything. I've always known everything just by looking into her eyes. We were special, we will always have a special connection, right? I'm special. I was about to say something, my mouth was open, when...

"Done!" Sandy was in my face, smiling "I told her, you didn't have to bring the entire New York City library! We can do other things here, right?" I still didn't register the words directed at me. My eyes were fixated on Alex. She finally met my eyes.

It was just for a second. But something on my chest exploded. Not the heart, probably a lung or the pancreas. Her eyes where the same eyes I've got lost into so many times, but they were hard. Almost daring. And then, just as fast as a blink of an eye, she turned her back on me pretending to look for something in the car.

"Piper, are you ok?" said a confused Sandy in front of me. She must have seen my face. I just couldn't believe what just happened. A fire started inside me, from the ruptured pancreas. Yes, I decided it was the pancreas, because the heat that was starting to spread into my body was pure bile.

Suddenly I was angry, very angry. But the anger gave me focus. So I showed at Sandy the full set of my whiter than white teeth.
"Oh yeah, all good...I forgot take the other keys. I'll be back in a minute"

And, like that, I was gone, walking so fast that Ralph was running by my side to keep up with my pace.

The minute turned out to be five minutes. And I'm still here, in my cabin, sitting on the floor with Ralph on my lap. Fuming.


Not working. What. The. Hell. Happened? I feel like I want to throw up, or hit her, or shake her. Mostly hit her. But she didn't do anything wrong. She just didn't look at me. Acknowledge me. What was I expecting? Big hugs and stories about the past?

Now I'm just so angry at myself for letting me fall so easily into this hole again. I hate when someone has power over me, and, no one has ever had more power over me than Alex. Or, as they call her now Martha.

Martha. My Martha. How I wish she were here right now. She always knows what to do, what to say, how to calm me. She's been with me for the last three years and she saw me grow. She let me grow, with her, with love.

Just the thought of her is enough to give me some peace. My breaths are deeper now. It's perfectly normal to feel like this, I wasn't expecting it. Maybe it was a shock for her just as much as it was for me. Probably she doesn't know what to do, what to say. And I don't know what to do or what to say either. So I can't blame her. Maybe Sandy doesn't know about me. Like Martha doesn't know all about her. My Martha. This is getting ridiculous.

And there's that too. Why Alex's name is Martha? Why her hair is red? New life? Witness protection?

Ok, I think I think too much. I went from 30 years of stupid, emotional and not so unconsciously impulsive Piper to a very mature thinking paranoid machine. Sometimes those 30 years come back, they have been my life for so long.

But now Ralph is drooling on my boots and I realize I'm in my place, in my life, I am relevant here, I am loved and I love. How could she see what I become in a split second? Why do I care if she knows or not know how good I am now? How mature and balanced? I shouldn't. I don't really want to go there now anyway.

Ralph is really really drooling on me. I love this fleabag so much. I'm smiling again, I scratch his head and I'm on my feet.

Alex is here, she's alive and good. She's not going anywhere for the next two weeks. I'm here for 10 more days, so there's plenty of time to come clean and talk. She can't avoid me now, if that's what she wants. I feel lighter. The elephant is no more sitting on my chest.

I open the door and start walking towards the cabin 6. Chin up and a smile.

I can hear them talking inside. Loudly "Come on Honey! What the hell are you talking about? We decided together to come here. What the hell got into you? Ah?"

"Sandy, I told you! I just don't... like this place! I'm.. you know... thinking about work. Tom is alone, I don't know if he can handle..."
Oh. That fucking voice. After 5 years, I still feel my inside tremble. But, bitch. She doesn't like this place? Coward.

"Martha, you listen to me. We talked about it. I need a break. You need a break. We need a break from work, pollution and all the fucking problems of our lives. I like it here and, even if I didn't, we don't have time to change location. So, if Princess Rainbow here doesn't want to get her boots dirty she can suck my …"

Maybe, just maybe, I am in the wrong place at the wrong time. The door is open and Sandy is looking at me, still flushed.

She smiles politely and she storms outside with the cell in her hand.

"Honey" she says looking behind her with a very sweet and very fake voice "I'm going to call home, you take care of everything. Sorry Piper" and like that, she's out. Nice one Sandy, nice one. Well played.

But now between me and Alex and 5 years of silence, there's just an open door. She's in trap, she can't escape no more. So I do the only think I can think of, and with three long steps and a with my heart pulsing in my throat, I'm inside.

It's dark in the cabin, she's making the bed, all I see is her back. Surprise, surprise. I wait for her to say something, and in the meantime, I look at her. I observe. I drink in every little detail.

I can see she's nervous. Good. Her movements are fast and frantic. I not so secretly hope it's because of me. She's a red head now, but she looks pretty natural. I always thought that black was her color. Hair, glasses and sometimes soul.

But she looks so…woman-ish now. She's always been stunning. Tall, statuesque, and intimidating. But this color suits her, in a way. Makes her more human or something. Probably I'm just so emotional that I would find her interesting even with a shaved head. That's what I'm feeling. I want to know everything about her. I'm honestly curious. That's all.

She's moving around, I can see her face now. She's dressing differently, an emerald classic shirt, jeans and boots. Not biker's boots, just stylish woman's boots. The ones you buy for at least 200 bucks. Even her glasses are different, her black rimmed glasses are gone, now a pair of dark green one are on her nose. She's more "soft" now, I don't know, maybe kind of sweet looking? If only she would start to talk.

No? No problem. I'll make my move.

"Need help?" I say going to the other side of the bed, facing her. Good, my voice did not break. I sound friendly and calm.

"No" Cold. Oh. And she still isn't watching me.

So much for calm and relaxed Piper. I raise a little my voice, incredulous "Nooo? That's all I get?"

"No. Thanks" Even colder. And sarcastic.

Oh. That's it. Kindergarten it is.

In two seconds I'm on her side of the bed, I'm not thinking straight, I just see red. Literally. We are in the dark side of the cabin, the door is open, but you can't see outside. And from outside they can't see us.
I grab her arm and I turned her around, facing me. This is definitely not how I imagined it to go, how I wanted it to go.

"What the fuck Alex?" I almost scream in her face. The electricity is there.

"Get away from me!" she replies dryly while pushing her arm free. Finally she raises her eyes. Finally we are looking at each other. I see a reflection of myself there. Pure fire.

"That's it? This is what I get after five years? No "Hi, nice to see you again"? I don't care anymore if I'm loud

"Shut up, Piper!" she says in a hiss. I can see her jaw pulsating, I hope it explodes

"Oh, so you still remember my name! How cute" I say with all the sarcasm I have in my body.

She doesn't reply. I can feel the electricity between us. I feel the heat irradiating from her. I can smell her. Our breathing is synchronized and shallow.

"Please, go away!" she whispers, her eyes leave mine, and for a second I almost believe she's still,,

"Alex…what happened? " I say softly. I'm at loss for words… I hear her loud breathing, and

"Don't EVER call me that again" she's looking straight at me in the eyes. All the softness gone.
"You just can't come here and act like we are …old friends! I don't care about you. I don't want to know what happened to you in this five years. If I wanted to, I would have called. I finally thought you were out of my life for good. So, no, it's not nice seeing you again, Piper. It's the opposite of nice. You're bad news. So please, and I'm begging you, please, don't do anything. Don't say anything to Sandy. Just pretend we've never met. Just for two weeks, then I'm gone, for good."

Her voice gets softer towards the end, but it cuts though my body like a warm knife through butter. All the things I wanted to tell her, the apologies, the explanations, the thanks. All gone. Pointless.

"10 days" I whisper

"What?" She says, confused.

"10 days. I'll be leaving in 10 days. And, ok" I'm looking at a point behind her. Cannot look at her in the eyes. I'm talking like I'm in a land far far away.

"Listen Piper…" her voice is soft and now she's the one grabbing sweetly my arm. It feels like it's itching, I just want to scratch it away. What is that? Pity? I don't need her pity. ". . .what I meant to say was that.."

"No, you listen, now" I stop her and I push away her hand. "I really don't know what you think of me, but guess what? I don't care too. YOU came here in MY camp. I could get you two out of here in two seconds, with the snap of my fingers. But I won't. Because, really, I don't care. All this anger and resentment you have, it's your fucking problem. And I'm gladly staying out of it. If my being nice was a fucking problem for you, then fuck you. I don't care. I don't need to prove anything to you. Your dirty secret is safe with me. I'm very, very good at faking, you should know about it."

Pause "These 10 days are gonna be fantastic, Martha"

Boom. The air is electric again. It's always like this with us. In these moments, anything could happen. I know she's angry. She's looking at me like she wants to eat me. No pun intended. And I gladly would eat her too. Make her disappear. I know that her eyes are mirroring mine. But there's something else there. Neither of us is moving. Neither of us is looking away.
Till we hear a voice from outside.

"Everything's good Honey?" Sandy again.

And again, the spell is broken and Alex or Martha or what the hell her name is, is walking outside. I'm behind her. Still with the rush of adrenaline running through my body.

She goes towards Sandy and she hugs her from behind. I can see her hands slowly going from her navel to the rib cage and slowly caressing her stomach. She's doing it on purpose. And it's working, my blood is boiling.

"Yes Love" she says moving Sandy's hair on a side and putting her smiling lips on her nape. "Piper here told me a lot of good things about this place. I think Princess Rainbow was wrong and Princess Rainbow is sorry. Can you forgive me?" she's still looking at me. Talking to the nape, but looking at me.

Sandy's laugh is contagious. She turns inside Alex's hug and she kisses her briefly on the lips. Alex is still looking at me but the arrogant smirk is gone. Good.

I turn my back and I start to walk away. This is what I wanted. This is my closure.

Behind me I can hear laughers and Sandy's voice "Thanks Piper! See you later!"

"Bye girls! Enjoy" I reply without turning around.

Fucking Princess Rainbow Bitch

I keep walking. I still need to fix the water tube in the Stevenson's cabin and I need to buy groceries for tomorrow, but I don't care. I just need to walk to clear my head. This all feels too juvenile. I will walk till I'm good, probably after a marathon. Or two.

This is what I wanted. Everything I did was good and right. I talked to her. I saw her alive and well. So why doesn't it feel like closure?
Chapter 3

I was furious. I still am furious. Furious at her attitude, furious at her arrogance, furious at the fact that she didn't even look at me, furious with myself. What did I expect? Or, better, why did I let myself have expectations? Stupid new Piper. So focused on finding the good in everything and everyone.

I knew it. I romanticized the situation, our past. It was easier this way, focusing on the positive things about our relationship so I could overlook all the pain, the annoying sensation of being always on a cliff, being always temporary. But frankly, I didn't remember her to be such an asshole.

I know that I've been an asshole too. While I was trying to gain control over myself, I lost her, I betrayed her. At least twice. I was so eager, so desperate to save myself, to get rid of my insecurities that I didn't look at anyone else. She was there, I knew it and I took comfort in it. But it was all about me. So when I started to really feel the power, all the rest faded away. Alex included.

So why the hell is she still so resentful? Is it because of our last months together? Because I didn't believe her? Well, in that case the problem was that I didn't want to believe her. If I believed that she was really in danger, than it would have been just my fault. I put her in danger. And unfortunately that's exactly how it turned out to be. But I went to hell for that, I'm sure she must have know it. Nicky must have tell her. Otherwise, why the "I'm good, I'm ok, I'm happy?" Am I reading too much into it? Or maybe it's something else, maybe because of that attack she got some issues? Physically she seems quite good. Maybe her life is a mess. Maybe she just genuinely hates me for everything. I think too much. I'm literally going around in circles. Both in my head and in this woods.

My feet seem to have a life of their own, and obviously, they bring me here, in what is probably my favorite part of the universe.

The sun that I loved this morning is now hurting my eyes. I'm sweating, I'm sticky, the birds are too loud and the branches are scratching my legs as I pass through the thorny bushes in the invisible path I know by heart. Ralph is already there, I can hear the splashing.

I jump over a moss-covered log and, for a brief moment, I think I'm falling, but in two big steps I'm in heaven. My heaven. There a small meadow in front of me, surrounded by high pine trees and a thick undergrowth, it's almost impossible to delve into that, but it's not a problem for me because all I have to do is cross the meadow and sit on the gigantic root of the old oak tree that fits me so perfectly, and I'm good.

Just a couple of feet after the oak tree, there's a shallow stream full of large smooth rocks. And, in the middle of it, there's my dog, trying to catch a fish with his paw. In the last five years, I've never seen him catch a single thing. That's probably why I love him so much. He never gives up and always has fun. If only humans were more like animals, life would be so much easier.

I sit on the root, facing the river, and I look at the yellow diamonds of light that filter through the leaves and dance on my scratched legs. I have to remember to put some antiseptic later.

I still remember the moment I've found this place. It was the first time I left the cabin after my release, my first walk as a free woman. I just started to walk with no direction, it was November and it was freezing. When the trail became not enough adventurous for me, I just turned left, into the woods. At first it seemed like a good idea but when it was almost dark and I didn't know where I was, I felt very stupid and I saw myself dead in a few hours like the guy of "Into the wild" but only more stupid. So, in my panic-induced confusion, I tried to go through some thorny bushes.
And that's how I accidentally discovered this place. I didn't even realize where I was, I've never been the nature lover type of girl, but when I saw the stream, I knew that I was safe. All the rivers go to the lake. Everyone knows it. And from the lake, I knew how to get to the cabin. As relive washed over me, I saw it. A big majestic deer with the antlers as big as my freedom was looking at me. The mist that softly rose from the river made everything more magical and full of a significance that I still couldn't comprehend.

Or maybe I just like to remember things better than they actually were, and it was just a goat. Or a very big beaver. And I was just scared.


So that's the story behind my secret place. No one knows about it, except for Ralph, of course. Not even Cal knows about it, and I prefer it this way. It is symbolic of what I accomplished and of the fact that I don't need to share things with others to make them valuable. This is a great and difficult lesson I had to learn. How to not depend on others. Lesson #1 Keep it to yourself.

The second time I came here, it was on the summer after my release. I wanted to know if the place of my memory was still the same. And, as I found out, it was even better. I followed the stream on its way down to the lake, like the first time. But, after that, I came back and started to follow it on its way up.

It was a hot summer day, just after lunch. With my bare feet I walked on the cold water and on the hot stones, enjoying the contrast. After a five minutes' walk I could no longer follow the river because I was in front of a wall of stones kissed by the sun and surrounded by high trees. The atmosphere was surreal, the stream opened into a round pool of blue, cold and transparent water.

I spent an hour just floating there, arms and legs opened, looking up at the crown of trees, sun and sky that that enveloped me, like a cocoon. It was like being inside the green and golden eye of a mysterious creature. So peaceful and so silent.

I also slept on the meadow a couple of time. Or, better, I just stayed up all night inside my sleeping bag. Not great for my neck, but good for my soul. You can hear the crickets sing, the occasional owl, an army of frogs and, my favorite thing, far from the light pollution you can see the milky way, really see the stars, and if it's a nice summer night, you can see fireflies swirling around your head. Pulsating shooting stars. The last time I did something like that was last month, when I came here after my mother's death. There were no fireflies that night, too early for them, but it was still useful.

Alex. Maybe she'll find a bit of sick comfort in knowing that I'm an orphan too now. Maybe that's the reason why she still hates me. Because I left her in Paris when Diane died. Or maybe it's because I choose Larry. Or Stella.

No, she can't be this angry about Stella. Stella was a really ridiculous phase I had to go through. I just wanted to prove to me and to Alex, probably, that I wasn't just an accessory, a trophy wife anymore. I was a sexy powerful predator, I could have whoever I wanted. Basically, I wanted to be Alex.

Now I laugh about it. A lot. But God, it was really a low point for me. I still feel embarrassed thinking about it. About the terrible secret kisses we shared while, in the meantime, someone was planning Alex's murder and no, it wasn't me.

Time to go back to the real life, I feel already more in control. I've left my soul here, so it's always good to be back and find it. Ralph is shaking off the water and this is the clue I need to get up and start the fifteen-minute walk towards the camp.
As I walk through the woods and Ralph keeps running around like he's on cocaine, I wonder what she would think if only she knew that, when I went to the doghouse to get a dog, I already decided that, in case I've a found a bitch her name would be Stella. So ironically on point.

But the eyes that got me hooked belonged to a ball of grey fur, sat on a corner. All the dogs were trying to get my attention, jumping, barking and drooling. Except for him. He just kept looking. He seemed scared and lost. Like me. I got near him.

"So, who is he?" I asked the girl who was volunteering

"Oh, he's Ralph. We don't know how old is he. Probably three or four, so, he's not a puppy anymore. It's difficult to find someone who's willing to adopt him. He's been in and out of here for the last two years"

"Why so?" I asked while I approached him and kneeled next to him

"Oh, it's sad. He's an hunting dog, so probably he was raised to be one. When we found him the first time, he was so beaten up that we though he wasn't gonna make it, he had his jaw broken and so was his leg. We didn't know why would someone do this to a dog who was probably worth a hundred dollars. But after a few month finally someone came and adopted him, just to bring him back after a few weeks because, and I'm quoting, "he is scared of the sound of the gunshot. How am I supposed to hunt with a dog that run away after I shot? He's useless"

While she was still talking about how this adoption-rejection thing kept on happening and how they were forced to do some check up on the people interested in him, to exclude hunters, I slowly started to caress him. First on the back. He was warm, but I could feel him shivering under my touch. Slowly I made my way up until I reached the head. He finally started to relax at my touch just like a scene from one of those terrible movies about horses. I was already in love, but when he looked at me, I knew that I was screwed. A pair of sad eyes were watching me, one green and one gold. They were almost daring me to take him and save him.

"It's called heterocromia" said the girl who didn't stop talking "It's when one eye is one color and the other is another one. He's not sick, and… he seems to like you. It's been a year since he let a stranger touch him. They want him because of the pedigree, but when we tell them that he's not able to hunt, they are not interested anymore and when he…"

"I want him." I stopped the ranting of the girl.

"I want him, and I can guarantee you that I'm not a hunter and I will never be. I sell soap and I have no history of violence. You can do all the check-up on me that you like"

They didn't check. Thank god for my waspy looks.

So I ended up with Ralph, or Ralphy, or Fleabag, or Banana depending on the level of love I want to express. But he's no Stella. Even if it would have been hilarious having a bitch with that name. But Ralph has a dick, maybe to balance the lack of one in my new life.

A laugh escape my mouth. A good laugh. Finally.

"Fleabag, where are you?" I shot as louder as I could. We're approaching the Camp, I can hear voices, so probably he went to the Goldberg's kids trying to score some cookies or some cuddles.

But, of course, when I turn the corner, I find him all over Alex. Ladies and gentlemen, my dog, the traitor.
I keep on smiling because I've just decided to accept the reality for what it is. Accept it and embrace it, just like all the Buddhist monks say. And they live happily and without stupid worries. I'm back in a good mood.

So yeah, let's try this.

Sandy is with her, they've changed into something more comfortable. Alex is wearing some khaki shorts and a white tank, that won't stay white for long if she keeps petting Ralph like this. I don't think I've ever seen her with an animal before, but she's good. He's clearly enjoying it.

Sandy is wearing a simple floral dress, and she's the first one to talk.

"Hey Piper! Where have you disappeared? We looked all over the camp for you!"

We? I highly doubt it. "Oh, I just had some things to fix in one of the trails. A tree fell last night. Did you need something in particular? Did you find everything?" I glance briefly at Alex, she's totally engrossed in the task of enchanting my dog, but at least she's smiling.

"Oh yeah. Everything is perfect. Just like you told me on the phone. We just wanted to know if there are some, I don't know, camp activities or group hangings…stuff like that. Oh, and Martha here wanted to know where's the kitchen"

I glance again at "Martha", who's still bent over Ralph and doesn't seem to be aware of the conversation we're having next to her.

"Oh, you see, me and Cal, my brother, we are not very much into the 'camp activities thing' where everyone is forced to wear a tag with their name on it and play stupid games. So what we do is letting everyone free to do what they want to do, anytime they want it. We have an activity for every day of the week, same goes for 'after dinner fun', but the presence is definitely not mandatory. So, actually, today is…"

"After dinner fun?" repeats Alex interrupting me with a laugh, still with her eyes and hands on Ralph. So, she's listening. And she's actually talking to me. Kind of. So I'm going to ignore, for now, the tone of pure mocking in her voice.

"Oh yeah, we didn't come up with a better name for it! But we are open to suggestions. Actually, Martha, if cooking is your thing, on Wednesday night we have a competition... and it's also bonfire night. Believe me. So much fun" I really hope she gets the ironic tone.

"Ah ah, nice. But actually, cooking is not really my thing. It seems like taking care of your dog is more like it. Is he even your dog? He seems more fond of strangers than of his owner ". Another sentence in my direction. Again with the mocking tone, but I'm shocked.

"Oh funny you mention that. I've never seen him so friendly with a stranger. He was trained to be a police dog, he sniffs out drugs. So, are you hiding something? Are you a drug dealer Martha?" For the first time her head snaps at my directions and her eyes are on mine, her lips partially opened. She stops scratching Ralph. She wasn't expecting that. Piper 1 – Alex 0.

Our exchange is interrupted by Sandy's big laughter. So, yes, I think I've got my confirmation. She doesn't know about Alex's past.

"Oh she's funny!" she says to Alex, who's now politely smiling and caressing Ralph. "You're funny" Sandy continues in my direction "So, when's your fiancè coming here?"

For the second time in the last two minutes Alex's face snaps, I can see it from the corner of my eyes.
I think she might have dislocated her neck. So she didn't know, Sandy didn't tell her. Surprise surprise Alex, I moved on too. I would give anything to look at her but Sandy is speaking to me and I don't want to raise suspicions. I think it's better also for me and for my relationship to keep pretending like we don't know each other. Just for ten more days.

"Oh, tomorrow, for a couple of days, and then… back to the city" I reply

"Good, we have to have dinner together! The Grinch here can actually cook really good. We need some new friends since we're moving to New York in two months and we do not know anyone there." Alex is now standing and looking at Sandy, smiling and rolling her eyes at the Grinch reference. They're cute. I don't think I like it.

"Great idea" I say with a smile "Can't wait to have some 'during dinner fun' together". They both laugh.

"Oh" Sandy adds with a conspiratory grin in my direction "And we need to check what your fiancé and my Martha have in common" I laugh. If you only knew

"What? Is he an international drug dealer like me?" Alex tries to make a joke. And I get the double meaning. This could be fun. We're all laughing

"Noooo Honey! Didn't I tell you? Piper here battles for our team and her girlfriend's name is Martha. What are the odds? But, seriously, where's you perfect gaydar? Do I need to worry? You really seem a little off today" She's joking, but I can see a flash of something in Alex's eyes. So I guess this is a lot for her as it is for me. This was kind of good and civil. Better not to push my luck.

"Well, I should get going. Ironically, I've got a pipe to fix. Anyway, you can find the program with all the activities in the cabin we use as a reception, it's between my cabin and the big structure that's the kitchen." I turn to Alex with a polite smile "You can find there everything you need, plenty of stoves, pens and fryers. A couple of fridges, a freezer, a microwave. Everything you need. All the guests can use the kitchen whenever the like. You can eat in the tables inside the kitchen, but in the summer we usually use the pic-nic area outside. And we usually dine together, but don't feel obliged to join us. As I said before, everyone here is free to do what they want. I go to the grocery store every other day, guests can come with me or just give me a list of specific things to buy. I'm going there after the pipe fixing if you need something" I repeat our standard explanation as a broken record

"Oh, ok. Thanks" She replies looking at me. With a normal voice. No irony of mocking. And I feel it real for the first time. I hear the vibration of her low voice, hitting something long forgotten. It's me and Alex again.

"Ok, so, I'm off." I say to the two of them while I start to walk with Ralph, who's now following me. "And, by the way, today is 'lake day', so after lunch, we all go to take a swim or fishing at the lake. I hope you brought your swimsuits"

"Yes we did!" Sandy's happy voice reaches my ear. "See you later Piper"

I turn my head to reply "See you later girls" and I'm gone.

This is starting to feel good. I have so many things to do, people to call, emotions to deal with. But there's just one shallow thing in my mind.

I wonder how Alex looks now in a swimsuit.
Chapter 4

After our "encounter" I just can't stop thinking about it. This is not like that time in Litchfield when I saw her for the first time after 8 years. Actually, it's so different from that time, that I want to laugh. And not only because this time she's the one who wants to scream and tries to avoid me.

But because I'm different. I'm finally different. And by different, I mean myself. No more bullshit, lies and confusion. I just have this...urge...to show it to her. To finally come clean and turn the page once and for all. Not that I feel like there's still something between us that needs to be sorted and analyzed, I've done that enough in the last five years for the both of us.

It's just that I feel like we can be...civil. And honest. And put a nice closure on the relationship we've had. Now I'm not scared anymore of apologizing, I just ask for a good talk, I just want to think back at the most important period of my life and at one the most important relationship in my life, and smile. And not having the image of her face covered in blood, her hatred and my guilt tattooed in my memory. This has to be good for her too. What kind of resentment is better than the peace of heart and mind? She has to see it. She has to hear what I have to say. No, better, she must want to hear that.

So, after our ironic-but-kind-of-polite exchange of words, with my heart still racing, I went and fixed the Stevenson's water pipe. I drove to the grocery shop with Mrs. Stevenson who didn't trust me to buy the right avocados for her mind blowing guacamole. It was a nice distraction from my overthinking.

"Piper, honey! Did you just see the Loch Ness Monster?" Someone is shouting at me. I turn around. It's Danny Goldberg with his wife.

I'm here at the lake since 2 pm on lifeguard duty, this day couldn't be brighter, it's perfect. I know that I'm not supposed to do it, but I can't help but feel responsible for the safety of my guests, especially if they are the two unsupervised Goldberg kids. So I'm basically walking back and forth along the small beach we have, keeping an eye on Sammy and Louisa and sending silent smiles to the old men who are trying too hard to catch a fish from the pier just like every other day.

So, now that the adult Goldbergs have arrived, almost all the guests are here. Bob Stevenson is fishing with Lenny and Donny, while her wife Rosa is gossiping with the three Golden Girls of Cabin 5. It's heartwarming to see such a beautiful friendship blossom year after year. The four friends of Cabin 4, the NY fashion hipsters, are getting a tan/sleeping under the sun, probably still with a massive hungover. I know that it looks like a mess, a mix between a retirement home, an amusement park for kids and an exclusive NY after party, but it works. So, the fact that a twenty seven years old fashion blogger got drunk last night thanks to the secret cocktail made by Molly, a 78 years old grandmother of eight, is perfectly normal here at Camp Clearwaters. And I fucking love it.

Speaking of Loch Ness Monster, still no sign of the two missing guests. I wonder what they are doing, even though, knowing Alex, I might have two or three ideas, I just don't want to think about them. So, since my lifeguard duties are over, I'm going take a relaxing swim.

I take off my shoes and my shorts with absolutely no grace and, as I'm about to take off my shirt, I feel a pair of eyes burning my back. I've always had this power, the power of knowing when Alex is watching me. I thought it had vanished with the distance and the years, but, nope, still there.

With the corner of my eyes I can see them both, walking towards the beach from the trail in the woods. I stop for a few seconds with my shirt slightly raised. I know this is childish and shallow, but
I can feel my power. I know they're both watching me and I know that my body is still more than acceptable, thanks to all the yoga and running I'm doing. My muscles are defined and my stomach is flat. Another great victory for me, feeling totally at ease with my appearance.

With deliberate and calculated movements, I raise my shirt over my head, I throw it behind me, and I slowly walk into the clear waters of the lake.

When my green bikini is under the level of the water, I turn around. Sandy is placing a towel on a deckchair, but Alex is still watching me. But it lasts a second, she averts her eyes and she's already rummaging into her bag.

So I'm not the only one who's curious. Good.

I try not to watch too much in their direction, but it's the first time I can look at her without having a nerve wrecking conversation. Unfortunately, she's still fully dressed. She has found a deckchair in the shadows, close to the pier where they're fishing, Ralph is once again at her feet and she's reading one of her books. Some things will never change.

Sandy is talking and laughing with the Golden Girls, already making friends.

I take a swim till I reach the buoy and, when I turn around, Sandy is coming into the water. Suddenly I don't feel as much sexy as I did 10 minutes ago. She can easily be a Victoria's Secret model, and her golden bikini is doing nothing to hide the fact that she's virtually physically perfect. Everyone is staring at her. It bothers me a little bit the fact that Alex could make a comparison between us, but it's a very self-centered thought and, above all, it's none of my business.

In ten quick strokes she reaches me and we start to chat and laugh for half an hour about trivial stuff, the Camp, PoPi, her job as a real estate agent. But not even a word about Alex. I'm literally dying of curiosity, I can't think of anything I want to know more in my life.

She's really fun, outgoing, friendly, when she talks, and she talks a lot, she's really passionate, maybe a little too cheerful for my taste. I wonder how they ended up together. Alex is like her opposite. She's friendly and funny too, but only when she wants it to be, when she needs it, or after she gets to know you. She's more selective. Maybe opposites really attract, maybe she's with her just for her looks. Maybe I shouldn't think about all of this, but who hasn't make comparisons when an ex is involved? It's perfectly normal. I've never seen Alex with someone who isn't.. well, me. So it doesn't mean anything.

I hear someone screaming my name and I get so startled I almost fall underwater.

"Where did you go Piper?" Sandy is laughing at me, probably she was talking to me and I have no freaking idea about what. So rude of me.

"Oh, sorry sorry! I was just trying to remember if I did close the gas on my way here! You were talking about that fireplace.. and my mind just drifted…" definitely better than I was thinking about your girlfriend

"Oh, well, in that case, you're forgiven" Big sexy smile "By the way, they're calling you from over there"

Oh yeah, right. The screams. My mind is completely gone.

I turn around and I see three fully grown men waving at me, almost jumping on the pier.

"Piper, look what we got! They're huge! We need the judge!" they keep screaming.
I laugh soundly. The fishing competition, I almost forgot. Every Monday the same story. They're no different from 5 years old children on a sugar rush.

"I'm coming, I'm coming" I say with a smile, and I turn around to excuse myself from Sandy who is already waving at me and with a splash she's swimming towards the center of the lake. In perfect style, obviously, like she's been a mermaid in her past life. I'm starting to find her perfection a little irritating.

I come out of the lake, but this time I do not feel like the hot girl from the Bond movies anymore. More like a wet cat. But the fishermen are waiting impatiently for me, and I can already hear them arguing about who's got the biggest one. Men.

So I will let the sun dry me. Still wet, barefoot and in my bikini, I walk in their direction which, casually, is also Alex's direction.

To reach the pier I have to pass really close to her. My heart starts to beat just a little faster at the thought. She's still reading. Will I ever get used to her hair? I don't think so.

I mumble a "Sorry" as I pass close to her, but I don't see a reaction, she keeps reading her book. Not even Ralph, the traitor, is moving.

So I just go straight to the three musketeers and, just like every Monday, I try to choose a random winner, based on my totally non-existent knowledge of the fish universe. By using made up sentences like "Yours is bigger, but his fish is very rare in this lake" or "No one has ever catch this kind of trout", I'm suddenly the greatest expert on the subject.

But this time my ruling has not been accepted without complains, so they're still arguing over the weight of some kind of fish, when I notice that Alex is on her feet. It looks like she wants to leave, but after a few steps she turns around and she looks at me a little…embarrassed?

Is my mere presence too much to handle that she has to leave?

I leave the three guys alone and I walk in her direction, puzzled.

I stop when I'm three feet from her and I suddenly feel naked. It's not like she hasn't seen me like this before. But this is different. She's kissed and licked every inch of my body, but now I don't know who I have in front of me. We're familiar strangers.

She's still avoiding my eyes, and by doing so, she's looking at some random lower part of my body while her hand is in her hair in a way that I know oh so well. This isn't helping at all.

"Ehm, I just…wanted to… but your dog…" she's stuttering.. maybe it's because she's in public, but she seems different from the angry girl of this morning… she sounds polite and almost shy. And I have no idea what the hell she's trying to tell me. My dog what?

"Sorry, is Ralph bothering you? I can, you know, call him..." She looks at me, and I think it was better when she was avoiding me because her hair may be different, but her eyes are still the same eyes I loved for so long.

"Oh no, no…It's just…I was leaving, and he was following me, and I didn't know if you..."

"Oh, got it" I say. We both sound like two awkward teenagers, geez. "You know, you were right before, he seems to like you more than he likes me, but now we're gonna have a little talk"

Panic. I see panic in her eyes. Oh god, did she think that I..?
"Oh no, no. Not us. Me and Ralph. About boundaries. About not following guests around the camp" I try to laugh, but it sounds more like a squeak. Alex has a sort of grin on her face, so maybe it's ok.

"Oh, Yeah. Actually I like him very much, so he can follow me everywhere… I just didn't know if, you know, there's something I need to know, if he's allowed to follow me, if he's gonna get lost…" she's clearly distressed.

"Well, if it's about that, don't worry. He is the king of this place, he knows every corner of the camp and he loves following people around, so…definitely he's not getting lost" I try to reassure her, with my eyes still glued to hers. I am drowning in them, drinking them.

"Ok, so...I guess, we're both leaving, then…" she starts to turn around, but then she stops and adds "Me and Ralph, I mean..

"Oh, ok! Bye" I hear myself reply before I realize that this can't physically get more awkward

"Bye" I hear her answer. And she's already into the woods with Fleabag on her heels.

Good. At least we're in this awkwardness together.

So, what the hell was that?

The rest of the day went smoothly. No sign of Alex, but when I went to my cabin, Ralph was waiting for me on the porch like nothing happened. If only dogs could talk.

So now, after a long shower, I'm ready for taco night and for the famous Rosa's guacamole.

It's one of those perfect summer night...warm breeze, no humidity and the smell of Mexican food. Oh, I love it. I wish my Martha were here, it's also her favorite day of the week because the 'after dinner fun' on Monday, is poker!

When I arrive at the clearing where we have placed the outside tables, everyone is already there, talking with each other and helping cooking or pretending to do so, mixing mojitos, drinking mojitos, the usual. Sandy is there, helping with the tables and when I go inside I find Alex chatting up with Rosa. She has a ponytail and for a second, I don't even recognize her. But her posture, the way she's looking closely and with attention at something Rosa's showing with her eyes slightly closed…it's her.. I wish I could be transparent and stay here just a couple of minutes, but...

"Piper, Piper, come here…you have to try this!" Damn, time's over. But it's Rosa's fault.

I approach the duo with a smile, Rosa is behind the kitchen counter and has already a spoon ready. The place is small, they're in the corner so, to reach Rosa, I need to lean on the counter, but Alex is currently in that position, so she needs to move.

As she's about to do so, when Rosa's hand grabs her forearm and keeps her in place.

"Where do you think you're going darling? Stay here, this is our baby" and then she looks at me "Here, Piper, it won't bite" She has probably sensed my hesitation, if she only knew what she's asking me to do.

I see Alex standing still, resigned. I really try to minimize the contact of my hands on her back as I lean in Rosa's direction, but, frankly, it's all I can think about. All my senses are on my fingertips, I feel like I'm touching the holy grail or the mouth of a tiger. Mystical and dangerous. But also nostalgic. It's like sitting on your childhood bed after 15 years abroad. Everything seems so strange
and smaller, but you can feel everything you've been through when you were young. The odors, the way the light passes through the curtains, the memories of lonely nights spent thinking about your future. Everything is familiar, and true.

This is exactly how it feels right now. Our physical compatibility, our chemistry, whatever the hell it was is still here. We already talked about it in prison. We just click so well.

I lean on the kitchen counter, careful not to touch her also with my body, I can feel her breath on my shoulder while I close my eyes and I taste the guacamole on the spoon.

"Mmm …so good Rosa!" It's a lie. I could be eating worms right now, I'm not focused on the taste. But I do know for sure that Rosa always delivers.

"Wait until you taste this, darling" and she's handing me another spoon. As I put it in my mouth, suddenly I'm well aware of the thing inside my mouth. It's like an explosion. And not only for the double dose of jalapenos, but it has something different. It's delicious.

I lick my lips and I realize I'm making that sound. But when I stop, it's too late. I sense that Alex is watching me and I think she heard me. I feel the need to go away, so I take a step back, my hands disconnect from her back and I try to keep talking about the food.

"Oh, Rosa, this was delicious. What is it?" I ask over enthusiastic

"Ask Martha here! She was telling me about a place she went to, where they grill the avocados for the guac, so she showed me how to do it, then she added basil and pomegranate juice and this is the result! Can you believe it? Isn't it great? Tell her!" I've never seen Rosa more happy, and I love Rosa.

So I look at the two of them "Oh yeah, really fantastic… can't wait to eat a whole bowl of it!"

"It's not a big deal" says Alex looking at Rosa. She looks content and satisfied. So I leave them and go outside, but I can still hear them talk.

"Not a big deal? What did I tell you? She loved it! So, tomorrow we're cooking together and I'll show you how to make eggplant lasagnas if you show me that Indonesian dish of yours that you were talking before"

"It's a deal" I can hear the smile in her voice. She's happy.

I'm not. As soon as I'm outside I lean my back against the closer tree and I take a deep breath. This day is never ending, and I'm really tired. It's been a rollercoaster of emotions, and I just want to get down.

Just a couple of hours and I'm off to bed.
This evening is never ending.

Really, I love everyone, but I'm so tired I can't think straight anymore. I feel like my head is full of… sponges or clouds, something fluffy.

There's a limit of stress, emotions, thoughts and awkward conversations you can have in a day, and I've passed it long ago. Now I'm setting new records. I don't care about anything or anyone, Alex included. I just need to go to my cabin, put my most comfortable t-shirt on and sleep, or better, fall into a coma. Close the doors to my brain and let it rest. Just for the night.

Tomorrow I will be ready, I will be prepared for everything, If Alex wants to ignore me, insult me, talking to me like we are ten years old strangers, she can do it. I don't care. Tomorrow is going to be another day. I will be rested, lucid and Martha will be here in time for dinner. I miss her so much. I feel like my balance depends on her presence, this is probably what love is about.

But now I need to find an excuse to leave this table.

The dinner had been a success. The food was delicious, especially the new and improved guacamole, courtesy of Alex Vause who has spent a big part of the dinner talking to Rosa and other guests, touching her girlfriend and drinking mojitos. I've lost count after the third one, I know she can hold her liquor, but she must be at least a little dizzy.

But, nevertheless, she's sitting in front of me, fully concentrated on her cards, with no signs of drunkenness apart from the "touching Sandy thing" that is becoming a little PG-13. I think she's doing it on purpose, I don't know why, but anyhow, it's not working. I still just want to find a way to abandon the game and go to bed, I have no time to think about the fact that Sandy is standing behind Alex, massaging her shoulder and arms, and oh my god, where is Alex's rose? Her rose, her tattoo, I can't see it anymore. Where the hell…

"Piper! Piper, it's your turn" Lenny brings me out of the state of shock I'm currently in. Oh, yeah, the poker game, not the tattoo.

"Sorry, Lenny! One sec…ehm…I change these two cards" I say paying really no attention on what I'm doing.

"Darling, I really don't know how you do it every time. You really don't know how to play! Your luck is incredible!" He says with a laugh and gives me two cards. My luck has a dark sense of humor. A couple of aces, that combined with the one on the table, and the couple of ten I have, it means that I have a big chance to win this hand. Oh shit.

It's almost 1 am, Rosa, Sandy, Donny and one of the girls of cabin 4 have already cleaned everything up and closed all the lights except for the Christmas ones, wrapped around the branches of the trees surrounding the tables. The atmosphere is surreal and magical and, on a normal night, I would cherish moments like these, but, right now, I really want to go to bed.

When they asked me to play, of course I said yes. I know Lenny and the Golden Girls are always so competitive and excited to beat me or my Martha at poker, karaoke or whatever we're doing that day. And, well, Alex was so eager to play that I couldn't pass the opportunity to compete against her, even though my chances of winning were close to zero, since, to begin with, I do not know how to fucking play.
So, there were 9 of us at the beginning. Now it's just four: me, Lenny, Alex and Linda, and I'm the one with more fiches. The second one is Alex. The winner gets 10 dollars. And I want to go to bed.

So, when I see that almost all the fiches are in the table, I try to think about what I should do to lose quickly.

"I fold" I say as I put my covered cards on the table. I raise my hands as a surrender with a loser smile, but I'm secretly proud of myself. I'm about to get up from the chair, when

"No, you don't" hisses Alex with a tone as cold as ice.

I'm speechless "Sorry?" I look around puzzled at the other players who are equally puzzled "I don't know how to play. Did I use the wrong word?"

She's still looking at me.

I'm exhausted. Please let me go away. I'm looking for help. Sandy, who still has her hands on Alex's shoulders seems as clueless as me and is looking at her girlfriend with a look I can't decipher.

It happens all in a few seconds, Lenny is trying to say something when Alex is suddenly on her feet, her hands almost slam on the table. She looks at me straight in the eyes.

"I know you've got good cards, Piper. Are you trying to make me win?" she shouts.

Oh god. This can't be possible.

"Listen" I start to explain, but in that moment everyone is talking to her. Lenny is going with a "Oh no, you don't know her, she really doesn't know anything about poker", the girls from cabin 4 are laughing, Rosa is saying "Oh Martha, dear, it's just a game". Sandy is touching her arm, but Alex pushes it away and starts to walk away.

You can sense the embarrassment in the air. The guests are watching me expecting something, but I have no fucking clue about what just happened, all I know is that this behavior is unacceptable, and I need to talk to her.

"I'm really really sorry" Sandy is talking to everyone and she's touching my forearm, her eyes are worried. "She's just really tired and we got into a fight today, but I swear, she's never like this. I'm really sorry".

And she is. I try to reassure her with a little smile, but I'm speechless. Luckily Linda comes in help "Oh don't you worry child, You should see the boys arguing about who's better at bowling. Like that time Donny threw Bob into the lake"

This causes a burst of laughter from everyone. Everyone remember that hilarious scene. The tension is dissipated and everyone is back at talking to each other and cleaning the tables. We won't have a winner tonight.

Sandy is still next to me.

"I'm really sorry Piper, I don't know what got into her today"

"Don't worry Sandy, really. It's not a big deal" Except yes it is. I can see she's trying to look in the direction where Alex disappeared, to see if she's still there.

"I think…I should..."
"Yeah, don't worry, see you tomorrow" I say, and she's gone.

I exhale, I didn't even know I was holding my breath. I silently help Rosa and the girls to clean and close everything for the night. They're talking about the new episode of a tv show that I've never seen and, for a few minutes, is relaxing to listen to other people speaking.

"Piper, darling, you cannot even stand on your feet! Go to sleep, we've got this" Rosa puts her hand on my cheek and I feel like crying at the contact. A warm hand, a nice and loving person, I'm physically and psychologically drained. I lean on the touch, with my eyes closed. I'm craving human contact.

I put my hand on hers and I slightly squeeze it with a smile full of affection. I thank everyone, exchange goodnights, and I'm off to my cabin with Ralph on my side.

When I walk past Cabin 6, I can hear heated muffled voices from inside. They're clearly fighting. It's none of my business. But my luck seems to think otherwise, because as I'm about to reach the shadow, the door slams open and Alex storms out of it like a motherfucking tornado and she's in front of me.

It lasts just a second, we lock eyes and she quickly walks away in the opposite direction, toward the woods. She's a fire, burning with bad things. Like a tank set on destroying anything that might block her path. I've seen her before in this state of mind, we were in prison and she was dressed with a trash bag.

The way it ended, well, I do remember that too. I've still got a little faded scar on my cheek from that day, and a much more big one in that secluded part of my brain where I don't go very often. The way we fucked that day is not something you can easily forget. She opened a new world for me the first time we got together. A world made of burning skins, whispered desires and tongues. At the beginning she was the goddess teacher and I was the worshiping pupil, but I learnt fast, and soon I understood how to enjoy sex and also how to use it as a weapon.

And that's what I did that day. I brought her in the library, I made her want to fuck me. And she did. Oh god yes, she did. But it was all my fault. The student surpassed the teacher, the slave became the master.

Not that I was a slave before, she never wanted that for me. She never saw me as one, I know that. But that's how I felt, in a way I decided to be her slave. I lived willingly under her shadow, she was...everything. Money, danger, self-confidence and sex. If I think about the beginning of our relationship, I still don't know if I wanted more to be with her, or to be like her.

This is a fucked up thing to think, but it's unfortunately the truth. When we met again in prison after 8 years, nothing was different. I was still a lost soul trying to find myself by impersonating who I thought was the right character at the moment. And it has worked for me so well, for so much time. Alex loved me till I decided to left her, Larry loved me and wanted to marry me, my parents loved me. Everything was good. Except it wasn't.

One thing I learnt is that the truth will always find you, no matter what. So, when I went to prison, I did the same thing I've always done, I became someone else. And that someone else, was very much like a fake imitation of an old Alex Vause that never existed. I had my version of the drug ring with the panties madness, I threw people in Max just to show my power, and I used sex. Not only in the Stella fiasco, but I used it against the only person I shouldn't use it against. Alex.

But it was an act, a deliberate act. I knew very well the reaction I was going to have from her. I disturbed the tiger by pretending to be one. But I was no tiger. I am no tiger.
I'm not a prude, I've always enjoyed sex very much and I still do. I'm adventurous, I like to try new things and I can be rough, but I'm not a walking sexual creature. She is. Well, she still is, because as I'm watching her march into the darkness I can't help but feel that all that anger, all that power, should be, and probably will be, channeled into that kind of physical release. She looks like she's glowing.

I feel a little bit guilty thinking about how it would feel to be still at the end of that kind of release, but I try not to dig too much into that thought. I'm still annoyed for her behavior and, well, I know how I usually get rid of negative sensations. But, sadly, my Martha is not here, so sex is out of the equation. It's always difficult for me to understand my emotions. Arousal or anger, pain or guilt, usually is always a mix.

Right now I can easily blame the adrenaline rush for the warm sensation in my body. That and the automatic response I still have for everything that is Alex Vause.

But, luckily, this is not my business anymore. She may still be hot and magnetic, but, seeing her behave like a child made it very clear for me that she's not the Alex I used to know or at least a rude angriest version.

So I just keep on walking. A little voice in me, the responsible one, hopes that she's going to be safe in the woods, but, as I'm thinking about the little landslide on the trail, Ralph leaves my side and runs in her direction. Good dog.

Fuck, fuck fuck. Someone is banging at my door. I look at the alarm clock. It's 1:30. I've slept for about fifteen minutes. What a joy!

I need all my willpower to get up from the bed and go to the door. God, I hope it's not the Stevenson's water pipe.

I open it still in my "pajama", an old t-shirt and my panties, no bra. But I'm not ashamed of it, everyone here has seen me in unflattering outfits, so it's not a big deal.

But when I open it, I'm a little surprised. It's not who I was expecting. At all.

"Hi Piper, sorry to bother you… I wanted to talk to you about… today" she says almost shyly.

"Oh…ok" after a moment of confusion I open my arms and take a step back to let her into the cabin, but she stops me.

"No… It's not necessary, you can go back to sleep, I'll be quick"

I'm feeling sorry for her, her discomfort is evident.

"Listen, if it's about what happened tonight, I've told you before, don't worry about it, I'm not one to hold grudges. It was just a game" I smile as warmly as possible.

"It's not that, it's… I feel like a owe you an apology"

"You don't owe me anything, Sandy. You did nothing wrong". *Your girlfriend did*. She's the one who's been rude. But I don't say that.

"We..well, you know we've been fighting all day long and I know that I shouldn't apologize for her, but I know I pushed her a little too hard today, and I really feel this kind of nice connection with you.."
She lets her words hang in the air and I reply with a big smile and my heart warms a little. I like her too. I move my hand in a way that means "keep talking", and she does

"…and everything, everything with her is too much these days. I told you we are moving to New York, right?"

"Yep"

"Well, she hates it. But I don't know why. She used to live there, her job would be so much easier in a bigger city and when I ask her the reasons why she hates it so much, she doesn't give me an honest answer…it's always something about having her roots in Chicago and the mess that is New York. But my firm will relocate there so I need to move. And she agreed to move with me, but she's behaving like it was an imposition, I don't know… I don't even know why I'm telling you all of this…"

I laugh "Don't you worry about me. You know, I've had a situation like yours in the past. I didn't want to move in with Martha. I was a bitch for a couple of months, but when we finally moved in and we spent the first evening drinking a bottle of wine on the carpet because we didn't have a sofa yet, well, it was good. Sometimes people just need to physically do stuff to understand them" I put my hand on her arm and I squeeze a little.

"She's actually quite funny and friendly most of the time" she says with a smile. "And I think she likes you. Today she was asking me about you, how I've found your place and what you do for work, stuff like that. That's why I don't know why she acted like a total bitch with you today!"

I don't know what she's saying because I stopped at the "she was asking me about you". I shouldn't feel like this. Probably it was just to know if I told her something about our past.

"Sandy, listen to me. Don't make it into a much bigger deal than it is. It was nothing. Everyone has shitty days and, as they told you before, it's not the first time someone fights for a game here at Camp. So, tomorrow is another day, I'm not taking anything personally, so don't worry. Are we good?"

Liar, liar, pants on fire. But it seems to calm her.

"Yes, we're good. Thanks Piper. I really meant what I said before. I just wanted you to know that is totally not about you…"

Oh Sandy, I think it is all about me

"I know… I know…You didn't have to say it, really, not a big deal"

"Thanks girl, so, goodnight, see you tomorrow… I just hope she's not getting lost…"

Oh, poor Sandy. "Don't worry about it. Ralph's with her… she's probably going to come back once she's calmer.."

"Yeah, hope so…goodnight Piper and thanks"

"Night Sandy" and I close the door.

Holy fuck not again. Two knocks at the door.

I glance at the alarm clock. 2:15 am. I slept for just 30 minutes. Someone hates me. I wonder what it
is about this time. I surely like Sandy, but this is too much. It must be the fucking pipe.

As I open the door, I almost fell because someone pushes me inside.

I panic for a few seconds, after the Pennsatucky episode I still live with the senses alerted, so my first instinct is to protect myself and fight back. But when I realize it's just Ralph I immediately relax.

But it lasts a second because the anxiety comes back like a tsunami wave when I remember who was with him. I raise my eyes, it's dark outside and I see a figure standing in the shadows of my porch.

It seems like she doesn't know what to do, but after a few seconds she enters the cabin without asking for permission and she turns around to close the door.

This day couldn't get worse. Alex Vause is in my cabin, and I see blood on her.
The only source of light in the room was coming from the bedside lamp. The long shadows of the furniture were projected on the wall on my left and the atmosphere couldn't be more surreal.

I was standing in the middle of the room, facing the door. The unmade king size bed was behind me and for a moment, after I saw the blood, I was glad to know that I had something soft to fall into, in case I fainted.

I was not prepared for the wave of panic and fear that started from my chest and washed all over me, like poison reaching every cell of my body. It made me a statue of terror, unable to move or breathe or think.

I've never been a fan of blood, but it has never triggered in me the sensation of doom I felt in those first few moments. It was the fucking combination of blood and Alex that brought me to that infamous day of five years ago.

But she's not dying this time. It took me a few seconds to realize that the cuts on her legs and arms are just superficial scratches, the same amount of time it took her to turn around and face me.

Bloody Alex, like the name of a cocktail I'd never wish to drink again.

"Hey, what happened?" I ask pointing at her legs with just a hint of concern in my voice, trying to be mature and pretend not to be irritated by her previous behavior. She doesn't need to know that my heart is still threatening to burst out of my chest.

"It's nothing" her harsh tone is doing nothing to calm me. Quite the opposite. I don't know if she's playing a game or if she's just fucking crazy. One moment she's angry, another she's talking to me quietly, and now she's here, in my cabin, why? To talk? To apology? To fight? I really don't get it.

"It's not nothing, you're bleeding Alex" I say as a matter of fact. As her name leaves my lips I can see her features harden. She doesn't move, she's still standing motionless, facing me, three feet between us.

It feels like one of those western movies where the two cowboys are waiting for the last stroke of the bell to see who's going to be the first one to shoot. But I have no intention of shooting.

"I… just fell into a thorny bush… I was following your fucking dog and…” I was wrong. I will shoot. I don't let her finish.

"My what? Really? Did you really just blame… Oh, never mind. What's wrong with you? No, wait, don't bother answering.. just…I'm too tired now...just get the fuck out of here." Just to be more clear, as I'm talking, I reach for the door and I snap it open. But she's not moving.

"Is this what you want? To piss me off? Well, you've won...now get out" I keep on talking. And she keeps on doing nothing. I'm about to grab her, when I hear her almost whispering.

"I'm..I'm sorry" She turns around, her left hand is in her hair and our eyes meet. There's something there that makes me anxious.

"It's…the witness protection" She exhale and her whole body deflates. Oh. I wasn't expecting that. Well, obviously I thought about it since I first saw her, but I didn't expect her to bring it out now.
"Oh" I wait for her to say something, to explain, but she seems…torn, her eyes are darting all over the room.

I've always had a problem with silences especially coming from her, but right now I have a way bigger problem with my guilt. I don't think she has any idea of the actual weight of the three words I'm about to say. I feel like I've ripped my heart from my chest and put it in a silver plate. She can either smash it or putting it back inside.

"Are you safe?" My voice is trembling, but I don't care. After a moment she answers.

"Yes. Yes I am" Immediate relief. I've never felt this lighter before. I didn't even know till now, how much this was affecting me. Yes, Nicky talked with her, so I knew she was alive, but there are a lot of ways to be alive.

I close the door again. She's still in the same spot. I think I've just exposed the first layer of this new version of Alex, but I don't want to push.

"So, is this the reason why you've come here now? To tell me this?" I have to ask.

"No, I just didn't want Sandy to see me in these conditions" Oh, so, no apologies. I thought this would disappoint me, but actually I prefer the change of subject, it allows me to be practical and gain back control.

"Ok, sit on the chair there. I'm going to take the first aid kit in the bathroom".

"Thanks" The heaviness of what she's just told me is still hanging in the air, but it's not in my chest anymore. It's out, so I'm feeling better. Happier. Knowing that my actions didn't destroyed a life that much, can be a mood enhancer, and the tiredness is gone too.

I decide to take just a clean cotton cloth, a disinfectant, a bucket of water and a torch.

When I go back to the bedroom, Alex is sitting on the chair next to the door, she's nervous.

I place the bucket of water on her left and I kneel in front of her.

"Oh, It's not necessary. I can take it from here" She doesn't want me to help, and she's starting to get up from the chair.

"Alex, don't be ridiculous. The thorns are small, you have them everywhere and it's 2 a.m., so it's pitch dark and I don't recall you having a third arm to hold the torch. And I meant it before when I said I was tired, so just cut the crap and take off your shoes".

I don't know if it's my tone or the situation, but after a moment, she gives me the hint of a smile and she thanks me, again. It was easier than I expected.

Or not easy at all. When she raises her bare right foot and she puts it in my thigh, I realize that I have to touch her and suddenly her idea of auto-medication is much more appealing.

But I have to do this for a million of reasons.

"Can you please take the torch and point it here?" I don't wait for her reply, I put it in her hand. She follows the order. And I start to remove the first thorn I see with my fingers.

"Ouch!" she gasps.

"Sorry…” I look up at her, but she's smiling. Probably ashamed of herself for not being tough
enough.

"Go on, go on, you're doing good"

And I do, I concentrate on her foot, her ankle, her shin. I take away the thorns, and then I clean the blood with the cloth. It's a mechanical repetition, but it helps me be centered and present. I know what's coming. I know what I need to say, but right now I'm enjoying this routine. And, after she relived me from my guilt, I don't think that there's anything more symbolic than me, on my knees, cleaning her blood.

We stay in a comfortable silence for a while, I've almost reached her knee. She follows my every movement with the torch. The scratches are really superficial, and there's more dirt than blood.

In a corner, Ralph is asleep and he's snoring.

"I'm sorry about before" her eyes are still fixed on the light of the torch.

"'Before' is a little too generic term" I reply faking an annoyed tone that it's almost not there anymore.

"You dog…he's...well…I didn't mean to be disrespectful" I want to laugh in her face. She's taking the long road to apology, starting with the animals. Well, I don't mean to be disrespectful either, but she needs to cut this crap.

"Alex, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but you need to cut this crap" The new Piper doesn't run away anymore, she faces the situation. The atmosphere changes in a second, maybe I should have phrase the concept in a different way.

"You're the one talking about respect? What about the fact that I asked you not to call me Alex?" She asks dryly. I suddenly know what she's doing. She's looking for the short way out and she knows that by rising my temper, it will end up with me telling her to go away.

I get irritated at the thought that, if it weren't for the thorns I'm taking out of her legs, she would have succeeded in her mission 10 minutes ago, in less than two sentences. She still knows me, even though I don't know how much deliberate it was her behavior today. I'm not falling into her trap this time. She's going out of here just when I say so.

"Well sorry. I just… It's been a lot for me today and I still need to process…"

She doesn't let me finish.

"There's nothing to process here, Piper. This…" and she uses her free hand to point at me and her "…this is just a coincidence, it's not fate or destiny or a way to make amends for the past. I need you to understand it." Finally a full sentence, even though it's definitely not what I wanted to hear. God, it's so difficult to stay calm, this hit too close to home. I need to change the subject.

"And I need you to understand the basic rules of this place. You don't go around treating me like you did tonight. It's unacceptable, rude and frankly, childish."

"But you cheated! Don't try to deny it!" We are shouting at each other again.

"Just because I wanted out! I was fucking tired and I wanted to go to sleep. Why the hell did you snap at me like that?"

"I thought you were doing it on purpose. To let me win"
"Why do you think I would have done something like that?"

"The fuck I know! To make me… happy. To be friendly… so I would be more inclined to talk… catch up, whatever the fuck you wanted to do this morning"

I don't want to lie, this is hurting because, as much as it was mostly for my tiredness, part of me wanted Alex to win and to be in a good mood. Part of me still wants to impress her, to show her what I have accomplished. I know it's egoistical, but the way she's talking about it now, like it's the most idiotic reason to do it, well, it hurts a little. But she doesn't have to know it.

"You're delusional" I try to lower my voice. "And out of place. Can you see it? Can you see that the way you stormed out of the game was over the top and totally uncalled for?"

"I've had a fucking horrible day, I just wanted something easy and relaxing. Maybe I was a little dramatic, but I had every reason to be upset because you were actually cheating and, of course, this morning I had no idea I would be facing you, of all people". She rolls her eyes. This gets me so riled up.

"Excuse me? Let me see if I've understood it correctly, you can be upset because of me, but I can't even say that I have something to process? Do you think that this is… " She interrupts me, again.

"They are two totally different things, and I'm definitely not affected by you" I'm not cleaning her leg anymore, fuck her. I'm still on my knees but now I'm looking straight at her, with her foot still on my lap.

"Bullshit! Then why are you treating me like… " I admit it, my pride is hurt.

"Why?" She is loud now "Why? Piper, I've just told you. I was in witness protection! Why do you think I was so upset?"

"I had no fucking idea! You didn't tell me anything! What exactly did you think I was going to do? Rattling you out to Kubra? Please Alex, don't be ridiculous" I know I'm exaggerating, but I am right and I have no intention of backing off.

"See? This… this is what I'm talking about! Stop calling me Alex, how many times do I have to tell you? And for the Kubra thing, well it wouldn't surprise me".

Unbelievable. She can't be serious.

"Oh God! Do you really, honestly, believe that I could possibly call Kubra, right now, and tell him who you are and where you are so he can… what? Finish the job? Do you think I could do something like that?" I know this is harsh and I already know the answer to it. And she does too. But, just to be clear, I'm pissed. She's trying not to show her emotions, but her eyes are not lying.

"That's really not the point." It's not an answer. Fuck her. She continues

"I already told you this morning, I don't want anything to do with you and I have no intention of… sharing … things or talking about things of the past that should stay in the past, but you just HAD to… be there… talking to me, and to Sandy, and saying things…"

This banting, this fighting, it's all so familiar. It's almost natural for us, to go back and forth, to throw up at each other poisonous words. It's been years since I've felt like this, a fire is burning inside my belly and its smoke is obfuscating my brain. I'm all physical sensations and emotions, and I know she's there too. Her cheeks are red and her muscles are tense. I know how these fights usually ended, and I know she has to be thinking about the same thing.
"I HAD to? We exchanged two civil words since this morning, You're the one who's acting like a crazy bitch and you're accusing me of being what, a stalker? Do I need to remind you who owns this place and who's the guest?" I feel outraged and I need to feel in control again. This is about power.

"Oh, believe me, I know. Tell me to go, then. You're the big scary boss of this fucking place." She's daring me. It would be so, so easy to fall into her sweet trap. To send her away once and for all from my life and getting back to normal. But there's something primal inside of me that won't allow me to do so.

"Oh, wouldn't it be easy… blame everything on evil Piper. You don't get to do that, not here. What happened to your bravery? If you want to go away so badly, just go. Scared of your girlfriend?" I know I'm pushing it, but once again she drove me past the breaking point and now I'm unleashed.

"Fuck. You. You don't have any right to speak to me like this" If looks could kill I would be dead. I realize I'm strengthening my grip on her foot, and this contact brings me back to the physical world. I want her to explode with me.

"Take off your pants" I say with my eyes glued to hers, not blinking even once.

The look in her face is priceless. Not affected my ass.

"Wh- what?" I caught her off guard.

"Take off your pants" I repeat it as slowly as possible, but my heart is racing, I think I might die. She's…oh god, I can't even begin to describe what I see in her face. At the end I see resolution.

"Oh really? You want to fuck me now? What makes you think I'd fuck you? Who's the delusional now?" We're doing the same thing. Trying to overpower the other. But it's pointless, it's a dog who's biting its own tail.

"Who said something about fucking? This conversation is clearly going nowhere, so, if you take off your pants, I can remove the thorns from there and we can both go to sleep" I can't read her face in this moment.

After a second I add "Only if you're not affected by it, of course"

I know that what I just did was wrong. And I know I did it only to win this "match". And I know that she knows it too. The thorns on her upper legs are at most four or five.

Now it can go in different ways. She could leave the cabin with only one leg cleaned, or she could slap me, hit me, kick me…

Instead she slowly removes her foot from my lap and puts it on the floor. She gets up from the chair and her hands are on her ripped shorts. She unbuttons it and in one fluid movement she lets it fall on the floor. She's standing in front of me in her black satin panties.

"No problem, but you're ridiculous" she says with a vicious smile while she sits again in the chair like it's a throne and she's a Lannister.

She is right, I'm a little ridiculous and I feel a little humiliated, but if I think about the expression she had on her face when I ordered her to take off her shorts, well, as they say, you win some, you lose some.

My hands are back on her legs and I waste no time. I need to remove and clean everything before my fingertips realize where they are.
She seems more relaxed, maybe it's because we're not talking or because she knows that I wasn't expecting this reaction from her.

I've just removed the last thorn from the inner thigh of her right leg, so I squeeze the cloth in the bucket and I start to clean the leg from the dirt and the blood. We both know that she could easily do it by herself, but I have no intention to surrender or to acknowledge my distress. She, on the other hand, is quietly pointing the torch in the general direction of her groin. And we both know that the light from the bedside lamp would be enough for me to see and complete the task.

But this is a duel, and we are both armed with the same weapons. And we are both losing.

The last thing to clean up is the inner thigh. I try to do it as quickly as possible, but not too quickly. As I put the cloth soaked with cold water there, I hear her take a short intake of breath. And she opens her legs just a little more.

I hope she hasn't heard me swallowing. Payback is a bitch, and my insides are melting, I don't know from what.

I release her foot and she places the other one on my thigh. The position now is uncomfortable, but I have no intention of moving.

I start again from the ankle and she follows my hands with the light of the torch.

Black satin. It's funny that, in this situation, I think about her panties. Panties have always been a part of our relationship. Either as a seduction tool, or as a garment to get rid of as soon as possible. They were also the symbol of our inglorious end, that silly prison business.

Right now, to get my mind off of this situation I've put myself into, I'm trying to remember when was the last time that I saw her in some "real" panties and not some white granny prison ones. Probably Paris, or even before that, since we didn't actually did anything remotely romantic in the most romantic city of the world. Was it Berlin or Venice? Can't remember.

But I do notice that they are black. I knew that the old Alex was still somewhere in this waspy looking woman. God, she probably look more waspy than me. This thought makes me smile a little bit. And I thinks she's noticed it.

"Liking what you see?" Oh god, if only her voice wasn't so low.

"Nothing new here" Play it cool Chapman "Except for the lack of tattoos".

Maybe now we have released some tension and we can have an actual talk.

"I had to take them off"

"All of them?"

"Yes, I just kept the salt shaker"

I wanted to reply saying it was my favorite, but she already knows that. And I'm under the impression that she wouldn't appreciate the walk into memory lane.

"I don't want to fight with you" I try another time, but with a softer approach.

"I don't want to talk with you" Her voice is not aggressive like before, even if the words sting just as much. I have the "why?" on the tip of my tongue, but I resist the impulse. I know I will get no
answer.

"We still need to find a way to behave around each other." My eyes are on her left leg, I'm almost finished. It's easier to talk without eye contact.

"I know" This is the first form of acknowledgment I have from her.

Her silence means that I have to be the one, again, to introduce the argument.

"Is it so hard for you to act like you don't want to murder me?"

From her mouth comes a snort that sounds like a dying short laugh "It's not that. It's the…things you know about me and my past…"

Why do I get this annoying feeling every time she says it's not about me?

"I would never use it against you, you have to know that Alex" I have finished with her legs, so I stand up while I tell her this. I need her to know that I'm telling the truth.

"It's Martha. Not Alex"

Oh dear god, not again. But she continues ignoring it.

"You talked about drugs, this morning, with Sandy, when I told you before not to do anything with her and God only knows what you said to her while you were talking in the lake". She's standing too and she's putting back on her shorts.

I need to think a while to remember the episode she's talking about.

"What? When I told you that Ralph was a drug dog? It was a joke, come on. Sandy was laughing, you're just being paranoid.."

Oh no, I realize too late the word I've just used. I can't take it back and I can see in her eyes that the damage is already done. I've fucked it up.

"I didn't mean it like that...let me explain.." I try to regain some credibility, but we're both thinking about that last months together.

"Don't " she's back being cold. "This is what I meant before. I don't want this. I don't need it. The only important thing for me is Sandy. She doesn't know anything and we need to keep her out of it. Do you think you can do that?".

We. She used the word 'we'. I don't know why, but this hurts me even more than what she 's just said.

"Yes, of course. And I need you to be… normal." She looks at me strangely. Maybe I've chosen the wrong word. I try to express it better. "Just, be… civil around me. Don't avoid me, at least in public. I have a role here, and people are coming here because we are all friendly and fun. And have a girlfriend. I don't want her to question me about you since I've decided to keep you…from her. But if she's going to ask, I won't lie to her. Never. Do you think you can do it?"

Her face is unreadable. I feel like I've just had a boxing match.

"Yes, I think it's okay". We're both drained, it's noticeable.

I take a step back to give her space to move. She goes towards the door. Still with her back at me,
she thanks me. Then she closes the door.

"You're welcome". I reply to no one.

I see the bucket full of dirty water on the floor, the cloth is still in my hand. The disinfectant is still unopened. I've forgotten to give it to her. We've also forgotten to remove the thorns from her arms. We.

I don't have the strength to think about what just happened.

I throw the cloth on the floor and I collapse into the bed. I look at the clock. It 3:15 AM.

Nine days to go.
Chapter 7

The annoying sound of the alarm clock woke me up at 8.00 am. And I did the only logical thing to do, I turned it off and I turned around.

It was the first time I did something like that since we opened this place two years ago, but I felt that the special occasion required special measurements. And what's better than being unconscious? I learnt it in the SHU...if you don't have alcohol or drugs to numb the pain, nothing is better than sleep. Not that I want to do drugs or drink myself into oblivion, even if maybe some red wine would be nice. And it's not even about pain, I'm not in pain. Well, maybe this metaphor is not really on point, but the feeling of wanting to numb whatever this is, is very similar to the feeling I had in the SHU.

So, when I decided to rise from the dead and I looked at the clock, I wasn't feeling very guilty, even if it was 11.45 am and I was supposed to do two million things in the morning. But that also meant that in less than 8 hours, Martha would be by my side, and in less than 8 days and half all of this would be over, one way of another, even if I have no idea about what one way or another could mean. Or even what 'this' is.

I'm feeling so much better now, rested like I've slept for a year, and I think I'm doing way better than yesterday. She is safe. This changes everything. I wish I could go back to last night and ask her what does 'safe' really mean, it's difficult to get rid of my guilt, it has been my close friend for the past five years.

But it's not important. Well, it's not that important.

I really can't describe how I'm feeling... or even what I'm feeling. But all I know is that I'm feeling. I'm feeling a lot. I don't know how much her presence here has to do with this. I'd like to think it's because of what she told me last night, but, truth to be told, I'm not sure.

I've always had problems with this... giving names to the things I feel. Or even recognize that I'm feeling something. I guess that's what happens when you spend your life wearing masks.

But now I've learnt that the truth will always come out. No matter what. Most of the time to slap you in the face, some other time to heal your wounds. All you need is time. And love. And I've got both. But I don't have patience, that's why I need to start doing something to take my mind off of this and not doing the countdown for Martha's arrival.

So I wash my face to get rid of the mess I see in the mirror and I clean the room, also to clean up the mess of last night. I see the disinfectant and I take it with me, maybe she's going to need it. After all I don't think I did a good job at all last night cleaning her scratches, and she came to my cabin only for that, right?

I close the door and I head towards the reception aka "the office". As I pass in front of cabin 6 I throw a glance in that direction as the door opens. My heart jumps a little when I see a pair of naked legs. But they are not Alex's, they're Sandy's, and she's only wearing a large Ramones t-shirts that I know too well.

I brought it in Kuala Lumpur one life ago. We had a fight the night before, we were at a 'work' dinner when I said to her hippie 'guests' that if they ate fish they were not real vegetarians. She was so mad at me and we went on all night arguing because, according to her, I was offending them on purpose because she didn't do something that I don't even remember. That was partially true, but of
course I wouldn't admit it even under torture. What I do remember clearly, are the words she used. Spoiled. Selfish. Lazy. Useless. She knew how to hurt me. We've always being very good at fighting. We are still spectacular at it. Anyway, it was a stressful period and we fought, she was still sleeping on the couch when I left the hotel the morning after.

I remember walking around with no direction, it was almost Christmas and there were 100 degrees outside. All the shops were full of fake Santas and fake snow and I was sweating from head to toe. I stopped for lunch in a food market in Chinatown, on the wall there was a "do not spit" sign. I sat and order steamed pork, in their freaking hippie faces. I wanted to leave, I wanted to go home, I wanted to leave Alex. It was like this after every fight we had. It left me drained, empty and every time it happened, it made me question our relationship to the point of wanting out of it. But I never did.

I was in a travel agency, looking for the cheapest flight from KL to NY, when my phone rang. I swear I didn't want to, but I looked at the message anyway.

Pipes, where are you? I'm sorry. Please come back.

Not enough. I was used to this. It was inevitable. We fought, I ran, she came after me, I came back to her. But it was all a show, because it was the same story every single time. Except that last time in Paris. Part of me knew that I had surpassed the limit, leaving after her mother's death, but part of me was still waiting for her call. Waiting to be chased and cherished. But that call never came, and I didn't have the courage to call her and apologize. I was devastated, but I honestly thought that it was a sign. My life was about to get in order. Without her. Stupid Piper.

I was still in the travel agency when the second message came. I knew it would come.

I need you. I love you so much. Please come back, I'm worried.

And, just like that, the void I felt inside me, was filled with lava. I burned with love. It was something I've only felt with her before, and I've never felt it since.

I'm not saying that I liked to fight with her, but even when I did, I knew that we would reconcile and there would be fireworks afterwards.

So I left the travel agency and I ran home as fast as I could. I didn't wrote her back, I wanted to let her slowly cook in her broth. I felt powerful. Alex, the great drug dealer was a pussy if I just threatened to leave her. But God, I was so addicted to her too. She made me feel brave, beautiful, she unleashed something in me I've never even dared to think I had.

The street vendors, with their european soccer team t-shirts, were trying to sell me everything, from clocks to chestnuts to probably human kidneys. But, as much as they usually got on my nerves, I didn't mind them this time. I was going back to my love.

When I saw the t-shirt dangling from a crutch, I knew I had to buy it. The first time we went out together, after I gave her my number at the bar, she brought me to see a Ramones cover band in a smoky pub. They were horrible. So horrible that we decided to leave the place after two songs and we ended up in her car, in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven, drinking cheap beer and talking about, trying not to be too awkward.

She sang to me her version of "I wanna be sedated" and she was even worse than the band, totally out of tune. But she didn't care, and this was incredible to me. That someone could be so free and at ease with herself to sing like a dying pig to a semi-stranger and still be so fucking hot. She later told me that she had never done it before with anyone else, that she already felt that I was different, but I didn't know it at the time.
So, when she stopped singing and she looked at me for a few seconds like I was a bottle of water in the middle of a desert, I felt my world crushing down. I've never felt more beautiful, desired, and lucky. I don't remember who was the first one to close the gap between us. I don't even remember the kiss that well, but I do remember the taste of beer and cigarettes, I remember the sensation of her warm tongue inside my mouth, her lips moving against my own, and I remember the feeling of power and happiness that was clouding everything else.

I wanted more, I wanted everything.

"Wanna go to my place?"

"Yes" The fastest answer ever.

She started the car and, looking at me from the corner of her eye and with a mischievous grin, she blurted out an "Hey ho, let's go". Ramones again.

I laughed so much that I was scared I was going to explode and die. I was so happy, so so happy. I thought that the date was going to be epic, and it would certainly finish with a bang. Instead it finished with a punch. Directed in my face. Maybe I should have read the signs from the start.

Anyway, that's how the Ramones became our band and how I ended up buying her the t-shirt in a dirty market in Kuala Lumpur.

When I entered the hotel room, she wasn't there, so I decided to wait for her on the couch with the t-shirt on, and nothing else, of course. I felt brave and naughty.

After 30 minutes, she hadn't retuned yet. I started to worry, maybe I should had text her, maybe she left. But when the door opened and I finally saw her, my head was clear, I was home. Her face went from panic to relief in 1 second, it took her another second to get angry probably because I didn't call her or told her I was ok. But when she saw the t-shirt I had on me, her face melted into a mask of lust and before I realized it, she was over me on the couch.

We didn't speak, we didn't need to. The look we exchanged was enough. *I'm sorry, I love you, our hearts can have a fresh start again.*

She fucked me in that couch so hard that I can still remember the aching I felt between my legs in the following days. A reminder of what she did to me and what I did to her. *Mine, mine, mine, mine.* She kept repeating it in a whisper while her two fingers were pumping inside of me and her hot mouth was on my shoulder, biting and then kissing the same spot, healing it with her hot breath and her soft words. *Don't ever do that to me again.*

I swear I really didn't want to do it again, I loved her so much. I probably loved her too much. She didn't want me to go down on her, maybe it had something to do with her desire to stay in control and to gain her power back. But I didn't listen to her, I spread her legs and I roughly started to lick her, worship her with my tongue in the best way I could. As she taught me.

Those were my *I love you*, my *I'm sorry*, my *I'll never leave you*. But it wasn't enough for me. It wasn't enough even when she started to move frantically her hips against my mouth. It wasn't enough when she started to scream my name as I pushed two fingers inside her while my tongue kept drawing mysterious fractals on her clit. And I couldn't stop even when her hands reached for something to grasp and they ended up in my shirt and they started to pull while she screamed that she loved me and I didn't want to stop even when I felt her explode and release all the tension built up from our fight, her job and all the shit in life.
When we were lying in the couch afterwards, covered in sweat and love, feeling invincible, I noticed that the Ramones t-shirt I was still wearing, had a hole on the left side. It was unstitched, probably it was Alex's fault. We laughed about it and when she offered to have it fixed, I absolutely forbade her to do it. I would always want to remember that day.

And that t-shirt soon became "my" t-shirt. It was Alex's, but I've never seen her wearing it, not a single time. But each time I was at her place, I only slept with that on. Even if it was freezing outside, I would wear a very unsexy gym suit, but the t-shirt was always underneath. And the hole on the side too.

That's why it's hurting like hell to see Sandy wearing it. It's not jealousy. It's pain. I'm disappointed. Does it really mean so little to her what we had?

"Hi Piper! Did you oversleep too?"

"Oh yeah, I was so tired last night, you have no idea!" Do I have to ask her about Alex? Sandy came to me last night, so maybe it's polite to…

I don't need to think it over because Alex appears behind Sandy. Is she trying to control me in case I let slip something to her girlfriend? She hugs Sandy from behind and whispers something in her ear. Sandy smiles and turns around to go back inside the cabin. I know that look. Once it belonged to a girl who was wearing the same ripped t-shirt.

"Bye Piper, see you later" I hear her say

"Bye Sandy… Martha" I add. We need to play it cool, right?

"Piper" Alex replies. One word. And they disappear into the cabin.

I'm walking to the office. I'm bitter and sad. I would be 10 times better to feel angry like yesterday. Now I can't shake this sensation of betrayal, even if it's stupid to feel like this.

It's 3 p.m. when I see Alex again. I'm in the kitchen with Katie and Bob, making the arrangements for the hike we're going to take in an hour, she enters the cabin and she goes directly towards the fridge.

"Hey everyone" she says almost shyly. She's probably feeling ashamed for the little show she put up last night.

"Hi Martha! Glad you didn't kill Piper, or viceversa" Bob, it's literally impossible for him not to grab the opportunity to make fun of someone. I hope she takes it the right way.

"Oh, I tried, believe me…” she answers with a smile, and I smile at the thought of how much close to reality this really is. If only he knew.

But her attempt of saying something funny is welcomed with some laughs and a chit chat about nothing between Alex and the two guests.

"So, are you and Sandy hiking with us later?" Katie asks

"Oh, I don't know. I'm not really into the physical activity thing…."

"Oh come on! You sore loser! I'm going hiking and I'm 78 years old"

I watch the exchange between them and I really have to stop feeling like this, happy, when I see
Alex getting along with the others and being relaxed. I guess it's like an unconditioned reflex, wanting her best. It seems like one of us still values our past relationship more than the other. And the bitterness is back.

Alex leaves with four slices of bread, two tomatoes and some ham. Probably they need to have a snack since they didn't leave the cabin for at least 12 hours. Not that I'm counting.

With this mood I go back to the cabin to get some rest before the hike, but I can't close my eyes not even for a second.

I'm really joyful when I reach the meeting point and I see no signs of the two lovebirds. It's just me and 9 other guests: Bob and Rosa, the four of cabin 4 and the three golden girls. We're going together for the first part, after a while the "over 60" are going back to camp, leaving me and the "under 35" to complete the 3-hour route.

We're about to leave when I hear Sandy's ringing voice behind me.

"Are we still on time?"

The cheerful squeals I hear from all the other guests just confirm the idea I had about her, everyone loves her.

Alex doesn't seem too thrilled about the hike. Truth to be told, I've never seen her doing something even remotely physical. Except, of course, for the sex.

"Ok, come on, let's go! It's getting late!" I interrupt the talks to get everyone in line, and I start to follow Ralph that already knows where we're going.

Everything seems to go smoothly. I'm heading the group and Alex and Sandy are in the bottom. Everyone seems to have a good time. The scenery is breathtaking, the dark greens and browns of the woods leave way to the light greens and yellows of the large meadows that, like the parting of the Red Sea, split the woods in slices. High trees and low grass, small rivers to cross and hidden waterfall covered in moss.

When it's time for the group to split, unexpectedly Sandy decides to go back to the camp with them.

"I had a motorcycle accident last month, so my ankle is still a little sore" I wonder if it was Alex's motorcycle. We used to have fun with that when we were in the States. It's not like the t-shirt, but, right now, all irritates me.

As I give the 'seniors' my last recommendations, I regroup with Al, Jason, Katie and Lauren aka the four of cabin 4 because we still have got a long way ahead of us and we better get going. And, frankly, I'm glad not to have Alex and Sandy on my back.

As I turn around to say my goodbyes, I see Sandy taking Alex's face between her hands and lightly kissing her on the lips. Just my luck. It's a sweet gesture, but I feel highly uncomfortable. Alex glances in my direction, but I don't want her to look at me and I don't want to spend the next hours analyzing what I saw in her eyes. So, I'm fast, I turn around and I head towards the trail with Lauren.

As Jason joins me and Lauren in our conversation about the new sushi restaurant in Brooklyn where the walls are tanks with live sharks on them, I am shocked to turn around and see Alex talking with Katie and Al a few feet behind us. I wasn't expecting that. I thought she would follow Sandy back to camp, I thought she wanted to avoid me. But I keep on walking.
Everything else goes exactly as planned. Except it doesn't. I just want to go back to camp. I'm tired of feeling clueless. We reach the highest point of the trail and we see the lake from above, we breathe fresh air and the conversations are funny and pleasant.

We do not speak directly to each other, but it's pretty comfortable, even laughing at the same jokes or being outraged when Al says that Adele is an overrated singer and she agrees with him. Everyone is covering them with insults and it's the beginning of a long, but funny discussion about music and talent.

"She's got some serious pipes! And if I'm telling you this, than it's true...You have to admit it" Everyone laughs at my joke.

"Well, you don't need just serious pipes to be good...what about Anthony Kiedis?" It's Alex who's talking to me. It's a first. She knows I like Red Hot Chili Peppers.

"Well, I can give you that, but he's an exception to the rule because he's got charisma...what about Freddie Mercury?"

"Well, he's an exception to my rule..." It's a harmless banter, but it feels like I've just won the third world war.

"Ok girls, let's just say that we have reached an impasse...what about we call it even and we go back to love each other?"

"In your dreams Al, this was too much for me, I will never look at you in the same way again...it's over" I reply. In response to this playful banter, Al is hugging me, dramatically asking for my forgiveness. Everyone is giggling.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry, Piper please forgive me...Adele is amazing, I will get a tattoo with her face on my left butt cheek...I swear" I know Al, he's covered in tattoos, he's really capable of doing it. He's amazing.

"You know I will always love you, Al!" I say between laughers to release him from is fake misery.

When I see Alex suddenly comes at a halt I realize what I've just said. Thanks god she's ahead of me, so I only see her back. Another burst of heat starts from inside my chest. This is not healthy.

The rest of the hike is more quiet, also because we are struggling as the route is impervious.

We are two minutes away from the camp, when Alex approaches me.

"She set me up" She says like we talk like this every day.

"Sorry?"

"Sandy. She set me up. She wanted me to make amends with you, so she arranged for me to be close to you, even though I hate to hike."

"Ah, smart girl" I don't want to think about the fact that Alex feels the need to explain to me why she's playing nice.

"Yep, she is. So... thanks for last night..."

"Oh, you're welcome, you have no idea how many times it happened before..." It's a lie. It's never happened before, not like this. My ex-girlfriend had never knocked on my door at 2 am to insult me
and to take off her pants. But yeah, we're having a peaceful conversation so I don't want to spoil it.

"So you've taken off also Bob's pants?"

"Ahahaha. He's the best…you should see what kind of monster he has between his skinny legs"

"Yuuuuck Pipes, that's something that will hunt my dreams for decades" Pipes. She's laughing and she has just called me Pipes. I just can't.

We are already at the camp, I didn't realize we were walking that fast. The four of cabin 4 are already heading to the cabin to take a shower. I see Sandy sat in the benches, talking with someone. She's looking at us and it occurs to me that probably Alex did all of this just for her sake. So Sandy could see us friendly together. I feel used.

But it doesn't look like Alex has seen her girlfriend because, as I stop and say "Martha", she just turns in my direction and answer with a "Yeah?".

But I have no time to explain to her that she got it all ironically wrong, because the person who's speaking with Sandy is on her feet and on my lips in a few seconds.

It's the sweetest of the kisses, just a peck on the lips. And I melt in it. After the hell I went through, finally my Martha's here.

"It's so good to see you, baby" she says as she's hugging me.

I'm at loss for words. I just hug her back and I make the mistake of looking in Alex's direction.

She's looking at us, and she seems…strange.

Now you know how I felt.
I melt into her embrace. She's a little shorter than me, so when I bend my head, my face is in her hair and I can smell her. She smells of home and safety. I hold her maybe just a little bit closer than usual.

"Hey, what's up baby?" she asks me taking my face in her hands. My arms are still around her and have no intention of removing them soon. I needed her and now she's here. Even though I know I can't tell her about Alex, I don't need anything or anyone else.

"Nothing, I'm just happy to see you. Can I be happy to see you? I'm always happy to see you" That's the truth. I deliver the line trying to sound humorous, I'm well aware of where we are and who's looking at us.

"Yes, I know, but you seem…happier…not that I mind it though" her smile could make people blind.

"Oh, fuck off" I laugh as I roll my eyes and I leave her arms. Enough PDA.

"Now, that's my Piper" she playfully slaps my butt as we turn around with a smile to acknowledge the other couple who has probably witnessed our exchange.

We are welcomed by an equally radiant smile and a not so radiant one. Actually, Alex is not even looking at us. Ralph must be very interesting.

When she looks at us, her face is wearing a mask of indifference, but I know exactly how she's feeling.

That's not true. I don't know what she's feeling, but I know that indifference is certainly not what's in her heart right now.

"So, you are the famous other Martha…" my Martha says.

"Or the other way around" replies Alex with a very fake smile raising on her feet to shake Martha's hand.

"Sandy told me you work in international trades. Import/export?" What? In all of this mess I realize that I've never thought about her 'real' and honest life. International trades?

"Well, basically only imports. Exotic furniture, art, whatever you want"

"Whatever? Really? Because I might just need something a little …unattainable" Martha is joking, but my blood is a few degrees colder.

"Well, not everything! Let's just say that I've watched enough Tv shows about border security to know what I can do or what could lead me directly in jail! You've got the wrong girl"

I know my Martha, I can see from the grin on her face that she likes her. She always likes people who answer fast and with wit. But I don't know if I like it. Truth to be told, I didn't expect it to be so strange. Maybe now I can understand a little more why Alex was so pissed for my harmless conversation with Sandy in the lake. I can't stand the thought of Alex being friendly with Martha. It can't be honest, I know her. And Martha is too special to be fooled. And she's mine. I feel possessive.
"Well, than you are of no use for me. Except for the fact that I own an art gallery and you're talking about art, so, Martha, what kind of art do you import?" Oh no. Not this. Please not this.

"That's more my area of expertise! I mostly deal in Southeast Asia, so anything from Japanese miniatures to Indonesian batiks. My contractors are usually interior designers, so nothing too big. But, as of yesterday, a cargo has arrived with a Vietnamese Dong Son drum, so…"

"What? You've got to be kidding me. A Dong Son drum? Original? It's impossible… and that's illegal too!"

"Not if you have an unlimited budget, you know the right people and the right way to gently pass through the bureaucracy without really breaking the law…" Oh, Alex. Some things will never change. The way her eyes are literally sparkling with passion and the tone in her voice, just reminds me of the girl I used to know. I can see the adrenaline rushing in her veins. Why couldn't she work for an international art cartel back then too? Our life would have been so much easier, and maybe…

"Amazing. And what can you tell me about Tibet?" I know my Martha too, and she's in her element, she looks like she's just found a gold mine.

"What about Tibet?" Fake Martha now sports a not so fake smile.

"We have a collaboration with the Met, and we host part of an exhibition on Tibetan Buddhist art in October. I need to score some serious shit, if you know what I mean…do you know what I mean?". She is doing her tough girl impression. She's adorable. Alex is definitely amused by her. I can see a change in her approach.

"Carved wood, bronze statues, thangka, what's your poison? I may know a guy…"

"I love you. Really…let me call off the wedding with Piper"

At the word 'wedding', or 'Piper', Alex's smiles fades a little. But no one notices it, because they are all laughing their ass off. Except for me, I notice, even if I'm jokingly slapping my fiancé on her arm and pretending to be offended.

"Over my dead body!" exclaims Sandy putting her arm around Alex. Here we are, two couples of new friends who are getting to know each other and enjoying each other's company. Except it's not. This is strange and wrong, I can see it now, Alex was right. But not because of our past, simply because I don't want to lie to Martha, or to Sandy, or to anyone. But there's no way out of this.

"I'll make you an offer you can't refuse. You give me your girlfriend, I give you Piper and of course some cash to compensate."

"Hey! I'm here, bitch!" I say with a big smile.

"Yes, sorry babe! But she actually knows what a Dong Son drum is…and, most importantly, she knows how to get one!" She emphasizes the last words and then she turns to the other couple to continue her loving rambling against me…I think I know where this is going.

"You know, Piper actually travelled to Indonesia and Malaysia, in fact she lived there for 4 whole months. I tried to ask her about the trip, the temples, the traditions, but nothing! All she could recall was the fact that the monkeys were not so cool and that the locals are better people than we are…"

"That's so not true!" Even though it's not an insult and even though it's an inside joke we usually laugh about, I feel a little hurt and anxious. It has never happened with Alex in front of me, so I'm feeling nervous and eager to change the subject.
But life has a strange sense of humour, and of course Sandy wants to continue this conversation.

"So, what did you do there for 4 months Piper?" Oh God.

"Ahm, it's a really long long story…we travelled a lot, even though we stayed mostly in Bali. I was young…" Level of uneasiness from 0 to 10. 11.

"We?" Fuck.

"She went there with her ex-girlfriend. THE ex-girlfriend" Thanks Martha.

"Oh woah, this is getting interesting.." No, it's not.

"No, it's not. She was working a lot there and, as I said, I was really young and naïve…"

"Well, good job then! You don't know how much I've tried to convince this one to bring me to Bali with her, but it's like talking to a wall. And did you have fun there even though she was working?"

I don't know what to say. I don't want to look in Alex's direction, I feel like everything I'm going to say, it's going to be wrong. So I settle for the truth.

"Yes I did"

"See Martha? Bali can be fun even without your constant presence by my side"

Now I look at her. She's trying to smile away the awkwardness, same as me. I need to get the hell out of here. We need to get the hell out of here. So I say the first thing that comes to mind, trying to be as natural as possible, even if I feel like anything I say can and will be used against me in a court of law, or something like that.

"Well, talking about Bali, after the hike, I smell like one of those stray dogs roaming the streets there, so I really need to take a shower."

"Oh, you're so romantic my love" jokes my Martha.

"I have to agree with Piper, I need a shower too!" Good, Alex gets the hint. But she keeps on talking…"Even though I have to say that some Balinese stray dogs smell like heaven"

"Incense" I blurt out in a whisper before I can stop myself.

"Yep, Incense" replies Alex with a sad smile. And she's looking at me.

I know I'm not supposed to read too much into this. I know she's probably just forcing herself to talk to me otherwise it would be suspicious, but she could have stopped before. She could have left Incense out of it. Incense, the stray puppy we adopted. Well, I adopted her, to keep me company while Alex was away. She lasted only 5 glorious days with us, but I made sure that Alex wouldn't complain for her smell, so I washed her daily with my human shampoo. As I said, I was young and naïve, so instead of taking the scooter to see the Goa Gajah near Ubud, I stayed at home trying to clean a dog, probably causing her a dermatitis, and risking catching the rabies myself.

Alex was referring to this, I'm sure. I feel like she's giving me an olive branch for a war I've never started, and it feels so fucking good that I'm feeling guilty.

"Come on girls! What about incense?" Sandy must have noticed something. I use my right to remain silent. It Alex's mess, she needs to clean it.
"Oh, nothing San, just the fact that they use incense for everything and everywhere, sometimes just to cover the smell of garbage bins, or dogs, or people. Bali smells like incense even in a dumpster"

"Charming…"

"See? That's why I am not bringing you there, I'm doing it for you own good…"

"Oh, Martha the humanitarian. Thank you very much, but you didn't convince me. Not even a bit, this winter I'm coming with you"

"We'll see…"

Sandy's arm is still around Alex and Martha has her arm around me. If this is not fucking awkward, I don't know what it is.

Thank god, after a few "bye" and "see you later" me and Martha are on our way to the cabin. We walk in comfortable silence, or at least I think we are…

"Now, can you finally tell me what's wrong?" I was wrong.

"What?"

"Come on Piper, don't play games with me, I know you. Something's off, so what is it?"

I want to tell her the truth so much it hurts. I want to tell her everything and I want to cry in her arms while she massages my hair, but I can't. And not just because Alex is in witness protection, but because I love her too much to let her see me like this. I want to spare her the disappointment of seeing her fiancé still crying over a past that is dead and buried.

Five years ago I swore that I would live my life in the most honest and truthful way possible because, thanks to Alex, I saw the consequences of my actions. Now, always thanks to Alex, I'm a liar. I lied to her when I told her last night that I was going to tell the truth to my fiancé, if she asked. I lied to Sandy, I lied to my guests by pretending I didn't know the red head, now I'm going to lie to Martha and I'm lying to myself. I'm a coward. If I have to be fucking honest, I am ashamed. Ashamed of being affected by Alex's presence, ashamed of feeling happy when she talks to me even though I know it's just for show and even though she's treating me like shit most of the time.

I don't want my Martha, the woman I will spend the rest of my life with, to see this. In 8 days it will be over, but in the meantime, I have to lie.

"Nothing, really, I'm just tired, you know…"

"Honey, come on, you know I don't buy this shit…what happened last night?"

I froze at the spot. We are in the cabin and I'm looking for clean socks in the cabinet drawer. Thanks god I'm not looking at her. How could she possibly know? I'm starting to panic.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"You didn't call me, Pip! You always do"

I think I've lost 10 pounds in one second just for the relief. But she's onto me, I need to give her something.

"Oh, well, it's a stupid thing. You know, last night it was poker night and we were playing. I was winning, but I was so tired that I tried to lose on purpose. And Martha, Sandy's girlfriend, she kind of
verbally assaulted me, but we…”

"What?"

The more I talk, the more confident I feel, so now I can turn around to face her.

"She did what?" Martha is incredulous, her mouth is open and she's looking at me like a deer in headlights.

"Well, it was not really an assault, but she said loudly that she knew I had a good hand and that I shouldn't try to lose on purpose to let her win. And then she stormed off"

"No. Way. You're telling me that the same girl I was talking to five minutes ago, that lovely girl went crazy on you? Because of poker? That girl?" She's on the verge of a big laugh and I can't help but start to raise the corners of my mouth.

"Yep! The same girl you've just proposed to" This is the last straw for her, she starts laughing so hard that it's impossible for me not to follow her. And I feel some of the tension dissipating.

"No, no, no, please tell me that you're joking! How's that possible? Is she crazy? Do we hate her?" She manages to blurt out some words between the laughers.

"No, she's ok, I guess. She came by to apologize later. She said she had a bad day…” In a way I feel guilty even just joking about her.

"I still cannot fucking believe it. In front of everyone? What did the others say?"

"They were just as shocked as me. Sandy included…” I'm on my underwear and I'm about to go to the bathroom. I really hope that this conversation is over.

"So that's why you two were looking at each other in that way…”

"In what way?"

"I don't know, it was kind of intense, now I know it was just awkward!" And she starts to laugh again. But I'm definitely not laughing with her this time, instead I go to the bathroom and I turn on the water. The door is still open.

"Do you want me to join you? I can help you relax after last night's assault"

I know that she means good and I've never turned down an offer that included sex and showers in the same sentence, but right now I just need some time alone.

"No, thanks honey! I'm too smelly and I need to make it quick. I've got some paperwork to finish before dinner" I always talk too much when I lie.

"Sure, then I'm heading to the kitchen to catch up with the others…see you there?"

"Yes! Bye"

When I hear the door close, I can finally let myself go. I don't even know why I'm crying, but, under the shower, the tears are mixing with the water, so I don't know how much I'm crying, and I prefer it this way.

I step out of the shower and I begin to dry with a towel, I hear the door open and close again.
"Babe, why are you back?" I ask from the bathroom.

"It's me" The deep low voice I can't forget.

I grab the biggest towel we have, I wrap it around me as fast as I can, I don't want to give my head time to think about what the hell is she doing here again if she doesn't want to talk to me.

When I open the bathroom door I find her in the same spot she was last night. Déjà vu.

"What are you doing here? Where's Sandy?" I don't know why I ask her this, of all thing.

"She's taking a shower."

I wait for her to say something.

"I saw Martha in the kitchen, so I guessed you were here alone"

Both my hair and my heart are dripping on the floor.

"Yes, I'm here. What do you want now? Did I say something wrong again?" I sound practical, but I'm freaking out.

"No. I wanted to finish the conversation we were having on the hike". The conversation?

"What conversation?" I'm really confused.

"The one about Sandy setting me up to make amends with you"

"What else is there to say?"

She doesn't answer and I'm losing my patience.

"It's just…" She starts, but then she stops. Without even realize it, I take a few step in her direction. Now I'm standing directly in front of her.

"Make it quick, I don't want Martha to walk on us"

"We're not doing anything wrong here. I can say that I came to you because I needed the antibacterial" She had this excuse ready. It means that she was planning on coming here. But it's the "anything wrong" part that hits me. What does she mean by that? Us killing each other? Or… I can't go there. It will never happen so I don't need to worry about it. But I suddenly feel very aware of my nakedness under the towel and of the fact that her eyes sometimes leave my face to go south for a quick glance. Has she thought about it?

"So, are you going to tell me something or do I have to guess?"

"It's …difficult… we didn't start on the right foot" Understatement of the year.

"Really? And whose fault was that?" She sighs and she covers her eyes with her hands for a second.

"Piper, listen. I know I've been an ass. And…I'm sorry about it… but I don't want to…" I interrupt her, I don't want to hear those words again.

"You don't want to talk to me, you don't want to talk about our past, you don't even want to hear what I have to say about it. I know. You've been very clear about it. You don't need to say it again. Is this what you wanted to tell me?"
"Yes…no…I don't know". No?

"No?"

"No, I mean… I still … I don't know how to explain it…"

"Alex…" I don't want to, but I swear that my hand moves on her own and goes to her forearm. She doesn't withdraw her arm.

"Fuck, sorry…I meant Martha…" I'm flustered. I expect her to hit me, so I take my hand off of her like her arm is a burning log. She's looking straight at me with her green piercing eyes. And what she does next takes me totally off guard.

She starts to laugh.

It's not acid or sarcastic. It's a genuine laugh. And, thinking about it, the situation is pretty fucked up and absurd. I've already cried and yelled, this was missing from the emotional rollercoaster ride we are having, so I join her. Because there's nothing left to do and because I recognize this sound. This is the laugh of the person I loved and trusted the most. We are two completely fucked up human beings.

"I was just looking at your face…did I scare you that much?" The smile is still lingering in her voice.

"Well, the last time I called you Alex you almost jumped at my throat, so forgive me if I'm a little on edge" I keep the playful tone.

"Well, sorry about that too"

Now it's us again, the atmosphere is totally changed and I see an opening, so I go for it.

"So, what did you want to tell me?" I ask her. She takes a deep breath.

"Well, I don't think we can really avoid each other… I was wrong…" That's a big statement coming from her.

"Yeah, but you were also right… we can't…we shouldn't…talk too much. At least in public…When we were talking about Bali…it was…"

"Awkward as fuck!" Another small laugh explodes from Alex.

"Oh yes…and nerve-wracking … I didn't know what to say, or what did Sandy know about our… your past trips to Bali…If she knew you went there with a…girlfriend…"

"She doesn't know about anything". She means that she hasn't told her about me, about the prison, about what?

"Anything?"

"Yes. Anything Alex related. She doesn't ask me questions about my past. She doesn't know about Litchfield, or about Chicago. Or about my previous…job." I can't believe this person in front of me is Alex.

"So, your life is a lie?"

"God Piper, I'm trying to have a civil conversation here, why do you always have to…"
"I have to what? I'm calling it as I see it…"

"You get…personal…judgemental"

"Yeah, like that time you brought Incense up …was it necessary? Was it not personal?"

"I just didn't….you still get on my nerves" I don't know why I feel so happy hearing that.

"I get on your nerves?"

"Yes. I…you…my reactions are… instinctive around you" I don't understand her, but then it dawns on me.

"Because you still hasn't forgive me?" It's a rhetorical question. I already read the answer in her eyes. She pauses for a second before answering. She's weighting every single word. I don't know if she's aware of the power she has in her hands right now.

"This is exactly the reason why I'm not going to talk about this stuff with you. At least not now" My heart jumps at her last words. At least not now. It doesn't mean never.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"What does Martha know about our past?" Oh. A direct punch in the gut.

"Everything"

"So why you're not telling her about me?" Another one.

"Who's getting personal now?" I feel like a cornered animal.

"It's none of my business anyway. I just wanted to know what I could or couldn't tell…"

"Well, I didn't tell her about Incense, but if you bring up something like that she might be getting suspicious" I feel highly uncomfortable talking about the better way to lie to my fiancé. With Alex.

"Got it"

I want this conversation to be over.

"So… how do you think we should handle all this mess?" I say with a smile. She has a smile on her face too.

"I think we can start by talking about just the present…"

"The present?"

"Yes. About Martha, not Alex. And being normal and careful in front of our…" She doesn't end the sentence.

"I got it. That's all?"

"I guess so"

"Good"

She goes to the door and she opens it. Before going outside she turns her head to look at me.
"I mean what I said before, about being not ready. For now. But I think we can manage to be a little… friendly?" And with that she is gone and the door is closed behind her.

I throw myself into the bed, facing upwards. A tornado of emotions is whirling inside of me, my palms are covering my face. I can feel my lips, I know that I'm smiling.

Friendly?

*We were never friends.*
Chapter 9

Yes, I'm avoiding her.

I'm sitting here, the check-in papers are spread all over the desk, but the only piece of paper I want is in front of me. It has been in front of me for the last 10 minutes.

I finished all the paperwork very quickly, I could be in the pic-nic area with my fiancé and my guests, if only I wanted.

But I prefer to stay here, with a crumpled photocopy of an ID, observing the black and white face of Alex Vause, who seems to be looking back straight at me. It could easily be a mugshot. And, of course, she looks stunning.

The black and white gives the impression that her hair are still black, and this is so strange that I need to touch her face in the paper with my fingertips.

Martha Reed
Baltimore, MD
Birth date: 06-28-1980

Her fake birthday is this Sunday. Her 40th fake birthday of her fake life. I wonder how she does it. Is she happy? Did she get to choose the day? What does she do on the 12th of November, the day she was actually born? I wonder if she still goes to some café to eat pancakes with chocolate milk, her tradition. I remember how important it was for her to keep the routine she started with Diane so long ago.

There was nothing in the world that could keep her from going home to Diane the day of her birthday and eat the pancakes with her mom. When we were together, she spent that day with me just once, and just because we were on the other side of the world.

Diane lived in a nice little house, thanks to Alex, and she was worried about her. She was a very smart and practical woman, I think she was aware of the real nature of Alex's job, but she never once complained about it. She knew what it meant to work her ass off to guarantee a future to her little girl, so if said little girl, now big girl, was earning a lot of money doing something morally ambiguous, well, she could overlook it.

I was in a beach in Cambodia when I got 'the' call from Diane. We were basically stranger, I was just the girl who was with her daughter in her adventure around the world and with whom she talked once during a skype call. So, when I saw the unknown ID caller, I panicked. I started to paint horrible scenarios in my head about my family, or Polly…

"Hello?" my voice was shaking.

"Piper, is that you?"

"Ye-yes who's speaking?"

"Hi honey, it's me, Diane, Alex's mom." I relaxed, but just for a second, because then I realized that there was only one reason why Diane would call me… Alex. And that was even worse than what I had pictured before.

"I…Wh-what happened? Where's Alex?" I started to look around me nervously, even if I knew Alex
wasn't there, she had a meeting out of town…

She must have heard the panic in my voice.

"Oh kid…no, don't worry, I just called to talk to you about Alex's birthday. She's fine, she called me a couple of hours ago"

I didn't even know about her birthday, I didn't even know that she had one. For all I know she was this alien drug goddess from outer space.

"Oh, sorry…I just…" I stopped, because I didn't know what I could tell her, I didn't even know how she got my number. Thank god she let it drop.

"Listen kid, everything is fine, just breathe. I just need you to do something for me".

And that was the beginning of my real relationship with that wonderful woman. She wanted me to find a place to buy some pancakes and a chocolate milk for her daughter, whose birthday was the day after. Naturally, there wasn't anything remotely similar to a Café in that fishing village in Cambodia, so I spent the day going around from home to home, looking for all the ingredients. I also spent a fortune in phone calls to Diane, asking her if goat milk was just as good as cow milk, or if she knew how to melt palm sugar in order to make it looks like maple syrup.

I'm not a cook, let's just say that I know the basic rules for not starving. So, what I did, was essentially a dark brown mess, but I did it with my heart, that was the important thing, or at least that was what Diane told me when I called her to announce that the birthday breakfast was kind of ready.

I hid everything into the fridge and I waited for Alex's return. It was already dark outside, and even if I knew that she could be late, I still got the sensation that something was off. For the first time since we've known each other, I was worried about her. I felt the danger, I felt the implication of the loss, I felt the love.

So I sat on the porch under the starry sky, with a beer, listening to every motorcycle sound I heard on the road, hoping that it would stop right in front of our residence. Trying to call her every 15 minutes just to find the phone always disconnected.

She arrived a few minutes after midnight, dead tired and sweaty as hell. She was a little surprised to find me on the porch, and also a little surprised by the deep kiss I gave her the second she took off the helmet.

"Wait a second kid, what happened?" she asked with a smile between the kisses. But I didn't want to ruin the moment by bringing emotions like concern and fear into our blissful life.

So I just kept on kissing her and I started to push up her shirt, my intentions clear. I wanted it off. She pushed me away a little bit, always keeping her hands on my arm.

"Pipes, wait, what's up?" Concern in her eyes.

"I just missed you" true "nothing else" false. And I started to kiss her again, with an intensity that I've never felt before, fueled by the danger and the fear of losing her.

"I missed you too, but I need a shower, Pipes." kiss. "Maybe we can bring this inside?" another kiss and a grin on her face.

"No."
"No?" Confusion.

"No." I repeated calmly as I pushed her back until she hit the rocking chair in which I waited for her all night.

"Pipes, what are you doing?" It was a rhetorical question because I had already taken off my dress.

"Sit."

"Pipes…" Her voice was the voice of lust and desire, so low and so deep that it could cause an earthquake.

She was already sitting on the big chair when I straddled her in my underwear and my lips reclaimed hers again.

"Kid, they could see us here..."

"So we need to be quiet...see? I do remember what you suggested the other day" I whispered in her ear while my hand went directly into her pants and inside her panties.

"Oh God" were her last words before my free hand covered her mouth, while the other kept doing her job and my mouth was free to lick and kiss and bite every inch of skin on her neck.

She came hard on my hand, I let her ride the waves of pleasure for a while before freeing my hand and get up from her lap.

"Wait, Pipes...where are you..."

"Shut up and don't move"

I went to the kitchen to take the indirect gift from her mother, but it was easier said than done. The goat milk didn't mix at all with the cocoa powder, the pancakes looked more like an omelet and I didn't have a candle, so I used an incense stick. But I will never forget the look on her face when she recognized the implication of what I'd just brought her.

I resumed my position on her lap.

"How...?" she said almost speechless.

"She called me... Happy birthday Al"

That was the first time I saw Alex Vause cry.

"I'm sorry, I'm a shitty cook..."

She looked at me in an adoring way, so innocent and intense, full of joy and love...

"It's beautiful...I love you".

"I love you too".

I resumed my position on her lap.

"How...?" she said almost speechless.

"She called me... Happy birthday Al"

That was the first time I saw Alex Vause cry.

"I'm sorry, I'm a shitty cook..."

She looked at me in an adoring way, so innocent and intense, full of joy and love...

"It's beautiful...I love you".

I resumed my position on her lap.

"I love you too".

"Piper, come on, dinner's ready!" Martha's voice from outside wakes me up from my daydream.

With a last look at the black and white picture, I close the paperwork folder and I go outside.

"Coming!" I yell at Martha who's already sitting at the table.
I sit at my usual spot, Martha's on my right and Donny's on my left. Alex and Sandy are helping to bring the food at the table. Today the four of cabin 4 have cooked spaghetti alla carbonara, and, after the hike, I'm starving so I can't wait to eat something rich and good.

When everyone takes their seat, I find myself smiling at Sandy, who's sitting in front of me and at Alex, who's in front of my Martha. The two Marthas of my life. The present and the past.

I feel like I'm making progress, because I do not flinch when I see her anymore.

The dinner is going definitely well, we talk, we laugh, we eat, all 19 of us. I do not talk directly to Alex, but it's not awkward. She spends most of the time talking about Tibetan art with my Martha, so much that Sandy is forced to stop her with a reproach in the form of a theatrical kiss in front everyone. This is met with whistles, claps and cheers. Alex is blushing and, when Martha turns towards me with a big smile, I thank god for my quick reflexes as I lift the corners of my mouth as much as I can in the most unnatural smile ever.

"She hates it when I do this!" Sandy is smiling, talking to the people around her, including me.

"Yet you always do what you want…" Alex replies with a smile.

"Oh, that is so not true!"

"Name one thing that I asked you not to do, and you actually listen to me…come on!" The Alex Vause inquisitive look…

"Well, I wanted to go to Bali…"

"Everything but Bali! You said before that you're going to come with me in winter no matter what, so…"

"Oh let's see…” Sandy is clearly trying very hard to think about something, almost everyone is looking at her, she really knows how to draw the attention to her. I am drawn to her too. And I'm very curious.

"See? I won" Alex says as a matter of fact.

"Wait a second!" Her eyes are sparkling, like a spider that has just seen a fly going directly into her web "What about that rag you didn't want me to throw away?"

"A rag? What rag?" Alex is confused, but after a couple of seconds her face totally changes and she's clearly taken aback "Oh, that…Well…” Her face changes again into a big smile as she looks into Sandy's eyes "Honey, it hurts me like hell to admit it, but you won!" she waves her hands as to dismiss the bet and surrender.

"What rag? Now I want to know!" exclaims Al from the other side of the table.

"Yes! We all want to know, come on Martha! What rag?" says my Martha together with almost everyone.

"Come on!"

Alex is smiling, but I can see that she's nervous. "It's nothing guys, just an old piece of cloth…"

"A 'ripped' old piece of cloth, you mean…” Sandy cuts in.

"Come on you guys! Sandy, just tell us…” says Donny on my left.
I watch closely as Sandy looks at Alex and silently asks for the permission. Sandy knows how to tell a story and be in the center of the attention, but she also knows that in order to do that, she needs to have her girlfriend’s permit. That's very sweet and respectful.

Alex just smiles and nods her head, she looks resigned, like a wild animal on a cage.

Sandy is starting to speak when Alex's eyes meet mine. Everyone is looking at Sandy, but I forgot to turn around like everyone else, so I kept my eyes automatically on her. She didn't look at me for the entire dinner, but now she can't seem to look away.

I was wrong yesterday, I can't read her eyes anymore. Her expression is blank, and as I'm wondering how long I can keep looking at her before my fiancé realizes it, I hear some of Sandy's words with the back of my mind…

"…old smelly rock band t-shirt with a hole on the side" *Oh fuck.* That's why. I turn my head so quickly that I almost break my neck. Everyone is laughing, so probably she's just said something funny.

"So, of course, being a good girlfriend, instead of throwing everything directly into the incinerator, I washed that disgusting thing, I took my mom's sewing machine and I fixed the hole…"

She keeps going "So, when she came home after work, I greeted her wearing that t-shirt, cleaned and fixed. You think that she must have been happy about it, right?" Everyone nods and cheers in agreement.

"…well, you are all wrong! Godzilla is Bambi compared to Martha that night!"

"Oh come on! I wasn't that bad…” says Alex pushing playfully Sandy on the arm.

"Not that bad? We almost broke up that day!" I don't know what to feel.

"So, how did it end?" says someone on my right.

Sandy turns her upper body in Alex's direction and put her hand lovingly on her girlfriend's cheek.

"Well, when she told me the story behind it, I just told her how sorry I was, we made peace and I also helped her with the task of unstitch again the side…"

Alex is smiling at her without doing or saying anything. Everyone on the table is "aaawwwwing" or "oooooohhing" at the sweet exchange.

I'm crushing the fork so hard that I think the metal will soon melt. What did she tell her? I highly doubt she told her the truth. But she kept it. She kept the t-shirt. And the hole. She erased her tattoos, her hair, her life, but not the t-shirt. That has to mean something, right?

"Oh, stop it! It's nothing…” Alex is clearly embarrassed with all the attention their story is having.

"Oh Martha dear! There's nothing to be ashamed about, we all have "that thing" that we keep…” says Rosa, Alex's new bff.

"It's like a security blanket! I have one too" intervenes Lauren, the fashion blogger.

"But in your case it's not a blanket, it's a vibrator!"

"AL! Shut up! There are kids here!"
But probably the kids can't hear a thing between all the laughs and the noise caused by Al's funny joke.

After this moment everything goes back to normal, except for me and my stomach. It's like a whale is lying on my chest, looking at me with my same WhatTheHellAmIDoingHere stare. I don't have a fucking clue, whale. Sorry.

"Honey, you ok?" says a worried Martha when I fail to answer something someone asked me.

"Yeah…actually, no. Not so much…my stomach is killing me…I think I'm going to start cleaning the dishes"

"You sure? Do you want me to come with you?"

"No love, thanks…you stay here…" I touch her shoulder with my forehead and I excuse myself from the table. Without even glancing in her direction.

With my hands into the warm water and the background buzz of happy people talking, I can finally begin to think about the last two days. It seems like a lifetime ago. I went from happy, to angry, to confused, to hopeful, to confused again. Now I'm lost. Something is not working in the connection between my brain and my heart. And I think I can give a name to the emotion that is messing up all my perceptions: guilt.

The gap between what I know I am allowed to feel and what I am actually feeling is too big. Is too big for me to function.

I am full inside my head, when someone enters the kitchen with a pile of dirty dishes. I don't hear the footsteps, I don't hear the sound of the dishes when she places them beside the sink, next to me.

All I hear is the sound of the blood rushing through my veins when she gently places her hand on my shoulder blade. I recognize her smell even if my eyes are still fixed on the dishes in front of me.

"Listen…about before…" that fucking low voice, I'm not breathing.

"Hey girls! Who needs another pile of dirty dishes?" Linda yells when she comes into the kitchen.

Thank god that the pile is so high so she can't see what's happening in front of her. I jump so high that I splash half of the water on my jeans. Alex retreats her hand from my shoulder so fast that her elbow smashes directly against the edge of the counter.

Based on all the "fucks" that I hear, I deduce that it must have been a hell of a thump.

"What a mess!" exclaims Linda as soon as she lays the dishes on the counter. "What did you girls do?"

"Nothing, just a little hiccup" I don't know from where my reply is coming, but I don't mind.

"Oh, come on, you're all wet Piper, go get changed, I will finish here".

I gladly take the opportunity to get out of this room. Thanks Linda.

"Thanks Linda…I'll be quick! I owe you one!"

As I'm heading towards the door, I look at Alex, who is still bent, holding her elbow in pain. She looks at me with a puzzled look, but I just smile and go.
I hear behind me Linda's voice: "And what happened to you honey?", but I'm already gone.

I take my sweet time to get changed, but not too much because I don't want Linda to clean instead of me. But, on the other hand, here in my cabin I'm free from Alex, her voice and her fucking friendly hand.

I don't want to think about it know. The more I think about Alex, the more I feel the need to be with my Martha. The more I am with my Martha, the more I feel guilty. Maybe I just should tell her and get it over.

When I return to the central area, everything is already cleaned and the guests are arranging the place for the 'after dinner activity' of today, karaoke.

Martha, my Martha is helping Sandy with the chairs, no Alex on the horizon, so I join them in their task.

After 10 minutes everything is ready. Al and Jason have just finished to connect the cables for the screen, the carafes of wine are filled and on the table and Danny has taken out his guitar. I go to the central cabin to turn on the speakers and when I go back, almost everyone is seated and singing Yesterday. I sit on the vacant chair between Martha and Sandy pretending not to notice the other vacant chair on Sandy's left side. Where the hell is she?

We are already at the second red wine glass, when Alex shows up whispering something into Sandy's ear. The guests are already buzzing with happiness, Denny's choice of songs is perfect, alternating evergreen ballad to modern pop songs that everyone knows. Rosa and Bob are dancing on the little square in front of the screen and the children are almost asleep in their chair.

"Cheers!" says Alex in our direction. We toast with her, but Martha is eyeing me perplexed. So I try to join the party and sing along even though I'm not the greatest singer in the world and, mostly, I'm not in the mood.

During that famous Oasis song that everyone knows, Alex puts her hand on Sandy's thigh. That fucking hand.

Martha is slightly drunk, she's singing like her life depends on it and she hugs me in the middle of the refrain.

"Because maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me..." But she's not drunk enough, because she notices that something is wrong with me.

"Pip, what's up? Still not feeling very well?" her hand is on my cheek and it doesn't burn like Alex's, her hand is just the right amount of warm.

"Yes, sorry…I think I'm calling it a night"

"Do you want me to come with you?" I really want to say no, she's having a good time, but…

"Yes, please…" Because maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me.

It's 3 a.m. and I can't sleep. Even though my body is perfectly relaxed.

When we went back to the cabin, for the first time in the last 48 hours, I felt good. In our cabin, in our pajamas, with our dog sleeping soundly next to the bed and the sound of muffled music outside, I was in a state of bliss.
I started to touch and caress Martha's beautiful face, it was like I've never seen her before.

"Feeling better Pip?" Brown intense eyes burning holes into mine.

"I love you"

Then I started to kiss her, in all my favorite places…

"Love, what are you doing? What about your stomach?"

"This may be the medicine I need". She had no idea of all the real implications of what I'd just said.

It has been a while since we made love like that…with intensity, passion and desperation, at least on my side. The results had been magnificent, for both the body and the soul. But now I can't sleep and I think I know why. It's the lie, it's the secret that's burning inside of me.

I don't know why I am so scared about telling her the truth. It's stupid, she already knows everything, what could happen? She knows how to keep a secret. So why I still feel like I need to keep her from Alex?

Without even thinking about it, I walk to the kitchen to eat a fruit salad. It's a really hot night, maybe something fresh will help me sleep.

When I reach the kitchen, the light is still on. They probably were too drunk or too tired to turned it off.

I step inside and my heart skips a beat. What did I say in prison? Well, I was right, it's inevitable.

Her face doesn't reveal anything, but she smiles politely at me. She's eating milk and cereals, her secret potion to avoid hangovers. I go straight to the fridge and I take out an apple, a mango and a banana. I sit at the table across from her, two feet of hard wood between us, and I start to cut the fruits.

"Sandy told me you weren't feeling very good"

"Well, yes… I had some stomach ache"

"So you didn't left because of me?" Woah, straight to the point.

"Geez Alex, really? Coming from the woman who yesterday told me not to even look at her again…?"

"You still didn't answer my question" She stops to looks at me.

"No. I didn't left because of you" I really hope that she buys this colossal lie.

"Ok" She knows that it's in both our interests if she pretends to believe me.

"How's your elbow?"

"Better now, but I couldn't feel my hand for a few minutes" I smile. I think her hand deserved it.

I don't know what to say anymore.

"So…it's a nice place you have here" she says
"Thank you. So, now you like it, uh? I seem to recall that your opinion was a little different yesterday…” It's not supposed to be polemic, but playful. She laughs.

"Very funny, very very funny" She steals a piece of mango I've just cut.

It's incredible how normal this all feels.

"By the way, I think we're doing better, no murder attempt today…” I say, trying to keep up the playful banter, I don't know how much deep I can go. I'm testing the waters.

"Not yet, you mean…” We both laugh.

"I've got some medals ready for us for when we reach the 24 hours goal"

"24 hours without fighting? Maybe you're a little presumptuous Piper…”

"Maybe you're right, but a girl can dream…”

This I so surreal, are we really talking about it so lightly? Are we really talking?

I am hypnotized by the way she's eating her cereals, the way her lips part, spoon after spoon.

She takes a deep breath "Listen, Piper, about what happened tonight…”

"I thought you wanted to reach the 24 hours goal" I say a little too coldly. The atmosphere is back being heavy.

"It doesn't have to end up with a fight"

"Says who?"

"Come on Pipes, I've already apologized for that…”

It's true, she did. But, truth to be told, I don't want to ruin this thing we have going on by digging up something that I know will hurt me.

"You're right, sorry. It's that… sometimes it feels like I'm talking to a stranger…”

"Is the red hair so bad?" She answers with a small laugh as she shakes her head like she's in a shampoo commercial. I join her in her laugh.

"Nah, the hair is fine. Fucking strange, but fine… But you know what I meant…”

"Yes I do. But… we are now. Strangers, I mean…kind of"

I have to avert my eyes from her because I don't want her to see how much I'm hurting. But it's the truth, I know how much I've changed in this 5 years, so why is the thought that she is changed too so…painful? There's no easy way out of this for me. So I go straight for it.

"So, what did you tell her, about the shirt?" I don't feel like pronounce her name.

"I told her it was my mom's" It's like someone is shooting a flame thrower straight at my chest. I know the implications of what she has just told me, but I need more. I'm shallow, I know, but what she did, it still stings.

"You certainly worked hard to erase me from your life" My words and my chest. Fire and ice. I look
her in the eyes a little challenging, but she doesn't flinch. Is she going to deny it?

"I could have thrown it away" she pauses "And we she asks me to wear it, I don't know how…"

I'm *fucked.*

I've never thought that I would actually hear those words coming out of her. And her eyes…they're so… I don't know. I'm *fucked* and I want to cry, but she's here and we are talking, and she seems to wait for an answer…

"It's ok. I got it" I whisper. I don't know if it's ok or not, but in the meantime, let's just say it is.

"Good…” she whispers back even if we are the only breathing humans in the room.

"Have you finished? I think I'm going back to sleep…If you want to stay, just remember to turn off the lights when you go" I think this exchange between us was more than enough for tonight.

"I'm done too. I'm coming with you" I put our bowls into the sink while she turns off the lights. It's pitch black inside the room, my eyes are still not accustomed to the dark, but I know this place like the back of my hand, so I head in the direction of the door.

I crash into Alex when I'm almost there. It lasts no more than a second, before we both jump back and exchange a thousand "sorrys", but it's a full body contact. Legs, stomachs, breast, arms, skin, everything.

When I open the door and the light of the moon and the stars enlightens the room, my legs are shaking and something on my belly is slowly burning. Guilt. It's guilt.

"Yesterday it was the thorny bush, today the elbow and now this. If I keep hurting myself, I'm dead by the end of the holiday" I'm still not used to this Alex who makes jokes, but I must admit that it's a good way to ease the tension. Tension that I feel, I still don't know about her.

"Do I need to remind you that the closest hospital is 20 miles from here? And that I have no intention of having MY holiday ruined?"

"Ahahah got it!"

We are walking in a comfortable silence in the short path that will lead us to our cabins.

"I haven't see the fireflies in ages, I thought they were extinct or something like that"

"Yeah, I know, that's one of the things that I love the most about this place…this is the perfect period…"

Little stars are dancing around us. I see them reflected on her glasses.

"It's beautiful…” She looks exactly like she did that night of her birthday in Cambodia.

As we are in front of her cabin, she stops and bends down. I think she wanted to tie her shoe, but instead she picks up something from the ground.

"Here, take this" And she puts something in my hand.

"What is it?" It's an old, rusty and dirty beer cap.

"It's 4 a.m., we've just reached our goal…this is your medal" she says with a smile. As I said it
before, I am *fucked*.

I want to say something in return, something witty, funny, anything. But I can't seem to be able to form a thought.

"Goodnight Piper" She is already on the steps of her cabin.

"Goodnight Alex" She just smiles back at me as she goes inside.

I've still got the beer cap in my palm as I crash into bed, trying not to wake up Martha.

I've called her *Alex* more than once, she never corrected me.
Chapter 10

I wake up with the smell of coffee and a pair of lips on my forehead.

"Wake up sleepyhead, it's almost noon…" Martha's voice forces me to open my eyes. I feel like I've been run over by a truck a few times, and I definitely did not rest enough.

"Do I have to? Really?" I'm still not moving from my comfortable place.

"Come on honey! Look at what I got you…donuts!"

"Mmmm…donuts"

"And they are here, honey…out of your reach, you need to get up if you want to eat them…"

"Mmmm …five more minutes…"

"Oh, what do we have here? A maple glazed donut with lemon cream filling? Are you lonesome, donut? Do you want me to eat you even if you're Piper's favorite?" Whoa, I love maple glazed donuts with lemon cream filling. In two seconds, I'm up. My head is spinning a little bit, but I would do basically everything to dig my teeth into that delicious piece of paradise.

"Give me that" I say with no grace at all. With the first bite the cream explodes into my mouth and I forget all of my problems.

"Woah, slow down there, Princess, you're getting dirty…" Martha is smiling at me.

"Buwt I whoow thum too wooch.." Trying to express my love with my mouth full it's not my forte.

"Come here, pig" she cleans the corner of my mouth with her finger, where probably there is some cream, and then she leans in for a kiss.

As our lips meet I can feel all the love and all the comfort that this amazing girl gives me, I can feel the reasons why I know that spending the rest of my life with her will be good, and I will be happy. But I also feel this brand new sensation, I agreed to call it "guilt". It has the face of Alex and the taste of betrayal. I didn't betray Martha, and I never will, I know that. I never even really thought about doing so, especially with Alex. After all, she's the reason why I would never do something like that, again. And I think that, even though she's actually being "friendly" with me, she still resents me too much to even think about it.

So why am I feeling like this? How can I get really past this, past her, so I can go back to my real life? To my real love who's still kissing me right now?

"Pip, geez…less passion please…" she sarcastically says after she breaks the kiss. She's right, my head was somewhere else. Focus Piper.

"Love, come on I…I just woke up, cut me some slack…" I give her another quick kiss on the lips and I'm off to take a shower… "By the way…where did you find the donuts, did you bring them with you yesterday?" I ask from the bathroom.

"No, I already went to the grocery shop to buy the bonfire stuff, so that you could sleep till noon… am I the greatest fiancé ever or not?"

"Yes, you are" And I mean it. "You did bring Rosa with you, right?"
"Honey, how could I ever NOT bring her with me? It's Wednesday… she would kill anyone who comes between her and the kitchen today". I laugh, because it's so accurate. I'm already under the spray of the water when I hear some movements in the bathroom. I smile because I already know where this is going.

Martha slides into the shower box in all her naked glory and joins me under the spray. She hugs me from behind and her hands move slowly till they reach my boobs and she starts to massage them.

"Are you trying to enjoy your last minutes of freedom before Rosa kidnap you to be her slave in the kitchen?" I say while her hot mouth is in my neck.

"Mmm mmm no"

"No?"

"Nope, today I'm all yours…I've been downgraded" her mouth and her hands are still on me.

"Really?" I ask her seductively as I turn around in her arms to reciprocate the treatment.

"Mmm yep… Another Martha is her favorite now…we even brought her with us at the grocery store" At the mention of her name, my blood freezes. I bury my face in Martha's neck hoping that she won't see whatever it's in there. I reply with a low hum, hoping she would drop the subject. But I'm not that lucky.

"She's fun, you know? And she's going to help me with the Met Exhibition in October…"

My replies are still in the form of kisses and caresses, no words are spoken.

"Did you hear what I say? Are you still angry at her from poker night? I can call it off if you want…" Oh God, I would like to scream a big "Yes, call it off", but I can't. I just can't.

"Mmm no honey, I'm over that…I'm just trying to find a way to shut you up and make you fuck me". Ironically, that's the truth. Finally, as she slides a finger inside me, I think I've finally reached my goal.

"Good, very good. Because I need her…and she's hot"

"No!" I say a little loud as the word slips out of my mouth without my consent. But I cannot stop it, and I cannot stop Martha from sliding her finger in and out of me in a rhythm that drives me crazy. She knows I love it.

"No, you don't think she's hot?" Her voice is low and sensual.

"I…I…" I don't know what to say.

"Are you more a Sandy kind of girl, Piper?" Her thumb starts circling my clit and I know I'm close. This feels so wrong and so good. My eyes are closed and I don't say anything.

"Tell me Piper, if we were to have sex with them, who's gonna be the one to lick you pussy, eh?"

I'm used to the dirty talk and the fantasies, I'm usually quite the master of it. But right now I'm literally in a tornado of emotions and sensations and she's sliding a second finger inside of me. Pumping so hard.

"Talk to me…is it Sandy?"
"No.." I manage to moan

"So, it's Martha, you dirty Piper…"

"No… faster…" She obliges, I'm so so close.

"Is it her face you want between your legs hon?"

Unwanted images from the past rush into my brain, I can't stand it no more.

"Yeah…." I scream while I'm shuttered to pieces by one of the biggest orgasms I've ever had from a quickie.

My legs are shaking. If it weren't for her arms around me, I would probably be on the floor, next to my dignity.

As I come back from the high, strangely I feel less confused. Did I just exorcise the demons of my past with an orgasm? I really don't want to think about it. I just want to focus on what is really important right now: my fiancé, who needs to be taken care of.

I get on my knees placing kisses on her belly.

"You're the only Martha that I want" And that's the utter truth. No other Marthas for me. I whisper that to her stomach, and to myself. I don't even know if she can hear me.

It's 4 pm and I'm in a very good mood.I didn't avoid Alex on purpose, well, maybe just a little bit, but the truth is that I wanted to spend as much time as possible with the person who loves me the most in the world, just to remember what it means to live a healthy and trustful relationship. And that helped so much that now, thinking about the past three days, I feel so stupid.

We went hiking on our own, with Ralph chaperoning, of course. We ate a little picnic on the lake shore and we returned to camp in time for the activity of the afternoon: archery.

When me and Martha arrive at the place where we shoot, almost all the guests are already assembled in the area.

"Hey, lovebirds, you took your sweet time! You're late" Screams Danny as soon as he sees us.

I can feel Alex's eyes on us. Well, everyone's eyes. But especially hers. As I turn around to greet everyone, I see her in the group with Sandy, Al and Lauren, she's not looking directly at me, but a little lower. Maybe at Ralph, maybe at our hands intertwined.

"Sorry!" I smile so hard that all my teeth are on display. "Come on, let's get started. Everyone, take a bow, pair up and place yourself on the platform. Who's shooting for the first time?"

Sandy's hand is raised and so it's Lauren's. I don't even start to think about it, I release Martha's hand and I move towards Lauren "You take Sandy" I shout above my shoulder in my fiancé's direction.

I'm not avoiding Alex.

I focus on Lauren, I put my hands on her hips, I show her how to aim, how to move, how to keep her balance. Then I think about how would it be if I were doing the same exact things to Alex and I raise my eyes in her direction. She's looking at me, but as soon as she sees me, her eyes are back at the target sign and she shoots an arrow. 7 points. Not bad, but not amazing. She doesn't look too thrilled about her shot. I smile when I see her frown, so typical of her. She's too far from me, but I
swear I can see the little wrinkle between her eyebrows and a warm sensation starts spreading inside my chest. But it's not burning and blinding, I think this is what you feel when you start making peace with the past.

But it's fucking strange having these thoughts while your future wife is holding the hips of your ex girlfriend's current girlfriend 50 ft. from you. So hilarious.

After Lauren finally shots an arrow that lands in the target and not in the trees behind it or in the grass in front of it, I think my job here is done, so I go around seeing if someone needs anything.

"I need more arrows Piper! You know which ones!" shouts Lenny from a distance.

"Coming…" I shout back as I walk in the direction of the little cabin where we keep the equipment.

"Hi" I turn in the direction of the voice. Alex followed me, I think in a way I was expecting it, but I don't know if I was wishing for it.

"Hey" I reply with a polite smile while I turn around again to find the right kind of arrows for Lenny.

"Are you avoiding me?"

"No. Why would I do that?" my voice is playful, I don't want her to think I was avoiding her, even though I know I was. I can't lie to myself for long.

"I don't know, I was just asking. I didn't see you around as much as the past days"

"Well, Martha is leaving again tomorrow, so…" for some reason I don't want to finish the sentence. Instead I put in her hand a few arrows while I look again for others "Hold these please…"

"Ok." Pause. "Sandy is leaving tomorrow too. For a couple of days" I don't know why she's telling me this and why does it feel like such a big deal. Are we going to be alone again?

"Yeah? For work?"

"Yes. She was talking about it with Martha. I think they're going to carpool…" a soft laugh escapes from her lips. The image of the two of them, in the same car, oblivious to everything that went on between me and Alex is so absurd and unbelievable that I join Alex in her laugh.

"That's …I don't know how to describe it" I say while standing in front of her with all the right kind of arrows in my hand.

"Freaky?" She suggests

"Unbelievable?" I reply still smiling.

"Fucked up?" My smile dies a little bit at her words, because yeah, fucked up is exactly what this is.

My new friend, guilt, rises inside of me once again. Who am I became? Someone who laughs when talking about a lie she told her fiancé? And who made me a liar? I would be too easy to blame Alex. Her presence clearly doesn't help, but this is all on me.

"Yeah…" I say as I start walking back in the direction of the shooting range. She follows me closely, but in silence.

I realize now that she didn't do anything at the cabin, so she just wanted to talk to me? That's strange. Even stranger than her behavior in the last two days. I'm not a fool, well, not entirely. I still can't
understand her game. Yes, I wanted us to be friendly, but she's just…too much…I don't know. She's affecting me and I know that she knows it. She's pushing it, why?

"So, you just wanted to ask me that?" I ask her.

"Sorry?" She replies with an inquisitive look.

"At the cabin, you just went there to ask me if I was avoiding you?" I'm amused.

"Oh. You're right I wanted to ask you if there was an armguard I could use somewhere…" I caught her off guard.

"Well, there's a couple of armguards in the drawer between the bows and the arrows back at the cabin" And no, I'm not coming with you, I'd like to add even though it's pretty obvious.

"Oh, ok. So, I'm going back…"

"Yep" today I'm monosyllabic.

She looks a little confused when she turns to go back to the cabin but I keep walking in Lenny's direction. I need to fight it. At least until I can figure out where she stands. It is hard to play when all your cards are uncovered on the table, but your opponent keeps them locked in a vault. And this is not a game.

The rest of the afternoon goes on smoothly, after an hour, I leave the shooting range with Danny, Al and Jason to collect dried branches and old trunks in the woods for tonight's bonfire.

Martha and Sandy are still shooting and laughing together. No signs of Alex. I find her later in the kitchen with Rosa, marinating the meat skewers. Of course. I've forgotten that now she's the official kitchen assistant.

"Piper, darling, do you remember the guacamole of two nights ago?"

"How could I forget it, Rosa?" I say while I wash my hands.

"Well, prepare yourself to be astounded even more this time… this girl here is magic! Where did you find her?"

"You need to ask her, because, technically, she found us…" I smile and I see that Alex is smiling too in Rosa's direction.

"Google, Rosa. Blame Google" says Alex.

"What's a google? Do we cook it?" we are all laughing together.

"I'm going back to the cabin to take a shower, I can't wait to eat whatever you're cooking for tonight…I hope you're still making your jacked potatoes…"

"You know that I am…but with Martha's twist…you'll see. Let's just hope that the storm that's approaching will give us enough time to eat outside"

"The storm?" asks Alex.

"Yes, one of those big summer storm is coming from North-East. It should hit us later tonight or tomorrow" I inform her. We are civil now, we can talk about everything.
She stops cutting the meat to turn her head and look at me with a grin that I know too well "And what exactly do you do here if it's raining outside?" I don't know what to say, I'm taken aback by her cockiness. If I didn't know any better, I would say that she is mischievous, borderlining flirty with me. But I know better and I know that this is not an attempt at being friendly. This is something else. Maybe an attempt to fuck me over or to make me miserable. Unfortunately, she's succeeding in her task, because, even though I know she must have a secret agenda, when she's like this with me, when she gave me the beer cup yesterday, even when she looks at me like this, something inside me cracks. It's a subtle thing, little cracks all over my body. But if the number of the cracks increases, with a well-aimed blow, she could break me. We're not yet at that point, and I will make fucking sure that I will never get there.

Rosa comes unknowingly at my rescue "Oh dear, some of the best days I've spent here were rainy days! We've got board games, cards, books, a tv, and also…booze, for you young people!"

"Exactly what she's said!" I say as I exit from the kitchen.

"Later Piper!" shouts Rosa.

I wave back at the two of them and I'm outside. I can see the clouds on the horizon. They're still far away, Maybe we're going to be lucky.

Or maybe not.

It's 8 p.m. now and the firsts drops are beginning to fall. I've spent the last two hours securing all the things that could fly away during the storm and I checked the two electric generators in case of power outage. I know I'm probably exaggerating, but the caution is never enough.

All the guests are already in the kitchen. I reach them, with Ralph beside me. We pass in front of the pile of firewood we made earlier today and that will probably be unused till next Wednesday, what a waste.

"Hey Piper, just in time!" Lauren greets me when I enter the kitchen.

They've already made a very good job. All the tables have been pushed together in the big area in the right side of the kitchen, leaving Alex and Rosa on the left side, the side of the stove and of the sink, surrounded by thousands of pans and pots. The smell is delicious and vaguely familiar. An invisible hand squeezes my heart a little bit. Another small crack.

I take my seat beside Martha and I pour myself a nice glass of red wine. By the time we arrive at the meat skewers I'm already at my third glass and my life is suddenly fun, easy and light.

"Hey! I do remember these!" I shout at Alex as she passes with the tray full of skewers and starts to distribute them to everyone. Her face is a mask of panic, she looks at my already empty glass.

"Yeah? From when you went to Indonesia?"

"Of course, they were my favorites!" I may be drunk, but I'm not stupid. In public we're strangers. We've never met, we've never fucked and we've never ever loved each other.

"I hope they are as good as you remember" She says a little more relaxed while she takes her seat in front of me and next to Sandy. Finally all the food is on the table, so Alex and Rosa can finally seat with the rest of the gang and eat their delicious creations.

"Mmm, so so good" I talk with my mouth still full. Maybe I need another glass of wine, just to help me swallow this evil food who's making me think about warm sunsets in Sanur, walking hand in
hand with her along the piers. I feel the need of telling her this, but I don't know how or why I should.

Everyone on the table is cheering and laughing, Alex and Rosa are quite the heroes of the evening. The mix between exotic and American cuisine is probably the most successful mix ever attempted here in the camp.

As the host of the place, or better, as the drunk host of this place, I think it's my duty to stand up with a glass on my hand and publicly thank our cooks. And that's exactly what I'm trying to do.

"Ladies and gentlemen of this camp.." I have to stop for a minute to wait for the applause and the laughers to end "as your host and as your queen…"

"Drunk queen!" shouts someone whose voice I don't recognize while everyone is still laughing.

"As I was saying. As your host and as your slightly inebriated queen, I would like to thank our two incredible and…powerful and…talented cooks! So thank you Rosa and thank you A- ehm". Fuck. What's her fake name?

"Martha!" Screams Linda from a distant "The name should be familiar!" Some of the guests have tears in their eyes from the wine and the fun they're having. I like this so much, even though they're laughing at my expenses.

"I knew it, Linda! I was just taking my time! So thank you Rosa and thank you MARTHA" I almost shout her name while I raise my glass in her direction. She's not smiling, but she doesn't seem angry either. Fucking Alex and her mysteries.

I sit down and Martha kisses me on the cheek. "Thanks for forgetting Martha's name, which is also my name, honey… I just hope that at our wedding you'll manage to remember the basics"

"Go fuck yourself, love" I reply with all the love I could manage.

I hear the sound of a fork against a glass. I turn around and I see Donny trying to get everyone's attention.

"And I speak on behalf of everyone here when I say congratulations to Piper and Martha for the royal wedding. We're waiting for the official invitations, please do not choose one of those vegetarian menu…"

I smile and I finish my fourth glass of wine while I thank everyone with my arm around Martha's shoulders. I've never made such a deal about the wedding, but it's nice to be actually happy about it.

"So, how did you two meet?" asks Sandy interested.

I'm on a roll, I feel very chatty, so I'm the one to answer "Well, you know how it goes… she wanted to buy soap, she went into my shop, I hated her, then we met again in a bar and she offered me a drink, I hated her a little less and then we met again at a party and I slowly stopped hating her. Is it enough accurate, love?" I innocently ask my fiancé.

"Well, you're way more drunk that I thought, but your story is pretty accurate. For me, of course, it was love at first sight. Even when I walked into PoPi and she complained about my pairings between soaps and body lotions I knew she was the one…"

"You were arrogant!"
"I just knew what I wanted. Or who I wanted" That's why I love her. She's so sure, so steady, I know I could always count on her. So I decide to go for a quick peck on the lips, even though I usually hate PDA.

"Oh, you two are so cute…" says Sandy in our direction and for a second I remember that Alex is sitting in front of me. She's watching me with the same look of before. Blank and almost neutral. Who cares.

"What about you? How did you two meet?" I ask them looking closely for a reaction in Alex. A muscle in her jaw shrinks. I consider myself satisfied.

"Well, it was pretty typical too. I was looking for someone who could get me some exotic furniture for my house, I called her, we met in a bar and after a couple of hours I was already at her place. Is it accurate, honey?" Sandy looks at her Martha in the same way I looked at mine.

"On spot"

"And, for the record, I'm not usually that easy" Sandy jokes.

"I know honey, I'm just that good" Too many déjà vu, I'm not comfortable.

"If only Piper were that easy. It has been a nightmare trying to convince her that I was good for her. You should teach me some moves Martha, not that I intend using them, of course." Martha adds looking at me. Thank God, Alex doesn't replies. When we met it took her two sentences to get me hooked and ready to follow her home and fuck her and my future.

Instead, what Alex says, takes me aback. "So, how did you propose to Piper?" The remains of my heart are officially dead. This is probably the last thing in the world I want her to know. But I don't see a way out of this for me, Martha is looking at me, asking for permission to say something that she knows is delicate. But I can't seem to find an excuse to say no. So I nod and I don't feel so drunk anymore.

"Actually, I didn't propose. Everyone thinks I was the one to do it, but truth is, Piper did it. The circumstances were a little sad…" her hand is drawing circles in my back, she always looks out for me "… We got into a big fight, one of the worst one, I left home and went to Minneapolis to see my family. After a few days she called me to tell me about her mother's death…" I'm looking at my hands on the table but I feel Alex's eyes burning holes in me "…she also told me to stay there and not to worry about it. But I didn't listen to her and I took the first flight available. When I arrived at her parent's house she didn't say anything, she didn't even talk, so I just hold her. After a few hours the first words she said were "Marry me". And I said "Yes". And here we are now" She looks at me with her kind and gentle eyes.

I feel like I'm dying. I want to cry, I want to explain myself to her. This is probably the end, the end of the possibility of having a real honest civil relationship. The end of my chance to talk to her about what's eating me alive since that day five years ago. The end of us.

I make the horrible mistake of raising my eyes. Sandy is looking at my fiancé, her eyes are sparkling with tears and she's clearly moved by our story. Alex, on the other hand, is looking at me in a way that I've never seen before. Her blank stare, emotionless, has been replaced with something that is so powerfully destructive that I'm in physical pain. Betrayal, pain, sadness, anger, resentment, I see in her eyes everything. Everything I want to see. What I feel I deserve to see.

She holds my stare for a few seconds, after that she excuses herself from the table and, mumbling something about going to the bathroom, she goes outside. The instinct to follow her immediately is
so strong in me that I need to keep myself seated by grabbing the sides of my chair with all my force. It would be suspicious. We can't risk the truth to come out.

The fact that something was wrong with her is clear to the people who saw the scene, luckily for Alex, it means just me and Martha. Like the first night, Sandy tries to justify Alex's strange behavior "She lost her mother when she was young and she was really close to her. I think she just needs to breathe some fresh air…she'll be back".

I have finally found the right excuse. "Because of the storm, I've locked all the public cabins, including the bathroom. I don't want her to catch a cold by being outside in the rain. I'm going there quickly to open it up" to convince everyone that this is the only reason why I want to go outside, I stand on my feet and I take out the keychain.

"Ok" I hear Martha saying. I'm already almost outside.

I run under the rain till I reach the bathroom. I stay under the roof on the long side on the cabin. I hear her talking on the phone, she must be under the porch on the other side, if I just walk around the corner, I would be in front of her. As I'm about to do so, I stop in my tracks because I hear what she's shouting on the phone. She's angry.

"...are you fucking kidding me, Nicky!" Nicky? Is she talking on the phone with Nicky? My Nicky? I don't want to eavesdrop, but I can't move right now.

"No, I'm not going to listen to you! I've been listening to you for the past few days and look where that got me!" Wait, what? I'm paralyzed.

"What? You should have told me that! And not all the bullshit about her being a better person and all the other fucking lies …"

"...No. No, I'm not listening to you again. I'm so fucking pissed… no…. " The few seconds of silence where probably Nicky is talking are not enough for me to understand what the fuck is happening.

"But I already did that! Exactly as you told me to. Did I wanted to do it? Fucking no. Did I do it anyway? Fuck yeah. I gave her a chance, I put aside everything and I treated her good, I talked to her, made her laugh, I even fucking gave her a beer cap…and look where we are now"

"...no Nicky… what the fuck does it mean that you did it for me? Do you really think that I would get something out of it? Well, guess what…you were fucking wrong…"

"Nothing big? Nothing big? She proposed after her mother's death. Didn't you think that this was something you should have told me?" The way her voice breaks…I don't want to think about the fact that maybe she's crying right now.

"I know that I said that I didn't want to know anything about her and her life, but fucking hell… What the fuck, Nicky, she's … what she did… she… I-I don't know…"

My head is spinning, I need to go away. I think I need some time to understand what I've just heard. And a call to Nicky is mandatory. But right now I need my constant. My Martha, otherwise I'm going to have the panic attack that I can feel it's growing inside of me.

I run back to the kitchen. Alex was still talking when I left, I don't think she heard me. I sit back at my place, I mumble something about the bathroom being already open and I focus on my breath waiting for the evening to be over.
Alex gets back 10 minutes after me, I don't look at her, I just focus on my breath. I don't talk much, just the minimum to not raise suspicions. Thank god everyone is pretty drunk.

When I finally am on my bed, with Martha almost asleep on my side, her hand on my stomach, I allow myself to think about what I heard. Finally I know why she was acting so "friendly" with me, it was Nicky's fault…

I love Nicky, I really do. And I know that she did it for me. But if she forced Alex to be "friendly" with me, well, that's fucking wrong and sick. I'm not some stupid teenager, I know when something is real and being right now in this fucking situation where I'm questioning everything that happened in the past days, it's frustrating and nerve wreaking.

What if Alex spoke to me only because Nicky asked her to? I know Alex, she would never do something if she doesn't want it. And I know that whatever I saw in her eyes was real. But right now I'm allowed to be stupid, so, what if?

I can feel another crack in me. A little bigger this time. Where my heart was.
3:13 AM. I've never slept so badly in my whole life. Not even in prison, when I was fearing for my life, not even in the SHU, not even when I slept outside alone in the woods, not even...well, it's not true. I do remember clearly a couple of times in which I've slept even worse than today. But what's the only thing that all my shitty nights have in common? Easy, Alex Vause. Alex fucking Vause.

Obsessive questions with no answers. All. Night. Long. Usually I would walk outside a little bit with Ralph, but the risk of bumping into her is too big, even with the rain. How's that possible, anyway? She's everywhere. It's not like she's put a GPS implant under my skin, but it surely feels like it. It's like we're...connected...but in a sick and hurtful way.

4:02 AM. Martha is so peaceful even when she sleeps, with her mouth slightly open. She's so cute. She doesn't deserve any of this.

4:28 AM. I'm sweaty and I'm turning around in my damp sheets, trying not to wake up her. I just want some peace, is it too much to ask?

4:35 AM. What if she wasn't faking it? What if...no, I can't go there.

4:53 AM. I've got to call Nicky. Is it now a good time? What the fuck was going on in that crazy head of hers? Did she really thought this could be a good idea? To force someone to do something? To force Alex, of all people?

5:14 AM. Finally! It's five. Another hour and then I'll have a reason to leave the bed and officially end this fucking night.

5:46 AM. I'm not gonna talk to her, I will not even look at her. Not right now. I need some time to calm the fuck down and sort everything out. You can't be clear headed if you're in the middle of the fucking storm. In every sense. This has got to stop, one way or another. The fact that I have no idea about what everything means is irrelevant. I need to focus on my life, on what's good, on who's lying next to me. The present. And the future. Not the past.

6:00 AM. Thank god. I'm up.

By the time Martha's awake, I've already cleaned up the kitchen, fixed the broken window in Cabin 3, taken out all the board games and the raincoats from the storage room and finished the paperwork I had to do. Everything is clean, in order and, hopefully, waterproof. There's nothing more for me to do, and this scares me a lot. It's still raining outside, the weather report confirmed that the big storm is hitting us later tonight. We just have to wait, probably here, in this room. My mind doesn't want to go there, but there's no escape from this, I'm going to spend the entire day in the same room as Alex, without my fiancè. And without her girlfriend. Not that it matters. I don't know how I'm feeling, if there's a part of me that is happy about this, I can't feel it right now. I just know that it will drain me emotionally. One way or another, again.

"Hey beautiful!" Martha's voice brings me back to the present and out of my head.

"Hello to you babe. Did you sleep well?" I can't help but smile at the sleepy face that has just entered through the kitchen door. She's still wearing her "camp pajamas", aka my Smith's t-shirt and a pair of green horrible shorts. Her hair is in a messy bun and I feel the need to kiss her right on the spot. And I do it.

I almost expect Alex to walk in in this exact moment, in the last days I've discovered that whoever is
in charge of destiny or fate has a really twisted sense of humour. But it doesn't happen, so I can relax into this hug and try hard to clean my head and focus on this. This is good.

"Mmm, definitely well. You?" she whispers still in my arms.

"Good" I lie.

"Your face says otherwise…"

"I just don't want you to go…" I channel my puppy eyes face.

"Come on, Pip, what's up, really? You've never been like this before… I'm not saying that you were happy to see me go last week, but… I don't understand, I'll be back in two days… We've been away much longer" her hands are on my cheeks and she's looking at me with such love and apprehension that I just can't. I can't take it anymore.

"…I know you too well, something is bothering that little cute head of yours…. What is it babe? You know you can tell me anything…” her sweet touch can't block the bitter of the bile that I can feel in the back of my throat or the tears that I can feel burning through my tear ducts. How can I tell her? I know I have to, but how?

As I'm about to break down, someone enters the room. If it's Alex I fucking swear that I will hit her.

"Good morning lovebirds! Ready for the road trip?" It's Sandy. Already perfectly dressed and with the perfect make up on. No Alex on the horizon. Martha's hands and eyes haven't left my face.

"Am I interrupting something?" Sandy says a little too joyful for my taste. She broke the spell, the moment is gone.

"Nope!" I say equally cheerful. I break eye contact with my fiancé and I move towards the sink.

"Coffee, Sandy?"

"Oh, that would be lovely Piper"

"Martha, coffee?" I ask my beautiful and still worried girlfriend.

"No thanks, I'm going to get dressed so we're ready to go, fill me a to-go cup" Her eyes say other things. Her eyes say 'We're not even close to be done'. I know she's right.

After 10 minutes of small talk, Martha is back, with her bag on her shoulder and the car keys on her palm.

"Ready Sandy?"

"More than ready!" she stands abruptly from the chair, giving me an half heart attack. My nerves are dancing on the surface of my skin, I just need a puff of wind to jump.

Martha has seen the scene and she approaches me with a look that I know too well.

"Goodbye Piper" her words are too formal, in contrast with the way she's hugging me. I hug her as close as I can. "We're going to talk when you're back" I whisper to her while I bury my face on her neck.

"Promise?"

"Promise". And I mean it.
"Ok" peck on the lips "I love you Blondie".

"I love you too, Love" And I mean it.

Outside the kitchen cabin, the hell is breaking loose. I've never seen so much rain falling down at the same time. They're not drops, they're like buckets of water thrown by a giant Godzilla. Someone is pissed up there in the sky, maybe as pissed as me.

It's 6 PM, I'm here since 6 AM. 12 hours of incessant rain and 12 hours of no Alex. Zero. Like she doesn't even exist. But I know she's here. I guess she's barricaded into her cabin, resisting the urge to come in the kitchen and find something to eat. Call me arrogant, or delusional, but I think she's doing it just to avoid me.

It's funny how almost 24 hours has passed without me seeing her and I'm already questioning my mental sanity. Speaking of which, I need to talk to Nicky, and I need to do it now, before the storm will hit so hard that the cell signal would disappear. I need to get back to my cabin, even if it means leaving all the guests here without my supervision. I just hope that they won't kill each other…I can see a very heated game of scrabble in the table closer to the window and, judging by the colour of Donny's face, someone is ready to burst.

"Rosa, I need to check something, I'm leaving for a few minutes, can I leave the fort in your hands?"

"Oh course, darling, but can't you wait a little bit for the rain to slow down? You're going to get wet!"

"I'll be fast, I promise!" I say as I put my cell into a little plastic bag and a giant red raincoat on.

"Can you please go check on Martha too? She texted me a few hours ago but I haven't heard from her since" So, it wasn't a dream after all. She's real. And what about the fact that Rosa has her cell number and they text each other?

"I'll see what I can do Rosa, but I'm sure she's good" What I really wanted to say was "No way I'm going to go check on her. No. Way."

I open the door and a gust of wind slaps my face, and for a moment I'm tempted to stay inside the cabin with all the others, where everything is dry, warm and drama free, but, in a flash, Alex's words from last night pop up in my mind and I'm suddenly ready to face the wet, cold and dramatic storm with Ralph on my heels. He hates the storm, especially when the thunders strike. He may be a social dog, but when he's frightened, my puppy always comes to mommy.

With my head held high, I start to run.

I'm already soaking wet after 5 seconds, I can't see anything, the water is everywhere, it feels like it's raining from the ground up. I just run on autopilot, why the fuck did I think it was a good idea to call Nicky now?

I know where I am, I can see the shape of Alex's cabin, but I know what to do, I keep on running until I realize that something is missing…so I stop.

"Raaaaaaalph! Ralph where are you?" I start to scream, but I seriously doubt he can hear me. "Raaaalph!" I start to run back, and I look in all directions until I finally see some movements.

Of course he's outside Alex's cabin and he's scratching her door like a maniac. I run towards him.
"Ralph! Ralph!" He's crying. As I approach him, I see Alex's shadow on the window, she's probably heard something and she's checking it out. She's alive, good for her, now I've got something to say to Rosa.

"Ralph, honey, I'm here now, I'm here. Everything is good" I pet him to calm him, but I want to get the hell away from this place, I'm starting to shiver for the cold and I swear that the rain is running also under my skin and into my veins. I take him by the collar and I start to walk in my cabin's direction. I don't turn around on purpose, I swear, but when I do, there's nothing on the window. Alex Vause is just a shadow, again.

Finally home. Or cabin, in this case. I let Ralph inside even if I think he's going to get everything messy and dirty, but he's so scared that he goes directly in his favourite corner of the room and he curls up in a shivering ball. My heart melts and so, as soon as I take off my raincoats and I release my luckily still dry phone, I go sit there with him on my lap, just like a did a few days ago when I first saw the girl I'm running from now.

She picks up after the third ring.

"Yo Chapman! Are you calling me from Noah's ark?"

"Hello there, Nicky. How are you?" I articulate the words very very slowly.

"Good, good. Ya know, same old shit. The renovation of the club is almost complete, so, I can go back to make money from this bitch real soon. Is the weather giving you problems? I saw some ugly stuff on the news report!"

Silence. I don't answer.

"Chapman? Chapman, you still there?"

"Yep" Still silence. I can hear the gears in her brain moving like crazy.

"…is everything good?"

"Yep. Nothing new here, or maybe not. Maybe there's something we should talk about, or not. Or someone. I don't know, what do you think?"

"…oh, fuck!" she sounds mortified. "Listen Piper…"

I interrupt her with a laughter, she rarely uses my first name. How can someone stay mad at her?

"Nicky, really? Calling you was the first thing I had in mind when I first saw her. Well, maybe not really the first thing, but I knew she would eventually call you, as I would have done if I wasn't so fucking shocked to see Alex fucking Vause as a redhead!" A moment passes before she answers.

"So, is she hot?"

"Nicky!" I shout at her, half pissed, half amused. Ralph raises his head and looks at me puzzled.

"Sorry, sorry, you can't blame a girl for trying. So, how's it going?" Her tone even if it's casual, is really cautious, she's trying really hard to be considerate. I deeply love her.

"I think you have already a clear idea about that. Don't you?"

"What do you mean?" She's confused, so I decide to give her the plain truth.
"I overheard her speaking to you on the phone yesterday"

Silence.

"Nicky?"

"…fuck"

"Yes, fuck. Now I need you to tell me everything you know. Now." My tone is so clear and direct that I surprise myself.

"Piper, I can't…"

"What do you mean you can't? You owe me that much!" I'm hurt. And pissed.

"Piper, girl. You know I love you. I didn't want to, I've always fight it, but I do love you. And I also love her, you know it. She was my girl way before you came into the picture, she's family, just like you are now. So you can't ask me to fucking betray family. Please. I feel like I'm the child in the middle of a divorce! You both should stop asking me stuff and just talk to each other."

She's right, I know she's right, but I fucking hate it. My blood is boiling and I register what she's just said only after a few seconds.

"Wait, did-did she ask you something about me?"

"Fuck Chapman, that's exactly why I'm not telling you anything. To the both of you!"

"Please Nicky, I need to know! I really don't understand her. Help me a little bit. I'm going crazy, I'm not kidding, one time she's good, the other she's a bitch, what does she want from me? I'm going insane, I was going to tell Martha everything this morning."

"Wait, you haven't tell Martha about Alex?" There's pure shock in her voice. A wave of guilt rises inside of me, everyone is expecting me to be honest with her, but I'm lying to my future wife.

"No. Not yet. She knows about Alex, of course, but she doesn't know that she is… well, the other Martha. I know I should have told her but…I don't know Nicky, I don't want to drag her into this, she doesn't deserve to see me like this, she wouldn't understand. Especially if this turns out to be… well… nothing. Nothing, just an unlucky encounter with a ghost who won't stop haunting me…"

"It's not nothing Piper, you know it. It took you three years of therapy to get rid of the guilt you felt. I was there… It's not nothing, if you're what you are now, it's because of that. It's normal to feel like that. It's not nothing."

My eyes are starting to burn from the tears that I'm desperately blocking.

"It is for her" I'm whispering, I don't even know if she's heard.

"Piper…" yes, she did hear me. And she isn't answering. "Piper please…"

I wipe out some unshed tears with the palm of my hand. She's right. I know she's right.

"Sorry, I know… You're right. You can't tell me anything…"

Silence.

Maybe the line is dead.
"Nicky, you there?"

"Yes" She sounds…annoyed.

"Are we good?" I can hear loud and clear her sigh.

"Fuck you Piper. Alright. You can ask me what you want, but I will decide IF I can answer or not. Are we clear?"

"What?" Oh my god.

"Oh, you heard me right, girl. Now go, shoot, before I change my mind"

So now what? There are too many things I want to know. So many. And I can already hear the line cracking, I don't have much time.

"Blondie, you there? Talking to you is getting boring…"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here. Just give me a sec. " I'm on my feet, pacing around the room still soaking wet. Ralph is looking at me very perplexed. I need to start somewhere.

"Did she know that this was my camp?"

"Wait, what? What kind of question is that? Of course not."

"Do you think that she would have come if she had found out that the camp was mine?"

"Bad question. Not answering. Next" There's something strange in her tone.

"Did YOU know that she was coming here?"

"How could you even think about something like that? I'm offended that you even asked." I know Nicky, that bitch is lying. She knew it, maybe she even suggested it. I can't fucking believe it. But I need to postpone any outrage and focus on what I really want to know.

"Does she really hate me?"

"Ask her"

"Nicky, come on!"

"Ask her, that's all you're getting from me, so stop asking."

I need to change strategy.

"Did you force her to talk to me?"

"Blondie… come on!"

"Did you? I heard her talking on the phone with you, Nicky. She was pissed…"

"So why are you asking if you already know the answer?"

"Because I want to hear it coming from your mouth, Judas"

"Piper, come on! I didn't force her to do anything. You know her. I just asked her to give you a chance…I asked her to try to act nicely to you for a few days…"
"Why?"
"Why what?"
"Why did you do that?"
"You know why…" 
"Tell me anyway"

Silence.

"Alright. I did it because you need closure. Ok? And I hate you for what I'm about to say, because it's cheesy as fuck, but you deserve it. Yes, you messed up, and you were an asshole, but you've became something else and you saved my ass more than once, and I thought she just needed to see it, to see you. And it's not only about you, I know it sounds stupid, but she's coming in NY and I guess it would be nice hanging around together without having to worry about what to say and to whom. It's been five fucking years, can't she-I mean you-can't you both be civil and get it over with?"

I love her so much that it hurts. My tears now are tears of pure love, I feel stupid for not having thought about this as the reason behind everything.

"PoPi, you there?"

"Yeah, I'm here you fucking crazy haired bitch. I wasn't expecting that, and I love you too" I say with a smile on my face.

"So, you got it?"

"Yep, that's all? I mean, are those all the reasons why you asked her to be nice to me?"

"No, you know they're not, but that's all you're going to get from me on this argument. Is it clear?"

"Yes"

"Are we good Blondie? Do I need to take off our friendship bracelet?"

"You can keep it, but you owe me a night out when I get back. Alcohol and sushi"

"Deal" I feel the relief in her voice.

"How?"

"How what?"

"How did you manage to convince her to act nicely?"

She's laughing from her belly.

"You don't give up, don't you?"

"Did you blackmailed her? Did you bribe her?" I honestly want to know, but I'm laughing as I'm saying that.

"You know that a thief never reveals its secrets. Or was it a magician? Or a prostitute? Anyway, it wasn't that difficult after all..."
I'm shivering because I'm wet and freezing, but something inside me burns.

"Well, don't expect me to thank you for this mess, but I kind of appreciate the effort…"

"I'm here to serve. By the way, is it? A mess I mean…"

"Well, you were on the phone with her last night. I haven't seen her since. I guess she's locked in her cabin, throwing darts at our pictures."

"Sorry about that, really… I've never really thought about your wedding and your mom, and her mom and your break-up, I mean, maybe I should have said something…"

"Or maybe you shouldn't have said anything at all" I interrupt her, because even if her intentions were good, she kind of manipulated the situation.

"Yeah, you're right. But maybe she would have left after the first day, when she called me she was pretty determined to run the fuck away"

"Maybe it would have been for the best"

"Hey, don't say that"

"Why? What do I have now? A fucked up mind, no closure and I'm lying to my fiancé. And for what? A couple of days of insults and of outstretched hands that were probably the results of you begging her to talk to me?"

"Do you remember what you did when I got out of prison and Morello invited us to her child's baptism?"

"Yeah…” I already know where she wants to go with this.

"Maybe you should remember it better, because not only you forced me to go and to comb my hair, but you also hold my fucking hand all night long the day before. And do you remember what you told me during the ceremony when I wanted to run the fuck out of that place and back in prison?"

"Yeah, I do"

"Do you? Really? What was it? Let me hear it again."

She's annoying. "I told you that you needed to face your demons if you wanted to go on with your life, especially if there was something still unresolved with said demons"

"Oh, very good. Very very good. Sounds familiar?"

"I know what you mean, but in this case it's different"

"Really, different? I don't think so. Remember when I found out that it was you who said to Lorna to include me in the invitation?"

"It wasn't like that! She wanted you to be there, she just didn't know if you were up to it!"

"And who said that Alex didn't want to talk to you either?"

I stop everything and my face is pure disbelief. "Really? She wanted to?"

"On some really fucking deep subconscious level, I'm sure she did!"
I laugh so much that my belly hurts.

"Go fuck yourself Nichols!"

"Gladly my dear, gladly. See? This is karma, coming back for you to kick your ass. Do you remember how arrogant you were when I was in your place? Now you know why they say that it's easy to be a gay man with somebody else's butt"

I'm really laughing too much, I'm hysterical. "Ewwww! Why do you have to be always so gross?"

"Oh, because you love me! Actually, talking about fucking, this reminds me of what I did at the baptism party. Do you remember also that?"

"How can I forget it? You used my mother's car to fuck that crazy girl. What was her name? Shonda? Wanda?"

"It was Rhonda, thank you. And she lately introduced me to her cousin Nate, who now is my very proud and rich business partner. See? Everything comes for a reason."

"I give you that. So, I'm curious, how do you see this thing ending?"

"Well, I certainly hope not in the backseat of a car without your clothes on, because this time I think it wouldn't be because of sex, but because of your murder. And, of course, if you betray the real Martha with Alex, I'm going to kill you myself."

"Don't worry. That's the only thing that's never going to happen…"

"Seriously though, I don't care what you do. Just find a way to put everything behind you. I don't care how, just do it. It would be ideal if you both could talk and do it together, and maybe in a few months we will be dancing at the club with our orange jumpsuits on"

"Go fuck yourself again Nichols!"

"Watch your language, inmate!"

"Remember me why we're still friends…"

"Because you love me?"

"Yeah, that's right, I do. Against my better judgement, but I do"

"So, now that we are good again, can we talk about the weather? I'm starting to feel static on the line, is everything ok?"

"Honestly, I've never seen something this big before. I've done everything I should have done to secure everything but the wind is blowing so hard that I fear it's gonna rip off the roofs…"

Just like on clue, a thunder strikes and Ralph starts to howl.

"What was it?" She's worried, I can feel it.

"Nothing, just a thunder and Ralph is getting scared. I think I need to go back to the kitchen and help everyone to barricade in their cabin. The cabins are the safest place in this freaking weather"

"I can't hear you well Chapman, are you going?"
"Yeah Nicky, I think the lines are dying, can you call Martha and tell her that I'm good?"

"Which one?"

"Go fuck yourself again" I say between laughers and the line is officially dead.

What I said about the storm is real. It's bigger than I expected. The windows are shaking like there's an earthquake, I need to get everyone safe into their cabin and help them close all the windows from outside. This means that I will get even more wet and frozen than now, so I better hurry up.

I take my raincoat, even though it's not very useful and I go towards the door. I turn around to look at Ralph. He's shaking like hell. Thunders are like gun shots in his ears and gun shots mean beatings and violence. I wish I could stay with him, but first I need to go and secure all the guests.

"I'll be back soon" I shout at him before closing the door. It's difficult to do so because the wind is really strong, that's why we need to put an extra wooden table in front of every cabin's door and window.

As I take the first step outside, what I see really scares me. Everything is grey, the visibility is nonexistent and the trees are a black mass of moving and waving danger. And the water, the water is everywhere. I need to stop for a second halfway to the kitchen cabin because a gasp of wind almost throws me on the ground, this is incredible. The water is running everywhere, inside my clothes, inside my nose, I almost choke. I've never been happier to reach the kitchen.

The faces that are looking at me are the faces of worried people. As the owner of this place I have the responsibility to keep everyone safe.

"So, listen up everyone! This is what we are going to do. The storm is hitting us right now, but according to the weather report, by tomorrow morning everything will be over. The cabins are all equipped for situations like these, the foundations are deep and strong. The only weak points are the windows and the door, that's why now me, Danny, Jason and Al, are going to help each one of you inside your cabin and we're going to fix extra wooden protection from the outside to your windows and door. You just need to stay inside and wait it out. If the storm will cut our power, and it will, we've got two electric generators that can give us enough power to live and have a rave party for three days. So, just wait a few minutes for them to start. In case you need anything, we're going to provide you with a short range walkie-talkie that will give you direct contact with me or Danny. We both have a satellite phone to use in case of emergency. Please do not prank call, and yes, I'm talking to you Lenny."

Everyone laughs and their faces are less tense. "Is everything clear? Any questions?"

"All clear boss!"

"Good, than let's get going!"

It's been more than one hour. More than one hour under the pouring rain, with the wind who made me fall with my ass on the ground more than once. I'm not even soaked, I'm part of this storm. And, as the storm, I fixed every wooden window and every wooden door like I was a mad man, with my hammer and my portable drill. Thank god I had the guys with me. I've just finished to fix Cabin 4, so right now I'm on my own. Just two more cabins left. Mine and Alex's. It is possible to fix your own cabin, but it's a longer process, that's why it was easier doing it from the outside. The guys asked me if I wanted them to fix Alex's cabin, but I told them that I would do it because her cabin is closer to mine and because they already helped me more than enough.
Truth is, I lied. I wanted to do it myself. And I wanted her to get worried about the storm and the shacking of the windows. She should have come in the kitchen with the rest of the guests and not stay on her cabin like a fucking hermit just because she doesn't want to see me. Guess what? Now she has to.

But, before that, I need to bring the satellite phone from the reception cabin to my cabin without it getting wet. I cover it with layers and layers of cellophane, I place it inside my pants, and I run. The weather is getting worse, I'm still a little scared, so I don't care when I find the door in my cabin open, I just throw the phone on the bed and I go outside again to fix my windows, this way, the last thing I'll do before collapsing into my bed would be fixing Alex's cabin. The last thing.

I work as fast as I can, it's a little difficult on my own, but I manage to do a good job. I have a strange and negative sensation, I'm worried, and I feel like I'm forgetting something important. Fixing the door is the most difficult part of the job, because I need to leave open a side so I can enter and close it from the inside once I'm done with Alex.

When everything is ready and I'm ready to go to Alex a thunder strikes so hard that the ground shakes. And then it hits me. Stronger than the thunder. Stronger than an earthquake. Stronger than everything.

Ralph.

The door was open.

Ralph is not howling.

I cut my hand on the wooden table, trying to open it faster. I run inside. Ralph is not there, I run to the bathroom. Ralph is not there.

This is panic. My head spins and I feel like I'm passing out.

Where are you?

Oh my god. He's so scared, my puppy. So scared. Where is he? He was not in the kitchen and not in the reception cabin. What if he got lost in the woods in this weather? What is he's somewhere scared and hurt?

Alex.

He tried to get inside her cabin before. Maybe he was scared and lonely and he went there and she opened the door for him. That's it. That's how things went. I slam the door and I'm running like my life depends on it. And, in some ways, it does. I think I fell, but I'm not sure.

I try to open Alex's door but it's locked. I bang with all my strength, I will break this door if I have to.

"Aleeeex! Aleeeex! Open up Alex!"

After what it feels like a lifetime, I hear the key turning and the door starts to open.

I don't have time for this, I slam it open and I rush inside leaving traces of mud and dirt on the floor. I'm looking around like a mad man, I don't care how I look. I don't fucking care about anything. I can't see him, but he likes to hide. I ran to the bathroom without noticing that Alex is behind me and with two fast movements, she pins me on the wall and one of her hand goes directly to my throat.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" She's screaming. Screaming so hard at my face that the storm is
nothing compared to her. Her face is the face of pure anger and hatred, but I don't fucking care. My ears hurts, but everything else is hurting more.

"Is Ralph here?" Is this my voice? I don't recognize it. It sounds like the scream of a wild animal.

Her face changes expression in a millisecond. Her hand release me and I feel like she should have kept it there. Her face says everything. She's understood everything. I already know the answer, but when she say the word, the world below me splits in half and swallows me.

"No".
"No"

I see black. All I see is black before my eyes and I taste blood. I feel like I should scream or convulsing, but I'm made of stone, I don't do anything. I hear something, cries of desperation, it could be me.

I just need a moment. I just need to bath in this darkness, drown in my fears until I reach the bottom, so I can push myself up.

He's not dead. Or maybe he is. Maybe he's dying alone somewhere right now.

I need to look for him, now. Every second matters. I need to find him.

I will channel this panic into something useful. The desperation will be the fuel in my legs, I don't care about anything else.

I'm suddenly aware of my surrounding. I'm in a cabin, I need to get out, inside the storm. I'm not afraid of the bad weather, nothing is worse than what's inside of me right now.

As I push myself from the wall I was leaning on and I sprint towards the door, a strong hand grips my right arm, hurting me.

"LET ME GO!" I scream at Alex, turning around, while I try to free myself of her grip, but she's strong and she squeezes my arm even harder.

No one can stand between me and that fucking door. I raise my left hand ready to slap her, punch her or ready to break…something. But I freeze when I see her face. She's not in the annoying ArrogantAlex mode, she's in full ReallyWorriedAlex mode. I haven't seen this level of realness in her eyes since… I don't know, Linchfield? I'm a little taken aback, and in those few seconds of hesitation, I find myself pinned at the door with both her hands blocking my wrists over my head.

"Tell me what's happening and I'll let you go". She's so close that I can smell her toothbrush.

I could kick her. I could kick her with all my rage. I know I could easily break one of her shins. But I don't.

I've learnt to choose my battles, and right now I just need to get the fuck away from this place and fighting her is not the fastest way to do it.

"Ralph. Can't find him". I don't recognize my voice anymore.

"Isn't he in your cabin?" She sounds genuinely worried.

Saying it out loud destroyed the last piece of lucidity I had. Now I'm overwhelmed by fear and panic. I feel like I'm about to faint or to throw up.

"Piper…hey Piper…"

I can't really focus on Alex's voice, I'm thinking about the enormity of the task I have in front of me. How can I find him in the middle of a fucking forest? How many square miles do I have to run through? In this weather… it's impossible. He could be anywhere. It's dangerous, it's dark outside, it's loud, he can't hear me screaming. But I'll never forget myself if I don't fight and just give up and
wait, wishing for the best. I can't...I'll never forgive me. Never. I happened in the past. I didn't fight
the good fight. The reminder of that event is shouting something at my face in this exact moment. So
close. So, so close.

"Hey Pipes, Pipes look at me!"

I'm brought back to reality by Alex's hands, they have left my wrists and are now on the sides of my
face, cupping my cheeks, pressing.

"Pipes, look at me!" I do as she tells me. I really look at her.

"...I need to go..." I try to move and this time she's not holding me back, her hands fall at the side of
her body.

"Wait, please, tell me what happened..."

Every cabin has a couple of torches in the emergency closet. I'm going to take one from her, I don't
think she will mind.

"He's not in my cabin, I've found the door wide open. I have to find him Alex...please..."

"How?"

I've found the torch, I'm ready to go. I look up at her, she has not moved from her spot in front of the
door.

"I don't know...bye" I say as I approach again her and the door. No more bullshit, I need to get out.

She's rolling her eyes in her typical way and she sighs. What the fuck? I don't have time for this, for
her problems with me, I'm about to push her aside when...

"Wait, I'm coming with you..."

Oh.

My first reaction is NO. No, no, no, no and no. For so many reasons. No. Just no.

She's taken a few steps in the bathroom direction. I turn around to tell her that no, I don't need her
help, but she has already the ridiculous red raincoat on her hand and I think about Ralph. If there's
even the slightest chance that she could help me, I can't risk it for some stupid pride fight. I wouldn't
ask anyone else to risk injuries and a cold for my dog, I know that they would volunteer, but I cant's
ask them that. But Alex is.... I don't know. She was family. She was love. And she's here right now,
any help is help. So, despise what I know should be the better answer, I find myself saying...

"Ok" And I nod.

I can see it in her eyes that she was expecting some resistances.

"How are we going to do it?" She asks.

I don't know. Truth is, if it wasn't for her, right now I would be screaming Ralph's name running
around with no direction. So I need to come up with a plan. Fast.

"Ok, so...ehm... we can start by looking here in the camp. Maybe he has found a shelter somewhere
close by...or maybe the lake! The lake, there are places there where we... oh god...but you don't
know the place...how..." I'm panicking again.
"Piper, breath..." she's taking my hand. She's taking my hand and it's not helping at all. But I'm breathing because that's better than thinking about everything else, including the warm hand that's holding my cold one. She keeps talking "Let's start with the camp. I know my way around here. We can split. We search it and then we meet at the kitchen, is it ok?"

I nod.

"And how do we communicate with each other? Cell? Can you give me your number?"

Under other circumstances, I would have laugh at this. But this is no fun.

"No, the signal is dead. We can use the walkie-talkies on a different channel, so the others won't listen...I don't want to worry them...they're scared enough..."

"Ok. Something else?"

"I need to call Danny....he's a vet... I've left my walkie on my cabin..." Her hand leaves mine. Finally. Finally?

"You stay here and call him from mine, I'm going to retrieve yours...where?"

"On the bed" I threw it there.

And she's out, way before I can even begin to think about thanking her.

I can't waste any more time.

"Hi Danny, it's me, Piper. Do you copy?"

"Loud and clear. All good? Did you secure Martha's cabin and yours?"

"No. Ralph's missing, Danny, I'm going to look for him"

"Did he run away because of the thunders? I'm coming with you Piper, give me a minute..."

"No, no, wait. I need you to stay here and be the person in charge if anything happens..."

"Piper, you can't go out there on your own! It's a madness..."

"I'm not alone. Al—Martha's with me..."

"But she doesn't know the place as well as I do..."

"That's why I need you to stay here and eventually help the others..."

There's silence on his side. I know he doesn't like to stay put and do nothing. But he's the only one I trust with the camp.

"Ok, Piper, but we need to stay in contact. Bring a walkie with you"

"Yes, we both are. Switch to channel 6, I don't want to worry the others"

"Ok. Piper? Be careful out there. I'm sure you're going to find him. Go to the places he likes the most...and bring him here as soon as you find him, ok?"

"Ok, thank you Danny, thank you so much"
I feel the need to cry, but it has to wait, at least until I'm under the rain and Alex can't see me.

"Bye Piper. Be careful"

"Bye".

And the conversation is over.

Alex is not here yet, so I think about all the things we could use in this search party. Torches and walkie-talkies. I can't think of anything else. It makes no sense to use the GPS. Too much work for nothing. We just need to be lucky. Ralph, where are you? I sit on the bed, my head in my hands. Alex should be here by now. Why isn't she here? I realise that I'm literally soaking the mattress, so I stand up, but I see the Ramones t-shirt and I can't help but taking it in my hands and running my fingertips around the hole, like a did a million of times before. A life ago. Or, better, two lives ago. One before prison and one during prison.

Alex decides to show up in this exact moment. She's at the door, completely soaked, from head to toes. Her glasses are fogged, so she can't see me with the t-shirt that I've already thrown back on the bed. Her hair is wet and it's not red anymore. It looks black. She's breathtaking. The hand that's strangling my heart squeezes a little bit more.

The walkie-talkie is in her hand.

"It's a hell out here. Are we ready to go?" I've seen her this focused and determined before, usually there were drugs involved. Some other times it was because of me.

"Yes. Change the channel, we're using the 6th" with two long steps I'm by her side and I hand her the second torch "I'm taking the left side, you take the right side and we're going to meet outside the kitchen. If we need to communicate, we'll use the walkie-talkies. Ok?"

"Yes, all clear" She's cleaning her glasses even if in two seconds they're going to be fogged again. In other circumstances I would have found this adorable. But right now there's a boulder in my chest and I need to find my dog. My lovely and scared dog. Fleabag.

"He likes to hide his head under stuff, to feel safe…" My voice breaks as I say this. Alex has put on her glasses and her eyes are looking directly into my soul.

"We're going to find him, Piper". Her eyes are sincere.

"Thanks Alex. Thanks for helping me…" I think we're having a moment.

"I'm just doing it for the dog" I can see her barriers going up, higher than the Great Wall of China. Of course she's doing it for Ralph. I'm not blaming her.

"Either way, thanks"

"Ok. Let's go"

And she disappears under a waterfall of rain.

---

It's been almost 30 minutes. I've looked everywhere, in all his favourite spots, but there are no signs of him. My head hurts, my legs are shaking and I feel like I'm drowning. Water, mud, I think I've fallen a few times because the wind was too strong. And still no sign of Ralph. I don't know if I'm crying or not, I'm just a soldier on a mission. The thunders are literally shaking the ground and the
time between the lighting and the strike is almost non-existent.

I arrive at the kitchen cabin before Alex. I can't wait for her without doing anything, so I decide to make another tour around the building. It takes me at least 3 minutes, when usually I can do it in less than 30 seconds. When I complete the tour, I find Alex sitting on the wooden floor of the kitchen porch. I let myself drop on her side, like a dead weight.

I see my fatigue in her eyes and my desperation in the way she looks at me. She hasn't found him either. She raises her arm and for a moment I think she's going to caress my head in the way she knows I love, but a static from the walkie-talkie interrupts her movement, so I will never know. I'm shocked by how much I feel like I needed that gesture. I forgot about it.

"Piper, Piper…can you hear me?"

It's Danny. I take the walkie from my chest pocket.

"Yes, Danny, I can hear you…"

"Is everything ok? Did you find him?"

I feel the panic rising again inside of me like a wave starting from the liver and going straight to my lungs, filling them with something hot and sticky and preventing me from breathing.

"No…"

A loud bang pierces my ears. Followed by an unmistakable sound.

"What was it? Piper? Martha? Are you all right?"

No, we're not, but I'm not going to tell him that. Alex has taken off her glasses, so, in the torch light, I can see that her pupils are so dilated that her eyes seems unnaturally dark. She's scared too, but she's acting like the fact that a fucking tree just fell in the woods in front of us is not bothering her at all. Always the badass.

"We're good. A tree got hit by a thunderbolt and fell…"

"Piper, go back to your cabin, both of you, please, it's not safe out there, we're going to look for him in the morning. He's smart, I'm sure he's found a hiding spot somewhere close by…." His tone is worried, I'm a little worried myself.

I look at Alex for comfort, she's still cleaning her glasses and she doesn't look at me. Of course, she's here just for the dog, even though I don't fully believe it. But I have no time right now to think about the all of this. I need to find him, so I make a decision for the both of us.

"Martha is going back to her cabin, I'm going to look a little more and then I'll be back too" I blatantly lie. I have no intention of stopping until I'll find him, not even a hurricane can keep me from him. I can feel Alex's attention on my left.

"I don't like it, Piper, I really don't. But I know I can't stop you, so just be careful and update me… can you do that?" Danny is a good man.

"Yes, Danny, I can. If you need something or if there are some troubles, I want you to call me too"

"Got it. Good luck"

"Thanks"
And with that it's just me, Alex and the storm again.

I still feel her eyes on me, so I turn my head to match her stare. She doesn't say anything, so I think it's my turn to talk.

"You need to get back to your cabin, I'm going to take it from here"

"Of course you are. So what's next? The lake? We can't waste more time" She starts to stand up from the floor and I'm on my feet because I need to stop this hero nonsense.

"Alex, you're not coming"

"Try me" She is giving me her daring stare, the one that caused so many troubles in the past. I know for experience that she's not going to change her mind. But I don't want her to get hurt because of me, she's a guest after all, not only my ex-lover ex-girlfriend ex-swore enemy. And god knows she got hurt in the past because of me.

I know how to make her blood boil. Maybe she'll react to that.

"Why are you doing this? Why are you helping me?" I know she doesn't want anyone to imply that she's doing something for me, so I'm hoping she takes the bait and, literally, storm out in the storm and back to her cabin. But she doesn't. I guess I'm not the only one who grew up in the past five years.

"Just take the help and shut up Piper. Maybe I just want leverage to make you shut up in the next days"

I don't know. Maybe she's right. Using the help she's giving me to make me do things. Or not doing things, in this case.

For a moment I think she wants to get hurt on purpose just because it will mean a lawsuit for me or the camp, but I really don't want to go there. She's an adult and she's making this decision on her own. I don't fucking care about anything at the moment, so I'll use her help.

"You can go to the lake, stay on the main road. I'll go to the archery area and look around in the woods. We keep in contact. These are shot-range walkie-talkies so we need to stay as close as possible. No more than half a mile. Ok?"

She nods. Focused, determined, with the water dripping on her face and so hot.

I nod back. We take a step together outside the protection of the kitchen porch and the rain and the wind slap us both with a force I've never experienced before. My ears are hurting. We walk until the crossroad and our paths divide.

After twenty minutes, I think I'm lost. There were no signs of Ralph on the archery area and now I'm going around in circles, screaming his name out of desperation, but I'm losing all hopes. I haven't heard from Alex, I'm about to call her on the walkie-talkie when the loudest sound I've ever heard in my life stops my motion. That was close. Really close. The thunderbolt hit something. My ears are ringing. Alex. Oh my god Alex. I need to call her. I look for my walkie-talkie but I must have dropped it on the ground when the thunderbolt hit. I take the torch and I point it everywhere on the ground. When I finally find it I can hear sounds coming from it. It can't be Danny, we're too far, it must be her.

"Alex! Alex! Can you hear me?"
Just static on the other side.

"Alex. Please, answer…"

"…Piper g-" more static "…going there" She has to be out of range. Fuck.

"Alex…Alex…I can't hear you…are you ok?"

Static. Fucking hell. Answer please. I'm already running towards the lake. My legs move on their own.

"I'm going there…" Finally a full sentence from her.

"Where are you? Alex?" I scream at the walkie-talkie while I'm running. Where is she going? Back to the cabin?

"….heard him…"

Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god. My heart is beating out of my chest and not only because I'm running like there's an axe murder behind me.

"You mean Ralph? Did you find him?" My hopes are so high that I'm not running, I'm flying.

"I think I heard him…" She's panting. She's probably running too.

"Where? Where are you? I'm coming…tell me where…" It's so dark I can't see, the torch is useless. I'm running on instinct and I'm scratching myself everywhere, falling every twenty steps.

"…I don't know…in the woods on the left after the fallen tree…"

The fallen tree? Oh my god. This is not good. I must have been the sound I heard before. We need to get back to camp. This is not safe. As on clue, another rumble rips apart my fears. And the sound that follows is the sound of another tree falling.

"ALEEEEEX" I scream without even pressing the button of the walkie-talkie.

"Alex. Are you ok?" This time I press the button.

No answer. Just static.

"Alex…Alex please answer!"

Nothing.

Oh my god. What… oh my god.

I finally reach the main road, the one that goes from the camp to the lake. The one Alex was supposed to take. Now, where the fuck is the fallen tree? I can't understand in which point of the road I am and I notice that I've lost my torch. Everything is completely dark. I take a lucky guess and I start to run towards the lake.

"Alex. Can you hear me? Alex? Please…please.." I'm not trying to hide my desperation anymore.

Still just static.

I found myself with the face on the mud. I've stumbled on a tree in the middle of the road. My shin
hurts like hell, but I love this tree. I love it with all my heart. She said after the tree on the left. I'm close Alex, I'm coming.

"...fuck.... him...."

"...think....found...

It takes me a few seconds to understand that the sounds are coming from my walkie-talkie.

"Hello? Hello? Alex, is that you?" As I pronounce those words, I realize that I am close to the Camp, so it could be Danny as well.

It's like everything around me is frozen. Like I'm in the middle on the fucking eye of the hurricane and around me everything is flying. But not me. I don't even feel the rain anymore as I'm waiting. Waiting for something. Maybe a miracle.

"..Yes, it's me. I've found him"

This is it. My miracle. The most beautiful words I've ever heard in my life.

"Are you ok?"

"Yes, we're good. But I think he broke a leg or something, we need to take him out of here"

"Ok, ok. Where are you?" You can die of fear, but you can also die of happiness, I think. And that's what is happening with me right now.

"I don't know. I've lost my glasses" I laugh. The situation is still dramatic, but the tension needs to be released one way or another.

This helps me focus. Because when another lighting strikes, I can see my surroundings. I know where I am and suddenly I realize where Ralph went. Of course. To our secret place.

I start to run again. I'm so close. I jump on the thorny bush like it's made of cotton candy and I'm finally on the meadow. There, under the oak, are lying the two living things that I want to see the most in this exact moment. Nothing and no one can beat the joy I feel right now. I think this is what pure love fells like.

I run towards them. Alex is holding Ralph's head on her lap and when I arrive there I throw myself on the ground and at Ralph. My head is in her lap too. My whole body is on the ground, I feel the cold water entering my bones, but I don't care. Ralph is here and alive and he's looking at me and he's reacting at my touch like it's the most beautiful thing he's ever felt. Well, I don't know if this is what he feels, but it is definitely what I'm feeling right now.

More than once my hands that are wandering on his body, meet Alex's. Alex. I am so.... I don't know. Grateful. Joyful. Full of...

I rise from the ground and I get on my knees. My arms go around her and I squeeze her like I want to strangle her. I don't fucking care if she's going to make me pay for this, I might as well enjoy it. I bury my face in her neck while I release an arm from the hug to caress Ralph who's looking at us with the puppy dog eyes. Scared as hell but alive. We must look like a fucked up nativity.

The hell is still breaking loose around us, but I don't care anymore. I know what I need, I will think tomorrow about the consequences of this. I tighten the embrace and I bury my face deeper into that place I still remember. The place on her neck where I fit perfectly. It was mine. She's not killing me
yet, and her right hand goes on my side, over my hip, maybe to gain some balance. I let my lips brush her skin. It's not a kiss, just contact. I rise my eyes to see her reaction. She's looking straight ahead, with no glasses on, but with a little grin on her face. I smile too on her neck, and our walkie-talkies burst into life.

"Piper, Piper, you there?" It's Danny. His tone is worrying me.

"Yeah Danny, I'm here. We've found..." He doesn't let me finish the sentence.

"Is Martha with you?" I look at Alex, she's now looking perplexed at me.

"Yeah, she's here, what happened?"

"Thank God. Oh thank God. You need to come back here right now, Piper" The relief in his voice is palpable "She's fine! She's with Piper!" I hear him screaming to someone else in the distant. I can hear the storm on the walkie, why aren't they inside a cabin? What happened?

"What happened Danny? Is everyone ok?"

"Yes. Everyone is safe. But you need to give up what you're doing and come back now, the both of you"

"We've found him Danny. We've found Ralph. We're coming.."

"Oh good! Hurry up. It's dangerous out there."

"Ok"

And, with that I put the walkie-talkie inside my chest pocket and I look at Alex. One of my arm is still around her neck, but now the position is a little awkward. I remove my arm and I stand on my feet.

I don't know if Alex doesn't see my stretched hand or if she avoids it on purpose, but she's soon on her feet with Ralph still in her arms. He is heavy. It must be difficult to transport him.

"Let me carry him" I say as I try to take him from her arms. But she turns around a little bit.

"Don't. I can't see. I'll carry him, you lead the way" Bossy Alex is right. It's the fastest way to get to camp. I put on the autopilot as I move through the woods that I know so well, trying not to think about the fact that my secret place has saved my life once again and that my hand is holding Alex's arm while I guide her and my very much alive Fleabag back to camp.

After what it looks like a couple of hours but it's probably only 20 minutes, we arrive back to camp. Everything is dark, so I guess the electric power is off. We go straight to the Goldberg's cabin. I can see a light coming from under the door, they took off the door protection. I know the storm is losing its power but I don't see why they did something like that. Did something happen?

I knock on the door and Katie opens it. Why is she here? She looks very relieved to see us.

"Come on in, you three" She whispers with a big smile.

We enter the cabin leaving a trail of water and mud behind us. The room is lit by a few candles, probably the electric generators aren't on yet. Al, Jason and Lauren are here as well and they're whispering with Danny on the other side of the room.

"What happened?" My voice is strong and demanding. Now that I know that everyone is safe I need
to know what the fuck happened.

"Shhh, you're going to wake up the babies on the other room" Danny is talking while he takes a clean towel, puts it on the floor and take Ralph from Alex's arm.

With his experienced hands, he checks Ralph, who's silently crying. My poor baby.

"Everything seems good. Maybe a little fracture on the left hind limb, but nothing serious. I'm going to keep him here for the rest of the night and keep an eye on him. I've got some painkillers in case he needs some".

I release the breath I didn't know I was keeping.

"Thanks Danny, really, I don't know how to thank you" for a moment I forget about all the other troubles.

"Listen Piper, Martha, something happened…” As he says that, he looks at Alex, not at me.

He continues "There's been an… accident. A tree fell very close to the Camp and the noise was really loud, so we talked and we decided to go outside to check and…well…the tree completely destroyed Cabin 6".

I'm at a loss for words. How was it possible? We followed all the rules, the trees are far from the cabins. How…?

"How? Danny…it's not possible, there are no trees there…”

"I know, we were shocked too, but…it's a mess out there, I'm sorry…”

I need to take the situation in my hands.

"Ok, guys, you did enough for today. The worst is over…you can go back to your cabin, take a shower, a good night's sleep and tomorrow morning we're going to see the damage, ok? It's only 1 AM. There's nothing we can do now….I'll call the insurance company tomorrow and see what I can do….And you Danny, really... I don't know what I would have done without you… really thanks… for this and Ralph, everything”

"Oh, you don't have to say it! Me and this buddy are going to sleep like babies tonight, I just hope that Sarah won't get jealous…but you need to take a shower and sleep too…as soon as possible. The both of you!" He's not looking at me.

Alex.

I've totally forgot about her.

Oh crap. Her cabin, all her stuff.

I turn around but she's wearing the usual mask. The neutral one. I realise she hasn't said a word since she's entered the Goldberg's cabin.

"I'm really sorry Martha…but I'm glad you're ok" Says Katie before joining her friends outside to go back to their cabin.

"Thanks Katie…” And then it hits me.

What if? What if she wasn't outside with me? Is she thinking the same thing? Oh God.
"Yes Martha, we're so glad you weren't there. You know, we tried to look for you and it looked like you weren't there, but we weren't sure until you answered on the walkie-talkie…let's just said we went through 10 minutes of hell"

He's touching her arm, she puts her hand above his with a smile. I think it's forced.

"Thank you, Danny. I'm still a little shocked, but all's well that ends well"

"Yeah, you're right. That's the spirit. So, see you in the morning? Piper, do you have an inflatable bed or do you want to borrow mine?"

Inflatable bed? Why do I have to use one? I already have a….Oh. Alex.

Crap.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

There goes my full night of sleep.

"No thanks, I have it. See you tomorrow…"

I go where Ralph is, I pet him a little bit and I whisper all my love to him, he seems to understand me because, for the first time tonight, he's wagging his tail. Good boy.

Alex doesn't do anything, but she's behind me when I go outside and close the door behind me after we exchange the last goodnights and thanks.

The adrenaline is leaving my body, so when I step into the rain, this time I'm just tired and heavy. I just want to find a corner and die there, figuratively speaking.

We don't share a word while we're walking. But when we are in front of her cabin and we stop to see the top of a pine tree coming out of the window, I ask her if she wants to go nearer and look.

"No, tomorrow…"

I'm really glad to hear that.

I open the door to my cabin with the silent walker always silently behind me. I take off my shoes and she does the same, we leave them outside. I take the torch and go directly to the closet where the candles are. I take out four candles and I light them up, positioning them around the room, so we can finally see something.

I need to break this silence.

"Listen, you can go and take a shower while I settle everything for the night"

"Ok…"

I look at her. Maybe for the first time. She's a wall of mud, dirt and water ad no glasses. She looks stunning, as always. Like someone from a sci-fi movie about zombies or alien werewolves.

She stands still, I don't know why.

"Do you need something?"

"Well…A t-shirt and a pair of panties would be good"
I'm blushing. Why didn't I think about it? She has something on her face that could be a little smile. Maybe. Thanks god for the layers of mud on my face.

"Ehm..Yes, of course, I'm going to bring them to you. In the bathroom you'll find everything, take whatever you need. Here's some candles. There should be enough warm water for the both of us."

"Ok, thanks"

And she's gone.

The first thing I do is getting rid of my dirty clothes. I take them off and put them into a bag. I'm probably going to burn them tomorrow. I start by placing a couple of more candles around the room and take out the inflatable bed. It takes a few minutes for it to get ready. When it's inflated I sit on it, still in my underwear, before putting the clean sheets on. It's really as uncomfortable as I remembered and it creaks every time I breathe. Poor Alex. I should ask her to take the bed. I'm not going to sleep anyway.

When she emerges from the bathroom with the small small small towel around her, I'm still on her bed, almost asleep. I rise up like someone has just spilled a pot full of hot lava on my stomach.

She laughs.

"Relax Piper, I'm not going to kill you"

I smile back because what can you do when someone is looking at you like this? Like no time has ever passed? Like we're at Litchfield and it's 4 AM and Suzanne has just finished cleaning the showers so we can sneak inside for our morning glory?

But then I remember where we are and who we are and that I'm undressed and the fact that the mud is starting to dry on my face and I feel like I've got a plastic surgery from someone from The Capitol of Panem.

"I'm going to take a shower too..I hope you left me some warm water… the panties and the t-shirt are on the bed. I wanted to put the sheets on, but, you saw me, I slept on the job…" This awards me a smile.

"Yeah, don't worry, I'll do it"

"I'll take the inflatable bed, you sleep on the real one…"

"Nah, don't worry about it. This one is good…"

"Alex, I mean it. It's the least I can do…"

"I've told you this is good, Piper" By the way she pronounces my name, it is clear that if I say another word we will end up fighting, so I reply with an "Ok" and I'm off to the bathroom. I can feel her eyes on my back.

The hot water on my skin is better than a good orgasm. And this perfectly summarizes my shower.

When I go back into the main room, Alex is already on her bed. She hasn't put on the shorts I gave her. She didn't ask for them and I know she liked to sleep without them, but better be safe than sorry. I'm on my side of the bed. Her bed is on my side of the room. I didn't do it on purpose. I swear it. She's reading the book I had on my bedside table. Something Buddhist about peace and love. At
least she's trying to read it, because without her glasses, she can't see shit, I know it. She's keeping the book as close as possible to her face and all I see is a cover book with a crown of half drenched hair around it. But they're still dark and if I squeeze my eyes I can see the old Alex reading the Quran again.

I hate to be the one to break this peaceful moment.

"So, I'm going to blow out the candles, but I'm going to keep this one on, if it's ok with you"

She raises her head from the book and looks at me. I feel like I'm looking at a timing bomb, ready to explode.

"Ok, no problem. I can't read a shit anyway"

She puts the book on my bedside table, her bed makes horrible noises.

I blow out all the candles except for the one on Martha's bedside table and I go back to bed. What am I supposed to say? She hadn't say a word since she's found Ralph.

"I'm sorry about your cabin, Alex…"

I hear her bed squeaking.

"Not now, Piper…"

"I just wanted to say that the insurance will cover every…."

"I said not now! I'm tired and I just want to sleep…we'll talk tomorrow…"

"Ok. I just wanted to say that. And thank you for…."

"What part of "not now" don't you understand?….please. I'm tired…"

"Ok, sorry…it was just a thank you…” I can't help but answer every time she says something. It's stronger than me.

She's in silence but her bed speaks for her. It's squeaking again.

And again, and again.

It goes on like this for more than half an hour. I'm losing my patience and she's losing it too, according to her sighs.

I reach the point when I can't take it anymore. Either she stops or I put a knife into her bed.

"Alex…"

"What?" Her tone is abrupt and pissed.

"Come to bed…”

"What?" Her tone is different now. I don't know how to describe it.

"I'm exhausted. I'm going to stab either you or the bed, so, please, put aside all your problems with me and just come to bed…”

Silence. She doesn't answer. She's stubborn like that. At least I hope she can stay put.
After less than a minute of perfect silence, my hopes are shattered. She's moving and the bed is creaking again. But louder this time. I force my eyes open to see what's happening, but I wish I didn't do it.

Alex is on her feet, circling the bed to take the spot beside me on my bed. Or to kill me.

Her bare legs are endless. The t-shirt I gave her is a little short and does nothing to cover her ass. Or to conceal her nipples.

I take a deep breath and I close my eyes again, I don't want her to see me like this and I don't want to see her. Or, better, I don't want to want to see her.

I feel the mattress on my right side shifts.

I take another deep breath.

The heat she's radiating is unbearable.

I will never get out of this night alive.

"It's only for tonight..." she whispers to me. Too close to me. Definitely too close. I don't even know what she means.

"Ok" I whisper back and I roll on my left side so my back is towards her.

Every muscles on my body is in tension. My jaw is closed. My hands are fists. I am aware of her. Of everything of her. Her smell, which is mine because she used my stuff. I can fucking feel her breath on my neck. The adrenaline is still flooding my blood. I can't breath. It's tonight's fault. The storm's fault. The thrill of the danger.

If she didn't follow me into the woods, she could be dead right now. Dead. On my camp. My fault again.

"I'm glad you're alive" I say it out loud. I don't even know why.

"Me too kid, me too". She's closer now.
Chapter 13

Every little cell in my body is vibrating, ringing like a fucking bell.

I'm hearing a silent sound bouncing inside my skull. It's deafening.

Why? Does God hate me so much? Is this punishment?

This surely feels like hell. And hell smells like myrrh and white musk. And burned candles. And temptation, and frustration.

My frustration.

Once, Einstein tried to explain his theory of relativity by saying that if you put your hand on a hot stove for a minute, it seems like an hour but if you sit with a pretty girl for an hour, it seems like a minute. I think he forgot to mention the case in which you're lying next to your ex-everything and a second seems like a decade.

According to Einstein's theory of relativity, I'm relatively fucked.

It's the time, the time is fucking with my head. This day has been eternal. But, at the same time, I cannot believe that this is only the fourth day that I have her face in front of me every waking moment. And if it's not her face, it's her voice, or her smell, or someone talks to me about her. She's everywhere.

I want it to be over so badly.

So badly that I don't.

That's why I'm lying here, as still as possible. I'm not moving a muscle. I learnt this in a buddhist retreat in Malaysia. Stay still, don't move. Let the emotions come and don't react.

But God, I do feel like someone is bombing me and I'm a motionless puppet. How is this supposed to help me? I'm too aware and too alert. I'm a not-so-living contradiction. This equilibrium is so fragile that even a breath of wind could blow me up.

Or the touch of an hand.

I think I'm imagining it. I'm officially crazy, on the verge of a panic attack and violently embracing my inner Ghandi. Needless to say, this isn't working.

Something is touching my arm. That something is moving. Slightly but it's moving.

I'm not crazy.

Acknowledging it would mean to acknowledge that this is affecting me. And to move. And I have no intention to do either one of the two. But she needs to remove that thing from my arm. If it's her hand, she needs to cut her arm and throw it outside this cabin. Drastic enough?

Maybe I can go outside. Wait in the storm. I guess it's more quiet than this bed. Or than my head.

But I'm also really tired and this is warm, the mattress is soft but firm and her presence forces me to lay still, and, even though my heart is breaking my ribs, I almost fall asleep in this kaleidoscope of absurd situations.
Almost.

Because that thing is moving again. Then it stops.

Then it starts again. Brushing for an inch. And then it stops again.

I have totally lost any fragment of sanity. Tomorrow I'll leave. Where's the problem? I just need to make some arrangements and all of this will be over for good. This is not good. Not healthy. But, mostly, this is not possible.

Something wakes me up. I don't know what it is, but it's loud and sudden, probably a thunder. And I find myself in a sitting position. I've moved. Oh no, I did. Everything is pitch black, the candle is no longer lit and I have this fear sensation that I don't know how to handle.

I don't see anything, I don't feel anyone, so I may as well being alone in this bed. The thought scares me even more, I don't know why.

But then I feel it. The thing. Her thing is real now. It's her hand and it's grabbing my forearm.

My fragile equilibrium is shattered into pieces.

Without even thinking about it, I try to free myself from her grasp, and by doing so, my arm crashes into her body. She's sitting too on the bed, and her hand's not leaving my forearm.

The obscurity helps me. It allows me to shake the numbness of the sleep and focus on the present. She's probably just as confused as me and her first reaction was to grab me.

I move my free hand to grab her wrist and remove her hand from me, but as I'm doing that, a lightning strikes. And, for a second, I see her face. And what I see there it's not fear. It's not confusion. It's something else. Something heavy.

Not a word has been spoken. And words aren't really necessary. They're dangerous, especially now, as I'm feeling her body moving into my sacred space, violating years of barriers, loyalties and common sense.

A word would put us back in this world. A word would end everything. Just a word.

Please, say something.

Please.

The answer to my prayers comes in the form of a shift of air indicating that she's moving. Over me. I feel her leg crossing my lap and before I have the time to breath, she's straddling me.

Nothing slow, tentative, tender, inquiring or even respectful. Her core pushed hard against mine and her hands on my forearms. I remain motionless.

She was the one to cross the line, but I didn't do anything to stop her.

So when her lips meet mine and the lightning strikes again, I keep my eyes closed.

I'm drowning in her. Tongues, breaths, bites, fingers. Everything, all at once. We're rolling on the bed the friction between our skins is almost painful.

My mind goes black, I let the great wave of heat take possession of my body. The damage is done, so now I feel the need to damage her, me, everything as much as possible.
We already had angry sex, sad sex, happy sex, sloppy sex, rough sex, prison sex, hungry sex and all the kind of sex you can think of. But this is new. This is not sex. This is our soul fucking with each other. Sweet auto-destruction. In the total darkness.

We're not soft, when my hand goes into her panties I don't even do the usual process, I go straight for the goal. She's more than ready, naturally, but she's not cooperating. She moves like an eel and with a swift movement, she's out of my grasp and she's taking off my panties. I wasn't expecting this, I try to gain back my position but she's quicker than me and I feel two of her fingers inside of me. It's like the air has been sucked from my lungs. She's pumping so, so hard. She never did it like this, but I don't have the time to complain because when she bites my shoulder I cross the point of no return. Was it worth it?

Her whole body is flushed against mine. She's not using her wrist but she's using her whole body to slam those fingers inside of me. I'm stupid, I'm fucking stupid, because as I'm about to come I grab her face and I kiss her. I desperately kiss her, like I want to melt her, with her.

As I come hard, with my eyes closed I feel her stupid grin on the skin of my neck. But the pleasure is too strong, the feeling of having released all the bad in the world overcome the desire to hate her.

Was it worth it? Yes it was.

I wake up covered in sweat.

I mimic the position I had before. Abruptly. I'm sitting on the bed. But this time it's different for three reasons. The first is that the light coming through the window is blinding. It must be morning. Maybe noon. The second is that I'm alone in this room, she's gone. And the third is that this is not a dream.

I'm fucked.

I cover my eyes with my hands and I feel embarrassed. Embarrassed for myself, for my subconscious, for whatever made me having a dream like this.

Why?

What does it mean? Do I have to acknowledge the fact that I still want to fuck her? What's the fucking point in that? Do I have to listen to her?

I feel dirty, I want to leave this bed. I need a shower. I go to the bathroom and I splash some water on my face.

I look at my reflection in the mirror.

Bags under my eyes. As usual.

My hair is glued to my face because of the sweat. I remove a lock from my eyes.

I don't recognize myself anymore. And not only because now I'm a red head.

"Fucking Piper Chapman" I say at the mirror. My voice even lower than usual.
Chapter 14

She is sleeping when I wake up, with the first rays of light inflaming her already red hair.

I can say for sure that I've never seen her like this. Or, better, I've never looked at her like this. At Litchfield we were constantly watched, never really alone, always careful. Before Litchfield, well, let's just say that I was young and slightly stupid, I wanted other things, I didn't care about this.

And by this I mean...this. To look and observe, nothing else. Being aware of the little things. Being aware of the dust dancing in the sun above her head, of the slow rising of her chest, of the reality that lays in front of me, the fact that all the cells of her body are here right now, after longing for this moment for so long, everything is physically here. She's here. It's a peaceful moment. The storm is gone, I can see beams of light coming from the window. Ralph is fine, no one is hurt and Alex is fine too. Alex is fine and she's completely harmless in my bed. She can't talk back to me, she can't even look at me, she's completely relaxed and completely safe. I completely would like to touch her, but just to print in my brain with my fingertips the way I would like to remember her forever.

I'm not a fool. I know that this situation is not really ideal, it's not the way I've picture it in my mind every day since that day five years ago, and after a couple of years, every other day, or, after Martha, every once in a while.

There would be hesitation, at first. Distrust. But after that she would have seen me, for what I am now. And there's when the mature conversation would have start. Maybe, just maybe, I've put too much imagination into this thing in my head, maybe because deep down I knew that the reality would have been different? I'll never know. All I can do now is work with what I've got, with as much honesty as possible.

I've made this decision this morning. She'll be gone in six days and this is how I will remember her. Safe, relaxed and in my bed. I'm not kidding myself, in six days there's going to be a goodbye, my last chance to get some kind of closure. The timing couldn't be more perfect.

I feel so full of light too. It's like last night emptied everything I had inside and now I can wake up brand new, with white light filling my body. Light and acceptance. Acceptance that this will probably be the first and last time I am allowed to see her like this, in my same room, breathing the same air as me, without animosity or layers of problems. We are both pure, in a way.

I smile when I think about the fact that the only way to achieve this moment was to have Alex unconscious, but, what the hell, whatever helps...

I should take a shower, but I can't, because it will wake her up and I think I will have to do a lot of dirty work this morning. Speaking of which, I need to call Cal. But I really also need just another small minute here.

I focus my attention on her regular breathing. It's all so beautiful. I look at her until it starts to hurt. And then I put on a pair of shorts and I leave the cabin.

What I have in front of me is simply impossible to believe. Broken branches everywhere, leaves, pieces of wood, pieces of plastic, garbage, a couple of umbrellas, camping chairs, ropes, a fucking tree smashed on a cabin. The scenario is apocalyptic. What the fuck happened last night? How did we survive? How much money did we lose and how much of it is covered by our very expensive insurance? My mind is in fibrillation. The sun is really bright, the water, stagnant on the ground, makes everything sparkle. It all could be a big metaphor of life, the clearness after the storm and all
the other philosophical bullshit that I like so much, but right now, as I see it, it's all a big "Fuck you Piper, I'm the weather, you have no control on this and, frankly, you're a mess". I smile at the thought and I take out the cell from my pocket. Damn, it's dead, I must have left it turned off after the all "Ralph-is-missing-Alex-is-in-my-bed" thing. I turn it on.

86 notifications. What the hell?

But first, coffee.

As I walk towards the kitchen I stop for a second to look at the disaster I have in front of me. Alex and Sandy's cabin is literally divided in half by a big pine tree. How did it happen? I have no clue. The first row of trees is at least 70 feet from all the cabins, did it fly? How strong were the winds? But the tree is there, with roots and all, and it could have killed Alex. I don't linger on this thought too much because the implications of what we risked last night are too heavy, and I know what happened to me the last time I thought I was indirectly responsible for Alex's death. It wasn't good, it wasn't good at all.

I shake these thoughts from my head and I keep moving. I miss Ralph on my side but I know that he's fine now, otherwise Danny would have called me. Some of the guests are already up and talking in a group not far from me, but I'm still not ready to face them, I already know what the only topic of discussion would be, so I need some alone time before the "Oh my god she could have died" and "what will you do now?" storm will hit me. So I sneak into the kitchen, I grab a cup of already made fresh coffee and I head out avoiding all the human beings and going directly to the woods.

No one saw me, good.

I sit on a patch of wet leaves, my ass is going to be wet soon, but I don't care, it will dry. I sniff my dark salvation and I already feel reinvigorated. As I sip slowly the coffee, a sense of excitement rushes through me. It was there also this morning. I don't know how to describe it. A rush of adrenaline, of possibilities, adventures. I don't know. My life has been pretty boring in the past years, but boring in a nice way. Last night I was in the middle of a storm, with Alex. That kind of excitement is new for me, or, better, I didn't think I still had it in me. I feel younger, in a way, happy. Happier.

I look at the screen of my phone. Texts from Cal, Polly, Nicky, Jones, Martha, some New York friends and also my father and Larry. Everyone was really concerned. Some guys died last night in a camping not far from here. Lighting strikes.

I quickly text Martha, telling her that I'm ok and that I will call her later and then I dial Cal's number. He picks up after less than one ring.

"Pipette, how are you? Is it true that cabin 6 has been destroyed by a tree? How is it even possible?" His voice is so high that it feels like a drill in my ear.

I smile at his concern. The situation is not funny, but everyone is fine and I've never heard him so concerned before. My big little bear brother loves this Camp just as much as I do.

"Hi Cal, calm down, everything is good. Who told you, by the way?"

And, then, for some solid 10 minutes, we talk about the Camp, the insurance company that will cover every cost and about his friend that owns an excavator and that can be here in a few hours to help us remove the tree from the cabin and take down everything, just like his lawyer friend told him to.
So, everything is set. I just need to clean the camp while I wait for the arrival of Cal and his friend. As I scroll for the last time the screen, I see a text I hadn't seen before. It's from Sandy.

"Hi Piper. I can't contact my girlfriend. And your Martha can't contact you either. Is everything ok? Please, if you read this before she does, can you tell her to call me? Thanks."

My girlfriend. I don't know why this annoys me. Maybe is just perfect Sandy that annoys me.

What do I have to tell her? That her girlfriend slept with me last night and that their cabin is destroyed? Probably yes. I don't know why my first instinct is to be stupid, but I'm also the owner of this place and she's worried about one of my guests.

"Hi Sandy. Last night the storm hit really hard and your cabin is damaged. Don't worry about Martha. She's fine and she's still sleeping. I'll tell her to call you as soon as I see her."

The answer is almost immediate.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you. I was so worried."

Guilt.

I answer with a smiley face and I put my cell back in my pocket. The temptation to turn it off and throw it away is really strong.

Let's go, we've got work to do.

It's almost 11 a.m. and still no sign of Alex. Danny brought Ralph to a vet in town, it turns out he's got a little fracture, but nothing that a little rest and a tight bandage can't cure. We're lucky, but I can't help but feel that the luckiest one of all is me. That's why my smile is even shinier than the sun. It may be the only shiny thing about me, because, well, I'm dirty. Like really really dirty.

I tried to convince the guests that I could do all the work on my own, but they didn't want to hear any reason. So everyone helped. Even the kids were going around the camp to collect the smallest branches to bring them in the pile of wood that we will use for Wednesday's bonfire.

Cal called me two minutes ago to tell me that they're on their way. So I need to go and check on Alex because, once the tree will be removed, we need to move all of her and Martha's stuff into the reception cabin, or into my cabin. Obviously temporarily.

When I enter the cabin I don't know what to expect, but I know that certainly I wasn't expecting to see her sleeping on my side of the bed only in her bathrobe, or, to be more precise, in my bathrobe.

Her hair is wet. Her hair looks black again.

That's why I need to hurry and wake her up now, so that my brain will not have the time to get too fucked up, or to look at the bathrobe that is slowly opening…

"Pipes?" a sleepy hoarse voice comes from the bed.

Fuck.

"Hey, hi. Sorry to bother you, but I need you to come with me outside…"

Silence, she's stretching.
"Now? Naked?" She's rubbing her face with both her hands. She's now in a sitting position and the bathrobe opens just a little bit more.

"Yes...I mean, no... I mean... Yes related to the now, the no to the naked part, obviously..." I'm babbling... so much for playing it cool, but she's smiling, or so it appears.

"Why?"

"Why what?" Oh god.

"Why do I need to follow you outside now, did something happen?" Suddenly she raises her eyes to me and her sleepy tone is gone "Did something happen?

"No, no, don't worry about it" I take a few steps in her direction with my arms extended. It looks like I still automatically feel the pull to reassure her, even after all these years, like when we were fighting, like when I decided to leave her in Paris.

But it looks like I'm the only one here, since I see her retreating from me, it's a small inch, but it's enough to hurt me, even if I have absolutely no right to expect her to be drawn to me in any way. But it hurts to know that her automatic reaction to me is to get as far as possible from my body. So I keep on talking, it's the thing I do when I'm nervous.

"It's just that Cal is arriving here with his friend and an excavator and when we'll remove the tree, we'll need to take all of your stuff and bring it here... or somewhere else... just temporarily. Lenny and Donny are leaving on Saturday, so you and Sandy can move in cabin #3 for as long as you like. And a full refund will be given you and also extra compensation for all the things that may have been broken or ruined last night..."

I pause one second to breath.

"Woah. Very professional Miss Chapman, so you're offering us a free holiday and an all-inclusive service in exchange for what? A good trip advisor review? Or to avoid a lawsuit?"

She's still smiling, but I can't figure out if she's joking or if she's for real. I know she could sue us. We have done everything by the book, but a lawsuit is a lawsuit. Could she really do that? My instinct says no. But my instinct also says that Alex, the new and improved Alex, is unpredictable. So I won't fall into her trap and be polemic. She's a client and the client is always right. I feel like she's trying to bring me on the verge. On the verge of what? I need to stay calm and collected. No more reaction in the heat of the moment with her, I cannot afford it, not now.

"Alex, listen, I don't want to beg you... but this Camp is really important for me and other people are involved... Cal, Yoga Jones..." At the word "beg" she started smiling with her typical amused grin. "...so yes... if you could just, not sue us, it would be great. I know you have the right to, but I just, what the hell, I just beg you, please don't do it. Insult me and shout at me all you want, but don't sue us please".

Now she's laughing from the belly, but I'm not. Is this a good laugh or a bad one?

It seems like an eternity has passed before she speaks.

"Relax kid, I was joking... you had me at the "full refund holiday", but, to be honest, I also liked the begging part... can I know more about it? What do I get? You on your knees? I'd really like that..."

A bomb of heat explodes inside of me. I don't know if I should be more relieved, offended or... well, "aware". Me on my knees. Been there, done that. I'm not turned on. I'm not.
"Fuck you, Alex…" I join in her laugh. If you can't defeat them, join them.

The air looks clear between us. Maybe last night was purifying also for her. Maybe we can finally have the talk. Actually, I can finally have the talk and the closure I need. I just need her to be honest and not having a secret agenda or a secret friend telling her to talk to me. I need her to be, well, her. Given the circumstances, I don't know, but I'm positive that I'm going to figure it out.

"How's Ralph?" she asks.

"Good, thanks. He's got a little fracture, but nothing serious. In three weeks top he's going to run around again" 

"Good" she looks sincere, and I'm pretty sure she is.

We are looking at each other in silence. I'd like to thank her again for last night, but I think I know how she'll react if I imply, even indirectly, that she did something to help me. I'm so glad that she's not hurt.

In a few seconds the silence will be awkward. I need to come up with something neutral to say.


She's taken aback from my words and my change of topic. I'm taken aback from what I've just blurted out. What is it with me that when Alex is in the same room, my mouth is disconnected from my brain?

She's opening her mouth to speak when my phone starts ringing. It's Cal.

"Hey Bro!"

They're here. Time to work. I hung up.

"Sorry, it was Cal…they're here" I look at Alex who's still in the same position as before "What were you saying?"

"Nothing" She's quick in her response. Too quick. "It can wait"

What does she want to tell me?

"Ok. Later" No pressure.

"I'll be out in a minute" she says as to dismiss me. Message received. I leave her half naked in my cabin while I go outside and close the door behind me. This is good. I don't know what it is, but it's good, promising.

I'm talking to Cal and to his friend Tom in the kitchen, in front of another cup of coffee, when Alex makes her entrance through the door and all eyes are on her.

My heart skips a beat, she's wearing my clothes. Of course, I should have thought about it. She doesn't have a wardrobe anymore. She has chosen a simple blue t-shirt and a pair of light brown shorts. I'm embarrassed because it means that she has probably gone through my stuff. Not that I have something to hide.

Then it hits me. Oh my god. What if she…? Where did I put it? Suddenly I raise my eyes in her direction. She's looking at me with a smile, pointing at her shorts. My shorts. She knows. Oh god, she knows.
Our sex life was curious and adventurous, but she doesn't need to know what I do or don't do now. Oh god.

My thoughts are interrupted by the entrance of Rosa who, like a tornado, engulfs Alex in a tight embrace. The Alex I knew wasn't really into public displays of affection, but I guess I'm not the only one who changed in all these years because she hugs Rosa back and she smiles sincerely. I'm happy that Rosa can do what I wish I could do.

"You made us all worry so much darling! Have you seen the cabin? I cannot even begin to think about what would have happened if you were inside! Thank god you were out with Piper…" At the mention of my name, Rosa seems to remember that I exist and turns her attention to me without leaving Alex's side, and without letting her talk.

"Piper, darling, what about you? Are you ok?"

"I'm pretty good Rosa, thank you very much"

"Did you both sleep well last night? Two years ago I spilled some tea on my bed and I was forced to sleep in the inflatable bed…needless to say, it was a nightmare!" This question is clearly directed at Alex, who wasn't supposed to sleep on the bed. She wasn't supposed to be so close to me that I could feel the heat radiate from her body…

"I was so tired that I slept like a baby…" it's her very neutral reply. I wonder if it's true. The fact that she was sleeping in the bathrobe at noon made me think about the opposite. And I kind of like the idea that she didn't sleep well by my side, that, one way or the other, she's affected by me as much as her presence is affecting me.

The answer seems to have placated Rosa's curiosity that now shifts to another topic.

"Cal! How are you darling? How's Neri? And the baby?" And in a couple of fast steps, she's next to me, hugging him.

"We're all good Rosa, next week they're coming here, so you'll have all the time in the world to spoil my child as usual. How's Bob doing?"

"Oh Cal! Always so charming! Bob is exactly how you left him last year…stubborn like a goat, but good." All the people in the room are laughing, Alex is walking in our direction, Rosa is still speaking.

"Cal, darling, have you met our Martha?" at the mention of Martha's name, my head snaps in the door's direction, expecting to see my Martha. Old habits die last. I don't know why my heart is beating so fast. Why am I scared at the thought that my fiancé could be here?

"No. Hi, I'm Cal, nice to meet you Martha. May I say that I'm really really sorry about what happened? Really…"

"Cal, stop please. You don't have to worry about it. I've settle everything with your sister. No one got hurt and I'm going to get a free holiday, so…"

I was so full in my head that I didn't think about the fact the Cal was going to meet Alex, and vice versa, and now the scene in front of me is more surreal than a Dali painting. If he only knew…

"You get a free holiday and Pipette told me we're not getting sued. I'd say it's a win-win situation, right?"
"Straight to the point Cal, I like you!" says Alex causing a burst of laughs in the room.

"Well, yeah. It's the usual Chapman's charm, you know how it is...I'm irresistible...but married" Since his marriage to Neri, Cal seems to have learn how to speak with women, in a way I'm proud of him.

"Oh Cal, I'm afraid she's more inclined to be charmed by the other Chapman in this room..." My blood is frozen, I can feel my ears burning. Rosa, what the hell are you talking about? Does she know something about us? Did she hear us? Oh my god. I turn my head in Alex's direction, why does she seem so calm? Why is she smiling? Cal's eyes are bigger and he looks at me with a puzzled look. I feel you brother. This may be my end, but then Alex starts to talk in her usual deep and playful voice.

"Well, what Rosa meant is that, since I'm a lesbian, I would be inclined to sail towards other shores. But since I'm a lesbian with a girlfriend, I may have to ignore the Chapman charm for today..."

Oh. God. That's what Rosa meant! I think Alex knew about my misinterpretation, because I saw her giving me a quick glance. Maybe she was afraid I could ruin our cover? Doesn't she know that, as of right now, the public revelation of the truth is my greatest fear?

"No, really? Another one? I'm starting to think is my fault, I'm surrounded by lesbians...I'm like a lesbian attractor..." Thank god the conversation is proceeding smoothly even without me. It seems that, if Alex is in the room, I lose all my intuitiveness.

"This is not me making a move on you, but you look quite familiar, Martha. Have we met somewhere?" I've spent my life eating healthy and exercising and, in a couple of minutes, Cal has given me a three or four heart attacks. I remember I showed him some picture of Alex, but it was years ago...he cannot remember... please Alex, say something definitive...

"I don't think so. I'm pretty sure I would remember you..." She delivers the line with a flirty mocking grin and that seals it. Everyone laughs and we start planning how we're going to remove the tree from the cabin. Now and then I glance at Alex, whose eyes I feel on me.

We've spent the last 2 hours working like mules, and now, in the same place where there was the cabin, there's a shallow hole. It took us more than one hour to move the tree, between the excavator and the chainsaw. I've worked side by side with Alex, we barely talked, but it was not the ideal situation, we just were practical. "Move that branch" "Take this box and put inside all the things that are not broken" and so on.

It turns out that, except for Alex's laptop, a few books and a trolley, nothing else got broken during the storm. We put all of their stuff into the reception cabin and a big box of Alex's stuff inside my cabin. We will share again the room tonight. The room and the bed, I'm well aware of that.

Usually we wash our guests clothes in the washing machines in town, we go there once a week, but right now, given the circumstances, Cal brought Alex in his home, a few minutes' drive from the Camp, twenty minutes walking, so she can wash basically everything and having it dried by tonight, given the outside weather.

They left more than one hour ago. I'm not saying that they should be here by now, but they could. If she has chosen the fast program of Cal's washing machine. Oh gosh, how am I wasting my time thinking about this crap? I need to take my mind away from her, and what she was about to tell me in the cabin, and what we may talk about when she will be back.
I cannot even immerse myself in other tasking, the camp is clean, the lunch is ready and I've taken the very needed shower. I don't even have to organize this afternoon's activities because Friday is "horse riding afternoon" and I've got some people from a nearby farm coming here with the horses and taking the guests on a ride around the lake. They will be here in a couple of hour, at 4 pm. I wonder if Alex knows how to ride a horse, we never did something like that when we were together and I don't recall her telling me stories about it.

Nothing. Nothing, nothing and nothing. This is the summary of the last two hours. Nothing to do, nowhere to go. I've spent them going around the camp, rearranging the deckchairs on the beach and sitting with Ralph on my lap while on the phone with Martha. I've tried to sleep, I've tried to read, all without any success whatsoever. Alex is still nowhere to be found. That's the point. I have almost the promise of a talk, a glimmer of hope, she was about to say something to me on the cabin, it seemed important and I can feel that her animosity towards me is turned down at least a notch. This is the perfect moment, so where the hell is she?

I could call Cal, but I don't want to. I think that I would sound too...desperate. And the fact that I am a little bit desperate is not something that I want to remind myself of.

Grayson and Laura, the couple from the horse farm, are just arrived here, so I finally have something to do. All the guests who signed up for this activity are already in the square in front of the kitchen, still no sign of Alex, not that I'm thinking only about that.

After an half an hour of preparations, all the guests are more or less safely on a moving animal, and they're touring the lake. This is usually one of my favorite moments of the week because there's a little peace on the almost desert camp, and I can do something for myself like tidy up or take a walk with Ralph, or Martha, or both.

But Martha is not here. This is pretty clear. I've talked to her, she's doing great and tomorrow she'll be back. A rush of acid rises from the stomach at the thought that maybe it's too soon. Maybe I would need another day alone with Alex to get past that armor she wears and have a real talk. In a way I'm doing it also for Martha. If I can get past this "problem" with my past, I will be even more ready to start a new future with her.

There's only one thing to do, when I'm in a situation like this. Only one place to go. My special place. It's strange to go there without Ralph, but I already feel better, just by walking in its direction. With a weather like this, it must be simply amazing.

I jump over the log, I step into the thorny bush, but something is strange. Probably is the lack of the dog running in front of me, but still something seems off.

When I arrive at the meadow, however, everything is like the usual, maybe with brighter colors. As I walk to my special place under the oak tree, my feet suddenly stop, and with them, also my heart.

I'm not alone.

In one of the flat rocks in the middle of the small stream, there's Alex. Reading a book.

I know she heard me because she lowers the book, just an inch so I can see her eyes, watching me behind the new pair of glasses she found in the remains of her cabin. They're black.

"Hi..." she says, almost amused "..the world is small"

I'm speechless. For being one that believe in destiny and fate, this is fucking incredible, or creepy, or both.
I still can't talk and I'm looking at her, but I don't know how my face may look from the outside. Maybe shocked?

"Is everything all right?" She has now put the book on the rock and she's looking at me with a puzzled look, but the grin is still on her face.

I sit down on my spot under the oak tree, she's 6 feet from me, in her rock on the stream, like a mermaid "What are you doing in my place?" As soon as I say those words, I wish I could take them back and choose some other words a little less arrogant.

She doesn't seem to mind. "Your place?" She's smiling in disbelief.

"Well, this is kind of my secret place" I realize that I'm using my "fake innocent" voice. I think the last time I used it, I was in Litchfield.

"Your secret place?"

"Is this game of questioning going for long, Alex?" I say her name deliberately slowly.

"Well, Piper, never mind, I'm going to find another place" She's starting to sound a little annoyed and she begins to get up.

"No, wait. I was joking. I was just surprised to see you here. I come here when I want some time for myself and no one else knows about this place, that's all…"

"Well, it's a really nice place, I wanted to see it in the light of day" she has sat back again. She's barefoot and her left foot is in the stream, she's looking around, breathing deeply.

"Yes, it is"

"So, can I stay here, in your place, reading a book?" she emphasize the word "your" and I don't know why, but I feel a shiver running on my back.

"Of course you can." I reply with an equal grin and an eye roll.

"Well, thanks." She lies down on the rock and she picks up the book again. I don't want this conversation to end, but I don't know how to start it.

After a few minutes I come up with something. "How did you find this place? Last night, I mean…"

She raises her eyes from the book again and looks at me. I'm in the exact same place where I've found her with Ralph on her lap. I think she's thinking the same thing.

"I tried to follow the barks, but it was dark and I couldn't hear them very well. I was about to call you, when I saw the thorny bush. And I remembered where Ralph brought me the first night I was here…well, my shins remembered it better than me…"

"Yeah, I do remember that too…" and now my mind goes back to when my hands where on her shins. And I asked her to take off her pants. Oh god.

Silence again. She picks up the book again.

I try really hard to relax. I lie under the tree, I look at the stream, I think about everything else, but my secret place is ruined. Ruined forever. It's been invaded and now Alex is everywhere.

I think this could be the perfect moment. The moment when I have my closure. Alex seems in a good
mood. I've never seen her like this in the past few days. She can't have a reason for faking it. Not for Nicky's sake, not even for her own sake. So why can't I ask what I really need to ask? Why am I so afraid? I feel like I don't want to ruin this moment of peace.

"What do you want from me, Piper?" Her voice startles me. I've just realized that my eyes are fixed on her, I didn't do it on purpose. She must have felt them. Her tone is not annoyed, more resigned and I know that this is the moment. No more games or tiptoeing around it. So I say the only thing that comes into my mind.

"Honesty" I search her eyes for clues on how this conversation may go. Bu I don't find any.

"What for?"

I don't know any more. I just know that I need it. I settle on the answer I would have given her a few days ago, but right now I know it's not just that any more.

"Closure" I've became monosyllabic.

She seems to think about it.

"You think you deserve it?" Her words stabs me in the chest. The pain I'm feeling doesn't allow me to think straight. I don't know what to answer.

"I used to think that I did. Now I don't know anymore. I just know that I'd like to move on with my life and cut all the loose ends from the past"

I'm sitting on the riverbank, under the tree, she's now sitting on the rock, with both her feet on the water, facing me. The sun is getting low, it's the beginning of the sunset, the guests will be soon at the Camp and I'll need to be there. But Alex is taking her time to answer and I'm starting to lose hope.

"So, after all this years, am I still a loose end you need to cut?" Her face shows no emotions.

I wasn't expecting her to say that. I don't know how she wants me to answer. So I go for the truth.

"Yes, in a way, you are."

She hiss a sarcastic laugh.

"Ok"

"Ok?" Ok what?

"Ok, let's talk. Once you've got this…closure, we're done, right?"

I try not to think about the fact that she's talking about my closure, not hers. Probably she doesn't need it. And I try not to think at the fact that she seems eager to be done with me. I don't want to think about that. I think that she's being this harsh to offend me, maybe she's trying to make me angry, so we'll start to yell at each other. But I'm focused on the final goal and I won't let my hurt pride get in the way. If she wants to be left alone after all the things that I need to tell her, I'll leave her alone.

"Yes, we're done for good". I use her same words and I appreciate the fact that she wasn't expecting them and her eyes betray some…feeling.

She withdraws her feet from the water, maybe they're getting too cold, the sun is disappearing behind
the highest trees, but there's still plenty of light. She takes a big breath.

"Shoot."

This is the moment I've been waiting for the last five years, and I'm not ready for it. I don't know where to start.

"I'm…I'm sorry…" My voice sounds strange…fragile…the heaviness of these words is enormous. But, when I look at her, she's laughing.

"Really? This is the big thing you wanted to tell me?"

"Fuck you Alex, this is not easy…"

"Well, it does look like it. You've said it, now aren't we supposed to be good?" She's not moving a muscle. I still know her well enough to recognize when she's saying something but she means something else. This is the case.

"Do you accept my apologies?" I look straight at her.

"Are you fucking kidding me? Of course not" she says with a laugh. But it's clear that she's not amused.

"Then we're far from being done"

Silence. She's looking at the water stream with her hand on the forehead. I see her breathing from here.

"Alex, please, can we talk about it? I don't want to fight with you, but you're making it impossible" I try to use the softest voice that I have. I want her to understand that this is not a battle. We've both already lost the war.

"Do you know what you did to me? Do you really think that you can come here and fix everything with a vague apology?" Now she's looking at me again.

"Of course not. But, that's the problem. I know I've fucked up, like big time fucked up, but I don't really know how it has affected you. Do you blame me for what Aydin did to you? Do you hate me for the Stella thing? I don't know anything about you anymore, so no, I don't know what to be sorry for precisely, if I don't know how my actions may have affected you…All I know is that I'm really sorry. For everything. And the guilt has eating me alive, I just hope that now, after all this time, some kind of redemption is possible" I can feel the burning sensation in the back of my eyes. I'm going to start crying really soon. My heart is literally on my hands, she can do whatever she wants to do with it.

Alex has her eyes fixed on the water, it's like se can't look at me when I speak. I know this is hard for the both of us, so why can't she be less stubborn?

This dance between us is killing me. Back and forth, good and evil. I'm confused and tired, but also really determined. I didn't know how much it was important for me until I saw her face again. It exploded in me.

"It's not your fault…about Aydin…" Her soft words hit me like a tsunami. I can't control myself and a tear runs down my face, but I'm not going to cry.

"What if I didn't report you to your parole officer?" It hurts, but I need to know the truth.
"Kubra was already on my back, he would have got to me, one way or another. Probably you saved my life"

"But I didn't believe you. Back at Litchfield, I thought you were…if only I just…"

"Are you trying to convince me that it's your fault?" Alex laughs again, but this time with a little bit of humour. I reply with a sad smile, it's the best I can do now.

"Not exactly, but I've spent so much time blaming myself, that I find it hard to believe that you don't blame me for everything that went wrong in your life…"

"Not everything is about you, Piper…"

Her words sting. She's right, I know that my ego needs to deflate. But a thought forcefully enters my mind and I can't shake it away.

"Yes, I know, but I wanted to be your everything…"

"Well, if that's what you wanted, you've made an awful job…” I know I did. I know it. That's what's killing me. But I cannot go deeper into this, or else I'm afraid I'm not gonna be able to go on. And I'm so close, so so close to the truth, I can feel it.

"So, if you didn't blame me for your attack, than why didn't you talk to me or write me back once you were out of the infirmary?” I need to know.

"Sometimes I wonder if you're real of this is just a fucking prank. Are you really asking me why I didn't contact you?"

"Yes, I am. Did you even read my letters?” Why is she so upset?

"Oh god. Here we are again, everything is always about you…” she's rolling her eyes and she's getting pissed, I know, but I'm getting pissed too. Why can't she be clear once and for all?

"I'm a different person now, I know I've been an asshole, but why do you think I'm still here, after all this time, trying my best to make amends? I'm lying to everyone, I'm lying to my fiancé, for god's sake. This has to mean something to you…”

"No, it doesn't. It's always like this with you. You haven't changed a bit…you're a master when it comes to shifting responsibilities "

"What the hell do you mean by that?" We are too far. I feel the need to jump into the stream and reach her on the rock and…shake her. But I stay put.

"Do it. Just fucking do it. Tell Martha who I am. Kubra is dead, I'm not in witness protection anymore. I just said it so you would leave me the fuck alone. That's what I was about to tell you in the cabin. And now I'm giving you my blessing. Tell Martha who I am. Tell anyone who I am, for all that matter. I'm willing to deal with the shit storm that's coming my way, just do it"

She's on her feet. Flushed. Fists closed and white knuckles. And I'm dying inside because…what she has just told me… I can't… I don't want… she's right….

I'm standing too, now. But I'm not looking at her. I can't. She has just killed me.

"You know I can't…” Is that my voice? Why does it sound so soft and defeated?

"And why can't you, Piper?"
I find the force to raise my eyes and look at her.

"Now it's too late to tell her who you are, she wouldn't understand…"

"So, are you lying to protect me or to protect you?"

"To protect the BOTH of us!" Now I'm close to screaming and I realize that my feet are in the water, shoes, socks and all. But I need to get closer to her. She's in the water too, the shallow stream touches her calf.

"Bullshit! You could blame me. Tell her it's all my fault and that I asked you to lie…"

"It's not just that…"

"Than what is it? What is it that she couldn't possibly understand?"

How can I make her understand?

"Us! Alex, she wouldn't understand us!"

"There's no us" Her answer is fast and cold.

"What we were. What we had. She knows…"

"Everyone has an ex, Piper…” She interrupts me.

"This is different"

"How so?"

We're not yelling anymore.

"Alex…” Why does she want me to talk about this? This is not how it was supposed to go.

"Tell me Piper, didn't you want to talk? Let's talk" I need to remember to take a breath. I'm talking from the heart, just the heart.

"You are not like the others. You are different…”

"Why?"

"Because I… I loved you. I loved you so much, like I've never loved anyone else, Alex…” This is it. The truth.

"I don't believe it" A striking light through my body would hurt less.

"Al- - Alex…what?"

"It's bullshit. What you're saying, it's bullshit…” No, no, no, no, no, this is not happening.

"How can you say that?” yes, I'm pissed.

"Because I don't believe you” Her face, she's so…I'd like to slap her. Hard.

"What the fuck Alex?"

Again with her fucking ironic laugh.
"You've said you loved me, but you've never loved me" There it is, the last straw. In two steps I'm in her personal space I grab her arms with both my hands. And I squeeze, I don't care if I hurt her.

"How can you fucking say that? After everything we went through..." I'm definitely crying right now. She mirrors my position and her hands are squeezing my arms too.

"After everything I went through. I was the one who was waiting for you to choose between me and Larry, I was the one you chose not to choose..."

"I was scared, I was confused... You named me Alex, you brought me to prison...I did realize my mistake when I chose Larry, but it was too late"

"Was it? Or were you just scared of being alone?"

"Maybe at the beginning, but then I wasn't alone anymore... I had friends there, people who cared for me...you know that..."

"You never did anything for me" Her face is like a stone, but her eyes are on fire.

"Really? What did I do in Chicago? You told me to lie to save your ass and I did it. I did it, just for you..."

"You cheated on me, Piper, in the moment I needed you the most. You told me I had nothing to worry about, and I saw you kissing that dumb bitch 10 minutes after that. It wasn't the cheating, it was the lie. You lied in my face. In the face of the girl you're saying you loved. You were my person, Piper. I loved you. I did fucking love you. I was so scared, so paranoid, and you got tired of your little toy. That's why I've never called or write back. You don't care Piper, you never did, and I'm glad that now you're changed and all, but I cannot believe you."

The tears are running down my face, my nails are still digging into her arms and my vision is blurred. She's turning her face on the left, avoiding my eyes. Is she crying too?

"Alex...."

"Let me go" She tries to break free, but I won't let her.

"Alex...I didn't know.... I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry. Please believe me at least this one time. Why would I try to make amends after all this time if I didn't care for you? Why do you think I didn't tell Martha who you are? It's still important, you're still important..."

"You said before that I was just a loose end..."

"You will never be just a loose end"

"You said it. You lied to me two minutes ago"

"I just said what I thought you wanted to hear. Otherwise you'd never have this talk with me. Tell me if I'm wrong..."

We're screaming at each other's face. The sun is almost set and the darkness is slowly surrounding us. I cannot live with the thought that Alex thinks that I've never loved her.

She stays silent for a few seconds before speaking in a lower tone.

"You're right. But that doesn't change the fact that I still don't believe you"
"So what? Was I faking it? Was I faking my love for you? How can you say that? You were there… we kissed, we fucked, some things cannot be faked."

"How can you prove it?"

"How can YOU prove it, Alex?"

Her eyes are melting mine.

"I can show you how I fake it"

And her lips crash into mine. Hard. Her hands are strong on both sides of my face, in case I try to pull away. But how can I possibly pull away? I'm paralyzed.

She pushes her body against mine, I step back, out of the water and my back hits the trunk of the oak. I don't know how I'm still standing.

She's hurting me. Her body is burning mine. Her kisses are hard. Lips on lips. Lips on teeth. Teeth on lips, pulling. Tongue on teeth. I open my mouth. Terrible mistake.

Her tongue crushes into mine as her thigh presses hard between my legs.

Thank god for the black out in my brain.

The kiss ends just as fast as it started.

Alex takes a step back from me. She's angry. I know these kisses. I cannot think about them, but I know them. And I know her eyes right now. They are turned to stone, she's about to throw some poison at me. Her hands are on her short pockets. I brace myself.

"You wanted closure? There you have it."

I still don't say anything. I can't. I know she's going to hurt me anyway.

"Once a cheater, always a cheater" She adds with all the disgust she's capable of, I do not move a muscle, heart included.

She's looking ahead, but I'm staring at her, my eyes glued to her features. I know that this is what she needs to keep going on with her life, to transform me in some two-headed monster with a magnetic pussy. But I don't care about it. I see through the bullshit. And I'm feeling already guilty enough. So when I reply

"It takes one to know one" I watch closely as she takes the hit. Her head snaps in my direction, she's ready to kill me. But there's one thing she doesn't know: I'm the one in it for the kill. Like a lioness with her prey, she's just showed me her jugular, so I bite.

And I kiss her again. Nothing like the way she kissed me. No, that was nothing compared to this. That was impulse, passion, confusion, anger. This is deliberately slow, this is how you kill.

I found no resistance when my lips meet with hers. Not even a second of resistance. So much for her hatred. My hands are at the sides of her face. Her hands are still on her shorts. I'm the one controlling it and I have no intention of rushing things. I know this is probably the last time we will see each other, so I don't want to live my life with regrets. I want to close this chapter of my life for good. She may need anger, resentment, pain to get over this, but it will never work. It's a lie.

This is how I want to remember Alex Vause. With my lips on her upper lip, not moving, and my
hands on her cheeks, not moving. My eyes are closed and all my nerves are on alert. I want to remember every little detail.

I'm taking my sweet time. She's not resisting, but she's not even moving. I don't care, she was leading our previous kiss, I'm leading this. So I move my lips to her lower lip. Barely touching, but increasing pressure, trying to remember the shape, the consistence, the heat. I feel her lips tremble; she's probably trying to find the courage to escape.

I need my heart to stop beating so fast, so I can have a clear mind. I will never have this moment again. As they taught me in meditation, breathing is the key. So I inhale and I breathe her in. Her smell, her essence. I keep on kissing her lips. Well, it's not really a kiss, I'm just caressing her lips with mine, my eyes are closed. Maximum concentration. She's letting me kiss her. She doesn't want to be a part of this, I get it. This is way too much. But she's not running away.

Her hands are always on her pockets. My fingertips are still on the sides of her face. My lips are softly pressing on her lower lip, when I feel it.

I slowly open my eyes and I see it. Her eyes are open, pupils dilated and they are piercing through my eyes, through my soul. She's watching me kissing her.

This thought sends a shiver through my body, more than when her thigh was pressed between my legs. I am unable to move. It's almost a cathartic moment. I feel like this is an upside-down battle, the softer the touch, the deeper the cut. Her eyes are green, mysterious and primal like the woods. There's a light in them, a dangerous one and I swear I can see the fireflies reflected on them.

I can't stand her stare for too long. She's stronger than me. But I know I hit her just as hard as she did, when I close my eyes again and I move slightly to the right. My lips never leave her skin, not even for a second, but my fingertips are moving now. And caressing that spot. She knows I know. I feel her exhale.

I've been thinking about it since the first day I saw her. At the beginning, it was just another "new" thing about her. A curiosity. But then I couldn't stop thinking about it, and finally Nicky gave me the answer I already knew. And now I'm replacing my fingertips with my mouth, and I'm kissing the tiny long scar on her left cheek.

She knows why I want this. She knows why I need it. Every time my lips touch her skin, I'm begging her for forgiveness, I'm telling her I'm sorry, I'm telling her all the things I wanted to tell her before, but couldn't. A kiss for all the times I didn't believe her, a kiss for Stella, twenty kisses for the shovel who broke her cheekbone, a thousand kisses for the time I left her after Diane's death.

She knows it. And I think this is painful for the both of us. I don't need her forgiveness, I just want to apologize. I need to apologize. I slowly push away from her. Our lips touching probably for the last time.

"I hate you" she says without conviction.

"No, you don't" I reply mirroring some words from an ancient time. And like that, I turn around and I'm gone.

Tears start to run, but when they reach my mouth, they find a little smile.

Goodbye Alex, goodbye my love.

Now, this is closure.
I'm not walking, I'm flying. At the speed of light though the woods.

I don't know what I'm feeling, I just know that I'm *feeling*. A lot. And this emotions are like fuel for my legs, for my totally overwhelmed brain.

When the light leaves the sun, it travels for approximately 8 minutes and 20 seconds before crashing into the earth's soil. I don't know how much time has passed since my lips have left her lips. It could be seconds or years, but I know that I'm the light and I'm still travelling.

Finally, finally I've had my closure. The thing I've been hoping, waiting for the last 5 years is mine, finally. Now I can go on with my life, we both can go on with our lives, right? I apologized, I explained myself, she kissed me.

*She* kissed *me*.

Alex Vause kissed me. Again, after all these years.

I've reached the main road, my legs somehow are not so light anymore, but I'm still the light, and I'm still travelling fast. My heart is beating too fast and too loud, and I don't think it's because of what my legs are doing.

*She* kissed *me*.

That wasn't exactly what I've planned, but that doesn't mean a thing, right? A closure is always a closure.

I'm panting now, I'm starting to feel the muscles protesting, I slow down my pace. I'm still thinking about that kiss. I should be thinking about my closure, not the kiss. My throat is suddenly very very dry. I want to feel again like I'm the light, travelling from the sun towards the earth, with a clear goal and a steady rhythm.

8 minutes and 20 seconds is the time it takes for the light to hit the earth's soil. I'm starting to see the cabins, I'm getting closer to the camp. I need to drink, my throat is closing.

I lick my lips.

Terrible mistake.

What I taste is different. I taste *her*.

I taste her because I kissed her. I kissed her too. Deliberately.

8 minutes and 20 seconds is the time it takes for the light to hit the earth's soil. I'm the light, I've just crashed into the earth's second more. 8 minutes and 21 seconds.

I'm starting to panicking.

No one tells you what happens *after* the light hits the ground. What the fuck am I supposed to do now?

I've kissed her. She kissed me, but I kissed her. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck and fuck.
"Piper, wait!"

I hear her voice behind me, she's clearly breathless, she was probably running after me. I don't turn around, I keep walking towards the cabins, towards the comfort of other people, of my salvation. I need to drink.

"Piper! Stop!" Her voice is demanding, maybe loud...too loud. She has no right to be angry, she has just probably ruined my life, again. Oh god, no. I know that's not true, but I'm panicking.

I don't want to stop. Well, I need to stop, but I cannot face Alex right now. I don't know what I could say. Or do.

I hear the footsteps approaching, she's running. What the fuck? We're at the edge of the camp, what if someone sees us? I cannot run from her, but I cannot really talk to her.

I do the only mature smart thing to do. Which is very stupid and immature, but who fucking cares. With two quick steps I open the door of the reception cabin and I slam it. I turn the key and I rest my back against the wooden door.

Even though I am waiting for it, a little moan escapes my lips the moment her fist bangs against the door.

I try not to move, even though I know it's stupid, I know she knows I'm here. And I know that I can't avoid her forever. But please, please not now.

I see the handle moving, she's trying to enter. She finds the door locked.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me..." My eyes are shut and my fists are clenched. I don't know what to do as the bangs on the door resume.

"Please, go away" I manage to say, even though I sound like a crow.

"Piper, fuck, open the door, now" She's pissed, she's so fucking pissed and she's hissing in a way that I know too well.

"Please, Alex..." Definitely a dying crow.

"This is ridiculous; you've got to come out of this cabin sooner or later, for god's sake..." Her voice is louder again and she's still banging at the door.

A new wave of panic envelops me...what if the guests can hear her? What if they start talking? Asking? I cannot risk it. Not now.

Martha.

My Martha.

I have to think about her. She cannot know. She doesn't deserve it. I have to stop this.

In a fraction of a second, I've made my decision. I turn the key and I put my hand on the handle. I'm ready for whatever Alex wants to throw at me. Maybe she wants to hit me, spit on me, slap me. All of these scenarios are better than Martha knowing the truth. At least not this way.

Alex must have heard the sound of the key turning because I feel her lower the handle from the other side and pushing the door open. The door opens for an inch and then stops.
"Hey honey, everything's ok?" Linda's voice come from somewhere close. Too close. My forehead is pressing against the door and I think I'm breathing too loud.

"Ehmmm… yeah, yeah Linda, thanks" I hear Alex's voice, she's not so loud anymore…she's clearly flustered… like she doesn't know what to say.

"What were you doing, trying to break down the door?" Linda asks, and I know I'm screwed because Alex isn't answering, she's bubbling gibberish, it could be klingon for what I know…

"Ehm…nothing, I was just… ehm…"

I need to do something. And quickly. So I open the door abruptly, Alex almost falls inside.

"Hey, hi…" I say. And now what? "Ehm…the bathroom is free now…" Oh god. Alex looks at me like I've grown a second head, but when I emphasize the movement of my arm pointing towards the bathroom at the other end of the room, in her eyes I see a flash of recognition. She mutters a 'thanks' or something like that and in two long steps she's already inside the bathroom, she closes the door and she leaves me here, with Linda in front of me with a really confused look on her face…

"Is she alright? Are you alright? You look pale, darling…" Linda looks at me with the worried eyes of a loving grandmother. If she only knew how bad I'm feeling…

"Ehm, I think we ate something bad…" I say the first thing that comes into my mind. Now I'm sure Alex is going to kill me.

"Oh dear God, really? Here in the camp? Do I need to alert the other guests?"

Oh. Fuck.

"No, no, no…it's not necessary…I…Ehm…We ate Martha's pastries from yesterday…" I wish I was truly sick, because now I feel like I want to throw up…using Martha as an excuse to save my ass is definitely one of the lowest point I've reached in the last few years. But it's enough to convince Linda, who's now talking to me about the dangers of spoiled cream while we walk towards the center or the camp.

I'm free. I've just realized that I'm actually free. Free from Alex and the things she wanted to say, or do…free to go into my cabin and take the things that I need for tonight's activity and hiding safely in the crowd for the rest of the evening. Or at least until I will be forced again to share the cabin with Alex. Or maybe I can simply sleep in the kitchen. Or not sleep at all. I yawn at the thought of not sleeping. I've spent last night running in the woods looking for Ralph and I worked my ass off this morning to fix the big mess. I really need to sleep, in a bed, alone. Is it asking too much?

In the cabin I find the torches, the big plastic sheets and a very bored Ralph that is napping at the foot of the bad and raises just one ear when he hears me enter.

"Hey buddy! Is this how you greet your loving master?" I've got a bored howl as an answer.

"You ungrateful sack of fleas" I throw myself on the bed and with one hand dangling from the side, I pet Ralph…while I close my eyes…just to rest a second, surrounded by this old and familiar scent on the bed sheets, that I wish I could forget.

I wake up suddenly when something hits my stomach making a ringing noise, I am scared to death as I sit brusquely on the bed, trying to focus my attention on the things that are surrounding me.
How to go from a peaceful sleep to this nightmare of reality. I shouldn't have lied in bed. Fuck.

Alex is moving fast, picking something from her bag. I'm still scared and confused for the terrible awakening, so I'm not thinking clear.

"It's your fucking keys..." She's giving me her back when she utters her first words directed at me since...well, the kiss, if we don't count the time she tried to talk to me and I run away.

But I still don't...I don't know...what...oh. I lower my eyes and I see a keychain on my lap. My whale keychain, the one from the reception cabin. So that's what woke me up. She closed the cabin. That's nice of her.

"Oh...thanks..." I feel very stupid right now, in trap, not knowing what to do, what to say, but mostly what to feel.

I see her back stiffen, clenched fists. She turns around slowly and she walk towards me. I'm still sitting on the bed, my legs dangling on the side, no sign of Ralph, that traitor.

She walks until her knees touch the side of the bed, between my open legs. She's towering over me, menacing as those black clouds full of storm and darkness. I cannot stop looking at her, her features are unreadable, I see a slight movement in my peripheral vision, where her right fist is. For a second my eyes dart in that direction and I'm so sure she's going to hit me, but when I look back at her, all I can see is astonishment and disappointment. She opens the mouth as to say something, but then she closes her lips in a humorless grin, she shakes her head, and she's out before I even have the time to exhale the breath I didn't know I was holding.

Fuck.

What now?

I glance at the alarm clock, I'm late, and I still need to prepare everything for tonight's activity. I hate it, but I have to skip dinner, actually I don't really hate it since it will give me the time I need to be alone and relax a little bit, far from my...issues. I grab the backpack filled with everything I need, I grab my phone, with 5 missed calls, I throw it inside the backpack without looking at it, and I head out.

My stomach is rumbling, I realize that I haven't properly eaten since...when was it? Yesterday? Merely 24 hours ago my life was still almost normal, it's incredible if you think about it.

Against my better judgement, I leave the backpack on the ground and I head for the kitchen, just to grab something to eat, not because I want to see her.

Not at all.

As I walk into the square, I can see a bunch of people gathered around the spot in which usually Alex sits. Of course, she risked her life yesterday...she could be seriously hurt by now, I tend to forget this. It must be pretty intense for her, too. Good, now I feel even worse than before.

Shaking my head, I enter the kitchen, happy to have walked through the pic-nic area unnoticed. I open the fridge, I grab a couple of apples, some crackers and two chocolate bars. Fuck it, I need them. And I also need the red bull I'm stealing from some guests, but I will buy it back. Fuck it for the second time. Two minutes and I'm out, stealthy as a ninja.
I reach the backpack and put it on my back and I head for the woods with my torch ready. After a few steps I stop. Fuck, I need to ask someone to lead the night walk, usually I'm the one doing it, but right now I need to go to the clearing and set everything up.

With my hand on my face I try to find another solution, an alternative, but there's no other thing to do but going back into the place I was successfully avoiding till now.

I try to look as normal as possible and not like the crazy psycho I'm channeling right now.

"Hey Katie, can I ask you something?" I say as softly as possible, putting my hand on her shoulder and hoping no one notices me.

"Oh hi Piper! Here you are! Guys, Piper is here!" Oh yeah, thank you Katie.

"Where have you been?" "We were worried about you" "You look like hell! Is everything ok?"
I'm literally in a crossfire of concerned stares and words. They are really special.

"Yeah, yeah…thank you guys…I'm fine. I've just had a lot to deal with, you know, after the storm?" I hope this is enough for them.

"Are you still feeling sick?" Linda asks with a warm hand on my arm.

"Ehm…sorry?" Do I really look that bad?

"How are you feeling darling? After, you know, the thing….today…" She's winking at me and a wave of panic rushes over me…how can she…

"I—I" I'm stuttering …my mind is completely blank…

"Well, at least I hope you've thrown away the bad pastries …" What? Oh.

"Oh….yeah yeah…I took some pills and now I'm as good as new" Oh my god. I feel like I've just won the golden medal at the Olympic games.

"Are you sure? You seem a little off, darling"

"I'm just really tired…and I just need to go and set up the clearing for tonight's star gazing.so…"
I try to walk away but another hand stops me.

"Hey Piper…" What now? I try not to look as pissed as I feel.

"Yes, Katie?"

"What did you want to ask me before?" Oh God, I've forgotten.

"Oh God, sorry… I wanted to ask you if you please can lead the group in an hour to the clearing, the one I've showed you the other day. I need to go and set up everything so I won't have the time to come back and do it myself…"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, for sure, no problem. Do you need help now? Al can come with you…” No. No Al, Alex, Alexander or every fucking name starting with A, please.

"Oh no, no, I'm good, thanks…I'll just…see you later"
This time nothing is stopping me, but after a couple of steps I turn my head. I don't want to do it, really. But I do it anyway...like an automatic reflex. I say to myself that it's just to check on Ralph, I've caught a glimpse of him under the table, but it's not true and even I don't believe myself.

She is turned in my direction and our eyes lock. A rush of something that burn passes through my body. We hold each other's stare for a second and then I turn around and head into the woods. Am I happy? Fuck, no.

During the 20 minutes' walk, that I usually spend with Ralph, I manage to empty my mind completely. I just walk and breathe. The sky is black and clear, the moon is a tiny crescent and there are the perfect conditions for admire the milky way in all its glory.

When I arrive at the clearing, I'm glad to see that the storm last night didn't do too much damage. I start clearing the grass from the fallen branches before laying down the plastic sheets to cover almost half of the exposed grass. I try to turn off the torch and I look up. It's perfectly beautiful, it seems like every star in the universe has put on a shiny dress.

All the sparkles that I see, I know that they come from a time in the past, maybe even before I was born. This never stops fascinating me, I started to study a little bit about constellations and stars when Cal and I decided to include this activity on the camp after one of the guests spent a whole night talking about legends, gods and beasts troubled love stories and light years. My eyes fall on Sirius. The brightest of them all. The light that I see now started its travel more than 8 years ago... I laugh thinking about where I was 8 years ago. Living with Larry, still free, but, actually, I was living in a golden cage, filled with fake smiles and fake goals. And no Alex except for the faded memory of a rebellious year...

I literally jump when the sound of my ringtone startles me. Fuck. I am in the woods, at night, all by myself without Ralph, so I have every right to be scared. Maybe I should have accepted Al's offer to help me. I turn on the torch and I head for the backpack, I take out the phone, that's still ringing, and I look at the caller ID. Martha.

I'm tempted to just turn it off for tonight and throw it away, my finger lingers on the red button, but, out of habit and guilt, I push the green one.

"Hey stranger..." Her voice is tired, I can picture her on our couch, with the feet on the puff searching for a Netflix documentary she hasn't seen yet...

"Hey honey...how's going?"

"Ugh, same shit as always! George is giving me a hard time with the vases I talked to you about... 100.000 dollars for an insurance seems a little too much, don't you think? It's incredible how much that tick is trying to suck my patience and my money out of me..."

And we go on like that...Our special thing: she talks, I listen, I laugh, I offer advice, I joke and then the roles are reversed. It's easy, familiar and so, so comforting. Exactly what I need right now. I put the earphones on so we can talk while I keep on working on the clearing. I still need to set the coils on the perimeter to keep away the mosquitoes as much as possible and, more importantly, I need to make some trips to the little cabin 300 yards from the clearing to bring all the blankets and pillows that we use to lie on while we watch the stars.

"...and then she told me to shut the fuck up while her hands were still dirty from all the ink! Can you believe that?" Martha's laugh brings me back to reality. I zoomed out a little bit.
"Yeah, yeah, it's incredible!" I say, trying to sound as much credible as I can.

"Honey, what's wrong? You're really off this week" Not credible enough, it seems.

"I...I'm just tired...with all the mess here after the storm...I wish it didn't happen during my turn, Cal would have handled it better, I'm sure..."I'm getting tired of using the storm as an excuse for everything.

"Are we talking about the same Cal? The one who called you at 3 AM to ask you if there were tides in a lake?"

I laugh from the belly, this happened 15 days ago.

"Well, he left his book there! He loves his book!" I say faking a serious tone, but I fail and I start laughing at the end of the sentence. Martha laughs with me and the sound we make is...perfectly good.

"So, speaking of which, how's the lake doing? Some more damage?"

"No, no, the lake is ok, just some deckchairs in the water and some others in the trees but nothing major...it's the camp the place more damaged, but now everything seems to have been taken care of..."

"And what about my homonym? Did she snore?" Suddenly it's way too cold here. And hot.

"Ah ahah! Very funny!"

"Come on! Nothing juicy to tell me? I'm bored here without you, love!"

"Nope, sorry" I try to say as few words as possible because, for every lie that I tell her, I feel a knife stabbing my guts. Oh, the guilt.

"Ooooh, you're not fun! Are you gonna sleep with her also tonight?" Oh, fuck. I didn't think about it. Fuck fuckfuckfuckfuck triple fuck.

"Piper? Piper, you there?" Fuck.

"Ehm...yeah yeah...sorry...I lost the signal for a moment...sorry...the guests are arriving...Ehm...call you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow I'll be there with you! Get some rest, you're really starting to worry me now, weirdo...and text me goodnight and how much you love me later, ok?"

"I always do that, honey!"

"Like last night? I don't think so...tonight I want a poem, better than fucking Shakespeare! Storm or not storm!" I laugh loudly.

"You're funny! Love you honey, bye!" And I hung up with a smile on my face. I take off the earphones while I admire the good job I've done. I also had the time to assemble the hammock, tonight's gonna be perfect.

"Was it Martha?"

I gasp at the sudden sound and I turn around quickly just to find Katie and all the other guests behind her.
"Oh god guys, you scared me to death!" I say with a hand over my heart trying to stop it from jumping against my ribcage like a flipper ball.

While they all laugh at me I raise my eyes to look for Alex, I'm not even trying to hide it to myself anymore. It doesn't mean a thing, it's just the crappy situation we're in, I just want to know how she is, if she's ok, stuff like that. She's not laughing. But she's not even looking at me like she wants to cut my throat. So I guess this is a good sign? I really don't know what to think. Lucky me, now I've got something to do.

"What are you doing standing like statues? Please, you know the drill…take a seat, take a pillow, lie on the ground, don't take the hammock because Donny is already on it, of course, cover yourself with as much blankets as you need and relax…we're going to start in five minutes"

What happens next is a scene that looks terribly like the one on The Lion King where all the wildebeests start to run. Every time is the same story. I stay on the edge of the plastic sheet, distributing blankets and checking the coils to see if they are still burning while the guests find their spot on the ground to be more comfortable looking up to the sky.

"We are ready Piper, let's start!" someone shouts from the ground.

"Patience! It took you a lifetime to get in position. So, please, everyone, turn off your phone, close all the lights and look up in the direction of the two tallest trees in front of you. Do you see their tops? Well, between them, you can see a very bright star. Do you see it?"

"Yes" The answer comes from some of the guests.

"Well, it's not a star, it's a planet, Venus…" That's how I start my guided tour of the night sky. I can almost recite it by heart, while thinking about something else. But not tonight, tonight I need to stay focused, with my head between the stars and the constellations, talking about terrible deaths, jealousy and the most tragic love stories of all time.

After approximately half an hour, I finish my speech with the most famous constellation of them all:

"And finally, you can see the Ursa Major also called "Big Dipper", because of its shape. Do you see it? It's right above the last constellation we saw before. Ursa means Bear, specifically a female bear. The legend behind this constellation is pretty consistent with what I've told you so far. There's always Zeus, or in this case Jupiter, since we're talking about Roman mythology and there's always a beautiful girl, a nymph named Callisto. She was so beautiful that Jupiter, naturally, acted upon it and, after nine mythological months, Callisto gave birth to a little boy called Arcas. When Juno, who was Jupiter's wife, found out about Jupiter's affair, instead of getting angry at him, as she should have done, she transformed Callisto in a bear. Arcas, Callisto's son, almost killed her mother in a hunting trip and that's when Zeus decided to turn also Arcas into a bear and put them both in the sky, to keep them safe from Juno. Yes, I know, it doesn't sound really a smart move. So we have the Big Bear and the Little Bear, Ursa Major and Ursa minor. We finish our tour with the last star in the tail of the Little Bear. That, my friends, is Polaris, the North Star and even though she's not the brightest, she's probably the most important star in the sky, because it always points to the North, it doesn't move like the other stars. She just stays there, still, helping humans and a lot of other animals to find their way home."

I've got always a strange sensation when I finish the guided tour of the sky, because I've talked without interruptions for almost half an hour, walking around the square where all the guests are, never really looking up to the sky and never really looking down at the people. And the silence that follows my last words is always kind of absolute. Absolute and sacred. No one ever talks for a few minutes. They know that, after the speech, they can stay there, just looking at the stars for as long as
they want. And sometimes, in the past years, I stayed with some of the guests till the first morning light started to hit the sky.

I don't know why I have this new fascination with all of this, laying in the wilderness, in complete darkness. Maybe it has something to do with the years spent in prison. This is like a big symbolic "fuck you" to cages and bars or maybe a "fuck you" to my old life, made of fake smiles and fake white-fence goals.

For the first time I look at the ground, searching for a spot and a free pillow to lie and look up at the stars, maybe I'll see a shooting star, I could use a wish. I take some blankets and I sit in the only free spot, I lie, finding a way to stretch my legs without touching the people around me, in complete darkness. The moment I settle the pillow under my head and I take a big relaxing breath, I can smell her perfume. I don't know where she is. She could be the big shadow on my left, whose head is close to my belly, or the shadow on my right, lying parallel at me. I try not to think too much about it, I'm in a good place right now and I'd like to stay like this for as much time as I can.

I think at least twenty minutes have passed when the first guests start to stand up and go back to camp. I recognize Rosa and Bob from their silhouettes, followed by other three guests, probably the golden girls. I fix again my eyes on the shiny darkness above me, letting the pitch black absorb everything that happened to me in the last few days, taking away all the pressure, even if just for one small minute. My eyelids are heavy, my heart feels light for the first time in I don't know how much. I catch a trail of light with the corner of my eye. Could it be a shooting star? I instinctively turn my head on the right, where I saw a glimpse of something, but all I see is just another firefly, reflected on a pair of glasses that are pointed at the sky. So, here she is, our heads almost touching, but our feet pointed in opposite directions. I don't have the time to think about the meaning of everything because the eyelids become too heavy, the familiar perfume penetrates my skin and, with all my barriers down, I let the black of the starless sky I have inside envelope me.

I wake up when I hear some voices whispering. I'm lying on my side and, when I open my eyes, I can see some shadows standing outside the plastic sheets, but I can't make out who they are. I'm the only one lying under the stars, I must have slept for more time than I thought. I need a bed, badly.

"We can wait here, you know, you can go to sleep now…You need to rest"

"Thanks but don't worry about it...We're sharing the cabin, I'll wait for her, you can go…" Alex's voice

"Really?" The other voice is masculine. Al or Jason?

"Yes, really, this is relaxing. Go to sleep…"

"As you wish, mistress" Muffled laughs. Definitely Al.

"Go. To. Sleep"

"Bye Martha, and if you want some real relax, you can sleep in my bed tonight, I can show you some moves…leave Piper here, she's a tough girl"

"In your dreams, Al…goodnight"

"Oh, my dreams! Goodnight babe"

When I hear the sound of Alex's low chuckle turning in my direction, I lie still and close my eyes, pretending to be asleep again. I don't know why. I hear the sound of shoes on leaves and branches coming from the woods and then some other footsteps, much closer. I feel Alex towering over me,
and then sitting back in her place beside me, this time she's lying next to me, with her feet in the same direction as mine. When her head hits the pillow, the movement of air reaches my face and I open my eyes again.

Alex is looking at me. I can't see her face very well, it's in the shadow, but I do know that she knows that I'm awake now.
Chapter 16

Alex is looking at me. I can't see her face very well, it's in the shadow, but I do know that she knows that I'm awake now.

I don't dare utter a word. After the childish way I've behaved in the reception cabin a few hours ago, I must say that I'm also a little embarrassed. I wait for her, this time I'm not running away. She opens her mouth, I can see her white teeth sparkle in the dark.

"I thought Callisto was just a character in Xena…" I swear, those were the last words I was expect coming out of her mouth.

I cannot stop myself, before I know it, I'm laughing out loud. Her teeth are almost glowing in the dark, she's like the Cheshire cat. At least I know she's smiling.

And here we are, back again in this strange rollercoaster where we hate each other one day, and the other day we still hate each other, but in the middle we kind of bond again for a few incredible moments.

"She was hot" I reply still smiling. She turns her head again towards the sky and I follow her lead and do the same, maybe it will be easier to talk if we don't look at each other.

"Weren't you straight when Xena was on?"

"That's what Netflix is for…to recover from past mistakes and to learn fake mythology…" I reply and she doesn't say a thing, but I know she's smiling, I can feel it. A comfortable silence falls upon us. Well, not so comfortable at least for me, I want this to go on.

"You know what? It was actually a rape" What the fuck did I've just said?

"What the fuck?" She's on her elbow now, looking at me. Really puzzled.

"No, no, Well…I mean, Callisto and Jupiter…He raped her in the legend, not a good story, the Xena's version is way much better…" Oh my god. At least she's laughing in disbelief.

"And you've just told me this, because…"

"I don't know, Alex. Because it's a thing and I wanted to tell you a thing…"

"You're really really incredible" she says with an amused sigh turning yet again towards the sky. And, yet again, the silence falls on us.

"Alex?"

"Mmm?" Her hum is so low that I feel goosebumps on my skin.

"I'm sorry about before" I say without really thinking. But I really mean it.

She doesn't answer right away. I'm looking at her with the corner of my eye and she looks engrossed in contemplation of the sky.

"About what in particular?" It's a tricky question I don't know how to answer. I settle for the easiest thing I can think of.
"The door"

"The door?"

"Yep, the door in your face. That's what I'm apologizing for"

"Mmm." Again with the hum. And again with the silence. I really want to resist, I really want to do it, I swear, but I. Just. Can't.

"Do you want to say something to me too?" I say with my little voice, the one I know she cannot resist, at least five years ago she couldn't.

"Something like what? An apology?" There's disbelief in her words.

"I don't know, maybe. Do you want to apologize for something Alex?"

"I really can't believe you. You do want me to apologize! And for what?" She's on her elbow, again. And again I'm not looking at her, but my eyes are fixated on the sky even though the corner of my lips is definitely up in a half grin.

"I didn't say that I want you to apologize, I just asked if you wanted to do it, that's all…"

"I've got nothing to apologize for" she answer brusquely and yet again she lies her head on the pillow.

"Okay" I reply always smiling. I know that I'm teasing her, but this conversation is too light and too good and maybe, just maybe, we can go somewhere "normal" with this. This time I don't try to break the silence, I just wait for her to do it. 3, 2, 1…

"What were you thinking?" Here we are. Talking. It's good.

"When?"

"When you fucking locked yourself into the cabin! What were you trying to do? Avoid me for the rest of your life?"

"No, not at all. I just… Alex I—I didn't expect the… Thing. So, after, I- was confused and I just needed some time to metabolize the… Thing".

"The… Thing?" She says with a laugh. Thank god I'm not looking at her.

"Yes, Alex, the Thing… I'm glad you find it funny" I say annoyed but not really annoyed.

"I don't find it funny, it's just funny the fact that you can't bring yourself to call the Thing with its real name"

"And what's its real name?"

"Piper…" She pronounces my name very slow and her tone is a little threatening. But this is the first time that she calls me using my name tonight.

"I'm just curious, Alex, how would you call it? Revenge? Mistake? Impulse? Hate?" I stop myself before I say too much, I'm not ready to hear about all the possible implications of what we did, not even from my own voice.

"I don't like the tone of your voice. Your question sounds like an accusation" She's right. I might
have channeled my frustrations and my guilt into my words.

"Yeah, you're right, sorry about that. I just, well, it's not easy for me…"

Silence again. Maybe I've pushed it too far. When I've lost all my hopes, she starts to speak again.

"I know what it's not. The Thing, I mean. I know what it's not" Alex is whispering now. And I have no idea what she means by that.

"What do you mean?" I ask, already fearing the reply.

"It wasn't a kiss. That's the only thing that I know." I don't want to feel like this, but I feel like all the sky, with all the planets and the stars came crashing down inside my chest. I think I know what she means, and she's right, but I never expected that these words could destroy me like they did.

"Because…you hate me?" I need to know now.

"No"

"No what Alex? I don't understand…"

"I don't hate you. Not anymore. But the Thing, you know, it cannot be a kiss…" Again. Every time she pronounce the word "kiss" it's like a ten-story building collapses inside of me.

"So, how would you call it?"

"Right now the word Thing seems a pretty good word to describe it" she says with a laugh. I cannot help but laugh with her at the absurdity of the situation.

"You know that 30 seconds ago you were teasing me because I came up with the word "Thing", right?"

"I have to admit that maybe I've underestimate your word choice…" Is she admitting what I think she's admitting?

"Say that again please?" I ask turning to look at her with a mischievous smile. She turns her head and looks back with a smile.

"Don't push your luck, kid" Her tone matches mine. It's dangerously funny and easy.

"Yeah, because I've been so lucky these days" I say with all the sarcasm I have.

"Are you referring to the Thing? Because for some people, that's the precise definition of "pure luck" Oh, that smirk. That fucking smirk is back in her face and I can't. I just can't.

"It's nice to see that you're still very much full of yourself" I say back, hoping that we can continue with this funny banter.

"Yeah, you know me, the Vause charm is in my DNA…"

"Even if you're not a Vause anymore?" I see the shadow of something painful in her eyes for a moment. But she blinks and it's gone.

"I'm still me" Her tone is a flat. I decide not to question her words.

"Is it strange? To be called with another name?" Here. Neutral territory.
"Well, at the beginning it's a mess, you turn around even when you hear someone yelling "Ferdinando", but after a while everything just becomes normal, and you realize that a name is just a name. You can take a carrot and call it "pineapple", but when you taste it, it tastes like a carrot. So, yeah, a name is just a name."

"Just like the Thing?" I cannot stop myself and, by the way she's laughing soundly, her eyes sparkling, I guess I've said the right thing.

"Yes Piper, exactly like the Thing" she manages to say after she's done with the laughs.

"Speaking of which, you haven't yet told me the meaning of the Thing…"

"You don't give up, do you?"

"Well, not now, not when I need to understand…"

"What do you have to understand? I don't get it…” She sits with her legs crossed and she puts a blanket over her shoulders.

"Don't answer a question with a question just to confuse me, Alex" I mimic her position, we don't need to pretend to watch the stars anymore.

"I'm not trying to confuse you. I really don't get it. I honestly don't understand anything about —I don't –Urgh this is so frustrating. And useless" She sighs. I know this sigh, she's closing up.

"No wait, I think we're getting somewhere here…” I instinctively put my hand of her forearm, just to retrieve it as soon as my fingertips touch her skin.

"That's exactly what I mean. There's nowhere to go here, so I don't see the point of this, of all this…” she says moving her hands between us. This hurts. I know, she has already told me this, but it hurts nonetheless. But she's here right now, talking to me. This has to mean something.

"So, why are you here right now? Why did you try to talk to me right after…the Thing? If it was nothing then you could just, I don't know, ignore me…”

"Because it wasn't nothing. Well, it was nothing for me, but with possible consequences that could involve…well, me!" Wait, what? I'm even more confused than before if it's possible.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Oh Gosh, this is so frustrating…” she covers her face with her hands and I'm afraid she's going to give up. I won't let her.

"You kissed me and that's the thing. Can we start from there, please?"

"You kissed me too, and it wasn't really a kiss" I'm starting to lose my patience, is she really turning this into a competition to see who kissed who first?

"Yes Alex, I kissed you too. Our lips met, that's the definition of a kiss. You may think it was a mistake, but a kiss is always a kiss, like a carrot is always a carrot, even if we call it pineapple" I'm using her words just to prove my point.

She doesn't talk right away, but when she does something inside of me explodes.

"It wasn't a mistake…” She's looking straight into my eyes. I wait for her to continue. "..you deserved it"
"I deserved to be...kissed?" It's starting to sound really absurd. Maybe it's just a dream.

"No, you deserved to be... punished"

"And you think that a kiss is a punishment? Why didn't you slap me?" I think my eyes are burning inside hers. She looks like the emperor deciding the fate of the gladiator. What will it be? Life or death?

"Because it would have hurt you less" Death. The answer is death. She kissed me to hurt me. And she succeeded.

"Why did you want to punish me? If you don't give a fuck about me and about our past, why did you want to punish me?" I don't know where I find the strength to talk, really. At least she doesn't look arrogant or evil, actually she lower her eyes, looking at the ground. But when she speaks, she looks at me.

"I—I was happy. Before. Before all of this. Before you came back, wanting to dig up things that were buried years ago. I was happy with Sandy, with my new live. And then you came, talking about Aydin, forgiveness, and all the bullshit... I just, I tried... Nicky forced me, but I tried to take it easy, play nice, but you were there, and too much, and I just, I just couldn't stand it anymore... so I... reacted in that way, but then you didn't run away or slapped me like I was expecting you to, you kissed me back Pipes, and I... I just... I was happy before all of this... really happy... but then you..."

I didn't expect this kind of honesty coming from her. Maybe, for the first time, I recognize her. The lover, the friend I could talk to. My love, my Alex. This had nothing to do with me. It was all about her, her new life, and the fact that I have no place in it, not because she hates me, but because she's just built her new life without me in it. I finally get it. It makes sense even if something inside of me is desperately looking for a sign that I still matter to her. Fucking ego. My voice is soft when I speak again.

"Did it work? Did it make you feel good punishing me?"

"No" Her answer is quick. She doesn't take time to think about it. I don't know if I'm supposed to feel bad for the fact that I'm not feeling bad at all at the thought that she didn't feel good.

"I'm sorry" And I'm really sorry. I'm sorry for everything and for nothing.

"I know. I'm sorry too"

"I know"

So that's it. We are sorry. I don't want to cry again in front of her. Now it's awkward, I don't know what to do. I hide my face in my bent knees, I just want this to be over, so I can have the time to think about it, to metabolize it and to go on with my life. Now it seems impossible.

I feel her hand on my head, massaging my scalp in the way she knows I loved. She still remembers it. I know what it is, it's a peace offering. But the sensation is so bittersweet that I can't stand it. I raise again my head, so she has to retrieve her hand.

"So that's what you wanted to tell me when I hid in the cabin? That you just want your life back?"

"More or less. I was really pissed at you so I would have used different words. And of course I
wanted to make sure that you weren't going to tell Sandy or someone else about…the Thing"

"Like I could possibly tell someone about it"

"You're getting married Piper…"

"To a wonderful woman who doesn't deserve a chea—a liar…” I almost say the word that it's threatening to enter my mind since the Thing. The word I'm fighting with all my power to keep out of my conscious brain.

"You're not a cheater, Piper" It's too late, the word is out, and now on Alex's lips. And now I'm looking at them like they are the keepers of the most hidden secret of the universe.

"Once a cheater, always a cheater. You said it yourself not so long ago…”

"I was trying to hurt you…”

"Well, it worked…”

"Pipes…” Her voice is soft, too soft. What is it? Pity? I don't want her pity.

"I kissed you back. I didn't run and I didn't slap you like I was supposed to do. Again, I'm quoting you"

"And I quote myself when I tell you that you didn't cheat. That we didn't cheat, because I'm not a cheater Piper. I'm not, not after what I've been through. And the Thing, it wasn't a kiss, because if it was a kiss, then we would be two horrible people. And we're not. Well, at least I'm not one. I kissed you to hurt you, because I know you and I hurt you. You kissed me back for the same reason, don't try to say it that you did it because you wanted to prove something…”

I know that she's right. In a twisted way I understand what she's trying to say. But instead of focusing in this, in my redemption, all I can think of is something else.

"Did it work?” Translate: Alex, were you affected by my kiss as I was from yours?

"What's the point of knowing the answer?"

"Answer me"

"You already know the answer to your question"

"Say it, Alex"

"…"

"Please…” I'm begging, I don't care.

"Of course it did" Her eyes never leave mine, but I need to lower mine when I hear the answer coming from her mouth, her half open, inviting mouth, the same mouth that I kissed less than six hours ago.

This is sick, this is insane. That's way it didn't work with her. Here I am, still looking at the ground, but happy. Happy because Alex just told me that I've ruined the life she built after me, she told me that she don't want to forgive me, but she was affected by my kiss. Something is seriously wrong with me and with my ego. Growing my ass. I realize that I'm smiling only because Alex talks to me again.
"Stop grinning like an idiot, blondie" I look at her but I keep on smiling. She continues "Why are you smiling, anyway?" She's smiling too but there's real interest in her attitude.

"I think I'm crazy" That's the most honest answer I can come up with.

"Well, I've known it for a long time, but go on, tell me anyway…” If I tell her that I just want to stop the time in this moment and relive this conversation every time I'll think of her in the future, I'm afraid she would just run away. So I just settle for something a little bit lighter, but true nonetheless.

"Well, tell me if I'm wrong, but here we are, after 14 years…” I speak deliberately slow, rolling every word on my tongue. I'm enjoying this way too much.

"15 years" she interrupts me. My smile gets bigger. I don't know if she realizes what she has just given me.

"Here we are, after 15 years, we travelled the world together, you were part of a drug cartel, I went to prison, thanks to you" She opens her mouth to stop me but I don't let her "you went to prison, twice, thanks to me…”

"Correct" There's a smile that's getting bigger, so I just keep on going

"I was punched by one of your girlfriends, you made me broke an engagement…” She keeps on smiling.

"Poor Larry. How is he?"

"Happily divorced with two kids, we still hang out sometimes…”

"Poor poor Larry…sorry for interrupting, go on"

"Feel free to help me here, Alex…”

"Ok, but I don't know where you want to go with this walk down memory lane…”

"Trust me…so where were we?"

"Broken engagement, but definitely not my fault…”

"Details! So, I almost killed Pennsatucky, you…” I don't know how to continue with this. Suddenly it all seems like a terrible idea.

"I almost got killed by Kubra's hitman…” she points with a finger at the scar on her cheek, the one that I kissed. It's enough to distract me, but she keeps on talking "…we had sex in a church…” So she does remember. Terrible terrible idea.

"We had sex in a lot of other strange places" is this my voice? I don't recognize it anymore and we're going in a totally different direction from the one I had in mind.

"Where do you want this to go Piper?" There's the fire of a challenge in her eyes. I smile in return with the same glint in my eyes.

"Go on Alex…”

"Mmm We...I had sex with Nicky Nichols…” She looks at me so fucking proud of herself, with that smirk on her face that I want to erase. But two can play this game…
"I might have had sex with Nicky Nichols too…" Her eyes just almost pop out of her face, her mouth opens. She wasn't expecting this. Take this Alex.

"Are you fucking kidding me? You slept with Nicky? When? Where? How?" She's so funny to look at. Totally shocked. I think my smile will break my cheeks if I keep smiling like this.

"I said I might, not that I had. After my release, at her place, there was a lot of alcohol involved, some weed brownies and definitely tongues. Lots of tongues. We woke up half naked with her hand inside my pants and no memories at all. This is the torrid story. We still referring it as "The Incident"" Alex takes off her glasses to rub her eyes that are shining from the tears of fun.

"That bitch never told me that! The next time we're going to talk, oh, she's definitely going to hear me…"

"We can call her now, together, she's probably going to die from an heart attack…"

"Definitely! A sudden death" And we laugh at the thought a little bit more and then slowly, with a sigh, we both calm down. And we look at each other in silence. The tension is back on. She's the one who breaks the silence.

"So, again, where did you want to go with this?"

"Well, before the Nicky talk we were almost there…"

"Before The Incident?"

"Yep"

"It has something to do with The Thing and with your habit to give names to strange things happening in your life?" I smile. But it's time for me to get to the point.

"Partially, yes. But I wanted to continue by talking about what happened next…I opened PoPi, I built this Camp, you became Martha…"

"I'm not Martha. I'm just called Martha" She's speaking softly now, we both are.

"Ok. You are called Martha, you're a red head, you sell artifacts…" Did we get closer without me realize it? I can see clearly her eyes now. Even in the dark. Our knees, are touching even if there are two blankets between them.

"You're engaged…"

"You have a beautiful girlfriend…"

"We are happy?" It's a question, not a statement. It's a question I don't want to answer. I can't answer.

"You don't hate me, but you don't want to forgive me…" I want her so badly to stop me and tell me that I'm wrong, that she didn't mean what she said. But she just stands still, silent. So I keep on talking, hoping to see something different in her eyes. Something that would tell me that I still matter, somehow. "You don't want me in your life…"

"I think we're going to eventually see each other in the City" She's referring to her job with my Martha or to Nicky, I don't know.

"But you'd rather not" I know this is hurting me, but I need to say it out loud. Still, no answer. I go
on. "You think I had never loved you" At these words something finally happens. She turn her eyes on the ground. She doesn't look at me. Is this hope that I feel? "Alex, please…" Talk to me, look at me, shout at me. Everything, I want everything.

"I think you talk too much" She finally looks at me again, but her eyes are unreadable.

"I think you're not talking enough"

"I think you're not asking the right questions" The tension between us is unbearable.

"You think that I'm not really sorry for what I did to you in prison, for Stella and for not believing in you…"

She takes her sweet time before she opens her mouth to talk.

"False"

With a single word she can make me feel so fucking happy. This is the power she still has on me.

"You think that I have lied to you when we were talking in the woods today. Before The Thing"

"False"

"You think that you'd rather not come here and see me again" She laughs a little bit at this.

"Correct"

"You think that the Thing was a mistake"

"You need to listen to me better, Piper, I've already told you…it wasn't a mistake"

"But you think that the Thing shouldn't have happened"

"Yes"

"I don't get it…"

"You're making the wrong questions kid, you still didn't get to the point, and I need to sleep" She's slipping away from me, but I don't know how to express the thing that I'm feeling and make her understand.

"The point was…the point is that, no matter what we've been through, the things we've done to each other, the ugly stuff we've said to each other, the years passed, the wars in the fucking middle east, the vastness of the universe, seven billions of people in the world, we're here. Again. Me and you. In the same place, at the same time, but never, never, never in the same moment together. What are the odds? Really. Think about it. The things we've done together. I think that we've done more things in our lifetimes together then probably the 99% of the entire population. And against all odds, we're here. But never really…together. Not together together, but together like …together. Like calm, with no problems. Together. Oh god, I don't know how to explain it…do you understand what I'm saying?"

I realize that I haven't looked at her while I was rumbling and when I do, she's smiling. Not the reaction I was expecting.

"I think this is the first intelligent thing that you've said tonight" I let out a laugh.
"Oh yeah?"

"Yep. I could have said the exact same thing in two sentences 20 minutes ago, but yes, it's fucking strange even for me. Almost creepy"

"And the Thing that it's not a mistake? Could it be a consequence of this creepy thing we have?"

"Listen Piper, I'm going to tell you this once and never talk about it again. Ok?"

"Ok"

"As much as I wish that I'd choose a different camp, this is the reality we're both in. And I have to deal with it, even though I don't want to, and I will probably try to...limit the time we will see each other in the future, if I can. But we will see each other, at least for a few months. Because I'll probably work with your fiancé and because my girlfriend took a liking in you and because I will finally hang with Nicky in person after so much fucking time. But I mean everything I've said to you before. I was happy Piper. And I will try to get that happiness back. Your absence was probably one of the reason of my happiness, but now you're back and all of the creepy Alex&Piper thing is back again and I don't know how to deal with it because it's strange and stupid and we kissed after a few days, we'll probably kill each other in another couple of days. So, it wasn't a mistake kissing you because it was the honest ugly and pointless mess that follows us since the first day we met. It wasn't a mistake because it cannot be a mistake if you're acting accordingly to what you feel. I wanted to punish you and I did it in the most efficient way, because we're a creepy thing together. You kissed me for your reasons but it's the same. It wasn't a kiss...it was just...us, being the creepy and dysfunctional thing that we have always been. We weren't cheating anyone. You're getting married and I have a girlfriend. Nothing is changed. We just fell into the familiar mess that we are together. The kind of mess I didn't want to fall into ever again..."

I've never heard her speaking for so much time. Ever. I'm speechless because she's just completely changed my vision of what happened. This is an absolution that I didn't think it was possible to have. A death row pardon. It's still too much to process. I need to process it, think about it. Sleeping on in.

She is clearly awaiting for me to say something, she's looking at me with waiting eyes, but I don't know what to say, for the millionth time today.

"I—I—Ok" I stutter

"Is it really ok?"

"I guess so...I just...no, it's ok"

"So you're not going to freak out and tell Sandy or Martha anything?"

"No, I won't. If you can stop yelling at me in public..."

"I've never-"

"Alex!" My voice is firm.

"Yeah. You're right...agreed" She stretches her hand in my direction and, I swear, this is the most absurd and incredible handshake that I've ever had in my life, and that includes the time me and Polly cut our hands, put blood on the palms and lick it off. I'm so affected that I don't even register the fact that Alex's hand was touching mine. I didn't even realize that she rose from her sitting position and she's now standing over me.
"So, can we please now go back to the cabin and sleep until tomorrow fucking evening?" Me, and Alex, on the same bed, again. Holy hell.

"Ehm, you go ahead...I'm going to clean up here and then I'll come…"

"I can help you, you know? Come on, tell me what to do boss"

"No, Alex, really, I need some alone time...you can go, I'm coming soon" Truth is, I just don't want to go back to this mess just yet. I just want to stay alone a little bit, gain clarity and calm. And then I can go and sleep in the devil's lair.

"Okay..." I think she knows what I need. She doesn't insist and she goes towards her bag behind me. I stay in the same position, with my legs crossed, looking ahead of me.

I'm still in the same position I was when we were talking, sitting cross-legged with a blanket around me and my mind is already drifting, so I'm not aware that Alex is approaching me until it's too late and her arms are around me from behind.

All my senses are in a complete black out, I'm not aware of anything, just her arms around me, her breath on my face, I feel. I feel so much that I don't even know what I'm doing, I turn my head in her direction and I stop when I'm blinded by a sudden flash of light.

"Come on, Piper, look at your face! At least pretend to be happy!"

I find myself blinking my eyes and looking at the screen of a smartphone, her smartphone.

"If we want to make Nicky shit in her pants at least a little bit, you have to look the part..." She hugs me again from behind, but right now I am aware of the smartphone in her hand in front of us. I smile as an automatic reflex. Her cheek is touching mine and I think that probably the truth is that I don't have any effect on her anymore, because she's acting like we're old buddies, while I really find it hard even to breathe. Or to talk. In fact, I'm not talking at all.

Just as quickly as she assaulted me, she's also on her feet, with her bag on her shoulder, writing on the phone.

"Done. This should be enough...can't wait to hear from her"

She stops for a second, maybe she realizes that she's basically talking to herself...but if she is thinking that, it doesn't show. Instead she just puts her phone in the bag and we're surrounded by darkness again. She looks in my direction, or at least that's what I think she's doing and after a "Good night Pipes, don't stay up too late", she turns her back on me and she starts walking towards the camp with the torch on.

My "Good night Alex" is slightly louder than a whisper, but I think she heard me, so that's enough.

When I'm finally sure that I'm all alone, I let myself fall back on the ground again, taking the blanket with me. I look at the stars, but they're not giving me any clue about what to do with all this mess.

I must have dozed off again because a sudden sound startles me. It's my phone. I forgot to turn down the ringtone.

I know it's not Martha, it's too late for her. It's too late also for me to give her the good night that I promised. Another thing to apologize for tomorrow. Maybe there's a problem on the camp.

I grab the phone to check, but all I see is a message from Nicky with a picture. "What the fuck is
I'm looking at the picture of a beautiful and smiling redhead next to a blonde mess with a fake smile who's not even looking at the camera. Perfect summary of the evening.

"I don't know Nicky, I don't know" I say these words out loud even if I know that Nicky is hundred miles from me and she cannot hear me. And then I close my eyes again. The darkness surrounds me and I drift off to a calm place, finally.
"Piper….come on, Piper, wake up…"

Something is grabbing me, taking me from a blissful darkness to bring me into a reality made of something confusing. Lights, hands, someone is touching me.

A sudden thought snaps in the back of my mind. Danger.

I react as quickly as I can, moving my arms to break the connection between me and whoever is touching me. My elbow makes contact with something, I hear a cry of pain and I stop, not because the voice is familiar, but because that voice still manages to freeze my blood. Or to boil it.

"Fuck, Piper, it's me!"

The light coming from the cell phone that's fallen on the ground, illuminates the face of a sore Alex, holding her arm close to her chest.

I'm not still entirely sure about where I am, or why I am in this place, but, as I slowly come back to my senses, I realize that I'm still in the clearing in the woods. On the horizon, a soft pink light is beginning to spread all over the sky. I must have fallen asleep. My neck is aching, again.

"What time is it?" I say with a voice almost as low as Alex's. The humidity must have gone straight to my throat.

"What? No apologies? You've almost hit my nose!"

"Well, you kind of attacked me while I was sleeping…"

I'm on my feet, adjusting my eyes to the world around me while trying to ease the pain from my neck with deep movements of my fingertips.

"Attack you? It's almost 5 am…" Alex's voice comes from my right side, so I turn around to face her. And it hits me. Why is she here?

"Is everything ok? Did something happen at the camp?" I can't help but being worried. Adult life, it sucks.

"Ehm, no. No…it's all good…just…I didn't hear you coming back in the cabin, so…"

So you came here looking for me? That's what I terribly want to say, but I don't, because I know she doesn't want to hear it. But that doesn't stop the warm feeling from spreading everywhere. So I just let the comment slide.

"I swear I just closed my eyes for a second…I must have fallen asleep…"

"Or you've been abducted by aliens…"

I take advantage of her funny joke and I smile. The smile I kept hidden inside in the last few minutes because Alex came here to check up on me. Now I've got an excuse to light up like a Christmas tree.

She smiles back, and for the millionth time since Monday, the world seems strange. Pink sky, red hair, emotions long gone but yet the memory is so familiar.
"Why are you smiling?" She asks me. Like it's the easiest question in the world. How can I explain it to her? I just can't.

"Nothing…" my smile grows bigger.

"Nothing?" The sun behind her is starting to show, it's like we're in a different world, fluffy, pink, soft, not real.

"Nope" I reply, still smiling, knowing that the spell we're in is about to break somehow, but while we're on it, it's just too good.

There's silence between us, and it's the loudest silence I've ever heard. I know she knows. We both know. But we just shouldn't...know.

"Come on, let's go…" She breaks the moment.

Her hand touches my forearm for a moment and she takes a step away from me. I follow her because, what else can I do?

As we're entering the woods, I have a sudden thought.

"Hey Alex, wait. I need to finish here…give me five minutes…" Truth is, I'm tired. But I cannot leave everything outside, the blankets, the pillows…I'm turning around, but the same hand as before is grabbing my forearm…

"Come on, Piper… I'll help you later, let's just go to bed…" she keeps on pulling me towards the woods. My resistance is futile, I don't even fake it. I just follow her even when her hand leaves my arm.

We don't need torches anymore, even though the sky is not properly lit. I'm starting to feel the cold of the night and the humidity inside my bones and the idea of throwing myself on a real bed with real sheets and a real pillows is starting to look like the most appetizing thing ever. I don't even care that Alex will be next to me. Really.

The walk towards the cabin is a silent one. We're both probably too tired to even think. And, to be honest, the magic of the woods at dawn is so breath-taking that my eyes move everywhere trying to record every little glimpse of light, every dance between colours and my mind drifts away. I see Alex's head from behind and her hair is burning just like a perfect piece of this incredible scenery.

She turns around just once, when she slams into a branch, probably because she's too distracted by a movement on the path. She's smiling with all her teeth and I laugh with her when I slam into the same branch, because, well, I was distracted too.

"Finally" I say out loud when we arrive at our cabin. I mean my cabin, not ours.

"Yes, finally…" she repeats after me. She enters first and she's already taking off her jacket. Her pyjama is still my t-shirt, even though now all her clothes are washed and dried.

Without even thinking about it, I start to undress until I'm only in my underwear. I feel Alex's eyes on me, she's already under the sheets on her side of my bed.

"Thanks…" I try to look at her without really looking at her. She shrugs, like it's not a big deal. Like leaving a bed, dressing up and going out alone in the dark at 4 am just to check on me after everything we've being through is not a big deal. It's a fucking gigantic big deal if you ask me.
"And sorry for the elbow in your face..." I add. This gets me a low laugh and when I turn around to go under the sheets, her glasses are on her bedside table and her eyelids are slowly falling.

I pull the sheets up till my neck, I'm a little cold after the night spent outside, even if the blankets kept me warm enough when I was sleeping in the clearing.

I assume a fetal position and I try to move my feet as close to my body as possible. But after a few minutes, I realize that it's not working. I need to get to the drawer and take a pair of socks but I'd sell my soul rather than leaving this half-warm cocoon I'm in.

I can hear Alex's breath, slow and steady on my right. She seems asleep. She's always been the warmest of the couple. Deliciously warm. I know I shouldn't go there, I just shouldn't. I need to shut down my mind, put my shit together and get out of the bed. Right now. On the count of three. One, two, three. But I don't move.

Instead I just inch a little bit on my right and I untangle my legs to move the feet a little closer to the warm mass that is also Alex, I swear, right now she is just a ball of aseptic hot bliss to me. I'm going to reach the minimum distance between us and then I'm going to stop. Promise.

I'm so, so focused on moving very slowly the toes of my feet that I don't notice a pair of eyes looking at me.

"You could just ask..."

I wince at the sudden sound of her voice and I almost jump out of the bed. A rush of something warm floods into me and I think I'm blushing too. So busted.

There's no need to fake it anymore. I push my face into the pillow.

"My feet are cold and the sock drawer is too far...I'm tired..." I whine with my little girl voice, muffled by the pillow. I also pout even though she can't see me.

"Argh...I knew this truce was a bad idea..." she says while her hands are on my calves and she drags them towards her. I cannot believe it. I was hoping she would get out of the bed to get me the socks, not...this.

The joy I feel when my frozen feet find their place in the back of her knees almost distracts me from the fact that my frozen feet are pushed against the back of Alex's knees, not just the knees of a common human being. Almost.

I rearrange my position so we can both be more comfortable. It's easy to do it because we've done it for years. I let out a moan without even trying to stop it.

"Oh my god Alex, I-" I stop just in time. Thanks God.

Even though our legs are touching, there's enough space between our bodies. It's not that awkward. And the fact that we're both dead tired is helping a lot.

I will have time to think about this tomorrow. Now I just close my eyes for a second.

Don't wake the sleeping tiger. That's what they say. And I guess they're right in more than one way.

There's literally a tiger sleeping next to me, but instead of waking her up, I'm hugging her. Or, well, to be honest, my hand is circling her waist, her back is pushed against my front and my left leg is
trapped between her legs. And that's the problem. I cannot move.

We fell asleep in an old position, I woke up in a totally different and new one. Me as the big spoon? I think that's a first, at least with Alex. With my Martha I'm always the big one.

But I cannot think about her now. Not while I'm here, with my hand softly touching Alex's stomach, so softly. I don't know how we ended up like this. I don't know what time it is and why the hell I woke up. Must be 7 am. Old habits die hard.

After the first few moments of pure panic, when I tried to disentangle myself from her and I almost woke her up, I realized that, to get out of this alive, I needed to act smartly. And that's why it's almost 30 minutes that I'm not moving at all, and I can't go back to sleep, thank you very much.

For the first ten minutes I thought about the moves I could use to retrieve my left leg from the clamp of her legs, the only thing that was keeping me from my safe side of the bed, safe from her. The ten minutes after the first ten, I tried to physically move the leg. Slowly at the beginning, harder when I realized that it was way more difficult than what I thought. When I found out that it was impossible to move it without waking Alex up, I tried to shift my body from the spoon position into something like a compass in which we are linked only by the legs but my body is far from her. Worst idea ever. The only outcome was her arm blocking my arm on her stomach, so now my left arm and my left leg are held hostage by Alex. And in the last 10 minutes I've just laid here, trying to mentally remove my left limbs, so I can go back to sleep in a world where I can forget about the feeling of my hand on Alex's stomach. Forget the way she smells. The way she breathes. Forget even the way her temperature is the exact temperature I remembered. This is so fucking strange.

There's only one thing left for me to do. Wait until she wakes up and pretend to be asleep, hoping that she won't look into this more that she's supposed to. And hoping that she'll set me free. In all the senses of the word.

Clearly, today is not my lucky day. To be honest, this whole week, luck is looking somewhere else, far from me, probably in another continent, or planet.

It's almost 9 AM when finally something happens.

The hand that is touching her, the same hand that I dreamt about cutting off from my body in the last hour or so, is moving. Alex has just taken a big breath and her thorax expands. She's awake and I'm suddenly terrified. How can I pretend to be asleep when I feel so tense and every nerve of my body is on alert?

Don't panic. Don't panic. She's the one who's trapping you, not you. It's all her fault. I relax just enough to notice that every inch of the body I'm pressed against, is tense.

I keep my eyes so shut that they are almost hurting. I feel like I'm on a roller coaster and I've reached the highest point. I know what's about to happen, but in that precise moment, everything is on pause. That's exactly how I'm feeling.

But the pause is too long. I'm waiting for the downfall, for the gravity to work its way down. But it never comes.

I have to remind myself to breath, but not too fast. Slowly. Everything has to remain still. Finally, I feel her body moving, she's probably going to push me out of her way, or she's just going to lift her limbs in the quietest way possible, so she can pretend that this didn't happen. I'm good with it.

I feel her moving without really moving, I feel her slither against me, like a snake. The friction is
electric and it's building. I'm waiting for the fire, the explosion at the end. And when her hand reaches mine, I know the time has come.

But, just like before, it doesn't.

She doesn't explode, she implodes. She deflates like nice cake that's been taken out of the oven too soon. I feel her exhale loudly and ...I don't know...surrender...

And here we are, again, in the same position, but this time her hand is laying on mine. And she's not doing anything. Just breathing. She isn't lifting my hand, she isn't moving it, nothing. She's just there. And I know she's not sleeping because I can feel her skin, and it's alive. And I wonder if she can feel mine too.

This doesn't mean anything, this doesn't mean anything, this doesn't mean anything. Except it does.

I focus on the breathing and on the relaxation of all my muscles. I don't know why I'm trying to look asleep. Maybe it would be easiest if I pretend to move in my sleep...maybe she'll get the signal and will use the movement to release my limbs. But I don't do it. Because this is something that I thought I forgot, but I didn't. And it brings up in me good things, good feelings. Like when I entered Cal's car the other day and I smelt the vanilla car freshener he just put in. It reminded me of the summer when I had my first car and me, Francis and her cousin, went to the Hamptons to go to that fucking strange party on the beach and I ended up making out with Johnny Rice on his grandmother's rocking chair. So much tongue!

I smile at the thought, and without even thinking about it, I tighten my grip on Alex's stomach. A rush of hot blood flows thought my body. I'm busted. Am I busted? People do strange things in their sleep.

I have not time to panic on this, because Alex is starting to make small circles with her thumb on my hand and this is bringing up a new wave of hot blood panic in my body. And memories.

It was her way of telling me that everything was going to be ok. When we took that insane boat to Lombok during the monsoon season, her thumb was doing the exact same thing, in the exact same spot, between the base of my thumb and my index finger. The Alex spot.

In that taxi in Bruxelles, while I was trying to calm down after I did the fucking thing that got me into prison. While we were cuddling in bed after the first time she said to me that she loved me. All of these memories are coming back to me, and it's a nice feeling, it's warm and I allow myself to push my face a little further into her hair. I don't care. We already talked about it. It's The Thing. The Alex&Piper thing. We are chemically, astrologically and I-don't-know-what-ally bounded to be this Thing. We have to be careful of the big things, but we cannot do anything about these little things.

After a while, it could be 10 seconds or 20 minutes, Alex takes my hand in hers and slowly removes it from her stomach to place it on my side. She does the same thing with the leg. She raises her left legs and she gently push mine a little back. If I were asleep, I probably wouldn't have felt a thing. But I'm not asleep.

I feel the mattress shift and I hear Alex walking barefoot towards the bathroom. As I hear the water of the shower running, I turn around, laying on my back and with a deep breath, I'm fast asleep.

When I open my eyes again, I know that I'm alone in the cabin. I take my time to get my senses back, to remember a little bit about the craziness of these last few days...I get up, and I head towards the bathroom to take a shower. Ralph follows my movement with his smart eyes and with a raised ear. Since the night of the hurricane, he spends his days sleeping it off in the cabin e being pet by the
guests in the kitchen, but I can feel his frustration for not being able to walk with the cast on his leg. Extra cookies for my fleabag.

Since Alex is using my products, my bathroom smells just like me. There's nothing that reminds me of the forced cohabitation that we have now, except for the toothbrush, and this makes my life way easier.

When I step outside, the sun welcomes me into another weatherly perfect day. I take out the phone and, I automatically call the first number I have on speed dial. When I realize who I'm about to speak to, the first instinct I have is to hung up immediately. The first very stupid instinct. I'm about to marry her for God's sake. I love her. But she doesn't pick up, maybe she's still at work. I leave her a message only to find one of hers already waiting for me. She can't wait to be here with me again today. I send her some smiley hearty emoji because I really don't know what else to do.

As I'm putting the phone on my pocket, it starts ringing. I answer without looking, it must be her.

"Hi honey" I try to sound as normal as possible, and I think I'm succeeding well enough.

"Don't honey me, Chapman" Fuck.

"Nicky, I thought you were Martha..." I really don't want to talk to her, I don't know why.

"Guess what? I'm not her, but I'm glad you still remember who she is..." That's why.

"Ah ahah. Very funny, idiot"

"I've seen your picture"

"I know, you send it to me..."

"Piüiper..." She emphasizes the i. It annoys me. Her tone annoys me. What she's implying annoys me. The fact she's implying something probably right, annoys me even more.

"What, Nicky?"

"Piüiper..." Again, it's hurting my nerves.

"Stop it... I've got stuff to do..." I know I'm answering like a child, but I don't like her tone.

"Just tell me..."

"There's nothing to tell..." Liar, liar pants on fire.

"Then why do I have 4 missed call from Alex and you're being all grumpy?" her voice is in her usual "fun tone" that I hate so so much and I can't stop my face to get all hot from the blood boiling under the surface...she's hitting a chord and I have no right to blame her for it. It's all my fault, but I just can't...

"I don't know, ask her..." I answer flatly. Even though inside all' I'm thinking is - Don't ask her. Don't ask her. Don't ask her. Please don't. What the hell does Alex want to say to her? Is she planning on telling her everything? Oh God.

"Seriously? I was just hoping you could give me the heads up. You know, you're supposed to be my friend, my gal pal, my confident, stuff like that. But since it looks like we're back at Litchfield, I will ask my old friend Alex what the fuck you're doing together.."
I know that tone. It's the serious tone and, most of all, she's right and I feel guilty, in more than one way.

"Come on Nic" my voice finally is soft again "I'm just really tired, I haven't slept at all..." I heard the intake of breath, so I speak before I give her the time to say something funny or sexual or, knowing her, both "...BECAUSE I've been working till late and I'm stressed, ok?"

I'm ready for her witty reply, but there's only silence on her part.

"Nicky, are you there?"

"Yes Chapman, I'm thinking.." this is so unlike her, where is her funny, sexual, fast answer?

"About what?"

"About whether blame you, comfort you, warn you or threaten you. See? My choices are too fucking many..." She's right. Oh God, she's so so so right.

"Pffft" My sigh is loud. "Nicky…I don't know…what to do, what to think, I don't know…" My voice is soft, I hope she can hear the honesty in it, probably all she hears is my desperation…I hope she can detect it too.

"Girl, I must warn you...Being the wise one is not my forte"

"You're doing an ok job" there's a smile on my face.

"Fuck you, Chapman, I'm doing a wonderful job" This makes me laugh.

"I really do love you"

"I know, it's obvious. So, can you answer something for me without going into your fucking defence mode?" I know what I want my answer to be, but I say what I know is the right thing to say.

"Yes" yet, it sounds like a death sentence.

"Did you two have sex?" my blood freezes. Just the fact that she thinks that this is a possibility is something that stops my heart for a beat. What if? Images of past sexual encounters fill my head and I'm taken aback because I see them in the past, but Nicky sees them in the present. And this thing is bothering me because now I think about the possibilities and...

"No" Short. Truth.

"Are you planning of having sex with her?"

"What? No!" Outraged.

"Sorry, sorry…I was just asking, no need to be so angry!" I'm not angry, I'm hurt.

"How…how could you think this?…Nicky, come on, you know me…"

"Yes, yeah, I'm sorry Blondie, you're right, but did you see yourself in the picture? You had the big fucked up face, your typical fucked up face, the one you only have when you fuck up big time. And, fuck, there's Alex with you. I know what I said to you, about being all friends and all the fucks, but Piper, I really didn't think that I would have seen your fucked up face."

"Stop saying fucked up face"
"You really have a fucked up face"

"Nicky…"

"Piper…"

"Nicky…” Maybe if I keep going like this she's gonna stop.

"Are we going to keep saying our names like this? Because if so, I need to grab a coffee…"

"You are the one who came up with the fucked up face!"

"Only because you don't want to fucking talk about what's happening" Her voice rises a few tones

"Because NOTHING is happening"

"Then why did Alex try to call me four times? Any idea? " Yes. I've got a few ideas. But I don't want to say them. Especially to Nicky. So I just stay silent, knowing that my silence is probably speaking louder than the lies I would have told her.

"Pipes…if you don't want to talk about it, I will not push, but you know I have to say it…are you thinking about the consequences?" Stabbed. I feel stabbed.

"I… I don't…there are no consequences…" Even my shaken voice is not agreeing with me.

I don't want her to know about the kiss. I don't want her to know about the things we said last night, I don't want her to know about anything that's been going on in my mind, but at the same time I need to be honest. With her, with me, with the fucking universe.

"I…I'm really confused…it's not what you're thinking…it's just too much and I'm…I don't know, I thought I was ready, but I'm not, and then she told me things…good things and then bad things and then good things again. She does that, you know? Every time…she confuses me, she says one thing, and she does the other I don't know what to do…really…I have no fucking clue about what to do…”

It felt good. Now I'm on the verge of crying, but it felt good.

But Nicky's not saying anything.

"Nicky? You there?"

"Yes. Just fucking thinking again…”

This time I don't ask her anything about it, I just wait for her.

"Do it."

"Do what?"

"Alex"

"WHAT?" what the fuck?

"You heard me. Go and fuck her. Or kiss her, I don't know. Do all the dirty things your dirty mind can think of. Get her out of your system or, better, get yourself killed while trying. I cannot see a way out of this."
I cannot fucking believe it.

"Really? This is your great advice? Go and fuck her? Nicky, come on!"

"Or don't do anything, just ignore her. Leave and go back to New York or send her away, tell her something happened, fuck her cabin is already broken so, I don't know, come up with something...a lice epidemic..."

Oh god.

"A lice epidemic? Did you've just said that?" I don't know if I should start laughing or crying. Probably laughing.

"I told you I wasn't good at being the wise one!"

"At least you're trying..." And I'm back at being miserable.

"Piper, come on, what's that tone? I don't know what to say to you...don't fuck up. Ok? Don't fuck up is a good advice, right?"

"Right" Easier said than done.

"You said that nothing happened, so you have nothing to worry about. You're just confused and overwhelmed, it's normal...I think. Just wait it out" I know what she's trying to do. But it's already too late. With every word she says, the sword of guilt penetrates a little bit in my flesh and the only words that keep echoing in my brain are "do it" "do it".

I try to take a deep breath, but it's really difficult. There's a lump in my throat.

"Piper, you there? Come on. I'm worried..."

"We kissed" There, I said it. Now it's out there.

There's a really long pause before she resumes her speaking.

"Fuck"

"Yep"

"Pipes..." I can feel the pain in her voice. She loves Martha. Everybody does. I don't know if there's also disappointment in her tone or if it's just me.

"I know"

"So, what now? Are you going down the old road?" Yes, it's definitely disappointment. But I do deserve it.

"No. She kissed me, out of rage. It was a one-time thing" I don't even try to defend myself, cause I'm indefensible.

"Piper..." I know she doesn't believe me

"I'm afraid Nicky...I feel like everything is slipping between my fingers and I cannot stop it, I don't know how to do it...one second I'm feeling like shit, the other one I'm euphoric, it's so frustrating..."

"Does Martha know?"
"She doesn't know anything. She doesn't deserve all of this. She doesn't deserve me"

"Don't say that. This is huge…the Alex-thing…it was huge, I was there. It's always been huge, but you need to stop it. Put an end to it…"

"I know"

"Do you want to stop it?"

Silence. I don't know what to say. I try to be as honest as I can, even if it means that I have to admit that I'm an horrible person.

"Not yet"

There's silence on her side.

"Nicky…do you hate me?"

"You know I can't. Even if you're trying really hard to make me" Her tone is affectionate and joyful. But I know she's doing it only because she knows that I'm already miserable.

"What do I do?"

"I don't know. Find a way to get her out of your system and out of your life. If you don't, than I don't want you to marry Martha. I will stop your wedding even if I have to sleep with the pastor to do so. I don’t fucking care. She deserves your full love, because she does love you. So sort this thing out, take the time you need, do all the screw-up you can think of. I don't want to know, but be sure. Please just get back to what you were last week, for fuck's sake…"

My brain is blank. I'm thinking about all of this. I hate the good feeling I have thinking about what Nicky is saying.

"Like when you are on a diet and on day you wake up and starts eating every disgusting things that comes into your mind but the next day you’re still on a diet and you still don't get too fat…do you know?"

"Yes…"

I'm listening to what she's saying, but my mind has already clicked, so I'm listening without really understand what she's saying.

I've set my mind. I'm very determined. I'm going to let her out of my system. Once and for all.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Maybe…yes…thanks Nic…I'll call you later…"

"Piper…"

"Yes, I know. Bye"

"Bye"

I hung up. And I walk with the sun in my eyes. I've made my decision. I have to.

It's exactly as Nicky said. I need to take her out. Martha deserves the truth. No clouds. It's like my
day off the diet. This will start and end here and now.

I see the kitchen cabin even if the sun is always in my eyes. Alex is there. She's the cause and the remedy of all my problems, and I need to know if I'm the patience or the disease.

With the sun always in my eyes but my face firm and stoic I walk toward my past to earn my future.

I don't know why I think about the diet thing. The day when you eat everything that you want.

It's called cheat day.

The corner of my lips shakes just a little bit.
Chapter 18

"Hi Piper!" Linda's voice greets me as I walk into the kitchen. I've had the sun in my eyes until a second ago and I only see shadows, but I still can make out her unmistakable shape.

"Hi Linda, how are you feeling?" I try to make my way to the coffee maker without tripping on something, hopefully I will soon have my daily dose of coffee.

"Very good darling! How are you?" I finally reach the pot of coffee. And it's fresh. Thanks god for the little joys in the world. I'm …

"I'm…radiant, thanks!" It's the first word that came into my mind but it describes perfectly the way I'm feeling right now.

"Radiant?" She asks with a mocking face. I laugh.

"Yes, radiant. Like the sun that's shining so brightly today…" I'm on a roll, you can't stop me. She keeps laughing.

"Oh darling, it's so good to see you in such a good mood…you were strange in the last few days…"

My smile waver for a second at the thought of the past few days, and the reason behind my…shadow. But I won't let that comes in the way of my happiness. So I will ignore it. I will ignore everything that's not bright today.

"How could I not be in a good mood with a sun like this outside?!"

"Don't' tell me, girl! I cannot wait to go to the lake and put my feet into the water… will you come by later? We've packed enough sandwiches to last a year!"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, just let me grab a coffee and I'll be on my way" I fight the urge to ask her if she saw Alex and if she's there with the others, but I resist. She cannot hide from me, not today.

With a "see ya later", she's out of the cabin and I finally can pour myself a dose of my favourite black drug. I take one sip of coffee and suddenly everything is even more rightfully right than two seconds ago. As I'm about to follow Linda's steps and go outside, I hear a fake cough coming from the darkest corner of the cabin and I know right away whom it belongs to.

If everything seemed right one second ago, now I feel like all the planets have aligned. And I smile because I didn't even have to look for her. She was right here all the time.

My eyes have adjusted a little bit to the dark place, so I reach the table and I sit down on the bench opposite Alex without making a fool of myself. I still don't see her features as much as I'd like to.

"Hi Radiant" she says with a sly smile when I've taken my seat.

"Hi … " I cannot think of a name, a fucking name to call her. So I start to laugh.

"What?" She asks amused….

"I …just don't know how to call you" She bares her white teeth, smiling at me.

"You can always call me Alex…if no one is around of course…" She's almost whispering and I
cannot understand the reason why hearing her name coming from her lips feels like a sting to my heart.

"Mmm…” I pretend to think about it "…don't overestimate me…I will fail for sure at the first public occasion…”

"Oh god! You're right" She laughs as I smack lightly her forearm pretending to be offended.

"So, how do I call you?"

"I don't know, since Martha is not an option, maybe you can come up with something …"

"Like what? A nickname?" I'm amused.

"Why not? Impress me…”

I try not to think about the effects of her "impress me" on my body and I focus on the task at hand. She's looking at me like it's a challenge, and if it is a challenge, I want to win it.

"Radiator" I reply mirroring her face.

"Radiator?" I really like to hear her laugh.

"Yes, you know, last night…I was freezing, you weren't…” I answer with a funny arrogance that I don't have.

She keeps laughing as she gets it. "That's a nice one"

"So you like it?"

"Oh yeah. I'm thinking about tattooing it on my butt cheek" This is easy. So, so easy.

"So, can I call you Radiator?"

"No"

"But you said that I could come up with a nickname…” And I'm back at being a fake whining baby. When was the last time I talked like this? I cannot recall. She unlocks stuff in me that I thought were long gone, but instead they just were there, inside me, I wonder what else is still hiding inside, waiting to wake up.

"Well, while I can appreciate the effort and the idea behind it, it sucks. It sucks big time"

I join in her laugh and I almost spill my coffee. Again, too easy.


"God you're right…it sounds too much like Red anyway…” Now I see her face and something passes on her eyes. So I keep on talking, as I normally do when I'm nervous. "Do you know that she will be set free in a few months?" The same thing passes again. So there's definitely something going on.

"Ehm. No. I didn't know that. Good for her" I can spot her forced smile from miles away.

"Didn't Nicky tell you about it?" Again, she seems a little off.
"Nope" She answers too quickly, there's something behind it for sure, but I know when to step back. The equilibrium between us is still a little too thin. So, after a few seconds, I just change argument.

"So, girl-with-no-name, what are your plans for today?" But maybe the change of subject is not the best idea. Because I feel anxious. Why do I feel anxious?

"I don't know. What does Camp Clearwater have to offer on a Saturday?" She rises from the bench to put her cup into the sink.

"Well, Saturdays are usually spent doing nothing… pic nic at the lake, walks, naps, nothing organized…" I turn my head to look at her. Expectantly.

"Doing nothing sounds really, really good" She doesn't add anything. Why is that? Since I've finished my coffee too, I mirror her movements and I go towards the sink. She's already at the door, going outside, and I don't know what to say. I know that I have to say something, but my mind goes blank. Thankfully, she takes me out of my misery.

"So, what are your plans Pipes?" I ignore the voice in my head that's whispering words like she-doesn't-want-to-spend-the-day-with-you and I try to sound relaxed and in control. I fail miserably at that.

"Oh. I haven't anything planned. You know…the same thing, going around, solving problems, eating stuff, reading…" I sound ridiculous, I know. I should just shut up.

"Ah ok, nice plan"

And we're back at the silence. She's outside, I try to clean my mug as fast as possible, when I put it in the draining board I know that all the black stains are still there, but I don't care, I need to catch her as soon as possible.

With three quick steps I'm outside, and the sun blinds me once again. Fucking sun. No sign of Alex, I turn my head almost 360 degrees, like an owl, but I can't see a thing. Fuck, she's gone.

"Are you looking for something?" Her voice startles me. She's way too close, that sneaky bitch.

"Geez, Alex…wanna kill me?" I turn around to face her, she was behind me the whole time.

"I know more effective ways to do so" I cannot help but flash a million watts smile. She didn't go away.

"I'm sure you do…being an ex-con and all" I look at her like it's a challenge and, in some way, it is. The only problem is that I don't know where this is gonna lead us. I don't know if I want to win it or to lose it.

"Yeah right, so you're implying that you could kill me too, being an ex-con and all?" My smile gets bigger, she's in my same mind-set. Challenge accepted.

"Of course I can. I'm a badass"

She laughs and looks unimpressed. "You could kill me with one of your soaps…put it in a socket and hit me, I would be one good smelling corpse"

"Well, I tried to summon a tornado, but it didn't work so well, it kind of backfired, so maybe the soap is a good option after all…"
"This one was funny" she says with her usual smart grin. She takes off her glasses to clean them. I can see some freckles too.

"Do I need to be offended? Of course I'm funny…I've always been…"

"Well, that can be discussed" she puts her glasses on again and the gesture is so familiar that it hurts. She starts to walk toward the path leading to the lake. She's just thrown the bait, I know it. But I will take it anyway.

"What do you mean by that?" I'm still under the kitchen porch, I've forgotten how to move.

"Piper, are you coming or not?" Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. My legs suddenly remember how to move.

"Yes, I'm coming Radiator" I reach her and I start walking on her left side.

"Drop it" Her threat is fake.

"What do you mean, Rad-girl?"

"I'm warning you… Drop it" Again. So fake.

"Or…” She suddenly stops.

"Or…or I'm going to spend the rest of the day far from you. Very far" The big Vause smile never leave her face. I'm so busted. Alex 1 – Piper 0. I try to save the situation.

"Oh yeah, like that would be a problem for me…"

"Really? What are your plans for today Alex?" She's mocking me. I can't believe her.

"First of all, I've never called you Alex. And second of all I was just a concerned owner, don't read too much into it…"

"Yes, sure…” She's not convinced, and she's right.

"Believe what you want to believe…costumer" I say as I leave the path and I take a turn. It's my turn to throw the bait. And waiting…three, two, one…

"Where are you going?" I hear her screaming from the spot where I left her a few seconds ago.

"To see Ralph. See you later?" I turn my head and I keep walking, but slowly. If everything turns out the way I want it to turn out…

After a few seconds I can feel her presence by my side. I turn my head and I show her the most presumptuous, self-righteous and arrogant smile ever produced by a human being. Alex 1 – Piper 1.

"Let me guess, you're just doing it for the dog?" I add laughing.

"Go fuck yourself" She roll her eyes and push me on the shoulder, but not with enough force to make me fall.

This. This is what I miss. Nothing else. The way we can so easily get each other. I think my cheeks are hurting, I'm smiling too much.
Chapter 19

"Yes honey, yes honey... who's a good boy? You're a good boy, I know, I know, I know..."

I perfectly know the face that Alex is making. It's the same face that everyone who's never had a dog has when they are in the proximity of a proud and loving dog owner.

But when I turn my head to see her eyerolling, I'm surprised to see just a smile on her face, a genuine one. So I feel free just to be myself, and I sit on the dirty floor of the reception porch taking Ralph's head into my lap.

"You're going to be fine really soon, and we're going hiking, we're going swimming and I'll let you jump into the muddy disgusting pond you like so much... I promise you, now your mommy has to go, but I'll be back soon. Just stay here and be a good boy, ok?"

His groan is not too happy, but he'll manage just fine. I can feel his frustration, but he needs to rest... a few days and my fleabag will be fine again. I rub his belly for another minute and then I lie his head on the pillow. A hand materializes in front of my face. I gladly take the help.

"Can we go now, mommy?" Alex's jokes are like fuel to my heart.

"Don't judge me" I warn her. Her hand has left mine and now it's patting Ralph's back. His face is a sadness mask, but his tail is saying something else.

"I'm not judging you. Your child is well behaved..."

Again, the smile she has is not a mocking one.

"Stop it. And yes, let me grab my swimsuit and we can go. Grumpy dog will be fine here with all the food I gave him and because he's a good boy, right?"

"Bye Ralph" I don't think I'll never get used to see a red head Alex being affectionate to a dog. My dog.

"Bye Love of my life" I say with a dramatic gesture of my hand, I take the bag with all the thing I need for the lake and I grab an extra beach towel, just in case, closing the door behind me.

"Now you're just exaggerating" she says as a matter of fact.

"Yes, I am" I confirm with a laugh and we're back in the dusty road to the lake.

We're walking in a comfortable silence. Well, at least I think it's comfortable for her, because all I'm thinking is that now we're walking in silence and maybe we should talk about something. About everything since I don't know if we'll ever have the chance to do so and since I don't know if this truce is going to last of not. So I mutter the first idiotic thing that comes into my mind, as always.

"So..." Duh.

"So what?" She's not looking at me but she seems amused.

"Mmm..." I'm at a total loss of word. Nothing has changed in the last 30 seconds, I still don't know what to say.

"Say what's on your mind, I won't bite, I swear." Her smile is still amused and she seems really
willing to give me an honest answer and have an honest conversation and this really isn't helping.

"Ehm...so...how's life?" Duh. Well, at least she's laughing. She's laughing a lot today, at me, with me.

"What kind of question is that? It's too general, you need to be more specific..."

"Mmm ok, so, let's start with...work?"

"Oookey" She doesn't sound too convinced "I can answer that. Work is good, thanks."

"Come on, give me something here! I want to know more than that..."

"Well, then you need to be more specific, what do you want to know?"

"What do you do, like specifically?"

"Well, if some art dealer in Asia wants to place something, they contact me and I try to place it in the American market but usually I don't get much money out of it. My main job is to work for art foundations or very rich men that want a particular rare object or are looking for handmade furniture or for other crazy stuff. You won't believe the things I've witnessed, and the loads of money involved, or the things they asked me to do..."

Things to do? I look at her with a raised eyebrow and a mischievous smile.

"What?" She says with a laugh when she sees my face "Come on, Piper!"

"What? The things they asked you to do? You served me this face on a silver plate...you know I'm all about the cheap and dirty humor" I say pointing at my face and at my still raised eyebrow and soon her hand is gently on my face to cover it and gently push it. Something she used to do and probably forgot to tell her body to forget. The reaction I have is also automatic, I lean on the touch. Yesterday seems far away years ago, when for a moment I thought she was going to hit me. She soon takes off her hand. Too soon?

"Oh yes, I can confirm it. Your humor is still very very cheap"

"Some things will never change. For example my very cheap humor and your ability to deal things for a lot of money"

"Can't argue with that" she raises her hands in surrender.

"So, what are these things they asked you to do?" I ask her almost conspiratorially. She looks at me for a few seconds before answering, like she was pondering how much she could say, or if she wants to open up with me or not. Her smile is the best answer I could ask for.

"Well, once someone very very rich asked me to find a mummy to put on his living room"

"What? A mummy like a real mummy, from Egypt, dead pharaoh and pyramids?" She laughs and I don't think she knows that her laugh is better than, I don't know, a lot of things in this world that create dependence.

"Well, those of the pharaohs are impossible to get, of course, but a smaller mummy, maybe of someone not so important, well that's not entirely impossible"

"So you did find a real mummy for the living room of a very rich guy?"
"Yes I did" Her smile is so proud it reminds me of that time I won the spelling bee match when I was in primary school.

"So, is it legal to own some dead guy's body and put it on the couch next to you while you watch tv? God bless America"

"Easy tiger, it's not really that easy. Technically you cannot own someone's body. You can do it only if you have a public museum, or if you are Norman Bates" I laugh.

"So, how did you do it? Old style Vause?" I ask it with a smile, but suddenly I'm really tense.

"Nope. New style. Now I have lawyers working for me. I've found a bureaucratic cravat. You cannot buy a mummy if you don't have a museum, but… you can win one at an art auction."

"And of course you won one…"

"Of course I did. It took me two years, but in February I did get my mummy and a shitload of money"

"Oh, listen to you. All proud, and rich and legal. Who are you?"

"The same old bitch. Even though I'm not that rich, let's just say that I'm paying off my debts and the future is looking brighter and brighter every day. So I can also afford to go into very expensive camps in the woods" She winks. She fucking winks.

"Very expensive?"

"Very expensive…"

"I can give you the number of a friend of mine who owns a camp on the other side of the mountain. It's very cheap, so you can go there if you'd like to fall into an algae infested river while said friend of mine grabs your butt to help you climb a 6 feet-high ravine"

"Woah…aggressive enough?" Her amused smile says entirely something else.

"I'm just calling it as I see it. Nobody puts Piper in a corner" And here it is the laugh. I'm feeling like Tinker Bell. I live for the applauses, in the form of her laughters.

She just smiles and keeps walking, without saying anything. But I feel brave, and I want to push it.

"Nothing to say?"

"What do you want me to say? Ten points to Gryffindor?"

"I'll gladly accept that, thank you…” Now, together with the laugh, there's a shaking of the head.

Again, we walk in silence, and, again, I break it.

"So, no more walk on the dark side?"

"If by dark side you mean the black market then no. Even if in the black market there's way more money, I'm after the thrill of the challenge and actually trying to do stuff legally is way more challenging. And then there's this little thing where I don't want to see a fucking prison for the rest of my life"

"The poster girl for the rehabilitation program! Now I feel ashamed. A couple of days ago I
downloaded Radiohead's new album...are you going to report me?"

"Ah ah, very funny. I'm still a badass. Once I've smuggled an original koteka from a tribe in Indonesia. Now ask me what a koteka is..."

I'm waiting for her explanation, but it doesn't come. She just has a smiling face that makes me wanna...

"Oh wait, you want me to actually ask you? Ok. So tell me, Greatest Dealer Of All Time, what is a kookboka?"

"I'm actually the greatest ART dealer of all time, thank you, and the koteka is a penis case"

She knew it. She knew how I would have reacted. I see it in her eyes and in the smirk that accompanies my almost death by laughter.

"It's a fucking penis case, made with a fucking gourd. And it was a used one, because I'm fucking serious"

There are tears in my eyes, I'm just picturing Alex asking for a penis case to some old tribe guy.

"So...so you...you...?"

"Yes Piper, it was one of my fist jobs. I've travelled for two days in the Papuan jungle to get to the safest place a white girl could reach just to ask for a fucking piece of hollow wood where you put inside you penis just because some rich old guy probably with an erectile dysfunction paid me 10.000 dollars to do so..." She stops because she's starting to laugh too much.

"I'm picturing you at the airport with the...thing on your bag, trying to look cool..."

It is difficult for her to stop her laughers just to keep talking.

"It was one hell of a check-in. You know, I've always used mules to do the dirty jobs, so I actually didn't know what it meant. And I spent all the flight back to the US with a piece of fragile wood in my bag picturing me trying to explain to Customs why I had a fucking wood condom with me"

Now the tears are really falling, I don't know when was the last time I've laughed this much. Maybe is not just amusement, maybe is also the fact that now I can do so, I can laugh with Alex. Again, for something she said just for me.

I stop and I put my hands on my knees because I just can't, I'm laughing too much. She stops by my side. Her hand is on my forearm and it makes me turn my head in her direction. She's laughing and there are tears in her eyes.

"And you want to know the funniest thing of all?" she manages to say between the laughs.

I just increase the smile I have and I look at her with a gaze that I know how it should look from the outside. We are both stilled in time.

"Well...after I passed Customs not only I discovered that it was totally legal for me to bring home that thing, but I also discovered that you could have an original koteka with the original certificate from ebay just for 50 bucks!"

I cannot stop myself. The idea is just too funny.

"So...so...you're telling me that you did everything...for nothing?"
"Oh yeah. Exactly. What he paid me barely covered the trip expenses…but it did nothing for the emotional distress I went through"

Her left hand is on my shoulder now. We are like two old friends, having a good time.

"So, what was harder…the trip in the jungle or having to hold a penis case in your hands?"

"What do you think?" she asks mimicking with her hand some very heterosexual act she I know she has never performed before. But it leaves me speechless nonetheless. "I've never been so close to something that once held a fucking cock inside" She continues with a pained face.

"You mean…apart from me and my pussy?"

Alex explodes literally. Her face gets red and god, it's all her fault. I don't know where it did come from, but it was her talking about cocks, things inside, sexual stuff. It's all her fault not mine. And if the result is Alex shocked face, followed by another big laugh and her hand that jokingly pushes me away, well, then I did something good.

"Whoa, you really did get funnier…"

"I told you…the new and improved Piper is basically perfect. So perfect that I won't even reply to your subtle accusation that I wasn't funny in the past"

"Really? So you now you're able to let go of the things you identify as unjust?"

"Again, yes. And for the second time I won't react to your subtle accusations"

"I see. I also notice that your use of the word "subtle" is considerably increased" I know she's trying to get a reaction out of me, but I won't let her win this one.

"I know what you're trying to do Alex, you won't succeed"

"Well, I wasn't trying to do anything, but good for you, Buddha Princess…if you only had been so wise a few years ago…"

I know my limits, and I know she's pushing them on purpose. Because she's smiling. And she knows that I'm boiling inside, but what she doesn't know is that now I'm really a Buddha Princess, and I can really resist. Keep calm and carry on. And maybe fight back a little.

"Oh yes, my dear, isn't it right?"

"And you're also full of shit…I can see you. You're just waiting to explode" Why does it suddenly seem like everything she says is sexual? Why does it seem that the air around us is suddenly hot and still?

"You know me so well…" Sarcasm, sarcasm and sarcasm. And for a little second, her smile becomes something else.

"Piper Chapman, lesbian illuminated entrepreneur…"

"You know I don't like labels"

"So you're not a lesbian?"

"I was talking about the word entrepreneur…I prefer philanthropic tycoon"
"Oooh humble" Her eyes are into mine.

"Very humble" My eyes are into hers.

"So, are you?"

"Am I what?"

"A lesbian" Why does she want to know?

"Well, I'm getting married to a girl, so..." "Why did you want to know?"

"Nothing, just curiosity..." I would believe her if only her eyes would have stayed on mine instead of focusing on a point above my shoulder.

This time I'm the one who doesn't break the silence. We're almost at the lake, so this could be the last time we're alone, before... Before she's back. I cannot even think about her name or a wave of guilt would rise from my stomach.

"So, Larry has been your last...?" she won't let this go. I don't know where she wants to go with this and I don't know what to tell her so, in doubt, I go with the truth. She has always suffered from my sexual preferences, or better, the lack of.

"Not really...I also went out with a couple of guys when I got out..."

"Simultaneously?" the smirk is back in her face. But two can play the game.

"I wish. Maybe together they could have made a decent fuck" Her eyes get bigger, she wasn't expecting that. Surprise Alex.

"That bad, ah?" she recovers quickly.

"Worse. They both didn't know how to use their fingers..." I look at her, straight in the eyes. I'm not losing this. "Or tongue" I add after a few seconds of silence. She doesn't move a muscle. But it seems like we're getting closer.

"Maybe they just needed a little encouragement"

"I gave them all the encouragement they needed..."

"Did you, really? You used to be a little...lazy sometimes" if it weren't for the little spark in her eyes and the grin, I would be profoundly offended. That's probably what she's trying to do.

"Really? I don't remember a lot of complaining but maybe my memory is not that good."

"Maybe. Or maybe the person you've been with was too polite..."

"It could be. The world is full of polite people who fake"

"I've never faked anything" Bingo.

"That's not what you said yesterday" Before you kissed me to prove it, I want to add, but I don't need to.

"Piper..."
"You've started this Alex…"

"I thought we were past this conversation"

"Yes. No. Kind of."

"Piper…yes or no?" I know that the answer here is fundamental. If I answer in the wrong way, it could be really over.

"Yes. We're past the big issues Alex…"

"I can sense a but coming…" She is so so so so so so right.

"No buts. Buddha Princess here…remember?" She looks at me suspiciously. I feel like I’ve just swallowed a sack of sand.

"Let's say that I give you the benefit of the doubt…for now"

My relief is so big that I think my smile is cutting my cheeks.

"So, can we go back to talk about your job and about stuff where to put your cock inside please?"

I win a laugh. Good.

"I don't think there's more to say about the disgusting thing you were referring to...or about my job"

"It's not true! How did you find it?"

"Do you remember that village in Bali, the one after the town with the big fish market?" It seems like we're back to normal.

"Do you mean the one with the surfers and the cobras?"

"Exactly that one. I went there after my release, to lay low for a little bit, far from everything and everyone. I was living in a guest house and after a few weeks a couple of interior decorators from Chicago came in the village, we talked, they wanted to import some furniture from Bali, but they didn't know the right way to do it. I said something smart, they asked me if I could help them and the rest is history"

"So, you're working for them?"

"Oh god no. Don't get me wrong, they're fantastic, we still work together but I've made myself a promise while I was still in prison. I didn't want to be an employee and having a boss anymore. I just wanted to be independent. A freelance"

"A freelance in Bali?" I ask. I can understand her need to be independent, but in Bali? That's basically impossible.

"No no, it's impossible. I was there just to, I don't know, find the strength to go back to my new life, or better, to the fake thing that was supposed to be my life from that time on. I wasn't ready to go straight into witness protection. It would have been like coming out of a cage just to go into another one, bigger and better, but always a cage."

"So you went there? Without any plan or protection?"

"Yep" How could she…
"And what if Kubra did find you?" I cannot help but being mad. I feel the blood rushing towards my head. It was an irresponsible thing to do.

"I didn't care" Her words hurt.

"Alex…" I've stopped walking. My fists are closed. She stops too and looks at me.

"Listen, it wasn't like that. It's not like I put up a neon sign over my head saying "Come here and get me Kubra". I dyed my hair and kept a low profile…"

"Oh yeah, like that would have helped…" I try not to show my rage, but the tone of my voice betrays me. Badly.

"Hey. You weren't there. You don't know anything" Her tone is defensive. On the verge of angriness. "You didn't know what it was like, I didn't have anyone…I was alone. An ex-felon with no skills. I just knew how to move drugs and money" That's not true, she could have had me. If only she wanted to. But she didn't. And her potential, was so much. She has always been so smart.

"What about Nicky, what about the friends you had outside the cartel? Carla, Jack, you aunt…". She laughs. But it's a humourless laugh now.

"You're still so naive… Do you know what it means to live in witness protection? I was protecting them from me. I was the one Kubra wanted to kill. So you're suggesting that I should have done what? Live with Carla and her 3-years-old girl so Kubra could kill them too? Of course I've never contact any of them and of course I went as far away as possible from them. What did you do when they released you? Throw a party with all your friends?"

It's a rhetorical question, but suddenly all the thoughts about my hard days after my release here at the cabin suddenly seem so stupid if put into prospective. I cannot even begin to think about the things she went through.

"Sorry…I…just didn't think about it…I…sorry….when you told me about witness protection I really didn't have time to think…about what it meant" I'm trying to defusing a bomb. I don't want her to get mad. I don't want me to get mad. I just want a normal conversation. It's up to her now. As always. I look at her with hope, she doesn't seem too angry.

"Of course you didn't know" there's not badness in her words, she's just stating a fact. "At least in prison I knew what to do, where to stay. What do you do with freedom if you're not really free?" Sadness. That's what I feel and what I see in her.

"So what did you do when they released you?" I need to know.

"I took the bus, went to my lawyer, talked with people from witness protection, they told me that I could choose when to enter the program. I waited a few days and then I made my decision and I left."

"But…how? I mean…where? Where did you wait? How did you pay for the trip?"

She waits too many seconds before replying. "Someone helped me". Way too many seconds. Something's is wrong, I can smell it.

"And I have the impression that you're not going to tell me who"

"It's irrelevant…"
"It is relevant if you're keeping it from me"

"It's irrelevant because it's my life, my choices and it's not like you have a say in the matter. And it's in the past." Something is wrong. Because she isn't screaming at me, she isn't mad. She's calm. Oh god, she went back to deal drugs. That's the only explanation. It's all bullshit, her stories about art and furniture, it's all a cover up story. She's still dealing drugs, I can feel it. I need to know the truth.

"If it's irrelevant and in the past, then why keep it from me?" She resumes the walk towards the lake. I follow her.

"Mind your own business" her tone isn't as rude as her words.

"This is my business" What if she tries to sell drugs to my guests? What if she's still using? That would explain her mood changes. Oh god.

"What the fuck are you talking about? Your business with my life ended a long time ago" Ok. Now her tone is as rude as her words.

"Well, now you're here, in my camp, so if there's something I should know about one of my guests, then it's definitely my business" I say the words with pride and determination. Her face shows utter disbelief. Her jaw is almost touching the ground.

"What. The.Fuck? You're crazy…"

"No, I'm not crazy Alex. And if you're hiding something that could cause a problem here, I need to know" I think I'm screaming, but I feel like I have the holy right to do so.

"Hiding something? Now tell me how on earth the fact that Nicky gave me money can be linked to your fucking camp" Wait. What?

"Oh…" Oh.

"Yes Piper. Fucking oh. She made me swear not to tell you. But dear god you always make me say stuff that I don't want to say."

Nicky. Nicky knew and didn't tell me. Ouch.

"Just…don't get mad at her, please…She just helped me…” I try to collect myself as fast as I can. This is something that I will need to discuss with Nicky. But I'm not mad, not really. I'm just, I don't know. I feel left out. I knew they were still in contact with each other, but this is a whole new friendship level that I didn't know existed. Am I jealous? Of them? Of Nicky? I don't know. Maybe I'm just angry because Nicky didn't insist enough and gave Alex the chance to run away and maybe be killed. Oh yes, I'm definitely angry right now. Or not. I still don't know. All I know is that Alex is not angry, and I don't know if it's only because she feels guilty for telling me about Nicky. There are a lot of I don't know in my head right now.

"No, I'm not mad at her…I'm just…surprised…” I know this is kind of a lie, but I also know that the anger, or whatever this is, will soon go away. So, I look at it as an half-truth.

"It was all me. I asked her to do it. She didn't want to, she wanted me to go into witness protection, but I made my choice and left her none. To help me or to let me find someone else to help me"

Nicky Nichols. The one and only Nicky Nichols. Of course she would help Alex. Who wouldn't? But still a little part of me feels betrayed because, well, she kept the secret from me so well. I thought we were special. I know we are, but maybe ... I don't know. I need to keep my ego in check, the
world doesn't revolve around me. Play the mature card, Piper.

"Well, I'm glad she did it" I settle for a partial complete truth. I think I've done something right because, the way Alex is looking at me...

"Thanks" She said and she sounds almost shy.

We settle again in a comfortable/uncomfortable silence, but this time I don't feel the need to break it, She's the one to do it.

"So, what were you thinking when you said that I could cause a problem in your camp?" The tone of her voice is amused, but I don't know how long it will last if I answer.

"Oh God, please no" Did I say it out loud? she's laughing.

"Come on Piper! I'm curious..."

"Don't make me say it, please. It was stupid"

"Say what? I really don't know what you were implying. How could it be a problem if someone two years ago lent me mon-" She stops mid-word. She finally got it, and now she's going to hate me.

"Listen Alex..." I turn in her direction and I put a hand on her forearm. She needs to listen to me. My worrying eyes are met with a smug grin and a laugh, one of those that come out directly from the belly. So I add my very nervous laugh to the symphony.

"Do you really think that I could sell drugs to your guests?" Still, not angry.

"Well, not really, but I didn’t…”

"Dear god…we've started talking what? 15 minutes ago? And we're already talked so much and we almost argued so many times that I feel the need to take a nap. How did we survived all those years?" Her tone is happy, her tone is good, she's not angry and I'm already opening my mouth to answer, because of course I have to answer, but she abruptly stops, turns in my direction and points her finger at me.

"Shush. Don't ever think about it. Keep your mouth closed. I'm hungry, and I've seen Linda waving at us with what looks like a giant pastrami sandwich. And I love pastrami. I crave pastrami. So no. Don't you dare utter a single word…” She tries. She tries her best to hide her smile. But she fails so gloriously that I cannot help but be part of this.

"But.."

"Not. A single. Word. Pipes." She punctuates every word and she resumes her walk towards the beach and towards that waving demon that is Linda right now.

I walk behind her with a gigantic smile. She has just called me Pipes again.
Chapter 20

The pastrami sandwich is the best pastrami sandwich that I've ever put into my mouth. Or maybe the fact that I'm happy in some way intensifies my taste buds. I don't know and I don't care because as I'm sitting here, in the shadows under the trees, with fragments of light kissing my legs, I'm happy. And it has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that Alex is sitting next to me, speaking to Linda with her mouth full and devouring her sandwich like she's never eaten in her life. Absolutely nothing.

Nothing to do with the way her teeth are always exposed in a blinding smile, nothing to do with the couple of times she turned in my direction just to exchange a glance that means "This sandwich is delicious". Nothing at all.

I'm just happy because I've just realized that this is the first moment of peace that I've had in forever. Of real peace. If only I could freeze this moment, I would.

The calm after the storm, they call it. The calm after the end of the world, I prefer to call it.

The camp, Alex, the storm, Martha, Sandy, Alex, Nicky, Ralph, Alex. Everything is behind me right now. I only have the peace I need to enjoy this blissful moment. I've been happy in the past years. I've been honestly, truly, wonderfully happy. But I've just discovered that there was a background noise in my life. A background noise that I've learn to live with and, later, learnt to ignore. I became so good at ignoring it, to forget that it was there in the first place. Until she came back into my life, and it transformed into a fucking heavy metal concert. But now something has definitely changed, and I'm realizing it just now. Not only the concert is over, but also the background noise is gone. And now all I hear is the lazy chirping of the birds and the laughter of the children playing on the shore.

Suddenly there's a hand in front of my face.

"Earth to Piper…"

It's Linda, she's talking to me.

I put on my best sheepish smile and I answer with my mouth still full.

"Too good…"

She seems happy and satisfied with my answer. She doesn't need to know that I'm not just talking about her sandwich.

When I turn in Alex's direction I can see her eyes fixed on my mouth. Suddenly my stomach turns into something very small and a rush of something warm washes over me. She's just looking at the sandwich, she's just looking at the sandwich, she's just looking at the sandwich.

I swallow with great difficulty what I have in my mouth before I stretch out the hand in her direction.

"Want some?"

I startled her. She raises her eyes and she looks at me like a children caught with the hands on the cookies box, but it only lasts a second. She grabs the sandwich from my hand and she starts eating it after muttering a not-so-convincing "sure" while keeping her eyes focused on something very interesting on the ground.
In the past 5 minutes I've been immersed in a conversation with Linda, Rosa and Kate about the benefits of warm lemon water in the morning, a subject I'm really passionate about, that's why I'm a little confused when I look in Alex's direction but she's not there anymore.

Suddenly, I'm on alert. Where is she? Did I say something wrong? I try to look around but there's no sign of her. Did she go back to the camp? Maybe she's tired. Or bored. Yes, probably bored.

"She's there, on the shore" Rosa says to me pointing the finger in the direction of a spot on my right. I follow the finger and I see her, walking barefoot, probably trying to find a little solace from the hot weather.

Note to self: stop acting so revealing around guests. And stop looking for a brunette, she has red hair now.

I turn my face again towards Rosa, with a justification on my lips, but the look on her face is something strange, because probably it mirrors the things I'm feeling but I'm pretending not to see. So I just shut up and smile. I'm imagining things. But I don't look in Alex's direction anymore and I have no intention of leaving my spot to go and talk to her. I'm going to stay here with my guests, because all guests are equal and there are no guests more equal than others.

But I'm burning inside, so when Linda suggests a little afternoon nap and her friends agree, I'm more than ready to take off my clothes, take my bag and go directly to the beach, where all the younger guests are sun bathing. And by younger guests I mean all of them, not someone in particular that I can't seem to find, but I'm not looking around too much either.

"Hi guys!" I say in a way that I recognize being too cheerful but only when the words are already out of my mouth.

"Hey Piper. Finally ready to chill?"

"Don't jinx it, Katie" I tell her while I put the beach towel on the deckchair and I lay down. Truth is, I'm definitely not ready to chill, since you-know-who is nowhere in sight. But fuck, if she wants me, she'll find me. I'll let the fate dictate the direction of this day, in this sick way maybe I'll feel less guilty. But guilty of what?

"Where's Lauren?" I ask, proud of myself for noticing things and for being also a good host not only a fifteen years old with boy problems.

"Don't know…she went to take a walk with Martha…"

Fuck.

Well, yeah. She can do whatever she wants with whoever she wants. It's not like we signed a contract, it's not like we both agreed on spending together all the seconds until both our girlfriends will be back. It's not what I want either, I just want peace between us and this is peace. Right? It's better to enjoy this nap.

Ten long and excruciating minutes have passed. I've tried to relax, I've tried to sleep and I've tried to force myself to get interested in Al's story about a girl he dated who had a third nipple, but nothing seems to help this feeling of restlessness and impending doom that I have.

I don't even feel guilty anymore when I hear some footsteps on the lake sand and I immediately relax.
I open my eyes, but the sun is too bright, I put my hand in front of my face but I only see Lauren in a bright yellow brazilian bikini, fixing her towel and laying down. Ok girl, we know you have a nice ass, is it really necessary to put it in our faces? With a yellow bikini. Bah. Desperate much? And where the fuck is Alex? Fuck. Enough is enough.

I rise from my spot and I look around squeezing my eyes. Everyone is sleeping or laying down with their eyes closed, so they don't see me. I don't have to pretend to act like a normal human being anymore, I can be the jumpy troubled woman who doesn't know where her ex fucking girlfriend is. And it's too fucking hot. Nap my ass.

I finally spot her on the far side of the lake, sitting on a rock under the trees, about 30 yards from me. Why isn't she here with us? I know for a fact that she likes to stay under the sun and I know that she already put a lot of sunscreen on, I smelled it on her. So why isn't she here? Is it something I've said? Why do I always think I'm the reason behind her every move? Fuck it. We are in a sort of truce and she kind of allowed me to talk to her like we're two normal human being. But I can't scream her name, I don't want to wake the others. So I just start waving my arms in hope that she'll notice me. She mirrors my movements and she waves back, but she doesn't move from her place. It looks like she doesn't want to come here. So, if the mountain won't come, I must go.

"Hey stranger..." I say as I reach her.

"Hello boss" She's smiling but I can see that she's in some sort of distress. She's sweating. I don't want to waste any time.

"So why are you sitting here all by yourself and not with us?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Obvious? What does she mean? At least she doesn't seem mad. An improvement from the past days.

"Well...no clues here. With this temperature is impossible to stay here" even I am starting to sweat. And I'm in a bikini.

"I know. I just don't want to flash everyone..."

As I'm about to ask her what she means by that, she raises her shirt and shows me what's underneath it, as I need to be reminded of how good her boobs look in a white bra.

White bra. Oh.

"Oh" That's all I manage to say, and it perfectly sums up what I'm feeling.

"Exactly. I'm going to stay here another few minutes, then I'm leaving...can you give me the keys to the cabin please?"

"To get changed?"

"No, I'm going to hang in there, with the AC. I don't have a bikini anymore, I haven't find them after the storm, God knows where the fuck they are! So, can you give me the keys?"

"No"

"No? What do you mean?" She's laughing, she thinks I'm joking. I'm not. I'm desperate and on a mission.

"No, I mean, you don't have to go back. I can give you one of mine" her laugh fills my head.
"Well Pipes, a lot of things have changed, but not the size of my boobs. I think that using your bikini would be more reveling than taking a swim in my white underwear" Oh, right.

"Don't you have some black underwear?" I'm squeezing my brain to find a solution.

"Yes, I do, but I don't think that lace panties are ideal for a place with, let's say, children!" She keeps on laughing. I'm about to suggest a swim in the lake with her clothes on, or a loan request for a bra to some of the golden girls, but I know how it would sound. Desperate. As I am.

"But I'm sorry you don't get to enjoy the cold water with this weather" I whine.

"Well, the shower and the AC look just as appealing to me right now" she says as she raises on her feet. "So...keys?"

"Yes, wait here, They're in the bag"

I walk towards the beach with an enormous sense of defeat. Now I know how Hillary must have felt, losing to Trump all those years ago. But I see no way out of this. I cannot go to the camp with her without a valid excuse, I have to wait at least a couple of hours here before I can pretend that I have to go and check on Ralph, not that I don't want to check on him, but I'm pretty sure he can survive for two hours without me. Is it stupid that I just want her really badly to enjoy this place? Maybe because it represents me, my new approach to life, I don't know. I want her to like the things I like, and now she won't see and do all the things that I like to see and do.

Unless...

Unceremoniously I put the beach towel on the bag, I put on some clothes, I quickly check the surrounding area to see if I've left something vital on the beach, and then take everything with me as I walk back to Alex, this time briskly and proud of myself. Everyone is sleeping; I don't need to inform them.

When I reach her and she sees that I've got my bag with me, she looks at me quizzically.

"Are you coming with me?"

"No Al, you're coming with me" I say with a decision I didn't know I had.

"Where to?"

"Just follow me..." I've never stop walking and I can hear her walking behind me and move on my left side.

"Do I need to be scared?" she says with her usual low voice full of fake arrogance.

I look at her straight in the eyes when I answer: "No spoilers".

She laughs and I soon join her. I've made the right decision.
"So, how do you like it here?" I ask her once we're on the path to the camp and we can't disturb anyone.

"It's good" she replies matter of factly. I wait for her to say something else, but she doesn't.

"Just good? Come on, you can elaborate"

"What, are you begging for compliments? You know very well that this place is pretty cool, what else do you want me to say?"

I look at her with the most mischievous look that I possess "Pretty cool, ahn? That means 'really really cool' coming from someone who doesn't know how to give compliments".

She playfully pushes my shoulder with hers and I almost stumble down.

"You did a great job here kid. See? I can give compliments. No big deal. I would work a little bit more on the hospitality, though". She jokes.

"What do you mean? I'm here, the Emperor of this Camp, giving you a special private tour of the most beautiful secluded secret place in the world and you doubt my hospitality?" In the meantime, we've left the main path and we're moving into the woods, towards the meadow.

"Not that I don't like it there, but I've been to your secret place a few times in the past few days, so it's not so secret anymore".

"And who said we're going there?" I'm so excited that I feel like running.

"We're not? Interesting..." She sounds genuinely intrigued. As we reach the meadow, I go straight for the oak tree and I lay my bag between its roots. Alex takes off her shoes and puts her feet into the water; I can see drops of sweat on her nape.

"Is this the part where you stab me and then serve my meat to your guests tonight?" She doesn't turn in my direction, but she's starting to use sentences with more than 3 words. I think this is definitely an improvement.

"Well, that's a very convoluted and sick thought, but no, this time you're lucky, it would take me too much time to get the barbecue ready and, to be honest, who wants to stay in front of a direct source of heat in this weather? Not me." To prove my point, I start to take off my shirt as she turns around.

"Well, that's also a very detailed answer …have you ever -" she stops in mid-sentence. I look up and I see her eyes quickly moving to my face. What they were pointing at before, I'll never know. But I can guess. I'm happy, but in a non-healthy way.

"Have I ever what?" I answer with faked innocence as I proceed to remove my shorts. She quickly recovers.

"..killed someone?"

"Mmm" I pretend to think about it "…not yet"

Her smile seems forced this time, and the situation is a little bit strange, me in a bikini under a tree and Alex on the water a few feet down from me and fully dressed.
"So…" I start.

"Yes?"

"I want to show you a place…"

"I know, that's the whole point of me following you here" she says with a smile.

"Yeah but, we need to...you know, go upstream, mostly inside the stream...so..."

"So...?" Her eyebrows rise in a way that I remember too well. She doesn't get it. I think she genuinely doesn't get it. Fuck it, why does it have to be so difficult all the times?

I try again "You should, you know…" I don't finish the sentence because it would be too embarrassing, asking her directly to get undressed, but I move my hands in front of her in a way that clearly says that.

She's puzzled for a second, but then I see her features change in an understanding expression "Oh, Ok". I'm surprised by her lack of quick, funny or arrogant reply. I would expect something among the lines of "eager to see me naked?" or something like that, but nothing, she just mutters something like "fucking heat", she comes out of the water and joins me under the oak tree without saying anything else and making everything so awkward again. Holy fuck.

She is awkward, I am awkward, this is awkward. I have totally forgotten what I'm supposed to do in the most basic situations. She starts to remove her shirt. Where do I look? Do I have to say something? What can I do to avoid looking at her while she gets undressed? I take the few steps that separate me from the small river, I put my feet into the water and I pretend to look at some leaves floating in the stream. My brain is clogged with billions of voices screaming DANGER, but none of them really reaches that part of me that is so determined to go on and see the end of this. Where is that part? In my brain? In my guts? In my heart? Nope. Not going there. My heart is taken. This feeling, that I don't want to call guilt, but fucking hell it definitely feels like it, almost made me forget of the object of said guilt (that is not guilt).

"I'm ready" She says behind me. I turn around just because I don't want to look more awkward than what I already feel. I regret it immediately. I regret a lot of things, all the things I did that brought me here, in this place, in this exact moment of time, with Alex in white underwear in front of me, looking uncomfortable. I wish she'd never came here. I advert my eyes as soon as I can. She's stunning.

"Ok, let's go. We're barefoot, so you have to be careful and watch where you put your feet. Try to follow my steps".

"Ok boss" I feel her tone getting a little lighter, so I venture in a side look and a smile as a response. I take the walkie talkie from my bag, in case something happens, and I start to walk in the riverbed.

The first few minutes pass in silence and peace. I don't know if you can really call it silence when you're surrounded by the sounds of nature...the birds, our steps in the water, the occasional frog jumping in the stream. Everything is peaceful and green and golden thanks to the sunbeams filtering through the treetops. This is my favorite part of the day, the first hours after midday, everything is so quiet, lazy, calm. I realize that I don't hear Alex behind me. I stop and I turn around. She's a few feet behind.

"Getting older?" I try to joke.

"I saw something cool back there and I stopped. I've never been this fit, for your information"
I look at her with disbelief. Part of her underwear is already see through in the spots where the water hit it. When I notice it, I turn around as quickly as I can. I've already seen enough. And I know she's fit.

"Auch!" I turn around again to see her grabbing her left foot and trying to look at something on the sole.

"What happened?"

"Something stung me!"

"What? Let me see" I get close to her and sit on a big rock on the water. She comes closer, puts her hand on my shoulder for stability and she raises her foot again to put it in my lap. There's familiarity in the gesture. There's nothing on the foot plant. A little red area, but nothing to be worried about. I trace the outline of it to make sure there's nothing unusual. She abruptly removes the foot. I look up at her. Her hand is still on my shoulder.

"Sorry, I'm ticklish. So, what was it?"

"Well, I think it's one of those rare and mortal river jellyfish. I'm afraid there's nothing we can do. We have to amputate the whole leg and hope for the best…"

She looks at me with an amused annoyed look. I continue. "Or a shark, you know that bull sharks can swim upstream, like salmons".

"Are you done?" She's smiling with all her teeth.

"Yep" I say as I get up on my feet again breaking the physical contact between us. "It's nothing. Probably just a sharp stone".

"River shark season is over?"

I laugh at her joke and I keep moving towards the place I want to show her. We're almost there. I just look back for a second to see if she can walk, but I don't see her having a hard time, so I increase the pace.

We're now in the darkest part of the woods, the dark green treets cover most of the sky and here, in the shadows, the temperature drops a little bit. I shiver but it's a welcomed sensation, after all the heat we had to deal with during the day. The atmosphere is always magical, and a little bit scary. It's like walking into an emerald cocoon that smells like humid wood, macerated leaves and musk. It's like being in another world. The riverbed is larger here, and flat, so we can walk side by side.

"This is - this is - wow"

"Yeah, I know" I reply. She's looking around like a child on an amusement park.

"I wish I had a place like this…”

"Well, technically this is not mine and I don't think that the Government of the United States will mind if you'd come here now and then".

This time she doesn't smile, she keeps looking around. I know this face, she's thinking about something obsessively. That's the face she used to make when we were together but she was thinking about her drugs. Needless to say, I hate this face. But I also know what to do in these situations: absolutely nothing. If I say something, a fight is guaranteed. I've been very good in the
past at ignoring this face.

We have reached the most difficult point of the walk, we have to climb a short waterfall with some big rocks. Nothing impossible, you just need to know where to put your feet, especially since we're barefoot.

"You just have to put your left foot here, on this pineapple shaped rock. Careful, it's slippery". I watch her from the corner of my eyes doing everything I tell her to do, but she doesn't say a word other than the usual "fuck" now and then. The "thinking face" is always on.

With a last push I reach the top of the rocks, so I turn around and I extend my hand.

"Give me your hand, we're almost there". I look at her from an upper position, she's hesitating. Is it pride or is it that she doesn't want the physical contact with me? I'm paranoid. God, it's so consuming.

She finally decides to take my hand. Her abs are stretching. I must not look at her abs. With a push, she joins me on the top of the rocks and releases my hand as soon as she can. She's facing me now, we're close, but not so much.

"Paradise is after that curve" I say with a proud smile. Maybe I've just misunderstood everything. She nods with a small smile and she brakes the eye contact with me. That's enough. The old Piper knew that she had to close an eye in these situations not to ignite a fight, but the new Piper doesn't care. What is there to lose? Maybe the right question is 'WHO is there to lose?', but the answer is nothing and nobody. You cannot lose what's not yours.

I lean my hand on her forearm and her eyes finally meet mine again. I need to be careful, using soft words to maintain the equilibrium. One wrong word and this is over.

"What's the matter with you? You haven't said a word in the last ten minutes… If you don't want to stay here we can go back, or you can go back" without me. I don't say it out loud but it is heavily implied. I'm giving her a way out and I'm ready to deal with the consequences, in case she takes it.

She's not looking directly at me, but at something over my shoulder and I can almost hear her brain thinking. She swallows visibly and she takes a big breath.

"I don't think we should do this" she finally whispers looking again at me.

A wave of shame rushes through my body. Here I am, wanting to spend time with my ex-girlfriend while the girl I will get married to is somewhere in NY completely unaware of what I'm doing and what I'm feeling. And who gets to acknowledge out loud the big pink elephant in the room? My ex-girlfriend. Not me. I feel cheap, even though I know my feelings for Martha are real. But I've made a decision this morning, I decided to take this day off my life, like a bonus day. I've decided to totally ignore the big fat gigantic pink fucking elephant in the room. That was my decision and that's the decision I'll stuck with. Tomorrow is another day, I can decide to tell Martha everything. Fuck, I probably will. But not now. Now there's no fucking elephant.

"Why? Going for a swim is against your religion?"

I know that joking is stupid. I know that it's like trying to defuse a bomb with peanut butter. I know a lost battle when I see one, but I'm not yet ready do give up on the idea that everything can magically become what I want it to be.

"Piper…" she says with that low voice, capable of saying the best and the worst things. There's no evilness in her tone this time.
"I know Al, but this is not wrong. Yes, lying is wrong, but this, us right now, walking, taking a swim together, this is not wrong". Even I don't believe in my words. This is totally wrong.

"We shouldn't dig up something that has been buried for so long" I know what she means, but I don't want to give up.

"But it has been buried the wrong way"

She looks at me with a smile and a raised eyebrow that screams 'no bullshit'.

"Come on Alex, it's a good metaphor…"

"It's a poor metaphor. But that's not the point. You know what I mean." Of course I know what she means, that's why I'm trying to avoid the subject.

"Yes, I know what you mean. But I know that you know what I mean, too" I try to explain.

She looks skeptically at me. No more bullshit? Ok, no more bullshit.

"Listen Alex, I'm not stupid and you're not stupid. We might not talk about it, and it's surprisingly good for me too. If you're here, with me, right now, is because at least a part of you wants to be here. Otherwise, you would be in the opposite side of camp or in NY or on the other side of the world, but not here. It cannot be about doing Nicky a favor anymore, and it cannot be because you just want to see a beautiful place or because you're bored. So, I don't need to know why you're here, but yet you are…here…with me" I stop just to breath some air.

"Are you done with your argument?" she interrupts me with a smirk.

"Yes, your honor" I also bow slightly.

"And are you proud of yourself?" Always with the smirk.

"It depends. What do you think about it?" She looks at me with an indecipherable look.

"I'll take the Fifth and decline to answer"

"Too easy, Alex" I joke, but I don't break the…moment we're having.

She shrugs. "It's never been too easy"

I don't know what she means by that, but I know that if I keep pushing, she's going to break. I'm going all in.

"So, do you want to go back?" We both know what I'm implying with this question.

I see her being conflicted. After what seems like a lifetime, she opens her mouth.

"No" Simple as that. I feel…lighter. I cannot hide a smile.

"Well, let's go then" I know she was expecting a rapid series of questions from me, but she doesn't know the new Piper. A contented mind is a perpetual feast, they say.

In this section of the stream, the riverbed is sandy, so walking barefoot here is wonderful. The sun starts to hit us, since the trees become sparser and it's a welcomed sensation. The contrast between the hot sun and the cold of the water, makes me shiver, but in a good way.
"Here we are, after that curve. You go first"

"In case an alligator is waiting for us?"

"Of course".

She jokes. I can see she's curious. I want her to be the first human being, after me, to see this place. And I want to see the look on her face when she finally…

"Holy fuck!" When she turns her head to look at me, there's a big smile waiting for her, with all of my teeth in display. She moves her head from me to the vision around us. She's in awe. And I am too. That's exactly the reaction I wanted to see. Is it stupid to be so happy because someone else likes the thing you love?

"Are you fucking kidding me? How is this place even real? How…the water…it's so blue and so clear…and whoa, the wall of stones. It can't be natural"

I cannot help but laugh at her enthusiasm.

"What did I tell you? Paradise…"

"…fuck" She moves around to take on the surroundings. The perfectly green trees, the perfectly round pool of perfectly deep blue water, the sun that perfectly hits the water leaving enough shadow. I put the walkie talkie on a rock on the ground, I move towards the wall of rocks and start to climb it.

"Where are you going?" She enquires from behind me.

"Up there! The view is fantastic and I'm going to dive into the pool…"

"Is it safe?" I didn't expected this question. I stop for a moment and I turn around.

"Well, I'm still alive, so…"

"Wait, I'm coming with you" Once an adventurer, always an adventurer.

In a few seconds she's up here with me, looking down at all the best that nature can offer.

"What is it, 15 feet?"

"I think so, more or less…why? Are you scared Alex?" She turns around and she looks at me with her classical cocky Vause smile.

"Please, I've jumped from worst things"

"So, you wanna jump, Miss Backflip?" I know Alex. The only way to make her do something, is to challenge her to do it.

"Sure. Jump with me?" I didn't expect her invitation at all, but who cares? Maybe she wants to test my courage.

"Sure" I say as calmly as I can. I've already jumped twice from this place, and truth is, it's a little bit scary. The first time I did it, I've waited at least 20 minutes before convincing myself that I would not die if I jumped forward enough to avoid the wall of rocks. The second time it was better. I just waited 10 minutes. But, of course, here in front of Alex I'm acting cocky and confident.

"On three. Ready?" I nod. "One, two, three…” Deja-vu. I stop myself while I watch her jumping
forward, free falling into the pool with her arms extended like they are wings, floating in the air. And then, with a loud splash, she's into the freezing water. I know it's freezing, I know the shock. The water is so clear that I can see her underwater, touching the ground with her feet and pushing herself up, towards the surface. One of the things that amaze me the most on these days is Alex's wet hair. She jumped in as a strange red hair girl and she emerged as a dark haired Alex. My Alex. As soon as she's out of the water with her head, she shakes it and breathes soundly. She looks around, I think she's looking for me.

"It's fucking, fucking, fucking freezing". She keeps turning around, moving just with her arms, but she can't find me. She's perplexed.

"If you keep moving, you're going to get used very quickly to the temperature" I scream at her from the top of the rocks.

She finally looks up at me.

"What the fuck are you doing up there?" I smile and I shrug.

"Looks familiar?" I ask her.

"What?" She's confused.

"Does this situation look familiar to you? With roles inverted, of course!" I cannot stop this smile from spreading, waiting to see if she catches the hint. She thinks about it for a second, before starting to laugh.

"Come on Pipes. At least that time in Cambodia the water was warm, not like this freezing hell coming directly from the Arctic"

I laugh. Too much laughing and smiling today. Tomorrow my cheeks are going to be sore. She's struggling to stay afloat, swim in fresh water is way more difficult than swimming in sea water.

"At least tell me that I'm not the first human being to have jumped from up there, risking my life". I would like to tell her that now she knows what it means to be left alone doing something scary, but this is not the moment to act like a child and, mostly, I don't care anymore. So a take a big jump and I launch myself in the air. The feeling of the free fall on my stomach always takes my breath away, but this time, I don't know, it's like I'm feeling it…more. I land on the water a few feet from Alex, I jumped carefully not to crash on her head. I welcome the sensation of the water wrapping around me, like an ice blanket.

When I emerge, Alex is there, waiting for me with a smile, she's already gotten used to the temperature of the water, unlike me. I'm breathing heavily. I splash her a little bit with my hand and her smile grows.

"You're a child…"

I move around to get warm.

"So? What did I tell you?" I say as I'm swirling around.

"You know what? It was worthy…having to listen to you bragging about this place and then having to also agree with you…still worthy" She's smiling, and it means that she's joking. When she's serious, like five minutes ago, she doesn't smile.

"Happy to serve. A happy guest is my reason to live"
"You're still so full of crap" a splash of water hits me on the cheek this time. I reply with a proud and elegant face.

I move around again until I'm floating on my back, my favorite position, so I can look at the sun through the leaves.

"How did you find this place, again?"

"Just walking around, with no destination…" I reply without moving.

"Alone?"

"Well, yeah. Kind of. With Ralph. Technically, you are the second human being to ever see this place… "

I hear her mumbling something. "What?" I ask.

"Nothing. It's just...the Piper I knew would have never done that without someone. You would have never jumped in Cambodia if I wasn't there with you. You did it to impress me"

She's right, at least partially. But I don't like to be reminded how I've spent the majority of my life, even if I've learnt to understand that those years have been fundamental for my journey.

"Maybe you're right, but that's... before. I've stopped doing a lot of unnecessary things now…" I don't go into details, she doesn't need to know all my struggling, and probably, she doesn't even care.

"I'm starting to believe you" She says nonchalantly, like it's not one of the greatest things she's ever told me since Monday. But my heart starts beating faster and I'm not so cold anymore. This means more than I can explain. If she believes me, maybe she can also believe how much I'm sorry. Or, better, how much I was sorry. I don't want to say anything else, I don't want to ruin the purity of what has just happened, even though she probably hasn't even realize it.

"And what about you, did you change at all in these last years?"

I hear her laugh somewhere beside me, my eyes are always fixated on the leaves and the sky as I'm floating around. "Of course I did, haven't you seen me?"

"I meant beside the obvious physical appearance…"

"I know what you meant, but I don't know. I don't think I've really changed, it's more like I've learnt to adjust. To life, to situations. When you realize what really matters, you stop doing things that are not important to you"

"So, basically, you're saying that you get wiser as you get older?"

"Not necessarily, it depends on you. On how you react. The same thing can make you better or break you…"

"Yeah...I do agree to that. And you are better now…" That's the most personal thing she has ever told me, so I try to push it a little bit. I don't want to know more than what she's willing to tell me.

"Mostly yes, I'm in a good place. But clearly I'm still not that wise"

I don't know if she's hinting at what we're doing right now, but it's not important. I'm happy to know that she's doing good. I believe her. I stay in silence, thinking about recent life changing things, not really wanting to go there...but it's impossible not to...
"I was sorry to hear about your mom..." Her voice breaks my thoughts. It's like she's reading my mind. Maybe it's obvious. Since it happened, it's always on my mind. *Life's too short, I don't want to die alone like her, stuff like that.* Maybe Alex saw it too. She could've stay silent, but she's decided to acknowledge it. I really do appreciate it.

"Thanks..."

"How?" I don't know why she keeps asking questions, I feel too emotional right now.

"Heart. It just... stopped" I hope she'll stop too, this is...not...I cannot open myself to her on this. It's too delicate.

I'm startled by a warm hand on my arm. I turn my head on the left to see Alex too close to me.

"It'll get better" I can see her honesty. Fuck I can feel it. I'm so close to tears, but I don't want to go there right now, so I mutter a "Thanks" and I break the contact swimming towards the rocks so I can lean on them and rest for a while. The water there is not deep enough so I can touch the bottom with my feet. Alex stays in the middle of the pool, still using arms and legs to stay afloat. Doesn't she get tired?

"Want to change the topic?" she still knows me well.

"Fuck yeah" I say with a small smile.

She stays quiet for a while. I think she's waiting for me to ask questions or to find a new argument, as usual. As I'm about to say something, her voice anticipates me.

"So tell me something you did, in these last years that I would not expect you to" Wow....that's...wow. That's personal and small funny talk. And wow.

"Mmm...let me think" I say as I stretch on the rocks. I want to do this in the right way "I went on a trip to Norway on my own, to see the northern lights".

"Mmm...nah...too easy. Norway is not dangerous. Everyone can travel alone in Europe. I'm not impressed...tell me something else..."

"Like what? Make an example..."

"Well, for instance, I'd discovered that I find solace in knitting. All kind of things. Hats, scarves, sweaters..."

I look at her shocked and incredulous, trying to see if she's serious or she's joking. She raises her hands above the water with a big smile. Dear God, she's serious. I start to laugh really loud at the images that have formed in my head right now. Fucking Alex Vause knitting in front of a fireplace? God no.

"See, that was easy...now it's your turn" A part of me thinks that she's doing all of this only out of some sort of pity, but I try to shut this voice.

"Well, ok, this is serious. I get it. Well, I...mhm. Let's see....yeah! I've got it! I ran a marathon" I say with pride. I can see in her eyes that she didn't expect this. Good.

"Woah! That was good, and pretty impressive for someone who once said that the only good things about sports are the breaks"
"Oh god, how could you remember that?" I cover my eyes in shame.

"How could I forget it? You said it while we were at the fucking Super Bowl…Do you know how difficult it was to get the tickets?"

"And I'll never thank you enough for that! The halftime show with the Rolling Stones was great" now she's on my left, the water on her side is too deep, so she's clinging to the rocks for support.

"I cannot argue with that" She says rolling her eyes.

I can't help but thinking back at that time. I had the universe at my feet, in less than 1 year I've travelled the world, I've seen beautiful places, I've been to the Super Bowl and I was madly in love. And yet, I was so stupid. If only I could relive those experiences but with this awareness…

But hell, I need to stop thinking about it. Moving on is always been so fucking difficult for me and even though I know that I needed to be stupid in order to understand a few things, I can't stop feeling like I've wasted time and opportunities. I need to live in the present and the present is me, in the water with Alex, talking about stuff like two old friends. And this thing in my present is good, so I just need to stop overthinking everything and stop thinking about Alex like she's the same Alex I once knew. I am different, so why do I assume she hasn't changed?

"I like this game- So, since I've clearly won this challenge, now it's your turn again" I say.

"What?" she turns her head in my direction like she's being insulted "First of all, this wasn't supposed to be a challenge…"

I'm about to reply but she shushes me raising her index finger and she continues "BUT, if this thing was a challenge, well, I would have won. Come on… Alex Vause knitting? That's way bigger than a marathon…everyone with two legs can run…"

"I strongly disagree with that. Nowadays knitting is totally mainstream, especially for the new hipsters like you…"

"Oh no, you didn't!" she comes close threateningly, but I can see she's joking.

"Of course I did. Alex Vause in 2020, hipster. Come on, working in the arts, going to a camp in the woods, knitting? And your car? Totally hipster…” A splash of water hits me on the face. But I've gotten used to the temperature, it's not that cold anymore. I laugh from the heart.

"Come on Alex…tell me something else…and we'll see if that's hipster enough…"

"Stop it!" she laughs with me.

"Then tell me" She seems to think about it, she opens her mouth but then…

"No" she says,

I laugh at her answer. I know that face…

"Alex, I know that face…what were you saying? And why did you stop? Come on….say it"

She just smiles and she goes underwater just to emerge on the opposite side of the pool, where there are others rocks to cling to. There are now 20 feet between us.

"Come on…you cannot swim from me…just tell me"
I can see she's conflicted, but she lower her gaze, smiling and then her eyes are on me again.

"I own a garden. I grow my vegetables, I make tomato sauce, marmalade and I make some motherfucking good artichokes. Happy? And don't you dare say anything…"

Dear god.

"Hey, I was just going to say that it's fantastic and wonderful and healthy and no hipster at all"

We laugh together.

She shakes her head while moving around in the water, but remaining on the other side of the pool. She tries to float facing up, like I was doing before. I have a joke ready on the right hipster way of swimming, but my words are stuck on my throat because now that she's in that position I can see everything. And by everything, I mean everything. She's basically floating naked in front of me. Till now I was too focused on our conversation to actually look at her. But now my eyes have betrayed me, they're fixed on the wet underwear and on the skin underneath it, now perfectly visible. She's looking at the trees, not at me, so I cannot look away.

I can deny a lot of things, I can be confused about feelings, I can blame everything on the shock of seeing Alex after all these years, but I cannot pretend to deny the sensations on my body right now at the sight in front of me. I've always been sexually drawn to Alex since the beginning of our story. Her voice, the scent of her skin, the way she touched me. And, after all these years, my physical response to her body is still powerful and immediate. Fuck, seeing her nipples peaking from the wet bra, erected from the cold water, I swear I can feel one of them in my mouth. For a moment I wonder how it would be, to take it, suck it, to warm it up with my tongue, to feel it between my fingers. To hear her sighs. I can feel a pulse between my legs, It's an objective physical response, like a Pavlov's bell. I cannot deny that, it's natural.

However, what I can actually do is trying not to think about it. Change the subject. Look away.

"Red would be proud of you, you know? You own your own garden…you grow your vegetables…"

She doesn't move from her position and doesn't look at me. "I guess so"

"Can I ask you something?" I say in her direction. I take her lack of response as a yes. "Red…"

I don't need to add anything else. I can hear her taking a big breath.

"I don't like your new intuitive side…"

I knew that the argument was an issue, I've seen her face when I mentioned Red.

"If you don't want to talk about it, you don't have to…"

"And I don' like this respectful side either"

I don't reply. I know she's just buying some time before speaking again.

"I feel guilty. When…when it happened, I was…it was very difficult for me, so I did the only thing I knew how to do. I cut the ties with everyone, everyone that reminded me of that past, not only Red, but everyone…Boo, Lorna, everyone"

"Except Nicky"
"Except Nicky. I needed someone more fucked up than me to have my back" she laughs, but it's a bitter laugh.

I keep quiet. And she goes on. "So, by the time I felt better and not like a complete disaster, it was too late. Too much time had passed and Nicky told me that Red asked about me and you know how Red is, I didn't want to listen to her complaining about me…I didn't want to feel like I'd disappointed her…and I was still in witness protection, so I kept away and now it's too late…"

"I don't think it's too late. Too late doesn't exist… I know you cared about her. She'll be happy to hear from you…if you still want to, I mean…"

"I- I do miss her, but I don't know… if I'm ready yet…" I don't want to tell her that if she keeps postponing things, she'll never get them done. She has already opened up for me, more then I'll ever thought possible. If I think at the beginning of this week, it all seems so strange and impossible.

"So you didn't even know about the big party that Nicky wants to throw for Red's release? How did you manage to do that? For months I've asked her to change topic just for a second, the last time she was talking about serving prison food, but made by stellar chefs." I make an elegant face palm.

She's smiling, that's good. "Typical Nicky".

"Typical Nicky" I agree. And I add "Did she tell you something about anyone else?"

"No, I asked her not to". It hurts a little bit. How could she? They were her family…I thought she cared…about them, about me… I know that what she's been through is something incredibly traumatic, but she used to care…I know that.

"Do you want to know one thing?" I ask her out of the blue.

Just like before, she takes her sweet time, thinking about it, being conflicted.

"Yes" Her voice is feeble, there's no trace of her usual self-confidence.

I also take my time before delivering what I know for a fact being a great life changing new. "Big Boo sells flowers".

"What the fuck?" She shouts while losing her balance on the water and going underwater for a brief second. When she emerges I'm laughing in her face. With three strokes she reaches me and she settles in the same spot she was five minutes ago, but this time she seems too close.

"Say it again?" her face is full of amused bewilderment.

"Well, Big Boo, AKA Carrie, is now the proud owner of a flower shop in Greenville, North Carolina together with her Italian fiancé Sara"

She laughs from the belly. "Dear God"

"I saw her once, she's got the green plastic apron and all…maybe I still have a picture on my phone, I'll check later"

"Please, please do it". We stay still for a little bit, there's silence between us, but is comfortable.

"By the way, thank you" she says touching my arm underwater with her hand. She's definitely close. Too close. I just smile, I'm unable to speak. I just want this sensation to go away.

Thank god she removes her hand.
"Can I ask you something?" she says. Always too close to me. Why does she have this need to talk to me right now? Shitty timing.

"Yep" I reply because, what am I supposed to say? Please Alex, shut up until I'm as cold as the water?

"Why did you erase the fish tattoo?"

Oh.

"So, you've noticed" I say as I unconsciously touch the back of my neck with my hand. She nods. "Well, I think you do remember the meaning of it. It was symbolic, a reminder of beauty. But, at the end, I did it because of you. You knew the context, you were the reason behind it. So when I accepted that you weren't a part of my life anymore, I needed to make peace with that. I made a statement of independence. A symbolic one. I erased the thing that I did for someone else, to be able to move on, focusing on me."

She looks at me with an unreadable face.

"And it was kind of ugly" I add. This time her face explodes in a laugh.

"Can I ask you something else?" she tells me as soon as we've stopped laughing.

"Is this a game of 20 questions? Am I allowed to ask you 20 questions too? If that's the case, the answer is yes, I'm in" I answer.

"Kid, have you ever played 20 questions?"

"Well, I think so. Isn't that the game where you ask someone something and that someone is obliged to say the truth?"

"No, that's truth or dare. In 20 questions you keep asking questions until you guess correctly an object"

"Really?" I'm starting to revaluate my younger years.

"Really" I'm really disappointed.

"So, what's the name of the game where you can ask questions and you are obliged to answer the truth, but without dares?"

"There's no game like that. Saying the truth is usually what they call 'education'" I laugh at that. She's fun when she wants to. Fun and smart.

"Ok, let me patent it. I'm gonna call it 'Education aka the game where you get to ask and answer 10 questions telling the truth', wanna play?"

"No thanks, I'll pass" she answers with a grin on her face. But I can't hide my delusion.

"Come on Alex, it will be fun. And you'll get to finally ask me what you wanted to"

"Tempting, but I can easily live without it…and, besides, I'm already telling the truth, so I don't see why we can't go on talking like normal people"

"Duh, you hipsters are no fun" This gets me a push on the shoulder with a smile.
"Soooo, what did you want to ask me?" I tell her after not enough seconds of pause. She laughs.

"I thought you wanted to punish me for not playing your game…"

"Today I'm feeling magnanimous" I say while raising my arms in what I hope it's a royal gesture.

"Well, it's not something that I really need to know. I was just curious to know why you erased the fish but you kept the 'trust no bitch' one" she points her finger at my forearm, but I know very well the placement of *that* tattoo.

"Well, for two main reasons. First of all, erasing white tattoos is fucking expensive. And secondly, I couldn't physically see the tattoo on my nape, so it was of no use for me. This one, on the other hand…" I raise the arm over the surface of the water "…this bad boy here, well, it's always under my eyes…and it's very useful to be reminded every day of what a crazy idiot I can be. So I learnt to love it. And it's fun, it's not something that you would expect from someone who looks like me…" She bursts into a laugh, again.

"Someone who looks like you? And what exactly do you look like?" She's amazed and I pretend to be offended by her subtle accusation.

"Well, I look like some elegant and sensible young woman. You'll never guess that I'm also a girl who's been in prison and who's not afraid to get her hands dirty. And, by the way, you've just used your third question"

"You're also very much full of crap…Piper Chapman, the badass" She says between laughs. I like it. I like all of it. This is going great. I make a fake offended face.

"Now it's my turn to ask a question, Al…". Now and then I try to sneak some *Al* or *Alex* into conversation. She doesn't seem to mind, and that's pretty good, thinking back at the way she screamed at me the first times I tried to use her name. Her real name.

"Shoot"

"Well, why did you choose Martha? It's not a common name…" I want to start with something easy.

"For the song, Martha by Tom Waits. You should know that, it was one of my favorites" Fuck I totally forgot.

"Oh right! And what about the surname, Reed?"

She just looks at me, with both her eyebrows raised. Like I'm supposed to already know the answer. But how am I supposed to know the reason why – Oh.

"Oh. Lou Reed. Fuck, I should have thought of it, damn it"

"That was easy, and a waste of questions…I was expecting something more from you" She's mocking me. I hate it ad I hate myself…that one was easy, fuck.

"You know how I am, I like to start slow. I just wanted to warm you up a little bit, before dropping the hot ones" Oh fuck, did I really say it out loud? I'm starting to lose lucidity. I'm starting to feel overwhelmed and the fact that she's so fucking near is not okay. Definitely not okay. At least she's laughing. Again. I think I'm going to make the water boils.

"Woah, now I'm really scared…Did you really say 'The hot ones'? You speak like a tv presenter from the ninties"
"Shut up" I tell her while I push her shoulder with mine. She loses the balance for a second, before lying her back against the rocks behind us. We're not moving and the sun on our faces is not enough. Soon we'll feel the frozen water and we'll have to get out of the pool. The spell we're under will probably break, and I don't want that.

"And there goes your forth question. Only six left" I tell her.

"I don't need six questions. Hell, I don't need questions at all. Stop pretending I'm playing this game with you" Her answer is the answer I was expecting. She always has to minimize everything I do and everything we do together. Ok, I get it. But she's smiling and I know the meaning of that smile in her face. It's the predatory one. She's having fun, I'm not delusional.

"Hey, look…" I say, raising my hands over the surface of the water "I'm just doing it for you. I just want you to have something to hit me back with, once I drop the hot ones…I just want to make it an even battle" I empathize 'the hot ones' with my fingers. I've just thrown the bait and she's not stupid, she knows what I'm doing. She can either take the bait, or dismiss this thing once and for all. I surely know what every single cell in my body wants. I don't even want her to ask me questions. Well, I would love to, but not if they are forced. I just like the idea that I can finally have the power to talk with her. The real her. My Alex.

"Like you could possibly make things difficult for me…" She's starting to chew the bait. Good.

"Of course I can. It only depends on whether you are really going to tell me the truth or you're going to lie" I answer.

"I've already told you. I have no problem whatsoever with the truth"

"So, can I go on with my questions?" Pause. Hope.

"Yes, but only because I want to know where you're going with this and because you've just wasted another question on something stupid and I like to see you frustrated".

FUCK. Fuck.

"Fuck". But also YEAH. The game is still on. I just need to be a little more careful and think at least 10 seconds before saying anything. She's laughing at me, but I've still got seven questions, it's more than enough.

"Did you ever read my letters?" Let's start with something easy. I don't look directly at her. She takes her sweet time to answer.

"Yes". Truth. Why would she lie?

I don't know how to feel about it. Am I happy that she read them instead of throwing them away or am I sad that she didn't even think about answering them or, worse, didn't believe the words in them? But I cannot waste another question on this. Can't I?

"Have you ever thought about contacting me in these past years?" This time I look at her. She's looking straight ahead and she's rolling her eyes.

"What a stupid question" she says.

"So just answer it" To me is not that stupid at all.

"Yes, of course" Her voice is quiet, my heart is not. I know that she's no going to say anything more,
but it's enough for me. Enough for me to last a lifetime. I can't hide the grin on my face. I try but I can't. It means more to me that I can explain. She have thought of me. Of contacting me. I don't even care to know why she didn't. This is enough. Enough with this stupid useful game. We can stop right here because this is the perfect end. I'm going to tell her that.

"Alex, listen —" She interrupts me. She doesn't let me finish…

"Wait, now it's my turn"

What? She wants to ask me something? How's that possible? What could she possibly… I'm too shocked and curious to talk. I just look at her, probably with the stupidest face that I do possess. "What do… No… How… " I hear her trying to formulate the right question and, fuck, I cannot believe it.

"How do you seem so at ease being here with me? Don't you feel guilty?" Oh, wow. This is… this is straight to the point. I'm feeling a little uneasy even though there are no accusations in her words. But, considering that I do feel guilty, her words hurt, but... With Alex it has always been about the buts. She's a drug dealer, but… She's a girl, but… She put me in prison, but… This is just the umpteenth but in a long line of buts.

I asked her to be honest with me, that's why I need to be honest with her. All cards on desk. Maybe if I don't look directly at her it will be simpler.

"Yes and no. I mean…of course I'm feeling guilty because I'm not telling Martha the truth about who you are and where we are and what we're doing, but… I don't know how to explain it… I've always felt this thing in my heart, like a stone, always there, heavy. And this thing in some way has always created problems for me and, indirectly, for the people around me. So if I get the chance to, I don't know, take it away or easy it somehow, I need to do it. To try it. God Alex, you've always hunted me…"

I look at her with pleading eyes, but all I see is perplexity. "You don't believe me" I say. And it's not a question, it's an affirmation. Finally she speaks.

"It's not that… I think you really believe in what you've said. But how is this…useful? I mean… spending time together? Acting like old friends? How can this thing be helpful?" She says while gesturing between us.

"I don't know Al, I really don't. But at least I'm trying to do something different. I know it sounds stupid, but this may be the last time we see each other…" my hearts breaks a little as I say this "… this may be my last chance to do something for this thing between us that I feel it needs to get closure. So I've just decided to take a day off from everything… from my life, from my responsibilities, from guilt… and just, I don't know, being around you. I don't know if this will help or not, but it's been five years Alex, at least I need to know that I've tried everything"

Her eyes are cold. Colder than the water we're in.

"So you've decided to do what? Wake up tomorrow and pretend that today never happened?"

"No! How could I? I just want to wake up tomorrow feeling better and with the knowledge that today was a parenthesis on my life that I needed to have, in order to try to be better…" How could she not see it? Fuck, it's easy.

"It doesn't sound stupid, it just sounds fucking selfish as usual. You only think about yourself…" Now I'm mad. So much for trying to be calm and friendly.
"How can you say that? How can you possibly know what is best for me? I've told you…this thing doesn't affect only me…"

"Bullshit"

"Bullshit my ass. You don't have a say in my relationship"

"And who's talking about your relationship? I'm talking about me. Do you realize that I'm here, with you, right now? Didn't you think that it would be a nice idea to inform me of what you were planning to do? Something on the lines of 'Hello Alex, I've decided to stalk you and befriend you, but just for today'. You wanted to do what? Using me for your guilt experiment and then? Not following me anymore like a puppy wagging its tail? This is what I call selfish"

WHAT? This is shocking. Unreal. I'm still so mad, but also strangely satisfied. I'm a fucking mess. I just know that I'm feeling. Stuff. A lot.

"Alex…I…how could I ever forget that you're here with me? That's why this is so…How could I know it? You've made it very very clear that you don't want ANYTHING to do with me, so I've just let you choose. What was I supposed to do? I've never pushed you into doing things that you don't want to do. Dear god, I know what happens when someone does that to you. Don't you dare accuse me of something I didn't do. You could have walked away a million times, there's no gun pointed at your head. You can't accuse me just because I've believed your words instead of reading between the lines…How could I know that you were…affected by this?"

She's affected by this. She's affected by this. She's affected by this. I feel like we've been here before. My voice is raising and her eyes are burning.

"I'm not aff-" I look at her with eyes as cold as the colder glacier in Iceland. I swear, if she says again that she's not affected by this, I'll drown her, with my bare hands.

"It was implied! For the same reason you've said. I could have been everywhere else, but I'm here. I think that's enough"

"Implied my ass, Alex. Since Monday you've just confused the hell out of me. First you hate me, then you're friendly, but you're faking it. You help me, you don't talk to me, you kiss me, but you hate me. Then we're here and we were having fun, and talking until you what? Accuse me of having believed your words? Now tell me, what the fuck do I have to think? I'm sorry, but I feel guilty for a lot of things but definitely not for having taken your words for true. What do I have to do? Tell me. I swear on everything you want that I don't want to fight with you. But I just…why are you here Alex? I beg you, tell me…"

I'm shivering. From head to toe. And I have a feeling that it has nothing to do with my body's temperature.

Her voice is lower than normal when she speaks.

"I…I have always told you the truth. And that's the problem because …it changed. When I told you that I didn't want to see you or talk to you, I was honest. I swear to god that until last week my life was perfect and I was good. But now, now it's like you've said before. I feel hunted. Hunted by you and by these things you keep talking about. And I know what I have to do. I have to make a decision, take a side. But I cannot fucking do it. I don't know why I'm here. I just…kept following you. Hoping to find something that would help me decide. Something that would give me a reason to leave. But you're always present, constantly on my back and it doesn't give me the time to get clarity. My fucking brain is exploding" She looks exactly as her words. Conflicted. But in a sick way, I
understand her. We're not that different.

"What do you think is happening to mine? I cannot sleep Alex, I …don't function anymore. And the time to figure out how to get out of this is less and less…"

I let the words run out of my mouth. We're not moving. We're not speaking. We're just here. In the freezing water. A few inches between us, but it's like we're on two separate continents. And I'm tired, so tired. I don't see a way out of this.

"What do we do Al?" I break the silence, but I don't look at her.

"I think you run out of questions"

A joke. That's how she answers. A stupid fucking joke. I laugh, but it's a dry laugh.

"I'm tired of thinking" she says.

I can see her head turning in my direction from the corner of my eye. I don't care if she's tired of thinking. I'm more tired than her. I turn my head and I look her in the eyes.

"Then don't".

Shut everything down. That's what I want to do too. So badly. That's what I've tried to do since this morning. I think I've finally manage to do that. I realize that I'm still looking her in the eyes even though my head is somewhere else. I focus on them. They become the only clear thing. The rest of the world is blurred. She doesn't move. I shiver. I lose the balance a little bit. I move my left arm to grab the rocks behind me. It's like she was waiting for it. She's faster than a snake. Her right hand in on my wrist. The hold is strong.

My eyes are back to hers. Do. Not. Think.

We move simultaneously. Our lips crash. We explode simultaneously. I don't know how, I don't know when, but both my arms are around her neck, in her hair and I'm squeezing, hard. Our lips never part and I try to get as close to her as possible. I want to melt with her. Both my legs go around her, she's my only foothold. It's like a dance we've rehearsed many times and we know what to do. We know when we have to change the pace, when to bite, when to open our mouths to let the tongues start to explore. My hands are on her cheeks as I keep covering her with kisses. Delicate ones. Deeper ones. She just lets me do whatever I want because she's doing exactly what I want. No complaints, just pure energy flowing through our bodies and a blissful blank mind. She starts to go down, leaving open kisses on my neck. I instinctively arch my back, unbalancing us. To support me, she leaves her grip on the rocks and she places both her hands on my ass. I fucking moan when she squeezes and I bite away the grin on her face. We start to move towards the center of the pool, where the water is too deep. I'm clinging to her like my whole life depends on this contact. And, in some ways, that's the truth.

I feel the level of the water raising towards my face. I try to disentangle myself from her, but when I attempt to touch the bottom with my feet, I can't. We both sink. We go underwater. I try not to break the contact between us but the water is freezing and I need to breathe, so I leave her lips. I leave the warm of our kisses for the freezing water.

We emerge at the same time. Thank god there's no need to talk. Our smiles are enough. I swim again towards the shore. I need to have ground beneath my feet. I go where the water is knee-deep. I want to get out but a hand on my wrist stops me again. I turn around.

"But I want to get out!" I complain with a big smile. I don't want her to think I'm running away. I just
want to be more comfortable.

She just takes my hand and leads me towards another side of the pool, where the water is only 10 inches deep.

"But I like it here. Sit" she orders. And who am I to complain? As soon as I'm sat, she kneels between my legs and she starts to kiss me again. I'm more than happy to kiss her back. Adrenaline pumps into my veins. I think I could die. I want more.

My hand finally finds her boob, and I squeeze. I feel her smile on my lips. Fuck, finally. But it's not enough. The hot tongue in my mouth, my hand on her breast. Still not enough.

I lower her bra, I want direct contact. When my fingers close on her nipple, it's like all the pieces of the puzzle finally come together. It's even better than I remember. Her hands are touching my body everywhere, but I'm so focused on her. Her moans just make everything better, or worse, it depends on the point of view.

I break the kiss because I want to suck her nipples, but before I manage to do so, I can feel her open hand pressing between my legs. I'm so aroused that I could explode. I stop to look at her. In her eyes there's pure lust and passion. The same things that I think are in my eyes.

Her hand doesn't move. It's there just to make a statement. A pretty clear statement. I take that hand and I remove it. I raise on my feet and, without leaving her hand, I pull it so she can raise too. She follows my lead this time and I bring her finally out of the water. It's not the most comfortable thing to do, laying in a bikini on the grass, but this will do. I just want to fuck her so badly. I lay down and in a second she's above me and she pushes down. Every inch of our body is in contact and I thank god for gravity.

Both her boobs are still out of the bra and this time nothing prevents me to take one nipple in my mouth. One hand on the ground to support me and the other goes straight between her legs, to mimic the same thing her hand is doing on my pussy.

I don't know how long I can go like this.

I feel the need to kiss her again. I leave everything and I caress her face while my tongues slips inside her mouth again.

I can focus on her hand on my pussy. She's finally going inside the panties of my bikini. The skin to skin contact in enough for me to moan. I don't even care anymore. Her breathe is getting fast. That's enough for me.

"Piper"

It's not her voice.

"Piper"

Again. Not her voice.

We stop everything. I can see the look on her face. Total panic. It's like someone has directly punched my heart.

Fuck.
Chapter 22

Fuck.

I reluctantly break the kiss and I look her in the eyes. There's panic there. She's terrorized.

I know it's wrong, but I can't hide a smile.

"It's just the walkie-talkie" I tell her while I touch her face with both my hands. I kiss her briefly on the lips and I can feel her exhaling out of relief. I want her to feel that I'm here. Still present. That this thing that just happened between us is real. I think I need to prove it to myself too. As I still hold her face on my hands I see her rolling her eyes and relaxing her tense body. That was scary.

Reluctantly, I break the physical contact. Each time could be the last, I know. I stand up and I go towards the rocks. The walkie-talkie keeps making noises.

"Piper, it's Danny, can you hear me? Over"

What does he want? Maybe something happened? Suddenly I'm on full alert. Back to real life.

"Danny, hi. It's Piper. Tell me"

I listen at the statics while I'm glancing over at Alex. She's going inside the pool again, probably to get clean from all the dirt. Is it metaphorical?

"Lenny and Donny. They want to leave early. Can you come to the Camp to check them out?"

Fuck. I cannot say no. Alex is completely immersed in the water, she's not looking at me. What does it mean? How will she react? Fuck, how am I going to react? I knew what I was doing. Fucking hell, this morning I knew that this could happened. What will she think?

"Piper, do you copy?" I'm startled by the walkie-talkie. In a couple of seconds I've totally forgotten about it. For the millionth time, fuck.

"Yep. Sorry, I'll be there in 15"

"Got it, bye"

Too soon. This is happening too soon. And too late. So now what? I literally feel like a gladiator after a fight. Now I have to look at the Emperor. Will he condemn me to death or will he spare me? The thumb will be up or down?

I turn around. The walkie still in my hand.

This time she's facing me. I brace myself because, if there's something I know, is that with Alex is safer to expect the worse. Or, in this case, maybe the wisest.

We look at each other and no one speaks. We both know what we did. We both know that this time there are no excuses, no "things" between us to justify a sudden impulse, no mistakes. Or, maybe, the biggest mistake of our lives.

I'm a fatalist. I'm a fucking fatalist, so maybe this is it. Fate. Fate wanted to stop us, and that was the sign. But if fate wanted to stop us, then why is Alex here, in my camp, and not in one of the thousands of camps across the States? Wasn't that fate?
"You should go. You've just wasted 3 of those 15 minutes staring at me" She's the one to break the silent staring contest. And her voice is not the patented Alex-Vause-evil-one. Maybe her brain is not like mine, maybe she's still got some neuron left instead of the hot mud I feel inside my skull right now. What have I done? Maybe she can help me. Dear god, did I really think that? That she could help me? I'm screwed.

"I know a shortcut, I can be there in 8"

I want to set the tone. And the tone is Let's-Be-Adults-And-Talk-About-It-Or-Maybe-Don't-Talk-About-It-And-Keep-Doing-What-We-Were-Doing. Do I want to? Do I really want us to fuck? Fuck. I'm so horny right now. But it's wrong. I'm as horny as miserable. In a hidden place in my head, I know that this is something that I would think about and examine for a long long time. What am I saying? I will think about it for the rest of my life. Fuck. I have to stop. But we've already gotten past the point of no return, we might as well keep going and sinking together. Oh god. And I'm still looking at her and not saying anything. I need to take control of this. Even though I'm not lucid at all. But I know that I will never forget myself if I don't at least try.

"Then go..." she says always without any harshness.

"Aren't you coming?" I hate myself for being so insecure and still so fucking dependent. I thought I was better than this.

"No, I'm staying here for a while". My heart sinks. So this is the end. Am I ready? No, I'm not. This is not enough. Will it ever be enough? No, probably not.

"Listen Alex, about what happened...I think we need to talk..." I start, yet again without knowing how to continue.

She laughs. She laughs at my face. What the fuck is so funny?

"I think we've talked enough..."

I open my mouth to reply but she blocks me.

"Listen Piper, you've said it, we weren't thinking. God knows I don't want to think about it, let alone talk about it. You've said that you consider this day a parenthesis, so stick with it and don't drag me into whatever you're going to say"

"Oh. Ok" I reply without really understanding a thing. Truth is, I've stopped thinking the moment we've touched and I'm still too overwhelmed by that. Pure physical responses. Pure pleasure. And now I have to go. But my body can't move. Walking away now it's like one of those movements that you cannot do. Like trying to strangle yourself.

"Do you know your way back?" I say the first thing coming into my mind. I need to say something, anything.

"I'll just follow the river...I think I can manage" Oh right. Dumb question.

There are a thousand questions in my head, but nothing vaguely sane crosses my mind, so, in doubt, I don't speak.

"Ok, so...see you later" I say as I turn my back on her and I start walking in the direction from where we came from.

Only after I reach the meadow and I start to put my shorts on, I start to realize, pieces by pieces, what

And we kissed. No, that wasn't a kiss. That was an explosion of something. A volcano eruption. We melted into each other. This can't be good.

I put my shoes on and I start to jog in the woods to get faster to the camp, I'm not using the main path. At least if I run among the trees, with bushes scratching my legs, maybe I can stop thinking about her hands on me. Or the feeling of her tongue into my mouth. Oh god.

Finally I reach the campsite and I go straight to Danny's cabin, but I don't find him inside. Only Ralph.

"Hi baby…how's the leg?"

I know he can't physically answer me, but I need to get a glimpse of normality right now.

He just keeps his ears down but the tail slowly moves. I sit on the floor and take his head into my lap. I start to scratch it. The tail moves faster.

"Ralph, I think I've fucked up"

Ralph just looks at me with his sad eyes. He doesn't care about my troubles, he just wants to get better and return to his life made of jumps, runs, races and all the things a healthy dog does. He is right. And who am I to complain anyway? I'm the killer here, I should not act like a victim. I slowly take Ralph on my arms and I move him to the porch outside. I want him to get some light. While I'm lying with him, I hear some voices coming from not afar. I clearly recognize Lenny's voice, complaining about something. There's someone else with him, probably the son, who came here to pick him and Donny up.

Finally they enter my visual. I don't let myself known right away. I'd rather stay here quietly and watch the scene with a little smile on my face. Lenny spots me.

"Piper! Hi! There you are! I'm really sorry, but this young man here doesn't remember a thing about the education I taught him! I told him thousands of times that I wanted to leave after dinner and not so soon, but he didn't listen, didn't you?" He turns around, facing a fifty-something man beside him. Some nose, some eyes, and same impatience, or so it seems.

"Dad, I've told you. We need to go back now. Tonight there's Lana recital and if we are late, she's going to kill us both!"

They keep going like this for a while, I watch them in awe. Family. That's what I want, what I've always wanted. Someone who becomes a part of you, your responsibility, your legacy, your redemption. That's what I want, now. More than ever. It took me years to accept mine, now it's my turn to create one, and I want to do it right.

I slowly remove Ralph's head from my lap and I raise on my feet. "Don't worry Lenny, it's not a problem. Next year you're going to stay more days to make up for this…"

The check-out takes more than 30 minutes, at least 15 of which spent for the goodbyes to all the guests. With a "See you next year", I kiss my two favorite grumpy men and I go straight to their cabin to clean it up. I sweep the floor, clean the bathroom and my mind is at peace, I'm distracted. But then I have to put the clean sheets on the bed and it hits me. It's impossible not to think about it. It being the fact that I'm preparing the bed for Alex and for her girlfriend. They'll sleep together here tonight. They'll probably fuck. And that's the thing that's bugging me the most. But it's sick, and I'm sick. I cannot think about this.
Tonight everything will be over, tonight we'll both sleep with someone else, and not anyone. I'm going to sleep with my fiancé. My wonderful fiancé. The only one who can give me the family that I want so much.

That's it, this has got to stop. This is already over.

But I wonder where is Alex? It's almost 5 PM, the temperature is not that hot anymore. What is she doing? She cannot be in the pool, she must be somewhere else. Maybe the meadow? Or at the lake, with the others? Will she talk to me? Will she be mad? Why do I care? All these scenarios in my head just agitate me. What do I want? I don't know, I don't know. I don't know. I'm going crazy. I have to get out.

I leave the cabin and I try to take a few big breaths. In, count to six. Out, count to six.

Apparently there's no one in the camp, they all must be at the lake to enjoy the view and the nature until the sunset.

I've promised the guests that tonight we're going to burn the bonfire we didn't get the chance to burn the night of the storm. Three day ago. It feels like a lifetime ago. Martha loves bonfires.

A sting of guilt hits me, I make my decision. This craziness has got to stop, and it has to stop now.

I'm not ready to face the crowd, I'm not ready to face her, so I think that it's a good idea to go back to my cabin and take a shower.

Whatever I wanted to prove with this parenthesis day, I've proved it. Now I have to focus on my future, on the family that I want. And I know there's only one person I could build something with. Alex has never been the right choice.

With my mind finally set on something, I open the cabin door and all my resolution crashes to the ground. Alex is sitting on my bed. Apparently doing nothing. I close the door behind me out of habit, or guilt or shame, I don't know. I stay frozen to the spot because, what am I supposed to do?

She's not here because she wants something from the cabin, I'm certain of it. This time she came here, to find me. I finally feel free, now she's the one who has to explain her intentions. Or not.

I don't even see her coming, it's a matter of seconds. Her soft lips are on mine again and her body slams against mine. My back is against the door. I'm so weak. So fucking weak and this is too much for me. My body reacts before my mind, so I find myself deepening the kiss with my hands on her hair, as to prevent her from getting away. Even though she's the one who came for me. She lit the fire and now we're burning together.

Our physical compatibility is so perfect it hurts. We're kissing with less desperation this time, and, fuck, this is worse. Way worse. Now there's softness and intention when she cups my face. I think I'll die. Her mouth tastes like caramel. My muscles give up and I surrender to the sensations. I smile on the kiss, she smiles back.

Suddenly everything is cold. Alex detaches herself and without even looking at me, she rushes towards the bathroom. What. The. Fuck?

I don't have the time to register anything because the door I'm leaning on gets opened and I have to take a step forward not to fall.
Chapter 23

"Oh baby, here you are! We were just talking about you!" A pair of arms engulf me. They are familiar arms, like the ones I had on me less than 30 seconds ago, but different.

"Zero traffic from the city! I've never been this fast!" Thank god she's doing all the talking because right now the only thing I can think about is that she can smell Alex on me. How can't she? That's all I feel.

"Hi Piper" I raise my face from the crook of Martha's neck and I see Sandy, standing on the porch. I just feel the impulse to lower my eyes immediately. Maybe she's the one who can smell her on me.

"Hi" The first words I can mutter don't sound so strange, so I get a little courage and I squeeze Martha a little bit before letting her go.

"We've seen the disaster made by the storm. It's fucking incredible…" Martha says while she enters our cabin and starts looking around. It's a mess, and there are signs of Alex everywhere. I panic, because she's going to know. I know that I have nothing to worry about because it is completely normal to have her stuff in my room, we're supposed to be temporary roommates, she knows that. But guilt is a powerful thing, and all I can see is the inflatable bed that is not so inflated and Alex was supposed to sleep there, and I see Sandy and Martha's eyes on it and I feel like I'm screwed. And where the fuck is Alex right now?

"Where is Martha?" Sandy voices my thoughts. But with a different name, of course. Now she's Martha again, Alex is gone, in so many ways.

"Uh?" I pretend not to understand what she said because I need to buy myself more time to think. But think about what?

"Martha. Where is she?" she repeats. And this time there's no running from it.

The sounds coming from the bathroom come in help. Of course! I feel so dumb. Thanks Alex.

"She's taking a shower. We went swimming" The moment I talk, I regret it. Too much information is the key to understand if someone is lying and I've just said too much. Or not? They're going to know, for sure.

But the facts prove me wrong because they both seem in peace and not worried about anything I've said. How is that even possible? I feel like I have a neon sign on my forehead. The scarlet letter.

"And what about Ralph? Where is he?" This time is my Martha the one to talk.

"He is the Goldberg cabin. Wanna go see him?" Please say yes.

"Yes, of course".

Suddenly I take back the control of my legs and they can move again. I want to get the fuck away from here. I'm already outside when I hear Martha "Sandy, are you coming with us?"

Of course. Sandy. I did forget about her. I don't want her in my cabin, I don't want her talking with Alex. I don't want her in my camp. Why can't she disappear?

But I guess that it's better if she's coming with us. At least I can check on her. Check for what? I
don't know. Just check.

"Ok, I suppose. I've got some of my stuff in the car, where do I put it?"

"Cabin number 3 is empty now. We can wait for A—Martha to finish the shower and then we can help you move everything…” Martha, Martha, Martha, not Alex. I almost slipped. This can never happen again. Sandy has a strange look on her face. Did she hear me? Does she suspect something?

"Good for me" it's her reply. Come on Piper, it's impossible for her to know what happened. Stay. Fucking. Calm.

We walk towards the cabin while Martha entertains both of us with stories from her workplace. I'm so grateful for it. When we reach Ralph, all the attention is on the dog. We sit on the porch and we start to talk about stupid things. Sandy is strangely silent. Or maybe I'm imagining things. I'm pretty proud of myself. I've talked about the storm without even mentioning Alex. And after a few minutes, my confidence is back. I've made some jokes too.

But, as usual, it all come crashing down the moment Alex enters into the picture. Wet hair, green glasses and fresh clothes.

"Hi baby" her low voice is directed at Sandy, who lightens up like a fucking Christmas tree.

"Martha!" she says before almost jumping and throwing herself at Alex. Alex has never liked the clingy type. I don't know what she's doing with Sandy. For someone so hot, for sure she's showing a lot of insecurities.

Sandy forces her lips against Alex's mouth. Octopus.

The only thing able to distract me from this annoying scene is an elbow gently poking at my ribs. I look at my side to see Martha looking at me with a knowing look and rolling her eyes. It takes me a second to understand that she must have seen my face and interpreted as a way of making fun of the public display of affection. It hurts, but I smile at her. When they finally disentangle one from the other, it's my Martha's turn to do the greetings.

"Hi girl, glad to have you back in one piece" she says with a smile.

"Thanks, I'm glad to be back too. How are you?"

With a shiver I realize that I haven't yet asked my girlfriend how she is. Alex did it first. A sense of shame washes over me.

"I'm fine thanks. Glad to finally be here…” While she says that, she places her hand gently on my thigh. This affectionate gesture almost brings me to tears. I need to go away as fast as I can.

"So…” I say as I stand up and let the hand on my thigh fall off "I think it's time for me to go and take a shower too" then I turn in Sandy and Alex's direction. Alex is looking at me in a way I can't decipher. Like she's trying to tell me something. But what? I take a guess.

"Cabin #3 is already open. You can go and move everything inside…” Her face tells me that it's not the thing she was trying to mind-tell me. Maybe she wanted me to help? I'm at a loss here.

"Honey…” I say turning back again in Martha's direction, "…can you help them? I'm joining you as soon as I can"

"Of course. Now go and get cleaned so I can touch you again without catching rabies or something"
She joyfully says while she slaps my ass and I can't help but smile.

For a second, everything perfectly clicks again.

With a fast pace, I walk towards the cabin and, even faster, I take off all my clothes and I left them on the bathroom floor. I'm finally under the water.

I've almost finished rinsing when I hear the bathroom door opening. It has to be Martha, needing something from the bathroom.

I'm still not ready to face her. I haven't had a meltdown in the shower like I hoped to. But I have nowhere to hide now, so I might as well face reality.

"Martha?"

A shadow approach and a hand pushes the curtain to the side.

Martha is in front of me, but not the one I was expecting. This is the wrong one.

"Alex!" I whisper-scream and I unconsciously take back the curtain to cover myself and doing an awful job since the curtain is transparent. "What the fuck are you doing here?".

I glance at the bathroom door. It's closed, but what if Martha for some reason comes inside? It's her bathroom too. Alex must have seen the look on my face "No one is here. I came by myself to take my stuff from the cabin"

"And how did you end up inside my bathroom?" I'm still whispering as loud as I can. I'm still afraid that something is going to happen. Something bad.

"We need to talk" she says like it's a normal thing to say.

I try really hard not to let my jaw fall to the floor.  

"Now you want to talk? Now?" I don't know if I'm more shocked or thrilled because, what does she want?  

"We need to get our stories straight" she adds with the same naturalness of before.

Finally something clicks in me. And I feel stupid. Stupid because of all the things I've thought she wanted to talk about, this was not one of them. But it should have been. I should have seen this coming.

"Oh, just Alex wanting to save her ass, nothing new" I blurt out without even realizing it. I didn't really wanted to say that, but it slipped out.

"Shut up, I'm saving yours too". I know she's right. I get her point of view, but the disappointment is blinding me and I can't help but feeling mad. I've gotten more angry in the last 5 days than in the last 5 years of my life. And all thanks to Alex.

"Do you really want to get our stories straight or do you want to know if I plan to tell everything to Martha?"

Her lips are pressed tightly together, like she's trying very hard not to say something she will regret. Or doing something.

"Both" she finally says.
I have to praise her self-control, I would have probably start a fight with me in her place.

I realize she's waiting for my answer and I also realize that I already have one. "I'm not going to tell her anything". The guilt burns inside of me "At least for now" I add, trying in vain to soothe it.

She makes a strange face, I can't decipher it. Again. She doesn't look...satisfied. Isn't this what she wanted?

"Good, and what about...the other thing?". I must have seen things that weren't there because now she's back being her old self, apart for a little discomfort in finding the words to describe what happened between us.

My same exact problem.

"I don't know, we didn't...I mean...we didn't do anything strange... Well, I mean I - I was talking about swimming. Swimming is not strange." God why can't I talk anymore? The small smile on her face is not helping "What I'm trying to say is that we went to common places doing common things...we can tell the truth...about the places I mean..."

She doesn't look convinced.

"But what if she asks me the exact place?"

It's so strange to be the one who has to reassure Alex. She has never been one to worry, well, apart from the time when they were actually trying to kill her.

"You could just say that you didn't know and you just followed me... Alex...Why are you so worried?"

She puts her hand on her nape. A thing she does only when she's anxious.

"You don't know Sandy...she can get really jealous and paranoid..."

I smile at the memories this is brings me.

"So, do I have to look out for burning dog poop on my doorstep?"

At least this made her smile too.

"No, she's a little classier... God, if they're not nuts I don't want them" she adds.

"Well, I beg to differ" I reply. The implication behind my words is clear.

"Don't flatter yourself. You're on top of that list" God, that smile. That smile can melt metal.

"I really don't think so..." I can't help but mirror her expression.

Now the air is electric again, just us, in the same room, smiling at each other. That's enough. And, well, I'm naked. That helps. There's not a single doubt on my mind about what is going to happen right now, with our girlfriends who can walk on us anytime. But this time I feel it. I know it's wrong. Will I be able to stop?

I don't get to know the answer to this dilemma because, against my prediction, Alex leaves with a "bye" and a smile.

I mutter back a "bye" at the door. How formal.
I quickly dry myself with a towel. I know there's something strange about me, but I don't know what it is until I pass the towel on my face and I realize that I am smiling. It's not good to feel this good. I take my sweet time getting ready. Truth is, I want to delay as much as possible the moment I will get back to the real world.

Every now and then, I hear some noises coming from the bedroom, I think it's Alex. She never once come inside the bathroom.

When I open the bathroom door, I feel almost ready. Almost. There's no one in the cabin, so I walk outside. My heart is slowly pumping faster. I see the three of them chatting amiably outside Alex and Sandy's new cabin. I feel like I'm walking towards a sure death, but I'm walking anyway. I mask my fear with the biggest smile I can master.

"Hey" I position myself immediately next to Martha.

"You took your sweet time, baby" she leans in to kiss me, but I react on instinct and I make a sudden movement to avoid the kiss. I realize too late what a terrible mistake I've just made. Martha's face is puzzled, and I mentally kick myself for being so fucking nervous.

"Sorry, a mosquito just bit me" I put my hand on the neck to empathize the lie. Her face is back at being normal-ish, so I think I've succeeded.

"So, did you move everything?" I try to change the subject and to address the guests. That's what a good host does, right?

"Yeah, thanks. We were just about to get inside and finish unpacking" Sandy replies.

"Ah, ok. So, see you later?" I'm eager to go away.

"Yes, of course" Sandy answers again. And with that, and a wave of the hand, she goes inside the cabin, followed by Alex who hasn't said a word, and I thank her for that.

This leaves me with some relief and my girlfriend on my side, she's watching me strangely.

"What?" I say.

"Nothing…" she replies starting to walk towards our cabin.

I know that behind this 'nothing' there's a lot, but I'm willing to put everything to rest, so I just shut up and try to get back to our normal selves. I put my arm around her shoulder and kiss her while we walk. The first time on the cheek, the second time she turns around and our lips collide sweetly.

I still hope she doesn't taste Alex on me.

Once inside the cabin I can't resist and I throw myself on the bed with a sigh.

Martha is still strangely quiet when she opens her suitcase and she starts unpacking. I'm really not in a mood to have a real conversation with her, or a fight, so I ask her how her days went.

At first, she's monosyllabic, so, instead of losing my patience like I usually do when she's in this mood, I try really hard to get her to talk a little bit about work and other things. After a while she talks more freely, I even start to tell her again about the storm and the damage it caused. When she sits on the bed, I reach for her and I hug her like we always used to do. When she kicks her shoes and she joins me on the bed, I feel like I've just won a battle, just because I've avoided one.
With her in my arms, I fall asleep.
I wake up because someone is caressing my hand. It's a nice way of waking up. I don't need to open my eyes to know that the person lying beside me is Martha, I recognize her by the overwhelming sensation of being home. Napping like this, with her, is one of my favorite things in the world.

I stir on her arms while the memories of the last hours forced themselves into my brain. They don't hurt that much now. They look like something very far away.

"Morning" I mumble with a smile and I start to open my eyes.

"It's seven o'clock and the dinner is ready" she replies with a smile. She's sitting on the side of the bed, her hand still in mine.

"Really? Can we please stay here until it's morning again?" I try to pull her hand so she'll fall on the bed over me, but she's faster, she disentangles her hand and she's quickly on her feet.

"No way. I'm starving, and you have a job to do" She throws something in the bed "And put that dress on. I want you super hot tonight. You have to make it up to me". What? This's got my attention. I raise up on my elbow.

"Why?" I try to ask hoping the panic won't reach my voice.

"You even have to ask?" I've known her long enough to know when she's hiding something that needs to explode. And this is one of those moments. I thought I disarmed the bomb before the nap. Guess I was wrong. I need to be extra careful.

I raise from the bed and I reach her from behind. She's looking for something on the closet. I put my hand on her waist.

"Honey, please… it's been one hell of a week, I'm sorry…what did I do wrong?"

I feel her stiffen under my touch, but then, with a sigh, she turns into my arms to face me. There's tenderness on her face, maybe everything is not lost.

"You've vanished Piper…in the past few days it's like you didn't exist…"

I see sadness in her eyes. Oh no, how could I hurt her? I put my hand on her cheek.

"Martha…I'm sorry…I just—I didn't want to drag you into the madness…you have already so many things on your mind"

"What, and you didn't think I could handle yours too? We're getting married Piper, do you remember that? We're supposed to share everything"

This hurts. This hurts like hell.

"Of course I do. You're right and I'm sorry… I didn't know… you have to believe me" That's the truth. Not a lie. A truth to hide a bigger lie, but a truth nonetheless.

She looks at me with a wounded look. "When something bad happens, you're supposed to turn to me first…I want to be there for you"

"And I want to be there for you too. It was a strange situation. It will never happen again. Let me
make it up to you." I lean on and I kiss her with more sweetness I can. She's stiff at the beginning, but after a while she loosens up a little bit and when the kiss is over, I can see a small smile at the corner of her lips, and I know she has started to forgive me.

"I'm sorry…" I repeat again. And I mean it so much that I want to shout it. She deserves the world, and I have to give it to her as best as I can, because I've been lucky enough to be chosen by her as the love of her life.

She smiles again at me, and she nods.

With another sweet kiss I turn to go again in the bathroom, picking up the floral dress she threw at me on the bed five minutes ago.

"I'm going to be so hot tonight babe…" I can hear her laugh behind me at my stupid joke.

Once inside the bathroom I look at my reflection in the mirror. I grab the sink hard until my knuckles are white. I am a bad person. But maybe I can make it up again. I can be good again. I fight the tears as hard as I can. It's a hell to put mascara on if you're crying.

Wasting time. That's what I'm doing right now. I've never put so much attention to details on make up, especially after Litchfield. I find it boring and mostly useless, since I haven't got anything to prove to anyone. But right now this is the only excuse I can have for not being outside with all the guests. Well, with three guests in particular.

When Martha shouts at me from outside, saying that I need to move my ass because the food is almost ready, I have no choice but to leave the safety of my own bathroom and, once again, face the world and the reality of what I've done.

The wonderful smell of barbecue almost makes me forget all my troubles, and makes my stomach rumble.

I look in the barbecue's direction and, of course, my gaze falls on Alex. It comes naturally. Her hair is in a messy ponytail, she's wearing one of the Camp's apron and there's a meat fork in her hand. Her cheeks are red, for being too close to the fire. I think I've never seen her in a ponytail.

Next to her, of course, there's Rosa, explaining something like it's a matter of life of death. Alex is so focused on Rosa's words that she doesn't even look up. I'm feeling good. Cleaned up, pretty, relaxed. This can be good, I can face everything, I can act normal in front of Alex. As I'm looking around, trying to find Martha, Rosa notices me and calls my name. I turn around and I wave back with a smile. Alex is flipping a rib eye steak. She briefly looks at me and I just keep on smiling. I'm too far to notice if the thing on her face is a smile or not…I guess we'll see.

"Piper! We're here!" a familiar voice shouts in my direction. I turn my back on Alex and I walk towards my fiancé, who's in company of Sandy and three glasses of red wine.

Sandy is so beautiful it hurts. Nothing is wrong with her, she's got a cute dress and no make up on and she looks like she's ready to have her photograph taken for a fashion magazine. The look of pure admiration and love that comes in my direction from Martha does nothing to relieve me from the feeling of inadequacy.

I sit on the chair next to the bench where Sandy and Martha are sitting and I kiss my fiancé because she's great and I desperately want to be what she deserves.

Despite what I'm feeling inside, I try to look proud of myself on the outside, for Martha's sake. And she says exactly what I wish for.
"So hot baby…"

I smile back ad her. A smug grin on my face.

"You're really beautiful tonight Piper…" and, with this, Sandy definitely kills my two seconds of good mood. She sounds honest, and I think she is. But she's…I don't know. I know it sounds stupid but she's too Victoria Secret to say that. To me.

But I cannot show what I really feel, so I reply with a thank you and a question about the new accommodation.

"The new cabin is lovely, thank you. For what I've seen every cabin you've built has the same basic structure but its own personality. The one we had before was more….country. This is a little more…classier. I noticed the different lamps, the carpets and the shape of the windows. I loved them. Did you choose them on purpose?"

I'm angry because yes, that was exactly what I wanted to do with the cabin and the fact that she's noticed and appreciated my hard work is, for some unknown reason, fucking annoying. Even though she's one of the very few people to have noticed the little details.

I can feel Martha smiling beside me. She knows how much I love when people are vocal about the beauty of the camp and, under other circumstances I would be glowing with pride, but there's something about Sandy that just…I can't. But no one has to know. So I try my best to ignore the sense of uneasiness that I have and, with an humble smile, I focus on the only thing that right now is giving me hope: that third glass of red wine sitting all alone on the table.

I'm basically on an empty stomach, so every sip brings me closer to that place where everything seems easier and funnier. I'm not a drunkard, far from it, but I know when a couple of good glasses of red can save the day. And this is the right moment. As they say, alcohol may not solve your problems, but neither will water or milk.

Time passes and I laugh at a joke Sandy has just made, and I really do find it funny. I pour myself the second glass.

"Honey, are you thirsty? What are we celebrating?" Martha laughs at me.

"Just…life. And the fact that no one got hurt during the storm. And…the fact that the insurance is going to cover everything…And…" I put as much emphasis as possible on my words "…the fact that you're finally here!".

I take the bottle of red and I start to refill Martha and Sandy's glasses too.

"Where's my glass?" The shock of hearing Alex's voice almost makes me spill the wine. I turn around and I mumble something like "Oh! Hey…Hi…Ehm…" This causes a fit of laughers coming from Martha and Sandy, probably justifying my words as the rambling of an almost drunken woman. I lock eyes with Alex. Amused or a fake smile? I cannot know.

Martha materializes next to me with an empty glass. Where did she find it? I fill it almost till the edge and I put it on the table, for Alex to take. She sits on the bench, between Sandy and Martha and she takes a sip.

"Mmm…it's so good. What is it?" She asks me directly.

"Cabernet Sauvignon, my favorite" I reply without thinking. And it's easier than what I thought.
"Really? I thought you were more of a white wine kind of girl…” Way easier.

"Well, taste evolves…” I see her smile disappears at my words, but I cannot understand why…

"So, are you ready for the best meat you've ever tasted? Not to brag, but Rosa marinated everything for 24 hours in something that I still don't know what it is, but it's delicious…” Alex changes the subject and also the people she's speaking to. To be precise, she's speaking to Sandy and Martha and never once glance back at me. What did I do? What did I say?

"I hope the meat tastes better than you, Martha. You smell like meat, but not the good kind…” Sandy jokingly says.

"Hey, woman! I cooked for you!” comes Alex's reply.

I spend the next minutes thinking about our conversation in silence while the others converse amiably. Then it hits me. I used to drink white wine when we were together and I kind of implied that. Come on! It was very subtle…Yes, I've made a small mistake, but come on, no one has noticed anything.

I try to pay attention to the conversation again, so maybe I can say something too, when Rosa arrives with a tray full of meat and a tray of grilled vegetables. The smell is to die for.

"Martha, give me a hand!” She demands. My Martha is the first one on her feet. I don't think Rosa meant to call her, but a pair of hands are always a pair of hands. This leaves me, Sandy and Alex alone. I immediately raise on my feet and I play the host card, trying to go around and make sure that everyone has a seat.

"Can I help you?” Sandy asks. Damn, how can she always be so polite? She's making it really difficult to hate her.

"Yes…you can check if there is at least a bottle of water every six people. If not, they are in the kitchen…thanks" I add the thanks just because I have to.

"On it boss" comes her reply, and she's already walking towards the kitchen.

As I'm putting the napkins on the tables, I can feel a presence behind me. And I don't need to be a genius to know who it belongs to. I don't even have to guess what she wants from me. So I anticipate her.

"I'm sorry about before…it just slipped…” I don't stop what I'm doing to look at her because I already know what's waiting for me. Accusing eyes. Worried eyes. Angry eyes.

"We need to be more careful” she says behind me. We? Not you? And why there's no angriness or accusation in her tone? I turn my head with what is probably a very perplexed gaze.

She's there. With a small smile and a hand full of napkins extended towards me. I take them mirroring her expression and without saying anything because, what else can I say? I'm speechless.

After a few minutes, everything is settled and everyone is sitting on the tables. I'm on the bench, I've got Marta and Sandy in front of me and Alex on my side. This is great because, in this way, I don't have to look at her for the whole length of the dinner.

The food is delicious, the weather is perfect and the wine blissfully slides into my stomach and into my soul. I pour myself the third glass while I try to explain to my new best friend Sandy why I do think that the criminal justice system in the USA is completely broken. Martha and Sandy have still
their glasses full, but not Alex. She's drinking even faster than me so I fill her glass too.

"60% of the people who get out of prison, are back in jail in the three following years…" I state as firmly as I can.

"I know. And I really do agree with you, but I think it's really difficult to identify the issue that needs more attention. Maybe something needs to be changed at the root, having only the true criminals in prison and not innocents, for exemple".

I smile. Because I do know how she feels. She's the good heart white woman who's never been to prison. Her intentions are good. I know it because I was her.

"Look, I know what you mean and I know that you mean good. But what you wish for is a little utopic. The urgent matter here is to humanize prisoners. Even if you're not a serial killer or a thief, if you're put into a sick system where you're treated like a number without even the possibility of express yourself and feel alive, once you're released, you're going to end up just like the serial killer or the thief. Detached from the world and unable to integrate into society, especially if you're born into a cultural environment where illegality is the way of life" I realize that I've raised my voice. It happens all the times that I speak about this. I think my poor Martha knows by heart every argument I've got on the matter.

"I can see your point, but, to be frank, and believe me, I don't want to be disrespectful to the issue, for me it is difficult to be so involved on a matter so far from me and from my life. In a way, it's easier for me to be emotionally involved in issues like children starving in Africa and refugees all around the world than prisoners who are paying for some mistakes that, hopefully, they have committed. I know I've been very lucky to be born into a nice middleclass family, so I don't know anyone who's ever been to prison…"

Wine is helping me getting over the natural aversion I have for Sandy. She means good. And I cannot accuse her of favoring dying children over someone who robbed a bank and lives I prison where she is fed and has a place to sleep. But maybe I can help getting her a little more empathic to the issue.

"Well, you're right on everything you've said except for one thing. You already know someone who's been to jail" I calmly state.

I feel Alex on my left side going completely still. She was going to take a sip from the glass, but instead she froze, with the hand in mid-air. I may be drunk but I will never expose her. God, she has to know that.

I look at Sandy, she looks at me perplexed, so I just simply tell her the truth.

"I've been to prison" I see her eyes getting bigger and her face is a mask of incredulity.

"Wh-What?" I laugh a little bit from her reaction. It is the same reaction I have all the times, but the irony of it never stops to be funny in my eyes.

"Yep. 2 years and 2 months. And before you say something…no, I didn't kill anyone" Her face still shows pure shock. I have no problem talking about it. Everyone on camp already knows about my past and last year Rosa even came to a couple of our Women's Prison Association meetings.

"I… I'm sorry, really…I didn't want to offend you in any way…"

"Don't worry, you didn't. And everything you've said is not wrong… it's pretty common not to feel compassion for inmates. I also didn't care…well, before I was part of the system, of course"
I see Sandy glancing at Alex. She's looking for a sign of recognition from her girlfriend. I don't know if she gives her one back because I don't want to turn my head in her direction. So I look at Martha. She's smiling. She has always been proud of me, of the way I've dealt with everything and for the way I've integrated activism into my actual life.

"Wow…this is really…fucking unbelievable…" Sandy's face is still amazed by the news. I kind of like to have this effect on people. So I take a sip of wine and I give her the thing she's really craving right now.

"Come on…ask me"

"Really?"

I laugh.

"Yes" but then I immediately add "No, wait, let's make this funnier… make a guess…"

This will be fun. Martha does agree with a laugh and a nod of her head. I think we're good.

"Oh god. Ok, ok….let me think…this is so strange, I'd never seen you as someone who could…I don't know….commit a crime. First of all, were you really guilty?"

"Yes" I firmly respond.

"Oh god" she shakes her head. "Ok, I'm going with the obvious one…tax evasion"

Me and Martha, we both laughs. This is funny indeed.

"Noooo! Obvious? Why is it obvious?"

"Well, white, rich…blonde" She's joking and the horrible thing is that I find her really funny. Under other circumstances, I think we could have been friends.

"Try again my friend" Martha says.

Sandy keeps thinking about it.

"Well, two years aren't that much…and since you've told me that murder is out of the picture, I would go with something like tax evasion"

"Wrong again. You're still going down the white rich blonde road. You need to widen up your horizons…" I says.

"Oh god, what did you do?" Sandy says dramatically. We all laughs at the table, including the three golden girls Kate, Molly and Linda that now are sitting beside us and joined our little chat. They already know everything.

"Honey…help me out" Sandy says to Alex.

I'm the one who gets stiff this time, because, for a second, I clearly see how this thing is pretty fucked up.

"I don't know…it's a tough one…ehm…maybe something to do with pills?" Alex says. I hear the uneasiness in her words, but probably the rest of the world thinks it has something to do with this game being hard.
"Pills?" It is Martha who answers.

"Yeah well…maybe, I don't know…maybe her father was a doctor and she took something from him…"

This time I answer directly and I look at her "Nice try, but no…not even close…" she seems pretty normal. That's good.

It is now Sandy's turn again.

"Has it something to do with banks or wall street or insurances or stock actions or something like that?"

"No. I'd say no. Even though money is involved"

"God, this is hard. Counterfeit money?"

"No"

"Robbery?"

"Nope"

"I give up. Just tell me…"

"Come on, don't you want to give it another try?" Martha asks.

"I don't know…I really cannot think about anything else…"

"It was love!" Linda almost shouts.

All eyes are on her.

"It was love that landed her to jail" She repeats.

We bounded a lot over my experience. One of her children did some time some years ago. She knows my story and I cannot help but smile at her because, what can you say? It was love indeed.

I turn around again to find a pair of beautiful eyes staring at me. Sandy is still pretty confused.

"She's right. It was love" I say, only to confuse her more.

"Money and love?" She still obviously doesn't get it.

This time is Martha who answers.

"Yes. Money and love. She was in jail for prostitution"

Again, all the table explodes into laughers. Prostitution. This is a new one. But particularly funny.

When we are all calmed down, Martha proceeds to explain.

"She was in love with a girl who was a drug dealer and she made Piper smuggle some drug money. Just once"

It is really strange to have someone else explain why you've been to jail and it's even stranger to have the reason of your incarceration sitting next to you while she's doing so. But it's better this way. I
don't think I would have been able to talk. Too afraid to say something wrong.

Sandy is still looking at me like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Is it true?"

"Yes. That's what happened. I've technically been incarcerated for criminal conspiracy and money laundering."

"Oh god. And how did it happened? I mean…did they stop you while you were on the plane or after you landed?"

"Neither. I went through custom without any problem"

Her bewilderment is still pretty visible in her face.

"So…how…?"

She's looking at me, but I really don't want to answer. I quickly glance in Martha's direction and I think she understands my uneasiness because she answers for me.

"Well, they broke up and after 10 years her ex girlfriend named her on trial"

Sandy's eyes are getting even bigger, if that's possible.

"No wait. Let me get this straight. You smuggled money just once in your life, you broke up with this girl, and after 10 years without any contact, she gives your name and she sends you to jail?"

It is really surreal to hear the story of your life explained like this. It is way more complicated, but yes, the facts are correct, even though I'm way past that kind of resentment.

"Yes, that's pretty much it" This time I'm the one who answer to her.

"That…fucking…BITCH!" Sandy exclaims and everyone on the table burst into laughs. Linda and Molly are even clapping. Everyone except, of course, the woman sitting on my left AKA that fucking bitch.

But I cannot help myself. Even though the facts are true, the reality is totally another thing. Way complicated. And I want to stop, I swear it, but I can't help but feel the impulse to comfort Alex. To show her that it's not like that. I've forgiven her for this shit, I've done even worse things to her. So I put my left hand on her thigh and I squeeze a little bit. This gesture is under the table, no one can see it.

I leave my hand there. She doesn't do anything, she doesn't push me away either.

"And do you know what happened to her? Did she get in jail too?"

"Not only that….she was in the same jail as Piper!" It is Martha's turn to put gasoline into the fire of this conversation. Again, everyone on the table burst into laughs. I smile too, but I'm starting to feel a little uneasy.

"No fucking way. This is way better than a Brazilian soap opera. So what did you do?"

This question is directed at me. I cannot run from it.

"Nothing…" I just hope that this conversation would end.
"Nothing? I would have at least, I don't know, made her life in prison impossible…"

I just shrug with a smile that is as fake as a three-dollar banknote.

"By nothing she means that she left her male fiancé to get back together with her, only to have her sentence once again extended when she betrayed her once again…"

I hate Martha right now. I really do. Even though I know she's just drunk and she means good. How dare she…

"Really? You didn't tell me that, Piper!" Linda says from the other side of the table.

I'm happy that they're finding this story so funny and amusing. I'm so fucking happy. There's a reason why I didn't tell you everything Linda, it's because this is my fucking business. But I know the only way to get out of this is to keep shining this fake smile. And not fucking talk.

"God Piper. Please, write a book about it. It's gonna be a best seller…I swear it. I'm going to be the first to buy it for sure. You can call it "The girl who fucked me up" or something like that".

Again, the sound of laughs around me is becoming unbearable. On a scale from 1 to 10, I'm regretting 11 the moment I've decided to talk about prison. Stupid Piper.

"Well. Not that I want to save the honor of my fiancé, but, just to report the pure facts, once the bitch got out of jail, Piper made sure that she came back for some more time" Martha adds.

Everyone is cheering now. I think I also receive a thumb up. Dear god.

I realize that I'm squeezing the hand on Alex's thigh only because she puts her hand above mine and she interlaces our finger. She's the only one who can understands me now. The only one in the fucking world who's now holding me from bursting into something I don't want to be. Or maybe she just wants to kill me.

"Really Piper? That's what happened?"

"Well, it's a little more complicated. You will have to read the book to know all the details. Now, can we please stop focusing on my dark past and eat this meat before it gets cold?"

"Of course we can!" Kate says. "May I just add that I'm also very glad that now you're over this phase of your life and have found a beautiful and nice girl?"

I smile because I have to. Martha just hugs Kate, that's sitting on her left. And there's a couple of ohh and ahh from all the people on the table.

Alex quickly disentangle her hand from mine.

Maybe it was just because she wanted to take the meat tray that they were passing to her.

Maybe.
"Come on, come on! Just wait 10 more minutes. It's almost midnight!" Sandy says very loudly at Linda who's threatening to go back to her cabin to sleep.

"Sandy, I'm not that young anymore. You've already made me drink more wine that I usually drink in a year!"

All the tables laugh at the joke.

The party is going great. It all went really well once we've all started to eat and the Piper-went-to-prison theme was dropped. After the first two rounds of meat and wine, we moved all the tables, to be able to be closer. Someone lit the bonfire and put some music on.

The air is hot and the Christmas lights are still shining all over us. Best. Purchase. Ever.

"Damn! I've forgotten to buy the marshmallows for the children" I say as soon as I see Sammy and Louisa, the Goldberg children, walking towards the bonfire with their parents.

"Oh god, you're so evil. They should put you in jail" Says Al who now is sitting next to me. I push him on the shoulder with a smile.

"Fuck off" I joke.

He puts a hand over his heart, faking a heart pain and raises up from the bench.

Feeling a little guilty, I shout at his back. "Wait! Where are you going?"

"To the cabin" and then, with a smile and a wink over the shoulder, he adds "to take the guitar!"

He's good looking, and fun. With tattoos. And kind of a bad boy with a heart of gold underneath the hard surface. Exactly what I like. Men like these are easy. Way easier than their female counterparts.

God how I wish I could be less gay.

"Don't make me wait!" I shout back at him. Who says I cannot flirt back? Martha is here and she doesn't mind when I do that. It is totally harmless.

I glance at Martha. My Martha, no tattoos and a heart of gold that shines without any barrier. Definitely not an Al. Or an Alex, for what it matters. She is immersed in a conversation with Jason and Katie and she seems really happy.

As I'm waiting for Al to come back, I look around. The sound of chatting feels the air. Everyone is looking happy and the tables show the disasters that only a very good dinner can cause. Cleaning up is going to be a nightmare. But one of those nightmares that I love to live through.

I decide that it is time for everyone to move and sit around the bonfire, so I go towards the reception to get the extra chairs. I don't ask for help because this is something that I can easily do on my own in a few rounds. My head is still a little too dizzy, but nothing serious, I can walk. I've been way drunker.

As I make the second round, I notice two people talking near the woods. I can see the light of a cigarette so it's either Molly or Sandy. I really hope it's not one of the youngest guests smoking something more "entertaining", because they know that, for that kind of fun, they have to wait for
Since I'm a curious person, once I've got 2 folded chairs on both my arms, I change the route to go back to the bonfire and I take the one that will bring me just next to the smoking couple.

And, as it turns out, it's Alex and Sandy. Not that I did that on purpose. Not that I've noticed that Alex wasn't sitting next to me when I left. It's definitely not that.

They seem to be in the middle of a heated conversation.

"You know that I don't like things like that…" it's Alex talking. She's facing in my direction while Sandy is giving me her back. I don't see a cigarette on Alex's hand and this thing, for some reason, fills me up with joy.

"Come on Martha, what are the options? Do you want to go back to the cabin? Don't you think that a behavior like that would cause more whispers and talks?"

"I'm not saying that… I know there are no other options, but can I express my opinion or is it forbidden by your law? I just did that." Alex is not happy.

"God how much I hate it when you go all whiny antisocial…" But Sandy is more pissed.

"Whiny antisocial? Oh god, really…" Alex raises her eyes to roll them but catches mine. Busted. I try to keep walking pointing immediately my head and my eyes to the ground.

During the dinner there hasn't been a real exchange between us, but we both did intervene in the same conversations and laughed at the same jokes. So I think we're fine. Even though I cannot help but being a little annoyed by the fact that Alex has just implied that she does want to go back to her cabin right now instead of what? Celebrating her fake birthday with everyone? I'm disappointed.

But I think I would be feeling like this for all the guests of the camp if they would show some kind of bad mood.

I think.

I'm almost sure.

When I arrive at the bonfire, Katie is placing all the chairs that I've already brought around it.

"Hey Piper! Do you need a hand?"

"Yeah, thanks! If you come with me, one more round and we're done!"

I go with Katie to the cabin to take the remaining chairs, but when I look at the spot where Alex and Sandy were a few minutes ago, I don't see anyone anymore.

When we go back to the party, they aren't even around the bonfire.

Is it possible that they really went back to the cabin without even say goodnight? Or maybe they did it while I was in the cabin. Can I please stop obstructing my brain with this unnecessary and ridiculous thoughts? Just please.

I've brought some blankets with me, and I give them to the children even though the bonfire is still big enough to warm everyone. They seem particularly electric tonight. They're looking around like maniacs, whispering something to Al. This cannot be good, but in a good way.
I find a place on a chair and Martha finds me and sits next to me, putting one hand on my knee.

Everyone is either sitting on a chair or standing close to the fire. Everyone except…

"Here she is! Here she is!" Louisa shouts and almost jumps in Al's arms. With a smile he picks up the guitar.

"Ready?"

"Yeah!" Both children scream.

"Ok. 1, 2, 3…"

As the first chords of the guitar fill the air, suddenly everything is finally clear. The whispers, the fact that the children are still up even if it's late… this is going to be epic. The singing starts.

"Happy birthday to you…happy birthday to you…"

All the camp joins in the singing, everyone except me. I've almost broken my neck turning around to see Alex's expression, and god, the smile she has on is so fake that I'm laughing so much that tears start to fall from my face. She has always, always, always hated public displays of forced and formal joy. And, maybe, the only thing she hated most was being at the center of the attention. And dear god, she's definitely on the center of everything right now. And for her fake birthday nonetheless! I really try to compose myself. While everyone is still singing, I seal my lips as tightly as possible, trying not to smile too much, tears are still threatening to fall and I clap, together with the rest of the camp. She's walking towards the bonfire for the end of the song. Sandy is staying behind her. She has a smile on her face, but it doesn't reach her eyes.

As Alex walks next to me, our eyes lock. She sees my expression and rolls her eyes in a way that I do still remember too well. Typical Alex Vause. It all lasts less than a second, but when she turns again her head, there's a smile on her face that I think is more genuine that the one she had before. Am I deluding myself?

"Thank you, thank you guys! You shouldn't have! And you've sung really well! Where did you learn to?"

She proceeds to kneel and to hug the children, something I've never seen her done before. She's really changed a lot in these past five years, and I've got the impression that I've only just began to see her new colors. I look at her while she starts to be hugged form everyone.

"Woah! 40 years old! You're still so young!" says Rosa while she caresses Alex's cheek. Now Alex's expression is no more painfully joyful, but honestly happy. And I'm happy for her and for her fake birthday.

I lose sight of her when she gets engulfed by the rest of the camp. I feel Martha patting my leg. I turn around.

"Come on, let's go!" she says.

Oh. Right. I'm supposed to join the festivities too.

We walk towards the bonfire and we wait for our turn. The paranoia is killing me. How do I act? Will they see?

Martha is the first one to go and hug Alex.
I don't like that in so many levels that I don't even begin to dissect the emotions.

My turn comes too early. I want to copy Martha's movements and do everything like the others, but Alex has other ideas and, when I get close to give her one of those fake kiss on the cheek where you don't even touch the face of the other person, she puts her lips on my ear and whispers.

"I've seen you laughing…bitch!"

Her tone, her voice, her humor. It's all still in there. I laugh so loud that I probably hurt her ear, but I can't help it.

"Happy birthday…" I stop myself before saying her name and I decide not to say her fake name too.

"Shut up…" she replies with a smile and she's on to the next hug.

With a stupid smile still on my face I go back and sit on my chair again, with Martha on my side.

"It was lovely…" Martha says to me once everyone is either back to their cabin or sat in a chair around the fire.

"What was lovely?" I ask while my eyes are fixed on the bonfire.

"The dinner, the evening…you…"

I turn my head at her words. A wave of guilt hits me. But I smile.

"You are lovely" I say. She smiles back at me. I feel so cheesy and mean. Horrible combination.

Somewhere behind Martha I can see Sandy walking towards Alex and kissing her on the lips.

A wave of something else hits me.

Martha seems to notice something on my face, because she turns around to look behind her.

"You don't like her, don't you?"

Panic. Who's she talking about?

"What do you mean?"

"Sandy. You don't like her…" Oh god, yes. This I can handle.

"Oh…well…it's not like I don't like her…it's just…" The look Martha gives me can only mean one thing: cut the crap.

I laugh at her and I try to be more…honest.

"Well, yeah! I can't stand her! But it is something that I don't know where it comes from, you know?" To be honest, I do have some ideas, but I'd cut my tongue rather than telling her that.

"But she's fun! Sometimes a little too intense, but we've been on the same car for more than 5 hours and, you know…she's not that bad. You know how I am. If she wasn't ok, 5 hours together would have killed me. She reminds me of you sometimes…the same sense of humor…the same passion for social issues…"

This comparison irritates me, I want her to stop because I know that she is right.
"My past as a runaway model…" I add with sarcasm.

Martha bursts into a wonderful laugh. I love to make her laugh.

"See? She would have made probably the same joke! Come on honey…why don't you give her another chance?" I know this Martha. This is her happily tipsy version that I usually find very amusing.

"Why are you insisting so much?" I ask her.

It's not that I'm jealous or something, it's just that, you know…Alex.

"No need to be jealous darling. I only have eyes for you…you're too pretty" She's mocking me…caressing my cheeks and talking to me like I'm a baby. I look at her with an overly fake pout.

"Come on Piper! You know that we don't know a lot of gay couples in NY! I want some new friends! And since we seem to agree that Martha is fun, why can't you just try a little bit to see what's underneath Sandy? I know you'll like it! Do it for me please?" She's exaggerating every move. To mock me. It would be hilarious if it weren't for the fact that it's not hilarious at all. But I laugh nonetheless.

"I know what you're doing honey. I know it…you're just playing the friends-in-NY card only because you need Sandy's girlfriend to help you with the exhibition…I know how your devious mind works…you don't fool me baby" I keep joking with her. We both laugh.

Did I really just called Alex Sandy's girlfriend? Oh god.

"What are you two laughing about?" Du Du Du Dum. Sandy's voice behind Martha breaks the spell.

"We were just talking about you and about how much we like you!" almost shouts Martha, taking my hand and kissing it. I follow her lead because, what else can I do? "Come on. Take a chair you both and seat here with us" With a smile, I say goodbye to a stress free end of the night.
Chapter 26

Ok. I have to admit it. This is not that bad.

Now that the majority of the guests is back to their cabins, it's just us here around the fire, with the guys from cabin 4. Al is still strumming the guitar and Jason is sleeping in a chair in a horrible position. We told him to go to bed, but he was pretty drunk and just wanted to 'close his eyes just for one second'. Tomorrow he's going to regret this decision so much. But, you know what? His bad.

Martha, Sandy and Katie are the only active ones, talking about travels and stuff. Me, Alex and Lauren, on the other hand, are listening to their conversation in a comfortable silence. It's not that I don't want to talk, it's just that so much has happened today and so much has been said that I kind of need a break. And I'm pretty sure Alex feels the same way.

Sitting here, still warmed by the fire that Al is keeping alive between songs, I try to think about the future. Maybe I can do it. Maybe it's not that hard. Listening to Martha, who's laughing to something very funny that Sandy's said, sitting next to Alex without thinking of arguing with her, or apologizing to her or doing something else to her…

I can see it. Us in New York. All together. Yes. But I also still remember how, these past few days, have been a rollercoaster of emotions and how I went from one extreme to the other in a matter of seconds. Or less.

"Tired?"

Martha's voice cuts through my daydreaming. When I turn around I see that not only Martha is speaking to me, but the three of them are turned in our direction, so this is a question addressed also to Alex and Lauren.

"A little bit, yeah! But keep talking…it's interesting…" I lie, trying to sound as honest as possible. Truth is, I'm not listening to a word they've said in the last half hour, but, knowing Martha and Katie, I honestly think that they're talking about something really interesting because they are two really interesting people. Martha's face expression changes for a second. I know what that means. Nothing good has ever come out from that face.

"I think I'm going to call it a night and go back to the cabin" intervenes Lauren beside me "And I'm going to drag drunken sleeping beauty with me" She raises up from her chair. Al shakes Jason's chair to wake him up, he slurs some nonsense in his sleep and moves into a new position, a definitely worse one.

We happily laugh at his expense.

"Come on Jason…wake up. Let's go to sleep" Now it's Lauren's turn to shake him.

He mumbles something that dangerously sounds like some mean bad words but, after a few more insults of encouragement from his friends, he's on his shaky feet and on his way to their cabin with an arm around Lauren. His hungover tomorrow will be epic.

"Come on guys! The night is still young….wake up!" Al says to no one in particular. I react by yawning.

"Hey boy…respect your elders…” answers back Alex with a grin. Al just puts the guitar on the ground and moves his chair closer to Alex with a mischievous smile.
"Martha…let me tell you a secret…40s are the new 20s…last year I've met a nice little woman, Theresa, 43, mother of two. By the end of the night, I was the one asking her to stop, begging her…on my knees. I think she sprained my ankle, don't ask me how. So, my dear friend, don't play the 'I'm too old' card. I've seen you…you don't fool me. The whole redhead with secretary glasses act. Come on…You're hiding something…something juicy"

"Yes. A corpse in the trunk of my car" Alex answers and causes another fit of laughs.

Al just smiles and, pointing a finger in Alex's direction, leaves his position and starts walking towards his cabin.

"Al, where are you going?" Sandy shouts at him.

"Trust me" it's his only reply.

He arrives a couple a minutes later with a vodka bottle.

"As they say, you only turn 40 once, right?"

I cannot help but laugh loudly because, actually, no, you don't turn 40 only once, in Alex's case at least twice.

Since I'm the only one laughing at this joke that wasn't even supposed to be a joke, everyone looks at me. I just shrug and take the bottle from Al's hands, I unceremoniously remove the cap and take the first sip just to deviate the attention to something else. Let them think I'm drunk.

"Hey, hey, hey! The birthday girl goes first!" Alex steals the bottle from my hand and puts her lips where mine where a second ago.

Everyone laughs.

She passes the bottle back to me again but, instead of passing it to the others, I take another gulp, this time bigger. It burns like hell going down my throat, but I feel like I need to prove something to somebody. I don't know what, but who cares, maybe this will wake me up a little.

"Yeah! Good job Piper, this is what I meant before…see?" Al is pointing at me and looking at Alex. I smile proudly.

"What? Just because she took two little sips of vodka?"

Again, the bottle is in her hands and this time she doesn't just take a big gulp. This time she actually drinks it like it's water.

When she's done, the bottle is almost half empty. Al's face is the picture of pure admiration. He falls on his knees and pretends to worship Alex.

"My only goddess, I'm just your humble servant. Do what you want to do with me"

She jokingly push him with her feet to make him lose balance.

"Do what you want to do but do not dare to question me again” she answers trying to sound pompous, instead she just sounds…wasted. Even though I really think she's more tired than drunk. We laugh at her attempt anyway. This is good, right? Then why do I feel like the Armageddon is coming?

The bottle is still in her hand and with a little bow, she says "To me and to my birthday" and takes
another sip.

"Hey honey, I think that's enough..." Sandy says, with her firm voice, trying to put some sense into Alex. I do agree with her this time. Alex is going over the top and I don't know why.

"Really? You do think that? Because I don't. I'm just here, celebrating my birthday, surrounded by people, like you wanted me to, right?" Alex's face is full of resentment.

Oh. So this is what it is. This is about the discussion they were having before. And it has nothing to do with me and what happened this afternoon. Not that I thought that...

Anyway...

I try to do my part to fix everything because that's what I do and that's what I'll always try do with everyone.

"Come on, give me this" I take the bottle from Alex's hand. She wasn't expecting this move from me and that's the only reason I manage to take it from her.

"You're not celebrating with people if you don't let the people celebrate with you" I say with a smile, trying to save the situation. To prove my point, I take another sip too, even though I never would have done it if it weren't for this annoying thing that I have and that puts me in very bad situations all the times. Why can't I just mind my own business? Well, in this case, this may also be my own business.

I turn my head to pass the bottle at the others but Sandy is doing a staring contest with Alex and Martha, well, Martha is looking at me like I've just killed a puppy in front of her. What the hell is going on? What did I do? I look at her puzzled but she doesn't change her expression. Thank god for Katie that takes the bottle from my hand.

"That's my girl" says Al before taking the bottle himself and drinking vodka like there's not tomorrow.

There's a strange atmosphere on the air. Full of tension. Sandy, Martha and Alex are silent and it's my turn to keep the conversation going with the help of Katie and Al. Now and then I glance at Martha. She's looking in front of her, never at me. She's angry, but, again, I really have no idea why. I haven't done anything wrong. Nothing that she knows, anyway. The thought that maybe she does know what I did this afternoon crosses my mind for a second. I push it as fast as I can to the farthest place in my brain that I have.

When the conversation about Al's sentimental life comes to a stalling point, I think it's time to go to bed and put an end to all of this. But Alex has another opinion.

"Come on! Let's do something..." she says, clearly talking to Al.

"Something like what?" he answers intrigued.

"I don't know. Something that wouldn't make me feel too old...or antisocial..."

The nod to the quarrel she was having with Sandy is, once again, as clear as this afternoon's blue sky.

I don't know if Al and Katie are starting to sense that something is off. Martha probably is. But why does she have to take it out on me? I've done everything she asked me for this evening. I even stayed up to prolong the night even though I just wanted to go to bed. Just because I know that she wanted
to do something different for once.

Al and Katie laugh. Good, they haven't understand the situation, I think it's better this way.

"Well, we could all play spin the bottle. I wouldn't mind…" He says with a grin.

For a second I panic, the idea of playing this stupid game that I don't play in what? 30 years? Is spine– chilling. But when everyone, even Martha, laughs at his words I realize that it was just a joke made by a man who's surrounded just by women.

I kick myself for being so ready to snap and panic. Will this anxiety ever go away?

"In your dreams, you idiot…"

"Hey…I was just trying to help… and I don't hear other tempting proposals…" he adds.

"Well, only because I've never been here! I don't know if there's something cool we can do!" I recognize this Alex. This is the stubborn Alex that will never stop if she's trying to prove a point. What point? I don't know. It's something between her and Sandy and, for what I've seen, Sandy is not a girl who surrenders quietly, if the glances she is exchanging with Alex mean something.

"Weed?" suggests Katie looking at Alex.

"Been there, done that" she replies with a smile.

"Badass" Al shouts out.

I want to laugh. Weed. If only it was just weed all those years ago and not heroin or cocaine or meth or whatever you can think of, who knows where we'll be. I bet not here.

"We can go to the lake and take a swim" intervenes Sandy.

I can recognize the challenge in her voice. What's going on? We all turn to look at her, but she's just looking at Alex.

"Why not?" replies Alex "I've never done that before".

Except all the times we had sex in the Indian Ocean at midnight, I'd like to add. But thank god I don't. I can be drunk but I'm not stupid. Well, most of the times. I don't know how my face looks like, but luckily I don't have to worry about it since everyone is cheering and no one looks at me.

"Yeah! Let's go to the lake!" Al almost shouts. He's on his feet, offering his hand to help Katie stand up.

"Well, I think I'll pass" Finally Martha says something. I've noticed the use of the singular instead of talking for the both of us, as she usually does.

Honestly, I'm glad to go back to the cabin too. I'm tired, I'm tipsy and Alex is in a strange mood. Nothing good can come out of this.

"No! You cannot go now! Come on Martha…” Sandy tries to convince Martha to stay by putting her arm around her shoulder. I don't like that.

"But I'm really tired…” Martha says.

"Piper! Convince her to stay, please" Sandy adds. And I hate her for this. Why does she have to put
me in the middle of a fight she's having with Alex? It is clear that she just wants to have someone close to her who is on her side. I now wonder what they talked about in the car. Or who the talked about. I'm not feeling at ease.

They are both waiting for my answer. Sandy still with her arm around Martha. And Martha is looking at me like my answer will decide my fate. I really don't get it.

"Well, I'm down for whatever Martha wants to do" How about that? This is the safest answer I could think of, and, truth to be told, I'm pretty proud of myself. But the look on Martha's face is not one of pure joy. She looks…I don't know. Slightly disappointed.

"Come on, Martha, please…." Again Sandy tries to convince my fiancé by talking too close to her face. I'm wondering if she's doing it on purpose. Maybe to get a rise out of Alex.

Martha never stops looking at me and with a look that seems like a challenge she says

"You know what? Why not?"

I really don't get it. What is she trying to prove? And to whom? Can't they feel that something is off? Probably not, since everyone is cheering.

We're walking in the dark towards the lake. I'm feeling like I'm in some kind of alternate universe. They are all chatting, but it all seems so…fake to me. Exaggerated. I'm talking about Alex, Martha and Sandy's enthusiasm for something that, I think, they have no interest in doing. Well, I cannot know for sure in Sandy's case, but for Martha and Alex, I could bet my house on that.

I'm walking behind everyone, the need to be alone is more pressing now. Katie looks behind her shoulder and sees me. She waits for me and she links her arm with mine.

"I have to tell you, Piper….I don't know if it's the storm or whatever but I've never seen the Camp so beautiful…and look…fireflies everywhere…really…a paradise…".

I do agree with her and I gladly accept the chance to arrive at the lake chitchatting with Katie and not having to talk to the rest of the group.

"Who's ready to get naked?" Al shouts, happy like a baby. I don't know from where he gets all that energy.

I have no choice but to go next to Martha, hoping to catch her alone. I have no such luck because Sandy is always there. BFF my ass.

There's no artificial light here, but thanks to the moon and the torch of my phone, I reach the deckchair close to Martha's and I start to remove my clothes.

She's next to me but she doesn't talk to me, only to Sandy. The moment they're both in their underwear, they walk towards the lake, without a word in my direction. I can already hear the splash in the water coming from Al…

"Wow…it's so warm! It's fantastic!" it's Katie's voice.

Really, I just want to go to sleep. With the pace of someone who's sentenced to death, I move towards the shore and the noises and I put my feet into the water. It is warm indeed. I don't want to get my hair wet because I have no intention of taking another shower before going to bed. So put my hair in a ponytail and I carefully walk until the water reaches my bellybutton. The water is warm, but the problem will come the moment I'll go out and the cool air will hit me. Damn, I've forgotten to
"Come on, take it off, birthday girl!" Al suggests.

"In your dreams" Alex replies and I hear a splash of water.

I don't know which type of garment he was referring to, but it makes me smile. I'm still in the dark, I'm walking towards the voices, I only see shadows.

"Well, being naked in a lake at midnight with five hot girl is actually on the top 3 of my favorite dreams to have, combining it with the one where we all play spin the bottle together and there you have it…the king of all dreams"

"Wait. Are you naked? Like fully naked?" Martha asks him.

"Like the day I was born, minus the piercings…if you want to see them, just ask" With that he dives underwater and, for a glorious second, his butt shines under the moon causing everyone to laugh and more than a few "gross" or "augh" to be thrown in his direction. I've reached them at the perfect time.

Against my better judgement, I go close to Martha and I hug her from behind.

"Hey" I whisper in her ear.

"Hi" she replies a little coldly but she doesn't push me away.

"Is everything good?" I ask, fearing the answer, but not caring anymore if the others can hear us.

"You tell me…" God that annoying tone. I take a step back, leaving the embrace.

"What do you mean, you tell me? You've stopped talking to me the moment the others arrived. And that was exactly what you wanted, no?" I cannot help but let a little bit of irritation in my voice. This time I didn't do anything wrong. She turns around.

"No! I wanted you to spend an evening with me and with all the others. You didn't even try…you just stood there, with a frown, waking up only do to that fucking stupid drinking contest…"

So, this is it. After the week that I had and the day that I had, I had to be the perfect host? Oh please.

"Keep your voice down" I look around but I don't see anybody. Just some shadows far enough from us. They probably have moved.

"I've told you…I'm fucking tired. You've said you did understand. What do you want me to tell you? Sorry for being tired? Sorry because three days ago a storm almost destroyed the camp and killed a person?" Now it's my turn to raise the voice.

"That happened three days ago. I'm talking about me and you right now. You could at least pretend to be having fun with me, you know? It was so obvious! Even Sandy asked me if something was wrong…"

I see red.

"Well, you can tell Sandy to mind her fucking business. She has enough problems of her own"

"What does that mean?" Martha asks with a bitter tone that I just want to crash from her voice.
"Exactly what I've said. She'd better mind her own fucking business" The red I'm seeing is so red that it looks like black.

"Like you did when Martha was drying up the vodka? Was that minding your own business?"

She did not say that. She did not really say that. I cannot believe my ears.

"That was a totally different situation. We were all around the fire and she was drinking too much. I did it just because it was the best human thing to do…"

"Well, excuse me, but taking the bottle from her hands just to challenge her to drink more doesn't look like a very human thing to me…"

"What are you talking about? When I took the bottle from her I passed it to Katie…"

"Oh well…are you talking about the first time, the second time or the third time? I'm talking about the moment you turned from a zombie to a party girl who just looooves vodka…" This is way out of line. This is really messing with my head and making my blood boil.

"Martha. Let me get this clear. And I'm not shouting at you just because you're clearly not yourself right now. What I did tonight, it was just for you. If it were for me, I would be in bed and on my third sleep. So, yes, I drank A FEW sips of vodka, but I did it just to stop the other one to drink more. That's it. I didn't do anything or said anything to get in the middle of their fight"

"So you did realize that they were having a fight?" her supposing tone is driving me nuts. She's never been like this.

"Of course I did realize it! Everyone with two eyes and ears did. God" I answer not caring anymore for my tone.

"So, for me, this is not minding your own business. Sandy told her to stop and you just had to take some kind of action. Like you always do… You cannot accuse other people for something that you do all the time!"

No. Words. No words to describe how fucking angry I am right now. I need to go away.

"Really. I can't believe I'm hearing this from you. What are you? Sandy's advocate? Martha, I'm not fucking joking. Talk to me again only once you've come to your senses. And, to be clear, this is not fucking over…" I point my finger at her and I start to move in the direction of the place where I see some movements. I'm walking so fast that the water is parting like the fucking Red Sea.

I can hear Martha moving behind me.

"Piper, wait…"

Her voice is softer now, but it's too late. I'm already pissed as fuck.

I haven't even reached the others when I hear Alex's voice.

"Who wants to swim with me to the buoy?"

"I do" I answer as quickly as humanly possible.

I don't wait for her answer, I don't wait to know if someone else wants to come, I don't even wait for Alex to confirm the she really intends to swim to the buoy. I might just as well swim there on my own.
I go completely underwater and I emerge just to start swimming in the dark in the direction I hope is right.

I don't care that my hair now are fucking wet and I don't even care that I have no towel to dry them and I'm probably gonna catch a cold.

Chapter 27

The moon is helping me. It is not yet full, but it is the only source of light here in the middle of nowhere. So, when I stop swimming to check my position, I can spot quite easily the buoy not far from me. There are some movements behind me, but I don't want to turn around, in case it's Martha. I still have no intention of talking to her right now.

I keep on swimming with my head underwater and my eyes closed until my hand crashes on the buoy. Perfect trajectory. I finally stop and I use that same hand to grab the rope at the top of the buoy so I don't have to move my arms and legs to stay afloat. The water here is too deep for me to touch the bottom.

As I catch my breath, I try to adjust my eyes to the darkness. At first, only blackness surrounds me, but after a while, I start to see the little silver ripples on the water, the big black shadows of the trees on the shore and the stars in all their glory.

I turn my eyes in the direction of the sound of someone swimming. I hold my breath until I see a head emerging a few feet from me. It's Alex and her white teeth are sparkling in a smile. I don't know if I release my breath or if I hold it more in me. I realize I'm smiling back. She swims closer and puts her hand next to mine on the rope. The buoy is big enough to support the both of us. Alex's panting.

"I don't remember you swimming that fast when you were younger…" She says trying to catch her breath.

"Well, I'm not the one who's turning 40 today…I'm still on my thirties" I reply with a joke.

"Ah. Ah. Ah. Very funny"

"And, to be honest, I don't think that all the vodka you've gulped down is helping you going faster" I add. She's in a good mood.

She laughs.

"Yeah, probably!" With her is always like this. Easy banter. Even if I'm aware that every second is different from the second before. So I try to sound as calm as I can be, just to be sure.

"What was the thing back there with Sandy?" I ask, fearing the answer.

She rolls her eyes, but she's not annoyed. Thank god, it looks like I didn't trespass any boundaries.

"Nothing…the usual…"

I don't know why, but this makes me happy. I think it's because, since I'm always in my head too much, knowing that I'm just a human being and that other human beings have the same problems as me, is reassuring in some way.

"So, do you usually argue with your girlfriend?" I don't know why I feel the need to push it a little bit, but I do.

"Well, is the water blue? You should know the answer to that" She replies with a laugh.

"Well, the water is black right now" I say with a smile.
She bursts into a laugh that, frankly, is exaggerated. It wasn't a good joke, but she's probably too drunk to notice it.

"And, who knows, maybe you've changed in the last years…" I add.

"Sorry?" She asks perplexed.

"I've said that even if we were fighting all the time when we were together, maybe now you've changed…" I explain it to her, thinking that she didn't hear me well the first time.

I was wrong. She laughs even more now.

"And, as usual, you've got it wrong! I wasn't talking about the past. I was talking about you! Now!"

She points her index finger at my clavicle, just to make the point more clear.

"Me? What did I do?" I'm confused.

"You were arguing with your girlfriend too…"

Oh.

"Oh, that…well, yes. But it was just…nothing serious" I really don't know why I'm trying to justify myself. And I also don't know why I'm lying. I haven't yet thought about it. But I know that it was not just a stupid fight.

Her index on my clavicle has become her whole palm leaning on the space between the shoulder and my neck. I don't know how or when it did happen.

"Relax kid. I was just stating the obvious. You argue, I argue, we all argue sometimes" I don't like it when someone makes assumptions about me, especially if said assumptions are correct.

"Oh, but I'm relaxed…" I'm definitely not relaxed. And when I'm not relaxed I say and ask stupid things. "And, by the way. How come you were listening? Worried that I was going to tell Martha everything about us?" I say.

She laughs out loud. Again. I'm kind of offended.

"So, first of all, I'm not worried. Not anymore. And secondly, I was referring to the fact that not less than ten minutes ago you just came out from nowhere looking like a possessed ball of fury who wanted to win the swimming gold medal while your girlfriend was the queen of sadness" she says.

I look at her with a face that I don't know what is expressing. She just smiles, moves her hand, puts it open over my face and pushes a little before removing it. I don't know what it means, but it is something that feels like such an intimate gesture that, for a moment I feel…exposed. I feel the water touching my skin in the places where Alex's hand was a few seconds ago. Probably it has something to do with the shame of having, once again, made the wrong assumptions.

She knows I want to know why she's not worried anymore. She also knows that I don't want to ask it, but I ask it anyway, even if I'll come to regret my curiosity. There's really no point in denying that me and Martha were having a fight.

"How come you're not worried anymore?" I hope my voice is as detached as I want it to sound.

Her smile falters for a second. Or maybe it's just my imagination.
"I've heard you fighting… She's really jealous. And insecure. If you're going to tell her about us, you're done. And I don't think that you want to end it"

A stab to the heart. A clean cut. That part of me that thinks that a good relationship should be based on honesty and respect is slowly bleeding out. The part of me that thinks that Alex may have said something right is growing, pulsing, aching.

For the first time since I'm here, I feel the cold on my face and on my head.

She's looking at me, but my eyes dart to the darkness behind her. I hear distant voices of people talking.

"There's no one else here…" She whispers, suddenly too close to me.

I feel her breath on my face. It smells like alcohol.

What do I do? Where do we stand? I don't know where we stand. Friends or not friends? That is the question. Can we really be friends anyway?

My Pindaric flight is interrupted by a pair of lips clumsily crashing into mine.

Oh. So, that's where we stand.

Even though I like this kind of connection, we are both in an awful position, linked to the buoy just with one hand each, so we kind of float away from each other after the impact and I think it is for the best because, for some reasons, I don't like the taste on my lips. She throws a hand in my direction, trying to catch me, I think, but instead of grabbing me, her hand hits my shoulder and accidentally scratches it.

"Wait Alex, what are you doing?" I say while I attempt to touch my shoulder with my only free hand, failing at it.

"What do you think I'm doing? I didn't come here to talk" She's clearly pretty drunk. She's now using her legs, linking them with mine underwater. When she succeeds, our bodies connect and touch. Her right hand goes around my waist to keep me in place. Her left one is still on the buoy, holding all the weight.

Even if the position is uncomfortable, she still manages to lower her head and to attack my neck with open-mouthed kisses, warm kisses on my cold skin. I shiver, but I stop her.

"Wait, wait…"

She raises her eyes. They're shining. She looks at me perplexed.

"What?" truth is, I don't know why I'm stopping her. Nothing has changed, so why do I feel this uneasiness? Is it just fear to be discovered? Guilt?

"You hurt me" I say the first stupid thing that comes into my mind. I raise my shoulder to empathize this idiotic thing I'm doing.

"Oh, sorry…" She replies and she's back kissing me, this time starting exactly from the shoulder. My skin burns when her mouth makes contact with the scratches and I cannot stop a moan from escaping.

Her reaction is immediate. She takes off the hand from my waist and puts it in my hair. Our bodies
kind of float away from each other, but our lips don't. And this time I find it really difficult to come up with an excuse to stop.

But eventually, I do. Because I finally realize the reason of my uneasiness. This thing is not something done with a logic or for a reason. This is just some drunken woman, on her fake birthday, probably thinking about getting older. There could be anyone in my place and this is annoying. Call it pride, or whatever.

I use my free hand to put it in the back of her head and I pull her hair as gently as I can. She finally lets go and she looks at me like we're on some kind of play and I'm just spicing it up. This is not helping.

"Alex, wait…" I repeat.

"What?" this time her tone is starting to sound a little annoyed.

I try as best as I can to find something to say, but what can I say? I'm sorry Alex, you're just kissing me because I breathe and I happen to be here or because you want to punish your girlfriend and I don't want to be used by you? Fuck no. I would never hear the end of it.

She suddenly leaves the grip she had on me and she grabs the rope of the buoy with both hands. I copy her movements because my arms are getting tired too.

We're now side by side, our face towards the buoy, our back to the darkness. I turn my head to look at her, her forehead is on the buoy and, for what I can see, her eyes are closed.

She looks… I don't know… She looks exactly like she looked in the past in the rare moments when her barriers were down and her soul was exposed. And this moves me. It still moves me like when I was 22. Maybe I'm deluding myself. Maybe she's just drunk and this is what I want to see. I've talked enough with my shrink to know how I work. And this…this is taken directly from my book. When I want something, I act like everything and everyone revolves around me, in this case Alex. And I wonder about the things she's thinking about right now. That probably haven't anything to do with me.

I know it, but still my hand moves on its own and goes straight to her wet hair. She doesn't move. I take it as an incentive and I slowly move my fingertips to caress her scalp. She leans on the touch and her head moves backwards. Her features are visible in the dim moonlight. Her eyes are closed indeed.

She makes me think of a feral cat. Wary, suspicious, gentle only when she wants to. The way she stretches, smoothly.

I take a gamble.

I move my hand forward, without ever losing contact with her skin. With only my fingertips, I trace the contour of her nose, her brows, my fingers move softly on her closed eyelids. She lets me do it.

I don't know why but a poem comes into my mind. A poem that I read a million years ago about tutored fingertips moving on a lover's face. A lover who just doesn't know.

I don't remember the exact words and I don't remember the author, but I do remember some lines. I thought it was poetic back then, now, as I'm living it, it is just bittersweet. And sad.

I trace the scar on her cheek. So thin and pink. She's probably so drunk that she cannot feel it. Or maybe she's asleep.
As I reach her lips, I repeat in my head part of the poem…"And all the straining things within my heart, you'll never know".

She'll never know.

She'll never know how much I ache.

How much I cared.

How much I want her.

Even now.

My body is moving without my knowledge, following the waves of a lake that doesn't have any waves. My lips find hers. They're wet and cold, like mine and they fit perfectly together, as always.

She sighs on my lips, she wasn't expecting it.

She moves her right arm, to my side, in this way I'm trapped between her arms, my back on the rough surface of the buoy, my arms around her neck. She's my buoy now.

Our kisses are slow, even when we deepen them.

To me, it feels like a Sunday morning spent in bed. There's no effort, no problems. And this, ironically, has always been the problem. Everything was easy with her, until it was not. Because, even if it doesn't feel like it when we're kissing, life is another thing. Life is made of problems. And, when I was with her, half of the problems came directly from her.

We take a pause to breathe. Our lips separate, but our foreheads remain connected or, to be more precise, Alex has still her eyes closed and I think she's using my forehead just to keep her head from falling in the water. Is she sleeping? My ego is a little bruised.

Then she starts to laugh. A small, amused laugh. The last thing I was expecting from her right now.

"What?" I ask even if it feels like I'm talking to myself.

"Never, never, never in a billion year I would have imagined to spend my unbirthday like this… never"

She answers, always laughing. Her words are a little slurred, but nothing exaggerated.

"Unbirthday?" I joke.

"You know I love Alice!" she replies with emphasis.

"I know …and yes, swimming in a lake at midnight is definitely strange" I add with a smile that she cannot see but can hear.

"Sooo strange" she repeats while our lips meet again. She's still laughing and my mouth is blocked in a warm smile. I can get over the fact that I'm getting drunk only by breathing so close to her.

I don't want to face the world. I don't want to move. Life is so hard and this is not.

Even if this is not real. This is pure ephemeral beauty.

She breaks the contact once again and this time she opens her eyes, but she doesn't look at me, she
looks at something behind my shoulder.

"How did they get here?" she calmly says.

What?

Who? Where are they? What did they see? My heart jumps on my chest. I feel the weight of the world on my lungs. I turn around quickly, I don't see anyone. Is Martha here?

I feel a firm hand on my chest, in the exact spot where all the weight and the panic is.

"Piper, relax...I've told you no one is here" Alex says with a smile.

I turn around to look at her. I'm still pretty shaken even if her hand is incredibly calming. I don't get it.

"I was talking about the fireflies...Geez you look like you've seen a ghost" she adds and this time it is my turn to bury the face on her neck and use Alex's body to support my head. I exhale and I deflate like a balloon. She puts her hand on my head in a way that mirrors the thing I did to her a few minutes ago.

Still my heart is racing, but maybe for another reason.

"Oh god" it's the only thing that comes out of my mouth.

She laughs in response. I'm glad someone finds it funny.

"They usually stay close to the shore. I don't know why some of them are here..." I say. I'm pretty proud of knowing everything there is to know about nature here in these mountains and yes, I want to show off.

I raise my head to see if there are really fireflies flying in the middle of the lake or if it is just Alex's imagination.

As it turns out, she's right. Three or four pulsing lights are flying around us. I put my face again on her neck and I tighten my grip around her body. I don't know why but I feel that this is the position in which I'm more comfortable right now. I'm still shaken.

"Maybe I'm attracting them" Alex says in a way that sounds almost serious.

I cannot help but laugh.

"Yeah, I'm sure that's exactly why they're here"

"What if they can't make it back? Go away, you bugs..." she says splashing some water in their direction.

"No! Stop!" I shout, suddenly raising my head and stopping her arm from throwing more water "if you get their wings wet, they won't fly anymore!"

"Oh no!" she stops immediately. I see her looking around alarmed, waiting for some flashes of light. Finally, she sees something.

"Look, there...I've counted four...did you see them? Are they all alive?" Her concern is really...cute.
"I'm sure they are Alex"

"Look! Another one!"

I can't help but laugh again at her, once my face has found its place again between her neck and her shoulder.

"There's nothing to laugh about, Pipes…What if I killed them by getting them wet?"

It takes a few seconds for the double meaning to get into our brains, but once it does, we both burst into stupid laughs together. I tighten my grip on her and I can feel her chest vibrating.

"This is a first even for me…usually they are happy when I get them wet" she says with a voice as low as the sound of earthquakes.

I jokingly slap her shoulder and, as a reaction, I get her lips and her teeth on my neck. If she leaves marks on me I'm going to kill her. But instead of telling her that, I just move my head to give her better access. What a loser I am.

"You were happy, weren't you?" she whispers in a place close to my ear.

I die on the spot.

I don't even have the force to think anymore.

I turn my head to kiss her but she keeps avoiding my lips.

"Did you like them? The things I did to you?"

She knows. She knows what she did to me. I don't want to answer. I don't want to give her the power. I don't want to, but she's still avoiding my kisses. And I need to feel her. So I dig my nails on her back. She hisses. And then she keeps trailing her lips and her tongue everywhere but not where I want her to. Neck. Shoulder. Clavicle. What a fucking tease.

"Alex…" I whisper, wishing she would take my desperate tone as an answer.

But it doesn't seem to affect her. I try with a counterattack. I start to suck and bite her neck, but she keeps moving. And there's something irresistible about having her warm breath, her lips, her tongue and her teeth on me, fuck the power. She not toying with me, she just wants it just as much as I want it, I know.

She cannot use her hands because they are both on the buoy, the only thing that's keeping us afloat.

"Do you remember how much I used to make you wet, Piper?"

Oh god.

Her lips on my neck are vibrating. My whole body is vibrating. I desperately need to channel all this energy I have in me. But she doesn't let me. Like some kind of revenge for having stopped the kisses before. She wants to prove a point.

I'm literally wrapped up on her. My arms are around her neck and my legs are around her waist. I try to let my body answer the questions she already knows the answer to, creating friction between our bodies. She starts to move with my rhythm, but it's not enough for me, I want more. I want power. I want her to beg me. I want to see her eyes.
So, once again, I put my hand in her hair and I pull, this time harder. She tries to resist. But I pull until she tilts her head back and her face is just inches from mine. I'm forcing her to look at me, but I don't care. Her eyes are half-closed, dark as the water we're in. Challenging me. Locks of wet hair frame her face. One of them covers part of her right eye and a corner of her mouth. It bothers me.

There's only one hand I can use. So I slowly remove it from her hair. I smile when I notice that, this time, she hasn't moved yet. I put the strand behind her ear and I leave my hand on her cheek.

She tilts her head only to be able to take my thumb between her lips and suck it. This...dance between us, this infinite challenge, is driving me insane. This kind of lust that fills every cell of my body and obliterates every neuron of my brain is all a matter of control. Taking it, giving it for a second, only to take it back. She's set the rules until this moment, but now it is my turn.

I reluctantly move away my hand and I use it to caress her neck, her shoulder, slowly. I want to drive her insane. I want her to beg me to touch her where it really matters. My eyes are following my hand, Alex doesn't move. She knows the effect that her words have always had on me, but I know the effect of my touch on her. And the fact that she cannot move her hands is...intriguing. I lower my hand under the surface of the water. I touch her nipple over the fabric of her bra as softly as I can.

If her shocked eyes aren't enough, the moan that escapes her lips leaves no doubt. She wasn't expecting this.

Very good.

I try to keep a nice rhythm with my fingers. A circular motion.

With one hand moving inside her panties, I only have one free arm wrapped tightly behind her neck. In this way I can keep looking at her face and I won't sink. Even if, in a way, I feel like I've already sunk and I'm in the warm, dark bowels of the earth, surrounded by souls of sinners like me.

And she's there too. An ancient creature with a deathly, magnetic power.

Her warm breath coming out of her slightly open mouth in increasingly faster pants. Hey eyes, fixed on mine but lost. Her only focus is in trying not to give in. To me.

I slide two fingers inside.

She closes her eyes and moans.

Yes, my dear, I still do remember everything.
Our faces can't get any closer without touching. I'm trapped between her arms, I can feel her contracted muscles as she pushes me against the buoy with her body, but she's the one who's trapped. If she moves just one of her hands, we'll both go underwater and I'll stop doing what I'm doing. I can feel her trying not to give in. Trying to find ways to gain back her power. But she still doesn't dare to move her hands.

My wrist hurts like hell, the position I'm in is not comfortable at all. The friction between the back of my hand and the elastic band of her panties is scratching my skin. But the feeling of looking in her eyes and watch her world falls apart a little bit more every time I pump into her, makes it up for everything. So I don't stop.

She's the one who closes the gap between us. Not me. Having her tongue inside my mouth is so overwhelming that I almost stop what I'm doing.

She's just as desperate as me and this fuels my dedication to her utter destruction.

But her destruction is also mine. How will I ever get out of this alive? How will I ever forget how powerful I feel right now? How sexy, how turned on… how…

Our kisses are becoming frantic, I can't last any longer, not in this position. I break the kiss without actually breaking the contact.

In a way, it is better this way so I can look at her.

I breathe her in. I breathe everything in. Our lips touch every time I push my fingers inside. There are sounds coming out of her mouth. Not words, but grunts, hums, moans. I take everything in. I want more.

A sudden cramp on my wrist makes me stop, my fingers involuntarily curls while they are still inside of her.

She moans, louder.

I immediately take out my fingers, she gasps for the loss of contact. I look at her, concerned. But what I see on her eyes brings me straight back to the past. There's pure lust, wanting, despair, anger, there and all for me. Just me.

I didn't hurt her. She likes it a bit rough and oh, god, I've forgotten how much I like it a bit rough too.

I try to shake my hand underwater, but it hurts like hell. So I raise it up and I put it around her neck, just to rest a little bit.

I make use of the time by kissing her swollen open lips. She doesn't respond. I can feel her short breaths on me.

I try again. Still nothing. She closes her mouth and I can feel her grinding her teeth.

I look at her, she's staring at me with angry eyes.

I'm about to ask her what's the matter but she anticipates me.

"Please…"

It's amazing how a single word can have this effect on me. Like there's lava in my veins instead of blood.
She thinks I've stopped. As some sort of punishment or power play, I don't know.

What she doesn't know is that it is just impossible. I'm not going to stop simply because I can't. I can't stop.

"Please Piper..." she repeats again, this time softer. And she uses my name as if admitting a defeat.

Fuck.

I didn't ask for it, but I'm so glad she did.

My wrist is still a little bit numb, but I can't wait anymore, so I leave my right arm around her and I immerse my left hand. The first thing I do is lower her panties. I don't want anything in the way. The second thing I do is find her clit and start once again to move my fingers over it and around it, even if I'm not left handed and it feels a little strange.

My eyes never leave her face.

She's not holding back anymore. I know it because her moans get louder and she throws back her head like she used to do.

The buoy is scratching my back, she's pushing me and pushing me against it, crushing me.

I know she's close. I can feel her orgasm slowly building. Her moans, the tension on her muscles, she's close to the edge.

I don't want to end it like this. My left hand feels too fucking strange and I know what I can do with my right one. So, fuck the pain, I'll make the switch.

Once again both my arms are around her neck, but this time she knows I won't stop. Because she kisses me until I risk of passing out for the lack of oxygen.

When we look at each other, everything is so clear. So fucking clear. For once I perfectly know what's going on in that brain of hers.

I smile.

She smiles.

"Fuck me"

That's all I need to hear.

My right hand finds her core and once again starts to move.

My eyes never leave her face. And her eyes never leave mine this time.

It's all so intimate.

Every once in a while I use my fingers to penetrate her. Most of the time I just say outside on her clit.

Every time she releases a sound of pleasure, it's me she's looking at. It's me. Only me.

And every time she does, I increase the rhythm. Faster. Harder.

"Yes"
"Faster. Harder."

"Yes"

Until she can't take it no more and she comes, tilting her head backwards and closing her eyes.

The way she moans is so sexy that I cannot resist the urge to put two fingers again inside of her and keep them there, still. Just to feel her muscles contract, just so, when she'll open her eyes again, she can't deny I was the one who made her come.

Her erratic breath slows down a little bit and become more deep and slow.

When she opens her eyes there's no shame in them. No arrogance or rejection, as I was afraid to find.

She just look…satisfied. And I can't hide a smile that I know is spreading on my face.

She smiles back and she lowers her head to kiss me again.

It's just our lips moving together. Almost a chaste kiss.

My body shift a little bit and the thumb of the hand I still have on her pussy, inadvertently brushes against her clit.

Her pelvis snaps backwards and it causes my fingers to suddenly pull out.

"Sensitive?" I ask with a smug grin while both of my arms are once again crossed behind her neck.

She smiles back and just nods her head.

I don't know how much time we've spent like this, lazily kissing in the middle of nowhere.

She's the one who breaks the silence.

"Can we shift places?" She asks between kisses that are becoming deeper.

"Of course" I say. After a couple of clumsy attempts, we manage to exchange the positions. Now I'm the one with both my hands on the rope of the buoy and she's the one, between my arms, hugging me for support.

It's more tiresome that I've imagined. It must have been strenuous for her.

The energy between us has shifted. There's awkwardness, or at least I feel awkward. Maybe it's because she has sobered up a little or because…because…I don't know…

"You're shivering" she says, tightening her grip on me.

With her warm body on me I realize that yes, I'm cold and yes, I'm actually shivering even though I didn't even know it.

"Mmm" I reply putting my face on her neck to get more heat.

"Let me help you with that…" she whispers on my ear while one of her hands starts travelling on my back, going lower and lower, pushing out body together, sending a different kind of shivers along my spine.

Oh.
This is not… I mean, she doesn't have to…just because I… Oh god, it feels so good.

"Alex…you don't have to…" I say.

She stops her movements and raises her head so I can see her face.

"But I…" she starts, only to be interrupted by someone shouting at us.

"Martha! Piper! Still alive?" Al's voice comes from somewhere close to the shore, but not close enough to us to cause any concern.

We exchange a look that means everything. It's been a long time since we've had this kind of connection where no words were needed between us.

"Yeah!" Alex shouts at the dark, my ears hurt.

"We're going back. Are you coming?" I can't hear other voices, only Al's.

Another look.

"Yes! We're coming" Another shout.

When there's finally silence again I feel Alex's stare on me, but I avoid it. I already know where this is all going, and I'm feeling … empty. But it is difficult to avoid her when her arms are around me and different parts of her skin are touching mine.

"Piper…" she starts to speak, but I don't want to hear it.

"Listen Alex, I already know…"

"Piper."

"…what you want to tell me and, look, I'm aware that…"

"Piper…" she calls my name once again, louder, and this time I raise my eyes to look at her.

"What?" If she wants so badly to tell it to my face, she can do it.

"I've lost my panties"

It takes me a few seconds to really understand what she's just told me.

Flashes of memories, like photographs, flow into my mind. Me, fighting with her panties to gain better access. Me, lowering her panties. She, moving her legs like a kicking horse. Us, in the middle of a lake, in the middle of the night, with several feet of black water underneath us.

I know that this is the end. Because I cannot stop what's growing inside of me. I seal my lips, I use my teeth to keep them closed. But when I look at Alex and I see that she's sporting a big smile and her eyes are shining so brightly that they are almost blinding, I lose it.

We both starts laughing at the same moment. I'm laughing so much that in more than one occasion, I risk of leaving my grip on the buoy. Our body, shaken by the laughs are rubbing against each other randomly, my thigh moves on accident between her legs and yes, she's not wearing any panties indeed.

This causes another round of fun and complicity between us.
When we stop, the energy between us has changed once again into something more familiar, less threatening.

But the question remains. What now?

"What are you going to do?" I ask with a smile.

"I don't know… I'll probably wait until you're all out of the water and on your way to the camp. It won't be hard to coming up with an excuse to stay in the water a little bit more…"

The reference to her fight with Sandy is clear.

I just nod. But my smile slowly fades because there's another fight that I have to go back to. A fight that I don't want to think about right now, while I'm in somebody's else's arms.

Alex's arms.

I look at her, hoping to find in her eyes some kind of comfort.

What I see is something intense, focused, familiar.

"Where are you?" Al's shout interrupts our silent conversation.

This time I shout "Coming" back at him. Without ever leaving her eyes.

There are so many things that I would like to say to her.

But we've got no time anymore.

I think she senses my discomfort because she tries to make it all better by kissing me again. Slowly but hard. The way I liked it. I lose myself in the kiss and, for a few blissful moments, I'm good. I'm perfectly centered.

But when, with a soft bite at my lower lip she breaks it, it all comes crashing back again. The sense of doom.

With a last kiss, Alex disentangles herself from me and gets underwater. She emerges a few feet from me and she starts swimming towards the shore, but not before having said to me the only four words capable of lifting up a little bit this weight that I feel inside of me.

"We've got time".
Chapter 28

What happened next, is still all a big blur.

I know that I swam alone, I remember reaching the others and telling them that Alex wanted to go for another swim. I remember how nervous I was, I remember how I kept repeating Alex's new name in my head. Martha, Martha, Martha, Martha... as if I didn't say that name enough in the last few years. I remember how I almost slipped up once. I remember shivering. I remember Sandy's worried face.

I don't remember putting clothes on, I don't remember if Martha told me something, I don't remember if Sandy said something.

I remember the cold feeling of wet hair against my neck in the night air, and the sense of doom, deep in the bone marrow as I walked towards the cabin in silence. Where was my fiancé? Was she walking behind me? I don't know. I just remember the shivering.

Everything has brought me here, in the shower, under a waterfall of burning water. Hoping for what? I have no idea. If I let the boiling water touch my skin, will it erase the last hours? Will it erase my sins? Do I want that?

Do I really want to forget everything?

"Fuck!" I shout, hitting the wall with my fist. What a cliché. What a fucking cliché.

I should have stopped.

I think back at the kiss she gave me on the buoy. At my attempts to stop it. Why did I do that? Why do I want it so badly to be about the guilt when all I remember is the sensation of annoyance for not having Alex kissing me in all her full mental lucidity?

It wasn't because it was wrong, it was just because she wasn't lucid enough.

I'm a really bad person.

Martha doesn't deserve me, no one does.

I feel so stupid, thinking back at this morning, at how I was so sure that I could take a day off from my relationship, how it would be just a parenthesis. Bullshit. Now I clearly see it...

I have cheated on her.

I've cheated on my fiancé for the second time in my life.

I've had two people in my life who loved me enough to want to spend the rest of their lives with me and what did I do to honor this? I've cheated on them. On both of them. I loved them and I've cheated on them. And always with Alex.

I've fucked Alex. Not the other way around. I did it. I've fucked her and I wanted her to be aware that it was me that was fucking her.

Alex... the drug that just won't leave my system.

Alex... who every fucking time manages to fuck my life even thought I was the one with the fingers
inside her.

"Fuck!"

I hit the wall with the other fist. It hurts like hell and it's not helping at all, I'm just ridiculous.

It's not her fault. It's my fault. She doesn't have anything to do with it. She never forced me to ruin my life, I just did it all by myself.

She could just….stop being so fucking …Alex!

Both my hands are on my hair now, the water is getting colder but I don't have the strength to move, let alone face the reality of having my fiancé on the other side of the wall probably worried about the sounds of my fists. Pounding. Against. The. Wall.

I'm such a loser.

I need to relocate to another planet and stay there for at least a whole fucking month without any fucking human being. Fuck I need to stay there forever and not bother anyone with my innate gift of ruining good things.

And Alex…Alex…she's… and I can't help but… no, no, no, no, NO!

This has got to stop. This was a mistake. Martha has to know who I am. She has to.

Without thinking too much I turn off the water, I don't even use the towel before putting on a pair of panties and an old t-shirt. I'll sleep with my hair wet and fuck the consequences. Who am I kidding? I'm not sleeping after what I'm about to do. Fuck, I'm gonna die of sleep deprivation if Martha won't kill me first.

With the recklessness of someone who's got nothing to lose, I open the door only to find an empty room in front of me. No traces of Martha.

I'm confused. She was supposed to be here and we were supposed to have "the talk". She was supposed to end me and this nonsense I'm stuck into. I am finally ready.

I open the door of the cabin and I walk on the porch. Still no signs of her.

I hear some noises on my left. Alex's cabin is in that direction. And Sandy's.

A wave of annoyance bursts in me. I have no right to have it, but there it is.

Giving absolutely zero fucks, I start to walk barefoot towards the muffled voices. Nothing is going to stop me. Not the pointy rocks and not even the wet thing I've stepped onto a few seconds ago.

I don't know what I'm going to find. Is Alex spilling the dirt to Martha and finally having her revenge on me? Are Alex and Sandy fighting? Is Alex actually there?

In a sick way I'm hoping that Alex can take my place in telling Martha everything. Yes, this is probably the most selfish thought I've ever had in my entire life, but I don't deserve to speak with her ever again. What if she forgives me? Can I live with the guilt?

When I'm finally able to see the cabin, I stop in my tracks. My heart jumps in my throat. There's Martha, sitting on a rocking chair on the porch, her shoulders are shaking, she's probably crying. I can't see her face because fucking Sandy is there, hugging her, touching her, comforting her. Probably talking shit about me. Fucking Sandy.
My nails are digging into my palms. My knuckles are still hurting like hell, but it's a welcome sensation. What the fuck is she doing? Do they know everything?

Sandy chooses that moment to lift up her eyes and meet mine.

Her face is emotionless for a few seconds.

But after that...she smiles.

It's a warm smile. A fucking smile that could melt ice.

I wish I could erase it from her face.

I don't understand.

She whispers something on Martha's ear, pointing at my direction with a nod of her head while she caresses her back with her hand. How dare she?

I'm focusing so much energy on Sandy and the things that I want to do to her that I almost miss the moment in which Martha lifts her head to look at me.

It's one of those moments that I will remember for as long as I'm alive. It's sadness, hope and happiness all in the same face, in their purest form. Because this is Martha. Martha is purity. And I'm mud.

I can see her tears even from here. She's still so beautiful as she raises from the chair and she runs in my direction. I think it's the first time that I see her running in my life.

I'm overwhelmed by everything. I'm overwhelmed by the scene I've just seen, by her contagious smile, by the way in which she's hugging me right now, covering my face in kisses and words of pure love.

_I love you, I love you, I love you. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Forgive me._

She's asking for forgiveness. I can't believe it. She has nothing to ask forgiveness for.

What have I done?

Of course I hug her back, of course I caress her head, of course I get lost in her embrace. I can taste her tears on my lips, and, for a moment, I think that the tears should be mine.

"Shhhh" I say as tenderly as I can. "Martha...relax..."

Her grip on me gets even stronger, if it's possible.

"I'm really sorry...I don't know what has gotten into me... I know that you've had some horrible days... I should have..."

"Shhhh...it's ok...everything is ok" I tell her more for my sake that for hers. I need her not to tell me this. I need her not to ask for my forgiveness. I need her not to tell me how much she loves me.

"I don't want to lose you. I cannot lose you..." she's still crying with her face buried on my neck.

"You haven't lost me" I say before I can stop myself.

In a way, that's the truth. She hasn't lost me. I did get lost, all on my own.
I remember what I've came here for, what I'm about to do. It's like someone has just punched me in the stomach. So this is what real guilt feels like.

How can I do it? How can I destroy her?

No.

No. I cannot do that now. I cannot hurt her now. She's so frail, here in my arms. She's shaking and she's one of the best person that I know. I cannot do it now. I will. She deserves to know. But not now. Tomorrow.

"Come on babe, let's go to bed. We're both tired, we both said things we didn't want to...tomorrow we'll talk about it..." I take her hand and I almost drag her towards our cabin, without looking back for a second. I don't know what's going on behind me and I'm in no condition to face it now.

She follows me, like always.

The moment we are inside and the door is closed, she turns around, she takes my face in both her hands and she kisses me. Her kisses are sweet, desperate and deep. Her intentions are clear.

I kiss her back with passion and with love, because I do love her very much, but there's no way in hell that I'm going to be able to make love to her tonight. How can I touch her with these hands? How can I look her in the eyes after everything I have done in the lake? How can I hear my name coming out of her mouth without thinking about Alex begging me to fuck her?

It is so wrong in so many levels. I need to go away.

Her hands are grabbing the hem of my shirt when I decide to stop her. I remove them as gently as I can and I drag her once again. But towards the bed this time. I make her sit and I proceed to remove both of her shoes. I'm on my knees in front of her and I find this position really appropriate. On my knees in front of her, telling her I am sorry for being the scum of the earth.

"I hate it when we fight like this..." she whispers above me. She's calmer now, but traces of the tears are still evident on her face.

My fingers are shaking a little bit while I untie the laces of her left shoe. I just smile, without saying any word. How could I?

Once I'm done, I join her on the bed and I lie in my spot. She automatically wraps her arms around me and starts kissing me again.

"Hey babe....not now...." I say trying to sound as sweet as possible. I kiss her.

She seems a little puzzled, but nothing else. I usually never say no to make up sex.

"...tired?" she asks with her big eyes a few inches from mine. Why is it that she cannot see the lies and the desperation in me? Why is she looking at me like I'm the Holy Virgin Mary? I don't deserve it. I don't deserve her caresses. I don't deserve her.

"Yeah..." I lie. Well, I'm really fucking tired, but that's not the reason why I want to stop.

She kisses me again.

"Talk tomorrow?" there's so much happiness in her eyes that I just can't... I feel like I need to throw up...
"Of course" I reply looking straight at her. Facing the bad karma. If this is only the beginning, I think I'll be dead by tomorrow evening.

Talking about it is the last thing I want to do, but I know that I have to. Tomorrow I'm going to break her heart.

I am a horrible person. She turns off the light and she resumes her position, with her right arm across my chest. She's hugging the enemy.

"I love you Piper…" She's loving the enemy.

"I love you too"

The darkness finally surrounds me, giving me this false idea of peace. The idea that tomorrow the sun will erase everything that's wrong in the world. So, basically, me.

She's fast asleep. Her breaths are deep and slow. The sleep of the just.

And since I'm not part of that club, I don't even close my eyes, it would be useless. Not only because I won't sleep, but because I don't want to.

Of all the confusing thoughts in my brain, there's only one permanent thought. One thing that my brain keeps repeating me unceasingly since I've left the buoy. It's like a broken record. Something that will drive me crazy if I don't listen to it. And act on it.

I slowly remove Martha's arm from me.

As softly as I can, I put on a pair of shorts that I find on the floor and Martha's flip flops.

The low light from outside allows me to turn around and look at Martha once I open the door… she's still so peaceful. And I'm about to destroy everything.

The night breeze welcomes me as I close the door, leaving everything behind me.

I take a deep breath and I finally allow myself to dive into the thought that's driving me insane even though I think that I'm probably already crazy.

With a determination that I didn't know I had in me, I take the first step towards my damnation.

I have to find Alex.
Chapter 29

Where the fuck is she? I've covered every inch of the camp. I've walked as far as the lake, without a torch or the light of the cellphone because I'm an impulsive fucking genius.

I even went to my secret place and stayed put, just because I wished to hear a movement of some sort. But nothing. Not even an owl to scare the shit out of me.

Desperate much?

I know what I must look like from the outside. Like one of those meth addicts in withdrawal, looking for something to get stoned… anything… even a bottle of perfume.

And I've seen some crazy shit in my life.

Where was their self-respect? Now I know the answer. It is in the same place as mine right now. A place very very far away. In another galaxy.

That means only one thing. She's in her cabin.

I don't know if I'm being too arrogant and selfish, but I don't think she should be in there. Come on…after all that happened, how can she even stay in the same room as Sandy? She should be outside, thinking. Deciding what to do. Like me. What the hell, with me.

I know she doesn't know what I'm going to do tomorrow, but God, I need her.

I need her because I want to understand. I need to know.

I need to know where we stand.

I need to know what was…that thing in the lake… but not only that… I want to know about this afternoon too…

I need to know what she thinks about it.

And what does "we have time" really mean?

Is she thinking about the future? With me? Or at the possibility of another fuck before we go our separate ways?

God, I'm so selfish.

I want her for answers that I don't have. How can I expect her to tell me what it meant for her when I'm the first one to be confused?

That's really selfish. And evil. Thinking about me, only me, only fucking me.

I don't think my shrink would be proud of me right now. After all these years of therapy, it just took me a week to get back at being a disrespectful selfish cheater.

A cheater who doesn't even know what she wants!

Because that's the problem…
What do I want? What do I really want?

Maybe the real question is … who do I want?

I hit my fist on the wooden pic-nic table outside the kitchen.

God. This is so frustrating. This could change my life. Forever. And I need to know.

This survival bullshit is switched on inside me and I want to know what will happen if tomorrow Martha will leave me.

Do I want her to leave me? No.

Do I love her? Yes.

So what's the problem?

Alex.

Alex is the problem.

As always.

What if she tells me that she wants to fuck me? Do I want her to? Yes.

Is it only that? A walk down memory lane?

Do I want more from her? No. Yes. I don't know. I…it would be wrong. It would be a disaster. We tried. We failed. Twice. But still…

She doesn't go away.

Do I love her? I don't know. In a way she'll always mean something to me.

I want her to want me.

I'm still addicted to her. I want her to be addicted to me too. I don't want to be alone in this.

So, I'm fucking selfish.

I'm pushing for something that I don't know if I want. But I know that it would be wrong and a mistake. And also so…full of things…emotions…

And I'm not thinking enough about the other people involved.

There's a girl. A girl who makes my life better and makes me a better person. A girl I deeply love and I can see me getting older with. And she loves me so much… with such devotion… and I am about to crush her. Kill her.

I find myself sitting on this bench with my hands on my face, I'm crying and I didn't even notice it.

And Alex.

She didn't want any of this, she clearly said that. She wanted to leave, get the fuck away from me. But I insisted. I kept going, like a tank, without thinking about what I destroyed in my path. So I pushed, I pushed and I pushed. Because when I set my mind into something, I go all the way, for my own sake.
She's an adult. She can think for herself, but oh god, did I push.

And for what? Maybe she's confused, angry of maybe something else…maybe she's happy... hopeful… and this scares me even more, because I'll probably destroy her too. Destroying myself at the same time. Maybe she's totally indifferent. Maybe this was just a nice fuck between two people who are just too good at fucking each other, in every sense of the word. If she's happy with Sandy then I don't want to ruin her chance at happiness.

How could I know what it was if Alex is not here with me?

I need her.

I've lived five years without her, but right now I cannot stand the idea of not having her here with me. To understand. Because if she's here I'll know, right? If she tells me that it was just a fuck I'll know what to do, right?

She said we have time, but it's not true. She may have time, but I don't.

And there's another thing in which she's wrong.

Tonight, at the buoy, she said that she was calm and not preoccupied anymore about me telling everything to Martha because she knew that, if I did, it would be over and I wouldn't want to end it.

I thought she was right, but I'm not so sure right now.

I don't want to end it, but, for the first time, I'm starting to think that this may not be the right thing either. I have cheated. On her. I had all the time in the world to stop, and I didn't.

Who does that to the love of her life?

I never thought that I could be here, on a bench, at 3 AM, crying my heart out and thinking about breaking my engagement.

But that's exactly where I am.

And there's nothing more to do, I just have to wait… for a sign. Or, more probably, for Martha to wake up.

In the meantime, I'll keep crying.

I don't know how much time has passed. I have closed my eyes for a second with my head on the pic-nic table and the exhaustion had probably knocked me out.

Someone is waking me up gently rubbing a hand on my back.

I'm tired, confused and torn between the wish to run, fight or disappear.

But I've put myself in this situation and I'm the one who has to face the mess I've caused.

I open my eyes and I try to adjust them to the morning light that is still not that strong. It's still really early.

I turn my head just to see how my defeat will look like.

But it's not what I was expecting. Who I was expecting.
I see Rosa's face, smiling at me.

I feel guilty just because of the relief that I feel. My demise is just postponed.

"Hey, sleeping beauty, what are you doing here?" she asks me with her hand is still on my back. I can feel the soothing heat of her palm through my shirt and it just feels so good. I'm cold and I haven't even realize it.

I try to come up with an excuse, with something harmless and plausible, but when I look her in the eyes, really look at her, I can't control myself. I try, and I try and I try, I close my lips as strongly as I can. I open my eyes as much as possible, but, no, it's impossible. This act of kindness and affection is just too much. And I love Rosa. She's always supporting me, even during the rest of the year.

It's not like we're friends, but she comes to the special events at PoPi, she calls me every few months. I do call her too. Like when my mom died. It was her voice that I wanted to hear, the second person I've called. After Martha of course. She doesn't judge, she also went to a couple of Women's Prison Association meetings with me. She's just there, funny and smart. And coming from a dysfunctional family, I'm so glad to have her in my life.

And that's why I cannot resist and I burst into tears once again. I cover my face with both my hands.

"Hey, hey, honey…what's happening?"

She's sitting next to me now, her hand is caressing my back, and it is comforting indeed. I can't help but think about a few hours ago, when Sandy was doing the same thing to Martha. I just hope that it was as calming as this.

I shake my head… I don't want her to know what's happening. I'm too ashamed.

"Ok…you don't need to tell me anything…" she calmly says. And I really appreciate it.

"Can I stay here?" she asks after a few moments. Rosa. Dear, precious, fantastic Rosa.

I am so grateful, really, so grateful for this moment of peace that I remove my hands to look her in the eyes and tell her "Yes, please...". I also manage to smile, and it's a genuine smile. I raise my leg to change the position on the bench so I can face her and, with a desperate last look at her face, I open my arms to hug her and being hug by her.

It feels so fucking good.

"Everything is going to be all right..." she keeps repeating. And it is good to hear it, even though I don't believe it.

I alternate moments of relative peace with moments of desperation. But, after a while, I decide that's it is enough. I don't want to burden Rosa with my problems.

So I disentangle myself and I try to dry the tears with the palms of my hands.

Rosa just puts a hand on my cheek.

"Honey…whatever it is you're gonna get even through this..."

Those are not the right words, I just lower my head and look at the ground. I don't want to cry again.

"Not this time" I whisper in a voice that I don't recognize.
"I screwed up" I add and a few more tears run down my face.

There are a few minutes of silence, where I just stay there, with my head low and Rosa just sitting next to me. And then she speaks.

"Do you know that me and Bob, we are not married?"

What? My attention is finally addressed to something else. I look at her with a puzzled face.

"When we met, I was married to Tom, the owner of a bakery and Bob was just the new baker we hired. My father worked there too"

God, I'm speechless. Rosa was married to another man? Why is she telling me this?

"My husband, a great man, was working his ass off to provide all the possible luxuries for me and for Amanda. I was pregnant with her at the time and, since it was a high-risk pregnancy, I had to stay at home, doing nothing. And you know me, you can imagine how much I was suffering… So I went to the library, took an italian cooking book, and I tried every possible recipe I could find inside there. I spent my days like that, with Tom working in the bakery and sending Bob, the new arrival, to bring me the groceries and all the different kind of ingredients I asked for.

I didn't like him at the beginning. He was silent and grumpy, always looking at the dishes I made as they were revolting. So, this one time, I still remember it like it was yesterday, I've cooked all day my very first melanzane alla parmigiana, I was very proud of myself. He came into the kitchen with some fresh basil and I asked him to taste my dish. At first, he politely declined, but, after a while, he took a bite. I was the wife of the boss, after all.

He didn't say anything, but it was clear from his face that he didn't approve of my cooking. I reacted badly, insulting him and his rudeness… I was a pregnant, hormonal, frustrated woman, but I still regret that outburst. It was not like I wanted him to like my melanzane, but I wanted him to at least recognize my hard work and give me a smile just because I tried.

His reaction was even worse. He just got all flustered and red but he still didn't say a word. He kept looking at the floor without speaking and, after a while, he left, slamming the door."

If Rosa wants to distract me, she is succeeding. Why is she telling me this? I'm still a little bit shocked by the fact that Amanda is not Bob's daughter and Bob is not Rosa's husband. My face must convey all of my emotions because she smiles at me before resuming her story.

"When Tom came home that night, he told me that Bob had resigned. I was even angrier because Tom was on his own to do the work of two people. I asked if he knew the reasons, but Tom said that Bob didn't say a word. I felt a little bit guilty, but I didn't say anything.

Two days after that, it was in the afternoon, someone rang the bell. It was Bob, with a tinfoil package and a letter. He just smiled, for the first time since I'd known him, he left me everything, said goodbye and left.

I remember sitting in that rocking chair for at least five hours. Reading the letter again and again. It was one of the most wonderful things I've ever read. It moved me to tears each time. In that letter he wrote about his life, how he was forced to move from Sicily to New York when he was just a boy, leaving his family behind because, after the war, they just didn't have enough money to feed everyone. He arrived here when he was just a 13 years old boy, and he has worked nonstop since, in order to send some money home.

He used such beautiful words that, for a moment, I even doubted that the letter was actually his"
Rosa stops her tale just to laugh. I laugh with her.

"Rosa…I can't believe it…it's really…how did you two..? Go on please…” I say.

"Well, in the letter he also explained why his behavior was so strange. His family owned a restaurant in Palermo, so, when he watched me destroy all his childhood recipes, he was nostalgic and a little bit pissed off at this wealthy American woman who acted like she was born in Italy… He apologized, a lot, for this and wrote that he resigned not because he was angry at me, but because he was ashamed for his behavior… it was just so sweet. Inside the envelope there was also his salary for the month he worked for us, just in case we couldn't find a substitute for him in time. And, as you can guess, in the package there was the most amazing melanzane alla parmigiana I've ever tasted in my whole life. I spent the afternoon crying, eating the melanzane and reading the letter.

He completely changed my point of view that day. And it helped in so many ways…”

Rosa stops for a second, maybe to take a breath, but I have so many questions…

"But…what happened next? How did you get together?"

"Well, that's a really long story… but, after that, I convinced my husband to call him back. I didn't tell him anything about the letter, just that I'd been too rude to Bob. Tom called him back and, with me present, apologized and offered him the job back. Bob looked at me, I nodded, and that's how he agreed to come back. From that moment on, everything was different. He always came by. But this time he also helped me cook, taught me new recipes, he taught me to dance, to speak a little bit of italiano. At the beginning, he stayed just a few minutes in the house, but after a while those minutes became half an hours and I found myself waiting impatiently for those encounters. I told myself that it was just because I was bored, I felt alone and I liked him as a friend.

After a few years, they offered him a job at the Italian embassy. A job that would allowed him also to travel back to Italy and to see his family. He came to me that day asking for advice, he wanted to know what I thought about it. I said that it was a great opportunity. I was already at war with my heart, but I didn't want to see the reality, because it scared me too much. He took my hands in his and asked me for the last time if there was a reason for him to say no to that job. I told him no. And he left.

I regretted it immediately. But what could I do? It was a totally different time. And I didn't want to acknowledge what I felt.

After a few days I got a letter in the mail. In this letter he confessed his love for me and he just wished me a long and happy life. By the time I got to the end of the letter, I was already calling the Italian embassy to find a way to contact him, but they said that he turned down the job.

With no way of contacting him, I just thought it was destiny. Maybe I could have done more to find him, but I was afraid. Afraid of the future, afraid of giving Tom the greatest pain of his life, afraid for my father's job, for what our friends could think, afraid for my children but also afraid for my future...what if it didn't work out? What if it was just a stupid crush? What was I really feeling?"

Why is she telling me this? Why? Every word hurts. It's just so familiar in a way… does she know? Is this her way of telling me something? I can't help but feel the desperation of her decision…

"I loved Tom, I loved him very much. We had a wonderful life together and some fantastic kids. And I don't regret a single day I spent with him. A few months before his death, he told me that he wished he could have given me what Bob did. I was shocked to hear that. I hadn't thought about Bob in years and, mostly, I didn't think that Tom had an opinion on the matter. He told me that he
saw us dancing and laughing just this one time…he knew it even when I didn't…"

Tears are running softly down my face and also Rosa's eyes look wet.

"A few years after Tom's death, Amanda came home to tell me that she ran into Uncle Bob in the City and that she invited him to have dinner with us. You can imagine my surprise. I almost had a heart attack. I kept repeating in my head that I just had a little crush, that everything was different now. 30 years had passed, and I was happy. Many things changed.

But the moment I opened the door to find a shy grumpy man with a tinfoil package and a forced smile, I knew it. And I was as sure as I've ever been in my life. He was the one for me. My heart felt the same way even after 30 years, there was no point in denying anything anymore. And, frankly, I was old enough not to give a fuck about what would people think. And that's all. We didn't spend a day separate since."

I can't help but laugh at Rosa's words. I didn't even know she was capable of swearing. So I'm crying and I'm laughing, I'm shocked and I'm even more confused than before. What is she trying to tell me? Wat should I do?

She must have seen the desperation in my face because she caresses me once again and hopefully asks.

"Did it help?"

I look at her. Even though I'm desperate, I cannot help but recognize the irony of it all.

"Not at all, I'm even worse, but thanks for trying…” I reply with a big smile and still tears running down my face.

"I don't know what you've gotten yourself into, kid, I'm old and I've got eyes, so I've got a few ideas, but I don't need to know . What I wanted to tell you is just that…you need time. Everything right comes at the right time… What would happened if I hadn't wait 30 years? I cannot know, but when it was the right time, I knew it. In the meantime, I've lived the life I wished to have…so I cannot complain…”

Ok, this may be a little more helpful. But how can this apply to my situation? What should I wait for? I think she knows. She knows me and she's getting to know Alex. Yesterday, at the lake, she knew I was looking for her… but…what is she thinking? Should I tell her something? Should I tell her that it's been already fifteen years since I've met her?

"But…what if I cannot understand when is the right time? I'm so confused.." I ask, tears still in my eyes.

"Honey…breathe …" Her hand is again on my cheek and she's looking at me like…she believes in me… if she only knew…

"Do you know what I did when I found out that Bob didn't take the job at the embassy and I probably wouldn't see him and talk to him anymore?"

I shake my head to say no.

"I cooked" she replies with a big, proud smile.

I can't help but smile back.
"It was a way to remember him and the things he taught me, but also a way of getting over him, creating every day something different and, hopefully, delicious… and it worked… Thanks to him I did find a true passion, and, subsequently, I turned this passion into a profession…and you know the rest of the story…"

She's talking about the restaurant she runs in Soho. I've been there a few times. Of course it's fantastic.

I want to laugh because I'm thinking about what Alex taught me…so basically how to move drugs and money, how to stay out of troubles in prison, how to make cocktails and how to fuck. How fun it would be if I did the same thing that Rosa did? Oh god, I don't think so.

But there's still a smile upon my face. It is reassuring to think that maybe I will also find a way to go on with my life thanks to something that comes from Alex. Does it sound insane? Am I finally losing it for good?

"Well, I cannot think about anything that would help me right now…and cooking is out of the question… I don't even know how to cook an egg, so…" I say to Rosa.

She slowly raises from the bench and takes my hand.

"The less you know, the better…I'll teach you something easy… no one is born chef…come…"

It's around 5 in the morning, I have no intention of going back to the cabin or find an excuse to knock on Alex and Sandy's cabin. What should I do? Stay here maniacally overthinking about everything without solutions because they do not exist? No. I'd rather go with Rosa and try to take my mind off the mess I've made. The problems will come in the morning anyway… And it's already morning anyway…

"Why not?" I say with a smile and I follow her inside the kitchen.

Once inside, she turns to me and asks. "So, darling… I can help you cook whatever you want, sky's the limit" she laughs at her own joke. "You just have to choose…"

"Mmm" I think about what I want to cook. There's still on my mind Rosa's story, so I'm thinking maybe something Italian. Alex loves Italian food. Also Martha, but I don't want to go there. I wish I had a quick answer like Rosa's. I wish that I could just think about Alex and automatically know what to do. Alex, I hope she's going to eat whatever I'll cook. I still want her linked to me. It's unhealthy, but that's what I want. She's never tasted something cooked by me… wait…

I can't help but smile, again.

"I know exactly what we're going to cook" I say proudly.

"Yeah? And what it would be?"

"Pancakes"

She laughs.

"Really? You just want to make pancakes? I was waiting for something a little bit more… challenging…"

"Pancakes and chocolate milk" I add, just to make her laugh a little more.
"Oh darling, you're the chef today….at least let's find a way to make them special…Let's see what we've got here…"

She proceeds to open all the drawers and take out a lot of things that I don't think I want in my pancakes, but it's relaxing to see her moving in her element so well.

"So, tell me, Piper…let's start…what do you think about the flour? Whole organic wheat or white flour?"

That's easy. Alex the hipster of course will prefer the whole organic wheat.

We go back and forth a little bit like this, choosing the ingredients, trying to be original but not too much, and it's easier each time…bananas to remember South East Asia, pecans because she loves them, chocolate chips because, well, who doesn't like chocolate chips? And, as a topping, salted caramel with caramelized nuts. The topping was actually Rosa's idea, but how can you say no to that? And she needed something a little more…challenging…

I don't know how much time has passed, but, miraculously, I'm feeling better… putting my hands into something, literally, is helping me…the texture of the food, the way Rosa's humming and old Ella Fitzgerald song…the smell…everything is putting me in the right mood. Together with the idea of doing something for Alex. Something unexpected for her. She's probably thinking about finding problems, guilt and endless conversations once she starts the day. And she's probably right. But it doesn't have to be just all that. This is something nice for her. Something that I really really really want to do for her. I really want her to be happy. I don't want to question the reasons why I feel this way, but I do feel better, with a purpose. And I'm fine with it. I'm starting to see a pattern and doing the things I want to do is helping me going towards that. Towards my needs. And just this, the fact that I'm actually doing something that I want to do, is giving me hope that, after whatever shitstorm I will go through, at least I would be following my needs. It gives me hope in some way. Hope to make the right decision. Right for my heart and not for whatever is supposed to be better or not.

The smell is delicious, I cannot describe it. It fills your heart. The pancakes are fluffy, soft, they taste like sweet heaven. The salted caramel is to die for. Rosa has really outdone herself. I cannot help but keep taking a spoon and taste it every time I walk in that direction.

My role right now is cooking the pancakes and be careful not to burn them. I can do it. I am doing it. My work is almost done, we've cooked enough pancakes to feed a good part of the guests. At least the ones that wake up early.

The first ones have already arrived. Kate and Molly. Followed by Bob. Once he enters the door, Rosa's face lights up. They kiss each other and I cannot help but think about everything that I've learnt about them in the past few hours and I feel hope, I feel love. But, mostly, I feel hope.

Thinking about how much I was in a full meltdown just a couple of hours ago, it is almost impossible to accept the fact that, right now, I'm almost happy. I'm hopeful. And I really want to see Alex's face once she sees this. She'll know why I did it. That time in Cambodia was epic. And replicate everything for her fake birthday I think it's a pretty good idea.

Once I've finished to cook all the pancakes, I look at them. They're perfect. Rosa was right, I already feel better. I take three of them and I arrange them on a plate, I pour the caramel over. They're perfect. But I have to store them somewhere safe…who knows when Alex will decide to join me in this mess. I don't want to risk that someone else eats my masterpieces.

I decide to use the little fridge I have in the reception cabin. Even if warm pancakes are definitely better than cold pancakes, but I cannot risk it. So I pour a glass of milk, I mix it with the chocolate
powder and, with the glass on one hand and the plate in the other, I exit the kitchen cabin to go towards the reception, hoping no one stops me for whatever reason.

It's a great idea, so, when I see Alex, we can also have a little bit of privacy. I just need to find an excuse to be alone with her. Maybe something to do with her ID card…

I close the door behind me and I put everything on the table. There's something missing, other than Alex.

Of course! The candles! I think I have some of them here somewhere…

I open all the drawers till I find them. Here they are…now I just need to place them on the pancakes….I think just four of them…one for every decade of her life. I take three intact candles and the fourth is half burnt. I hope she'll get the joke. Of course she will. She's smart.

I have all the candles in my hands when I heard the door open.

I turn around with a smile.

My heart stops the moment I see it's Martha there.

Fuck.
Chapter 30

ALEX POV

Where the fuck am I?

What the fuck did just happen?

God.

God.

God.

It's not possible.

I knew it.

Not now.

I couldn't stop.

I should have stopped.

God.

It felt so good.

So fucking good.

I'm still feeling good.

I'm not supposed to feel like this.

It's like my lungs are bigger now and I can breathe more air.

My arms and my legs are moving without effort in the water.

I can't feel anything. Not the exhaustion, not the exertion.

I just feel it.

Between my legs.

God, I came so hard.

I'm broken.

She broke me.

And I'm smiling.

Where am I going?

There's no time.
I need to act, and to act quickly.

But one problem at a time. I'm the Queen of problem solving, for God's sake. Even if I'm still slightly drunk.

First thing first.

I cannot walk out of the lake without my panties on.

So, I will not walk out of the lake until everyone else is gone. I just have to come up with an excuse.

My feet are touching the bottom of the lake. I can feel the stones and the mud between my toes. Now, for the first time, I feel the creepy sensation of being immersed in a dark living liquid. There's life inside this lake. Frogs, plants, fish, maybe snakes too. And I have no panties on.

And it smells. I'm a city girl.

God, I feel like I want to throw up.

But I can't. Not now.

I need to focus.

I walk slowly towards the shore and towards the voices, with every step my feet touch something slimy and disgusting. Everyone is on the beach, getting dressed, I think. Piper should be behind me, I can't hear her and I definitely can't see her even if my eyes now are well adjusted to the darkness and I can see a lot more. But, without my glasses, I'm practically lost.

It's better this way. I'm more lucid if she isn't near me.

I walk until the level of the water reaches my bellybutton and I stop.

"Guys!" I scream.

Al is the one who answers back. "Martha, Piper…hurry up!"

I know Sandy like the back of my hand. She won't talk to me. She'll pretend that nothing has happened. Her pride will get in the way. We fought. She'll give me the silent treatment until we'll reach the cabin and then she'll unleash her demon version.

I can't stand anymore this part of her personality. It was one of the traits that attracted me the most at the beginning. Her being so bossy and determined. Now I see it more like a mask to cover her insecurities.

"I want to stay here a little bit longer…" I shout back. Hoping it will be enough.

"Come on, get your ass out here! It's late" comes the reply, always from Al. Nope, not enough.

"It's my birthday…let me do whatever I want…" There's no way I'll go out without my panties on. They'll have to drag me out.

"Where's Piper?" Martha's worried voice reaches me and, for the first time, I start to feel the weight of what we've just done. But now is not the time to feel guilty.

"She's coming, she was behind me…" I reply.
Her worried tone worries me. She was behind me. She has never been a great swimmer, but she can manage herself, right?

Thankfully, after a few seconds, I hear splashing and panting a few feet from me. Piper is clumsily walking towards the beach. She doesn't seem to have notice me. I can't see her face, but I know she's making the deer caught in the headlights one.

If she screws this up...

I hear them talk. I don't move. I cannot comprehend what they're saying, I just have to hope that she won't screw it up.

Come on Pipes, you can do it.

I still don't move.

Apparently she hasn't said anything compromising because they're all leaving.

Good girl.

I can hear someone asking "What about Martha?"

"Well, you heard her… let her stay here…" Sandy's voice is cold as hell.

I know what's in it for me once I go back to the cabin.

But, frankly, I do not care that much. We've been in this situation so many times.

I turn around and I swim a little bit even if I don't want to. Everything to keep my feet from touching the disgusting bottom of the lake.

I want to go towards the buoy once again, but I've just discovered that the darkness is creeping me out. Especially since I'm alone.

So I swim back, as closer as I can get to the shore.

Once I'm confident that no one's there, I quickly go outside.

It's dark, I'm freezing and the strange sensation between my legs isn't going away.

Fuck.

My shins hit a few deckchairs before I finally find the right one, the one with all my stuff.

First thing, glasses.

Second thing, pants.

Third thing, shoes.

Ok, deep breath, I'm safe.

I take a seat on the deckchair and I use the t-shirt to dry my torso and as a towel for my hair. I'm starting to shiver. It's a warm night, but not that warm.

And my head is spinning. It was better when I was in the water. Maybe I've drank too much.
I sit for another few moments. I don't want to risk facing anyone on my walk back to the camp.

I need to keep my sanity as intact as possible.

I have always been the smart kid, the one who could come up with the better solution in half the time. That's why I was the best at moving drugs and using mules. I knew how to improvise, how to read people, how to react quickly, how to make the right choices.

There were only two things that could take away my lucidity: drugs and Piper Chapman.

They were the reasons why I've been arrested and the reasons why I've made the biggest mistakes of my life.

I thought life gave me a lesson five years ago. A big one. One of those lessons you have to learn if you want to survive.

Know your kryptonite and stay the fuck away from it.

And I've survived.

So, I've learnt the lesson.

At least that's what I've thought. I've never touched any kind of drug and I've stayed the fuck away from Piper. But this week has proved me wrong.

I've lost control, I've lost lucidity. And not for one minute, not even for one hour.

It's unacceptable.

My first instinct on Monday was to run away. I should have listen to that, my gut is always right.

But my gut right now is happy. My gut is telling me that I haven't come so hard in years, maybe forever.

The high I'm touching right now is a high I've always associated with drugs. Cocaine in particular. It is addictive. Empowering. It's happiness.

It's dangerous.

I always hate it when people say that drugs are horrible. Drugs are fantastic, that's why they're addictive. They can take you out of your misery, they can make you feel powerful, happy, loved, strong even in the middle of the shittiest day of your life. The only problem is that they kill you and they rule your life. You become a servant. A slave to the only thing that can make you feel good. Everything else doesn't matter. Your life, the one you wanted to run away from, doesn't exist anymore. You live in a lie. A wonderful lie. And the more you're into that vortex, the less time of daily bliss you have, because you're good only when you're high. They depersonalize you. They obliterate you. They imprison you. And I've spent enough time high and enough time in jail to know that I will never go back in a cage. Never. Not a physical one and not a mental one.

I raise on my shaking legs and I start walking towards the camp. My head is spinning even more. I'm starting to feel nauseous.

5 years.

5 years without any drug on my system. Not even weed.
5 years of healthy eating and healthy living.

5 years without Piper.

5 years sober.

After I almost died.

After Aldrin left me in a coma for three days. After I woke up in a hospital bed. Handcuffed. Alone.

They threw me in Max while I still couldn't walk on my own. It's for your own safety they said. Safety my ass. They just wanted to buy time, to understand how to deal with the "guard who tried to kill an inmate" thing. To isolate me seemed like the right thing to do.

At least I met Nicky there. She was the proverbial glass of fresh water in the middle of the fucking desert. I wasn't alone anymore. I was alive and I had at least a friend in the world. Someone who wouldn't kill me or betray me. Someone who made me laugh. Made me forget about the stiches on my face, the broken ribs, the hit on my head and about the fact that the person who swore to love me didn't believe me and left me alone, to be killed, while she was fucking a kangaroo behind my back.

That hurt so much.

But I had Nicky. She stayed with me during rec time, she made me walk, she brought me chocolate chips and dirty jokes. I started to feel alive again.

After a couple of days, they sent Nicky back to gen pop.

And I was left alone, once again. Without any will to make new friends, or to speak to other people. Paranoia and depression still running deep.

And then it happened.

My worst nightmare.

I think it was after maybe ten days. My memories about that time are still a little blurry.

It was rec time and I was in my cell, pretending to read. With my cellmate gone, I was alone.

Two girls entered the cell, another one closed the door. I started to panic even if I had already seen this scene a lot of times. They wanted me to join whatever gang they were in, they wanted me to take I-don't-know-which side of I-don't-know-which internal war.

I knew how it was supposed to go. They would ask me to join, I would say, gently, no, but I would assure them that I wasn't going to cause any trouble. If I was lucky enough, I just needed to stay in my place and accept the fact that probably they were going to steal something from me now and then. Or maybe beat me up for no reason.

I could do it. I could resist without reacting. I just needed to get over with it.

I closed the book and I looked at them with a detached look on my face, but shivering on the inside.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Vause, where are your manners?" replied the blond one who looked like the boss. God, how much I hated those bullies.
I didn't reply. She went on saying stuff that I don't remember. Maybe veiled threats.

I do remember clearly what happened later.

I was a little confused by the lack of proposals, but I was relieved when they turned their back to leave.

At the last second, the blond one turned around and threw something at me. I still was so confused that I didn't know what it was. When I realized that there was a dead rat on my lap, with blood coming out of his mouth, it was already too late because her words were forever engraved in my brain.

"By the way, Kubra says hi".

I remember how I spent that night. Looking into the dead rat opened eyes, letting the panic attacks have their way with my body, but feeling detached from it. There was nothing more I could do except pray that my death would be quick.

The next day I woke up. I slowly ate my breakfast and I went in my cell to wait for rec time.

I had no more power, but maybe I could still decide how to die. Fighting.

I walked into the blond's cell, she wasn't in it. I started to open every drawer, look inside every pillow, hoping to find something sharp. Anything that could help. A razor. A toothbrush. Everything. I was going to bring down everyone related to Kubra before getting killed.

On the sink drain I found pills. Meth.

A lot of them.

I had only a few seconds to think, and I don't really remember how I came into the decision to ruin my life once and for all.

I remember the feeling of bliss, of joy, of power, while I was laying on the ground, high, high, higher that I'd ever been.

I thought about my mom, how I was going to see her, maybe. I didn't thought about what she would think about what I just did. I thought about all the things she did for me, all the love, all the strength she had, the fun, when we watched The Sleeping Beauty together on that old sofa…the feeling of her hand caressing my back, braiding my hair…

I thought about my friends, the ones I had and the ones I lost. Parties, first kisses, wonderful landscapes, night stars…everything was good, blissful, loving.

Piper.

There was only love. And, as powerful as love, there was hate, but it was masked.

I hated her. I hated her with all my power. And I hated myself even more because I loved her so much that she was going to be my last thought before I died.

There was no harm anymore in pretending to feel different.

I was dying and I wanted to die pretending to be in her arms. To have her whispering in my ears, to feel complete with her.
Remembering these things, still gives me the chills and gets me back into the real world. I'm in the path towards the camp, dark woods surrounding me.

I stop to throw up. The nausea is overwhelming and the fucking walk down memory lane is not helping.

The acid burns my throat, but it is nothing compared to what I've been through in max.

Overdosing is not fun if you survive it.

I thought I was dead, for the second time in a month. And, for the second time, I was wrong.

They found me. They thought that the top dog tried to kill me by forcing me to take the drugs, Fig didn't want to risk me filing a complaint, so I got transferred once again.

The rest is history, and a lucky star that I didn't know I had.

Chicago was a paradise. Nothing like Litchfield and nothing like the mixed prison I've been with Piper for the Kubra trial.

I stop to throw up once again, just for good old times' sake. I've become such a lightweight...

Waking up was horrible. Everything hurt. Everything was wrong. My heart was still shattered in pieces and my conscience too. I knew what I did. I knew that I let myself go. I didn't stop. I could have killed myself. But I was alive. I was given another chance. For some mysterious reason, life wasn't done with me and I wanted to do everything in my power to pay it back.

And I did.

I got away from the diseases of my life. The things that hurt me and that made me touch the lowest point in my life. Drugs and Piper.

5 years.

5 years without any drug on my system. Not even weed.

5 years of healthy eating and healthy living.

5 years without Piper.

5 years sober.

And now I feel like I'm back to square one.

I stop to throw up once again even if there's nothing to throw up anymore. But the nausea makes me do it. I don't know if it's the wine, the vodka or the memories. I can see the camp in the distance and I just want to reach my cabin and go straight to the bathroom. I have a feeling that this will take all night. I'm not on my twenties anymore.

Inside the cabin there's Sandy, waiting for me. She's sitting on the bed with an annoyed look on her face.

"Not now" I say walking directly into the bathroom and closing the door behind me.

I don't care if our fight will be even more horrible now, I just need to stay the fuck alone. I turn the key to lock me inside. Just in case.
I know what to do. I splash some water on my face, I take a glass of water, I sit on the floor, close to the toilet and I force myself to drink, waiting for my head and my thoughts to stop spinning.

I don't know how much time has passed and how many glasses of water I have drunk, but I find myself with my forehead on the toilet. I must have dozed off.

I try to turn my head. It's way better. If only I could go to bed right now…

I was expecting at least a knock from Sandy. She didn't and I'm glad. Maybe she's asleep.

There's no point in waiting.

My hair are still wet and smelling disgusting.

I force myself to take a shower.

I brush my teeth for the millionth time and then I enter the bedroom. There's no one inside, but I hear some voices coming from the porch.

"Don't worry about it….everything is going to be fine…" Sandy's voice.

"Something is off this time…really off…" Martha's voice. She's evidently crying.

A sting of something strange hits me.

And I think again about Piper.

And my body reacts because the duality is too much to handle. Hate and love. Lust and disgust.

I cannot handle it right now.

So I turn around, I go back to the bathroom, I open the window and I climb outside. They cannot see me. I walk towards the woods. The black silence is calling me.

Finding the secret place is easy. Finding the perfect spot to sit, with the rocks still a little warm is easy too.

Trying not to think about everything that happened is impossible.

I've been fucked. In every sense of the word.

I thought I was over it. I thought I had control.

Truth is, I just brainwashed myself into thinking that what we had wasn't that great. That our…"thing" wasn't really special but a construct of the mind. That sex wasn't that great.

Fuck.

I still fucking feel it between my legs.

I was the first one to kiss. When she kissed me back, under this tree I'm sitting right now, I lost control. I was unbalanced. She took me by surprise and she almost drove me crazy. But, after that, I got up again. I wasn't the same stupid girl dominated by her love and obsession towards a stupid blond.

I was a new woman. New and independent.
I was leading the game, I had everything under control. When we kissed in the pool, I knew what I was doing. I knew what was going to happen. I made it happen. On my terms.

In the cabin, before we were interrupted. Still in control. Fully in control.

I fooled myself into thinking I was immune. Healed.

But the lake was a total disaster. Another Waterloo.

I could blame the alcohol, the fight with Sandy, I could even blame Piper. But I know the truth. It was all entirely my fault.

There was a moment that changed everything.

Like a fucking Napoleon I went there, I reached the buoy and I started to kiss her as I wanted. Drunk or not drunk, Alex Vause does not lose control. No memory lapses and no walks of shame.

I got rejected.

She stopped me.

It wasn't part of my plan.

Maybe it was better this way, I thought. Maybe it was fate. Even if I wanted to be the one to stop everything, she could do it. It didn't change anything.

I just wanted to kiss her. Maybe fuck her. Loose myself in this walk down memory lane, but without really losing control. I wanted to get physically through everything and survive. Getting out of it alive, cured. To prove myself that I was past the ghost of her memories.

And I was so close. God I was so close.

But then she started to touch me. Caress my scalp with her fingers, my face. And I lost it, completely.

I kept my eyes closed because I was afraid that, if I opened them, I would have seen her and I wouldn't be able to ever forget her face and that moment.

She was like a snake enchantress. And I was a puppet in her hands. I couldn't function anymore.

And then she kissed me.

And fuck, I wasn't expecting that.

It was sweet when all I thought I wanted was heat. Intense when all I thought I wanted was lightness.

Problem is, it was exactly what I wanted.

I tried to get the control back. I trapped her between my arms. So I was the predator and she was the pray. But she did found the way to turn the tables around.

When her hand found its way into my panties, I was dead. Game over.

It was so fucking hot. All it would have taken was the movement of one of my hands. They were both on the buoy. I was holding afloat the both of us. If I just removed one fucking hand, everything would be over. We would go underwater and the spell would be broken.
But I didn't.

I didn't even try.

Actually, my hands were gripping so hard the buoy that now the palms of my hands and my fingers are sore.

I let her do whatever she wanted of me.

The build-up.

The moans that kept coming out of my own traitor mouth.

Her breath on my skin.

I begged. I fucking begged her to finish me. To make me cum.

I said please.

Fuck, I said please.

I hit again the ground with my hand. How can I get so turned on just thinking about what happened if what happened is the reason why I'm suffering like this?

Why did I do it? Why did I fucking do it?

I hate myself.

Why did I come here of all places?

This is not my spot. This is hers. Everything around here screams Piper Fucking Chapman. I swear I can still smell her.

I got on my feet because I need to go. I need to get away. I feel my temples pulsing. I'm going to have an epic headache and actually it won't be the worst part of my day. I know it.

I start to walk back towards the camp. I don't know what time it is, it's a little bit lighter, so the night is almost over. I wonder if Sandy has already teared down the locked bathroom door or if she's waiting for me on the other side with her typical disappointed look.

I don't want to face that.

But the alternative of facing Piper is even less appealing. Or not.

I must fight every fiber of my body not to go around looking for her. I cannot do that. I cannot fall back into the darkness.

I walk closer to the woods, just in case someone is in the camp, but I don't see anybody.

Wait.

No.

No. No. No.

Piper is there.
Sitting on the bench outside the kitchen cabin. She's covering her face with her hands. She's clearly crying.

I have to stop myself. Force myself not to go there and fucking hug her.

I've made a mistake. A terrible one.

As a punishment, I just sit under a tree, doing nothing.

She cannot see me, but I can.

I have to see. I have to learn.

Nothing good can come out of it. It never did and it never will.

But looking at her…

So desperate…

So frail…

So beautiful…

I told her we had time. I don't know why I did it.

It was stupid, stupid, fucking stupid.

I was stupid.

I can't leave. I can't move and get back to the cabin.

I want to stay here for as long as I can, waiting for this feeling to go away.

I have to face my demons, right?

Fuck.

I don't know for how long I've stayed here. Piper is asleep with her head on the table. It gave me a lot of time to process things. Truth is, nothing has changed.

I know this is wrong. I know this almost killed me.

But I just can't help it.

She's a magnet and I'm made of iron.

This…push that I feel is more powerful than everything that I've felt in the last 5 years.

There's clearly a masochistic component on it, but it is so powerful nonetheless.

I must have dozed off too when I hear something.

"I screwed up"

I wake up with the feeling of panic running through my nerves.
It's just Piper. Talking to Rosa, hugging her. I'm still safe.

Well, as safe as I can be.

When Rosa starts to talk, I know that I should go away. I shouldn't listen to her private conversation with Piper, but, once again, I cannot move.

I need it just as much as Piper.

It confuses me, it hurts me.

Is it possible?

Love can last for so long?

I don't even realize that I'm kind of crying. My eyes are wet and a couple of tears are running down my cheeks. The way Rosa is talking about the joy of being reunited with her love. I feel it. I feel it inside of me and I know what I'm thinking about.

Is she thinking the same thing?

How can something so wrong feels so good?

Why am I letting myself feel this?

What do I want?

Who do I want?

"Pancakes"

Piper's voice startles me. And in the worse way.

Is she really…

"Pancakes and chocolate milk"

Oh god. Yes she is.

I let myself free to hope, for just one moment.

The last barriers have just fallen.

My cheeks are wet. There's no doubt anymore.

Fuck, I need to talk to her.

I need to talk to her alone.

So I wait.

Impatience running wild.

And I wait.

I don't know what I'll do, but I don't want to think about it.
I've made a decision and I'm going to stick to that.

Why the fuck is taking them so much?

Why isn't Rosa leaving?

The sun is up. It's just a matter of minutes before Sandy shows up.

Hurry up Piper, for god's sake.

It's like she's listening to me. She's out of the door with a covered plate heading towards the reception cabin.

It's my clue.

I just need to give her a few minutes, not to raise any suspicions.

I take the longer road, the one through the woods.

Just in case.

I'm behind the cabin, I circle it from the left side.

I made the terrible mistake of looking inside the window.

Piper is not alone.

She's hugging Martha like her life depends on it.

"Did you make them for me?" Martha asks.

"Of course" comes the reply, after a few seconds of silence.

That's all I need to hear.

I turn around and I leave.
"Did you make them for me?" Martha asks with her face still buried in my neck.

"Of course" comes the reply, after a few seconds of silence.

I'm lying, but there's nothing else I can do.

This is not the time nor the place.

I try to swallow the disappointment by focusing on the sense of guilt towards Martha. I'm not supposed to feel this way. I need to find Alex. I need to find her as soon as possible.

But I can't.

I cannot find a valid excuse to leave this cabin and go searching for her and leave Martha here on her own.

I need to find her, I need to talk to her. I need to maybe decide to change my life forever again. This is not something that I can manage to do in the time that it takes me to, I don't know, take something from the kitchen.

I need at least an hour.

But Martha is taking my hand and dragging me to the couch. And I have to let her do it. Let her take her time. I owe her this much. Because I've cheated on her and she's a wonderful, special human being who loves me so much…

So I sit with her. And I smile as much as I can as I look at her eating all the pancakes and drinking the chocolate milk that I made thinking about another girl. I'm going to break her so much.

And I can't help but wonder if I'll find some pancakes in the kitchen for Alex. And I feel like a shit for thinking about this while I'm here with Martha. But I can't help it. This is where my mind is going. And not only my mind, I fear.

Martha is talking. Talking about stuff. I smile and I really try to be alert and focused on what she's saying, but I just can't. She's so happy. Every time she shines her smile, I die a little. And I just can't stop feeling this push. The blood is pumping into my brain. I just need to see her. I've never wanted anything as much as I want this.

The time passes slowly. Slower and slower. Martha's done with the pancakes but she's not moving from her spot. She even takes my legs and puts them on her lap. I feel like I'm dying.

"You know what? I think I'm going to take a shower… I think I'm starting to smell…"

She laughs and she leans in to kiss me on the lips.

Good.

It's my way out.

"Yeah….you're definitely smelling like a rotting fish…” I remove my legs from her lap and I raise on my feet. Martha takes my extended hand with a smile.
"You're going to marry me…so you may just get used to this…” she jokes.

I cannot resist and I take her in my arms for another brief kiss.

I can't help it. I love her. I love her too.

"What can I do? I'm a saint…” I say, giving her a small slap on her ass and following her outside.

Finally.

Finally free.

God, I'm a horrible human being.

I don't know how much time has passed. One hour? Two hours? Ten minutes?

Where the fuck are you, Alex?

With nowhere specific to go, I walk with Martha towards our cabin, hoping to get a glimpse of her. But nothing.

Her cabin looks unoccupied.

I'm getting nervous. What can I do once I find her? What kind of excuse I could make up to justify the fact that I'm going to kidnap her and take her to a secluded place for as long as I need? Will she come willingly?

Actually, I don't care about it.

I'm going to get it done.

I don't know why, but it feels inevitable. And important. So massive and important. Life changing. Like everything with her.

I leave Martha with an "I'm going to see Ralph and take a look around the camp". She dismisses me with a smile and a wave of her hand.

I start walking around with no direction. I see the Goldbergs, Linda, Rosa, Al, I see everyone except the only one I want.

Maybe she's still sleeping. Like Jason. Maybe she's just in her bed with a big hungover.

I need answers. So many.

Molly stops me to ask me something about the activities for the afternoon.

I can't connect my brain enough to give her a real answer.

"Piper, darling, are you ok?" she asks.

I focus on her just for a second, in order to answer with a quick "Yes, just tired" and to resume my scan of the whole camp.

Her face isn't too convinced. But, frankly, I don't care.

I promise her a funny afternoon and I walk straight towards the kitchen. The only place left.
If she's not there, she's either at the lake or in her cabin.

"She's gonna hear me, you can be sure of that!" Sandy's voice comes from the inside of the kitchen.

Great. Just great. But if there's Sandy, maybe there's Alex too.

I go inside.

Sandy is on a bench, talking with Rosa.

No signs of Alex.

She has a plate with a half-eaten pancake and my blood starts to boil. How is it possible that everyone is eating my fucking pancakes except the person I've made them for?

I put on my perfect-host-face, a big smile, and I sit on the bench next to Sandy.

I can feel Rosa's eyes on me.

"Good morning! So, how are the pancakes?" I ask directly to her. If someone knows where Alex is, it's her. And I won't stop until I'll find her. Even if it means I have to make small talks with a girl I've just disrespected in the worst possible way.

"They're really good. But I'm not that hungry" She says playing with a piece of pancake with her fork.

"Why so?" I have to ask.

Rosa's eyes are still glued on me. I cannot help but feel like she knows something. Like she knows what happened. Her face is not amused or soft. She looks disappointed, in a way. Maybe I'm just projecting my guilt on her.

"Well…" she starts with a cold voice "…you where there last night".

Oh god.

Is she…

Does she…

No, it's not possible. Alex would never…

And Sandy would have killed me by now.

I realize that Sandy is waiting for my reply, so I mutter a vague "I'm sorry…"

"It's not like it's your fault. You've seen how she is. Sometimes she just… exaggerates…"

She takes the fork in her mouth and eats a piece of pancake.

So much for being not hungry.

I don't know what to say anymore. So I just shut up, even if Sandy's face is begging me to say something. But I've got other things to think about.

Like Alex. Where the hell did she go?
It's got to be the lake. The lake or her cabin. Maybe the meadow, but no… I don't think so...

While I'm planning my search party of one, Rosa and Sandy are still talking.

"...but running away the day of her birthday is something new even for her. A new low…".

I dislocate my neck by turning it towards Sandy too fast. What?

"What?"

I ask.

My voice is shaking. I hope she hasn't noticed it.

Sandy looks at me confused. She probably has said something while I was zoned out.

"She's just left. She put all her stuff on a suitcase and she took the car. Our car. So how am I supposed to go back to New York? Fuck her…"

Her fork hits the plate a little too hard and it makes a horrible sound. I think my heart is making the same sound on my chest.

What?

Alex. No. No, no, no, no, no.

Why?

I don't know what to say. Or what to think. I cannot think.

I know that I'm supposed to say something right now but I just can't connect not even two of my brain cells.

"I'm sure you're going to figure it out…together…"

Thank god for Rosa, coming to the rescue.

I'm just feeling like the I've lost the timing in the Alex and Piper infinite voyage towards the unknown galaxies. Like we are two trains, going in different directions. We crossed paths, twice. It looked like it would last forever, but in the blink of an eye, we were again on the other sides of the world. And how many chances do we have to meet again? To have another perfect timing?

No, no. It's not possible. Not right now. I won't let it.

"… tonight, I think…"

Sandy is still talking. I don't know about what.

"I'm sure he will, darling…"

He? What are they talking about?

"He?"

I ask, before I can stop myself.

Sandy looks at me a little confused. Again.
Mental note 'I should listen to her more'.

"Yes, Al…"

I nod. I pretend to have understood. This little sparkle of hope inside of me is growing. Maybe I got everything wrong. Maybe she's still here, somewhere and she was talking about something else. But she did talk about a she, right? I can't remember.

It's too good to be true.

"Thanks for the pancakes Piper, they were really delicious…"

She flashes a sad smile at me. I reply with another smile. I hope it doesn't look too fake.

"You're welcome…" I reply.

"Where are you going?" Asks Rosa once Sandy is almost at the door. She's still looking at me with some hard eyes.

"It's better if I start packing…" she sadly replies. And exits the cabin.

A pair of judging eyes is suddenly on my face.

I don't want this Rosa. I want the Rosa who was hugging me tonight. What have I done?

I lower my eyes because I'm confused. And hurt. And I still don't know what happened. Rosa knows. For sure. And I fear that it has something to do with the way she's looking at me right now.

I don't say anything. Like a little child who knows she did something wrong, but doesn't know what exactly.

I want to ask. I will ask, because the alternative of not knowing is too much for me to handle.

Suddenly I feel her hand on mine, squeezing in a strong but loving way.

I look at her again.

"You should at least have said something more to her…" Her eyes are still hard, but not that much.

My heart drops. Just how much does she know?

"To whom?"

I play dumb.

"To Sandy, Piper…"

Oh.

I wasn't expecting that.

"Oh…"

I'm walking on egg shells right now, too afraid to say something that I'm not supposed to. And I don't know why Rosa thinks that I should have said something to Sandy. To her of all people.

"Look. Martha came to me…" she starts. And my heart drops. Does Martha know something? I feel
even more guilty.

"...before she left"

I'm confused. Martha left?

Rosa must have seen something on my face, because she continues "The other Martha…she came to say goodbye"

Oh. The other Martha. She means Alex.

God.

Alex left. Alex really left.

I can't stop my heart from beating so fast. How am I supposed to keep a straight face?

I don't know what Rosa can see while looking at me right now, but I know that she's seeing something for sure.

"Piper, you know the situation you're in…"

**Situation**… she's talking about Martha, my Martha. The girl I'm supposed to marry. And the fact that someone else is talking about it…someone I trust and that right now I don't know what is thinking about me…it's hard. Hard and real.

"Sandy was clearly in distress and instead of offering some nice words, some comprehension, even if fake, you just had to storm in here, just wanting to know where the other Martha was…"

I don't say anything. What can I say?

"I didn't expect this from you, Piper. At least some humanity. I don't know what you both did and in what kind of mess you've got yourself into, but she's in this situation because of you… because of the both of you…and she's confused…she was looking just for a couple of nice words…"

I've never thought about Sandy. I've always thought about me and Alex and a little bit about Martha. But there's another human being in the picture and I've indirectly hurt her without the blinking of an eye.

I feel like shit.

"..I'm sorry…" I say to no one in particular. Rosa squeezes my hand a little bit more. I feel like I could talk to her.

"Did she really left?" I ask with my trembling voice.

I don't need to tell her who I'm talking to.

"Yes"

A stab on the heart would have hurt less.

"Did she tell you why?" Yes, I'm that desperate.

"She had some urgent things to do for her job"
I quickly raise my eyes. She has the face of a person that doesn't believe a word of what Alex told her. And I think I've got the face of a person that knows that Alex told her a bunch of lies.

I put my forehead again against the table and I sigh.

What the hell am I supposed to do right now?

I cannot ask this directly to Rosa. She doesn't need to know the reality of the situation. I don't want her to think less of me because of it, but I really really really need to talk to someone that knows everything.

I think about going to Cal's house and tell him everything.

But no, I've rarely spoken to him about stuff like this. No feelings or relationship problems. Well, not that much anyway. And he loves Martha. And he cannot keep a secret even if his life depends on it.

No, I need someone else.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I know what I have to do.

I suddenly raise my head again and I face Rosa. I won't run away. She's expecting something from me. Probably the truth. And she's going to get it. Or at least a part of it for sure.

"I don't know what to do" I start with the truth.

"You need some time to think, darling. And to sleep on it, a lot. You have the face of someone who just came out of a rave party"

Oh Rosa… always so nice to me. I smile at her.

"Don't look at me like this. Of course I know what a rave party is…” she continues.

My smile gets bigger and I have a timid laugh.

"I guess you're right…” I reply. Not really convinced.

"There's too much at stake for you to go around like a zombie, making wrong decisions" The innuendo is clear. The thing at stake here is my future. My happy marriage to a fantastic girl that I love and that loves me. And the wrong decisions…well…it's not that difficult to understand what she's thinking about.

But the fact that she's referring to the decisions as "wrong" is hurting a little bit. But she doesn't know. She doesn't know a thing about us.

"I know” I reply. Because I know that what she's saying is true. I need time. But I need time with her….I think. Do I really need it or do I just want this mess to go on for a little bit more because I know that it won't lead us anywhere?

I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

Fuck.
"Just go and sleep on it. Take some time for yourself. Some alone time…” She emphasizes the word ‘alone’.

It scares me a lot, but I know it's the right thing to do.

But first, I have to reach Alex.

"I will…” I say as I raise on my feet.

She doesn't look too convinced. Maybe the fact that now I think I look really determined, like someone who does know what to do is in contradiction with my behavior in the last few days, or minutes for that matter.

But I know what to do.

Finally I have a glimpse of light in this vortex of darkness I've fallen into.

"Piper…” She starts with a voice full of…something.

But I can't. I can't listen to this right now.

So I walk around the table, I hug her from behind and I kiss her on the cheek.

"Don't worry about me" I add. Not really believing it.

She still looks at me like she isn't buying it, but I'm already outside.

I walk towards my cabin. Martha should be out of the shower any second now.

Once I reach the porch, I keep walking, towards the woods.

I need to be alone for what I am planning to do.

Once I'm pretty certain to have put enough distance between me and the camp, I take out my phone and I dial a very familiar number.

And I wait.

And I wait.

She picks up after too much time.

"The answer is no…"

"Nicky…”

"Don't 'Nicky' me with you diabetic-bff-bullshit voice. The answer is again and immutably no"

"But I still haven't asked you anything!” I smile, because she makes me smile anytime, anyway.

"Oh, I know you Blondie. You're going to ask me something really soon, and my answer is always going to be no, so why bother?”

"Come on! Nicky…I need you…”

"No, you don't need me. You need a therapist. Or a priest for an exorcism. More the second one now that I think about it…”
"Nicky…please…"

There's silence on the other end. I raise the bar with the diabetic-bff-bullshit voice and I put more honey on it. I'm desperate.

"Nicky…please… I only have you to talk about it…you're my friend, the only one who knows everything…I need your help"

I can hear her sigh.

"I was not joking when I said that you should see a therapist again, Chapman… I don't know how much you really want to talk to me. You know what I think about all of this… you can't put me in the middle of this mess…they're both my friends…"

She's talking about Alex and Martha. There's a little sting of jealousy, because I always want to be in pole position in other's people hearts, especially Nicky's. But she's right. She loves Martha. She hangs out with her even without me. And, in a way, I cannot do this to her. But she's my only way. The only way.

"I know. And I'm sorry. And I shouldn't do this, I know it. But…but the thing… the thing is that… she left without saying anything, and I'm lost…"

"I know"

Wow. What? I didn't expect this.

What does she know?

Shu must have talked to Alex, for sure.

How come she hasn't told me anything? Why is she keeping things from me? Am I not her friend?

"What?" I ask. Cold.

"Go on. Keep talking"

"Wait. What do you know?" Maybe my voice comes out harder than I wanted to but…I have no filters anymore…

"Chapman, go on!" She replies with vehemence.

I see red. And maybe I'm shouting.

"I AM going on…I am telling you the things I want to know and you're not answering me!"

"Technically, you haven't ask me anything yet…and the answer will always be a big fat NO"

"Nicky…this is not the time to be a fucking annoying know-it-all…” Maybe I'm still shouting, maybe my tone is too harsh. Maybe I shouldn't vomit all my anxiety on an innocent woman, but it's too late. "…I shouldn't even talk to you right now, after what you did…Alex told me about the money you gave her to disappear. Why didn't you tell me anything? What if Kubra found her? What if he killed her? How could you?" Ok. This is an evil thing to say. And a cheap shot. And I really should have eaten my tongue and counted to ten before even implying something like that. I regret the words the moment they leave my mouth. I don't believe in them.

I put a hand on my mouth, as if I could erase the last 10 seconds of my life. As she could see my
regret. But I don't say anything, I only wait for a few seconds before I hear a "Fucking bitch" followed by the sound of the dead line. She hung up the phone on me.

And she had every right to do so.

As quickly as I can I dial her number again.

It rings but she doesn't answer.

I wait until it goes to voice mail and I try again.

It rings again. She doesn't answer again.

No, no, no…what did I do?

What did I become?

I realize that I'm crying. Tears are running down my face and I can't breathe anymore.

Everything I do, is wrong.

Mechanically and maniacally I keep trying to call her. I can't give up.

Why her of all people?

I shouldn't have said those things to her. Not like this. Not like an accusation.

"What?" I didn't expect her to answer. And when I hear her voice, well, she's pissed. Like really pissed. But she's answered, and that's a thing.

"I'm sorry Nicky, I'm so sorry…" I say between sobs.

"Please forgive me…I didn't mean anything that I've said. I swear…"

I'm desperate and I don't really know if she can understand my words since I'm sobbing so much that my breath comes out in small quick puffs.

"I swear it…on everything… I got angry when she told me about it, but I know you did it to protect her….she would have gone anyway….probably to someone who would be…bad…I'm really sorry…"

I'm blabbing. I'm confused and I hate myself.

"Girl, you've got to get your shit together…" are her first words to me.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry Nicky…after everything that you've done to me…. I'm sorry… Everything is so difficult and…I can't…I can't anymore…"

"Girl…"

"…and now I don't know where she went and she left me and my life's a mess…I don't know what to do…"

"Girl!"

"And I shouldn't have called you…I'm so sorry Nicky….really…believe me…" I'm on a roll. A self pity roll. And I won't stop until…
"CHAPMAN! Shut your fucking mouth!" Until something like this would happen.

I immediately stop. There are only my soft sobs filling the air.

"Ok. Good. Now, could you please keep you fucking mouth closed for a minute, please?"

I'm so fucked up that I nod my reply, as she could see me on the phone.

"Is this silence a yes?" she adds.

"Yes" comes my reply.

"Very good then. Now you listen to me very carefully...because I will say this only once. Ok?"

"Ok" I answer. And I wait for whatever she is going to say like my life depends on it. Something coming from her is always something more than what I have now. And she has talked with Alex, so she knows something more than me for sure.

I'm slightly more calm right now. I force myself to take deeper breaths.

"I don't know what happened between the two of you..." she starts...

"We..." I try to speak to come clean with everything. I don't care if she knows. She's Nicky for God's sake, she's the only one that can understand. We kissed multiple times. We fucked. She has to know. But she interrupts me.

"AND...I don't want to know. So keep your mouth shut and don't interrupt me. You're going to speak only when I say so. Otherwise, I hung up again. Are we clear?"

It sounds a little childish, but I realize that I'm not exactly the most mentally sane human being at the moment, so maybe I need to be treated like a child. And I fucking need to know what she has to say.

"Yes"

"Good. Because I'm not joking this time. You've been a bitch. To me of all people! A fucking horrible filthy bitch. And we're going to talk about it once you're back in NY, don't you think that I will let you off the hook easily. But we won't talk about it now, since you're a batshit crazy stalker who just needs to calm the fuck down. Ok?"

"Ok..." I force myself not to say that I'm sorry and to justify what I did.

"Good. So, back to what matters... you're both my friends. Hell, the three of you are my friends. And this puts me in a fucking awful position. So, the less I know, the better it is. I don't want to be thrown in the middle of this, even if, for some sick reasons, you both think it's a fantastic idea to call ME to confess your sins and to complain and cry for I don't know what."

Cry? Is she talking about me? Or Alex? Is Alex crying for this? What happened? Did she feel guilty? Does she regret everything we did? Is she ashamed of herself?

I learnt my lesson, so I don' talk.

"I've been on the phone with Alex for one hour straight just to make sure she didn't crash her car..."

Alex. Just hearing her name makes my heart jumps on my stomach. Hearing her name in a context of danger makes my heart do a backflip on said stomach. I bite my tongue not to ask anything. I think I'm making strange sounds.
"She went on, ranting about stuff that I didn't understand...about lakes, birthdays in South East Asia, fate and other obscured things...but one thing was clear in all this mess. And I don't know how to tell you this without sounding like a cold bitch myself, but she just wanted to run away from you, Piper..."

My heart is not jumping anymore. My heart is dead. Dissolved.

I don't believe it.

"So, I don't know what happened, or why she was like that, but it was almost like 5 years ago... It was...bad. And she was...not good. And, believe me, I've seen her in a bad mood in my life. And I know you too. And you're not good either..."

I try to make sense of these words. It's really difficult. It sounds absurd. Everything. I'm getting married and my fingers were inside Alex less than 12 hours ago. Now everything is back to square one, but it's like we're in another fucking planet. It's so absurd that I almost want to laugh.

"Chapman...are you there?" She asks. Probably she was waiting for another one of my ramblings, but I don't have the strength to do that anymore.

"Yeah" I reply.

"Say something"

I'm at a loss for words. Really. What can I say?

"I... I don't know..."

"Piper..." again, my name. She must feel so much pity for me right now.

"Nicky...I need to talk to her..." That's the only thing still in my mind. The only thing that keeps me going.

"I'm afraid I can't help you with that" she says sadly.

"Give me her number"

"No"

"Please" I beg. I'm not even ashamed anymore. "Please, Nicky. I really need to understand what happened and why she went away..."

"I can't Piper..." there's definitely pity in her tone.

"Why?" I can't see why she is playing the moral compass card right now. Why is she deciding what's good and what's not in this situation? Who is she?

She stays silent for a few seconds.

"Because she asked me not to"

I hear the sound of the nail on the coffin. My coffin.

I start to cry again.

"Piper...listen...she was clearly not on her right mind. I think it's good if you two don't go back
straight into whatever made her run away and made you cry like an insane baby straight out of a horror movie... maybe she needs some time. Maybe you need it too. She knows that I have your number. She can ask for it whenever she wants. Maybe she will..."

I understand her words, but I don't believe in them.

"She'll never do that..."

"You don't know that..." I can hear she's trying to console me. Not to convince me. And this speaks volumes about what she thinks of this situation.

"Yes. I know it. It's over. This time it is really over..." I can't even recognize my voice. I'm so knocked down that I almost feel...calm.

"There's New York. There's me. You're going to see each other again..."

"It's not the same thing..." We will never be alone. It is impossible that the planets will align again like this.

"Come on Blondie, you're tired, confused...probably still hungovered... you just need to calm the fuck down and see this clearly for what it was..."

"And what was it?" I ask. Begging for someone to take me out of this misery and to tell me everything.

"I'm sorry honey, I have no fucking clue...I just know that you have to get out of this. You've been through worse things..."

I don't know if she's referring to the prison or to my mom. Either way, she's right. I've been through this before. And there was only one thing that could put order in my life and put a resemblance of calm sanity into my brain.

I know what to do.

"Piper...you still there?" She asks after a few seconds of silence.

"Yes"

"Still annoyingly alive?" I can't help but make a small laugh.

"Unfortunately for you, yes"

"That's a pity...I was hoping to cash my part of the heritage sooner...." I laugh again.

"Thank you Nicky. Really. I don't know what I would do without you..." I say after a while.

"Don't mention it, girl. In fact, do remember this when we will fight over what you said to me before. Once you're back in the city of course...."

"I will. And I'll make up for it, I swear. I love you and I'll change my will in your favor the second I'm back in the City" I say with a smile. She laughs. I think she has already started to accept my apologies.

"So now, what are you going to do?" She asks. I know what she's referring to.

"I'm leaving. I think it's time for me to go to my mom's beach house for a few days and do the
cleaning I was supposed to do weeks ago" I reply.

"And what about the camp?"

"Cal will gladly take my spot if this means that he won't have to go to the beach house…"

"Yeah, probably!"

There's silence on the line. I know what she wants to ask me.

"And what about….her?"

There it is.

"I think I'll tell her that I need to do it alone. She'll understand. And I'll have time to think"

"I think it's a good idea". Her reply comes unexpected.

"Really? Nicky Nichols thinks that I have had a great idea?"

"I said 'good', not 'great'" She's joking again. With me. At least something is going right in my life at the moment.

"So, I'm curious…what would you have considered a 'great' idea?"

"I don't know…maybe a threesome?"

Thank god I don't have anything in my mouth right now, otherwise I would have spit everything.

She's laughing like a maniac on the other side of the line. I cannot fucking believe it.

"Too soon?" She says. She even had to courage to ask! I can't help but laugh with her at the absurdity of everything.

"Yes, Nicky. Too fucking soon." I'm still laughing. I can't believe it.

"Oops" She replies between laughters.

I'm going to hell. In definitely going to hell.

"Oh God…" I say to no one in particular.

After we both stopped laughing she talks again.

"So, can I relax? Aren't you going to do something really stupid and not-at-all mentally sane?"

"No, don't worry about it" I say and my eyes roll without me wanting them to. I know what she's asking and I know she's right. So I will wait. I will wait until I'll be rested and clear minded to do something really stupid and not-at-all mentally sane.

"Good girl. Now, can I please go back to sleep since it's a fucking Sunday morning and I went to bed two hours ago?"

"Yes, you can…"

"It was a rhetoric question, Chapman" We are back to our usual banter. So I push the bar a little higher. Just to test if we're good again like before.
"Fucking bitch"

I just hear the sound of her intake of breath. I can imagine her shocked face.

"Too soon?" I ask as mischievously as possible.

She starts to laugh.

"Wait till you're back, bitch... wait till you're back" she says as a threat.

"Bye Nicky, I love you" I say with all my heart and with a big smile.

"Bye inmate... call me as soon as you arrive at the beach house..." Oh Nicky. Worried about me. She's such a great friend. I'm so lucky to have her in my life.

"You can count on it, sweet potato" I know how much she hates it when I call her something sweet.

"Fucking bitch" she replies and the line goes dead.

I laugh, because this time, the 'fucking bitch' is something that comes out of love. Totally different from the other one.

So now I am back again in the reality. On my own. With a little more awareness and a far more fear of the future.

Small steps. That's all I have to focus on. Acceptance and small steps.

My goal right now is to go to the beach house. To do so I have to talk to Martha, and I don't have to raise any suspicion. To do so, I do have to calm the fuck down. To do so, I have to accept the fact that Alex is gone. She ran away from me. From what we did. She didn't want to address it. She doesn't want to talk to me. To accept all of this is impossible. I have to pretend to do it for as long as I need.

I need to vent.

It's almost 10 AM. I can be missing for another 30 minutes without raising any suspicions in Martha. It's my usual tour around the Camp to check if everything is in order with a few stops.

I can make up a problem to fix in the archery cabin and that will buy me another 20 minutes.

The plan is this: cry for 30 minutes, compose for another 20, go to Martha and play the mum card, take the car and go straight to Martha's Vineyard.

Too many Marthas. Unquestionably.

Fate has definitely a fucking strange sense of humor.

But, you know, as they say... you have to follow the wave and don't ask where it goes.

So I will embrace this mess. I will immerse in it. And I will come out of it someway.

I sit on the ground, I take out my phone. I go straight on the search page and I digit the exact thing that I want right now.

As the first piano notes of the song fill the air I take a deep breath, I try to relax my shoulder and I start to cry.
Operator, number please, it's been so many years
Will she remember my old voice while I fight the tears
Hello, hello there, is this Martha, this is old Tom Frost
And I am calling long distance, don't worry about the cost
Cause it's been forty years or more, now Martha please recall
Meet me out for coffee, where we'll talk about it all
And those were the days of roses, of poetry and prose
And Martha all I had was you and all you had was me
There was no tomorrows, we packed away our sorrows
And we saved them for a rainy day
And I feel so much older now, and you're much older too
How's your husband, and how's your kids
You know that I got married too
Lucky that you found someone to make you feel secure
Cause we were all so young and foolish, now we are mature
And those were the days of roses, of poetry and prose
And Martha all I had was you and all you had was me
There was no tomorrows, we packed away our sorrows
And we saved them for a rainy day
And I was always so impulsive, I guess that I still am
And all that really mattered then was that I was a man
I guess that our being together was never meant to be
And Martha, Martha, I love you, can't you see
And those were the days of roses, of poetry and prose
And Martha all I had was you and all you had was me
There was no tomorrows, we packed away our sorrows
And we saved them for a rainy day

END OF PART ONE
THREE MONTH LATER, NEW YORK.

Whoever says that fall isn't the best season of the year, is a fool who's never been to Central Park at the beginning of October and has never sat on a bench just looking at the explosion of colors threatening to burst.

It's too soon to see any real color, but you can see the start of something big. You can feel the potential of a wonder of the nature. And this is why I love this period of the year. It's too easy to come here when the foliage is almost completely on the ground, no, I prefer it like this, when I can see the first leaves changing into gold, yellow, orange or red sparks of light, trying so hard to stay linked to their branches.

Like a sad story of stubbornness and, eventually, fall. It's like having the opportunity to witness the death of a giant. And I am all for it.

God, New York is really beautiful.

How could I have been so adamant when I said I didn't want to move here? New York is everything. It is my life. It was my life. I thought I couldn't come back here, but I was wrong. This is my place in the world. This is where I want to stay and to settle. It's been decided.

Yes, it's cold, sometimes humid and there are definitely too many tourists, but it's alive. It's so desperately alive that you can't help but feel alive too. People are happy to come here and there's a reason for it. Whatever you want to see, to eat, to watch, to get shocked about, you have it.

And whatever you want to love, too.

All the coolest art galleries are here. The richest people of the country have at least a house in here. If I want to go naked into a club, I can do it. Not that I want to…. Those days are over… But I still like my freaky places.

I've also got new people I can go out with. People I've met on the job, people I've met in the Narcotics Anonymous, people I've met in bars, in the photography course I'm attending, and now I can even go out with Nicky! Not bad for my third month in here.

The first time I've seen Nicky outside of prison was more than two years ago, when I was scared and desperate and I needed money. It wasn't a good period of my life, so we didn't really have the time to realize what we were doing and where we were. But now it's different. Kubra is dead. There's no reward on my head anymore. I can walk freely in this fucking world, I don't have to look behind my shoulder anymore, even if some days I still feel like somebody is following me.

In these two years I've never visited her once, I don't know why. Maybe I was still ashamed of what I did or about the situation I've put her in, even if I gave her back all the money she lent me. Or maybe she just reminded me of a time, or a person, I wanted to forget. Yet, we did talk every week, of course. But knowing that she was still linked to that…part of my life was making me feel not at ease. What if I went to see her and someone else would show up?

I want to laugh now, thinking about it. I was so careful at avoid her that I ended up in her fucking camp. At least now everything has changed, everything is different. It's not that impossible to deal with and not that "dark". I've been through hell again, but I'm back on my feet, still alive.
Yes. I've survived Piper Chapman for the third time.

Saturday night I went to pick up Nicky and we ended up in a crowded hole where everyone was dressed up as a freaky mini pony vampire and all the drinks were served in rainbow potties. And drink, we did. At first to get over the slight embarrassment. And later just because we were having too much fun. What a glorious night! That's the life I want and that's exactly the life I'm having right now. I'm good.

And I'm ready for whatever the world and this City have to offer me. There's nothing to be scared about anymore.

I just wonder how my life would have been if only I didn't fall into the drug ring. Would I be happier? Maybe married and with kids? Or would I be just a sad, pathetic waitress?

I guess I'll never know. But those years spent behind bars sometimes are still feeling like a total waste of my fucking life. I just have to be calm and to remember what I have now thanks to that time. I've got a new life, I've got the reward of resurrection, I'm so strong and I've got great people around me.

Brooding and thinking about my past has never done me any good. And being literally fucked by my past has proven to be just as useless.

I'm distracted from my thoughts by a movement on my left. A fast movement. Like…

"Ouch! What the…"

I'm on my feet in less than a second. Something fast is hitting my leg, attacking me.

All my nerves spike up just as fast as they turn off the second I realize that the thing that hit my leg was just a dog and that I don't have any kind of pain in my body, so he probably didn't bite me. He is just a very invasive dog who's just kind of…licking my leg? Hitting me with his wagging tale? How can I get rid of him without having to touch this ball of fur that looks a lot like…

"Ralph!" Someone is shouting from a distance.

Fuck. I should have known better.

But no worries.

I am ready. I knew this day would have come. I've spoken to Martha on the phone the other day. We're going to meet to start planning the Tibetan art exhibition we talked about back in the summer. A part of me knows that I could just have said no, but this is a great opportunity for my career and I've never worked for an actual art exhibition. Always for private rich men of for art galleries. This job will give me the chance to be creative, to think outside the box, to improvise. Just like I did when I was moving drugs, but legally and without killing human beings indirectly. I think this makes it a win-win situation. I'm pretty sure these are the only reasons why I've accepted the job. The pros weight more than the cons. Or better, they weight more than the only one con. The same con that is probably walking in my direction without a clue about who's she's about to run into. I've dyed my hair a darker red, maybe she won't recognize me immediately.

I realize that I've started to nervously unconsciously petting Ralph, who's now standing on his two hind legs and licking whichever part of me he can reach. I'm not used to get this kind of affection from animals, but Ralph is special. He really has a small little place in my heart. Especially after that night, after I found him crying and shaking under the rain and I'll never forget what I felt when I took him in my arms and he looked at me. It's stupid, but we had a connection. A real one. And I can't help but be joyful for the fact that apparently he got over the injury and he's now free to run around
like a crazy bullet…

And he's keeping me a little bit distracted from the inevitable thing that is about to happen any second now…

"Ralph, come here!" says a strange voice that I don't recognize. "Sorry ma'am…I don't know why he's doing that, but he's good…he won't harm you…Ralph!"

Ralph is not moving from his position. He's not listening to the voice of…

I raise my head to see if my ears have deceived me.

Nope.

There's a little girl in front of me. Definitely not what I was expecting.

Who the hell is she?

Instinctively I don't let Ralph move. I squeeze him tighter. I've looked into his eyes to make sure it is really him. One green and one golden. It's him. I won't let him go until I'm sure that this girl has the right to go around with him. What if someone has kidnapped him? And, by the way, who lets a girl who's, I don't know, 4 years old, go around Central Park on her own with a dog?

I don't even have the time to think that…

"Ava! I told you not to run!" a male voice says next to me.

I look at the source of the sound and … are you fucking kidding me?

What the fuck is Larry Fucking Bloom doing here?

He's kneeling next to the little girl.

"Honey. I've told you…the park is big, I don't want you to run away from us…"

"But Ralph…"

In that moment he finally decides to look at me.

"I'm sorry Ma'am…Ralph….here!"

Ralph doesn't move.

Larry hasn't recognize me. Good. A part of me is finding all of this really hilarious. Another part of me is still wondering what the fuck is Larry Bloom doing here with Piper's dog and, apparently, with a small human being that should be his daughter. I remember Piper telling me something about it back at the Camp.

"Ralph!" He says more vehemently. "Ralph!" tries the daughter too.

The dog doesn't move. Good dog. Good, good dog.

"Ralph!" Another voice, coming from behind them, imperious and way more familiar, joins the calling match and, this time, Ralph leaves me and he's on Piper's lap in less than a millisecond.

I am prepared. I am ready. I knew this day would come.
I try to take a deep breath but I fail miserably. So shallow breath it is. I look closely.

She's not wearing anything in particular. Just a pair of jeans, a light brown coat and a brown scarf. Her hair looks longer. Her face looks...like her face. Nothing more. I'm ok. Nothing out of the ordinary. I know her face. Nothing new.

She's looking at Ralph. And she's not smiling. She's not looking at me. Maybe she hasn't recognized me. It's better this way, right?

No.

I want her to look at me, damn!

Fuck.

We finally lock eyes but her expression stays the same.

I'm not feeling at ease anymore. I'm standing here like a fool. Maybe I should sit on the bench...

"I'm really sorry Auntie..."

The little girl, who's name apparently is Ava, demands Piper's attention so she kneels on the ground, breaking our silent stare that lasted approximately less than half a second.

"Don't worry honey. Just be more careful next time. You know, Ralph is smart and he can easily find his way back... But if you run away from me and daddy, how could we find our way? You're our special guide...ok?"

I can't take my eyes off the scene in front of me. With Piper kneeled on the ground, caressing lovingly the little girl's head with a smile. Something stirs inside of me.

"Ok" replies the little girl with another great smile.

"Good...let's go then" she says raising on her feet, taking Ava's hand and turning her back on me.

Ouch.

That wasn't exactly how I pictured our meeting.

Not that I pictured it. I just... wanted to be prepared for what I thought was going to be a big confrontation.

I just didn't expect the silent treatment, that's all.

I'm not disappointed. I was the one who ran away after all. This is good. Not disappointment.

I can feel Larry's eyes on me. He's staring in an uncomfortable way. He's probably using the three neurons in his brain to remember why I look familiar.

I wish he would remember me.

So badly. So I stare back at him.

But he turns his back on me too.

"We're sorry..." Piper voice takes me by surprise. It is clearly directed at me, but when I look at her,
she is already turning her head again.

This must have ignited something in Larry that suddenly stops in his tracks and turns around. He looks at Piper. Then at me. Then at Piper again. Then at me again.

This time I wave my hand in his direction and I can't stop a laughter from coming out of my mouth.

His eyes grow bigger than a Japanese cartoon. His mouth is open.

"Fuck" he mutter.

Yes Larry, fuck.

"Daddy has just said a bad word!"

He turns his head in Piper's direction. I can see her profile.

She's pressing her lips together as to suppress a laughter.

I know that expression. It's one of my favorites. When she knows she's not supposed to laugh or smile, but she can't stop anyway.

Larry looks at me again and I fiercely stare back at him, again.

It's Piper who makes him move by taking him by the arm and forcing him to resume their walk.

And they walk away.

Like a family.

Like the family Piper probably would have if I hadn't decided to name her.

But now it's not the time to mull over the past. Especially *that* part of my past.

It's time to go to work.
"Hooooly shit! Specs? What the fuck are you doing here?" Nicky Nichols ladies and gentlemen, reacting to my impromptu surprise with a tense smile.

"Geez, curb your enthusiasm Nichols…I was in the neighborhood, and I just wanted to see how you were doing…” I sit on the only bar stool of the club she's opening in 4 weeks like I belong here and I give a quick look around. It still looks like someone bombed the place. Using H-bombs. Nicky herself looks like a drunk construction worker with a bad case of lack of hygiene. Her hair is a mess and there are bags under her eyes. This place is her baby, she worked so hard for this and now she's giving it all she has, just for it to be exactly as she dreamed. We even talked about it in the few days we've been together in Max. I wasn't much of a talker back then, so she just went on and on talking about everything, from conspiracy theories on the real identity of Madonna, to this crazy idea of a club called "Between the bars" where everything was supposed to be prison related, entourage included. And now she's about to make her dream a reality. She can do it. If someone can do it, it's her. I have no doubt.

"Well, as you can see…I'm tired poor soul…” She says looking around with an actually tired look. "I'm a busy and tired poor soul" she adds. There's a dry tone in her voice. Like my surprise visit is not a welcomed surprise.

"Well, if you want I can leave…” I point at the open door, not really wanting to go, but with my pride slightly bruised. She doesn't look too happy to see me either, maybe for the first time.

Her attitude towards me changes abruptly. Maybe it's my face, but I have the impression that she has just decided something.

"Come on! You're too old to be a little whiny pussy… help me move those bricks from there to the fucking brick container I have outside. I have to do it before the workers arrive tomorrow morning at 6 am and, as you can see, I have one hell of a night in front of me, so I can use a little help for a while…I hate Nate, he is a saint, he trusts me, he's depraved and he's full of money. I would be sucking his dick in a yacht in the Bahamas right now if I wasn't the queen of the lesbians, but, let me tell you, as an operative business partner he's worse than a dead octopus…”

I look at the pile of bricks. It's massive. How is she planning of doing it on her own? It's impossible.

"Really? In which ways?" I follow Nicky's rant, because there's nothing else to do when she starts to talk like this. And also because she's splendid when she does so and I've missed her so much.

"Well, just to start, a dead octopus can be eaten…” I knew it. I knew it by the way she smiled at me that she had a joke ready.

This makes me laugh. And after the day that I've had, it's a welcomed change of tone.

"Come on…I've met him! He doesn't look half that bad…” I say. Trying to understand how much of what she's saying represents the truth. In the meantime, we've put on some working gloves and we've started to put the bricks on the wheelbarrow. I'm definitely going to ruin this new pair of expensive pants that I've just bought, but for a good cause.

"No, and that's the problem! He's perfect! He's like this male version of me, but smarter, healthier and definitely more trustworthy!"

"Impossible!" I say with a laugh. "So what's the problem? Why isn't he here with you getting down
"and dirty?" I ask.

"We had a disagreement about the righteous way to use our money" she snorts.

"*His* money, you mean…"

"Trivialities! It's all a matter of priorities!" she yells like the pompous ass she is. I've touched an exposed nerve, so I'll go straight into it.

"Let me guess…you wanted people to drink cocktails using small rainbow dildos as straws and he didn't?" I ask.

"No, but thanks for the fantastic idea! You're a genius. Nate just didn't think that having two famous Russians models slash contortionists slash did-I-say-probably-sexually-fluid-models? performing half naked as our special guests at the inauguration was a groundbreaking idea. Obviously, I did! I've got the vision"

I smile at the idea.

"So, who won?" I ask.

She stops to look at me with the classic Nicky face that says 'I'm gonna fuck them both or dying trying'.

"Of course I did, but he didn't want to invest more money on it, so he made me choose. It was either paying the Russian contortionists or paying the construction workers to take away all this mess for a week…"

I laugh. Typical Nicky. "You should have told me that we were working for such a good cause! I would have come sooner and brought beers with me! This is practically charity work"

We laugh a little bit together while she explains in sordid details what she's planning to do with each one of them. But I really wonder why she didn't call me. Of course I have to work, but she knows that now that I'm here in NY she can count on me for whatever.

"By the way, do you want me to go buy some beers? If we're going to be here for a while, it's important to be hydrated" I propose. But she looks at me in a strange way.

"Nah….it's not necessary…I'm good. And there's not that much to do anymore. It's almost done…I don't want to take advantage of you…"

I look at the pile of bricks. We have already filled and emptied 3 wheelbarrows and I don't see any difference from before. How could this be almost done? It's like she doesn't want me here.

"Ok…" I say a little perplexed.

After working for almost ten minutes straight with me trying to make small talks and with Nicky answering in monosyllables, I just can't take it anymore. I drop the wheelbarrow and I turn in her direction with both my hands on my hips.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I ask her.

"Me? Nothing's wrong… " She says in the fakest and highest voice ever.

"Then why didn't you call me to help and now you're not even talking with me?" I can see something flashing in her eyes. Like she's finding it hard to come up with an answer.
"Well…I told you … I know you're busy…with the job and all…it's my mess, I can do it on my own" Poor and lame excuses.

"Come on, Nicky! What aren't you telling me?" I don't know why I'm pushing this hard. Maybe because I don't want anything unsaid between the two of us, or maybe because I think that this has something to do with Piper and if Nicky's the first one to come up with "the Piper topic", then I can ask her about what's the deal with her and Larry. It's been bugging me all day and that's why I came here. I was not in the neighborhood, I was on the opposite side of the city, but I needed to know. Not because I care, just because I want to know. But if I ask her directly it would look like I care. And I don't.

She tiredly sighs and roll her eyes.

She looks even more tired and defeated.

"Actually, to be more precise, there are two things that I'm not telling you. And to be even MORE precise, I know exactly why you are here and so I happen to know that you're not telling me something too. This makes us kind of even so I have every right to keep my mouth as shut as I want…"

Ouch. Maybe I'm more transparent that I think. I'm slightly offended, but I'm also busted. And she's right.

"What?" I play the confusion card.

"You heard me Vause…" She plays the no-bullshit card. And she's right, again.

I don't know if denying everything is the right thing to do right now. I guess not.

"I'm not hiding you anything…” but the need to deny is stronger than me.

"Not even your little encounter of the third kind in the park today?" She looks at me with another no-bullshit look. I'm attracting a lot of them lately.

So she knows. She spoke to Piper, so I guess that Piper saw me too, after all. I even had some doubts she didn't recognize me.

"There's nothing to say about it…” Why am I doing this? There's a lot to say about it. Actually, it's the main reason I'm here, other than the fact that Nicky is like the only friend I have who knows who I really am. Or was. And I like to see her, and talk to her.

"Yet, here you are… coming for a visit unannounced for the first time since you're in NY, willing to get down and dirty in your new business woman outfit accidentally on the same day you run into our common friend…”

She's pushing it. She's pushing it a little too much.

"I don't like what you're implying. And if you insinuate another time what I think you're insinuating, I'm going to happily leave, but I guess that's exactly what you want, right?"

We both can play this game. She clearly wants me to leave. And there are only two possible reasons for it:

1 – She's about to get laid
She wants to avoid talking to me about something Piper-related she thinks I want to know about even if I asked her not to tell me anything about her.

Since I'm sure she wouldn't have a problem telling me to get the fuck out if she was waiting for a girl, I guess it's the second option.

She just sighs very loudly, and this sigh is the answer I need to understand that I'm right. It surely has something to do with Piper.

"So, why aren't you telling me something anyway?" I ask her.

"Because you asked me not to and I don't know how you would take it" she waits a little bit. It's like she's arguing against herself in her brain "but I think you should know..." she adds.

What the hell is she talking about? What should I know? The problem is, I want to know. Now I really want to know. It was hard not to ask her how Piper reacted when I left the camp without saying goodbye. It was hard even for me, but it was the right thing to do. Otherwise I would have fallen again in the Piper pit. I know it. I was so close to fuck my life once again and for what? For someone who would marry another woman once she's done with me? Again? No, thank you.

It must be something big for Nicky to be this nervous about it. Maybe it has something to do with the wedding. Maybe they've already got married. They've decided not to waste any time. It could be. Or maybe something bigger...someone's dead...or maybe... No. No, it's not possible. It can't be.

I want to laugh just because I've thought about it. She can't be back together with Larry. God. That would be... God. No. No, no. It's impossible. But it would be big. And something Nicky would want to tell me. But I asked her not to tell me anything about her life. Oh God. Is she back with Larry? Not Larry. Everyone but not Larry. Now I don't care anymore about my pride or whatever. I need to know.

"Then tell me...I won't get mad, I promise..."

"Alex..."

"I know. I temporary withdraw all the limits I gave you. You can tell me anything..." There. All in. She takes a deep breath. I get ready for the big symbolic slap I'm going to receive. Now I'm pretty sure it is about Piper and Larry. Better to know it sooner than later. Gosh.

"Well, you know that the opening party is the first of October, right?" Nicky starts.

What? Not what I was expecting.

"Yeah..." I reply perplexed.

"And you know that it's a Thursday, right? Not exactly the perfect week day to open a new club..."

Where the hell is this going?

"I guess so..." I reply even more perplexed.

"Well, there's a reason behind it..."

What the hell does this mean? Are Piper and Martha getting married at the opening of Nicky's club? Or Piper and Larry? God, it doesn't make any sense. What happened on the first of October? I can't recall anything about Piper linked to that day. Not her birthday, not some particular anniversay. I'm
anxious.

"Nicky. Will you please get to the point before I go into menopause or die of aging?" I've never been more impatient. Which horrible scenario will be the reality?

"It's the day Red gets released and I'm going to throw her a surprise party in here" She says in just one breath. And I'm left… speechless… Or almost speechless.

"WHAT THE FUCK?"

I didn't realize I just shout it.

I was so focused on what I thought she was going to say that I didn't even think about other possible subjects that wouldn't include very specific blond girl.

"You promised you wouldn't get mad. So don't get mad. I would eventually told you…but you told me not to talk about her anymore…too"

She tries to calm me, but she doesn't know the reason why I reacted like this. I didn't expect this. Fuck. Red. My Red. I still haven't contacted her. And now she's coming here. And I'm going to see her for sure. God. She'll be so disappointed. What if I don't go to the opening? Can I and my shame avoid her forever?

"I'm not mad… just…I didn't expect this…"

I know why Nicky didn't tell me anything about it. The last time she told me to go and visit Red in prison, I just yelled at her. I wasn't ready. But maybe I'll never be.

Fuck.

Red.

But I'm so glad she'll be released. So soon. She's going to see her sons…her nephews…

I look at Nicky. She's looking at me with some worried eyes.

I put my hand on my face and I take a deep breath before looking again at her.

"What do I do Nicky?" I say dejected.

"Well, you've still got a month to make things right…"

I know she's right. It's time to face it.

I don't say anything more. That's why Nicky wants so much some Russian contortionists. It's more an homage. Sweet, caring Nicky. But that still doesn't explain why she didn't ask me to help her here.

"Fuck…" I say…because…what else can I say? I know I'll have to do it. I have to talk to her.

"See? You can't blame me for being worried about telling you this…there was the solid possibility that you would just killed me and, being this place a fucking mess, you could easily dispose of my body!"

She starts again to throw bricks into the wheelbarrow and I follow her lead.
"But that doesn't explain why you didn't ask me to come here to help you tonight and kind of wanted me to leave…"

She stops again to look at me.

"Well…in a strange indirect kind of way, yes, it does…"

"Why? Just because you were planning to avoid telling me about Red until the very last second?"

"Not exactly…"

"Nicky!" I've had enough of her little nuances.

"I just wished you would leave before I have to tell you the second thing I'm not telling you because you made me promise not to tell you anything ALSO about it ever ever again even though, judging by your face, I think you've already guessed what I'm about to tell you".

Oh.

The second thing.

The Piper thing.

In all this mess, I've kind of forgotten about it.

Kind of.

She says I've guessed right.

Dear God, it's Larry and Piper.

Fuck.

Fuck.

It sucks. It's plain horrible just to think about it.

It's wrong.

On so many levels. She has never really loved him. Not like she loved me.

Fuck I can't go there.

Fuck, no.

"Say it" I need to know. I need to take off the Band-Aid in one quick movement.

She opens her mouth to talk, but she's interrupted by another voice, coming from the entrance.

"Nicky, where are you? I've brought your favorite beer, the Japanese one with the horrible naked ladies on the label."

Piper.

This is Piper's voice. How…?

I look at Nicky with a face that screams panic and confusion.
Her face mirrors mine.

I've got approximately 10 seconds before Piper finds out we are behind this pile of bricks.

"In here!" Nicky yells back, looking at me, shrugging like it's the only thing to do.

Or zero seconds. Fuck.

"I'm going to put them in the fridge! Polly said I could leave early this week only if you'll give her free booze at the opening" Piper yells back and I can hear, but not see, her footsteps moving away from us.

"Deal! She gets drunk just by smelling alcohol…not a problem for me" Nicky replies yelling in the vague direction of Piper's voice.

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I whisper as loud and angry as possible once I'm sure Piper can't hear us.

"You knew it!" Nicky replies and it sounds like an accusation.

"WHAT?" I say with crescent panic in my voice and an incredulous face. I try to look around, to find some way to escape this situation or to hide, but it's impossible. There's only one door and Piper will be entering from there. I hate Nicky.

"You said you knew what I wanted to tell you!" her face is a mask of confusion.

What? My shocked face must have spoken for me.

"You didn't-? Fuck" she says. Realization hitting her.

"Yes. Fuck." I reply coldly.

"What did you think I was going to tell you?" She asks always screaming/whispering.

"I don't know… something about her and Larry!" I reply still under shock.

"Larry?" Her horrified face gives me all the answers I need. There's no Larry in the picture. She just didn't want to tell me that she called Piper for help instead of me. And the reason she wanted me to leave was to avoid…this. Fuck. I'm so stupid.

I can hear the footsteps.

I'm not ready.

I'm not fucking ready.

"Here you are! Why didn't y-"

Piper Chapman with boots, a jeans salopettes and a white shirt underneath, stops in her tracks. Looks at me like I'm the hunter who killed Bambi. She then proceeds to look at Nicky with almost the same look. And then, without saying a word, she turns her back at us and she starts to walk away.
Did I already say it before? Fuck.

Nicky reacts in a couple of seconds and runs behind her.

"Wait, Piper…please"

I don't move.

They are talking just outside the door. I can hear their voices, but not all the words they're saying.

It doesn't take a genius to understand that Piper is really pissed.

Pissed at Nicky for not warning her about my presence, I guess.

"I told you not to!"

Piper's voice gets louder and louder. And Nicky starts to shout back.

I don't like this.

I don't like to be the cause of a fight between them.

There's only one thing to do. One thing that will also free me from this situation.

I walk towards them.

They're facing each other and I don't think they have seen me.

"Why do you always have to react like this?" It's Nicky's turn to yell at Piper.

"You know why! If only you would have had the decency to send me a text we wouldn't be here, just to begin with…"

"I was trying to make her leave!" Nicky is trying to justify her actions. It hurts a little bit to be used as a justification, but now it's not the time to be sensitive.

This is my clue.

"Nicky's right! She didn't know I was coming…" I say as loud as I can.

They simultaneously turn their heads in my direction. Piper's eyes are drilling holes in me. Nicky's eyes are telling me 'what-the-fuck-are-you-doing-here-are-you-out-of-your-mind-?'

"I'm not talking to you" Piper says coldly and turns her attention back again at Nicky. She opens her mouth to say something.

"But she did try to make me leave…” I add before she starts speaking again. I won't give up. Maybe I can save this situation.

"I've told you I have no intention of talking to you" This time she doesn't even bother to look at me. It's not like I did something wrong, for god's sake! I've just came here to meet my friend…

"Do what you want, I'm leaving anyway…Nicky, I'll call you later…”

That's my brilliant plan. Save the princess and run the fuck away from the burning castle.

With three long steps I'm almost outside when…
"Yeah, run away…that's what you do best…"

I stop.

I freeze.

I boil.

How dare she?

I turn around.

"Sorry, what did you say?" I don't have any filter anymore and my voice is as cutting as the intention behind my words.

"You heard me, Alex"

I don't know if it's the way she has just said my name or the fact that now she's looking directly at me, but I just…explode.

I'm in front of her in a second.

"You talk to me about running away?" I laugh. It's a dry laugh. I hope so much that my words could convey all the accusations I want.

She doesn't back up. She actively takes a step in my direction. We're face to face.

"What now, are you going to bring out things that happened a thousand years ago?" Oh no, she didn't. She just didn't refer to the death of my mother as a thing that happened a thousand years ago. She wouldn't dare.

"I'm sorry if the death of my only mother has been an inconvenient to you…" It's a childish low blow, to call her out on this. But seeing her affronted face from up close makes it worth it.

I think she's going to eat me alive.

"STOP IT!"

A strong hand on my chest pushes me back. The same thing happens to Piper.

Nicky has separated us and now stands between us.

"THE BOTH OF YOU! FUCKING STOP IT"

I've rarely seen Nicky like this. I immediately shut up. And Piper too.

"I don't fucking care what I've told you or promised you" She points her finger alternatively at us. "To the both of you. This has got to stop. And it's got to stop NOW! I'm fucking tired to be in the middle of this. Nicky don't tell me this, Nicky don't tell me that, tell me only this thing that I want to know, I won't go there if she's there, she's fucking horrible, she's a coward…all of this! All of fucking this has got to stop. Now! I've got my head and my virtual testicles full with this kind of crap and I've got no space in my brain to think about what to say or not to when I'm in front of you. And I've got no fucking time to be careful not to hurt your feelings! You're not children, for god's sake. You're both my friends and you both owe me for so many things that the least you can do is trying to make my life easier and not throw me in the middle of this stupid feud. You hate each other? Good! But don't come to me to complain. I don't want to hear it, I don't care. It's not nice to hear nasty
things coming out of your filthy mouths. I just want to open this fucking pub and if I need help, I want to have the help of both my friends. TOGETHER! Without having to think that if you're here I can't call her and vice versa. Is it too much to ask or do we have to set up a fucking shared calendar?"

It's a rhetorical question and we both don't answer. After taking a breath she continues.

"So this is what is going to happen now -"

Like a tornado Nicky stops mid-sentence and leaves the room.

Fuck.

What now?

In a way, I saw it coming. In another way, it was impossible to predict.

Piper is not looking at me but neither of us is moving. It's like we're living in pause, waiting for Nicky to come back and tell us what to do.

And, thank god, after a few seconds she's back, with two big bottles of beer.

She storms inside and she puts one in my hand and the other one in Piper's.

"I'm leaving now..." she starts and suddenly I'm feeling very uncomfortable because I'm starting to understand where all of this is going. "...I'm going to the pub on the other side of the street and I'm going to sit down, relax and drink a whiskey with my friend Bob, the bartender. When I come back I want to see two empty bottles and two human beings working together in harmony to move that fucking pile of bricks outside of my pub." She looks at both of us like she's not messing around. "And smiling!" she adds with her typical maniac joker face.

"But-" Piper tries to talk but Nicky silences her.

"No buts. Blondie. If you leave, don't even bother to come back and don't try to call me, I don't want to fucking hear from you until at least the week after the inauguration. And, by the way, you'll not be invited. I'm not fucking joking anymore. You put me in this mess and you're going to take me out of this. No more complaints, no more censorship, at least not in front of me. And this applies to you too, Vause. If I want to say Piper's name in your presence, I will. She's no fucking Voldemort. I'm going crazy even without you! I don't need this drama. I'm not asking you to become best buddies, god knows what happened the last time I tried to do so... I'm just asking you to behave when you're in front of me and don't make me shut up about stuff regarding the two of you..."

She takes another breath.

"So please, ladies, if you'll excuse me..."

And, with a small bow, she's out. Without adding another word and without giving me the time to realize what has just happened.

Nicky gave us an ultimatum, and I don't think she was joking.

Fuck.

I take a glance at Piper. She's looking in front of her, her eyes are unreadable, her jaw tightened, her knuckles white and I think her bottle is about to explode.
And yet, she doesn't move.

But I need to do something. So I take mine and I use the edge of the wheelbarrow to open it. I take a sip. It has a strange taste but it's not half that bad.

"Do you want me to open it for you?" I ask. This is kind of my version of the holy olive branch. We have to start from something. I don't know how to do it, but I have no intention of losing Nicky. That's not an option. And deep down I know that all the rules I set about Piper were childish and stupid. But they made me feel better. Apparently they were a burden for Nicky, and, well, I was talking shit about her friend…so I guess she was right. And of course we're going to see each other a lot more now. It would help to be… I don't know… civil? Is it even possible? Can we fake it? Can I fake it?

But it is really hard… after what I did… I know she hates me now…and even if I keep telling me that it's not a problem, deep down I know that it's not entirely true. And I really want her out of my life for good.

"No, thanks" she says.

I was so lost in thoughts that I kind of didn't expect a reply.

She walks in my direction and uses the same border I used to open her bottle in the same way I did. It's not a thing the old Piper would know how to do.

She takes a sip.

I'm just fusing my brain, thinking about what to say to make this discussion we're about to have as peaceful as possible. How do I start? Do I need to apologize? Do I really want to? Do I fake-apologize?

"This beer is still as disgusting as I remembered, so either you'll finish mine, or I'll empty it in the sink…"

She's the first one to talk.

It's clearly something that she's doing against her will. I can easily read her face this time. But she's doing it anyway.

I really appreciate it, even if I don't know what to say back. I'm stuck.

I think I've spent too much time thinking about what to reply that wouldn't make me sound like a moron, since I'm still a little pissed off, but I don't want to continue the exchange we were having five minutes ago…

"I'm going to put it here. You'll decide…" She adds, looking at me and placing the bottle on a small table, taking my silence as, I don't know, maybe a rejection of a conversation.

She then proceeds to move by my side, but only to take the wheelbarrow. She places it near the pile of bricks, she puts on her gloves and she starts to fill it up with debris.

Ok, now I look like a moron anyway.

"Thanks" I mutter.

Doh.
I take a big gulp of my Japanese beer, I put it on the table next to hers and I follow her lead by putting on my gloves and starting to throw bricks into the wheelbarrow.

I have to say something.

We have to talk.

This silence is impossible to bear.

"Piper…"

I start, without really knowing what to say… Fuck you Piper or I'm sorry Piper?

"You'll have to smile…" She interrupts me before I can decide where to begin.

"Sorry?" I ask confused.

"When Nicky will be back, you're going to smile and we're going to smile together and talk, I don't care about anything else, you can tell me or accuse me of whatever you want, I don't care-"

She stops mid-sentence. She was going to say 'anymore', I know. And I wasn't expecting to feel this kind of pinch in my chest.

"Of course I will…" I reassure her.

We resume our work in silence.

This is good. This is what I wanted, right?

I knew this day would have come. I expected troubles and shouting, but it looks like I've just had the golden free pass handled to me.

Then why do I feel like something is off? Why do I feel like I have to say something?

Am I feeling guilty?

Fuck.

I don't know how much I've waited, but I take the leap just after we've emptied the first wheelbarrow and we go straight towards the table with the beers. She's about to grab hers, probably to throw it away.

"Don't!" I say. "I'll drink it". To prove my point I take a few deep gulps of mine.

She doesn't say a thing, she just leaves the bottle on the table and goes again towards the pile of bricks.

"I think we need to talk…" I say without even realizing it once I'm kneeled at her side, throwing debris in a cloud of dust. Is it really me? Is it really my voice?

She looks at me and, for a fraction of a second, I can see something alive behind her mask of dignified calm.

"I don't think that's necessary" she replies, again with a calmness that is freaking me out a little bit. I know who she is. She's the one who was shouting at my face not so many minutes ago. That's the real Piper, my Piper. Not this serial killer version.
"I've started to work with Martha at the Tibetan art exhibition…" I reply. To justify my need for clarity and confrontation.

"I know" she says matter of factly.

Ok.

So they're still together.

Or I guess so.

What was I expecting? A break up? And for what?

She would have never left her fiancé for me. And I wouldn't want her too. So what's the problem?

If she's going to marry someone even if she's actively fucked another human being during their engagement, it's her fucking problem, not mine.

This conversation is stalling. It's not going anywhere. I need to push it.

"We're going to see each other a lot more…" I add. Hoping to ignite a useful conversation.

She's looking at me like I've said the most obvious thing in the world. And she resumes her work..., probably thinking about that time at camp when she was the one who wanted to talk and I was the one avoiding it.

"Piper, come on, say something…"

She stops and takes a deep breath.

"Listen. Nicky's right, she's stressed and this situation isn't going to help her or us, for what it's worth. And she's my friend, I'm willing to do whatever it takes to keep it this way"

She takes another breath and it's like she's carefully choosing her next words.

"Me and you, we've already talked enough to cover a couple of lifetimes and look at what happened anyway. I can't let…this…get in the way of my life another time, and, frankly, after what you did I don't care anymore about what you think on the matter. I'm sorry for raising my voice, I wasn't expecting you here as you didn't expect me, and I assume it wasn't a nice surprise for you too. At least we still have something in common." She has an ironic smile what she says this. I want to erase it from her face, I'm getting pissed off again.

"We do know each other enough to act normally in public. Or at least to try it…" She finally adds.

What she's saying is right, has sense from a logical point of you, and she has also apologized to me. But I can't shake the feeling that this is not Piper. She's faking it big time. And the thing about sharing the same desire not to be in each other's presence anymore? Bullshit.

It's not like I want to see her. But there can't be this indifference she's showing.

We're Alex and Piper, for fuck's sake.

It's not like I want a fight or a confrontation, but why isn't she asking me why I left?

And why is it bugging me so much?
Maybe because I've come to the conclusion that she deserves a clarification, and the fact that she doesn't want it leaves me...I don't know... feeling like this.

"I think we should come clean and talk about what happened this summer anyway..." I continue, like a tank.

She snorts with an ironic smile.

"And I really do think that there's nothing to talk about. At all." There's a hint of a challenge in her voice.

"I just want to be sure that you...understand why I..." Fuck, I cannot even say it.

"Don't worry Alex" Piper cuts short. "It's all crystal clear".

I don't know what she's thinking about my ...escape. But I am somehow sure that she's come to the wrong conclusions.

It's a sensation, but it's bugging me.

I should let it go. I have what I wanted.

But I can't.

"I left because it was the right thing to do..."

I expect fire. I expect her to tell me how wrong I am. Or how I could have just talked to her, or called her. Or left her a note. Anything.

And I want her to tell me these things, because she would be right.

I didn't handle it in the best way possible.

A part of me wants to tell her this.

Another part of me wants to stop trying to do things for her and get the fuck out of here so I won't have to go through hell for the millionth time once she'll treat me like garbage for the umpteenth time.

It's a tough competition between my two thoughts.

"It's ok" it's her calm reply.

Fuck.

It's not ok.

It wasn't ok.

Why is she like this?

Has she accepted what I did? Does she know that I took the car that day to save the both of us? I know exactly what would have happened if I've stayed there. Hell again. Lives ruined again. And for what? For some hot session of sex based on faded memories of a glorious past? For having my heart crushed and thrown away again?

No, thanks.
Not that it was easy. It was everything but. It was the only sane thing to do.

I don't think she's thinking this.

But you can't talk with a wall.

If she wants to act like this, it's her choice.

It only proves that I made the right decision back there.

This thing that I'm feeling will go away with time. As everything else.

So I don't say anything back.

Even if it's bugging me.

And we work. Hard. Like it's almost a silent competition. She's sweating and she keeps being a mute Oompa-Loompa that never looks in my direction. My arms hurt like hell, but I won't ask her to stop for rest. I only pause by the table to drink the beers each time we go outside to empty the wheelbarrow. Mine is empty, Piper's is almost empty too. And I welcome with open arms the dizziness that's coming from drinking too much.

For the love of god, please Nicky, hurry.

I don't know how much time has passed.

Maybe one hour or more. One hour of deep and heavy silence. I think I've never heard Piper being silent for so long in my whole life.

The pile of bricks is way smaller than before. I think our job will be done with just another 7 or 8 rounds.

But still no signs of Nichols.

How much fucking time do you need to drink a fucking whiskey?

Then, after another 10 minutes, finally, my salvation.

Nicky's footsteps that echo around the silent room are like a sweet melody in my ears.

Thank god this is over.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" Nicky says with a very complacent face and a way too ironic smile.

I dare to look at Piper. The relief on her face makes me think that at least we do agree on something else today.

Nightmare's over.

"Whoa…if I knew that the two of you could do the work of six men in only two hours, I would have organized this play date sooner…"

I roll my eyes, but I smile. Because she's funny, because I'm relieved and partially because I've promised Piper to do so. She has a smile on too, one that probably looks more genuine than mine.
"Sooo girls… let me check the bottles of beer…." She goes around the room, looking with appreciation at all the work we have done.

Damn.

Piper's beer.

In two quick steps I'm in front of the table and I drink whatever is left. It's not that much. Not that I think that she would get angry if we haven't finished the bottles.

"See? Until the last drop…." I proudly show her the empty bottle and it gives me the opportunity to say something, anything, for the first time since I don't know how long. She laughs.

"Piper hates this beer…did you drink hers too?"

"A girl's got to do what a girl's got to do" I joke back. I'm really too relieved.

"Well done, well done. So, do you have something to say to me?" She says, this time directed at Piper.

"Cut the crap Nicky… we did what you asked us to… we talked and we didn't kill each other. Don't push it " It's Piper's turn to say something this time. Her tone is jokingly pissed off. How is she able to do so, it's unknown to me. It's like looking at a pro con woman.

Nicky joins us close to the table.

"So, how was the whiskey?" Piper asks nonchalantly.

Nicky just looks smiling knowingly at her in silence, amused. She clearly isn't buying it.

"Unbelievable…" Nicky mutters mostly to herself.

"What is unbelievable?" this time I'm the one who asks. I want to be part of this conversation too. I can fake it better than her.

"You both" she says, always laughing and clearly enjoying herself. She hugs us both, one arm in each of our necks, and she squeezes so our cheeks almost crash together.

"You want to tell me that everything is good between the two of you?"

"No…" replies Piper disentangling from Nicky's hold. "…but we've put aside our… differences… so now you can have us both in the same room without the risk of it becoming a crime scene…"

Piper then proceeds to do the unthinkable and looks at me with a complicit look and a smile.

Woah. Really credible. Kudos to Piper. I don't know if I smile back.

"So, are you telling me that now, if I want to, I don't know, go out with my prison friends Alex and Piper, you're both coming with me and we're going to have fun together and hug each other?"

She's still hugging me, but I'm way taller than her, so she looks like a monkey dangling from a tree.

"Piper's right. Don't push it!" I say disentangling myself too.

"Piper? You're calling her using her real god given name? Gosh Vause, now I'm starting to think this is truly real…"
I roll my eyes because how do you respond to something like that?

Piper comes to my rescue. Kind of.

"Well, if you didn't think that it was a possibility, then why did you leave us here, trying to reach an understanding?"

Nice question.

"Well, to be honest I didn't really think it through. I thought of it more like the Hunger Games, where only one would come out of it alive. The one who loved me the most, probably. Or the one with the better butchering skills" she laughs. "By the way, my money where on you, Blondie. Vause is a softie now that she's a redhead."

I hit her on the shoulder.

"Ouch!" she says. And we laugh. We all laugh. Together. The three of you.

"I would have bet on me too…” Piper adds, looking at us and smiling.

It's clearly my turn now to prove that everything is amazingly and falsely good between us.

"I've spent more time in prison that the two of you, I'm way more street smart than a couple of upper class toothpicks…”

This wins me another round of relaxed laughter. Mission accomplished.

"This looks too good to be true… but a girl can dream…Let me be clear… the embargo is over?" Nicky asks.

"There was never an embargo" comes Piper's quick reply.

"As a matter of fact I wasn't talking to you" Nicky says looking straight into my eyes.

The push to lie is really strong. But I need to prove that I'm ok with this charade.

"Yes. It's over".

Nicky's really affected by my answer, I can clearly see it. In a fucked up way I'm happy to relieve her of some tension caused by my, or better our, behavior.

"If I need help with the club, can I call you both to help me together?"

"Yes" Piper replies. I nod.

"If, let's say, you run into each other at the park, will you immediately call me to complain about the unfairness on life, interrupting my siesta saying it's a really really important matter?"

"I didn't call you for that!" Piper can't admit it. But I feel a wave of satisfaction in knowing that she did noticed me in the park after all and what she felt wasn't indifference.

"So the important part was that you received an Amazon pack addressed to your neighbor and there was a vibrator inside?"

"I know how much you love those gossips!" She keeps trying to justify her actions. It's cute.
"Well, you know you're right!" Nicky and Piper laugh. I think it's a good idea to join in the fun. When Nicky turns in my direction, I already know that it's my moment to be publicly harassed.

I brace myself.

Is she going to mention that time that I called her crying from the car or the other time where I was at her place and she found me sniffing a scarf that I knew belonged to Piper?

"And if you're thinking that it's a matter of national security to know if Piper is back with Larry or not, will you show up unannounced in my club, or are you going to ask directly to the source?"

Oh. This one.

"Larry?" Piper exclaims "I wasn't really worried!" I say. Our answers mix together.

Nicky just laughs at our face.

"See? Isn't it wonderful that we can joke about these things together?" I don't know if she's mocking us or if a part of her is really relieved for this kind of fake truce.

Her phones rings in that moment before we have time to answer.

"It's Nate" she says, showing us his name on the phone screen.

She answers the phone and walks away from us.

"Larry?" She asks me once Nicky is on the other side of the room, but loud enough so she can hear us.

Well played, Piper.

But a fake question requires a fake answer.

"I was just curious…" I say as nonchalantly as possible.

And, as before, our conversation dies a silent and uncomfortable death.

I try to keep up the appearances.

"Ralph is looking healed…"

"Yeah. He has totally healed" she replies with a smile.

But after that, is the Sahara desert of the conversations.

I look closely at the label of the beer that I still have in my hand. There are some naked ladies indeed. Some ideograms.

And when there are no more trivial things to focus on, I just look around hoping that the conversation with Nicky and Nate would be over really soon.

Piper is checking her phone. Classical lifesaver move. Mine is in the jacket. I wish I had it too.

When Nicky is done and in front of us again, I'm almost having an anxiety attack.

"Sorry. You know…work" She says with a laugh. Probably laughing at something only she can
understand.

"Let's go finish moving the bricks" she adds with an energetic movement of her hand.

Piper takes a step towards the wheelbarrow, but I actually have other plans.

"Well, I leave you two at it...I've got to go..."

This awards me a suspicious smile from Nicky.

"I was supposed to stay here for ten minutes! It's already been two hours and I've destroyed my new suit...I think I've deserved some rest..."

I don't wait for her reply and I just walk towards my jacket and I put it on.

"Thanks for your visit, Specs!"

"You're welcome" I reply. I can feel the freedom. "Bye" I add when I'm almost outside.

"What, aren't you even going to give us both a goodbye kiss?"

I don't even turn around, I just flip her off.

I hear laughters at my shoulder. Mission accomplished.

The cold wind hits my face and it's a really welcomed sensation.

But before I start to walk again, I just need some time to calm down. So I lie with my back against the outer wall of Nicky's club and I wish I was still a smoker.

A cigarette is exactly what I need in this moment.

It has happened.

The moment I feared and dreaded.

And, as always happens, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would and, of course, it was a totally different thing from what I was expecting.

I was expecting screams and accusations, avoidances. Lately I've also started to think that she was going to tell everyone who I really was. Or am.

Definitely this was not an option. Seeing her almost...resigned...is strange.

Why is it bothering me?

Has she given up on me?

It's probably just an ego thing. I'll get past this.

Maybe this can work.

Maybe this was exactly what we were supposed to do from the beginning.

Two polite strangers who happened to have kissed every inch of the other's body.

Two civil strangers who once thought that their lives were meant to be linked together till the sun
exploded.

Two strangers.

No more thinking about it. I need to focus on the positive things.

I've got an art exhibition to create. Nicky is opening her club. Red is going to be free soon. Sandy is waiting for me at home with a bottle of Italian red wine. No one is going to unveil my real identity. I'm alive. I'm free.

I don't have to think about anything else.

I start to move. I cannot help myself but take a quick look inside the open door of the pub. I can see Nicky and Piper. Hugging. Nicky's hand is on Piper's head.

That's another very positive thing.

Nicky is happy. And she isn't suffering for our behavior.

When, later, while I'm lying on my bed, ready to sleep, I receive a text message from her, saying only "Thank you", I can't help but feeling good. I can't help but think that what happened today was good. Was useful.

In spite of the horrible feeling I can't shake away from the moment I've laid my eyes on Piper this morning.

The feeling that her ghost will hunt me forever.
Strangeness has become my reality. I've never been a common girl, someone predictable. But this is odd even for me. And even odder is the fact that I'm getting used to it.

Living a lie is way easier than I thought.

Now, when I laugh because I know that I have to, sometimes I really enjoy myself. So much that I'm starting to question my very own sense of humor. Am I doing it because I find it funny or because I know that I'm supposed to laugh and it's easier to convince myself that this is really funny?

It's the fucking dog eating its own tail. There's no way out of this. If I really start to think about it, and I tried a little bit in the past few days, the risk of short-circuiting my brain is so high that it's practically a certainty.

So, there's only one thing to do. Ride the wave and don't ask where it goes.

And that's why I'm having drinks right now, after work, with Piper and her fiancé Martha. There's not even Sandy here with me for a moral support she's not even aware she's giving me.

And, fuck, it's pleasant.

For real or not, I guess I'll never know. The deep part of my brain is a place that I do not intend to visit in this period of my life.

It was automatic. Me and Martha were at the Art Gallery, taking measurements, planning a room after the other, thinking how to move what and where, and suddenly the afternoon was over. We were planning something big and I was so overwhelmed by...happiness and satisfaction that when she told me that she had to go to an aperitif with Piper and that I could join them, I said yes without even thinking twice. I wanted to keep talking about the didactic side of the exhibition. Education through art is something that I've never thought about, but it makes so much sense and it opens up so many possibilities in my brain, roads that I just want to explore... new approaches that I want to learn... and... god, I've never felt so good in my life.

I've never felt so...interested, stimulated, useful. And they're paying me! The fucking Met is paying me, a lot, for doing something that I would do for free. I'm breathing Tibetan art, I'm reading everything that I can put my hands on. I'm trying to learn as much as possible because I still feel like they're putting too much trust in me, and sometimes I think that I don't deserve it. I'm not good enough, or experienced enough. I'm going to let them down. I'm putting everything I have on this project. I feel like I finally have a purpose and I just can't get enough of this feeling. Even though I'm terrorized most of the time.

And I owe everything to Martha.

My job was great. It still is. Fantastic. I invented it and I'm really good at it. But gosh, this is something else, this is thrilling. I wasn't feeling like since forever.

I've started as a consultant a few weeks ago. I've never been one, so, at the meetings, I just put everything that I knew on the table. Ideas too. I didn't know what it was specifically included in my role or not, so I just kept suggesting things.

Martha saw something in me and trusted my vision enough to ask me to be an executive member of her team. I didn't even know if I wanted to be a part of it. I've always worked better on my own.
Now I don't know how I lived without it. This is planning, scheming, risking and putting yourself out there in a way that I've never legally experienced.

Moving drugs, organizing mules and planes, predicting every variables, was really satisfying. I created complicated schemes that were true masterpieces. But no one was allowed to see them. And someone surely died because of them.

In this case, it's the opposite. Everyone will know what I did. And, most importantly, people are hopefully going to enjoy my work. Get inspired by it. Learn something from it.

If this is not redemption, I don't know what it is.

And Martha… She's the most patient woman I've ever met. She's good. Kind. And she's never treated me like the stupid newbie that I think I am. I can ask her whatever I want and she teaches me all I need to know with and enthusiasm that I didn't know a single person couldn't have.

"I'm not your boss, we're collaborating" she says every time I thank her for her help. I've never felt better working with someone.

That's why I didn't even think about Piper when Martha asked me to join them at the pub. At all.

Not when me and Martha walked into this place, still deep in conversation. Not when me and Piper quickly hugged and smiled just to sell this act that we're putting on. And not even when Martha and Piper kissed briefly on the lips. Not at all. Not even now, that we are alone at the table because Martha just left to go to the bathroom.

This is our reality now.

Politeness when someone is watching us, indifference when we are alone.

I've learnt to always have my phone fully charged when I know that I'm going to meet Piper. Just in case.

It's been going on for a couple of weeks, since that day at Nicky's pub. We've seen each other a lot. At least every other day. To help Nicky or when I'm working with Martha and Piper comes during lunch break or when we're done working. Her presence is becoming something familiar again.

"I think Piper's jealous of us…" Once Martha told me with a smile "She says we're spending too much time together…" she winked.

I felt horrible. But I laughed because that was what expected from me.

"Come on!" I replied.

"Yeah, I know. But actually I'm pretty happy about it… it's the first time that she shows some sort of jealousy…"

"Happy to serve…" I replied "If you want to raise the bar, you just have to ask…" I added pushing my shoulder against hers.

Everything ended like that, with a big laugh between us.

But inside, I was dying.

Because my first thought was about Martha, about how…good she is. Unlike me. Unlike Piper. Then I was feeling angry. Angry at myself, for what I did at the camp, but mostly angry at Piper. I
didn't know Martha, but she did! How could she? How could she have done something so …bad and wrong?

There are only two answers in my head regarding what happened this summer.

The first one, the one I've decided to strongly believe in, says that Piper tried to get rid of her guilt for her past actions by 'befriending' me, but the situation, the shock of our reunion, the storm, Ralph, all of this confused her and made her do stuff she didn't really wanted to do. Like fuck me. She temporarily forgot about Martha. That's it. That's what I've chosen to believe.

The second one. The horrible second one. The one answer that I strongly decided not to even consider an option, speaks of something else. Something I don't even want to think about. Something that I perceived while I was looking at Piper and Rosa the night of the lake, when they were unaware of my presence. Something that I felt when she touched my scar for the first time. Or in the lake when she took my face and kissed me. Something that scares me like hell because there's the possibility that I was the only one to have felt it. That it was all in my head because that's what I wanted to see. To feel.

Nope. Not going there.

I've got enough problems of my own.

And those problems have a name and they are texting me right now.

'Where are you honey?' Sandy's text.

In a bar with a girl I've cheated you with and her girlfriend that is kind of my boss.

'Still at work. Be back in an hour' my real reply.

The less she knows, the better.

It's not like I'm not thinking about her. I feel really guilty for what I did to her, too. She didn't deserve it. But what happened this summer helped my realize the hierarchy of my thoughts.

And she wasn't in pole position.

But she's important in my life. She believes in me and I need her. I need someone like her. Someone who's there for me. Someone who loves me.

That's why I can't leave her. Not right now. I need her.

It's not too selfish. I'm really trying to make it work.

When it's just the two of us, everything is close to perfection.

The problems come when other people are involved. And that's why I have to lie. Better to be safe than sorry.

'See you soon, baby. Buy the milk' her text.

'As you wish milady' my reply.

I have to stop the instinct to put the phone away because Martha is not yet back and it means that I need to pretend to use it otherwise I would be forced to look at Piper who's now pretending to use hers.
What a fucking ridiculous joke has become my life.

I've tried.

I swear I've tried.

I asked her about Ralph, about her job, about PoPi and even about Larry! I tried to make a joke about all that misunderstanding at the park, but nothing.

A polite smile and nothing else on her side.

I've tried to talk to her. Really talk to her. Like we used to do, with a straight line going from my heart to hers. But nothing.

Not even a 'Stop it'. Just silence and the occasional 'it's ok'. It drives me mad.

She seems to be aware of my presence only when someone else is involved. Like right now, with Martha back at the table with us. She smiles, she jokes, she asks me to pass her the glass of wine, she asks me about my job, she asks me if it's easy to work with her fiancé. She calls me Martha.

This is easy. Even for me. I ask her stuff about her work. What is the soap flavor more sought-after in the fall. It's cinnamon, by the way. I ask her again about Ralph. And this time she is obliged to answer. And she seems happy to do so. Telling me stories of adventures in the mud, of rolls on some decay carcass, of stormy nights spent under the bed…

I know she's telling me the truth. Those are real stories about him. But the feeling that, if she could, she would have never told them to me, makes me feel almost …bad. Definitely sad. Mostly because I really want to know those things.

The real problem is when it's just the two of us with Nicky. Those moments are the worst. Because there's no Martha anymore, I'm just Alex. And there are also Piper and a crazy head that knows us like the back of her hands.

You can't fool Nicky Nichols. Or, actually, it looks like you can, by faking a polite strange difficult relationship. It almost fools me sometimes. It's pretty convincing. When she talks to me in front of Nicky, she's not super friendly, she has the perfect amount of discomfort and awkwardness that makes everything look so credible. But the moment we are alone for some reason, it's pretty clear that everything is an act. At least from her part. I don't know how I would behave in a real situation, she hasn't given me the opportunity to explore that. There's no relationship between us. We're strangers.

Strangers that tomorrow are going on a road trip together.

"You're a genius, Piper!" Said Nicky yesterday after Piper herself had proposed something so gigantic that I almost had a panic attack right there, between the still dirty walls of the pub.

"I know… two pigeons with one stone! Since I have to go anyway, she can come with me! What do you say? Don't you think it's time, Alex?" She had the guts to look at me. All proud at herself. I don't know if she was proud for having proposed something that would perfectly sell our new fake budding relationship or if, not even so deep down, she was just proud for putting me through such a great difficulty.

"Fuck no, I don't think that the right time will ever come…" I replied after a few seconds of pure shock. And it was the truth. It still is.
But it took just one glance at Nicky to know that I had no choice on the matter. She was right. They both were. It was time. But fuck, it's hard.

I'm going to Litchfield tomorrow.

Me and Piper are going together back to prison. As visitors. And I'm going to talk to Red.

Piper is going to drive me there. I've never been in a car with her actually driving. And this is only the first of a long list of things that are making me feeling fucking uncomfortable.

We're going to be alone in the same car for a total of at least 4 hours. I'm pretty sure they're going to be 4 hours of embarrassing silence. And I cannot even fucking look at the phone because I've got car sickness since I was a child. And, with the luck that I have, we're definitely going to be stuck in traffic.

God, how will I survive tomorrow?

Is there a way to bail out?

No. I can't. I cannot do that to Nicky. I cannot do that to myself. But mostly, I need to speak with Red, I need to beg her for forgiveness before the inauguration of Nicky's pub. And I will have to do that in front of an hostile Piper and I don't know how many other strangers. Just my luck, again.

What if she won't forgive me?

What if Red will decide that I'm not worthy?

What will I do? How will Nicky react to this?

I suddenly feel like I'm suffocating. I need to go away. Go outside. Go home.

"Drinks are on me!" I say, raising up from the chair like it has suddenly turned into lava.

"Wait, are you leaving already?" Martha's voice reaches me.

"Yeah. Tomorrow I have to wake up early…it's better if I get as much sleep as possible…"

"Oh, yeah…the mysterious day off…" Martha jokes. She's referring to this morning, when I told her that I wouldn't be at work tomorrow. When she asked me why, I paused for a second too much before making up a story about some relatives that I have to go visit. She spent the day making fun of me, imagining strange scenarios involving me and my day off.

I roll my eyes. "I know you're going to miss me" I say with a wink.

From the corner of my eye I can see Piper stiffening. I swear I didn't do it on purpose. I was just being honestly friendly with Martha. Nothing more than that.

I guess I've just earn another 5 minutes of silence tomorrow. Lucky me.

"Bye Reed…have fun" replies Martha sending me a kiss.

"Bye Adams…don't break anything. Bye Piper..." I smile and wave at the both of them. I have to do it. Piper waves back with a smile that could blind a whole fucking country. It would be nice if she would tone down the fake enthusiasm just a notch.

I think I'm going to talk to her about it tomorrow, just to pass the time in what will probably be a very
As I'm about to pay, a hand on my shoulder makes me turn around. I know immediately who it belongs to.

"I need to do some stuff tomorrow morning at the shop. I was thinking about leaving a little later, around 10.30. Is it ok for you?"

Piper talking to me when we're alone is always strange, even if she's doing it just because of technical reasons. We didn't exchange phone numbers. So she hasn't any other way to contact me. I think it would be useful to have each other's number again. But after I've refused to give her mine this summer, I don't think it's a good idea to ask for hers now.

So, yeah, we're going to communicate old style. Long stares and mind reading.


"Yes"

"Thanks. See you tomorrow…" I reply. She turns around and leaves after squeezing a little bit my shoulder. Or maybe I've felt something that wasn't there. But her hand had stayed there all the time it took her to tell me about the new plans. I'm pretty sure of that.

I'm not out of this fucking place soon enough.

And I'm not at home soon enough.

But still, I'm not even really ready to go inside. So I just keep walking for another thirty minutes. With no direction. Just around my neighborhood, like your usual lunatic psycho.

The reality of what I have to face tomorrow finally had hit me.

Piper, Litchfield and Red. All in the same day and with no idea of the possible outcomes. It could be a disaster. It will be a disaster.

God.

I have to stop it.

I go inside.

10 minutes is the total amount of sleep I had last night.

Not one minute more.

I've tried to drink. I've tried to fuck. I've tried to read. But nothing. The usual routine didn't work for me.

Sandy was worried. 'It's just work stuff' I replied. Feeling a little guilty after the intense sex session we just had.

But, as I said, nothing.

The sense of doom didn't left my body not even for one second.
So I just gave up around 5 AM, I went for a walk, I took a shower, I left a note for Sandy and I went straight to my office where I rearranged my files, cleaned everything and also took out the trash.

I took another walk. I tried some breathing exercises. I waited outside an antique shop for almost an hour to purchase a Fabergé egg replica that I think Red would like, only to remember that I cannot physically give her anything while she's still in prison. I went to the coffee shop. I took some snacks and two cups of coffee, one for me and the other for Piper, and now I'm in front of PoPi, not knowing if I'm supposed to wait outside or to go inside.

So I just wait outside. It's cold but not that colder. And I've got the coffee cups to keep my hands warm.

I'm already feeling embarrassed. Standing here. Doing nothing. With a coffee that is getting colder as the minutes pass. Maybe it was all a joke. Maybe Piper just wanted to make me lose some time and scare the shit out of me.

It would be a relief. This day hasn't even officially started and I'm already exhausted.

The door opens.

"Come inside, Satan! We're almost done"

Fuck.

I should have seen this coming.

I enter the shop.

There's only one person inside.

"The red hair suits you, you know…flames of hell, blood of the innocents…" she says with a smile. She's not surprised to see me at all.

"It's nice to see you too, Polly" I say as politely as possible, looking around to see if I can catch a glimpse of Piper somewhere. But I have no luck. It's not that nice to see her. I've never liked her. But now so much time has passed…

"Holy Mary! You remember my name! And you brought us coffee…you're really a changed woman" she says sarcastically taking both cups from my grasp, analyzing them, leaving Piper's favorite on the counter and drinking from mine. At least Piper still likes her cappuccino with hazelnut.

"You're actually drinking from my cup" I say.

"Mmm, poison tastes delicious" she says taking another sip. I let her do whatever she wants. I don't need a coffee to be on full alert today.

"Where's Piper?" I ask.

"In the back, she'll be here shortly…" she says with a smug grin. She's just staring at me. With knowing eyes. I just want to erase that grin from her face.

I wait until she's taking a sip.

"So, are you still fucking Larry?"
She spits all the coffee on the floor, coughing. She'll have to clean everything up and I'm sure I'll pay for it someway. But it was so worthy.

"What the f-" she starts.

"What's happening here?" Piper comes out of nowhere and looks disappointedly at the mess on the floor.

"Nothing, me and Holly were just catching up…" The irony is very intentional in my words and I try to mimic Polly's smug expression from before. If looks could kill, I would be dead right now.

"Be careful Alex… Piper told me everything, or should I say…Martha?"

I don't know what she's threatening me with. I highly doubt that she'll blow my cover and I highly doubt that Piper had really told her everything. Right? And, by the way, except for disappointing everyone who's ever known me as Martha, I wouldn't risk anything. Not anymore.

I just shrug and, for the first time, I really look around. It's a lovely place. The furniture is new, but in the style of the old pharmacies. Lots of wood, pastel colors, a nice smell not too overwhelming.

"Nice place you've got here" I say, looking around and mentally checking what I could put and where to make it even more characteristic.

No one answers me. Polly is starting to clean the mess she made and Piper is putting on her coat.

"Let's go" she says after a few seconds and she goes straight towards the door. I grab the cup of coffee I've bought for her and I follow her.

I can't help but turn around to look at Polly once again and send her a small kiss. I can appreciate a good banter between two individuals that never clicked together. She must feeling in the same way too because she smiles back at me. And it's an honest smile.

Maybe the only honest smile that I'll receive today.

"I didn't tell her anything, except for the…you know…cover name…" Piper tells me as soon as the door is closed behind us.

She talks to me. It's a nice start. Is it her way of telling me that she hasn't told Polly about our summer…thing?

"I've guessed so…" I reply.

I've never really thought about it. About the possibility that Piper would tell "that" to someone. Someone who isn't Nicky. I've never really told Nicky everything specific too, but I've given her enough clues to put two and two together. Like when I called her crying from the car, telling her that Piper was ruining my life once again and that she was a poison and a drug and I was just a fool who would do anything for an orgasm.

Not my highest moment.

But since then, at least I've never cried like that anymore. Definitely not on a car.

And yeah, I guess that Nicky knows. If not from me, definitely from Piper.

Piper undeniably didn't tell anything to Martha. Otherwise she wouldn't be this nice to me and she would have never offered me the job.
This leaves who? Cal? Rosa? Her New York friends? I highly doubt it. But I have to admit that I don't know anything about her life anymore.

We're strangers. Not my Piper anymore.

"Hey, I've got you a cup of coffee…" I say to interrupt the silent walk towards her car.

She turns for a moment to look at the cup in my hand like it's an alien puppy and, with a "Thanks, we're almost there" she resumes her walk without taking it.

What was I expecting?

I find it ridiculous nonetheless.

She stops in front of a parked brown station wagon. There's nothing posh about it, nothing shiny. Just a solid, useful car.

She sits on the driver seat and reaches across the passenger seat to open the car door for me.

I climb in. It's not that clean inside, well, it is clean for my standards but not for Piper's old ones. There's an old plastic minion on the dashboard, a pack of her favorite gums, some papers, a bottle of water and something that looks like a scarf.

But the smell is so undoubtedly Piper Chapman that I almost feel at home.

I sit comfortably.

And I wait.

And wait.

I haven't moved a muscle in the last 15 minutes. I've still got the coffee cup in my hands. I guess me and this cup will become besties in the next few hours if Piper decides not to stop.

And, judging by the way she's aggressively driving through New York horrible traffic like a maniac, I guess she'll never stop.

Finally, when we get into the Interstate, everything seems to calm down. I breathe more freely and I can see Piper relaxing and stretching her back against the seat.

Then, a miracle happens.

"Can I have the coffee please?"

She is talking to me. I could faint for the shock.

"Yeah, of course…" I reply and I pass her the cup maybe too quickly. She takes a sip of the cold coffee, but she doesn't seem to mind.

"It's good, thanks"

Thanks? Wow. There's clearly something wrong with her. We left the city and it's like a lot of other things were left there.

I know what I want to say. What I know has to be said before we reach our destination and before I
begin to freak out. Because I will, I know I will.

But I need to find the right way and the right time to do it, even if I know that there are no such things as right things with her.

"Nice car you have here…"

Dumb. Nice shop, nice car, nice life. It's like I cannot say anything else.

"It's a little old but she does her job"

Another reply. Another miracle.

It's not a stream of consciousness, but it's better than the absolute silence I was expecting from her.

She takes her phone, she digits something and suddenly the car is filled with music.

God, I love music. It eases the awkwardness. I can look outside the window and not at Piper all the time. She can tap her fingers on the steering wheel. And the time can pass way better, even if I can still feel the tension. The road is long, I have time to get myself together and decide when it's the right time to talk. Not now. It can wait a little bit.

"It's a random playlist…I can change it if you want…" she says after a while.

The music is good. Some new indie, some old rock, the ever present 90's pop hit. It's the ideal for a road trip.

"No, it's perfect" I reply.

She has talked to me. Out of the blue. I cannot have a better signal that this is the perfect moment for us to talk.

"Listen" we both say at the same time.

I laugh because this is absurd. A day has 86400 seconds and, of course, we choose the same one to talk to each other. It's the thing you only see in the movies. She isn't laughing but I think she's trying to hide a smile. Her eyes are fixed on the road.

"You go…" I say. I prefer to know beforehand what I have to deal with.

"No, you go…" She says. I don't want to be the first one to talk, but this could easily be the start of a never-ending ping pong game, so I just surrender. I have to play my cards well.

"First of all, thanks for the ride…" I start with politeness. I want to kick myself. This is not me. Or, well, this is definitely not me with Piper. I was just caught a little bit off guard. She rolls her eyes. I'm rolling mine too.

"I…really appreciate it…" How do I say what I really want to say? "It's…well…" I'm stuttering. I'm really struggling to find the right way to express what I feel. "I…I'm..." Dear God. "I'm really nervous, but this is also something that I know that I needed to do, so if you didn't….I'd never…" that's it…that's the best I can do.

She just has a polite smile on her face and she turns to look at me just the minimum amount of time to let me know that she heard me but she has clearly no intention of replying.

This irritates me a lot.
But I'm in no position to say anything. So I just change the subject, hoping that she would bring out the argument we need to discuss, but I highly doubt it. "What were you going to say?"

She takes a breath.

"I didn't get the chance to speak with Red. I've tried to call her yesterday, but I couldn't reach her. So I didn't ..warn her about your presence. So…she doesn't know your coming…"

Perfect. Red doesn't know about me. This makes me way more anxious. She hasn't had the time to prepare.

"How do you think she'll take it?" I ask before I can stop myself.

Piper waits a little bit before answering. I can see that she wants to be careful with her words.

"You know her… I don't think she'll take it too well. But I also think that she's going to accept it… sooner or later…"

That's exactly what I don't want to hear. Especially the 'sooner or later' part. What if she starts to yell at me? What if she doesn't want to see me? What if she hates me? I know she's angry at me, Nicky kind of implied that… Is it already too late? I know she has every right to be mad at me. To be disappointed. But I'm really sorry. I did it also for her…

God, it's going to be horrible.

And I'm on my own.

Why did I say yes to Nicky?

With still 30 minutes to go, I desperately need to occupy my mind with something else.

I try to think about the exhibition, I try to make a mental list of all the things that I need to buy or to find. But that's exactly what I'm doing since day one of my new job, so, after a while, with the Beatles in my ear, I decide that it's the right moment for me and Piper to have the other talk.

"Why are you doing it?" I finally ask what I really want to know.

She turns around, confused. It lasts a second. My words could mean everything... Why are you giving me the silent treatment, why are you bringing me with you at Litchfield…

"What?" She asks back. Composed.

"Why did you let me tag along? Why did you suggest it?"

She takes another deep breath. It's becoming her routine every time she has to talk to me. Taking a big breath and going through the horrible task of having to acknowledge my presence so she can get out of it as fast as possible.

"I want Nicky to have the inauguration she's always dreamt of, with the people she loves. And that means you have to be there too. But I also want Red to have the welcome back party she deserves. And if you two don't … sort out your …situation… and you're going to be there anyway for Nicky, I think it'll be a mess… and it'll be awkward…"

I understand what she's saying. But that's not enough.
"More awkward than us now?" I joke. I can't resist.

"It's a totally different thing" she replies without hesitation. Like she was expecting this. Like she was prepared. I wonder what happened to the old Piper, the impulsive one. Did I kill her this summer? Or is she like this only with me because I killed off myself from her life?

"I don't think it is that different at all" I hope she can understand, by the tone of my voice, that I have no intention of closing this conversation until I'm satisfied.

"It's not awkward between us" she calmly says.

"Really? 'This' isn't awkward?" I ask, pointing my finger alternatively at us, trying to look less polemic as possible. Only sarcastic.

She smiles. God it's so unnerving.

"No…it's just… inconvenient… We talked about it…we agreed" She's referring to the one-way conversation we had when Nicky left us alone in the pub.

"Not really. You talked about it… I didn't really have a say on the matter…"

She keeps smiling. I hate it.

I wait for her to say something, but it looks like she doesn't have any intention to do so.

"Piper, come on. We didn't agree on anything. You just shut me out and decided everything…"

Another deep breath. Another sarcastic smile.

"You want me to say it? Ok. I'll do it. You've kind of lost the right to say something the moment you took your car and you ran away from the camp".

We're not screaming at each other this time. This is a real, adult conversation.

"See? I told you it was a thing we should have talked about!" I'm completely twisted in her direction and I look at her even if she's always fixed on the road.

She briefly looks at me and I think that, for a second, I see fire behind those eyes. Even though she keeps her composure.

"Why? Why are you doing this? I've spent a week this summer, BEGGING you to talk with me. To clear things out. And what did you do? You tried everything in your power to shut me out. To tell me that it was useless to dig up things from the past. Things that I thought we needed to talk about. But you didn't. And guess what? You were right. It was useless. You want me to say it again? Yes, you were right. I'm just doing the same thing you did at the camp…"

I feel like my heart is being squeezed by a giant fist. I've never thought about the similarities between what I did this summer and what's happening now. But it was different, I was different.

"It's not the same. I wasn't expecting to see you. I just reacted out of instinct. I've changed my behavior after that…"

"Yes, by forcing yourself to talk to me only because Nicky asked you too and then leaving without saying a word after you told me that we had time? You should have stayed faithful to your instinct…"
"Piper…” I say. And I'm scared by how sweet my voice sounds.

I don't think she has noticed it, because she's almost laughing at herself.

"It's incredible how much I understand your actions right now. I desperately wanted to explain to you what I did and why I did it. I wanted so badly for you to understand me. Now YOU want to explain to me why you left the camp" Another laugh. And then she continues.

"I know what it feels like. Even if it's useless, if you want to do it, you can" she turns and looks at me. "I'll tell you how it'll go. You're going to tell me that you did it for whatever reasons, I'm going to say it's ok, you're going to believe me or not and that's it. This isn't going to erase the mistakes we did and it's not going to help us be less awkward of whatever you want to call it. It won't lead us anywhere, so why bother?"

What did I do? What did I transform her into? How much did I hurt her? I much did I hurt myself too?

"It could be better than this" I say and fuck, I really believe it. That's why I did what I did. There's too much …reality… between us. We're not meant to be…fake.

"I don't know. You said we were never friends, remember?"

My words are coming back to bite me in the ass. And not for the first time. And, unfortunately, I think I still believe them. But I also believe that it can be better than this. It has to be. I'm not feeling good. I'm not ok with this. There has to be something better. Something that can make me feel less… wrong. I don't know how long I can go on like this. But I also don't know how I can change this. If I can, or want to change it. It's like I'm trapped. How do I want to change it? We were never friends. Maybe there's no solution.

"Yes. But…this is also… too …strange… we've always found solutions to issues that were… " I don't want to say the word 'wrong' even if it's what I'm really thinking about.

"I—you ran away Alex…I don't know…I don't… think…"

Her knuckles are white on the steering wheel and I really have no answer to what she's saying. I'm confused. I need to digest this conversation. I need to find a solution. Not for us, there's no us. It's over. But for me. For my life.

We stay silent for a while. Both immersed in our own thoughts.

I got lost into the magic of the sounds and words of the Massive Attack song that is playing on the background. It's about souls without minds and bodies without hearts and I think that it really describes what I'm feeling right now. I'm missing every part. I'm missing something. Only when the song slowly comes to an end I realize that the car has stopped.

I look outside the car window.

"We're here" she says.

Oh, no.
Chapter 35

I'd laugh at the irony of the situation if I wasn't so fucking terrorized.

We are a little late and visitation hour started 15 minutes ago, so everyone is already inside. This leaves me and Piper all alone in the freezing autumn air, still shaken by our conversation in the car. Well, of course I'm only speaking about me.

Piper seems at ease. Like she's done this every month since her release. And, according to Nicky, that's exactly what she did.

Like I wasn't feeling guilty already.

So yeah, let's walk in silence together towards the Litchfield gate! And let's not think about all the discomfort, the betrayals, the deaths, the depersonalization and the hurt that we experienced in this place. And let's not even think about the real reasons why we experienced that.

Who turned who and when? We both committed mistakes and we both have our burdens to bear. In a sick way, I think we're even at least in this.

Everything that I'm doing feels unnatural. I walked out of this, I crawled out of it more than once, more dead than alive. I'm not supposed to come back. Every nerve, every muscle, every cell of my body agrees with me.

But here I am. Like a reverse dead man walking, going straight inside the beast with someone that, I'm pretty sure, would be glad to see me behind bars again. And I'm not talking about Nicky's pub and its ironic name.

So, yeah, let's walk together down horrible memory lane. In silence, of course.

Actually, the sound of my pounding heart covers the silence. At least it's still useful for something.

I'm so scared that I don't even realize that we're inside. It's the smell that reminds me exactly where we are. So familiar and so dreaded of. A mix of cheap disinfectant and human defeat.

We pass the metal detector. A female guard that I don't recognize does a sloppy physical search on us. I can't help but think about what I could have smuggled inside.

God.

I came here as a visitor only once, to see Piper. After my second betrayal and before her second one. Everything seems so different now, but also everything is just the same.

As we're approaching the door with the frosted glass I turn around and I see a guard that looks familiar. Was her name Wilma or Wanda? She looks at me. At us. She nods in Piper's direction, with a little smile. It's a small gesture, a greeting, a nod between two human beings that acknowledge each other as they've clearly done in the past.

This small stupid thing throws me over the edge. Piper, in prison, acting like she belongs in the real world, greeting the guards, like they're equals. And here I am, cautious, still angry, not willing to go past the fact that a fake guard almost killed me and a lot of other real guards didn't do anything to help me.
No, I don't belong here.

I have to go.

I feel like I'm fainting.

I stop abruptly. Piper senses it and turns around. There's determination and a hint of annoyance in her eyes.

"What are you doing?" she whispers at me.

I hear Red's voice from inside, laughing at something or someone.

"I- I—can't" I must be pale. I feel pale.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

My brain is blank. I just want to go home.

"I can't…really I can't…" it's impossible for me to go back inside there. It's impossible just to stay here and breathe this air. I'm suffocating. And what if I have to speak with Red? What if she doesn't want to talk to me? What am I going to tell her? Am I going to ruin Nicky's inauguration? No, I can't go to the inauguration. I need to find an excuse…I have to let Nicky, Red and also Piper have fun, without me. I only cause troubles.

I take a small step back. Or maybe I've lost my balance.

Piper's stare goes directly to the guard. She grabs me by the arm and, squeezing, she drags me towards a door on the right.

As it turns out, it's the bathroom.

"Alex, what are you doing?" she dryly asks as soon as the door is closed and she's sure that no one else is in here.

"It's this fucking place…" I answer with both my hands on the sink, grabbing the edge to prevent me from falling. I'm primarily scared to fall into my fears, not into the floor.

I look at Piper's reflection on the mirror. She's looking everywhere else, but not at me.

"It's not as bad as it seems" if this is her way of cheering me up, she's doing a weak job.

"I don't think I can go in there…" I am ashamed of my words, but that's exactly how I feel. I didn't expect to freak out like this. I can't control my muscles.

"You can't pull out now" This time she looks at me through the mirror. I try to convey what I'm feeling with my eyes. There was a time where we only needed to look at each other to know how the other was feeling. The person I'm seeing right now doesn't look like someone willing to understand me.

"I'm going to wait for you in the car…" I've made my decision. I try to push myself from the sink to get my legs moving. I want to cry so badly.

Her hand on my arm stops me almost immediately. She's squeezing maybe a little bit too hard.
"Don't. You're going to regret it…" This time I'm the one refusing to look at her.

"Is this a threat?" This is my way out. I just need to upset her, it shouldn't be too hard.

But she doesn't fall for it.

"Come on Alex…you know it's the right thing to do…you know you have to do it…" she says a little too softly. I wonder if she means that I have to do it because she put her face on this or because it's the right thing to do.

Either way. She's right. But I'm also right.

"You don't know… You don't know how I'm feeling…I can't breathe Piper…it's this place…what…what if she doesn't want to see me? What…" I'm bubbling again. Her hand on my arm is the only thing keeping me in this world. The only thing that won't let me fall into the vortex of darkness that is my brain right now.

"I know. I've been through that too, but it's going to be ok… I'm gonna be there…" She says with a voice that, now I'm sure, she's using just to calm me. It is the same voice she would use to comfort an unknown child.

I almost smile.

"That's part of the problem" I say. And this is partly the truth. She immediately breaks the contact between us and removes her hand.

"I can wait outside if you want…"

I wonder for a moment if this could be a good solution. But no. I'm definitely not yet in the stage where a missing Piper is better than a fake Piper. And I feel kind of ashamed for this thought.

I snort.

"No"

I can't add anything more.

I have to do it. I have to face my fears. It's the only way to move forward.

"Let me do the talking" she says while her hands are turning the sink knob.

I have to do it. I have to.

"Put your wrists under the water…." She adds. I do as I'm told.

The freezing water is helping a little bit. I splash my face too. Luckily I didn't put the eyeliner on today.

Her warm hand on my back makes me turn around, I'm feeling like the unknown child she's trying to comfort only because he's crying and annoying everyone.

"Visiting hours are over in 15 minutes"

Another wave of panic rushes through me. But I have to do it. For Nicky. For me.

I look at Piper. Straight into her eyes, with no filters. The last time I did something like this, we were
at the camp and I later regretted it and kicked myself for it for days. But now I need it. I need everything that can help.

I nod.

Let's go. Help me.

She nods back and she opens the door.

I follow her.

She opens another door.

I'm enveloped by light, people and joyful chattering. It's already too much.

I look around at the familiar environment. Everything is like when I left. The vending machines, the dirty walls. Even the same people.

I've got some eyes on me. I can feel them. I wonder what they're thinking. They're multiplying. I feel them all whispering. Is she the one who almost got killed in here? Straight from the land of the living dead? Is everything only in my head?

"Piper! You're late! I was worried you couldn't come to see me in this hell hole for the last time!" A loud joyful voice that I would recognize everywhere resonates in the room. I take a look in that direction.

And fuck. Red is not red anymore. Red is yellowish? Grey? What color is that? Besides that, she looks the same.

She has eyes only for Piper, who's walking towards her table with tentative steps. Red doesn't seem to notice me, she raises from her chair and hugs the living hell out of her. I stay two steps behind. Still. The panic isn't allowing me to feel awkward. I'm not feeling anything.

I can physically feel the moment her eyes land on me. She's still hugging Piper, but she disentangles herself quickly.

"What is she doing here?" She says without leaving my face for even one second. Her tone is harsh and sounds way more Russian than I remembered.

"Red, sit down please" Piper gently tells her and puts her hand on her shoulder in the same way she did with me a few minutes ago. I feel like a loser.

"What the hell are YOU doing with her?" This time her Russian vibe is directed only towards Piper.

"Red, please…" She says again and kind of gently pushes Red towards her chair.

Like a hawk, Red looks straight at me again, sending me darts with her eyes.

"Hi Red…" I say in a voice that sounds almost normal.

She doesn't reply, she just looks at Piper again and they communicate without words. It doesn't take a genius to understand that Red is pissed off at Piper and even a little worried about me being here with her. I wonder what does she know about me. What did Piper or Nicky tell her? On the other hand, Piper just tries to calm her. Her hand is always touching Red and, after another "Please…", Red diligently sits down, but always keeping her proud face.
This is a victory. She could have easily asked me to leave. Or, more likely, obliged me to leave.

I wait for a sign from Piper. She must have sense that because she looks at me and nods. And, by the time I reach the table. She has already taken an empty chair for me. I sit on in. My hands are on my lap. Piper is sitting on my left and my past is looking at me from the other side of the table like I'm the ghost chicken she was trying to catch my first year on this place.

"I hope you're here to apologize" She begins.

"Yes" I nod too. I'm fidgeting. My nails are leaving marks on the palm my hands for sure.

"Then do it" She demands, peremptorily.

I really don't know from where to start. And she's looking at me like…

It takes me maybe a second too much to come up with the beginning of my apology because she speaks again before me.

"Did the guard cut also your tongue?"

WHAT THE FUCK?

I gasp. Soundly. I surely wasn't expecting the red carpet, but fuck, not even this.

"Red, come on!" it's Piper voice, coming to my rescue or something like that. I've lost my words.

"You. You…" Red says pointing accusingly her finger at Piper "Once I'm out we WILL talk about this…What the hell were you thinking? An ambush?"

"It's not an ambush, come on…you know why we did it…" Piper replies.

"Nicky should have come! Not you…" Her tone is harsh.

"She's busy with the club and all…"

They're talking about me like I'm not even in the room. Like I'm some sort of annoying package that needs to be delivered and no one wants to do it.

"She should have come on her own if she really wanted to come…” this time the jab is directed at me. This time I'm ready.

"You're right, Red. But, judging by what you've just said to me, there was a high chance of you shooing me away…or of me walking out of this room…” I couldn't stop before spitting out the last part of the sentence.

"It would only prove my point"

"Your point being?"

"That you only care about yourself. Always have…"

Her words feels like a direct hit on my stomach. I sense the tears starting to burn in the back of my eyes. I won't cry. Not anymore.

"I almost died Red! They wanted to kill me! What was I supposed to do?" my words sound like a supplication.
"You should have turned to us! We were your family. That's what you do. You don't disappear without a word… do you know what we've been through?"

She's talking about a 'we', but I'm here only to talk about her. I don't want to go somewhere else. I don't want my guilt to get bigger. I came here to get rid of a small amount of the weight that I feel.

"Yes" I calmly say with my eyes pointed at the table.

"Really? Do you? Do you know that I haven't slept for weeks and that I've spent months waiting for something from you? A letter. A phone call. You sometimes wrote to Nicky, so I knew for sure that you were alive. But what about me? What about the woman who took you in as a daughter? Who protected you for years? And don't get me started on what you did to this girl here. I had to feed her. Take the fork and feed her, like a baby bird, because she was crying all day long and she didn't have the strength to eat. Did you know that?"

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.

"Red! Don't…" Piper's voice anticipates me. She clearly doesn't want to be exposed like that, I get that.

"No Piper, she has to know. Because I was there and she wasn't. She didn't even had the decency to notify us that she was still on the living world. And now you're all happily driving here together, like nothing has happened and you are all friendly when you were here crying because she left, again, not more than 3 months ago! Don't you learn from the past? You have to hear this too… So, Alex, did you know it?"

Nicky wrote me something once when I was in Chicago. Just once. About Piper's reaction to my incident, about other people's concern, before I banned her to do it ever again. And I've also read Piper's letters but I've never truly believed in the words written in them. But now it's different…

"Not immediately, but yes" I tell the truth.

"Then why didn't you do anything?" There's resentment in her words. I'm starting to see their side of things too. But at the time I was so involved in things like my depression and my paranoia to even think about other human beings' feelings. I was thinking more about their survival. Their survival from me.

The truth will set you free, they say.

So I start…

"I was depressed…"

"That's not a good excuse" Red interrupts me.

"Fuck Red, I've let you talk. Now you let me talk…after that, do what you want" I maybe raise my voice a little bit too much. Maybe she wasn't expecting that. But it is already so fucking difficult with the knowledge that Piper is next to me, listening to everything. At least now Red is a little offended, but silent.

"I was depressed and I was paranoid. No one believed me. Not you Red, not…" I stop before saying Piper's name. I still need a ride back to New York. "…not anyone of the family you were talking about. I was alone, scared and I was left in a pool of blood more dead than alive…" while my girlfriend was fucking someone else. I don't say it but I think it. It still burns. Even if I know that I was impossible to deal with at the time. I've accepted that. I wasn't myself. I was a walking disaster.
But still…

"I was in a coma for three days. I woke up and I was thrown into Max. I would be dead if it wasn't for Nicky…" I feel Piper stiffen beside me and I see Red's face turning into stone. It's not easy for me to talk, but it's also not easy for them to listen.

"A few days after Nicky left, an inmate approached me, telling me that Kubra had given her the order to kill me in Max".

There's a gasp coming from Red's lips, and I think Piper has stopped breathing. It's clear that they both didn't know anything about this story. Nicky has kept the secret after all and I can't help but feel a surge of affection towards her.

"On the night it was supposed to happen, I went into this girl's cell, she wasn't there so I started to look around, searching for weapons…" Piper's hands are on the edge of the table and it looks like she's about to flee.

"…but what I've found were drugs" I pause. For me is really difficult to say this out loud. I take a deep breath. "I took them. I overdosed" Piper pushes and the chair slides behind. She's about to stand up and walk away.

I put my hand on her knee, without thinking. I need to stop her. I need to touch her. She has to know everything at this point. I keep talking, fast, as I squeeze her leg, hard. Red has a hand in front of her mouth.

"I don't know how, but I survived. Figueroa got me secretly transferred to Chicago. I've spent a lot of time in isolation… she came someti-"

I feel the shift under my hand. Piper gets on her feet and my hand loses the contact with her thigh.

"I'm waiting outside" she says and not me nor Red can say anything at all. She's already out of the door before we even have the time to realize it.

I'm half-scared and half-relieved.

I look at Red.

Do we acknowledge it?

"So what about the evil Fig?" she asks after a few seconds, ignoring Piper's exit. Her tone is way less harsh than before.

"She came to visit. Once in a while. To make sure I was still alive. She knew about the threats…she helped me…"

"What threats?" Red asks. Fuck, I've said too much. I wasn't supposed to let her know this. Even if it's over. It was a secret I wanted to keep from everyone. I don't want them to know that they risked their life just because they knew me and I loved them. I take another big breath, I'm becoming like Piper.

"Kubra. He said he was going to kill everyone who was… connected to me and then, you know… kill me…" I can't look at her face right now.

I swallow. I fight the tears.
"Proklyatyy!" She almost shouts. I don't know what it means, but I like the sound of it. "That bastard!" I almost smile. It's been a long time since I've talked about it with someone. Only Nicky and Fig know about it. And the federal government, of course.

"Yes but, you know…nothing happened, so…it's good…"

She has this way of looking at me, so intense. I melt.

"It's not good, not good… where is he now?"

"Dead. Everyone I knew is dead, or in prison. The cartel is dismantled …"

She doesn't say anything for a while. I'm nervously shaking my leg under the table. She doesn't move her eyes from me.

"Are you safe?"

She's using the same words Piper used when we were talking in her cabin, just before I let her clean my legs from the thorns and the blood. Even there, I almost burst into tears. I turn my head and I try to look at the ceiling. I cannot talk right now, so I just nod.

"Good, that's good Alex"

I keep nodding, I do not dare to speak or look at her.

"I still think you should have called or write, but it's good" I can feel the affection in her words. So I turn around with a smile. She's smiling back. Something inside of me warms up. I wasn't feeling like this in a long time. I clear my throat.

"I know but…I didn't want to risk it. Contacting you meant putting you at risk. And I was already doing it with Nicky. I couldn't use the phone or the mail system. I gave Figueroa the letters for Nicky and she gave me the ones from her… she did everything in secret and in person, she was the only one who knew…" I never meant to go into details, but now that I've seen an opening, I want her to know, to understand. So much.

She smiles at me with a mischievous smile.

"Figueroa was you mule!" she says matter of factly.

God. I laugh, hard. Together with Red. I never thought about it that way, I am mostly deeply grateful with that not-so-evil woman. But yeah, I can see the irony in it.

I've never thought my meeting with Red could end like this. Especially after the way it started.

So, when our laughs fade, I tell her what I came here to tell her.

"I should have called you. When it was over, after the witness protection and Kubra's death. I should have come here…to explain…or just to…see you… I knew you were worried… I'm sorry"

I look at her while I speak, hoping to show her my honesty. She's listening to me with a serene face that has nothing to do with the face she was sporting at the beginning of our talk.

"Then why didn't you?" she asks.

Now it comes the hard part.
"I- I was a coward. I was still angry. I was ashamed. Afraid of your judgement. After I almost… " I still cannot say out loud that I kind of tried to kill myself "after the overdose…I couldn't…I felt betrayed by…her… I wasn't strong enough…" It looks like I cannot even say Piper's name anymore.

"Last two minutes! Visit hour is over!" the voice of a guard interrupts me.

I resume. "It was easier to pretend that part of my past didn't exist anymore. You were better off without me…"

"Don't say that! Never say that!" I didn't even realize that my hand was on the table and her hand was covering mine.

I look at her without adding anything else. There's too much. There so much more to talk about. But this is not the time or the place. I think she has the same feeling because she seems to accept my explanation and then changes the subject.

"Are you clean now?"

"Five years. Yeah"

We smile at each other.

"We need to talk about this again. Once I get out, you owe me a dinner at a fancy place. To make the apologies more official, of course"

I laugh.

"Of course. And I already got you a little something…from my new job…you know, I'm an art dealer right now…"

"I know everything about you. Nicky told me. I just hope is something good"

"Russian and special" I wink.

"Visit hour is over! Do to some technical problems, all the visitors are requested to follow the guards to exit the parameters of the Litchfield prison grounds. Please follow the guards"

I'm on my feet immediately. If they tell me to follow the guards, I still always sprint. Too many years behind the bars. I reach the other side of the table, where Red is raising up from her chair too.

She looks behind me, to check on something. Or someone.

"Don't be too harsh on her…” I don't need names to know who she's talking about.

"I'm not doing anything…” and it's true. I'm really not doing anything.

"Atonement. You two can only hurt each other so much" I don't know what she means by that. But there's no time to ask. Piper's probably coming this way.

"I don't want to hurt her" I look at Red straight in the eyes. I want her to believe me, because if something is true, is this. I'm done. I've discovered this summer that, the more I hurt her, the more I get hurt too. And I'm done with that. I'm done with pain and suffering. I'm fucking done.

"So let it go. It's easier" I'm still not sure what she's talking about. My job? My resentment?

"She isn't talking to me"
Red just looks at me. Clearly not telling me something that she's trying to tell me with her eyes. She looks again behind me. This time I'm pretty sure that Piper's on her field of view.

"Just promise me that you're going to go easy on her" she quickly whispers.

I nod. Even if I want to tell her badly that is Piper who should go easy on me. And she doesn't know what happened at the camp. I don't want her to picture me as the only bad wolf.

I don't need to turn around to know that Piper is beside me. I can feel her.

Red just slaps me softly on the cheek. She doesn't hug me and I'm glad for it, I don't know if I would be able to resist the urge to cry.

"See you outside, red head"

I smile back. I can do that.

"Bye, Red"

"Come here you, kid. Let me give you a kiss"

She doesn't give Piper the time to bend, she has already taken her into her arms. And she's whispering something in her ear. I only see Piper nodding. I take a few steps towards the other visitors because I want to give them some privacy since Red is probably telling her something about me.

It's a strange sensation, but I'm glad she's doing it.

"Visit hour is over! Do to some technical problems, all the visitors are requested to follow the guards to exit the parameters of the Litchfield prison grounds. Please follow the guards"

The inmates are walking in order through a door on the right, the one that leads to the sleeping quarters.

The visitors are being gathered on the right side of the room.

I see Red cross that door for probably the last time. And I'm really happy for her, I know what it means to leave the fucking prison. I can't wait to leave even if I'm not a prisoner anymore.

After a few moments, Piper joins me in the group of 20 or so people. I feel like the worst is over. And I'm really happy for her, I know what it means to leave the fucking prison. I can't wait to leave even if I'm not a prisoner anymore.

I swear I'd never thought that it would matter that much to me, but there's nothing now that could ruin my mood.

"If you'll follow me, please" A loud guard's voice cuts the chatting noise of the room. "The entrance is unfit due to some leaky pipes, so now we'll have to go to the other exit. It's not that far from the parking lot. We are sorry for the inconvenience. We ask you not to touch anything and not to wander around. Just follow me please" and he starts to walk. Towards the same right door where Red disappeared a few minutes ago.
My heart has stopped the moment he said "other exit". I don't know what he said after that, but I know what he is referring to. There's only another exit. And to go there, we have to… oh fuck.

Oh fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no.
Chapter 36

Everyone is excited. They're happy to have a free tour of a real penitentiary.

I can't move my legs. Fuck, I can't feel my legs.

Everyone else is moving. I'm not.

"Come on Alex, we have to go" Piper tells me, a few feet in front of me. But I don't move, I can't. So she turns around and looks at me. I think I can pinpoint the exact moment in which she understands the situation.

She's on my side immediately. We're the last two of the group. Behind us, there's a guard, closing the line, impatient.

Piper's hand finds her old usual spot on the lower part of my back, and she pushes me, forcing me to take the first step towards what I now see as the gates of hell.

I'm not fucking ready.

She keeps pushing me. Hard. I let her drag me. Step after step. I try not to look, not to observe, to keep my eyes unfocused, but it's impossible. The fear is making me see everything, smell everything, hear everything.

Step after step. The alleys. The beds. The neon lights. The door that leads to the chapel. The sound of my heart. Beating too much. It's not healthy. It's covering everything else. I'm dying. I'm dying again. I'm dying in this fucking place like I was supposed to. If it wasn't for Piper's hand I would be still in the visitation room. But she keeps pushing me.

It's even worse when we go outside.

I can't breathe.

I know the path. I've walked it a thousand times.

Last time I did, it brought me to…

Fuck it's still there. Why didn't they fucking destroy it? Tear it off? Erased from the face of the earth?

The greenhouse is looking at me. Still pulsing with black sticky death. Soaked with my blood.

The queue has come to a stop. Why aren't they moving? They're too slow. I have to go away. The air, I can't breathe. I have to…

"Hi baby girl, long time no see" I can still hear Adyin voice in my head. Stronger than anything. I still see him inside the greenhouse.

"You don't have to do this" my voice. Tiny. Whiny.

"Yeah. I do"

I see the shovel. Leaning against the wall. I see the shovel over my head. I think I'm about to…
"Don't look. Alex!" I can't tear my eyes from that fucking greenhouse. I'm falling. "Alex! Look at me!" for a second I follow Piper's voice, louder than all the other voices in my head. I look at her face. I see an anchor. A lighthouse. A buoy in this sea of darkness I'm drowning into.

She pushes me again. Harder this time. The line is moving again. I don't turn around anymore. She's pushing so hard I almost trip.

Before I even realize it, we're outside. The gate is behind us, the net is behind us, our past is still fucking behind us. And I'm still alive.

She keeps pushing me until we reach the car. Her hand leaves my back and she goes towards the car to open it. I collapse. I put my hands on my leg and I bend forward. Trying to catch my breath. Trying to let the panic pour out of me. Trying to feel part of this world again. I'm alive. I'm alive. He didn't kill me. I'm still here. I'm alive.

All the visitors are slowly leaving the parking lot. I just stand motionless until everyone is gone and our car is the only one left.

Piper isn't doing anything. She's not pressuring me. She's giving me the time that I need and I'm glad for it even if I think that even all the time in the world could give me back my sanity. Time heals, but I'm forever broken.

When I feel like I'm not spinning around anymore, I stand straight and I stretch a little bit my back. Breathing as deeply as I can.

I still see the world a little blurred, but I feel I am able to control myself and my body. The grip of panic loosens up.

The last time I had a panic attack I was at the camp, this summer. It doesn't take a genius to know what part of my life is the messed up one. I've started to see someone who's helping me. I'm going into the right direction, even if this trip could probably be labeled under 'things I've done too early', as Tom exactly predicted. But I had no choice.

I walk towards the car. Towards the passenger seat. Piper is already on the driver seat, checking her phone. She raises her eyes once she hears me approach.

I really don't want to talk. So I just look at her. No bullshit, no walls this time. She knows exactly what I think and feel, I'm sure.

"Let's go home" she says. I don't know if it's a question or an affirmation. But I just nod. I let my body fall into the seat, I close the door, I put the safety belt on and the car starts.

Silence is golden. This silence between us is the greatest thing that has ever happened between us. I'm so tense and tired that even a "How are you?" from Piper would bring me over the edge. And I have no intention of having a nervous breakdown in front of someone who doesn't even want to talk to me. I look outside the car window, trying to calm myself, but I can't. My mind keeps going there.

I wasn't supposed to talk about what happened after the attack. Only Nicky knew about it. Nicky and Fig. I didn't want Piper to know it. To know that I've overdosed. That I've been almost attacked again. I didn't want her to know it because it wouldn't change a thing. It wouldn't help me getting over everything and it wouldn't help her. At least not yet. I know she's blaming herself for everything. And everything now is in the past. Why did I have to bring it out again? It was not her fault.

I'm fighting the tears since I was talking to Red. In the rare occasions when my eyes move in Piper's
direction, I can see her as tight as a violin string. Her hands are crashing the steering wheel. Her knuckles are white. Her eyes are fixed on the road. She's not ok, and I'm not ok. We both know it and we both can't do anything about it. She puts on the same random compilation. Maybe the music will help.

But it doesn't.

I check the watch every few minutes, but the time seems to have slowed down. I need to go home, I need to be alone.

And I need to call my therapist as soon as I put a foot on the ground.

I'm doing everything wrong. I'm not breathing as he taught me, I'm not getting out of the vortex of anxiety, instead I'm letting myself fall deeper inside.

They were just four fucking wood walls and a stupid roof. Why did I let it affect me so much? A fucking greenhouse. Like millions of other greenhouses in the world.

No.

It was the context.

The talk in the car.

The prison.

Piper.

Red.

Having to say out loud all the things that went wrong in my life.

The reasons why I've wasted my life.

I feel like I've crossed the point of no return.

I can still taste the blood in my mouth. I can hear the sound of the shovel, hitting my face, breaking the cheekbone.

God, I feel the panic rise again.

Oh God. God help.

I can't ask her to stop the car.

I squeeze my fists as hard as possible. I look outside. We're in the middle of a wood of some kind. I'm trying to resist, but I feel my eyes getting wetter and wetter.

I bite my lips.

This goes on for I don't know how long. Until all hell breaks loose.

Literally.

The song that the radio is playing is 'Hell breaks loose' by Death Maiden.
My dad's band.

I realize it after the first guitar riff, and I gasp.

I cover my mouth with my hand but it's already too late.

This has nothing to do with my dad. It's just...too much.

Tears are running down my cheeks. I turn my head towards the window, trying to hide from her, trying to repress everything, but she knows.

Of course she does.

She has turned off the radio as soon as she has recognized the song.

I feel so pathetic. I just hope she'll keep ignoring me.

Instead, she pulls over. She drives into a dirt road and she turns off the engine.

It's a dead road, there's nothing around us.

I'm still trying really hard to keep myself together. I can't block the tears anymore, but I can block the desperation that I desperately want to let out. I'm like a volcano, with the lava slowly pouring out of me for everyone to see, but I know that I'm about to explode and destroy everything around me.

I think Piper wants to abandon me here and leave.

I wouldn't be too opposed to the idea.

I turn my head to look at her. She's still looking straight ahead and her hands are still on the steering wheel.

She looks... pissed?

"I- I'm sorry" I manage to say between the sobs.

She doesn't turn immediately. Her breaths look uneven, like she's fighting the urge to do something.

"I'm sorry" I repeat, trying to dry my eyes, preparing myself to leave this car.

I can see a little better now. And when she turns around, her eyes are full of tears.

It's like the time stops just for a second.

The second it takes her to unlock the safety belt and engulf me in a hug so tight that I don't have the space to think anymore.

I squeeze her back, as hard as I can. As hard as the safety belt and the horrible position I'm in allow me to.

And I finally let myself go.

Without thinking. Without any filter.

I feel at home. I feel safe.

I let out everything.
"I'm sorry" I say again with my head buried in her hair. Crying for everything that went wrong in my life. In our lives. And I'm crying also for the relief I feel. All that tension…

Tom told me that it is good to cry now and then, that crying is an healthy way to acknowledge and process traumas and pains. I didn't shed a tear since I left the camp and now I'm like a flooded river.

And with Piper holding me. If this is not an ironic twist of fate, I don't know how to call it.

'I'm sorry' I keep repeating.

I don't know what I'm sorry for exactly, but I know what she means when she says the same words back at me. I feel her guilt.

"It was not your fault" I tell her. And suddenly I realize that I'm able to speak and that I can breathe.

She keeps saying she's sorry. Like a mantra.

One of my hand is in her hair, the other is on her back. There's no space between us.

I think she's crying too.

I'm afraid she's going to loosen the grip on me, but it doesn't happen.

A shiver runs through my body the second she puts one of her hand on my nape.

I want more.

So I risk it.

I take off one hand and I try to unlock my safety belt. When I succeed, I separate our bodies for the minimum amount of time required for putting the safety belt where it belongs and go back into her arms.

I know this is dangerous. This is the part where she can easily back off.

But she doesn't.

She doesn't look at me, but when I push my body on her again, her arms just find their original place around me.

I don't know why she's doing it. If it's for me, or for her. I think for both.

But I know that she's not faking it. This is her. This is Piper. Finally my Piper, again.

I think I've never cried so much in my life.

My glasses are fogged, I take them off and I throw them in the backseat.

I let her comfort me for I don't know how long.

I don't know if it's wrong, I don't care… I let her hands draw circular motions on my back, on my neck…

"Thank you…"

I whisper to her neck. I repeat it until I'm sure she feels the honesty in my words.
I can breathe again. It's like a mountain of dirt has left my lungs. The greenhouse doesn't seem that scary anymore, I can see small sparkles of light, of hope. I can see a future that's not entirely made of pain, suffering and dangers. The grey blanket of panic around my heart has finally started to drop, and the relief is immediate.

And there's Piper.

And the power she has on me.

This is not her comforting some crying child. This is her, sharing a connection with me, and I swear to god, I want her life to be good. I want her to be happy. I don't wish anything else for her. Just what's best for her.

What we had was too much. I've started to remember it back at the camp and I do remember it now. I do feel it. This is a recurring subject between me and Tom. I cannot let all the love we shared go wasted, rotten somewhere. Nothing good can come out of the bad thoughts I had about her until now.

"It was not your fault…" And I really mean it. In this moment, in my heart, I feel free. And I know without a doubt that it was not her fault. Not the things she's blaming herself for. We hurt each other in all the possible existing ways. We both did it. I did it too. Now I think I know what Red meant when she told me that we can hurt each other only so much.

She gasps at my words. I feel her back shaking.

Now it's my turn to comfort her. And I really feel like I want to do it. To release her of the tension she has built inside for years, in the same way she's helping me releasing mine.

It's probably not the right thing to do, facing everything like this, and not the right moment too, I'm way too shaken, and it's way too early, but… "You overdosed…I wasn't there…" Are her first words to me. And probably the principal thing she's accusing herself of.

I don't think that telling her that she was my first thought when I took the first pill and the last one before passing out is the right thing to say.

"Piper…don't…." I repeat. But by the way she's sobbing I don't think she's believing me.

So I take her face in my hands and I make sure she's looking at me this time.

"Piper… I did it. I messed up"

I wait until her eyes are on mine and until I'm sure she has understood it. Her face is tired and exhausted and I think it mirrors mine.

"But if only I…" she starts.

"It's impossible to say what would have happened… Maybe I wouldn't be here…" I interrupt her. I don't want her to say anything more.

"I'm sorry Alex…for…not been there… for betraying…you" She's looking at me right now and this time I'm the one who feels the need to look somewhere else. Because I know what I'm about to say and I don't know if I have the strength to say it in her face. But I can't move.

"I know. It's ok"
The relief in her face is so evident and so beautiful that I really don't know why it took me so long to do it, since I'm feeling way better too. And I realize I'm smiling.

It's like the wall is finally falling and we're able to communicate again. I don't know what it is. If the fact that I've seen Litchfield again, that I'm here with Piper or that I've just had a panic attack and I'm crying without pause, but I feel this urge to put everything behind me. Honestly coming to terms with everything. Good things and bad things. She's here. She knows what I went through and I know that she's really sorry. And she really cared about me. She understands me. Maybe the only person in the world who could. It has always been like this. I'm tired. I'm deadly tired of pressing and pushing all the negative thoughts in the back of my mind. I want to let everything go. I want to let the past go, once and for all. I don't know if I'm just caught up in the whirlpool of emotions that I'm feeling right now or if this something that I would have done anyway, but, in this moment, I don't care.

"Why didn't we speak like this at the camp?" She says, laughing, while she dries her tears with the back of her hand.

"Well, it would have saved us some awkward moments for sure" I say, laughing with her.

"You were kind of a psycho there…" I add with a smile.

"I was not!" she replies faking being offended. I look at her with my eyebrow raised. "Really?" she asks and we both end up laughing.

"Well…let's just say that you were kind of…intense. And, as you can see, I don't handle 'intense' very well"

"Not that you were that sane anyway… no offence" she says jokingly.

"None taken…when you're right, you're right…" I reply.

We break our hug, so we can talk better. I must say, I'm still a little confused about everything. About the difference between the Piper who was trying to avoid me at all costs a few hours ago and this new-old Piper.

She isn't saying anything, so I take it as my chance to say what's on my mind.

"I was serious when I said that I think we should talk…I really want to… come clear…to get past all of this... but I cannot do it if you're… not willing to…" talk? Forgive me? Acknowledge me? I don't even know how I want to end this question.

Piper takes one of her deep breaths.

"I really don't know what to say. You're just… you're just… late. Your… openness, it…doesn't make any sense now. It confuses me. Why are you doing it? Why now? I tried in every way to talk to you back at the camp, even humiliating myself, and the moment I decide to give up, for good, you want to talk. You left Alex. You left and you didn't try to reach me. For months. And now you wanna talk. Is it because you're working with Martha? I… I don't know what to think. It looks like a power game to me… a way to get back at me…"

"No. No, it's not like that" I interrupt her because… I can see her confusion.

"What is it then?" she asks the most difficult thing. But I need her to understand. I need her to know.

"I- before this summer, before the camp, I managed to… block everything. I thought I was over it, for good. I thought I had everything under control… and then… well… everything happened. And-
and you kept pushing and digging and…” I take a pause to breath. It still is difficult for me.

I continue.

"I- When I realized that- when- you know…things started to happen… I started to panic. I couldn't think clearly. I tried to gain control but I did it in the wrong ways…” by trying to fuck you, I should add. But I don't. I guess she knows what I'm talking about.

"I wasn't ready to confront…everything that happened. There were too many things happening all at once… and then… I saw you with Rosa, making the pancakes, then Martha came…”

Her face changes the moment I say her girlfriend's name. Like I've slapped her in the face.

"They were for you" she says after a few seconds. A little coldly.

"I know"

She looks surprised by my words.

"That's why I left. I- you were…we both were clearly … confused… It was the right thing to do…”

"No. The right thing to do was talking about it…” she says with decision.

"I don't think so. We both weren't lucid"

"How could you know it if you didn't talk to me?" she is pressing me.

"You were making me pancakes, Piper, for God's sake… with your fiancé sleeping in the next cabin!" Our tones are getting louder, but we're not fighting even if I regret my words the second they're out.

"You should leave my moral dilemmas to me” she answers dryly, slightly closing herself off. It's not what I wanted.

"I didn't mean it like that. I- I spent the night looking at you instead of going to the cabin with my own girlfriend … it wasn't just you…” I confess.

By her face I realize that this is something she's not willing to discuss with me. And I totally agree with that. There's nothing to talk about.

"You decided for the both of us. You didn't leave me a choice and you left without even thinking about giving me an explanation” she replies, ignoring my confession and focusing on my departure.

"I knew that we would have seen each other in New York eventually” I try to justify my actions. I still think that I did the right thing. I wasn't ready to face her immediately. We both weren't.

"I still think it was a really egoistic thing to do. A text message. A call. Nothing. You left me wondering why the hell you disappeared…”

"I thought it was pretty clear” I reply. How could it be difficult to understand? We were living the same things.

She snorts.

"Clear? I even thought that it was all a premeditated plan to ruin my life…”
Oh god. Is she referring to the lake?

"Come on Piper! Nothing was premeditated… I could never…"

"You could never what? Kiss me just to prove me that you can do it with no emotions as you did in the meadow?" she's pushing and pushing. This is how we are. This is how we work together and how we squeeze out everything that's inside of us in a way that I've never experienced with anyone except for her.

"Come on! What I said was a pile of bullshit. We both knew it… we already talked about it" I insist.

"And I have to believe you based on what? I don't know you anymore…"

"You know I'm not like that…"

She almost laughs at my face.

"You know what? I thought…Well, I thought a lot of things. I even thought that you left because you felt like I…I don't know…that I took advantage of the fact that you were drunk…"

Fuck. What?

"What?" I can't believe it.

I think she's blushing. I can't believe she had those thoughts. It's… impossible, come on!

"Yeah. And those are just some of the things that I've thought… until I've decided that I had enough. Enough confusion, enough time wasted thinking about possibilities and about people that didn't even bother to send me a fucking text. And for what? You cannot draw blood from a stone…" The words hit me a little bit, but I don't let them take control of the direction of the discussion.

"And that's why you decided to play the Quiet Game with me?" I ask rhetorically.

She just flashes me a sarcastic smile. She's right. A sarcastic question requires a sarcastic answer.

"Listen, I get it. Maybe I should have said something after a few weeks, I was… confused and kind of angry at you… but… do you really think that it would have made a difference?".

She doesn't say anything, again. She just looks at me. But I know she's thinking I'm slightly right. I don't want to say it out loud. I still want to preserve the both of us. And, also, there's the risk that everything is and was only in my head. Even if…

"And you were probably pissed at me…" I add with a smile.

"Understatement of the year" she jokes, even if she's not smiling. Good.

"And about…the lake… well… you never took advantage of me or stuff like that… I thought it was pretty clear…"

"And again, what is clear for you isn't automatically clear for the rest of the world. But it was just a thought in a sea of other thoughts…"

"And then you decided to…"

"Yes. I decided to say a big FUCK IT. Can you blame me?" I laugh a little bit.
"Honestly? Not so much" I concede her this. And it's honest, even though I don't really like it.

"Good, because I'm tired of being the poor girl who's treated like shit but she's always there when the others need her… it was also my fault. I let you treat me like that. So the FUCK IT was also for me, not only for you of for whoever decides to cross my path and be a dick"

I smile at her words. When she's passionate about something she lights up and she engulfs everything that surrounds her. She has basically just told me that I'm a dick, but she has done it in a typical Chapman way…

"I know it sounds absurd, but I do agree with you...." I reply. Always with a smile.

"See? This is not helping. This. This version of you is the thing that confuses me the most, Alex. You're giving me everything that I asked you for this summer. You're treating me like a human being, you agree with me, you want to talk, you tell me that it was not my fault. Why? Why do this now after you run away and didn't try to reach me? Why do it only when I started to give you the silent treatment? I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop"

"I told you… I thought it was the best thing to do for the both of us…"

"Stop it. You've explained very well why you left and that was not what I asked. We both know that, if it wasn't for Nicky, we would have never seen each other again and you would have never tried to contact me. Am I correct?"

I cannot know what I would have done if Nicky wasn't in New York of it I wasn't working with Martha. It was never an option.

"I don't know…probably, yeah…" I admit. "But I knew that that was not the case…. It's just speculation…"

"Don't beat around the bush Alex. What do you want from me?" She asked directly in her slow sing-songy voice that reminds me of my primary school English teacher. There's no going back now. It's now or never.

"Closure" I say. And I really want to roll my eyes at myself because I know how ridiculous everything sounds, but her incredulous shocked face is enough for me to keep a straight one.

"I'm seeing a shrink. It's been a couple of months now. As it turns out, you were right. I didn't really come to terms with everything that happened, at Litchfield and even after that… in Max and in Chicago. I- now I'm aware of it…"

Her face is still the same. A mask of disbelief and shock. I can't blame her.

I wasn't planning this. Any of this. I've talked about it with my shrink, Tom. A lot. We both agreed that it still wasn't the right time for me to talk to Piper about these things. Because I wasn't ready and, well, because she wasn't talking to me. The plan was to focus on me, on my work and on the little things that I could enhance. Step by step. Even going to see Red was premature, according to Tom. And, judging by the way I've reacted to everything, I guess he was right after all.

The one I'm taking right now is not a step. It's a fucking jump into the unknown.

I keep talking, because I don't think she's planning to say something.

"I know how strange this may sound to you…"
"No, I don't think you have a fucking idea…" she intervenes. I smile.

"You're probably right. But that's how it is. I'm tired Piper. I'm so fucking tired of the nightmares, I'm tired of blaming myself and everyone else for what happened to me, I want to move on…"

"And what does it have to do with me?"

That's it. That's the thing I shouldn't tell her. Big breath.

"What you told me, back at the camp. I couldn't stop thinking about it… I thought I was ok with you blaming yourself, I thought I didn't care for your guilt…but it's not true…"

"It makes no sense…" she says.

"It does. I think that, in order to accept what happened to me I need to make peace with the past… including you. I don't want you to blame yourself for things that you're not responsible for. I don't want another human being to suffer only because of my …wounded pride. If I keep allowing that, I will never be really free. You are you, Piper"

Piper rolls her eyes. I think she's trying to avoid the formation of new tears. After all, I'm telling her exactly what she wanted to hear all this time, but it looks like she doesn't want it.

"Then why didn't you tell me this sooner?" She asks.

How can she be so naïve?

"Because of the things we did at the camp, for fuck's sake! Do I have to draw you a picture?"

"There's no need to be crude, Alex"

I still can't understand if my words have some meaning to her or not.

"Piper…really, how could I have come to you and talk after… everything we did?"

She rolls her eyes again, without giving me an answer. But she looks at me like…

"What?" I ask.

"I think we can agree to disagree" she says.

"All right then. Let's disagree on this… can we at least talk about why you left when I was talking to Red?"

She lower her gaze. Clearly distressed.

"It was too much…" she says with a soft voice.

"They told me they would have killed everyone who was involved with me…" This time I'm the one who's fighting her tears.

"I know, Red told me… " So that's what Red told her. I guessed right.

"That's it. That's all that happened, now you know everything. I was so scared… for you…for everyone else…” this time some tears actually fall from my eyes.

"If you had told me…If I knew about what happened after…I would never…" she's crying too.
"Nothing would have changed…"

"You do not know that"

"Yes, I do. I was too angry at you…"

"And now you're not…” she says matter of factly.

"No, it's been too exhausting" I confess. And I really mean it. "What happened, happened. I'm here and I'm still alive. I need to let it go and for some reason I need you to ... I don't know… don't feel like it's your fault…that's it…”

She looks at me, straight in the eyes. Probably to understand if she can trust me or not.

She nods and lies her forehead on my shoulder. I put my arms around her. We are linked but in a less desperate way. It's like a soft hug now.

"I've missed this…" I whisper on her hair after what feels like a lifetime, surprising even myself for the fact that I've just said those words out loud and that I really mean them.

"What? Pain and panic?" I can hear the smile on her voice and I can't help but laugh a little bit.

"No, this…” I reply.

"This?" she asks caressing me the scalp with her fingertips. I lean on her touch, I feel like a cat.

"Yeah”. The Thing. Our Thing. A connection that, now I know, can never be broken and never will. It's part of who I am. Of my story. I'm done running away from it. I can't change the past. I'm done.

She suddenly stops her movement.

"It doesn't change the fact that we can't…I can't…”

"I know" I reply before she has the time to finish the sentence. It would be awkward to say out loud what we're both thinking while we're hugging each other. We cannot commit the same mistake again. We always end up disappointing ourselves.

"Alex, I mean it. I- it's been a mess. I can't switch from pretending you're Martha to talking to you like you're Alex. Every time I do it, it's like I'm… cheating all over again"

Cheating. She's the one who used the word we were trying so hard to avoid. It was hanging in the air like a sword of Damocles.

I break the hug to look at her again.

"This has nothing to do with our current situation. Well, I mean, not entirely. What I really want is a clean start. I want to leave my past behind and finally move on. I cannot force you to do or believe in anything. It's just…I wanted you to know everything…”

I didn't even realize that my hand was on her cheek.

"Ok" she says after a while, before shifting in her seat and moving so my hand has to go back to its original place on my leg.

"Piper, I mean it…”
"I understand, Alex. And, of course, this is… this is something that… I've waited a long time to hear, but…"

I know what she's not saying.

"I'm not asking you to be my friend. I just wanted you to know what happened and what I feel about it. That's it. It has nothing to do with your silent treatment. You can keep ignoring me for as long as you like…"

This makes her smile.

"Really?" she says.

"Well, it would be nice to reduce a little bit the awkwardness, but no pressure…" I reply, smiling too.

"I can't promise you that…" there's always a smile in her face now.

"Then I'll make sure that my phone is always fully charged when you're around" I joke.

"Smart girl" she says while putting on the safety belt once again. It looks like confession time is over.

I put on mine too.

It's incredible how good I feel right now.

She starts the car.

"Are you feeling better?" Piper asks.

"Like I've been under a train, but definitely better…" I'm feeling drained. Empty. Tired. But good.

"Good, because I don't need another thing of yours to feel guilty about…" I turn my head, shocked.

"Was that a joke, Miss Piper Chapman?" I say with the biggest grin on earth.

"Maybe…" she replies with a grin.

And those are the last words that I remember before lying my head on the car window and closing my eyes.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!