Taking In Strays

by Argyle_S

Summary

Maggie’s dad became the new Sheriff in Midvale after Sheriff Collins is arrested for Kenny’s murder. A few months later, he finds out Maggie is gay and throws her out. When Kara finds her crying under the bleachers and takes her home, Eliza decides to take her in, and Alex makes a surprising discovery about herself.

Notes

Please read the warnings. This story is ultimately a romance between Alex and Maggie, but given the nature of Maggie’s relationship with her parents and her history in Blue Springs, it deals a lot with Child Abuse, Bullying, Sexual Assault, Homophobia and touches on Racism. It also deals with a character (not Maggie, Alex or Kara) who was raped in the past. The story isn’t graphic, but high school can be terrible, especially for girls and queer people, and this reflects that. It also touches on things like child protective services.
investigations, court room hearings involving abuse and homophobic parents, the fact that Maggie's parents are legitimately awful human beings, and some other heavy issues.

I think that covers all the potentially triggering stuff, but if you see anything else I should warn for, please let me know.

Also, yes, I know canonically that Alex was born in 1989, and Maggie was born in 1987. In this story, they were both born in 1988 because I needed them to be the same age, and I’m bad at math, so I got 130,000 words into the story before I realized if Alex was born in 1989 she’d only be 17 in 2006, and moving the story a year would require a complete rewrite, which wasn’t happening.

This story is 19 chapters, and will post on Saturday, along side Devils in the Dark for the next few weeks, then fill the gap between Devils in the Dark and the sequel. The story does not have a happy ending, but there is a sequel planned which will have a happy ending, but it will be a while before the sequel goes up.
The Girl Under the Bleachers

Wednesday, February 15, 2006

One of the first and most painful lessons Kara had learned about school was to ignore the crying. It was hard, because long after she had trained herself not to hear the gossip, the mocking, the idle conversation, and all the other things she didn’t want to hear, she could never quite manage to not hear the crying.

There was a lot of crying in high school. There was Jane, who cried every time her best friend had a date. There was Michael who cried every third Monday. There was Gary who cried when the football team picked on him. For a while, there was Vicki, who cried every time she saw Alex. And those were just the regulars.

It was hard because it was contrary to everything Kara was to ignore someone in pain. But she had learned that humans weren’t like Kryptonians. They felt shame when they needed help or comfort. They got angry when you saw them in a moment of weakness or need.

So, Kara ignored the crying. She ignored it on her way into the building. She ignored it on her way to class. She ignored it all morning. She ignored it at lunch, but by then it was harder, and Alex asked her what was wrong, but Kara said it was nothing. She tried to ignore it that afternoon, but when the end of the day rolled around, and she still heard the miserable sobbing coming from beneath the bleachers, she couldn’t ignore it any longer. Instead of heading towards the bike rack where she usually met Alex to walk home together, she headed for the football field.

“Are you okay?”

Maggie lifted her head up off her knees and saw a girl with long blonde hair and glasses climbing under the bleachers. She had no idea how the girl had even spotted her as far back in the shadows as she was, but the girl didn’t seem to be taking the whole ‘hiding under the bleachers’ thing as a clue that Maggie wanted to be left the fuck alone.

“I’m fine,” she said. It was a lie. She was wet; she was cold; she was covered in mud; she was starving; the whole left side of her face hurt; and she was pretty sure her lip had started bleeding again. She was about as far from fine as she could get, but she didn’t want anyone to see her that way. Especially not some strange girl.

“You don’t look fine,” the girl said as she sat squatted down next to Maggie.

“Who asked you?”

“No one,” the girl said, a confused look on her face. “You’re hurt.”

“No, I’m not,” Maggie said. She reached up to grab one of the metal struts and started to pull herself up, but she’d been sitting still for so long that the moment she moved, her legs decided to inform her they were asleep, and she dropped back down on her ass, letting out a small cry of pain. She closed her eyes, trying to hold back the tears that were threatening to spill again. She grabbed the strut once more, and this time, she managed to get her legs to hold steady under her, pins and needles and all, and reached for her backpack, only to have the girl catch her wrist.

“Wait,” The girl said. Maggie tried to pull away, but the girl was stronger than she looked, and her grip was like iron. “Please. I know you’ve been out here all day. I just want to help.”
“I don’t want your help,” Maggie snapped.

The girl let go of her and stood up, and something about the pained look on her face made Maggie regret her tone. The girl turned and started to walk away. She stopped after she’d slipped through the first row of supports and turned back around. “You don’t have to tell me what happened. I just want to help.”

Maggie stared at the girl and wasn’t sure what to do. She didn’t want anyone to see her like this, but she was scared. If anyone at school saw her, they’d call her parents, or they’d call the cops, which was pretty much the same thing. She’d been hoping to use the shower in the girls’ locker room and grab her gym bag out of her locker, but she hadn’t wanted to risk being seen by Ms. Anderson.

Maybe the girl could get her gym bag for her. At least then she would have something clean to wear, though walking around in the middle of winter in gym shorts wasn’t going to do a lot of good. Especially since she’d still be filthy. Maybe, if she could get her gym bag, the girl would let her take a shower at her house.

“If I give you my locker combination, could you get my gym bag?”

“Sure,” the girl said.

“Okay.”

“My name’s Kara.”

“I’m Maggie.”

Kara held out her hand, and Maggie took it.

Maggie hesitated when she saw Kara’s house. Maggie’s family wasn’t poor by any stretch of the imagination, but she could smell money the moment she saw the place. A gray and white two story right off the cover of Better Homes & Gardens, sitting on a piece of beachfront property. She knew right away that she did not belong there.

“Um… maybe this isn’t such a good idea,” she said.

“It’s okay,” Kara said. “No one’s home.”

Maggie wasn’t sure that made it better. The last thing she needed was for the rich, white parents to come home and find the little, brown lesbian alone with their precious daughter. Kara started towards the house, and Maggie seriously considered making a break for the woods, but the gnawing hunger in her stomach made the decision for her, and she followed Kara up the front steps. Kara took a long time cleaning her shoes off on the welcome mat before she opened the door, so Maggie did her best to get the mud off her boots before she followed Kara inside.

When they stepped into the house, Maggie cringed slightly, immediately understanding why Kara was so meticulous about cleaning her shoes. Everything was neat and spotlessly clean, and she stood there, covered in mud and dirt, and afraid to touch anything.

“Take your boots off,” Kara said, as she took her shoes off and put them on a rack by the door.

Maggie bent down and untied her boots, slipped them off, and put them on the rack.
“Come on,” Kara said as she started up the stairs. Maggie followed, feeling a little like she was being led to her execution. When they reached the top of the stairs, Kara pointed towards the end of the hall. “Wait in the bathroom. I’ll get the first aid kit and some clean cloths.”

“What?”

“You’re kind of… um…” Kara sputtered, suddenly uncomfortable.

“Filthy?”

“YES!” Kara said, sounding so relieved it made Maggie laugh, which made Kara frown. “I was trying to be polite.” An adorable pout pulled down the corners of her mouth. “But if Eliza comes home—”

“Who?” Maggie asked, her heart suddenly beating a mile a minute.

“Eliza,” Kara repeated. “She’s my foster mom.”

“Oh.” The sudden fear at hearing Elisa’s name again slowly faded away.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “I, um… I’m good.”

“Okay. Just, try not to get mud on anything. Eliza will ban potstickers for a month.”

“Right,” Maggie said. “Look, I can just rinse out my clothes in the tub.”

“Yeah, but then your clothes would be dirty and wet.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Go!” Kara shooed Maggie towards the bathroom. “Before you drip mud on the floor!”

Maggie sighed and marched down the hall into the bathroom. She flipped on the light and flinched when she saw herself in the mirror. It was no wonder Kara thought she looked like some kind of charity case. A dark, vivid purple bruise covered the left side of her face, and there was a ragged gash where her dad’s class ring had caught her lip when he’d slapped her.

“Sit down,” Kara said as she came into the bathroom.

Maggie perched on the edge of the bathtub and watched as Kara sat what looked like a full EMT bag on the toilet.

“Your dad a paramedic or something?”

“No. Eliza’s a doctor.”

Maggie watched as Kara unzipped the bag and started pulling supplies out, wondering again if this was a bad idea. The girl was a foster kid, and Maggie had heard enough stories to know that foster kids who caused trouble didn’t tend to stay foster kids. She didn’t want the girl to wind up in some group home or something just for trying to be nice.

“Maybe I should go,” Maggie said.

Kara ignored her as she pulled on a pair of nitrile gloves, then poured some betadine on a gauze
pad. “This is going to sting a bit,” Kara said.

Maggie nodded, and stuck her lip out a little, gripping the edge of the tub as Kara cleaned the wound. Kara threw the gauze away once she was done and picked up a white packet with red lettering that said, ‘BleedStop.’

“This will stop the bleeding, but it’s going to hurt.”

“I can handle it.”

“Yeah,” Kara muttered, shaking her head a bit. “That’s what Alex said the first time too.”

“Who?”

“My sister,” Kara said as she tipped open the packet. “Stick out your lip again.”

Maggie did as she was told. Kara dumped the packet on her lip, and Maggie screamed.

“SHIT!” she yelped as the burning pain in her lip made her eyes water.

“Sorry. Oh! Oh, no! I forgot to ask. You’re not allergic to shellfish, are you?”

“No,” Maggie said, squeezing her eyes shut as she tried to ride out the pain, which felt like someone had poured hot sauce directly on her split lip. “That’s a weird question.”

“It’s made from shrimp shells,” Kara said. “I’m supposed to make sure you’re not allergic to shellfish, but I’ve only ever used on Alex, and she eats shrimp all the time.”

“Um… Okay.”

Kara dropped the packet into the trash. “There are clothes and a laundry bag on the counter. The underwear is new, right out of the package, but I don’t have a bra that will fit you.”

“That’s okay,” Maggie said.

“Just set the bag outside the door, and I’ll wash your clothes once you get out of the shower.”

“Thanks.”

Kara gave her a huge smile before she picked up the EMT bag and left.

Alex trudged up the walk to the house, torn between being angry and being worried. Every day after school, she and Kara met by the bike rack and walked home together. Except Kara hadn’t shown up that day. Alex had waited almost an hour and sent a dozen texts before she finally gave up and walked home alone.

It wasn’t like anything could hurt Kara, so she wasn’t really worried about that. It was just weird for Kara not to show up, and history had proven, time and time again, that Kara acting weird was never a good thing.

Alex opened the door and stepped inside. She took her shoes off and set them by the door, noticing with annoyance that Kara’s shoes were already there. She frowned slightly when she saw a pair of work boots she didn’t recognize mixed in with the assorted pairs on the rack, wondering where they’d come from.
A disgruntled meow came from the top of one of the bookcases, and Alex looked up.

“What are you complaining about?” Alex asked.

Streaky let out the same annoyed, demanding meow he always used when he wanted attention and Kara was doing something other than petting him with both hands.

“I know what you mean,” Alex said. “Your mom totally ditched me after school. Any idea where she is?”

Streaky responded with a grumpy meow and a flick of his tail.

“Of course. I should have guessed. It’s Kara.”

She reached up and gave him a scratch under the chin before heading towards the kitchen.

“You want anything else?” Kara asked, and Alex frowned, wondering who Kara was talking to.

She had just enough time to wonder if Streaky was pissed because Kara had brought home yet another stray dog, when someone answered.

“No,” a girl said. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to eat all of this.”

“Are you sure?” Kara asked.

“I should be asking if you’re sure you won’t get in trouble for me being here,” came the stranger’s voice again.

“It’s fine.”

So, definitely not a dog. At least Kara remembered her manners. Although given that she and Kara were both social outcasts at school, she had no idea who was in the kitchen with her sister. But that was an easy enough problem to fix.

Alex stepped through the kitchen door, and the first thing she noticed was that Kara had made her surprise guest a Kara-sized portion. There were at least a dozen sandwiches on one of the big serving platters. Kara was sitting with her back to the kitchen door with a girl Alex vaguely recognized as one of Elisa Wilkey’s friends. Alex had never gotten a good look at the girl before and was floored by how gorgeous she was. She had long, dark, wavy hair with highlights of dirty blonde, skin that was golden brown, and a face that was just beautiful.

The girl was so focused on the food that she hadn’t noticed Alex, and Alex just stood there, feeling the same way she used to feel when she looked at Vicki. The way she still felt sometimes when she looked at Vicki. That sort of ache that never quite made sense. Some weird sort of jealousy she didn’t understand. She’d never been unhappy with the way she looked, leaving aside fourth grade, which had more to do with a chemistry set and a subsequent buzz-cut than her face, but sometimes she’d see a girl, and she just had a hard time looking away. It hadn’t felt anything like the jealousy she felt when Kara showed up, or when she saw Kara using her powers, but it was harder to deal with, and she hated it because it was so confusing.

But confusing or not, she did finally notice what the girl was wearing.

“Is that my shirt?” Alex asked.

Kara and the girl turned towards her, and Alex got a look at the other side of the girl’s face. It was covered in a massive, ugly bruise, and her lip was split. For a moment she panicked, wondering if
Kara had accidently hit the girl.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t think my clothes would fit her.”

The girl looked over at Kara, then back at Alex. “Please, don’t get mad at her,” the girl said. “She was just trying to help me out.”

“Why did you need help?” Alex asked.

The worry in the girl’s eyes turned immediately to anger.

“Alex!” Kara glared at Alex.

“It’s okay,” the girl said as she stood up. “I’ll just get my stuff and go.”

“But your clothes are still in the washer,” Kara said as she turned back to the girl.

“I can wear my gym clothes.”

Alex saw Kara’s shoulders tense up.

“Um… I put them in the washer too.”

“Why?”

“They smelled,” Kara said.

The girl dropped back down into her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. “I knew coming here was a bad idea.”

“It’s not,” Kara said. “Look, just stay here and finish eating. I’ll fix this.”

Kara stood up and walked over, grabbing Alex’s arm and dragging her out of the kitchen.

“Come on,” Kara said, and Alex followed her because she didn’t really have a choice. Kara led her to the living room, then turned around and glared at her.

“What is your problem?” Kara asked.

“My problem?” Alex let out an incredulous scoff. “You didn’t show up at the bike rack.”

“Oh… Um…”

“I waited an hour, Kara. I sent you a dozen texts, and you didn’t answer, and then I come home to find you with some strange girl who’s in there wearing my Nine Inch Nails t-shirt.”

“She’s not some strange girl. Her name is Maggie.”

“Well, who is Maggie, and why is she wearing my clothes?” Alex asked. “And why is she eating half our refrigerator?”

“She was hurt. And hungry. And her clothes were covered in mud.”

“Why didn’t she go home?”

Kara peered over at the living room door, not-so-subtly lifting her glasses up. Alex knew it meant Kara was using her X-ray vision, which only made the situation worse, because Kara was using her
powers when they had company. She lowered her glasses and looked at Alex and spoke in a whisper. “I don’t think she can,” Kara said. “She was hiding under the bleachers all day, and I’m pretty sure she slept under them last night.”

Alex glanced towards the door, then back at Kara, and suddenly the whole situation made sense. If Maggie really didn’t have a place to go, there was no way Kara wouldn’t have brought her home. Kara was always trying to adopt strays. These days Alex understood better after having asked Kara why she kept doing it when Eliza always took whatever Kara brought home to the local animal rescue; Kara had told her she simply couldn’t leave something out there without a home.

The problem was, Maggie wasn’t a dog or a cat. Maggie was a person, and the longer she stayed, the more likely it was she would see something she shouldn’t. And there wasn’t a convenient shelter Eliza could take a teenage girl to. At least, Alex didn’t think there was.

Alex glanced over at the clock. It was a quarter to four. Eliza would be home by 5:30. It would take that long for Maggie’s clothes to go through the washer and dryer, so there was no way to get rid of her before Eliza got home. Even if there was, Alex didn’t think she’d take it. If the girl was homeless, the whole situation wasn’t something Alex knew how to handle.

“She can stay until Mom gets home,” Alex said.

She was pretty sure the hug Kara gave her cracked a rib.

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Maggie watched as Kara dragged her sister out of the room and looked around the kitchen. She spotted a box of sandwich bags sitting on the counter and walked over and grabbed a handful, then went back to the table. She stuffed six of the sandwiches Kara had made into bags, then stuffed a couple more bags full of Cheetos. She dropped all of them into her backpack before picking up another sandwich and eating it. If Alex kicked her out, at least she wouldn’t be hungry, even if she would be wet and miserable.

She really, really hoped she hadn’t gotten Kara in trouble. The girl was awkward, but she was so nice it was almost painful. Maggie felt bad about taking the sandwiches and the Cheetos, but she had no idea where her next meal was coming from.

She hated this. She wanted to go home. She wanted to see her mom and her dad, for them to hug her and tell her it would be okay, but she knew that wasn’t going to happen. She’d known it back in Blue Springs, the moment she realized she was gay. Being a non-white girl in a small town had been hard enough, and she’d tried so hard to keep her head down, not draw attention to herself, and never, ever admit to anyone she was gay. That last part had gotten harder the older she’d gotten. The longer she went without a boyfriend, or even a date, the louder the whispers had gotten. Lesbian, queer, dyke. She’d been fifteen the first time someone said it loud enough that she couldn’t pretend she hadn’t heard it. The first attack had come a couple of months later.

Her parents hadn’t understood why their quiet, shy little girl was suddenly getting in fights, and Maggie sure as hell wasn’t going to tell them. Instead, she’d spent the next two years in her own personal hell. School was torture, and the suspensions were a relief, even if it meant her parents’ yelling at her. Not that the yelling was anything new, but it had gotten a lot uglier as things at school deteriorated.

When her dad had been offered a job in California, Maggie though that maybe, just maybe, things would turn around. She’d known better the moment they drove into town. It might be in California, but Midvale was just the same Podunk shithole by a different name.
Except her first day in town, she’d met Elisa Wilkey. Elisa with her punk hair, shaved on one side and long on the other, her tight jeans, her black lipstick, and her combat boots. Elisa who touched Maggie every chance she got, who texted her constantly, who didn’t have a boyfriend and glared at any boy who came near her. Elisa who loved Tori Amos and Nine Inch Nails. Elisa who made Maggie fall in love. Elisa who’d given the Valentine’s Day card Maggie had slipped into her locker to her dad, who had called Maggie’s parents.

Maggie had gone home that cold, wet Tuesday with a smile on her face, daydreaming about the text she’d get from Elisa telling her how much she loved the card, how she felt the same way. She’d never gotten the text. Instead, she’d gotten slapped across the face. Her father screamed about how they’d moved away from Blue Springs because of her. How she’d embarrassed them and humiliated them, and how she’d already shamed them in their new home. He’d told her to leave, to never come back. That she wasn’t his daughter anymore.

The only place she could think of to go was under the bleachers. She and Elisa used to sit under there for hours, talking, joking, existing. She hated that it reminded her of Elisa, but she couldn’t think of anywhere else, and it had been safe enough until the rain came. She’d woken up in the middle of the night, soaked and shivering, and hadn’t had anywhere else to go. Not until Kara showed up.

She needed to get out of Midvale. The thought made her sick because it meant leaving her sister alone in the house with her parents, but she didn’t have a choice, because going home wasn’t an option anymore. It wasn’t ever going to be an option again. If she could get to National City, she might be okay. They had shelters there.

If she’d had some warning, this would have been easier. She could have packed a bag. Had some money with her. She could have bought a bus ticket. Instead, she was going to have to hitchhike.

Her train of thought was interrupted when Kara came back into the kitchen, a smile on her face.

“We’re good,” she said.

“You sure?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah,” Kara said. She looked down at the tray that was a lot emptier than before. “You want some more food?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “Please.”

She felt bad about it, but she’d feel worse if she had to go hungry.

Eliza stared up at the house and took a deep breath, trying to put on a brave face. She’d thought if she could make it through Valentine’s Day, she would be okay. What she hadn’t counted on was all the little rituals that followed. Every year from the time they got married, Jeremiah would go on a chocolate shopping spree the day after Valentine’s. He would buy a ridiculous amount of it, and she would spend weeks finding little bundles of chocolate stashed all over the place. Every one of them would have a love note attached. She’d been sitting in the lab earlier that day, running a DNA sequence, when she realized that she wasn’t going to come home to truffles on her pillow or mini Reese’s in the cereal bowls, wouldn’t reach into her purse and find a hand full of Dove promises. There wouldn’t be any notes telling her how much Jeremiah loved waking up next to her, how much he loved raising a family with her, or how much he loved the life they’d built together.

This was the second year since he’d disappeared, and she couldn’t understand why it hurt so much.
worse this year than it had the year before. Maybe it was because she’d started to get used to the loss. Maybe the year before she was in so much pain that she didn’t notice how much not having their little rituals hurt. Now, though, after she’d had time to adjust, to get used to not having him around, the reminder was tearing open a wound that had started to heal.

She took one more deep breath and reminded herself she could not cry. She absolutely could not cry, because Kara would hear her. Kara tried, she tried so hard, but she could never quite train herself not to hear someone in pain, and if Kara knew, it wouldn’t be long before Alex knew, and whatever made it hurt so much worse this year, Eliza could not take it into that house. She couldn’t let her grief hurt her girls.

She got out of the car because ready or not, one of her girls would notice her sitting in the driveway if she didn’t get out and head into the house. Once she was inside, she hung her purse on the peg by the door, set her briefcase under the table next to the door, and stepped out of her shoes, setting them on the rack. She noticed a pair of muddy Dickies work boots on the rack she was sure didn’t belong to Alex or Kara. Alex was a die-hard Doc Marten enthusiast, and Kara loved her Timberlands.

She definitely wasn’t in the mood to have company in the house, but she would have to deal with it. If one of her daughters was actually starting to make friends again, she wasn’t going to do anything to jeopardize that. She just wondered why it had to be the one night when all she wanted to do was curl up into a ball and cry.

It was definitely going to be a delivery night if they did have company. She was not up to cooking for herself, Alex, the bottomless pit that was Kara’s alien appetite, and a guest.

An aggrieved meow came from above, and Eliza looked up to see Streaky perched on his roost on the top of the bookshelf where her awards used to live.

“You’re not hanging out with Kara?” she asked.

Streaky snorted and gave an annoyed flick of his tail.

“Oh, is that so?” she asked.

He rested his head on the bookshelf and gave a huff before closing his eyes.

Eliza shook her head. If Streaky was that grumpy, it was almost certain that the company belonged to Kara. Most nights, you couldn’t pry him away from Kara with a crowbar and a case of dynamite.

She looked into the living room, saw that it was empty, and headed for the kitchen. It was so quiet she’d just about decided that the girls must be upstairs when she stepped into the kitchen and found a strange girl sitting there with a slightly shell-shocked look on her face, staring into space.

“Hello,” Eliza said.

The girl jumped slightly and turned towards Eliza, a panicked expression on her face, like a deer caught in the headlights. The expression wasn’t what caught Eliza’s attention though. It was the dark bruise on the girl’s face, and the gash in her lip. Eliza’s first, terrified thought was that Kara had hit the girl by accident.

“Um…” The girl looked like she was about to bolt.

Eliza walked over and pulled out the chair. “You mind if I sit down?”
The girl shook her head.

Eliza lowered herself into the seat, careful not to make any sudden moves. She took a closer look at the girl’s face, and while it had been a while since Eliza had worked in the ER, it was easy enough to tell the bruising was at least a day or so old. That put to rest any fear that Kara had hurt the girl; there was no way she would have been able to keep quiet about it that long.

“I’m Eliza,” she said, frowning when the girl flinched at the sound of her name.

“I’m… Maggie,” the girl said.

“It’s nice to meet you, Maggie.”

She heard the sounds of footsteps and turned around to see Kara coming into the kitchen carrying a stack of neatly folded laundry. Kara froze the moment she saw Eliza.

“Hey!” she said, in way too cheerful a voice. “I see you met Maggie.”

“Hey, sweetie,” Eliza said. “I was just introducing myself.”

Kara gave her a smile that was so forced Eliza worried she was going to hurt herself, but Eliza just reached out and lifted the clothes out of Kara’s hands. “Run and get the first aid kit.”

“I already cleaned her cut,” Kara said a little indignantly.

“I can see that. Go on.” She made a shooing motion, and Kara reluctantly left the kitchen.

Eliza turned back to Maggie, who looked absolutely terrified. She reached up and tapped her own lip, right where Maggie’s was cut.

“The betadine stains a bit.”

Maggie started to reach up and touch her lip but stopped about an inch short.

“Does it hurt?” Eliza asked.

Maggie shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“Sweetie, did Kara tell you I’m a doctor?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said.

“That cut needs to be closed up.”

Maggie reached up, covering the cut. “I’m fine,” she said again.

“Are you sure? If it doesn’t get treated, it’s probably going to start bleeding again. It might even get infected. Either way, without treatment, there’s a pretty good chance it will leave a scar.”

Maggie glared at her, but before either of them could say anything, Kara came back into the room, carrying the EMT kit Eliza had kept in the house ever since she found out she was pregnant with Alex. Eliza took the kit from Kara and reached into one of the side pockets, pulling out a strip of butterfly closures. She sat them on top of Maggie’s clothes.

“These are butterfly closures. They aren’t as good as stitches would be, but they’re better than nothing,” Eliza said. “Kara, grab the menus for the pizza place and the Chinese place, and find out
what Maggie wants for dinner. I’m going to go upstairs and see what Alex wants.”

“Okay,” Kara said.

Eliza stood up and headed upstairs. The door to Alex and Kara’s bedroom was open, and Alex was sitting at her desk doing homework.

“Alex.”

Alex jumped slightly at the sound of Eliza’s voice and turned around. Eliza closed the door and sat down on Alex’s bed.

“I swear, she was here with Kara when I got home,” Alex said.

“Why didn’t you walk home with Kara?”

“She never showed up at the bike rack. I sent her at least a dozen texts asking where she was, and she didn’t answer them. I waited for over an hour, but I finally had to come home.”

“Relax, Alex. You’re not in trouble.”

“I’m not?”

“You know your sister and strays.”

“Yeah.”

“What do you know about Maggie?”

“Not much,” Alex said. “I think she’s new. I don’t remember seeing her before this year. I’ve seen her hanging out with Elisa Wilkey.”

The name caught Eliza’s attention, not just because it was her own. She remembered the way Maggie reacted when she introduced herself.

“Do you think this Wilkey girl might have been the person who hit her?”

“I don’t think so,” Alex said. “Kara said she thought Maggie slept under the bleachers, and if I got hit hard enough to look like that, I’d go home. Which makes me think maybe she can’t.”

Eliza bit her bottom lip as she thought about the situation. She wasn’t really surprised, because once she’d realized Kara hadn’t accidentally hurt the girl, the fact that she was here and not with her parents had been a dead giveaway that something wasn’t right at home.

“Do you know her last name, by chance?”

“No.”

Eliza nodded. “It’s a pizza and potstickers night. Any requests?”

“Mushroom pizza, curry chicken, and hot and sour soup.”

“Egg rolls?”

“Well, neither of us are getting any potstickers,” Alex said with a grin on her face.

“Good point.”
Maggie looked at herself in the mirror and hated what she saw. Her eyes were still red and puffy, the bruise was getting darker, and the bandages Kara’s foster mom have given her made her look like she had tried to tape her face together and done a bad job.

She did feel a little better being back in her own clothes, but she was still scared. She knew her welcome was running out and she’d have to leave after dinner, but she still had no idea where to go. She couldn’t sleep under the bleachers again, or she would wind up filthy and cold again. If she’d been back in Blue Springs, she would have known a ton of places she could have gone. Hell, if she’d been back there, she could have called her aunt Juanita and asked if she could crash with her.

Maybe that was still an option. She’d memorized Juanita’s phone number when things were bad back in Blue Springs. If Kara would let her use the phone, maybe Juanita could wire her enough for a bus ticket. It was a long shot. She hadn’t talked to Juanita in years, but she was a lesbian; maybe she’d take pity on Maggie if she explained why she got kicked out. There was a Western Union in the check-cashing place next to the liquor store. It wouldn’t help tonight, but a bus ticket would be a lot better than trying to hitchhike all the way to National City.

She’d just have to survive a few weeks in the shelters. She’d be 18 at the end of March. Then she could get a job and get a place.

She squeezed her eyes shut and grabbed the edge of the sink to steady herself, trying her best not to start crying again. She’d had plans. She’d had her life mapped out. She was going to be a cop. She’d already picked out colleges and knew what she’d need to take to get into the Police Academy.

How the fuck could she be so stupid? She’d been so close to making it out. So close to being able to be herself and live the life she wanted. Why the hell did she have to give Elisa that fucking card?

There was a soft knock on the bathroom door.

“Food’s here,” Kara called in.

“I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Okay.”

She opened her eyes and took a moment to put on her best ‘leave me the fuck alone’ face. Once she was happy with it, she washed her hands and headed for the kitchen.

Alex, Kara, and their mom were already sitting down and loading their plates. There was a place set for her, so Maggie sat down, only to have Kara pass her a carton of Chinese food.

“Sesame Chicken,” Kara said.

Maggie reached out and took it from her. “Thanks. Is there any brown rice?”

“Here,” Alex said as she handed over the rice.

That was, by and large, the extent of the dinner conversation. Requests to pass food and asking if someone wanted something. Acknowledgements and the odd thanks. Maggie had the impression that it wasn’t usually like that, and suspected she was the obvious source of the tension—a fact that was confirmed by the way Alex kept sneaking looks at her.
Maggie did her best to ignore it and ate as much as she could. It wasn’t as much as it would have been if she hadn’t spent the afternoon stuffing herself on sandwiches, but she finished about half of the Sesame chicken, two slices of pizza, and a couple of egg rolls. She was a little shocked at watching Kara polish off a large pizza, two orders of potstickers, an order of Mongolian beef, and a bowl of hot and sour soup, considering the fact that Kara had downed a couple of sandwiches herself.

She tensed up as dinner wound down. Kara cleared the dishes and loaded the dishwasher, while Alex packed up the leftovers and put them in the fridge. Maggie knew it was getting to be time for her to leave, but she still didn’t have any idea of where she could go.

“Kara, Alex, why don’t you girls head upstairs,” their mom said. Both of them looked like they wanted to argue, but the expression on their mom’s face didn’t leave any room for argument. Kara gave a small wave and what was probably meant to be an encouraging smile before she and Alex disappeared from the kitchen.

“Thank you for dinner,” Maggie said as she stood up.

“You’re welcome.”

“I should probably get going.”

“Sit back down for a minute.”

Maggie looked at her and tried to figure out a way to escape, but she couldn’t think of a way without being rude, so she sat down again.

“Maggie, I’m not trying to pry. You can tell me as much or as little as you feel comfortable with, but if you don’t have a place to stay tonight, there’s a couch in the office. It’s not as comfortable as a real bed, but it’s comfortable enough that my husband used to fall asleep on it all the time. It’s also safe, warm, and dry. If you’d like, I can get you some blankets and a couple of pillows.”

Maggie sat there for a minute, torn. On the one hand, the idea of a warm, dry place to sleep was pretty tempting, but on the other hand, she was afraid that staying would be a mistake.

“Tell you what. I’ll go get the blankets and pillows. You decide if you want to stay or not.”

Maggie nodded and watched her go.

She looked over at her backpack and gym bag lying on the floor and tried to talk herself into getting up because she should leave. She knew she should leave. However nice Kara and her family were, Kara’s mom had obviously figured out Maggie was homeless. She was probably upstairs calling the cops, which meant calling her dad, and Maggie did not want to see her dad right now. Or maybe ever again.

If she were smart, she would get up and leave and never look back.

She didn’t. She couldn’t. She was scared; she was hurt; and she was alone. Here someone was offering her a safe place, even if it was just for the night, and she couldn’t walk away from it, even if she knew that she should.

Alex sat at her computer staring at her Stanford Application Essay without really seeing it. Her mind was still downstairs. She wasn’t sure why she kept thinking about Maggie, especially since Eliza was probably taking her to a homeless shelter or an orphanage or something.
She frowned. Were orphanages even a thing?

She pulled up Google and did a quick search, and found that apparently orphanages weren’t a thing anymore.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?” Kara asked.

Alex looked over at Kara, who was sitting on her bed, holding a copy of Lois Lane’s latest book.

“Yeah. Mom will know what to do.”

“You think so?” Kara asked.

“Yeah,” Alex said again. It was a lie. If Kara were right and Maggie didn’t have a home to go to, she wasn’t sure what Eliza could do to help.

Lie or not, it seemed to satisfy Kara. She smiled and returned to her book. Alex turned back to the computer and did another search on what happened to homeless girls.

By the time she went to bed two hours later, she wished she hadn’t.

Eliza closed the bedroom door and sat down on her bed. She wished more than anything that Jeremiah were there. He was always better with the girls, and she couldn’t help but think he’d know what to do. Or maybe not. She wasn’t sure.

When Clark had asked them to take Kara in, they’d spent hours arguing about it. Eliza had wanted to take her in immediately. There’d never been any doubt in her mind. The girl was scared, hurting, and alone. Kara had needed a family, and Eliza and Jeremiah were literally the only option. He’d been afraid of the risk, and in hindsight, Eliza should have been more afraid; that was what was making her hesitate in the present.

With Kara, she thought she’d known the risks and had been woefully unprepared for things she’d never had any way to anticipate. With Maggie, she had no idea of what the risks were. She didn’t know anything about the girl, other than that someone had hurt her, she was alone, and she was so scared she wouldn’t let Eliza help.

The decision would be easier if it weren’t for Kara. Or rather, if it weren’t for Kara’s secret. Eliza wanted to help Maggie, but she had to think of what it would mean for her daughters. Of what could happen if Maggie found out the truth about Kara.

She slipped a hand into her pocket, pulled out her cell phone, flipped it open, and selected a contact.

“Hey, Eliza,” Clark said. “Everything okay?”

“Not really,” Eliza admitted.

“What’s wrong? Is Kara okay?”

“She’s fine. But I need some advice.”

“Okay,” Clark said.

“Kara brought a girl named Maggie home with her today. I’m not sure if she’s a runaway or not, but she has a huge bruise on her face, a nasty gash in her lip, and Kara thinks she spent last night
sleeping under the bleachers at the school.”

“That’s not good. Have you called the police?”

“No,” Eliza said. “I don’t know if that would be a good idea or not. If the girl’s running away from an abusive home, the police might send her back, or put her into the foster system, or even throw her in juvenile detention.”

“You think she’s in some kind of trouble?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything about her.”

“Hang on a second. I’m going to put you on hold and get someone else on the line with us.”

“Okay,” Eliza said.

The line went silent for a moment, then Clark came back. “Eliza, I have a friend on the line with us. Can you describe Maggie?”


“Anything else?” a deep, gravelly voice asked.

“Alex said she thinks Maggie is new at school this year, and she hangs out with a girl named Elisa Wilkey.”


Eliza rubbed at her temples. “I’m not sure whether to be grateful or disturbed.”

“Both usually works for me,” Clark said.

“Do you need my email address, or have you already read the book I’ve been writing?” Eliza asked.

“The one about using extra-terrestrial gene sequences in gene therapy, or the trashy romance novel?”

“Well, I walked right into that one,” Eliza said. “Send the records.”

“Done,” the gravelly voice said, right before Eliza heard the sound of the line disconnecting.

“I take it that was Batman?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah. He can be… intense.”

“Well, let him know I am grateful. He was a big help.”
“He usually is. Is there anything I can do?”

“You could come see Kara sometime.”

“You know why I stay away.”

“You’re her family, Clark,” Eliza said. “A visit every couple of months wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

“I have enemies, Eliza.”

“Fine. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Eliza-”

She hung up without waiting to listen to whatever excuse he had this time and went downstairs to get her laptop out of her briefcase.
Pride and Prejudice and Yogurt

Chapter Summary

Alex finds out why Maggie can't go home, which raises an interesting question. Eliza makes Maggie an offer.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Homophobic language.

Thursday, February 16, 2006

Alex walked into the kitchen and was surprised to find Eliza standing at the stove. Usually Breakfast was already on the table by the time she and Kara came down.

“Morning,” Eliza said. “Breakfast is running a little late this morning. It should only be a couple of minutes.”

“Okay.”

“Before you sit down, can you go to the office and wake Maggie up?”

“She’s still here?”

“Yes,” Eliza said. “Go on. Breakfast will be ready when you get back.”

Alex turned around and headed for the office, wondering the whole way why Maggie was still there. It wasn’t that she had anything against her, and after her Google search the night before, she was kind of glad Maggie was safe. It was just that they didn’t know anything about her, other than that she hung out with Elisa Wilkey, which definitely wasn’t a point in her favor. Elisa Wilkey was probably the only person at Midvale High less popular than Alex and Kara.

Of course, given the kinds of shit that got people turned into social outcasts at Midvale High, that didn’t necessarily mean anything. But Alex was never entirely clear on what Elisa’s deal was, or why people didn’t like her, so she had no idea what kind of person would be her friend. And with all of those unanswered questions, she wasn’t sure if Maggie was the kind of person she wanted around Kara.

Alex knocked on the office door and waited. It took a couple of minutes for the door to open, but then she found herself face-to-face with a mussed-haired Maggie, who wasn’t quite awake yet, still wearing blue silk pajamas that were at least two sizes too large.

She looked at Maggie and felt a queasy, unbalanced feeling in her stomach, almost like the moment when you started down the hill on a rollercoaster, hit with the sudden sensation of falling. “Um… ah… Breakfast,” she spluttered, pointing towards the kitchen.
“Thanks,” Maggie said, a confused look on her face.

“Right. Um… see you,” Alex said, because apparently she’d decided to channel Kara. She turned around and headed for the kitchen, not sure what the hell had just happened, or why she’d turned into a stuttering idiot. There was something about Maggie that threw her off every time she got into the same room as her, but she couldn’t figure out what it was.

Maggie closed the door of the office, torn between feeling amused and depressed that she had apparently freaked Alex out so much that the girl couldn’t form a complete sentence. It might have been cute under other circumstances, but knowing she was freaked out by the fact that Maggie was homeless kind of ruined it.

God, that word felt terrible. Homeless. She was homeless. She couldn’t go back and crawl into her bed and cry. She couldn’t hug her mom or her dad or her little sister. She couldn’t… She couldn’t go home. Because she didn’t have one.

She sat down on the couch for a minute, trying to absorb it.

She took a couple of deep breaths, trying to keep herself from throwing up, and remembered what her dad always told her: when you have a problem, lean into it. Do everything you can to solve it.

She wasn’t going to solve anything by sitting there and crying, so she grabbed her socks and pulled them on, then changed out of the pajamas Kara’s mom had loaned her and put her clothes back on. She took a moment to fold the pajamas and blankets while she thought about what she could do to make her situation better.

First, ask Kara’s mom if she could use the phone to call her aunt Juanita. If Juanita would help, she’d go over to the Western Union place, then from there to the bus station. If not, then she could hike up to the interstate and try to hitch a ride.

She didn’t really relish the idea of trying to live with nothing but the clothes on her back and a gym uniform, but it was all she had with her.

Unless…

Her mom and her dad should both be at work all day. Her sister Mike would be in school. It would be risky, but her dad hadn’t taken her key; he’d been too busy telling her how ashamed he was and slapping her around. If she went to the house, she might be able to get some of her things. A couple of pairs of jeans, a few good shirts, her spare boots. Underwear and bras. She’d love to pick through the camping gear, but she didn’t dare take that much time in the house.

She sat the folded blankets and pajamas on the end of the couch, then grabbed her backpack and her gym bag and headed for the kitchen. Kara, Alex, and their mother were all there, sitting at the table and eating. Kara got a huge smile on her face when Maggie walked in.

“Hey.” Kara pointed towards a plate piled high with eggs, sausage, and bacon. “Breakfast!”

Maggie’s stomach immediately rebelled. She tried to hide it, but Kara’s mom noticed.

“Is something wrong?”

“My stomach is a little sensitive in the mornings,” Maggie said. “I usually just have dry toast.”

“Oh. We’re out of bread, but I think I have a bag of sesame bagels in the fridge, if you don’t think
the seeds would upset your stomach.”

“Thank you.”

Eliza waved her hand at the free seat. “Sit down. I’ll get them.”

Maggie sat down and pushed her plate away. She was never quite sure how people could eat stuff like that so early in the morning.

“Are you going to school today?” Kara asked.

“Kara,” her mom said in a soft, warning tone.

“But I just wanted to know if she wanted to walk with us.”

“It’s okay,” Maggie said. She looked at Kara. “I don’t think I’m going to make it today.” She didn’t add that she was pretty sure she wouldn’t be going back at all.

Kara frowned and looked down at her plate, which was empty. She looked up, eyeing the plate Maggie had pushed aside.

“Go ahead,” Maggie said, remembering the way Kara had devoured the food the night before. She laughed at the look on Kara’s face as she pushed her own plate aside and grabbed the one Maggie had offered her.

“Maggie, would you like one bagel, or two?” Kara’s mom asked.

“Two, please. Double toasted.”

Eliza could feel Maggie tense up as soon as Alex and Kara left, and honestly, she couldn’t blame her. She felt more than a little tense herself. She’d been up half the night, wrestling with the decision, but in the end it had been simple. She needed to do the right thing. Just like she had three years earlier. She might not know exactly what that was yet, but she did know that there was no world where the right thing to do was to put a child out on the street. If she did that, she’d never be able to live with herself, and she knew Kara would never forgive her if she used her as an excuse to avoid helping someone who needed it.

“Maggie?” she asked in a soft voice, trying not to spook the girl.

“I know,” Maggie said in such a hopeless voice that it broke Eliza’s heart. “It’s time to go.”

“Maggie?” she asked in a soft, warning tone.

“No, sweetheart. Not unless that’s what you want to do.”

Maggie looked up at her.

“I told you last night I don’t want to pry, and you don’t have to say anything you don’t want to, but it’s hard to miss that you need help. I’d like to help, if you’ll let me.”

Maggie looked down at the table, and Eliza could see her struggling with the decision.

“I know it might be hard to trust anyone right now. Someone hurt you, and that makes it scary. But you don’t have to decide all at once. We can start small.”

“What do you mean?”
“Your lip still needs to be treated,” Eliza said.

She saw Maggie start to panic.

“I’m not talking about going to the hospital, if that’s what you’re scared of. I can take care of it right here.”

“I can’t pay you anything,” Maggie said.

“Maggie, I’m not asking you for anything.” Eliza reached out and rested a hand on Maggie’s arm, and Maggie looked up at her. “I promise you, I don’t expect anything in return for anything I offer you. I just want to help.”

Maggie stared at her for a minute before she said, “Okay.”

Alex had never been under the illusion that the world was a kind place. It had taken her father. It had taken Kenny. And when she tried to do the right thing, it had thanked her by leaving her friendless, a social outcast, with only Kara on her side. But as harsh as the world had been to her, she’d never seen the really nasty parts of it. Never been confronted with some of the horrible things that could happen to people who fell through the cracks.

Now she had murder and suicide statistics and words like “sex trafficking” bouncing around her head, and they weren’t just abstract concepts or things she saw in the movies or on TV. They were real things that could affect a person she knew.

Well, sort of knew.

And that was part of the problem too. She hadn’t thought of Maggie as a person. She’d thought of her as a problem, the same way she used to think of Kara as a problem. The same way she thought of the dogs and cats Kara brought home as problems. She hadn’t even tried to get to know Maggie, and now, she might never get the chance, and that felt wrong.

She was so distracted by the idea and by the guilt she felt that it took her three tries to open her locker, and she nearly closed it again without getting her English book. She remembered at the last minute and grabbed it before she shut her locker and headed for class.

She had a bad tendency to look at everything as something to be solved. She knew it, and it was eating away at her because she knew she was still thinking of Maggie as a problem. Just a different kind of problem. The solvable kind. She wasn’t thinking of Maggie as a ‘how can I get rid of her before Mom kills me’ kind of problem. She was thinking of her as a ‘how can I help her’ kind of problem, which she hoped was better, though the answer wasn’t clear. At least, not until it walked right by her in the form of Elisa Wilkey.

“Hey, Elisa, wait up,” Alex called.

Elisa turned around with a confused look on her face. “Are you talking to me?” Elisa asked.

“Unless there’s another Elisa here I don’t know about,” Alex said, putting on a big smile as she looked Elisa over. Alex didn’t know much about her, other than that she had a weird haircut, shaved on one side and long on the other; had three piercings in each ear; wore Doc Martens, jeans, flannel shirts, and black lipstick all the time; and always smelled faintly of cigarette smoke.

She also didn’t appreciate Alex’s attempt at humor, if the way she rolled her eyes was anything to go by.
“What do you want?” she asked.

“I wanted to ask you a question about that girl you hang out with. Maggie, right?” Alex asked.

“Fuck you,” As Elisa turned to walk away, Alex grabbed her by the arm before she could take a step. “Let go!” Elisa shouted.

“Will you shut up before you get both of us in trouble,” Alex said.

Elisa looked around, noticing the looks both of them were getting from people in the hall, and turned back to Alex. “Why do you want to know about Maggie?”

“She was hanging around with my sister,” Alex said. As lies went, it had the virtue of being completely true, and also playing into the fact that everyone in the school made fun of her for spending all of her time with her younger sister.

“Jesus,” Elisa said. “You need to keep your sister away from her.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s a fucking dyke, Danvers. I spent months thinking she was my friend, but it turns out she just wanted to get in my pants.”

Alex let go of Elisa’s arm. “Is that why her parents kicked her out?”

“How the fuck should I know? Probably. She put a Valentine’s card in my locker with all this shit about how in love with me she was. When my dad saw it, he called her parents to let them know she’s a little fucking perv. But I’ll tell you this. You need to take care of your sister, or she’ll end up a freak and a dyke. Are we done?”

“Not yet,” Alex said, taking a step into Elisa’s person space. “You ever call my sister a freak again I will knock your teeth out. You understand?”

“Whatever,” Elisa said, before she turned around and stomped off.

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“Here you go,” Kara’s mom said. “Have a look.”

Maggie took the hand mirror she was holding out and used it to get a look at the gash in her lip, which was now held together by four neat, tidy stitches.

“It might still scar a little bit, but we’ll get you some Vaseline to keep it moist and that will help. If there is a scar, it should be really small.”

“Thank you,” Maggie said.

“You’re welcome.”

Maggie sat the mirror down. “When do you have to leave for work?”

“I took the day off. I thought we could take the time and get you squared away.”

Maggie stared at her for a moment and almost broke down in tears. She had no idea why this woman was being so nice to her, no idea how she’d been lucky enough for Kara to have spotted her under those bleachers, but she found herself thanking a God she wasn’t sure she believed in anymore.
“I… um…” Maggie stammered, trying to find a way to express what she was feeling, but the words wouldn’t come.

Kara’s mom turned to start cleaning up the table. “You know, I’m not sure if you noticed that Kara calls me Eliza. She came to live with us after her parents died in a fire, and I didn’t want her to feel like I was trying to replace her mom, but I also didn’t want her to have to call me Mrs. Danvers, so it seemed like a good compromise, but if you’d be more comfortable calling me Mrs. Danvers or Dr. Danvers, that’s okay. I know that names can be difficult sometimes, when they remind you of something bad that’s happened.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Danvers,” Maggie said.

Mrs. Danvers looked at her and smiled.

“Can I ask if you have somewhere safe you can go, or someone you can call?” Mrs. Danvers asked.

“I have an aunt back in Nebraska.”

“Are the two of you close?”

Maggie shook her head. “No. I haven’t seen her since I was about six.”

Mrs. Danvers looked at her for a moment. “Maggie, do you want to go back to Nebraska?”

“No!” Maggie said. She regretted it immediately. Hated the fear and the panic she could hear in her own voice. But it was true. Going back to Blue Springs was just about the only way she could imagine things getting worse.

“Okay,” Mrs. Danvers said. “I’m not going to try to make you do anything you don’t want to do. I just need to know what kind of help you need. If it’s just help getting to someone or someplace, or if you need a place to stay. I know you’re scared, but I promise you, I won’t judge you.”

Maggie sat there, taking in what Mrs. Danvers was saying. She almost told her everything, because she wanted to tell somebody. Anybody. She wanted to tell them and hear them say that she hadn’t done anything wrong. That loving someone wasn’t something to be ashamed of. She wanted to believe she could trust her, that she could tell her the truth, but telling someone the truth was what got her into this mess in the first place.

“I could use a place to stay,” Maggie said. “Just until I figure out what I’m going to do.”

Maggie could tell that Mrs. Danvers was a little disappointed, but she didn’t push.

“Okay, sweetie,” Mrs. Danvers said. “If you’re going to stay, why don’t we go pick up a few things for you. After all, you can’t wear the same clothes every day.”

“You had a fight with Elisa Wilkey?”

Alex looked up from her lunch as Kara sat down across from her. “No,” Alex said. “What gave you that idea?”

“That’s what everyone is saying. That you jumped Elisa in the middle of the English hall.”

“Kara, two weeks ago, everyone was saying you were a Russian spy.”

“Yeah. That was weird.”
“I told you not to read War and Peace in the original Russian.”

Kara shrugged. “I thought it would be better.”

“You also thought that about Crime and Punishment and Anna Karenina.”

“I know,” Kara said. “But I thought that they’d have to have at least one book that wasn’t just unending misery and depression.”

“You thought the same thing about Victor Hugo. I tried to tell you that anyone whose most famous work was titled ‘The Miserables’ wasn’t going to be big on happy endings.”

“I don’t get why people would keep reading such depressing books.”

“Not everything can be Harry Potter,” Alex said, pointing with her fork.

“Or Jane Austen.”

“I don’t like Jane Austen.”

“You dragged me to see Pride and Prejudice eight times in six weeks,” Kara said.

“That is a great movie!”

“We’re getting off topic. What happened with Elisa Wilkey?”

“I asked her about Maggie,” Alex said. “I saw them together a few times, and I figured maybe she could tell us what happened.”

“Did she know anything?”

“She just told me to fuck off.”

“You think maybe she and Maggie had some kind of fight?”

Alex’s whole body tensed as she remembered the whole interaction. “I think Elisa Wilkey is a bitch. If they had a fight, it was her fault.”

Kara gave her a confused look. Alex ignored it and went back to her Salisbury steak.

Mrs. Danvers’ idea of ‘a few things’ turned out to be a little different than Maggie’s. Maggie had figured they’d go on a goodwill run for some pairs of jeans and a couple of shirts. Instead, Mrs. Danvers had tried to take her to the mall. They hadn’t exactly argued about it, but Mrs. Danvers had finally agreed to Walmart after Maggie had insisted that she wouldn’t be comfortable if Mrs. Danvers spent that kind of money on her. Maggie really hadn’t thought about the fact that Walmart carried some really good brands, or that Eliza would just slip things into the cart when she wasn’t looking, and when they left Walmart, Maggie probably had more clothes now than she did before she got kicked out. She had at least 10 pairs of jeans, seven of them Levi’s 501’s; three pairs of flannel-lined Eddie Bauers; a dozen good flannel shirts instead of the clearance rack stuff she usually settled for, and just as many t-shirts; more socks, bras, and underwear than she could shake a stick at; a leather jacket; a raincoat; a couple of hoodies; a peacoat; a bathrobe; two pairs of pajamas; a pair of sneakers; and two pairs of boots, including an honest-to-God pair of Doc Martens. On top of clothes, there was a toothbrush, a razor, toothpaste, floss, shampoo, body wash, deodorant, and pads. Maggie honestly wasn’t sure what else was in the bags, because Mrs. Danvers kept adding things when Maggie wasn’t looking.
The only thing she’d actually been able to talk Mrs. Danvers out of buying had been the makeup and the dresses. Maggie had actually been a little surprised that she’d been willing to believe that Maggie didn’t want either, given that some of the worst arguments she’d ever gotten into with her mom had been over whether or not she wanted a dress or if she should wear makeup. She hadn’t questioned it at the time, because she’d been too busy being stunned at what was happening.

She did notice that Mrs. Danvers found a reason for Maggie to be somewhere else when it came time to check out, and Maggie was actually grateful for that. She had no idea how much money Mrs. Danvers had spent that day, but she knew it was a lot. It might have been Walmart, but Maggie had spent enough time drooling over them to know a pair of 8-eye 1460 Doc Martens alone cost more than Maggie had spent on clothes in the last year.

When they’d gotten back to the house, Maggie had helped Mrs. Danvers clean out the closet in the office where she spent the night. She noticed everything they took out was men’s clothing, and none of it looked like it would fit anyone in the house. She wondered a bit about that, but she didn’t ask. She just watched as Eliza cut all the tags off the new clothes and hung everything up.

She wasn’t sure how to feel about what had just happened, and part of her was suspicious. She wondered if Mrs. Danvers had done it to make her feel tied down, since, if she left, there was no way she could take even half of it.

“You look a little overwhelmed,” Mrs. Danvers said as she was cutting the tags off Maggie’s new leather bomber jacket.

“I don’t know why you did all of this,” Maggie said.

“My husband would probably say it’s a bad habit,” Mrs. Danvers said as she hung the jacket up. She turned around and grabbed one of the office chairs and pulled it over so she could face Maggie. “I know it must seem strange. I barely know you, but I’ve offered you a place to stay. I’ve bought you a bunch of clothes. I’ve patched up your lip.”

“It is strange,” Maggie said.

“Maybe, but it shouldn’t be. My husband and I took Kara in because her parents had just died, and the only relative she had left wasn’t much more than a kid himself. He couldn’t take care of her. Could barely provide for himself. But he’d been a student of mine, and a good friend, so when he came to me with this scared, lonely little girl who didn’t have anywhere else she could go, it never even occurred to me to do anything else. I wouldn’t have been able to look myself in the mirror if I didn’t help. When I came home yesterday and saw you, it was the same thing. There was this scared, hurt, lonely little girl sitting there with nowhere to go, and no one else to help her. I couldn’t turn you away. If I did, I’d never forgive myself.” She paused, gave Maggie a few seconds to absorb the information. “Does that make sense?”

“A little,” Maggie said. “I just… I don’t know. With everything that’s happened, it feels too good to be true.”

“You want to talk about what happened?” Mrs. Danvers asked.

“No.”

“Okay. I do need to ask because I have two daughters to think of: are you in any sort of legal trouble?”

“No,” Maggie said. “No, I promise I’m not.”
“Okay, sweetheart. There are going to be a couple of rules if you’re going to stay here, though.”

“Okay,” Maggie said.

“No fighting.”

“Okay.”

“No smoking.”

Maggie winced because she’d been dying for a cigarette, but nodded.

“No drinking, no drugs.”

Maggie nodded.

“No shoplifting, no stealing.”

“I’m not a thief.”

“No, I don’t think you are,” Mrs. Danvers said. “But I also saw how uncomfortable you were this morning letting me buy you basic necessities. Sometimes it feels easier to take than to ask. But please, if you need something, if you need anything, you come to me, and we’ll take care of it. I would much rather buy you what you need than buy a lawyer a new BMW.”

“Okay,” Maggie said, not adding that she was even more anxious to avoid any trouble with the cops than Mrs. Danvers could imagine.

Mrs. Danvers bent down and picked up the last Walmart bag and took out a cell phone box. Maggie stared at it, not quite believing what she was seeing.

“I went ahead and paid for this outright, instead of getting it on a plan. It’s yours. If you decide to leave, we’ll go get it switched to a prepaid plan for you. As long as you’re staying here, I’ll pay the bill. But if you’re going to be late getting home or have to go somewhere you haven’t told me about in advance, I want a text or a phone call. I’m not trying to pry or run your life, but I do want to know that you’re safe. Same rule applies to Kara and Alex.”

“Okay.”

“Last rule,” Mrs. Danvers said. “If you decide to leave, come talk to me. You can choose to leave anytime you want, but if you do, I want to do everything I can to make sure you’re safe, and you have everything you need. Can you do that?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “I can do that.”

Alex sat in her Spanish class, staring at the whiteboard without really seeing anything. Her confrontation with Elisa Wilkey kept playing in her head, over and over again, leaving her more and more confused each time, because she couldn’t understand it.

It wasn’t that she hadn’t known there were people who felt that way about gay people. You couldn’t really miss things like that when it seemed like half the politicians in the country had run on a ‘ban the gays’ platform in the last election, and there was talk all the time about amending the constitution to ban same-sex marriage. It just wasn’t something she had ever really spent any time thinking about. She knew it was important to her mom for some reason, and her dad talked about it sometimes, though she got the feeling that was more his making polite noises to keep her mom
happy than any genuine interest in the subject. But it was mixed in with so many other things that her mom cared about that she’d kind of lost track when it came to politics. After a while, she’d just focused on getting into Stanford and their pre-med program.

The thing with Maggie and Elisa bothered her though. Any time she didn’t get something, it bothered her. Kind of like with boys and kissing and dating. She didn’t get what all the fuss was about. She’d tried it, but she’d never thought it was worth the effort. The couple of dates she’d been on had been boring, and the time Vicki had talked her into playing seven minutes in heaven at a party was a memory she’d rather forget. She knew she wanted to have kids someday, but she wanted to get through medical school first, so figuring it out didn’t seem that urgent. But it had always bothered her that she’d never really gotten it.

She couldn’t even figure out what, exactly, it was about the Maggie thing that bothered her. Elisa had made the whole thing sound like something dirty. For a moment, Alex had really been worried that Maggie was some kind of creep. She hadn’t liked the word Elisa had used, but it sounded like Maggie was like some of the guys on the football team that girls warned each other away from. But then Elisa had said Maggie only put a Valentine’s day card in her locker, and Alex had gone from worried to confused.

If all Maggie had done was give her a Valentine’s Day card, why was that bad? Alex thought getting a card sounded a lot nicer than the way boys let you know they liked you. The looks some of the guys on the football team gave her made her feel like she needed a shower.

She tried to put herself in Elisa’s position. Tried to imagine what it would be like to have Maggie as a friend for months. She didn’t know much about Maggie, so she mostly ended up thinking about things she and Vicki used to do, only with Maggie in Vicki’s place. Days spent at the beach in front of the house, surfing, laying out in the sun, watching the sunset while they daydreamed about all the things they were going to do after college. The daydream with Maggie was a bit better than the reality was with Vicki because in Alex’s head, Maggie loved motorcycles, and the idea of riding down the coast to Baha and renting a couple of boards was met with enthusiasm instead of questions about why they couldn’t just fly down first class. She thought about lying in bed with Maggie, watching Fried Green Tomatoes or Bend It Like Beckham, about falling asleep next to her after staying up too late.

She thought about doing that for months, of having a friend like that back in her life, and she couldn’t find any reason to be upset about it. So she thought about the rest. Thought about what it would be like to open her locker and find a Valentine’s card from Maggie.

She could picture it clearly. Opening her locker and finding a red envelope under a little bundle of chocolate, wrapped in red cellophane and tied with white and pink ribbon, the way her dad used to do for her mom. She imagined picking it up and breathing in Maggie’s perfume. She felt a little thrill shooting through her as she imagined opening the card and seeing a big red heart with the words ‘I Love You’ written in it. Opening the card and seeing a hand-written note from Maggie telling her she loved her and wanted to be her girlfriend. Imagined rushing across the school to find Maggie as she walked to one of her classes. Imagined the way she wouldn’t have to say anything because Maggie would see her there, holding the card and smiling at her, and she would know Alex felt the same way, and she would kiss her right there in the hallway.

“¡Señorita Danvers! ¿Qué es más importante que mi clase?”

Alex jerked up out of the slouch she’d sunk into. She felt her cheeks heat up as everyone in the class stared at her.

“Nada, Señora. Lo siento mucho,” Alex said.
She straightened up and looked at Ms. Gomez and tried to put Maggie out of her head, but by the
time the class ended twenty minutes later, Alex still hadn’t heard a single word Ms. Gomez had
said.

“You’re awfully quiet today,” Kara said as she looked over at Alex. They were about halfway
home, and Alex hadn’t said a word. That wasn’t entirely out of the ordinary. After the Kenny
incident, they had a rule against discussing anything Krypton-related outside of the house, so
conversation on the way home was mostly limited to how their days went. Some days, life in
Midvale wasn’t interesting enough to sustain a conversation, so the walk home could be quiet.

Today felt different, thought. Like the silence had more weight to it. Given everything that had
happened, Kara was pretty sure of the topic that was on Alex’s mind.

“Just thinking,” Alex said.

“Are you mad at me?” Kara asked, a little afraid of the answer. Everything had been really good
between them since they’d caught Sheriff Collins, and she was a little afraid she’d messed it up.

Alex looked over at her. “Why would I be mad at you?”

“You seemed pretty upset about my bringing Maggie home.”

“You did the right thing,” Alex said. “I was upset because you didn’t show up at the bike rack.
And because you didn’t answer your texts.”

“And because I gave Maggie your clothes?”

“It was my Nine Inch Nails t-shirt, Kara.”


“Yeah. And whose fault is that?”

“I said I was sorry.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of Alex’s mouth. “Not as sorry as Mark Wilson was when he
realized there was an octopus in his shirt.”

“That was pretty funny.”

“I still can’t believe we got a lifetime ban from the Aquarium for that.”

“I know!” Kara said. “It’s not like any of the penguins escaped.”

“I think they were more upset about you trying to take one of the otters home.”

“It was so cute!”

They walked a bit further, both of them smiling the whole way, but Kara couldn’t get the question
she really wanted to ask out of her head. “Do you think Maggie will still be there when we get
home?”

“I don’t know.”
After their talk, Mrs. Danvers had left Maggie alone, which wasn’t really the best thing, because it gave her time to think and wonder how she’d messed up so badly. She’d been so sure Elisa felt the same way, so sure Elisa was gay too. The haircut, the way she dressed, the way she didn’t even talk to boys and only mentioned them when she was complaining about how much she hated it when one of them asked her out. Maggie had thought she’d finally found someone else like her. Someone who understood her and loved her.

The worst part was, after her dad had slapped her, after he screamed at her that it was her fault they’d had to move away from Blue Springs, that she’d embarrassed him and her mother, that she’d humiliated them, spit in their face, and shamed them; after her father told her she wasn’t his daughter anymore, and she should leave and never come back, all Maggie wanted to do was see Elisa. She wanted to curl up next to her and be held. She’d lost everything, and all she could think of was how much she still wanted the person who had done this to her.

How fucked up was that? How desperate for love and attention did she have to be to miss people who hated her the way she missed her parents and Elisa?

The thoughts kept running around in her head. Hating Elisa, missing Elisa, hating herself for missing Elisa, hating her parents, missing her parents, hating herself for missing her parents, wondering what was so wrong with her that no one could love her. Wanting to see her sister, being afraid her sister would hate her too. Over and over again, until she couldn’t stand it anymore. She grabbed her backpack and went to the kitchen, taking out her books and starting on the homework that was due yesterday, just to have something, anything to do.

Alex wasn’t sure what was going on in her head. She hadn’t really been able to focus on anything after Spanish class because somehow, the idea of kissing Maggie wouldn’t get out of her head. And it wasn’t just Maggie. She and Vicki had sixth period psychology together, and maybe because the whole thing had started with her imagining Maggie in Vicki’s place while they were surfing or watching movies, her brain ran through the whole card scenario with Vicki in Maggie’s place, and she’d felt the same slightly queasy feeling when she thought of what it would be like to kiss Vicki that she had when she’d thought about kissing Maggie.

She’d tried, just as an experiment, picturing the same thing with guys and ran into a problem there because honestly, she couldn’t think of a single guy in the entire school she actually wanted to spend time with. Much less kiss. She tried anyway. She pictured Jason Hart, who was easily the best-looking guy in the school. Thin, with long, silky blonde hair and brown eyes. She’d gotten bored before she even gotten to the part about opening the locker and finding the card.

“Kara,” Alex said as they came as they started across the bridge where Sheriff Collins had tried to run them down.

“Yeah?” Kara asked.

“You said you almost kissed Kenny that night in the woods, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“What did it feel like?” Alex asked. “I mean, what did you feel like, when you were about to kiss him?”

“I don’t know. Nervous, I guess. I actually felt like I had an upset stomach. I remember because that hadn’t happened since before I... Since before.”
Alex frowned. She’d never felt anything like that around a guy, but it sounded an awful lot like what she’d felt that morning when Maggie had opened the office door. And like what she’d felt when she thought about kissing Maggie, or even when she thought about kissing Vicki.

“Why?”

“Just something that came up in psych class today,” Alex said.

“Me almost kissing Kenny came up in psych class?” Alex didn’t have to look to know there was a dubious expression on Kara’s face.

“No. Just… what people feel when they want to kiss someone.”

“Oh,” Kara said. “But you’ve kissed guys before, haven’t you?”

“A couple of times. It wasn’t really that great.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I asked about Kenny. What I felt wasn’t anything like that.”

“What did you feel?” Kara asked.

“Mostly, I just wanted it to be over.”

“Oh.”

Eliza was sitting in one of the armchairs in the living room with Streaky curled up in her lap when she heard the front door open. “Girls, can you come into the living room?” she called out.

Alex and Kara both came into the room a moment later, causing Streaky to look up from his very important nap.

“Hey, Mom.” Alex’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“Come in and have a seat,” Eliza said.

Alex and Kara both took a seat on the couch, and Streaky decided his current perch wasn’t good enough anymore. He hopped down, trotted across the room, and hopped up into Kara’s lap. Eliza watched Kara and Alex as they sat there, Kara petting Streaky, while Alex stared at her like she was waiting for bad news. She wished that Jeremiah were there. He’d always been able to read people better than she did, and it was a skill she could really use right in that moment. She had a pretty good idea how Kara was going to feel about this, but it had always been harder for her to get a read on Alex than just about anyone else she knew. She feared this would go like Kara’s adoption. Alex hadn’t said anything when they’d told her Kara would be coming to live with them, but it had become pretty clear not long after that Alex hated the idea. Eliza just hoped that an older, more mature Alex would be more understanding.

Of course, being worried about how Alex was going to react to this didn’t mean she wasn’t worried about Kara, but she was worried about Kara for an entirely different reason. Having Maggie here would take away the one space where Kara was allowed to be anything other than completely human. No powers in the house. No talking about Krypton at the dinner table. This was going to be hard for Kara in ways she probably hadn’t considered when she brought Maggie home, but then, she probably hadn’t imagined that Eliza would let her stay, either.
“Is Maggie still here?” Kara asked.

“She’s in the kitchen.”

Kara smiled and visibly relaxed. Alex’s response was a lot harder to interpret. The look on her face said relief, but her whole body was tense.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” Eliza said.

“Is she going to stay here?” Kara asked.

“For a few days, at least. She doesn’t have anywhere she can go right now, so I offered to let her stay here for a while.”

“How long?” Kara asked.

“I don’t know. Situations like this are hard to predict.”

“What kind of situation?” Kara asked.

“I don’t know the details, and I promised Maggie I wouldn’t pry, which is a promise I expect both of you to keep as well, but she can’t go home. That may change, but from what I gathered, it’s not very likely. I couldn’t let her end up out on the street, so I offered to let her stay here.”

She kept her eyes on Alex as she spoke. There was none of the anger she’d half-expected, but she couldn’t make heads or tails of what she saw.

“I know this might not be easy for the two of you—”

“We can handle it,” Alex said.

“Yeah,” Kara said.

“I know,” Eliza said. “But we should talk about what you’ll be handling because as long as she’s here, there are going to be a few new rules.”

Kara’s head shot up at that. “What? Why?”

“Because she can’t know about you,” Alex said, dropping her voice to a whisper.

“Alex is right,” Eliza added.

“Oh. Right.”

“So, no powers,” Eliza said.

“That’s already a rule,” Kara said.

“And how well do you follow it when you’re upstairs and want a snack?”

“But that’s—”

“Kara,” Eliza said, cutting her off before she got going. “No powers. And no talking about Krypton or your cousin’s second job where Maggie could overhear you.”

“Okay.”
“And you have to wear your glasses,” Eliza said. “Even in the house.”

“Okay.”

“I know this is a lot to ask of both of you,” Eliza said.

“Mom, it’s okay,” Alex said.

Eliza felt relief flood through her at Alex’s words. She hadn’t realized quite how much she’d been expecting Alex to put up a fight, but she was glad Alex and Kara were both onboard with Maggie staying.

“Kara,” Alex said.

Kara turned and looked at Alex. “Yeah?”

“Can you give me and Mom a minute?”

“Uh… sure,” Kara said, looking a little confused. She picked up Streaky, who let out a little squeak of protest at having his nap disturbed, stood up, and headed for the door.

“And no eavesdropping!” Alex said.

Kara stuck her tongue out, and Eliza had to bite her lip to keep from smiling. She waited until she was sure Kara was out of earshot, then turned back to Alex. “What is it, sweetheart?”

“I… um… I talked to Elisa Wilkey today,” Alex said.

“Maggie’s friend?”

“Not much of a friend,” Alex said in an angry tone.

“Alex,” Eliza said, in a tone she hopes was both gentle and stern. “Whatever happened between Elisa Wilkey and Maggie is between them. You shouldn’t have gone poking around in Maggie’s business.”

“I know. I wasn’t trying to be nosey. I just wanted to see if there was something we could do to help.”

Eliza felt a swell of pride as she looked at Alex. She’d grown so much over the last few years, and every time Eliza saw the proof, it amazed her. She wanted to reach out and hug Alex, but she had the feeling that she best thing she could do for her was to listen.

“What did she say?” Eliza asked.

“A lot of stuff I don’t want to repeat. But the important part is, Maggie put a Valentine’s card in her locker because Maggie liked her. Elisa freaked out and gave it to her dad, and he called Maggie’s dad. Elisa said she didn’t know for sure, but I think Maggie’s parents beat her up and kicked her out because they found out she’s gay.”

There was a small quiver in her voice that Eliza hadn’t heard in a long time. Not since the night she’d told Alex and Kara that Jeremiah wasn’t coming home. She wasn’t sure why, but Alex was taking what had happened to Maggie personally.

“I had an idea that that might have been what happened.”
“You did?”

“Yes, I did. Alex, I need you to keep this to yourself. You can’t tell Kara, and you can’t tell Maggie you know unless she tells you about it first.”

“Why?” Alex asked.

“Because Maggie should get to decide who knows this about her. I know it might be hard to understand, and it’s not fair, but sometimes it’s not safe for people to know if someone is gay or bisexual or transgender or anything other than straight. Sometimes, the only way for someone who’s gay to feel safe is to stay in the closet.”

Eliza took a deep breath to steady her own nerves and get some distance from the memories this entire situation was dredging up. “If Maggie told Elisa that she had feelings for her, it’s probably because she trusted her. Right now, Maggie is probably feeling exposed and vulnerable because someone she trusted betrayed her and outed her to people who hurt her. The best thing we can do for her right now is let her feel safe and in control. Telling her you know she’s gay when she hasn’t told you will take that feeling of safety and control away from her. We have to let her tell us in her own time.”

“What if she never tells us?” Alex asked.

“Then that’s her choice, and we have to respect it.”

Alex looked down at the floor, and Eliza could practically hear the wheels turning in Alex’s head. She watched as Alex wrapped her arms around herself protectively, each hand gripping the bicep of the opposite arm. It was a posture Eliza recognized as Alex’s ‘I’m scared and I’m trying not to be’ pose.

“It is okay though, isn’t it? That she’s gay?” Alex asked in such a small voice that Eliza had to strain to hear her.

“Of course it’s okay. Sweetheart, look at me.”

Alex lifted her head and looked at Eliza.

“There is nothing wrong with being gay. It’s part of who a person is. It’s like having green eyes or red hair or being left-handed. What’s wrong is judging a person for being who they are, or a parent’s placing conditions on their love for their child. A parent should love a child however they are.”

Eliza wasn’t quite sure how to interpret the look on Alex’s face. She had the same expression she wore when she was working on a particularly hard math problem. Eliza thought she knew what it meant, but if she were right, then what she’d said about Maggie was just as important for Alex, and she had to be patient and let Alex come to her when she was ready.

Though, like with Maggie, she wasn’t above dropping a hint.

“Is there something you want to talk about?” she asked.

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “It’s just been a long day, and I’ve got a lot on my mind.”
“Okay. But if you want to talk, I’m always here.”

“I know,” Alex said. “I’m going to go grab a snack and get started on my homework.”

“Okay, sweetie.” Eliza watched as Alex grabbed her bag and left the living room, wondering the whole time if she was ready to deal with this. She wished Jeremiah were here and was a little angry at him for leaving her two raise two girls on her own.

Maggie had her math homework spread out in front of her and was trying to make heads or tails of a sine function when Kara walked into the room carrying a black cat who was complaining bitterly. She pulled out a seat and deposited the cat into it.

“Hey, Maggie,” she said. “The noisy little guy is Streaky.”

“Nice to meet you, Streaky,” Maggie said. Streaky’s only answer was a flick of the tail.

“Friendly fellow, isn’t he?”

“He’s just cranky because I’m not sitting down and petting him. Are you hungry? I was going to make a snack.”

“I could eat.”

Kara walked over to the fridge and opened the freezer. “We’ve got mac and cheese, chicken enchiladas, and Salisbury steak with mashed potatoes.”

“Mac and cheese,” Maggie said, because however good enchiladas sounded, she wasn’t about to settle for frozen. Some things were sacred.

“Mac and cheese it is.”

Maggie went back to her math while Kara puttered around, putting the food in the oven before coming back to the table and sitting down next to the cat.

“Brownie?” Kara asked.

Maggie looked up to see Kara opening a package of Little Debbie fudge brownies.

“I thought you were making mac and cheese,” Maggie said as Streaky climbed into Kara’s lap.

“Yeah, but that takes like, thirty minutes. I could starve by then.”

“I’ll pass. Unless you have some tiramisu hidden somewhere.”

“No.”

“Thanks anyway.”

Kara shrugged and tore open one of the brownies. Maggie went back to her math homework. After a few minutes of quiet, Kara asked, “What are you working on?”

“Pre-calculus.”

“You have Ms. Fulton?”
“Unfortunately.”

“How do you keep from falling asleep in her class?”

“I don’t,” Maggie said, which made Kara smile. “Which is probably why none of this makes any sense.”

“She is so boring.”

“What do you have her for?” Maggie asked, happy to have an excuse to ignore her work.

“AP Calculus. It’s terrible. I don’t know how anyone can make math boring, but somehow, she manages.”

Maggie could not have heard that right. “Did you really just ask how someone could make math boring?”

“Yeah.” Kara barely looked up as she tore open a second brownie.

“What planet are you from?”

Kara looked up at her, a confused and slightly scared look on her face. “Um… this one.”

“Right… Math is always boring. Useful, but boring.”

“You can’t mean that!” Kara said with more indignation than Maggie had ever seen outside of a football player who’d just been turned down for a date.

“That math is boring?”

“Yeah,” Kara said. “Math is amazing!”

“Do not let her get started on that speech.”

Maggie turned towards the sound of the voice and saw Alex walking into the kitchen. She sat her bookbag down next to the seat Streaky had only recently vacated in favor of Kara’s lap and headed for the fridge.

“She said math is boring, Alex,” Kara said with a hushed voice, like it was something scandalous.

“It is when Ms. Fulton teaches it.”

“Exactly!” Kara said. “She takes something amazing and beautiful and poetic and makes it so boring it puts people to sleep.”

Alex came back to the table carrying a spoon and a cup of yogurt. “You’re just going to have to learn to live with the fact that not everyone is a giant nerd like you,” Alex said as she sat down next to Kara.

“You suck.”

Alex gave Kara a smug smile as she tore the lid off her yogurt. “Don’t hate me because I’m the cool sister,” Alex said as she scooped up a spoon full of yogurt. She turned back towards Maggie as she lifted the spoon. Their eyes met, and Alex stuck the spoon up her nose.
Alex sat with her head back and a tampon stuffed up her right nostril to stop the bleeding.

“Does anyone want to tell me how it happened?” Eliza asked as she tossed blood and yogurt-soaked gauze in the trash.

“I don’t know,” Kara said. “One minute, everything was fine, the next, Alex tried to shove a spoonful of yogurt up her nose.”

“That’s not what happened,” Alex said, wishing it were possible to strangle a Kryptonian with her bare hands.

“I don’t know, Alex,” Maggie said. “I think that’s a pretty good description of what happened.”

Alex could hear the amusement in Maggie’s voice and felt a burning desire to crawl in a hole and die of embarrassment.

“What did happen, Alex?” Eliza asked.

“I just went to take a bite of yogurt, and I missed my mouth with the spoon,” Alex said, and hated herself for it, because ‘I missed my mouth with the spoon’ sounded every bit as idiotic as ‘I tried to shove a spoonful of yogurt up my nose’.

“You missed your mouth?” Eliza asked.

“Yes,” Alex said, because obviously she wasn’t embarrassed enough without having to have her own stupidity repeated back to her in front of the girl she’d spent half the day thinking about kissing. Which was something she really wasn’t ready to deal with. At least not with said girl in the room, laughing at her inability to manage tasks the average toddler had mastered.

“Sweetie, are you feeling okay? You’ve seemed off ever since I got home yesterday.”

Alex stared up at Eliza, wanting to hug her. She might not have realized it, but she’d just given Alex the perfect out. “I haven’t been feeling that great.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I keep getting hot, my stomach feels weird, and I’m having a hard time concentrating.” As lies went, it had the virtue of being true.

Eliza frowned and reached out, placing a hand on Alex’s forehead, and Alex wanted to die out of embarrassment again, because of course her mom couldn’t get the perfectly good thermometer out of the first aid kit. That just wouldn’t be mortifying enough. “You’re a little warm. Why don’t you go lie down until dinner? If you feel up to it, you can do your homework after. If you’re still feeling sick in the morning, you can stay home for the day.”

“Okay.” Alex got up and headed for the stairs, fully intending to find out if it was possible to smother yourself with a pillow.

“Is your sister always like that?” Maggie asked as Kara pulled the trays of mac and cheese out of the oven.

“Like what?” Kara asked.

“A little weird,” Maggie said.
“Alex?” Kara asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone call her weird before. Of course, that could be because they’re too busy calling me a freak.”

Maggie watched as Kara dug a pair of spoons out of the silverware drawer and felt a stab of anger at anyone who’d ever said an unkind word to Kara. The girl was definitely odd, but she’d saved Maggie from God only knew what just by being kind, and the idea that she would accept being called a freak so casually bothered Maggie a lot.

“Why do you ask?”

“She just seems kind of uncomfortable around me. Does she get nervous around new people?”

“No,” Kara said as she carried the trays of mac and cheese over to the table. “I don’t think Alex is afraid of anything except Eliza’s ‘I’m not mad, just disappointed’ speech.”

“I imagine that would be pretty terrifying. You have any hot sauce?”

“Sure,” Kara said. “Tabasco, Siracha, or Cholula?”

“Cholula.”

“Got it,” Kara called over her shoulder as she headed back over towards the fridge. “I think Alex is just having an off day. She spent the whole walk home thinking about something that happened in her psych class.”

“Oh,” Maggie said, even though she knew that wasn’t the explanation. Alex definitely hadn’t been happy when she’d first seen her the day before. Maggie had really hoped it was just Alex’s being upset because Kara had loaned out her clothes without asking her. Dinner had been a bit weird for everyone, so she couldn’t really judge how Alex was feeling then, but Alex had clearly been freaked out that morning when she’d knocked on the office door. Maggie had thought it was just because she was homeless. She hadn’t really worried about it because she figured she was leaving in a bit anyway, but whatever was bothering Alex had clearly been bugging her before school, and she’d been looking right at Maggie when she’d accidently jammed a spoon up her nose.

The only conclusion Maggie could come up with was that the supposedly fearless Alex Danvers was freaking out by her. She felt a brief moment of panic at the idea that Alex knew she was gay somehow, but it was only a moment, because Alex had been weird before school. If she’d come home acting weird, it would be different. It would mean she’d gone to school and asked about the weird kid, and what happened was probably all over school by now.

Maggie stopped mid-thought as she realized she was wrong. Alex and Kara were rich kids. They had cell phones and probably had computers in their bedrooms. Alex had probably run upstairs yesterday and texted all her rich girl friends about the weird homeless girl her kid sister brought home, and all her rich little friends probably couldn’t wait to tell her about how Maggie was a great big lesbian.

“You okay?” Kara asked as she sat down, placing the bottle of hot sauce in front of Maggie.

“Yeah.” Maggie grabbed the hot sauce and splashed a good bit into her food. “Just thinking.”

“You and Alex should form a club,” Kara said.

“I’ll think about it,” Maggie said, which made Kara laugh, but Maggie was thinking about Alex. If Alex knew she was gay and was that freaked out about it, it was only a matter of time before Alex told Mrs. Danvers, and she would be back out on the street.
‘Am I gay?’

The question kept bouncing around inside Alex’s head as she lay in her bed staring up at the ceiling, and she was starting to get really frustrated with it. It was a question she’d never asked herself before. It was a question she had never thought she needed to ask before, but suddenly it seemed important because she’d never intended to imagine what kissing Maggie was like. She’d only been trying to understand why Elisa Wilkey was upset, something which still escaped her, but when she thought about what it would feel like to find a Valentine’s Day card from Maggie, her brain had run away with her. She still wasn’t sure how she felt about the idea, but she had definitely felt something, which was more than she could say for the couple of times she’d actually kissed a boy.

Whatever that something was, the more she thought about kissing Maggie, or Vicki, the more she felt it, and the more she felt it, the more she liked it, which certainly suggested she was gay. Or bi. Bi was a thing, right? Of course, if she were bi, wouldn’t she feel something when she thought about kissing a guy?

Maybe the problem was just the guys. Midvale High was pretty lackluster on that front. None of the guys at school really had any appeal. Though if she thought about it, she couldn’t really think of any guy she liked. Well, maybe the guy who played Mr. Darcy in Pride and Prejudice. She’d always felt herself go a little weak in the knees doing the scene where Elizabeth and Darcy kiss.

She closed her eyes, picturing it. Sitting in front of the lake, the torches flickering around her, her eyes closed as Elizabeth’s lips covered hers.

“Fuck!” she said as she opened her eyes and sat up because she had very definitely felt something. Except she hadn’t been thinking about Mr. Darcy at all.

So, probably not bi. If she couldn’t think of a single guy she wanted to kiss, straight wasn’t looking promising either.

But was she gay?

Did one silly daydream really mean she was gay? People daydreamed about stuff all the time without wanting to actually do it. Maybe that’s all this was. Just some sort of weird daydream thing.

How the hell did people know for sure?

Alex got up out of her bed, walked over to her computer, pulled up Google, typed in ‘how do you know if you’re gay?’ and hit enter.

Eliza smiled at Alex as she walked into the kitchen behind Kara.

“Are you feeling any better, sweetie?’ she asked as Alex and Kara sat down next to each other and across from Maggie.

“Yeah,” Alex said without any real enthusiasm.

Eliza picked up the pan of lasagna and carried it over to the table. She sat it down and looked over at Alex’s face, checking quickly to see if there were any signs of bruising from the spoon incident before she went to get the garlic bread. When she sat down a moment later, she looked around the table. Kara was practically bouncing in her seat, which was pretty normal when she’d gone more
than an hour without a major infusion of calories and was about to eat. Maggie was quiet, busily looking anywhere but at Alex, while Alex was staring off into the distance, her gaze trained somewhere along the kitchen wall. Eliza wasn’t sure what was going on with them, but she knew she didn’t want another meal to go the way of breakfast and dinner the night before, so she picked what she thought would be a relatively safe topic of conversation. “How was school today?” Eliza asked as she started dishing out the lasagna.

“It was good,” Kara said. “We started the unit on corporate law in Business Management today.”

“Are you still enjoying the Business classes?” Eliza asked. She was a little surprised Kara had signed up for them instead of taking an extra science class, but so far, she had seemed to like them.

“Yeah, It’s nice to take a class on something I don’t already know for a change.”

Eliza winced and hoped Maggie wouldn’t read anything into Kara’s comment. “How are your art classes?”

“Not bad,” Kara said. “I liked oil painting better than acrylic, but watercolor is a lot of fun. I wish they offered more than two semesters of drawing.”

“You want me to see if you could take a sculpting class at Midvale State this summer?” Eliza asked. She knew as soon as she saw the look on Kara’s face that it had been the wrong thing to ask. The smile that had been there moments earlier immediately vanished.

“Sure,” Kara said. “It’s not like I have anywhere else to be.”

Alex reached up and put a hand on Kara’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “Your cousin sucks,” Alex said, and Eliza wanted to scream because they definitely shouldn’t be talking about Clark in front of Maggie.

“He’s just busy.” Kara tried her best to defend Clark, but she couldn’t muster any real conviction these days.

“Yeah,” Alex said. “Real busy being a selfish-”

“Alex,” Eliza said, a warning in her tone.

Alex looked over at her. “I was going to say jerk.”

“No, you weren’t,” Kara said, a grin on her face.

Alex looked over at Kara, a huge smile on her face. “No, I wasn’t.”

Eliza hid a grin of her own. She thought it might be worth it to let Alex get away with a bit of language now and then if it would cheer Kara up like that. Of course, it would lose the effect if she actually told Alex that.

“You have a cousin?” Maggie asked. Eliza looked over and saw the curiosity on Maggie’s face.

“Yeah. He lives in Metropolis.”

Eliza could see the questions forming behind Maggie’s eyes and decided to head off the subject before it ventured any further into dangerous territory. “It was a complicated situation,” she said. “Her cousin had just started working, and he’s only a few years older than Kara. He thought she would be better off with a family, and he and I had been friends for a while.”
“And he’s kind of a useless jerk,” Alex added.

“Alex,” Eliza and Kara said in unison.

“What?” Alex asked, anger in her voice. “It’s been four years and he hasn’t visited once.”

“He’s busy!” This time Kara’s defense of Clark was earnest.

“All the freaking time?”

“Girls!” Eliza. “Enough!”

There was a large part of her that agreed with Alex. She lived in a near constant state of low-level rage where Clark was concerned. When she’d talked Jeremiah into taking in Kara, she’d expected Clark to be a regular visitor, to be involved in Kara’s life. Instead, he’d been a complete stranger. If Maggie stayed through the weekend, she would have spent more time with Kara than Clark had in the four years since she landed. But Eliza had always been very, very careful never to show that rage to Kara.

Alex, on the other hand, had gone from resenting Clark for dropping an unwanted interloper into her life, to resenting Clark for the very real pain he caused the sister she’d grown to love. Clark was one of the few things Kara and Alex fought about because Kara always got upset when Alex started in on him, and Alex had problems keeping her temper any time Clark’s name came up.

Eliza glanced over at Maggie and saw a shocked look on her face. “Sorry. It’s a bit of a sore spot.”

“It’s okay,” Maggie said. “My sister and… You know, it’s okay.” Maggie looked away as she reached for the garlic bread.

No one said anything for the rest of dinner.

Maggie stood at the sink, drying the dishes as Mrs. Danvers washed them. She didn’t particularly want to be there. Her plan had been to go hide in the office after dinner and stay there until morning, but Mrs. Danvers had asked her to help with the dishes, and she really didn’t feel comfortable saying no.

They’d been working for about ten minutes when Mrs. Danvers finally said something. “I’m sorry about dinner.”

“It’s okay,” Maggie said because really, it was. She was used to fights at dinner, but not being the reason for the fight was a nice change of pace.

“It’s not. I’ve tried to convince Alex that there’s no way to win that argument, but she’s so protective of Kara. I think she’d fight the entire high school over the way most of them treat Kara if she thought she could get away with it. Some days, I think she’s going to do it anyway.”

“It’s good that they’re close,” Maggie said, and it was true. She actually envied them. She loved Mike, and she knew Mike loved her, but she didn’t want to put Mike in the path of her father’s anger, which had been directed at Maggie so often over the last few years that she’d deliberately started keeping her distance from Mike, and every day it felt like they drifted a little further apart.

“They’ve been through a lot together,” Mrs. Danvers said.

Maggie made a polite noise of agreement, but it made her wonder. Was that why Alex was being
so weird? Did she think Maggie was going to hurt Kara? It didn’t seem right because Alex was acting nervous, and from what she’d seen at dinner, if Alex thought she were going to hurt Kara, Alex would have been right up in her face. Maybe Alex thought she was trying to put the moves on Kara. Or hell, maybe Alex was worried she was going to put the moves on her.

“You mentioned having a sister,” Mrs. Danvers said.

Maggie stiffened a little bit and avoided looking at Mrs. Danvers. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay. I won’t press, but do you think she’s safe?”

Maggie frowned. She hadn’t really thought about it. Was Mike safe? “I don’t know.” Things with her family had been okay up until she had realized she was gay. Or, until the kids at school had, anyway. They’d only started to go sour when she started getting into fights. With her out of the house, things might actually get better for Mike. Unless Mike turned out to be gay too, she should be fine.

“If you ever think she might not be, I have friends who can look in on her,” Mrs. Danvers said, her gaze on the dirty plate in her hand.

Maggie made a non-committal noise because whoever Mrs. Danvers’ friends were, she really doubted they’d want to stick their noses in a sheriff’s business.

“And if you change your mind about wanting to talk, remember what I said. I won’t judge you.”

Maggie took the next plate and started drying it. She wasn’t sure why Mrs. Danvers was so willing to accept her refusal to talk, or even why she was willing to let Maggie stay, but she was starting to wonder if it was really necessary. If Mrs. Danvers meant what she said, maybe talking to her would make things better.

“There is a question I wanted to ask.”

Maggie looked over at her, wondering if things were about to fall apart again.

“Would you like to go back to school?” Mrs. Danvers asked.

“Can I even do that?” Maggie asked.

“You should be able to. I emailed the lawyer who handled Kara’s adoption and asked. Unless your parents or guardian went down and withdrew you, you can keep going. But if you want, I can go to the school and file a caretaker affidavit. That way, if anything happens, they could call me instead of whoever they were calling before.”

“You’d do that?” Maggie asked, not quite believing it.

“If you want me to,” Mrs. Danvers said. “But there is one condition.”

Maggie looked back down at the plate she was holding, bracing herself for the catch she should have expected to come with all of this.

“It’s not as bad as all of that. You just have to tell me your last name, so I can fill out the paperwork.”

Maggie looked over at Mrs. Danvers, who was looking at her with a gentle smile on her face.

“Rodas,” she said. “Margarita Elena Rodas.”
“Kara?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you awake?”

“No,” Kara said. “I’m answering you in my sleep.”

Alex rolled over on her side so she could look at Kara, who was staring back at her. “I’m sorry. I just… I can’t sleep.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve been thinking about some stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

Alex didn’t answer because she wasn’t sure what to say. What would her Kryptonian sister think of her being gay? Another thing on the list of questions she never knew she needed to ask, and one she couldn’t Google the answer to. Not that Google had been particularly helpful today.

“Did they have gay people on Krypton?” Alex asked.

“Um… I don’t know,” Kara said.

“How can you not know?”

“There might have been people humans would consider gay, but sexuality worked differently on Krypton.”

“What do you mean?”

“We didn’t really have categories like you do. People just took whoever they wanted as a lover.”

“I thought you said families arranged your marriages.”

“They did,” Kara said. “But we didn’t really think of marriage in the same terms. Marriages were about family and children. They were a way to build alliances between Houses and share the best parts of our Houses and bloodlines with each other. It’s not like it is here, where’s it’s all about love and… you know.”

“Sex?”

“Right.”

“But there were women who took women as lovers?” Alex asked.

“Sure. My mom used to have a lover named Lyssa Cor-Vex.”

“Your mom was gay?”

“No,” Kara said. “It’s not… Alex, being gay is a human concept. Being bisexual is a human concept. Being straight is a human concept. My mother was Kryptonian, so no she wasn’t gay. I don’t know if humans have a term that fits.”

“Were their women who didn’t take male lovers?”
“I don’t know,” Kara said. “Probably. But it wasn’t something people talked about. It was private. I don’t know if my Dad ever had a lover. I don’t know if my mom ever had a lover aside from Lyssa. I only knew about Lyssa because I saw her and my mom kissing one day outside the door to my mom’s bed chamber.”

Alex rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. She chewed on her bottom lip as she started up into the darkness. Kara’s answer left her sure Kara wouldn’t care if she was gay, but it also presented her with even more confusing questions. How the hell did sexuality work differently on Krypton? And Kara’s mom sounded pretty damn gay if she was sneaking off to her bedroom with her girlfriend.

“Alex?” Kara asked.

“Yeah?”

“Does this have anything to do with your psych class?” It was an innocent enough question, but Alex knew Kara well enough to hear what Kara was really asking. Because Kara might be a little different, and she might be a little naïve, but whatever else she was, Kara wasn’t slow.

Alex looked over at her sister, who was staring back at her with worry on her face and did the only thing she could do. “I don’t know for sure. It’s confusing, but I think maybe it does,” Alex said, because she could lie to her mom she had been able to lie to her dad, she could lie to her friends, and she could even lie to herself, but she’d never learned how to lie to Kara.
Custodial Authority and Romantic Comedy

Chapter Summary

Maggie goes back to school, which causes some complications.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Racist and homophobic language.

Also, if you missed it, I posted a one shot called Protection this week. Check it out.

Friday, February 17, 2006

Mrs. Danvers had warned her about the bathroom situation, so Maggie set her alarm early. She’d made it to the bathroom and finished her shower and was planning to be back downstairs before Kara and Alex’s alarm went off, but what she saw in the mirror stopped her in her tracks and made her regret turning down Mrs. Danvers’ offer to buy her makeup. Overnight the left side of her face had turned a dark, unhealthy purple, shot through with splotches of black, and given its distinctive shape, there wasn’t any chance of anyone’s mistaking it as anything other than a handprint. Combined with the stitches, it wasn’t a pretty picture. Unfortunately, it was too late to do anything about it other than put on her best ‘don’t fuck with me’ face and try to brazen her way through it.

She pulled on the bathrobe Mrs. Danvers had gotten for her the day before and headed downstairs to the office. For once, luck seemed to be on her side; she didn’t run into Kara or Alex on the way —something she was grateful for. Kara wouldn’t really have been bad, but she didn’t think she could put up with Alex’s weirdness today. Going back to school was going to be hard enough. She honestly wasn’t sure she could deal with it, since there was no way she could avoid seeing Elisa. They had three of their six classes together.

If she could do it, if she could tough it out from just a few months, she might be able to keep her mistake from completely derailing her life. Then she’d graduate at the end of May. Three and a half months. If she could just make it that long, she might still be able to get into college.

If Mrs. Danvers let her stay that long, and she managed to graduate, she could find a job in National City and get an Associates in Criminal Justice. It wouldn’t be as good as the Bachelor’s she was planning on getting from SFSU, or Berkeley if she could get in, but most Police Departments only required an Associates anyway. She could still do this. She could still have the life she wanted. She could still be a cop, still help people. All she had to do was to make it through the next few months.

She grabbed a pair of jeans and one of the new flannel shirts and started getting dressed as she turned everything over in her head. The truth was, she hated it. It wasn’t that she was ungrateful for what Mrs. Danvers was doing for her. It was more that she hated how her entire future suddenly depended on a woman she had known less than two days. She hated how out of control she felt. But most of all, she hated herself for being stupid enough to believe anyone had ever actually loved
pathetic little Maggie Rodas from Blue Springs, Nebraska.

At least she wouldn’t make that mistake again.

Alex walked into the kitchen for the second day in a row to find her mom still at the stove. This time though, Maggie was already there with a plate of burnt bread in front of her.

“Breakfast will be a couple of minutes,” Eliza said. “You don’t need to rush, though. I’m driving you to school today.”

“Why?” Alex asked as she sat down.

“I need to file some papers with the school so they know Maggie is staying here.”

“Oh.” Alex took a moment to process what Eliza had just said. She wasn’t sure what kind of paperwork Eliza was going to file, but she knew that any kind of paperwork at all meant she was serious about Maggie staying with them. Alex wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about that, other than that she liked the idea a lot. It would keep Maggie off the streets, keep her safe, and keep her away from her parents, who Alex was pretty sure she wanted to punch in the face.

“Cool,” she said. She turned towards Maggie, intending to ask if Maggie was going to school today, but somehow, she slammed her elbow into the chair next to her with enough force to knock it over and sent it sliding halfway across the kitchen. “Fuck!” Alex clutched her elbow, which was screaming in agony.

“Are you okay?” Eliza asked.

“Alex?” Kara asked as she appeared in the door to the kitchen.

“I’m fine. I just banged my elbow on the chair.”

“Sweetheart, that’s two accidents in as many days.”

“Yeah. Don’t remind me,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Maggie, be a dear and get the first aid kit, would you? It’s in the upstairs closet across from the girls’ room.”

“Uh… okay.” Maggie stood up and slipped past Kara.

“Kara, quick, before Maggie gets back.”

Kara lifted her glasses, and Alex shifted so she could get a good look, turning slowly so Kara could get all the angles.

“Nothing’s broken.”

“Then why does it hurt so bad?”

“It’s a sensitive spot,” Eliza said. “Kara, go tell Maggie not to bother with the first aid kit.”

“Okay.”

Alex watched her mom, who waited until Kara was out of the room before turning around and looking at her. “Alex, what’s going on?”
“Nothing,” Alex said, because really, what was she supposed to say. ‘I might be gay, and Maggie’s definitely gay, and for some reason that makes me stupid’?

“Do you need to stay home today?”

“No. I’m fine. Really.”

“Okay, but one more accident, and I’m taking you in for a full checkup.”

“Great,” Alex said as Kara and a confused-looking Maggie walked back into the kitchen.

Maggie had to stop and grab her backpack and her gym bag out of the office, so she was the last one out the front door. Mrs. Danvers was waiting for her as she stepped out and pulled the door shut.

“I’ll go by the hardware store today and have a set of keys run off for you, but if there’s an emergency, there’s a spare key under the flowerpot,” Mrs. Danvers said, giving a small nod towards a terracotta pot to the left of the door.

“Thanks.” Maggie headed down to the car while Mrs. Danvers locked up and went around to the driver’s side, climbing into the back next to Alex, who was staring off into space.

“How’s the arm?” Maggie asked.

“What?” Alex turned towards Maggie, and her face flushed bright red.

“It’s… um… I’m fine,” Alex stammered.

Maggie kicked herself for asking. It wasn’t bad enough that Alex was uncomfortable about whatever it was—probably the gay thing—but Maggie had to go and bring up something Alex was apparently really embarrassed about. Which was kind of stupid because everyone with elbows occasionally smacked them on something.

Maggie tried to give her a reassuring smile but ended up wincing and reaching up to cover her split lip with her hand.

“Are you okay?” Alex asked, which was probably the first coherent sentence Alex had said to her.

“Yeah. The stiches just pull a bit.”

“Oh,” Alex said.

Then Mrs. Danvers opened the driver’s door of the car and climbed in, distracting them both. “I’m taking another day off work today, so if you need me, call me on my cell instead of at the lab.”

“Why are you taking the day off?” Kara asked.

“I just need to take care of a few things since Maggie is going to be staying with us,” Mrs. Danvers said as she started the car. “Some of the places I need to go aren’t open on the weekend.”

Maggie’s first instinct was to tell Mrs. Danvers not to buy her anything else. She was already a little uncomfortable with how much Mrs. Danvers had spent on her. But at the same time, there was something she really wanted, and Mrs. Danvers had already offered to buy it for her and had made her promise she would ask for anything she needed.

“Mrs. Danvers?”
“Yes?”

“I know I said I didn’t want any makeup yesterday, but do you think you could pick up something to cover the bruise?”

“Of course. Do you have a particular brand you like?”

“Not really,” Maggie said. “My… Um… I had some L’Oréal, I think, at home.”

“Which shade?”

“I don’t remember. I… My mom picked it out for me, but I never actually wore it.”

“Okay. If you let me snap a couple of pictures with my phone, I’ll see if I can find you some concealer that will match your skin tone.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s not a problem. You need anything else?”

“I think I’m good.”

Eliza marched into the office of Midvale High like she owned the place, projecting a confidence she didn’t entirely feel. What she was about to do was risky because it could draw a lot of attention to her and her family, but there weren’t a whole lot of choice. She wasn’t going to let Maggie’s position at school be left in the hands of a family who had beaten her and tossed her out on the streets. Fortunately, Maggie’s willingness to let Eliza take a couple of photos that morning had given her leverage over Maggie’s parents that she doubted Maggie realized she was handing over.

She stopped in front of the counter and waited with Maggie standing next to her.

“Can I help you?” the woman behind the counter in the office asked.

“Yes,” Eliza said. “This girl is a student here. Maggie Rodas. She’s no longer living with her parents, and I need to file a Caretaker’s Authorization Affidavit.”

“Oh,” the woman said. “Um… I’m sorry. I’m not sure of the procedure. Give me a moment.”

“Of course. But Maggie would like to get to her class, so please hurry.”

The woman nodded and stood up. “Wait here,” she said before heading back into the office.

“Well, that could have gone better,” Maggie said.

“Don’t worry. Whatever happens, we’ll take care of it.”

The woman returned before Maggie could reply, followed by Principal Munroe. Eliza forced a smile onto her face as she watched the thin, blond-haired man approach the counter.

“Mrs. Danvers-”

“Dr. Danvers,” Eliza corrected.

“Of course,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m here to file a Caretaker’s Consent Affidavit for Ms. Rodas.”
“I’m sorry. Surely there must be some mistake,” Principal Monrue said in a tone that someone might use when speaking to a child.

“No,” Eliza said. “Ms. Rodas is currently living with me. I need to make sure you have proper authorization for emergency medical care and the correct contact information on file in the event that something happens to her.”

“But Ms. Rodas has parents,” Principal Munroe said.

“Mr. Munroe, I am raising two daughters on my own and have a full-time job. Do you really think I would be wasting my time here if Ms. Rodas were still under the care of her parents?”

“Um…”

“Now that we’ve agreed how ridiculous it would be for me to walk in here and try to file a Caretaker Affidavit if Ms. Rodas still had custodial parents, can we please fill out the paperwork so that she can go to her classes?”

“Well… um… I… Excuse me for a moment.” He turned around and disappeared back into his office.

“Maybe we should just go,” Maggie said.

Eliza put a hand on Maggie’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, sweetheart,” she said. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

Maggie looked ready to bolt, but Eliza just gave her shoulder a squeeze and waited. A couple of minutes later, Principal Munroe reappeared. “Mrs.-”

“Doctor,” Eliza corrected again.

“Right. I-”

“You know, Mr. Munroe, why don’t we let Maggie go on to her first class. The bell will be ringing in just a few minutes, and we wouldn’t want her to be late.”

“Um…”

“Go on,” Eliza said. “I’ll pick you up this afternoon.”

“Okay.” Eliza could see the worry in Maggie’s face, but she headed for the door.

Eliza waited until she was out of the office and the door was closed before she turned around to face Principal Munroe. “You called her father, didn’t you?”

“Of course!”

“When will he be here?” Eliza asked.

“In about 10 minutes.”

“Well then, I think I’ll just have a seat while I wait.” Eliza walked over to a row of chairs lined up against the wall, sat down, took out her phone and made a call.

“Hey, Eliza,” Clark said.
“Hey. I may need your help.”

“What’s wrong? Is Kara okay?”

“It’s the same situation we discussed the other night,” Eliza said.

“Oh. Did you take the girl to a shelter?”

“No, Clark. Some of us don’t run away from responsibility at the first sign of inconvenience.”

“Eliza-”

“I don’t want to hear it. You owe me a favor, and I’m calling to collect.”

“What do you need?”

“I’m at Midvale High School,” Eliza said. “I came down to file a Caretaker Affidavit for Maggie so she could stay in school. The principal called Maggie’s father, and he’s on his way here. I emailed the lawyer who handled Kara’s adoption, and she was willing to point me in the right direction, but this may come down to a legal fight between Maggie’s father and me.”

“Okay.”

“You have resources.”

“Eliza-”

“Don’t,” Eliza said. “You arranged things with Kara. Don’t tell me you can’t do this.”

“I had to call in a huge favor to get that done.”

“So, call in another one.”

“I don’t exactly have another one banked.”

“Well, I suggest you figure it out, because you owe me.”

“I know I do, but are you sure this is the best idea? I want to help the girl, but…”

“I’m going to send you a couple of photos,” Eliza said. “Then you can tell me what you think.” Eliza took a second to email Clark the pictures of Maggie, then lifted her phone back to her ear. “You should have an email,” she said.

“Christ,” Clark said. “Eliza, I’m going to hang up. Someone will call you within five minutes.”

“I’ll be waiting.” She snapped her phone shut without waiting for a response.

Clark was true to his word; four minutes later, her phone rang. She flipped it open and answered, “Dr. Danvers.”

“Good morning, Doctor,” came an unfamiliar voice. “This is Bruce Wayne.”

“Good morning, Mr. Wayne.”

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m calling.”

“I assume you’ve been in touch with Clark.”
“Yes, I have. I understand you’re in Midvale, is that correct?”

“It is,” Eliza said.

“That will make this a bit more difficult than it would be if you were in National City, but it’s still doable. The law firm I used for the adoptions of my children has an office in National City, as well as Gotham and Metropolis. I’m sure we can find someone suitable there to handle any issues long term, but for now, I’m about to conference in the attorney who handled my adoptions. He’s not licensed to practice in California, but I’m sure he’ll be able to walk you through the current situation until we can bring in more specialized assistance.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bruce said. “I’m getting Philip Wettman on the line.”

“Okay,”

“Hey, Bruce,” a man, presumably Philip, said. “Please tell me you’re adopting another kid. My wife wants a new BMW.”

“Not quite,” Bruce said. “I have Dr. Eliza Danvers on the line with us. She’s a friend of a friend, and she needs some emergency legal advice. The night before last, she took in a young girl named Maggie Rodas. I’ll let Dr. Danvers tell you the rest.”

“Hello, Mr. Wettman.”

“Call me Philip, please,” he said. “How can I help?”

“I’m sitting in the office of Maggie’s school right now. I came down to file a Caretaker’s Authorization Affidavit and have myself listed as Maggie’s emergency contact. The school called her father, and he’s on the way here.”

“I see. Why did you take in Maggie?”

“Her father found out that Maggie’s gay. He hit her, at least once, badly enough to have a clear handprint bruise on her face and a half-inch gash on her lip.”

“I just emailed you pictures,” Bruce said.

After a moment’s pause, Philip’s voice came through the line again. “Holy shit. Why isn’t this guy in jail for assault?”

“He’s the local sheriff,” Eliza said.

“Well, on the bright side, it looks like my wife is getting that new BMW. Which school?”

“Midvale High School in Midvale, California.”

“Or not. Bruce, I’m not licensed to practice in California.”

“I know, but I don’t know anyone in your National City office, and there’s a time crunch. We need to get through the next few minutes.”

“Give me two minutes. I’m going to get someone else on the line with us. If he arrives while I’m gone, stall.”
Eliza waited until Philip came back. “I have Debra Walters on the line with us. She’s my lead counsel for family law in California.

“Hello,” Eliza said.

“Hello, Dr. Danvers,” Debra said. “Philip filled me on the details. I have a quick question for you: how far are you willing to take this?”

“As far as necessary.” Eliza was a little surprised by her own words, but they were true. The deeper she got into this situation, the more sure she was that she was the only one who had any interest in what was best for Maggie.

“Up to and including adoption?” Debra asked.

“Maggie will be 18 on March 29th, so I don’t think adoption is an option. But I’m a licensed foster parent in California.”

“You’d be willing to accept full custodial authority?” Debra asked, needing to be sure.

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Debra said. “When he arrives, put the phone on speaker and let them know who I am. If I instruct you to do something, I need you to do exactly what I tell you. Do you understand?”

“Yes,”

“Good. I hope your cell phone battery is charged.”

“It is.”

“Then give me every piece of information you have on Maggie.”

“I’ll send you an email,” Bruce said. “Just promise not to ask where the information comes from.”

Maggie felt the eyes on her as she walked through the halls headed to her first period class, and she absolutely hated it. One of the best things about Midvale High was that she’d been mostly invisible here. She’d been ‘that girl that hangs out with Elisa Wilkey,’ and she’d been happy about that. It was such a huge improvement over Southern High School, where she couldn’t go to the bathroom without someone calling her a dyke or a spic.

Now everyone was staring at her, and she could hear the whispers starting. There would be rumors by lunchtime. In a town as small as Midvale, all there really was to do was gossip, so it spread like wildfire, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. So, she did what she’d always done back in Blue Springs and leaned into it with her ‘don’t fuck with me’ face, daring anyone who looked at her to say a word.

It seemed to work because the whispers never got loud enough for her to be able to hear what people were saying. That was always a good sign, because it meant they were too afraid to say it to her face. It was when they started saying things loudly enough for her to hear that it would end up being a problem because then she’d have to put the fear back into them, and that would end up breaking one of Mrs. Danvers’ rules.

Of course, the whispering wasn’t the worst problem. She already knew the worst problem would be waiting for her in her first period class. Elisa Wilkey sat in the back row, right next to the spot
where Maggie usually sat, and Maggie had been right. Seeing her was an absolute kick in the gut.

“Hi, Maggie,” Ms. Mercer said.

Maggie smiled and turned towards the tall, red-headed woman who flinched as she caught sight of the bruise on Maggie’s face.

“Hey, Ms. Mercer,” Maggie said.

Ms. Mercer didn’t respond. Maggie ignored it and took a moment to decide what to do about the seating situation. She could pick a different seat, but then the whole room would know that there was something going on with her and Elisa. Of course, that was going to be obvious soon enough anyway, so it really didn’t matter. What finally made up her mind was the glare Elisa was giving her, as if telling her to stay the fuck away. Which pissed Maggie off.

She walked down the usual row and dropped into her usual seat, while Elisa glared at her the whole time. She unzipped her bag, pulled out her English book, and set it on her desk. Then, once she was settled in, she looked over at Elisa. “Morning,” she said, in a bright, cheerful tone.

Elisa stood up, grabbed her bag and her book, and moved as far away from Maggie as she could get. Maggie just shrugged and looked up at the front of the class.

Eliza had been waiting about ten minutes when a Latino man wearing a sheriff’s uniform walked into the office. He headed straight for the counter and addressed the woman behind it. “Where’s Principal Munroe?”

“I’ll get him for you.” The woman pressed a button on her phone. “Principal Munroe, Sheriff Rodas is here.”

“I’ll be right out,” Principal Munroe replied. He stepped out of his office a moment later and walked over to the counter. “Hello, Sheriff.” He held out his hand, and Eliza watched as the two men shook hands.

“Principal Munroe. What’s this all about?”

“Um…” Principal Munroe looked over in her direction. “Mrs. Danvers.”

Eliza stood up and walked over to where the two men were standing.

“It’s Dr. Danvers. Which I’ve told you repeatedly. Every time we’ve ever spoken.” She held up her phone. “And this is my lawyer. Debra, would you introduce yourself?”

“Debra Walters, of Wettman, Walters, and Associates. I also have Philip Wettman and Bruce Wayne here with me.”

“Hi,” Philip said.

“Hello,” Bruce said.

“Uh… The Bruce Wayne?” Principal Munroe spluttered.

“If you mean the one who owns Wayne Enterprises and all of its subsidiaries, then yes,” Bruce said.

“I, um… I…”
Eliza smiled. “Perhaps there’s somewhere we can all go and talk in private?”

“Um, this way,” Principal Munroe said.

Eliza followed Principal Munroe and Sheriff Rodas into Principal Munroe’s office, took a seat, and set her phone on his desk. Sheriff Rodas took the seat next to her, while Principal Munroe closed the door, then moved around to sit behind his desk. “There,” he said. “Nice and private.”

“Excellent,” Debra said. “Just so everyone is aware, I’m going to record this conversation to make sure there are no misunderstandings later.”

“Is that really necessary?” Principal Munroe asked. “We’re all here to do what’s best for the girl.”

“That’s exactly my intent as well,” Debra said. “To make sure there’s a record of the decisions reached. It shouldn’t be an issue, since I’m sure everyone here is acting in good faith.”

“I don’t have any issue with that,” Eliza said. “Sheriff?”

“If it will get this over with faster,” he grumbled.

“See, Mr. Munroe. We’re both fine with it, so there shouldn’t be any problem.”

“Very well,” Principal Munroe said with an expression on his face like he was sucking on a lemon.

“What’s all this about?” Sheriff Rodas asked.

“A misunderstanding, I’m sure,” Principal Munroe said. “Mrs. Danvers.”

“My client has asked to be addressed as Dr. Danvers on multiple occasions, Mr. Munroe,” Debra cut in, the firmness of her tone clear even though the slight static over the line.

“Um… yes. Apologies,” Principal Munroe said. “Dr. Danvers arrived this morning in the company of your daughter, saying that Maggie was no longer living with you and that she was here to file a Caretaker’s Authorization Affidavit. I figured there must be some sort of mistake, so I thought it was best to call you.”

Sheriff Rodas looked over at Eliza. “Who are you?”

“I believe I’ve already introduced myself, but I’m Eliza Danvers, M.D., PhD,” Eliza said. “I’m the lead researcher at Magnus Labs’ Midvale facility.”

“And how do you know my daughter?”

“My youngest daughter, Kara, found her bleeding, wet, and filthy after she was hit across the face and spent Tuesday night sleeping under the bleachers here as the school.” Eliza tried to keep the anger she felt out of her voice, but even to her own ears, her words came out sounding like they were spoken through clenched teeth.

“When was this?” Principal Munroe asked.

“Wednesday afternoon,” Eliza said. “She was so scared it took me almost 14 hours to convince her to let me sew up the gash on her face.”

“Well, if the girl ran away, of course she’s scared,” Principal Munroe said. “And obviously the best thing to do would be to get her back to her parents.”
“I won’t have that girl back in my house,” Rodas said.

“But—”

“Mr. Munroe, please. Let Sheriff Rodas speak,” Debra said. “It will be easier for all of us if there are no interruptions. Sheriff, you were saying?”

“Do you know why I told her to leave?”

“Yes,” Eliza said. “Not that Maggie would tell me. She’s still terrified that I’ll throw her out too.”

“You should,” Rodas said. “If you care about protecting your daughter.”

“Maggie’s no danger to anyone. She’s not the one slapping children across the face.”

“She shamed me,” Rodas said. “After everything I did for her, after all the sacrifices I made for her and her sister, she spit in my face.”

“So you slapped her hard enough to leave a bruise and turned her out on the street?”

“I have another daughter to think of. I won’t have her bringing that lifestyle into my home. I won’t have her corrupting her sister.”

“Sheriff Rodas, are you saying that you have no intention of allowing your daughter to come home?” Debra asked.

“Her made her choice, and I won’t have it in my house,” Rodas said. He looked right at Eliza. “If you knew what was best for your daughter, you would throw her out too.”

Eliza had to bite her tongue to keep from telling the bastard sitting in front of her where he could stick his advice.

“Dr. Danvers.” Debra’s voice startled Eliza out of her increasingly violent daydreams.

“Yes, Debra?”

“Would you be willing to accept full custodial authority for Maggie?” Debra asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Sheriff Rodas, since you’ve made it clear you have no intention of allowing Maggie to return home, would you be willing to sign a temporary custody agreement transferring custodial authority to Dr. Danvers until her 18th birthday?” Debra asked.

“If she wants the girl, she can have her,” Rodas said.

“Mr. Munroe, do you have a fax machine there?” Debra asked.

“Of course.”

“Could I have the number?”

Principal Munroe reached over, grabbed one of his business cards, and read the fax number off of it.

“Thank you,” Debra said. “I’ll have the custody form drawn up and faxed over within the next 20
“Minutes. I assume you have a notary on staff?”

“Yes. My secretary.”

“Excellent. That will make this simple. I’ll have the paperwork faxed over. Dr. Danvers and Sheriff Rodas can sign the document, have it notarized, and that’s that. Dr. Danvers will then have custody and full medical authority until Maggie turns 18 at the end of March, and Sheriff Rodas never has to trouble himself again.”

Eliza looked over at Rodas. If he recognized the disgust in Debra’s voice, it didn’t show on his face.

“Would you mind waiting?” Eliza asked.

“No,” Rodas said. “If you want her, she’s all yours.”

Maggie had managed to make it through the rest of the morning without incident. The whispers were still quiet enough that she couldn’t make out what anyone was saying, and she didn’t have any more classes with Elisa until after lunch. The whispers and the odd looks from students and from teachers made the day more stressful than it would have been otherwise, but it was still nothing compared to her old school.

When third period ended, Maggie got up and headed for the cafeteria. Her stomach was settled enough for real food, and Friday was always pizza day, so she was actually looking forward to lunch. She’d just grab a tray and slip out to the courtyard to have lunch out at one of the picnic tables. The weather was still crappy enough that no one else would be out there, so she could eat in peace.

“Hey!” Kara appeared at her side, seemingly from nowhere.

“Hey.”

“Pizza day,” Kara said cheerfully as they got in line.

“Yeah.”

“You having a good day?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Maggie said, “but I’ve definitely had worse.”

“What’s wrong?”

Maggie glanced over at her, and God bless her, Kara looking like she was ready to fight the whole school. Maggie couldn’t stop herself from smiling. “Nothing, really.”

“Must be something,” Kara said before she turned to the woman fixing plates. “Four pieces, mac and cheese, and fries please.”

The woman smiled at her as she piled four pieces of pizza on Kara’s plate. She turned to Maggie next.

“Pizza, broccoli cheese casserole, and tots,” Maggie said. The woman nodded and fixed her a tray. Maggie took it with a quiet, “Thank you,” and followed Kara through the line, grabbing an apple juice while Kara picked up an orange juice.
“Rodas, Maggie,” she said at the end of the line, and the cashier pulled her up on the screen.

“All set,” the cashier said.

“How much is left in my account?” Maggie asked.

“Thirty dollars.”

“Thanks.” Maggie stepped away from the cashier, planning on making a beeline for the courtyard, but Kara was there waiting for her.

“Come on.” Kara turned and started towards the tables before Maggie could argue, and Maggie couldn’t quite bring herself to ditch Kara, so she followed her over to a table and sat down next to her.

“So, what’s wrong?”

“I thought you said I didn’t have to tell you,” Maggie said as she tore open a couple of packs of hot sauce and poured it over her tater tots.

“That was before. Come on. Why aren’t you having a good day?”

Maggie shrugged. “School’s kind of rough when you don’t have any friends.”

“Yeah. I get that. But now you’ve got Alex and me.”

“You, maybe. I don’t think your sister likes me very much.”

Kara laughed, loudly enough that a few people looked over at her.

“What?” Maggie asked.

“I think Alex likes you a lot,” Kara said, with a big grin on her face.

“Yeah. Right. That’s why she can’t seem to get out actual sentences when she’s around me.”

“Give her time. She’s kind of going through some stuff.”

Maggie shrugged. “Whatever,” she said as she tore the top off her apple juice.

Alex’s last class before lunch was on the far end of the school from the cafeteria, so she was always one of the last people to get to the lunch line. She didn’t mind that much, since Kara always grabbed a table for them, but today she was annoyed because she wasn’t sure if Kara would ask Maggie to sit with them. She thought Kara would, but sometimes Kara could miss certain cues, and Alex wanted to make sure Maggie wasn’t stuck eating alone on her first day back. Which was why she breathed a sigh of relief when she walked into the lunchroom and saw Kara sitting next to Maggie.

She turned towards the serving line, only to find her way blocked by an angry-looking Elisa Wilkey.

“What the hell, Danvers?” Elisa asked, loud enough to draw the attention of everyone in the room.

“Didn’t I tell you to keep Maggie away from your sister?”

“Yeah, you did. But you know what, fuck off.” Alex started to go around Elisa before Elisa made it
any more of a scene—and hopefully before it drew Kara and Maggie’s attention—but unfortunately, Elisa had other ideas. She put her hand in the middle of Alex’s chest and gave her a small push.

“What the fuck is your problem?” Elisa asked.

“Right now, it’s that there’s an asshole standing between me and my lunch.”

“Christ, don’t you even care that she’s going to turn your little freak sister into a dyke?”

Alex didn’t even think about it. She just drew her arm back and took a swing right at Elisa’s face, fully intending on making good on her threat to knock Elisa’s teeth out, but the punch never landed. Kara caught her wrist a good six inches shy of Elisa’s face.

“Let go!” Alex said as Elisa took a step back and out of reach.

“You’re crazy, Danvers,” Elisa said.

“And you’re going be spitting teeth.”

“What’s going on here?” Alex looked over and saw Ms. Anderson walking towards them.

“Nothing,” Elisa said.

“Is that right, Alex?” Ms. Anderson asked.

Alex tugged her arm until Kara noticed and let it go.

“Yeah,” Alex said. “Just a little disagreement. No big deal.”

“Oh huh.”

“Come on, Alex,” Kara said, and Alex let Kara lead her away from Elisa, who stomped off in the other direction. “What was that about?” Kara asked as soon as they were far enough away from Ms. Anderson.

“Like I said, Elisa Wilkey is a bitch.”

Maggie saw Kara turn towards the door of the cafeteria and looked over to see Alex walking in. A second later, a lump settled in her stomach as Elisa walked up to her and said something. Maggie was too far away to hear it, but whatever it was, Alex didn’t look happy. She said something back and started to step around Elisa, but Elisa shoved her back.

Kara jumped out of her seat and crossed the cafeteria at a dead run. Maggie watched, not quite believing it when Kara straight up caught Alex’s wrist mid-punch to keep her from decking Elisa.

When Ms. Anderson showed up, she was sure the whole thing was about to turn into a complete disaster, but Kara managed to drag her sister away, leading her over to the lunch line. Maggie looked back over to Elisa, wondering what the hell was going on. Elisa just glared at her for a minute before she turned and stormed out of the cafeteria.

Maggie turned towards Kara as she dropped back into her seat. “Alex will be here in a minute,” Kara said.

“How’d you do that?”
“Do what?”

“Catch Alex’s arm.”

“Oh, that? You just have to know Alex. She likes punching people. Although it’s usually boys on
the football team. Someone’s got to keep her out of trouble.”

“Kara, you caught her arm mid-swing.”

“Alex really likes punching people,” Kara said as she picked up one of her pieces of pizza. “I get
lots of practice.”

“Uh huh.” Maggie glanced over towards the lunch line and saw Alex coming their way. “Any idea
why Alex wanted to punch Elisa?”

“No.” Despite the ease of her answer, Maggie got the distinct feeling Kara had just lied to her.

Alex sat her tray down across the table from Kara and dropped into a seat. “You should have let
me hit her.”

Kara just rolled her eyes. “No way. Eliza would ground you for the rest of the year, and you
promised you’d go see She’s the Man with me.”

Alex made a face.

“Oh, no,” Kara said. “I sat through Underworld: Evolution for you. You owe me!”

“Fine,” Alex huffed. “But if she opens her mouth again, I’m knocking her teeth out.”

“How do you know Elisa?” Maggie asked.

“I don’t. I’ve had exactly two conversations with her, and both of them ended with me wanting to
punch her in the face,” Alex said as she picked up her orange juice.

“What did she say?”

Alex looked over at Maggie, and for a second, their eyes met. Alex didn’t say anything. She just sat
there for a moment, as her face turned a light shade of red.

“Um… she… I…,” Alex spluttered, then turned away. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay.” Maggie frowned in confusion, wondering what the hell just happened.

Eliza watched as the movers finished loading the last of the furniture from the office into the
moving van. It wasn’t easy at all. There were so many memories of Jeremiah attached to all of it
that seeing it go felt like losing him all over again. There was nothing for it, though. The house was
a four-bedroom, and the third upstairs bedroom was a small office for Eliza, while the fourth was
split into an art studio for Kara and an electronics workshop for Alex. Before Jeremiah died, Eliza
sometimes went down and sat on the couch in the office so she could be near him, but she couldn’t
bring herself to use it afterwards. Before Maggie had shown up, she doubted anyone had set foot
inside it for months.

“Ma’am,” one of the movers said as he walked up to her. “Is that everything that’s going?”

“Yes,” Eliza said.
“Do you need anything else before we go?”

Eliza shook her head. “No, that’s everything.”

“Okay, ma’am.” He handed her a slip of paper. “Here’s the address and unit number. You can drop by tomorrow and pick up the keys.”

Eliza slipped the receipt in her pocket. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” He looked back towards the street at the sound of another truck approaching. “That yours?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll get out of your way.”

Eliza watched him climb into the moving van and drive away as the delivery truck from the furniture store pulled into the spot where he’d been parked.

She checked her watch. She still had about two hours before she had to leave to pick the girls up from school. Plenty of time to get the new furniture set up. She just hoped Maggie liked what she’d picked out.

The last two classes of the day were hard for Maggie because Elisa was in both of them, and whatever happened at lunch seemed to have pissed her off. It has hard enough listening to Mrs. Fulton drone on about sine functions on the best of days. Doing it while Elisa stared at her and ground her teeth was enough to make Maggie want to scream. Physics was almost worse because it was a class she normally enjoyed a lot, but she couldn’t relax enough to do that with Elisa glaring at her the whole time.

By the time the day was over, she felt more than a little exhausted and was really glad Mrs. Danvers was coming to pick them up. She was on her way towards the parking lot, looking forward to the weekend and not having to worry about anything other than Alex’s being weird, when Kara appeared next to her.

“Hey,” Kara said.

“Hey.”

“Did your day get any better?”

“Not really, but it’s over.”

“Want to go home and watch Buffy episodes until our eyes bleed? We have all seven seasons on DVD.”

“I’ll pass,” Maggie said.

“You don’t like Buffy?”

Maggie shrugged, not really wanting to explain that she’d loved Buffy, right up until the moment Tara got shot, and once it was clear they weren’t bringing her back, she’d just quit watching because it hurt too fucking much.

Kara didn’t say anything else until they got out of the building. Alex was waiting for them by the
bike rack, and they all headed towards the parking lot where she spotted Mrs. Danvers waiting for them. Kara started to get in the front seat, just like she had that morning, but Mrs. Danvers said something to her, and Kara stepped back and motioned for Maggie to get in. Maggie frowned, but climbed in.

“Hey,” Mrs. Danvers said. “How was your day?”

“I’ve had worse.”

“Not a ringing endorsement, but we can work with it.”

The ride home was mostly silent and thankfully short; it only took about 20 minutes for them to get back to the house. Once Mrs. Danvers turned off the car, Maggie started to get out, but Mrs. Danvers stopped her.

“Maggie, wait a minute. Kara, Alex, you two go on inside.”

Maggie felt a knot of worry settle into her stomach, but she didn’t have to wait long to find out what the issue was. As soon as Alex and Kara were out of the car, Mrs. Danvers turned towards her.

“I hope I didn’t scare you, and before you start worrying, this is not me kicking you out. Like I said, you are welcome to stay as long as you like, but there’s something you should know before you go inside.”

“Okay.”

“When Principal Munroe went back into his office this morning, he called your father.”

“Oh.” Maggie felt the sudden urge to throw up. “What happened?”

“Your father came to the school.”

Maggie closed her eyes. “Did he tell you why he kicked me out?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Danvers said. “Sweetheart, I’m sorry. You should have had the choice about when to tell people, and I’m so sorry that got taken away from you.”

Maggie opened her eyes and looked over at Mrs. Danvers. “You’re not… You’re not mad at me?”

“No. Maggie, the only people I’m mad at are your parents. What they did to you was awful, and I’m going to do everything I can to protect you from them. Which is why I wanted to talk to you.”

“What about?”

“I’m afraid I may have overstepped a bit. I wanted to make sure that your parents couldn’t cause any trouble for you at school, so I called a friend, who got me on the phone with a family law attorney in National City. She asked me how far I was willing to go to help you, and when your dad said he wasn’t going to let you go home, the lawyer asked him if he would sign a temporary custody agreement. He agreed to it.”

“Oh,” Maggie said, not quite sure how she felt. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“For now, it means that I’m registered as your legal guardian at the school. It also means that if you need any sort of medical care or anything, I can take you to the hospital. It means I can look after you until you turn 18.”
Maggie looked away from Mrs. Danvers, staring down at her feet. “He really just gave me away?”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

Maggie squeezed her eyes shut, trying to hold back tears. She wasn’t sure why she was upset. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Her dad had made it clear he didn’t want her back when he slapped her across the face. But somehow hearing Mrs. Danvers say it made it real. Made it worse.

“Can we go inside?” If they went inside, Maggie could go into the office and be alone.

“In just a minute,” Mrs. Danvers said. “The reason I told you all of this is because I made a couple of changes while you were at school. I put the furniture from the room you were sleeping in into storage and picked up a bedroom suite for you. The room is your bedroom for as long as you want to stay here. But the biggest reason I told you all of this is that your dad agreed to let me get your things from his house. I didn’t have a lot of time, so I just threw everything I thought you might want into a couple of boxes. I didn’t want you to be surprised when you found your stuff.”

“Thank you.”

“Come on,” Mrs. Danvers said. “Let’s get you inside.”

“What do you think they’re talking about?” Kara asked as she put a tray of meatloaf in the oven, too hungry to wait for it to preheat all the way.

“I don’t know,” Alex said as she reached into the fridge and grabbed a yogurt.

“Why were you going to punch Elisa Wilkey today?”

“Because she’d a bitch. Just like I told you yesterday.”

“She said something about Maggie, didn’t she?”

Alex sighed and looked at Kara, knowing Kara wasn’t going to drop it. “She said some really nasty stuff about Maggie.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t worry about it, Kara,” Alex said as she grabbed a spoon out of the silverware drawer.

“But-”

“Just drop it. Please?”

Kara frowned, but she gave a small nod. “Okay. But we should figure out something to do tonight, since Maggie had a rough day. I suggested a Buffy Marathon, but she said she didn’t like Buffy.”

“Who doesn’t like Buffy?” Alex asked as she sat down.

“Maggie, apparently.”

“ Weird. You think she likes horror movies?”

“NO! Nope. Absolutely not. We had a long conversation about it before you showed up at lunch, and she hates horror movies.”
“You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not!”

Alex smiled and pointed at Kara’s forehead. “Crinkle.”

“Damn.”

“Bet you she likes horror movies.”

“With my luck, probably.”

Alex smiled as she dipped her spoon in the yogurt. She double-checked to make sure Maggie wasn’t in the room before she put it in her mouth.

Maggie stood in her new bedroom and stared at everything in complete shock. She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting, but the shopping trip yesterday probably should have given her an idea. At first, she’d felt a little relief, because she thought Mrs. Danvers had gotten the furniture at a thrift store, or goodwill, but the illusion hadn’t lasted past a first glance. The bed, the nightstand, the chest of drawers, the dresser, the vanity and the desk all matched, and while none of it looked new, all the wear and tear was a little too perfect, a little too artistic, like a pair of pre-ripped jeans. And while the furniture might be trying to look older than it was, there was no hiding that the computer sitting on the desk was brand new. The entire room was neatly arranged, and the only thing out of place was the stack of boxes she assumed were full of her stuff.

If she’d been worried about what Mrs. Danvers had spent on her the day before, what she was looking at drove home the point Mrs. Danvers probably didn’t even realize she was making. The fact that she could spend money so casually just screamed that she was rich. That would have been enough to make Maggie feel uncomfortable and out of place, but seeing the room, seeing the boxes of her stuff sitting there made it feel realer than it had before.

Her Papi and her Mamá didn’t want her anymore. They didn’t love her anymore. They’d given her away.

She sat down on the bed and picked up a pillow, clutching it tightly as she felt the tears start to roll down her face.

Alex took a deep breath. She could do this. She could. She totally had this.

She raised her hand, knocked on the door, and waited, fighting the urge to run and hide.

She could totally do this.

The door opened, and Maggie looked out at her with puffy, red eyes. The kind she was used to seeing on Kara after Kara had been crying. Suddenly, all the nervousness and queasiness she’d been feeling was gone, replaced by concern.

“Are you okay?” Alex asked.

“I’m fine. You want something?”

“Um… yeah… Dinner’s ready.”

“Right,” Maggie said. “I’ll be there in a minute.”
“Okay.”

Maggie closed the door. Alex sighed and headed back to the kitchen, wondering why Maggie had been crying.

Eliza set the dish of empanadas in the middle of the table just as Maggie walked into the kitchen. She glanced up and smiled, doing her best to pretend she didn’t notice how red and puffy Maggie’s eyes looked.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Eliza said.

“Are those empanadas?” Maggie asked.

“I hope so. Kara said you made a face yesterday when she offered you enchiladas, so I thought this was a safer bet, but I’ve never actually made them before. If they’re terrible, we have the pizza place on speed dial.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Maggie said as she took a seat across from Alex and Kara. Eliza sat down, took the tongs, and put a couple of the empanadas on her own plate before passing them to Maggie and reaching for the rice.

“So, did you have a good day at school?” Eliza asked.

“It wasn’t too bad,” Maggie said.

“You didn’t get too far behind, did you?”

“Not really. Pre-calc is the only class I’m having trouble with, but I’m always a little lost in there.”

“You have trouble with math?”

“Not before this year.”

“She’s got Mrs. Fulton,” Kara said. “I told you she was terrible.”

“Kara, just because you don’t like her doesn’t mean she’s a bad teacher.”

“No, Kara’s right. She’s terrible. I mean, math’s always boring”—Alex rolled her eyes at the indignant noise Kara made—“but that woman could make a class on motorcycle repair boring.”

“You like motorcycles?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah,” Maggie said.

“Really?” Alex asked.

“Yeah. I love the Triumphs.” Alex made a face, and Maggie looked over at her. “What?” she asked.

“Ducatis are better.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Go easy on her,” Eliza said. “My husband had no taste when it came to motorcycles. Alex’s first ride was on a ’97 Monster 900.”
“It’s a great bike.”

“I have a 2000 Triumph Thunderbird myself,” Eliza said.

Maggie’s eyes lit up. “You ride?”

“I do. Jeremiah, Alex, and I used to go out every weekend.”

“Jeremiah’s your husband?”

“He was,” Eliza said. “He passed away a couple of years ago.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, sweetie,” Eliza said. “Have you ever been riding?”

“Yeah. My cousin Manuel works at a dirt bike rental place, so I got to go out pretty often before we moved here.”

“Did you get your license when you moved to California?” Eliza asked—not because she didn’t already know, since it had been included in the file Batman had sent her, but because Maggie deserved the dignity of being asked. It might seem like a small thing, but too many choices had already been taken from her in the last four days.

“Yeah, I have a provisional license and a motorcycle learner’s permit.”

“How long have you been driving?”

“I got a school permit when I was 14.”

“If you want to give me your license number, I can add you to my insurance,” Eliza said. “That way, if you wanted, you and Alex could take the bikes out sometime.”

“You want to put me on your car insurance?”

“Just go with it,” Alex said. “She put Kara on the insurance, and you can’t be that bad.”

“HEY!” Kara said. “I’m a great driver.”

“Tell that to the possum,” Alex scoffed.

“It came out of nowhere! And it was fine!”

“Terrified, but fine.”

“Eliza,” Kara whined.

“I’m sorry, honey. I have to agree with your sister on this one.”

Kara put on her best pout, which made Alex and Eliza both laugh but Eliza was surprised when she heard Maggie laughing too. She looked over at Maggie and saw a smile on the girl’s face. It stayed there through the rest of dinner.

“You want to wash or dry?” Maggie asked as she carried the last load of dishes over to the sink.
“Both,” Kara said. “It’s my night. Don’t worry about it.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah”

Maggie shrugged and wiped her hands before turning around and heading for her new bedroom. She was almost there when she heard Alex behind her.

“Hey, Maggie,” Alex said. “Wait up.”

Maggie turned around, to see Alex standing there, looking uncomfortable, and a little red in the face again.

“Kara and I… Um… Friday is sort of our movie night.”

Maggie stared at Alex and wondered why she was stuttering out half sentences. Alex had seemed fine at lunch and at dinner. Well, maybe not fine at lunch, but less weird, and now they were back to this.

“And what am I supposed to do with this information?”

“Oh! Sorry. Come upstairs? I mean, if you want to. You can even pick what we watch. I don’t know if you like horror movies but Saw II and The Exorcism of Emily Rose are both on pay-per-view.”

Maggie stared at Alex for a moment, wanting to shake her head, but also a little touched. If Alex did know she was gay, which Maggie figured she had to, at least she was trying to be okay about it. And a little company might be nice.

“Okay,”

“Great!”

“I can’t believe there are two of you,” Kara grumbled as she climbed into bed.

“You’re just upset because you’re the only one who likes romantic comedies,” Alex said.

“Two horror movies in one night, Alex. There should be some kind of limit.”

“There should be a lifetime limit on romantic comedies, and you’ve exceeded yours,” Alex said as she turned off the light.

Kara was quiet for a few minutes, which was a bit weird, because usually they talked for a while after lights out.

“You okay over there?” Alex asked.

“Yeah. I was just thinking that there’s a romantic comedy you might like showing at the AMC.”

“Kara, I don’t like romantic comedies. Period.”

“This one’s different.”

“What? Is it about a girl who has to choose between three morons instead of two?”
“No. But… well… I thought you might want to see it for your psych class.”

Alex frowned, wondering what Kara was talking about, but then it clicked. “Oh.”

“I just thought it might help you figure things out,” Kara said.

The room fell silent again while Alex thought about what Kara had said. She’d always hated romantic comedies. Always hated romances of any kind, really. Always got annoyed when women were forced into romance with some guy just because. It was one of the reasons she liked horror movies. The girl was always the last one standing at the end, and there was hardly ever any romance subplot.

That dislike would suddenly make a lot more sense if she were gay. But did that mean she wanted to go see a romantic comedy about two women? She thought about it for a moment, thought about all the movies she’d sat through with Kara and stopped on The Princess Diaries 2 for some reason. Kara had loved it, thought it was so romantic. Alex had spent the whole time wondering why Mia didn’t toss Nicholas out on his ass and spend her time hanging out with Lilly. She thought about it, about what the movie would have been like if it had just been Mia and Lilly hanging out and falling in love. Imagined them kissing at the end.

That was a movie she would like to see.

“What’s it called?” Alex asked.

“Imagine Me & You.”

Alex lay there, thinking about it as silence filled the room. She could feel Kara’s eyes on her, could hear the unasked questions, and finally answered with one of her own.

“How about next Friday night? We can borrow the car from mom, get cupcakes, and go see a movie.”

“That sounds great.”

Alex smiled at her sister and closed her eyes.

“Alex,” Kara said.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

Alex opened her eyes and looked over at Kara, who was staring back at her. Kara was smiling, but Alex could see the worry in her eyes.

“I love you too,” Alex said.
Of Coffee Shops and Bookstores

Chapter Summary

Alex takes a little trip to try to figure things out, and makes a new friend. Kara drags Maggie out for some coffee and sugar. Eliza asks some questions about Kryptonian culture.

Saturday, February 18, 2006

Waking up that Saturday morning was strange. Maggie couldn’t think of any other way to describe it. The bed was the most comfortable thing she’d ever slept on. The sheets were so soft she could hardly believe they were real. Even the pillows were the perfect balance of soft and firm. It was ridiculously comfortable, even luxurious. Ironically, it was that very comfort that made her feel uncomfortable.

She was so used to waking up in a bedroom she hated. A cheap mattress pressed up against a cheap white headboard with ribbons and bows carved into it, with a cheap pillow and scratchy pink sheets and pale pink walls and a floral blanket. She was used to waking up in a place that tried to force her to be everything she wasn’t, that tried to twist her into a shape that her parents wanted.

Here, she looked around and felt like she could breathe, like she could just be Maggie without having to pretend. Mrs. Danvers knew she was gay, and she didn’t hate her, didn’t think there was something wrong with her. Kara wanted to be her friend. Even Alex, as weird and uncomfortable as she was, was trying.

It made her want to cry, because she was in a strange house, surrounded by people she barely knew, but she felt safer, freer, and more like herself than she had in almost eighteen years living with her parents.

It felt wrong, somehow.

She woke up in a room she loved, in a place she felt safe, surrounded by people who were, at the very least, trying to accept her for who and what she was, and she felt guilty because she had never felt any of this with her own family.

What did that say about her? What was wrong with her that she fit in better with a bunch of strangers than with her own family? Why was it so easy for her Mamá and her Papi to throw her out in the street?

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts and pulled her out of the downward spiral before she started crying again, and for that alone, she welcomed it. She got out of bed, walked over to the door, and opened it enough to peak out.

Alex stood there, a nervous look on her face, and as soon as Maggie made eye contact, Alex’s face turned a little red.

“Hey,” Alex said, a small grin appearing on her face, and Maggie couldn’t stop herself from answering it in kind.
“Hey,” she replied.

“Um… Kara’s making pancakes. Please come help me eat them.”

“What?”

“Mom sleeps in on Saturday, but Kara hates waiting for breakfast, so she cooks. Pancakes. It’s always pancakes. And she made extra because you’re here, so you have to come help eat them.”

Maggie stared at Alex, who gave her a pleading look, like the last thing in the world she wanted to do was go into the kitchen and eat pancakes alone, which made Maggie a little suspicious. “Are they bad?”

“No! My sister takes pancakes very, very seriously. Honestly, they taste amazing. Kara’s a great cook. Just don’t ever eat anything she’s baked.” Alex gave a horrified shudder.

“What about you?”

“Me?” Alex asked, a confused look on her face.

“Yeah. Do you cook?”

“No!” Alex said, a look of pure terror in her eyes. “No. My cooking privileges got revoked after the fire.”

“Fire?”

“Just a small one. Kara put the curtains out before it could spread.”

Maggie reached up and covered her mouth to keep herself from laughing, which made Alex smile again.

“Come on,” Alex said.

“Okay, but the pancakes had better be good.” She followed Alex into the kitchen. “Jesus,” she said as she got a look at the table, which had three enormous platters of pancakes sitting on it. She glanced over at the stove, and saw Kara had three large griddles, each covering two of the stove’s six burners, and each currently covered with six more pancakes.

Kara turned around to look at her and frowned. “Did I make too much?” I always make too much.”

“Um…” Maggie looked over at Alex who gave a very small shake of her head. “No. It’s always better to make a little extra. That way you’re sure everyone gets enough.”

Kara smiled one of those huge, beautiful smiles that just lit up the room.

“What kind do you like?” Kara asked. “I remember you saying you had a sensitive stomach in the morning, so I made a lot of plain ones, but Alex likes strawberries, and I like blueberries, so I made some of those too.”

“Do you have any buckwheat ones?”

Kara looked at her like Maggie had just slapped her. “You did not just say that.”

“Oh God.” Alex’s head hit the table.
“What?” Maggie asked, looking back and forth between Kara and Alex.

“Kara has opinions on buckwheat pancakes.”

“That’s because they’re not pancakes!” Kara said.

“Kara…” Alex whined, closing her eyes.

“They’re lying, Alex. They’re worse than carrot cake.”

“What’s wrong with carrot cake?”

Alex groaned and covered her face with both hands.

“It’s not cake!” Kara practically shouted. “It’s a vegetable lying about being cake!”

Alex gave the bike a little more gas as she passed the halfway point, accelerating out of the turn, just the way Eliza had taught her. It was cold and probably a little bit damp for what she had planned, but after breakfast, she’d climbed on her dad’s bike and headed out. She’d loved the bike from the moment her dad had brought it home and used to love riding behind her dad as they cruised around town, feeling like even the shortest ride was some grand adventure. When she was old enough and had had her Provisional License long enough, she’d insisted on getting her motorcycle learner’s permit. To her surprise, Eliza had started letting her take the bike out. Every time she did, it made her excited and just a little bit sad. Excited because riding was the closest she would ever get to flying without Kara there to hold her up. Sad because she knew how much her father had loved it, and she would never get to ride next to him on a bike of her own.

The sadness couldn’t keep her away, though. She loved the bike and everything it represented. The memory of her father. Freedom on a keychain. A way to escape from the day-to-day pressures of being Alex Danvers.

She’d worried a little at first. She was afraid that Kara would be hurt by her desire to go out alone, but Kara had seemed to understand and always gave her a smile and a hug when she said she was going for a ride.

Today Alex was more grateful than usual for that understanding. Kara had been amazing the last couple of days—that wasn’t really a surprise; Kara was always amazing—but as much as she loved her sister, more than anything right now, Alex need space to think. Space that wasn’t filled with Maggie and all the confusing feelings that threatened to overwhelm her any time Maggie was in the room.

Well, maybe the feelings themselves weren’t confusing. But their connection to Maggie was confusing. Which was confusing. Or maybe not. Maybe she understood and just didn’t want to because of what it would mean. God, was it possible to be confused about whether or not you were confused? Because that’s what it felt like. There were so many layers of confusion going on it hurt her brain.

Alex eased the bike out onto Highway 1 and pointed it north. She would have preferred to head south and go to National City, but that was almost a five-hour drive, while Coast City was only an hour and a half north. Less, if there wasn’t traffic. But traffic or not, she should have four of five hours before she had to head home.

Once upon a time, Sunday had been Eliza’s late day. She and Jeremiah would stay in bed on
Sunday morning, and just be together. Physically and emotionally, it was the time and place where they reconnected. After Jeremiah had died, she couldn’t stand to stay in bed on Sunday mornings, so her gardening time got moved to Sunday, and Saturday became her late day. Despite everything, this Saturday was no different, and it was a quarter to 11 by the time Eliza finally made her way downstairs, Jeremiah weighing heavily on her mind.

She wondered as she walked into the kitchen what he would think of Maggie and of the decisions she’d made in the last few days. Would he be happy with the choices she’d made, or would it be like the arguments they’d had over whether or not to take in Kara? It hurt her that she would never know, that the person she used to share those kinds of decisions with was gone and would never be back.

She checked the microwave and smiled at the huge stack of pancakes waiting for her. Kara, as much as she tried to estimate correctly, always made too many and always left Eliza more than she could eat in two meals. She tried so, so hard, and she’d gotten better. The portions she fixed other people had shrunk considerably from when she first started cooking, but she still had a hard time judging. It wasn’t her fault, really. The natural Kryptonian caloric requirement was almost twice what it was for a human because of their planet’s higher gravity. With the yellow sun supercharging her body, she needed almost five times the number of calories a human did. Her idea of appropriate portion size was colored by her own constant need for calories.

Eliza pulled down a Tupperware container. She put half the pancakes in it and popped it in the fridge, knowing it would be gone by lunchtime. She then dug behind the canned vegetables in the pantry for a can of apple pie filling, added a couple of scoops to the top of her pancakes, and put the half-empty can next to the pancakes in the fridge for Kara to finish.

After warming her food, she sat down at the table to eat. While she ate, she mentally ran through all the things she still needed to do. Maggie would need health insurance. That was easy enough. She had a friend who could take care of the physical. After that, it was just a matter of a phone call. She’d need to get clarification from Maggie on whether she identified as lesbian or bisexual. If it were the later, she’d see if Maggie wanted to get on the pill. She’d also probably need to have the safer sex discussion because even if her parents had talked to her, she doubted anything they told Maggie would include gloves and dental dams and how to choose sex toys that were easy to clean and all the other little bits and pieces.

She was also going to have to talk to Alex and make sure Alex understood that Eliza’s acceptance of Maggie’s sexuality extended to her as well, if she were gay or bisexual. And Kara. That was going to be a much more difficult discussion because she had no idea what Kryptonian attitudes towards different sexualities were. She’d asked Clark about that back when they’d taken Kara in, but he’d been singularly useless on the topic of Kryptonian sexual morals. Blushing, he’d stammered through telling her that the sexual anatomy was close enough to pass for human on visual inspection and had his robot email her a couple of anatomical diagrams that explained the differences in anatomy and sexual and reproductive function, which were fairly minor. However, she was lacking in cultural context for any of this and had no idea how Kara would react if it turned out her sister was gay.

That was a discussion that would have to happen soon, but then there were all the other questions how to approach the subject without violating Maggie or Alex’s privacy. Eliza frowned when she realized she was going to have to call Clark again, and soon. Like, as soon as she finished her breakfast levels of soon.

Money for college was going to be an issue too. She and Jeremiah had been putting money away for Alex’s college fund since before she was born, and when they’d taken Kara in, they’d set up a
college account in addition to the trust fund Clark had sat up for her, so Alex and Kara were both covered, but she’d had years to plan and prepare for both of them. She had less than six months to prepare for Maggie’s college education. She also had no idea what Maggie’s plans were. Despite the suspensions for fighting, Maggie had enough honors classes that she was pulling down a 4.2 weighted GPA and a solid 4.0 unweighted, and she had good SAT and ACT scores. With a good application packet, Maggie could probably get in anywhere she wanted.

There wasn’t any help for it; Eliza was going to have to dip into the life insurance payouts from Jeremiah’s death. If she did, she should be able to put together enough that Maggie wouldn’t need financial aid. She’d need to spend a day at the bank juggling money, but it was workable. Jeremiah had three different policies, and since officially he was an FBI agent killed in the line of duty, she’d received a full Public Safety Officer’s Benefit.

It was probably too much to hope that Alex and Maggie would select the same school. It would make things a lot easier if she could just get one apartment for them. She’d had the same thought about Alex and Kara, but Alex had her heart set on Stanford, and Kara wanted to go to National City University.

The biggest question on her mind was Maggie’s sister. It was a thread she was hesitant to pull at, largely because Maggie’s father could revoke the temporary custody agreement if she pissed him off, but she was afraid his discovery of Maggie’s sexuality would spark abuse directed at Maggie’s sister. The problem was, without actual evidence of abuse, there was nothing that could be done.

Well, not nothing. She could get the girl a prepaid phone and program in her and Maggie’s cell phone numbers, so that if Sherriff Rodas did turn abusive, the girl could call for help.

God, maybe she should talk to Clark about that too. She wasn’t sure if he could or would do anything, but it was worth a try.

“Hey, Eliza,” Clark said.

“Hey, Clark,” Eliza said. “How are you doing?”

“I’m good. Did everything work out with Maggie?”

“It’s still a bit of a work in progress, but Bruce’s attorney helped me arrange a temporary custody agreement, and Maggie’s father signed it. Now we just have to get through the next few weeks, and she’ll be free and clear.”

“That’s great news. Any thoughts as to where she’s going to go once she turns 18?”

“Nowhere. Clark, there’s no point in my trying to adopt her when she turns 18 in less time than it would take to get a court date, but this isn’t a temporary measure.”

“Okay. Sorry. I think I misunderstood.”

“Clearly,” Eliza said.

“It’s just, are you sure she can be trusted around Kara?”

“Considering that by Monday, she’ll have spent more time with Kara than you have, I don’t think you get to ask those sorts of questions.”

“That’s not fair.”
“Neither was having to listen to Kara cry herself to sleep for weeks because you abandoned her.”

“Eliza—”

“This isn’t a debate, Clark. I’m calling because I need information, and you are literally the only person other than Kara who might have it.”

“Um… What do you need to know?”

“What are the Kryptonian views on homosexuality and bisexuality?” Eliza asked. “And while we’re at it, let’s go ahead and throw gender identity into the mix, so I don’t have to make another call if that becomes an issue. If Kara finds out that someone close to her is gay or transgender, what kind of reaction should I expect?”

“Um… I…”

“Clark, please tell me you don’t have an issue with this because I really don’t want to lose what respect I have left for you.”

“It’s not that,” Clark said, and the waffling was gone from his tone, and he sounded a bit more like the bold, confident and charming man she’d met years ago. “Eliza, I’m actually very close to someone who’s transgender and a few people who are at various places other than zero on the Kinsey scale. I don’t have an issue with someone being gay at all. I just honestly don’t know.”

“I thought you said you’d studied all of the cultural archives your father sent along.”

“I did. But… There’s no word for homosexuality in Kryptonian culture. No word for bisexuality either. And honestly, I’m not sure if they had a concept of gender as something separate from biological sex at all. There were references to something called ‘reproductive realignment,’ which involved a device called a Chrysalis Chamber or a Molecule Chamber, depending on the reference.”

“Well, how much information did your father send along with you?”

“He sent a duplicate of the Kryptonian Central archive, which would be kind of like the Library of Congress and the entire internet.”

“And the Kryptonian internet had nothing which would give you any sort of indication as to what Kryptonian’s would think of same-sex relationships?”

“No,” Clark said.

“You’re sure? No fiction, no movies, no theater?”

“There’s a lot of that, but I haven’t had time to go through all of it.”

Eliza reached up and covered her face with her free hand, because honestly, he wasn’t getting what she was hinting about, and however open minded she was, she was not going to ask Clark if he’d ever browsed Kryptonian porn.

“You’re frustrated,” Clark said.

“You think?”

“I’m sorry.”
“It’s not your fault. I do have another problem though.”

“What’s that?”

“Maggie has a younger sister,” Eliza said. “I’m concerned.”

“I know someone who could look into the issue.”

“It needs to be done carefully, Clark. He’s the sheriff here.”

“I understand. My friend will make sure there’s nothing that could blow back on you.”

“Okay. I’ve got to go have a talk with Kara.”

“Right. If you need anything else, let me know.”

“I need you to come visit your cousin, but you’ve made it clear that isn’t going to happen.” Eliza snapped her phone shut, ending the call before Clark could respond.

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After a quick stop at the Lindt store to pick up some chocolate for Kara, Alex slid the bike into a parking spot about a block away from the store she’d come all the way to Coast City to visit. If there was one thing she hated about Coast City, it was the parking. Parking was always terrible, and you could never find anything close to where you wanted to go. Today, though, she was oddly grateful for that. She was nervous enough as it was, and walking might help her get up the nerve to actually go into the store when she got there.

She pulled off her helmet and attached it to the helmet lock, then started up the street. The walk should have been short, but it felt like the longest block in the world, and she spent the whole time convinced that everyone on the street knew where she was going and why. The rational part of her brain knew it was stupid, but she couldn’t help it. She felt… exposed was the only word she could think of.

It was hard to miss the place she was looking for. There was a big rainbow flag hanging over the door and a sign in the window with a purple and yellow flower embroidered with the words ‘Wild Iris Books.’ Alex took a deep breath, opened the door, and stepped inside.

Her first thought was that it didn’t look that different from any other bookstore. There were a few flags on the walls. The rainbow one she knew, but there were also ones she didn’t recognize. A light blue, pink, and white one; another one that was hot pink, purple, and blue; and a purple one with a black triangle with a white battle axe in the middle of it. She had no idea what they were for, but that was kind of why she was here.

She walked towards the shelves. She wasn’t really sure where to start, so she wandered the aisles, skimming the shelves to see if anything jumped out at her. There was a history section with titles like, Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, and, Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement In America. Biographies with names like Harvey Milk, Alan Turing, Oscar Wilde, Isaac Newton, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Virginia Woolf. There was a CD section with Melissa Etheridge, The Indigo Girls, Ani DiFranco, KD Lang and a bunch of others. A DVD shelf with titles like D.E.B.S., Fried Green Tomatoes, Better Than Chocolate, Bound, Saving Face, But I’m a Cheerleader, The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love, a boxed set of something called The L Word, Season 1, and a handful of other titles. A sexuality section where she just averted her eyes because she really wasn’t ready to go there yet. There was a politics section, which she didn’t bother with, because she was pretty sure that was like Advanced Placement Gay, and she was really more looking for Remedial Gay or maybe Kindergarten Gay.
Fuck, she needed help.


“Can I help you?” a girl asked, making Alex jump a little in surprise. She turned around and damn near swallowed her own tongue. The girl standing there had short, spiked black hair, deep brown eyes, and one of the most beautiful faces Alex had ever seen. She didn’t have any makeup on and wore a black leather motorcycle jacket over a white v-neck t-shirt, black jeans, and Doc Martens.

“I… um…”

Fuck. She wanted the floor to open up and swallow her right there because there was no way in hell she was going to get out a coherent sentence.

“First time here?” the girl asked.

Alex nodded.

“What are you looking for?”

Right. She’d come here for a reason. She could do this. It was just a woman, right? She talked to women all the time. She could totally do this.

She opened her mouth.

Nope. No. Absolutely not. She could not do this, because if she tried to say anything, she was going to shove a spoon full of yogurt up her nose again.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and somehow that made it easier. Maybe it was because she wasn’t looking at the girl anymore. She took another deep breath. Just words. She just had to get out words.

“I’m not sure.” Her voice squeaked through the words.

Jesus, she sounded like an idiot. She opened one eye, looked at the woman in front of her, and was surprised to see sympathy on the girl’s face.

“Not sure what you’re looking for, or not sure about yourself?” the girl asked.

“The second?”

“Okay. We can work with that. I’m Susan, by the way.”

“Um…” Alex had to stop and swallow before she could say anything else. “Alex.”

“Nice to meet you, Alex. Are you looking for something to kind of help you figure things out?”

Alex nodded.

“Come on,” Susan said. She turned around and headed for a section of the store Alex hadn’t gotten to yet. There were two shelves. One labeled, ‘Identities,’ and the other labeled, ‘Coming Out’.

“Here you go. I know the labels are a bit confusing. I keep trying to tell my mom we should do a big display up front for people who are questioning their sexuality, but I haven’t been able to convince her yet.”
“Your mom?”

“Yeah, she owns the place. I’m just free labor on the weekends, in the evenings, any time I’m not at school really.”

“That sucks.”

“Oh, it’s not too bad. And there are definitely some benefits. Free coffee, pretty girls,” Susan said, as she smiled in a way that made Alex’s stomach do backflips.

Eliza smiled as she peeked into Maggie’s room and found Maggie sitting on the edge of the bed, watching Kara do something on the computer.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah,” Kara said. “I mean, it’s pretty simple. You just need the right software and a little patience, and… done.”

“And what are you done with?” Eliza asked.

Kara and Maggie turned around at the sound of her voice, and both of them looked like deer caught in the headlights.

“Nothing!” Kara said far too quickly.

“Nothing?” Eliza asked.

“Well, not nothing, nothing. Just, nothing important. I mean, um… kind of important, because Maggie likes music, so I was… um… setting her up with software to rip her CD collection?”

Eliza had to bite the inside of her lip to keep from laughing because really, Kara was a terrible liar.

“That’s very nice of you. Maggie, would you mind if I borrowed Kara for a few minutes?”

“Uh… no,” Maggie said. “Go ahead.”

Kara gave Maggie the most betrayed look Eliza had seen since the night Alex had eaten the last potsticker.

“Kara,” Eliza said.

Kara followed Eliza upstairs and into the workroom she shared with Alex. She spent the whole trip wondering what she’d done because the thing with the music was just a little bit of creative computing. It wasn’t a big deal. Not even real hacking. Earth computers were so simple, and their cybersecurity was really more like a suggestion than an actual barrier. Besides, Maggie already owned the CDs, so why was it a big deal if she had access to the digital files? Well, okay, maybe getting her access to those files might also, as a consequence, get Maggie access to pretty much every song ever recorded, but that was just a happy coincidence. Really, Eliza couldn’t get mad at her for something any Kryptonian over the age of five could do in their sleep, could she?

Well, she probably could, but it would be really unfair.

“Close the door,” Eliza said.
Kara closed the door. When Eliza sat down in Alex’s chair, Kara pulled over the stool she sat on while she was painting, wondering what this was all about and hoping she wasn’t in any trouble.

“Sweetheart, I need to ask you a couple of questions about Krypton.”

“Oh,” Kara said. She hadn’t expected that at all, and it was very confusing. Eliza pretty much never brought up Krypton or asked about Krypton unless Kara brought it up first. Even then, Eliza was always careful not to ask much beyond what Kara volunteered. Kara knew it wasn’t because Eliza wasn’t interested; she was just afraid if she started asking questions, Kara would get upset. So if Eliza was ready to ask questions, it had to be something really important.

“What do you want to know?” Kara asked.

“This may sound like a strange question, but I was wondering if you could tell me what Kryptonians thought about same-sex relationships?”

Kara felt her heart start racing as she tried to remember everything she’d said or done in front of Eliza in the last two days. Had she messed up somehow? How had she messed up? Alex was going to kill her. Or worse, Alex was never, ever going to forgive her. But how did Eliza find out what they had been talking about? Kara had been super careful to make sure that she didn’t say anything in front of anyone because humans were really, really weird about the whole thing, which Kara totally didn’t understand, but knew was a thing. Oh, Rao’s Shadow, did she leave one of her searches up on her computer? She’d been so careful to make sure she didn’t. She’d even cleared her cache and her browsing history.

No. No, she hadn’t slipped up. She’d been really careful because it was Alex, and she’d never let Alex down. It had to be something else. It had to be a coincidence, right? It had to be.

“Um, why do you want to know?” Kara asked, though she wasn’t sure she actually paused between words, so she might have asked ‘whydoyouwanttoknow?’ but maybe not.

“I can’t really tell you, sweetie,” Eliza said. “Not without violating someone else’s privacy. But I promise you no one is in trouble.”

Kara relaxed a little, because this wasn’t as bad as she thought. Eliza was trying to protect whomever it was, so that was good, right? Maybe it wasn’t even related to Alex. No, it had to be related to Alex. Given the timing, there was just no way it was a coincidence. But how did Eliza know?

Kara knew it was a stupid question as soon as she asked it. Alex was being a completely useless dork every time Maggie so much as walked into the room. Her heart started beating faster, she started blushing, her body temperature went up, and her scent even changed a bit. Kara had noticed it the first time Alex had seen Maggie, but she hadn’t realized what it meant right away, since she’d never seen it happen to Alex before.

Okay, she needed to answer because Eliza was starting to look at her funny, and fortunately she’d done a little bit of research on human views on the topic since she’d had such a hard time explaining it to Alex when Alex had asked.

“I haven’t really done a lot of research on how humans view sexuality and gender, but some of the language doesn’t have a direct translation,” Kara said. “We don’t have a word for gay, or bisexual, or straight because those weren’t concepts we had on Krypton.”

“You’re saying Krypton didn’t have gay people?” Eliza asked, and there was a little frown on her
“No, we didn’t. Gay, straight, bisexual. Those are human concepts. Cultural concepts. Social constructs. A Kryptonian isn’t human, so a Kryptonian couldn’t be gay, or bisexual, or straight.” Kara frowned. “Maybe Kal-El. He’s absorbed a lot of your culture, so he might fit one of those ideas into his concept of self. But those ideas would be alien to someone who was raised on Krypton. And honestly, kind of weird.”

“But did you have people who pursued romantic relationships with people of the same gender?” Eliza asked.

Kara winced a little because the Kryptonian concept of gender was another one of those concepts that didn’t quite match to human norms, but she could be there for hours explaining the differences, and she wasn’t sure Eliza would grasp them without experiencing them.

“Yes,” Kara said. “My mother had a female lover. Lyssa Cor-Vex. They worked together in the citadel and were good friends my whole life. I don’t know how long they were lovers because it was something that was considered private. I only ever found out about it by accident. I wasn’t supposed to be home, but my lessons ended early, and I saw them kissing outside my mother’s bedchamber.”

“Your mother had a lover besides your father?” Eliza asked, and Kara could her the shock in her voice.

“I don’t know if my mother and father were lovers. It was private.”

“Sweetie, I’m not sure I understand.”

“Kryptonians decoupled reproduction and, um… physical… stuff…”

“Sex?”

“Yes, that. They decoupled that from reproduction thousands of years ago. If a couple wanted children, they went to their family’s Genesis Chamber and had blood taken to seed a birthing matrix. The child came to term in the matrix, and when the child was ready, the matrix was opened.”

“Marriage was about reproduction and family alliances. Not about love, or physical… contact. Taking a lover was a personal choice. Something private, done discreetly. There were men who took male lovers and women who took female lovers. There might have been people who preferred lovers of their own gender, or who exclusively took lovers of their own gender, but it was a private matter and not part of a public identity like it is here on Earth.”

“I think I understand.”

“Was there anything else you wanted to know?”

“No, sweetie. Do you think you could keep this conversation just between us for now?”

“Yes,” Kara said because really, the only one she could tell would be Alex, and if Alex ever found out about this conversation, she would murder Kara in her sleep. “Can I go back downstairs?”

“Sure.”

Kara stood up and put her stool back where it belonged and started for the door.
“Kara?”

Kara stopped and looked at Eliza. “Yes?”

“Are you attracted to girls?”

“Yeah,” Kara said.

“Can I go?”

Eliza nodded, and Kara left the room just as quick as she could without using her powers.

Alex sat the small stack of books and DVD’s on the counter. She hadn’t really meant to buy that much; she’d just been planning on getting a book, but Susan had recommended two books on sexual identity and a book on coming out, and then there were novels Alex just had to read because apparently you weren’t allowed to be a gay woman if you hadn’t read Fingersmith and Tipping the Velvet. Alex wasn’t at all sure how the DVDs had ended up in the stack, but she knew it involved Susan smiling at her, which was a completely unfair tactic since it made her brain switch off. It was actually completely humiliating how quickly she turned into a jabbering idiot when a girl smiled at her.

Except, it wasn’t just any girl. She was fine at school, other than a little flutter in her stomach when she looked at Vicki. But even that flutter was nothing compared to what she felt when she looked at Maggie or Susan. She wasn’t sure why it was different with them, though she was beginning to think she knew.

“Anything else you need?” Susan asked as she started scanning Alex’s books.

“No. My mom’s already going to wonder what the hell I was thinking when she sees the credit card bill.”

Susan stopped what she was doing and looked at Alex. “Is your mom going to be okay when she realizes what this place is?”

Alex nodded. “Yeah.”

“Are you sure?”

“Considering how this all started, I think I’m good.”

“Sounds like a story.”

“It is,” Alex said.

“I’d love to hear it,” Susan said. “Maybe after I’m done raiding your college fund, I could buy you a coffee and you could tell me about it?”

Alex felt her stomach doing backflips again. She was pretty sure Susan had just asked her on a date. Which she should definitely, absolutely, positively say no to because she wasn’t sure if she was gay, and everything was confusing, and she had no idea what she was doing.

She was definitely, absolutely going to say no. She was. Except Susan smiled at her, and her insides turned to jello, and she blurted out, “Yes,” before she could form a coherent response, and oh God, she was definitely gay.

Eliza managed to keep a polite smile on her face until Kara was out of the room, but as soon as
Kara was out the door, she covered her face with both hands and did her best not to scream. She had thought, when she got her head around the Kryptonian view of sexuality, that she’d dodged a bullet. If Alex was gay, and Kara had a problem with that, it would have been an absolute disaster, so Kara’s Kryptonian view on the subject was an enormous relief, right up until the moment where she realized that it also meant there was a good chance Kara might be interested in girls, at which point in time, she realized the light at the end of the tunnel was definitely an oncoming train.

Alex was possibly gay, or bisexual. Kara was… Eliza knew Kara wouldn’t like the bisexual label, but she didn’t have a better one, so, functionally bisexual. Maggie was definitely gay or bisexual. Which meant that she had dropped a young, attractive, hormonal teenager who both of her daughters might view as a potential romantic partner right into the middle of their lives. If both of them developed feelings for Maggie, or one of them developed feelings for Maggie, and Maggie developed feelings for the other one, it could destroy the relationship Alex and Kara had worked so hard to build, and Eliza couldn’t talk to any of them about it because if she did, she’d be violating everyone’s privacy.

Why couldn’t anything ever be simple?

Okay, that was a stupid question. She was the former biology professor and friend of the most powerful superhero on the planet. She had adopted a super-powered teenage alien girl from a dead culture, and her husband had been murdered by the head of a covert anti-alien paramilitary organization that had been blackmailing him into working for them by threatening to take their daughter. Nothing in her life had ever been simple.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It didn’t help. It just made her angry at Jeremiah for running off and getting killed and angry at herself for listening to him when he refused to call Clark after Hank Henshaw’s visit. Why the hell hadn’t she just called Clark anyway? Clark might not have bothered to have an actual relationship with his cousin but charging in like a knight in shining armor and saving the day was right up his alley, and she was pretty sure he could have dealt with the DEO.

One crisis at a time. She just needed to handle one crisis at a time. Focus on one thing and get it done, then move on to the next problem. Right now, she needed to talk to Alex. To make sure Alex understood that she loved her and supported her, whatever her sexuality.

She could do that. That was manageable. She just needed to find her.

“Everything okay with your mom?” Maggie asked as Kara came back into her room.

“Yeah. Just some stuff going on with Alex. No big deal,” Kara said. She flopped down on the bed beside Maggie. “Any idea what you want to do today?”

“Not really.”

“What do you usually do on Saturdays?”

“I uh… I used to hang out with a friend.”

“Elisa Wilkey?” Kara asked, wrinkling her nose at the name.

“Yeah. Not really an option anymore.”

“I kind of got that impression around the time Alex tried to knock her teeth out. What sort of stuff did the two of you do when you hung out?”
“Watched horror movies, smoked, and listened to music.”

“Um… Why? No! As long as there’s no Marilyn Manson,” Kara said.

“You don’t like horror movies?”

“Ugh. No.”

“You watched two of them last night,” Maggie said.

“Yeah, but Alex and I agreed you could pick the movies. I didn’t want to complain, because I didn’t want you to feel uncomfortable.”

“Alex suggested the movies.”

“I figured. But it was Alex’s turn anyway, and she loves horror movies.”

“What about you?”

“I love romantic comedies. Sci-fi is kind of hit or miss. Period dramas. Disney movies.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind for next time. What about you. What do you usually do on Saturdays?”

“Hang out with Alex. Not an option today, so it’s just me and you.”

“So, I’m your fallback option? Okay, I see how it is.”

“What? No! That’s not what I meant!” Kara said, a mortified look on her face.

Maggie managed to last five seconds before she burst out laughing.

The mortified look on Kara’s face turned into a disgruntled glare.

“You suck!” Kara said, which only made Maggie laugh that much harder, right up until Kara grabbed one of the pillows and smacked her right in the gut, hard enough to knock the wind out of her.

“Ow!”

Kara smiled and stuck her tongue out.

“That hurt,” Maggie said.

“You deserved it,” Kara said.

Maggie laughed again. “Yeah, probably.”

“You know, we could borrow the car and head over to the square.”

“What for?”

“Have you ever been to Yab-Yums?”

“What the hell is Yab-Yums?”

“It’s where we’re spending our afternoon,” Kara said with a smile. “You’re going to love it.”
“Your mom just took her in?” Susan asked.

“Yeah,” Alex said.

“Wow.”

“It’s a little crazy, right?”

“The good kind of crazy. Honestly, your whole family sounds kind of awesome.”

Alex felt her cheeks start to heat up a bit and distracted herself by taking a sip of her coffee. It was a good strategy. She and Susan had gone over to the café attached to the bookstore after Alex had paid for her books, and every time Alex had started to get overwhelmed by the attention she was getting from Susan, she’d stopped and sipped her coffee. It had kept her from devolving into incoherent babble, and the longer the conversation went on, the easier it had gotten to just enjoy herself.

“I feel sorry for Maggie, though,” Susan said.

“Me too. I’m just glad Mom is letting her stay. I did a little reading on what happens to homeless kids and… it’s not good.”

“That’s an understatement. There are a lot of kids like Maggie in this part of town. They get kicked out by their parents, and they come here because the neighborhood is kind of famous for having a lot of queer people. We do what we can to help. Point them to the queer-friendly shelters. Volunteer at the queer community center. We give away a lot of coffee and sandwiches. But the streets are rough.

“That’s why I got worried when you mentioned your mom seeing the credit card bill. A lot of kids don’t really get how dangerous it can be coming out to your parents, and I don’t want to see you end up in the situation Maggie was in before your sister found her.”

“Thanks for looking out for me,” Alex said. “I appreciate it.”

“No problem. There is still something I don’t get, though.”

“What’s that?” Alex asked.

“You told me about Maggie, and how your sister found her, and how you found out she’s gay, but you’re the one here, looking for books to help you figure out your sexuality.”

Alex looked down at her coffee again, feeling her cheeks heating up as Susan looked at her.

“Hey,” Susan said, reaching across the table and taking Alex’s hand in her own. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“No, it’s okay,” Alex said. “It’s just a little embarrassing.”

“I promise you it’s not as embarrassing as my Rachel Weisz obsession when I was ten and The Mummy came out.”

Alex laughed as she looked up to see Susan smiling at her and squeezed Susan’s hand.

“After I talked to Elisa Wilkey, and she told me what happened with Maggie, I was really confused. I couldn’t figure out why she was so upset. I mean, it was just a Valentine’s Day card. I
thought it sounded a lot nicer than any of the ways a guy had ever asked me out. Then I started turning it over in my head, thinking about what it would be like if Maggie was my friend, and I found a card from her telling me she liked me like that.”

“I’m guessing you liked the idea?”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “I liked it a lot. I kind of had this daydream where I found the card and read it, and I ran across the whole school to find her, and she took one look at me and kissed me.”

Susan smiled and let out a little laugh. “That’s pretty gay.”

Alex grinned and ducked her head a little. “That’s not even the worst part of it.”

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense.”

“There’s this other girl at school. Vicki Donahue. We used to be friends, but we had a fight. I tried imagining what it would be like if the card was from her, and it was the same thing. That slightly sick feeling you get on a roller coaster during that first big drop, my heart pounding in my chest. Then I tried thinking about a guy.”

“How’d that go?” Susan asked.

“Well, the first time I tried, it took me like, 10 minutes to figure out which guy to think of, and I got bored with the whole thing before I even got to the part of the daydream where I found the card.”

“And the second time?” Susan asked, a knowing grin on her face.

“It kind of turned into a daydream about making out with Keira Knightly in Pride and Prejudice.”

Susan covered her mouth with her free hand to keep from laughing, but Alex could see the mirth in her eyes, and the way her shoulders were shaking.

“Are you done?” Alex asked after a minute.

“I’m sorry,” Susan said, still struggling not to laugh.

“No, you’re not”

“No, I’m not.”

“Well, if you think it’s so funny, maybe I won’t tell you the rest.”

Susan’s eyes lit up, and she sat up so straight Alex was a little afraid she was going to hurt herself. “I’ll be good.”.

“Right.”

“Promise.”

Alex stared at her for a moment, until she was sure Susan wasn’t laughing anymore before continuing.

“There was this boy Kara liked, and I asked her what it felt like for her when she was about to kiss him, and the way she described it sounded a lot like what I felt when I thought about kissing Maggie or Vicki. After I realized that, the more I thought about it, the more stuff started to make sense. Like why every time I’ve ever kissed a guy, I hated it and wanted it to be over. Why I never
like romance storylines in movies. Why, whenever all the other girls where talking about the boys they liked, I was always just bored and annoyed. So, I started looking for ways to figure out for sure if I’m gay."

“How did you find this place?” Susan asked.

“Google.”

Susan snorted. “You totally Googled, ‘How do I know if I’m gay?’ didn’t you?”

“I did,” Alex said. “God, am I completely hopeless for not having this figured out?”

Susan squeezed her hand again. “No. Absolutely not. Alex, you just started thinking this was a possibility for you two days ago. To get here, after that short a period of time, it’s kind of amazing. But figuring this out, figuring yourself out, is going to take however long it takes. Don’t feel bad because you don’t have it all figured out in two days.”

“How long did it take you to figure it out?”

“Me? I was born wearing a flannel onesie and clutching the keys to a Subaru.”

Alex laughed so loud a couple of other people in the café looked over at them.

“I’m not a great example to go by though,” Susan said. “I was raised by a lesbian couple, so it never seemed strange or different to me. I mean, there were some dark days after Fellowship of the Ring opened when I thought I might have a thing for Orlando Bloom, but then I saw a picture of him without the Legolas hair, and… Yuck. But mostly, I just started liking girls the same way most girls start liking guys.”

“Sounds like you had it easy,” Alex said.

“I did. I mean, I get shit at school sometimes, but who doesn’t? High school sucks for everyone. But the fact that I’m at a high school where I can be out means I’ve got it better than most kids like us.”

“God, I don’t have any idea how people at school would react. It’s hard to imagine that anything could make me and my sister less popular than we already are.”

“Why are you unpopular?” Susan asked.

“That’s another long story.”

“I got time.”

“Are you sure?” Alex asked. “Because the girl behind the counter looks ready to murder you.”

“That’s my sister, Tammy, and she always looks like that when she’s jealous.”

“Jealous of what?”

“Well, she’s over there making coffee for zero dollars an hour, and I’m sitting here talking to a beautiful girl.”

Alex closed her eyes and covered her face with her free hand. She could feel her cheeks burning, and her stomach had started doing flips again, and when Susan squeezed her hand, reminding her of the contact, she felt her heart start hammering in her chest.
“You’re cute when you blush,” Susan said.

“Please stop.”

“Okay.”

Alex opened her eyes and peaked out through her fingers to see Susan sitting there and smiling at her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to get her heart to stop pounding. She’d just about managed it when she heard the text chime on her phone.

“Shit,” she said, letting go of Susan’s hand. She dug in her pocket for her phone, took it out, and flipped it open.

Mom: Where are you?

“Shit!” Alex repeated.

“Trouble?”

“My mom. She never texts unless it’s an emergency,” Alex said as she typed out a reply.

Alex: Coast City.

Mom: Why?

Alex: Buying some books.

Mom: In Coast City?

Alex: Yes. Couldn’t find them in town.

Alex: Didn’t want to wait for Amazon.

Mom: Okay.

Mom: When will you be home?

Alex stared at the message, not sure what to do. She was having a really good time with Susan and wasn’t ready to leave, but her mom never texted unless something was wrong.

Alex: I can be home in two hours if you need me to be.

Mom: Please.

Mom: We need to talk.

“Shit,” Alex said yet again. ‘We need to talk’ had never been the start of a conversation that didn’t suck in the entire history of the universe.

Alex: On my way.

Mom: Love you. Be safe.

Alex: Love you too.

Alex closed her phone and shoved it in her pocket.
“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ve got to go.”

“I didn’t keep you too long and get you in trouble, did I?” Susan asked.

“No. Something must have come up. The only time she ever texts me is when something’s wrong.” Alex started to get up, but Susan reached over and caught her hand again.

“Wait. Just a minute, okay.”

Alex nodded and sat back down. Susan let go of her hand and reached into her jacket and pulled out a pen and a stack of business cards for the store. She flipped one over and carefully wrote a phone number and an email address on the back, then handed it over to Alex.

“Take this,” Susan said. “Let me know you’re okay.”

Alex took out her wallet and tucked the business card inside, then slipped her wallet back in her pocket, grabbed the bag of books off the table, and shoved them in her backpack. “Thank you. For everything.”

“Any time,” Susan said. “You know where to find me.”

Alex started to walk away, but she only got about three steps before she turned around and walked back to the table. She took one of the business cards, grabbed the pen right out of Susan’s hand, and wrote her number, then handed it back to Susan. “Now you know where to find me.”

Yab-Yums turned out to be a little hole in the wall coffee bar just off the town square, and Kara was right; Maggie loved the place from the moment they walked inside. There wasn’t a single matching piece of furniture in the entire place. There were bookshelves lined up against the walls stacked high with battered old books and board games. There was a good-sized stage in the corner, set up with amps and a drum kit, and in the gaps between the mismatched bookshelves, the walls were adorned with paintings. Most of them were abstract pieces, though there were a couple that were so realistic that if it weren’t for the fantastical subject matter, Maggie would have taken them for photographs. One of the paintings was a massive canyon with dozens of waterfalls spilling in along the sides. The middle of the canyon was filled with mist, and a rainbow ran down the length of the canyon. The second of the two photorealistic paintings was a massive city floating in the clouds of a twilight sky with a deep red sun on the horizon.

“Hey, Kara,” the woman behind the bar called. She was a muscular woman with black hair that ended in blue tips. She had a ring through her right nostril, tattoos running down both arms, and was dressed in a black tank-top and jeans. Maggie’s first thought was that she was in love.

“Hey Kim,” Kara called.

“No Alex today?” the woman, Kim apparently, asked.

“Not today. This is Maggie.”

“Nice to meet you. You want the usual, Kara?”

“Yeah.” Kara turned towards Maggie. “What kind of coffee do you like?”

“Can I get a mocha?”

“Sure thing,” Kim said.
“Get her a Yab-Yum too,” Kara added.

Kim just nodded.

Before Maggie could ask what a Yab-Yum was, Kara grabbed her arm and led her over to a table in the corner.

“How did I not know this place was here?” Maggie asked as she sat down.

“Not a lot of people at school do. Mostly just the theater kids and the art students.”

“Which one are you?”

“She would be the best painter to ever grace my walls,” Kim said as she stepped out from behind the bar carrying a small tray. She set two small plates down in front of Kara and one in front of Maggie. Then she placed an envelope in front of Kara. “The Firefalls sold.”

Kara smiled as she picked up the envelope and slipped it into her pocket. “Ms. Lynch again?”

“You even have to ask? She loves your work, and she asked to meet you again.”

Kara shook her head. “I’ll pass.”

“I figured. Those are on the house. Drinks will be up in a minute.”

Maggie watched Kim go and turned back to Kara. “What was that about?”

“Kim sells the paintings on the walls. Ms. Lynch is her friend. She’s a gallery owner in Coast City. She visits Kim every few weeks, and she keeps buying my paintings. She’s been trying to convince Kim to introduce her to me ever since Kim started showing my work.”

“Which ones are yours?” Maggie asked, even though she had a pretty good idea what the answer was going to be.

Kara pointed at the two photorealistic paintings. “Rainbow Canyon and the Sky Palace,” Kara said.

Maggie stared at them for a minute before turning back to find Kara digging into her food. She smiled when she saw what Kara was eating and glanced down at her own plate. Sure enough, there was a thick slab of chocolate chip cookie dough covered in hardened chocolate sitting on her plate.

“Eat,” Kara said around a mouth full of cookie dough.

Maggie picked up her spoon and took a bite.

“Oh, God. That’s good!”

“Right?”

They ate in silence, barely acknowledging Kim when she returned with their coffee, but it was nice. Just relaxing and enjoying herself for a change. She didn’t even bat an eyelash at the fact that Kara finished two of the cookie dough things in the time it took her to finish one, but once they were both done, Maggie looked up at Kara. “So, why don’t you want to meet the gallery owner?”

“Because I’m under 18. I couldn’t sign any sort of contract or anything, so she’d want to meet Eliza, and if Eliza found out I was selling my paintings, she would freak out.”
“Why?” Maggie thought that was sort of weird. Most parents would be thrilled about their kid making money.

“It’s complicated.” Kara looked down, staring into her coffee. “She’s probably right too. I probably shouldn’t be selling them. But I’m trying to save up enough money for a trip to Metropolis once I graduate.”

“To see your cousin?” Maggie didn’t really need Kara to answer because it was obvious why she would want to go to Metropolis, even if Maggie couldn’t figure out why Kara’s selling her paintings would be a problem.

“Yeah. I mean, I know he’s busy, but I thought if I could afford a hotel, and I could pay for my own flight, it wouldn’t be any trouble. Maybe we could have lunch together every day while I was there or something. Just get a chance to spend some time together, you know.”

“You really love him, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Kara said. “I mean, I love Alex and Eliza. They’re my family now. But Clark is all I have left of my birth family.” She picked her coffee up and took a sip. “I know Alex hates him, because he doesn’t treat me the way she thinks he should. I even sort of get why she feels that way. But…”

“But you don’t want her to hate him because you love them both, and it makes you feel like you have to take sides.”

“Yeah. Sorry. I didn’t mean to get all gloomy on you.”

“It’s okay,” Maggie said, even though it wasn’t. Not because she was upset with Kara, but because she was starting to think Alex had the right idea as far as this Clark person was concerned. Anyone who had someone who loved them as much as Kara loved this asshole and just ignored it absolutely deserved a good, sharp kick in the teeth. She wasn’t going to say that, though, because it wasn’t really what Kara needed to hear. “So, did you just drag me here to get me hopped up on sugar and caffeine?” Maggie asked, hoping to lighten the mood a little.

“No,” The smile returned to Kara’s face. She pointed towards the stage, and Maggie looked over to see that a band had started setting up. “You said you liked music, so I figured you’d enjoy this.”

Maggie had said that, but looking at the girl who was hooking up an electric guitar, she was pretty sure music wasn’t the only thing she was going to enjoy about the show.

The ride back from Coast City had been tense, but Alex couldn’t find it in herself to relax as she pulled the bike into the garage and killed the engine. She’d spent the whole ride wondering what was going on, and finding the car gone when she got home had done nothing to alleviate the worry gnawing at her guts. As soon as she had the kickstand under the bike, she dug her phone out and flipped it open to check her messages. There wasn’t anything new. Nothing telling her why her mom wasn’t home. She shoved her phone back in her pocket and headed into the house, pausing only to hang her helmet on its peg, take her boots off, and put them on the rack by the garage door.

“Kara? Are you here?” she called as she walked through the house.

“She’s not home,” Eliza answered from the living room.

Alex frowned and headed into the living room. She found her mom sitting on the couch with her laptop. “Where’s the car?” Alex asked.
“Kara and Maggie took it and went down to the square.”

“Oh.” Alex was only getting more confused. If something were wrong, why would her mom let Kara and Maggie go out?

“Is something wrong, sweetie?” Eliza asked.

“No. I just don’t understand. What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“You texted me and told me to come home. You never text me unless something’s wrong.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry. Sometimes I forget how much of a worrier you are.”

“Nothing’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

Alex didn’t know whether to laugh or scream. She’d walked away from the best date she’d ever been on because of a misunderstanding. Because on today of all days, her mom decided to text her for something other than a crisis.

“Are you okay?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah,” Alex said as she shrugged off her backpack. She dropped down into one of the armchairs. “I just really, really wish you had told me it wasn’t urgent.”

“Why?” Eliza asked, a frown on her face.

“It’s not important,” Alex said, which was a lie, because it was really fucking important. But she couldn’t exactly tell her mom she’d met a girl when her mom didn’t even know she was gay.

Or should that be ‘probably gay’? ‘Maybe gay’?

She thought about the way she felt when Susan had smiled at her and realized she could have saved herself the price of the books because yeah, she was definitely gay.

“Sweetheart?”

“Sorry. What did you want to talk about?”

She watched as Eliza closed the laptop and set it aside, then patted the couch next to her. “Come sit with me.”

Alex got up and moved over to the couch, sitting next to her mom. Eliza took her hands and squeezed them.

“Sweetheart, I’m not asking you to tell me anything you’re not ready to tell me or to talk about anything you’re not ready to talk about, but I keep thinking about the conversation we had about Maggie the other day. I might have misinterpreted what you were feeling. I’m not always great with feelings. You know that. But when you asked me if it was okay for Maggie to be gay, the question felt personal. At the time, I thought I said everything that needed to be said, but I had a run in with Maggie’s parents yesterday, and after seeing what they were like, I feel like I need to make sure you understand exactly where you stand.
“You are my child. I love you, however you are. If you’re gay, if you’re bisexual, if you’re straight, or if you’re something else entirely, I love you, and I want you to be yourself. I want you to be happy. I want you to fall in love with someone who makes you happy. And I want you to know that there’s no shame in being who you are.”

Alex sat there, staring at her mom, not sure whether she wanted to hug her or strangle her.

She had known her mom would be okay with her being gay. She’d worked that out from her mom’s politics and the way her mom had just taken Maggie in without a backwards glance. But there was a big difference between knowing it, and having her mom say it. Alex felt like a weight she hadn’t even realized was there had been lifted off her chest, and it felt wonderful.

She took her hands out of Eliza’s and leaned forward, pulling her into a hug and squeezing as hard as she could, and Eliza hugged her back, just as hard.

“I love you,” her mom said.

“I love you too, but your timing is terrible,” Alex said, laughing in a way that only sounded slightly hysterical.

“What?”

Alex let go and sat back so she could see Eliza’s face. Eliza stared back at her with a bewildered expression on her face. “I… um…,” Alex stopped and took a deep breath, then closed her eyes, because apparently it was much easier to talk to people when you couldn’t see them. “I met this girl while I was at the bookstore,” she said, already feeling her cheeks heating up. “Susan. She… um… invited me out for coffee.” Alex opened one eye and looked at the expression on Eliza’s face.

“I interrupted a date, didn’t I?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“Sweetie, I am so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I got her number,” Alex said, preening just a little bit.

Eliza laughed and pulled her back into a hug. “Good for you.”

Alex walked into her bedroom, smiling at the sight of Streaky curled up on Kara’s pillow. She dropped her backpack next to her bed, and sat down, digging her phone out of her pocket. She’d barely had time to flip it open before she had a lap full of cat, chirping disgruntledly and demanding petting. She scratched behind his ears, eliciting a purr as she pulled out her wallet and found the card with Susan’s number. She entered it into her contacts, then fired off a text message.

Alex: Hey, Susan. This is Alex.

Susan: Hey!

Susan: You make it home okay?

Susan: Is everything alright?

Alex: Yeah. I made it home no problem.

Alex: Whole thing was a false alarm.
Susan: You mean you didn’t have to run out on our date?

Alex: Apparently not.

Susan: That sucks.

Alex: Tell me about it.

Alex: I wanted to strangle my mom when I found out what she wanted.

Susan: I’m almost afraid to ask.

Susan: But only almost.

Susan: What was the big not emergency?

Alex: You’re never going to believe this.

Alex: She wanted to tell me it’s okay if I’m gay.

Susan: You’re kidding!

Alex: Nope.

Alex: Apparently, I am not subtle.

Susan: You’re kind of not.

Alex: Thanks a lot.

Susan: Any time!

Alex: It was kind of nice though.

Alex: She really just wanted to make sure I knew she’d be okay with it.

Susan: Your mom sounds kind of awesome.

Alex: She has her days.

Alex: Not sure today is one of them.

Susan: It is. A lot of kids don’t ever get to hear that.

Alex: Okay, now I feel like an asshole.

Susan: Well, she did interrupt an awesome date.

Alex: Awesome, huh?

Susan: You were with me. Of course it was awesome.

Alex: Pretty sure of yourself.

Susan: You were totally into me.

Alex: Maybe a little.
Susan: If it helps, I was totally into you too.

Alex reached up, covering her mouth with her hand. She knew she was blushing, could feel the heat in her cheeks, and it was driving her nuts. Susan wasn’t even in the room, and she was nervous. She thought about it for a second and decided to try to steer the conversation back onto safer ground.

Alex: It makes me feel bad for Maggie though.

Susan: You should bring Maggie by the store sometime.

Alex: I will, if she ever comes out to me.

Alex: I’m not supposed to know she’s gay.

Alex: Mom said she deserved to be able to choose when she told us.

Susan: Again, your mom sounds awesome.

Alex: Kind of, yeah.

Alex: I sort of came out to her.

Susan: You did?

Alex: I did.

Susan: Holy shit!

Susan: That’s amazing, Alex.

Susan: Really.

Susan: This may sound corny, but I’m really proud of you.

Alex: Thanks.

Alex: Telling her felt amazing.

Susan: What did you tell her, exactly?

Alex: I told her I’m gay.

Susan: So, you figured it out without the books?

Alex: I think I figured it out after the first daydream.

Alex: But I was sure after today.

Alex: I felt more having coffee with you than I did kissing a guy.

Alex stared at the message for a minute before she hit send, and when she did, she immediately wondered if she’d said too much. Susan’s answer came just a moment later though and made her sure she hadn’t scared her off.

Susan: So should I start explaining why you want a refund to my mom now?
Alex: No.
Alex: I’m still going to read the books.
Alex: I know I’m gay.
Alex: But I think I might need some help figuring out what that means.
Susan: I’m happy for you.
Alex: Thanks.
Susan: I should thank you.
Susan: It’s not every day I get to help a pretty girl realize she’s gay.
Alex: Do all the pretty girls wear blindfolds?
Alex: Because one look at you, and WOW.
Susan: Liked what you saw, huh?
Alex: Yeah.
Alex: A lot.
Alex: I had a really good time today.
Susan: So did I.
Susan: You mom has terrible timing.
Alex: I told her the same thing.
Susan: Really?
Alex: Yeah.
Alex: You might have come up.
Susan: Do I need to hide?
Alex: Only if you keep stealing all the pretty girls from your sister.
Susa: Eh. I can take her.
Alex: I don’t know. She looks tough.
Susan: I’ll just yank the nose ring.
Alex: That’s vicious.
Susan: Some things are worth fighting for.
Alex: Like pretty girls?
Susan: Top of the list.
Susan: Besides, I saw you first.

Alex: Technically, Maggie saw me first.

Susan: I can take her too.

Alex: Probably no need.

Alex: I don’t think she likes me.

Susan: Not possible!

Susan: Seriously though, do you like her?

Alex: I don’t know.

Alex: I get really nervous and jumpy around her.

Alex: But this is all so new.

Susan: And before today she was the only gay girl you knew.

Alex: Yeah.

Alex: I’m pathetic, aren’t I?

Susan: No!

Susan: Absolutely not!

Susan: You are smart, brave, and beautiful.

Susan: Especially when you blush.

Alex: God, how did you know?

Susan: Lucky guess.

Susan: Alex, you don’t have to figure everything out today.

Susan: You don’t have to figure it out this weekend, or even this year.

Susan: You’re two days in.

Susan: Just breathe for a minute.

Alex: Okay.

Alex: I’m sorry I’m such a mess.

Susan: I’m used to it. All gay women are a mess.

Alex: Aren’t you supposed to say something nice?

Susan: Fishing for more compliments?

Alex: No!
Susan: I’m teasing.

Susan: I’m going to be honest for a minute, okay?

Alex: Should I be scared?

Susan: No.

Susan: Alex, I like you.

Susan: A lot.

Susan: But I know things are confusing right now.

Susan: I don’t want to make things harder by putting any pressure on you.

Susan: So, I’m here as a friend.

Susan: You need advice on how to gay, or about girls, or whatever, I’m here.

Susan: Okay?

Alex stared at the messages for just a moment, wondering if she’d done something wrong. She’d heard a lot of people complaining about the ‘let’s be friends’ thing before but had never really thought about it. Suddenly, she understood how much it sucked to be on the receiving end of that.

Alex: Did I just get dumped?

Susan: With lesbians, it’s hard to tell.

Alex: LOL!

Susan: No. You didn’t get dumped. You just made a friend.

Susan: Though with lesbians, that’s kind of the same thing.

Alex: Why do I feel like I’m missing a joke?

Susan: Because you’ve only been gay for two days.

Susan: Some of the jokes take time to understand.

Susan: Seriously though, take time to figure out what you want.

Susan: If you like Maggie, I’ll be happy for you. I promise.

Alex smiled. She hadn’t screwed things up. Susan was just trying to take care of her, the same way she had when she checked to make sure Alex wouldn’t get in trouble when her mom saw the credit card bill. She was a little disappointed that there wouldn’t be another date, but Susan’s concern made her feel warm inside. But there was still a question she wanted an answer to.

Alex: And if I don’t?

Susan: Then you know where to find me :)

Alex: Yes, I do.
“Hey, Alex,” Kara said as Maggie followed her into the bedroom she shared with Alex.

Alex looked up from the book she was reading with a startled expression on her face and snapped the book shut.

“How was Yab-Yums?” Maggie watched as Alex set the book down on the bed and not-so-subtly shifted one of her pillows to cover it. “How was Yab-Yums?”

“Good,” Kara said as she sat down her own bed. “Kim says hi.”

Alex smiled at that, a slightly dreamy expression on her face. Maggie sat down next to Kara, not quite sure what to make of Alex’s reaction.

“You missed Rhonda though.”

“What? But it’s not the first Saturday of the month!”

“There was a last-minute cancellation.”

“Damn. Sorry I missed it.”

“She asked about you.”

A faint blush colored Alex’s cheeks. “What did she play?”

“A bunch of stuff. She did Zombie, Constant Craving, Somebody Bring Me Some Water, Don’t Speak, My Beloved Wife, Closer—“

“She covered Closer?”

“And Something I Can Never Have,” Kara said.

Alex picked up the pillow she’d used to cover her book and pressed it to her face, letting out a muffled scream. Maggie glanced at the book. She couldn’t quite make out the entire title, but GLBTQ was at the top in huge letters. Maggie started to lean forward to get a better look, but before she could, Alex dropped the pillow back down over the book and stared at Kara with a pathetic look on her face. “How could you have let me miss that?”

“You’re the one who decided to take the day and go do your whole angsty biker chick thing.”

“I told you not to call it that,” Alex said, glaring at her sister.

“I’m just calling it like I see it.”

“Fine!” Alex leaned down and dug a huge orange bag out of her backpack. “I’ll just share these with Maggie then.”

“NO!” Kara jumped up off the bed. “I’m sorry!”

Alex laughed and held the bag out to Kara, who snatched it greedily before sitting back down on the bed. Maggie glanced over to see what Kara was so excited about. Of course it was food. A 60-
count bag of Lindt Peanut Butter truffles.

“I didn’t know what kind you liked,” Alex said.

Maggie looked back over at her to find Alex holding out a smaller gold bag of truffles towards her. A 5-flavor assortment. She reached out and took it. “Thank you,” she said, which for some reason, made Alex give her an enormous smile.

“How was Coast City?” Kara asked as she tore open her bag of chocolate.

The smile vanished off Alex’s face, replaced by an absolutely furious blush. “Fine,” she said. Although Maggie thought ‘said’ might be a bit generous. It was more of a squeak, really, and apparently odd enough to distract Kara from food. Something Maggie had already learned was nearly impossible.

“Alex?” Kara asked.

“What?” Alex’s voice was still a little strained. “It was fine. I picked up a couple of books for psych class.”

“Oh!” Kara glanced over at Maggie, and Maggie didn’t miss the nervous expression on her face before she looked back at Alex. “We were thinking of catching a late movie.”

Maggie had to fight to keep from rolling her eyes at what had to be the least subtle topic change she’d ever seen.

“What were you going to see?”

“I want to go see the new Harrison Ford movie,” Kara said.

“Or we could go see Final Destination 3,” Alex said.

“No! Come on. We watched two horror movies last night.”

“She’s got a point.” Maggie personally would have preferred to see Final Destination 3 herself, but she felt like she owed Kara for taking her along to the square that afternoon.

“Fine,” Alex said with a roll of her eyes. “But you’re getting your own popcorn this time.”

Judging by the little victory dance she did, Kara didn’t have any problem with that particular condition. Alex stood up and went over to the closet to grab her jacket, while Kara stuffed a truffle in her mouth.

“Ready?” Alex asked once she had her jacket on.

“Yeah.” Kara and Maggie both stood up, and Maggie let her lead the way. But once Kara and Alex both had their backs to her, she lifted the pillow on Alex’s bed, just for a second. Just long enough to read the title of Alex’s book: GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Teens.

Well, that settled the question of whether Alex knew she was gay or not. Maggie wasn’t sure if she was comfortable with that, but at least Alex seemed to want to try to be okay with it.

She dropped the pillow and followed Kara and Alex out of the room.
Secrets, Lies, and a Bikini

Chapter Summary

Alex and Maggie spend some time together, and Eliza gets an unwelcome visitor.

Sunday, February 19, 2006

Maggie carried her bagel over to the table and sat down. She’d beaten Alex and Kara to the kitchen and was enjoying having it to herself for a few minutes to think. The movie they’d gone to see had been pretty generic and forgettable—even Kara had been pretty bored by the time it was over—but the night had still been fun. Watching Kara and Alex together was actually kind of the highlight. The two of them were connected in a way that made Maggie envious because she knew she’d never have something like that in her life. It was the kind of relationship she wished she could have with her sister. She had always been afraid to get to close, because she was afraid her parents anger towards her would spill over onto Mike.

It also made her a little sad that Alex was still so jumpy around her because when Alex relaxed, she was fun to be around. Maybe she should just talk to Alex about it. See if she could figure out what was bothering her.

Okay, that was probably a terrible idea. After all, she’d thought it was a great idea to tell Elisa what she was feeling, and it had pretty much destroyed her entire life. If she hadn’t gotten very, very lucky, she wasn’t sure what would have happened to her, but no matter what it wouldn’t have been good.

Maybe it would be different. After all, Alex was trying. The book proved that. But Maggie was afraid if she pushed, it would blow up in her face. Mrs. Danvers was nice—way beyond nice, in fact—but Maggie didn’t believe for a moment that Mrs. Danvers would let her stay if Alex or Kara had some kind of problem with her.

She’d just have to suck it up and deal with it.

Alex didn’t have any plans for the day, so she had slept in. Partly because they’d gotten in late last night and partly because she figured if she got up, the first thing she’d do was text Susan, and that felt a little desperate. So instead she’d stayed in bed until her stomach and her bladder were both protesting a little too much for her, then finally got up. She took a minute to use the bathroom, thankful Kara was always up early on Sundays, then headed downstairs for breakfast.

She was actually looking forward to getting a chance to have the kitchen to herself for a change, but it turned out she was a bit late for that. Maggie was already sitting at the table, eating her burnt bagel. Alex felt the same flutter in her stomach as usual when she saw Maggie and felt a little bit of dread at the thought of turning into a babbling idiot again. She considered just grabbing a granola bar and heading back upstairs, but that seemed a little ridiculous. She couldn’t hide from Maggie until it was time to leave for college. Besides, if she ever wanted a girlfriend, an idea that had gained a lot of appeal in the last couple of days, she was going to have to learn how to talk to girls.

She could do this. She could totally do this. After all, it had taken a little bit, but she and Susan had
been able to have a mostly normal conversation yesterday. And it should be easier with Maggie, since Maggie wouldn’t be flirting with her.

She could do this. She’d just go in there and use the same trick she’d used yesterday with Susan. She’d make herself a cup of coffee, and if she started to get overwhelmed, she’d take a sip to distract herself.

“Morning,” she said as she walked into the kitchen.

“Morning,” Maggie replied.

Alex went over to the counter and took a few minutes to fix herself some breakfast. She put a pod in the coffee maker, and while her coffee was brewing, she made herself a bowl of shredded wheat, which was pretty much the only cereal they could keep in the house for more than a day, since Kara absolutely refused to touch the stuff—even the kind with jelly in the middle.

Once her coffee was done, Alex carried her mug and her cereal over to the table and sat down opposite Maggie. “You sleep okay?” she asked.

“Yeah. Kara not up yet?”

“Kara’s been up for hours. It’s Sunday, which means she and Mom are out back working in the garden.”

“Oh, I thought I was the first one up.”

“No. They’re out there at first light. Mom likes to get done before the sun gets too high. It doesn’t really matter a lot right now, but in the summer, it can get miserable outside.”

“Kara’s into gardening?”

“Sort of. Mostly it just reminds her of her dad. He was a biologist, like my Mom, and Kara used to help him in his greenhouse.”

“Can I ask something?”

“Sure.”

“What happened to Kara’s parents?”

“A fire,” Alex said, the familiar lie rolling off her tongue before she even thought about it.

“God, that sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“It was four years ago?”

“Yeah, February 6th was the anniversary of the day Kara came to live with us.”

“Shit. I didn’t realize.”

Alex shrugged. “She doesn’t like to talk about it.”

Maggie nodded.
“Got any plans today?” Alex asked.

“Not really. I don’t really know the town that well.”

“Why not?”

“Because I really didn’t plan on sticking around after graduation. Didn’t seem like there was much point in learning all the ins and outs when it was going to be temporary.”

That actually made a lot of sense. Alex didn’t exactly hate Midvale, but she was really looking forward to living in an actual city. The only thing reason she wasn’t chomping at the bit to get out of Midvale was Kara. Leaving her behind was going to be hard, but Maggie probably didn’t have anything to hold her here.

“Any idea where you want to go?”

“I was planning on going to UC Berkley if I could get in. Or maybe San Francisco State University. San Francisco has a lot of appeal.”

“Yeah, I’m looking at Stanford and National City University.”

“Why NCU?”

“They have a really good Medical School/Bioengineering PhD combo program. I’d actually prefer to go there for my undergrad work, but people keep telling me that it looks better if you do your undergrad and graduate degrees at different schools, and Stanford has a great bioengineering undergrad degree.”

“Why bioengineering?”

“It kind of runs in the family. My dad and my mom both have PhDs in Bioengineering. My mom also has an MD and PhDs in biochemistry, genetics, zoology, and botany.”

“Wow.”

“What about you?” Alex asked.

“I want to be a cop.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said, sounding a little defensive. “I mean, it’s not as fancy as being a bioengineer, but I want to help people.”

“I think that’s great.”

“You do?” Maggie asked, and Alex could hear the surprise in her voice.

“Yeah.”

“Most people always tell me I should do something else. Act like being a cop is for people who aren’t smart enough for anything else.”

“They’re idiots. Being a cop would be great. You get to help people. Make the world a better place.”
“You really think so?”

“Yeah. I used to want to go into the military.”

“What changed your mind?”

Alex thought about it for a moment, trying to come up with an answer that she could safely give Maggie. Because she definitely couldn’t tell her she couldn’t go into the military because the background check might look a little too closely at Kara’s adoption records, and if that happened, her whole family would be destroyed. She also wasn’t quite ready to tell her that she’d discovered another reason why going into the military would be bad for her.

“Lots of reasons,” Alex finally settled on. She was a little afraid Maggie would keep asking, but Maggie seemed to talk the hint and move on.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do about college now. None of the big city police forces will take you unless you have a degree, but a lot of them only require an Associate’s, so I’ll probably get a job and go to night school, and then go to the Police Academy.”

“You should talk to Mom about it,” Alex said.

“I think your mom’s letting me stay here is probably enough. I don’t think asking her to send me to college is the best idea.”

“I just meant, you should ask her about financial aid,” Alex said. “She put herself through college.”

“She did?”

“Yeah. She hasn’t talked to her parents since she left for college.”

“Why not?”

“No idea,” Alex said. “I asked a couple of times, and she just said that they aren’t the kind of people she wanted in her life. I know she still talks to one of her cousins, but she doesn’t have anything to do with most of her family.”

Maggie looked down at the table, frowning slightly. “I’ll think about it.”

They sat there in silence for a few minutes, and Alex kicked herself because she’d made things awkward. She cast around, trying to come up with something else to talk about, but only one thing really came to mind. It was kind of stupid, but she was a little desperate. “What’s your favorite movie?” Alex asked.

Maggie looked up at her, and Alex couldn’t help but notice that she was blushing a little. “Terminator 2.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too,” Alex said, not able to keep a smile off her face.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve got it on DVD upstairs. You want to watch it?”
“Yes!”

It took about 15 minutes to get settled in upstairs. Part of that was Alex’s insisting on making two bags of popcorn. Maggie had been a little confused by that until she remembered the way Kara had gone through popcorn at the theater the previous night and during the movie night on Friday. Once they had snacks and drinks, Alex led the way upstairs. Maggie grabbed a spot on the couch while Alex put the DVD in, then grabbed a blanket off the back of the couch and spread it across both their laps.

Alex had just reached for the remote when she stopped suddenly and looked down at the blanket, then over at Maggie, her cheeks turning a little red. “Sorry. Is this okay?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Alex blushed a little harder. “I was worried I got in your personal space without asking.”

Maggie smiled, a little surprised that Alex even thought about that. “It’s fine. It’s been a while since someone tucked me in.”

Alex reached up and covered her face with one hand, groaning slightly as her cheeks darkened another shade. “I swear I’m not normally such a dork.”

Maggie laughed. “I have yet to see any evidence of that.”

Alex dropped her hand and glared at Maggie for a minute before she turned back to the TV and started the movie. Sarah Conner’s opening monologue began, and Maggie turned to watch the movie, ready to enjoy two hours of an increasingly sweaty Linda Hamilton in progressively more badass outfits, but when Arnold appeared on screen a few minutes later and started prancing around naked, Maggie glanced over at Alex, curious what her reaction would be. She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. Apparently the sight of a mostly naked, ridiculously buff man busting up a bar made Alex crave popcorn because she was stuffing her face with it. Maggie grabbed a handful for herself and turned back to the movie.

She was cheerfully getting lost in it when Linda Hamilton finally appeared on the screen in a tank top and pajama pants, flexing her muscles in glorious high definition as she did chin ups on an upturned bed. Maggie heard Alex’s breath hitch and looked over. Alex was sitting there, holding a couple of pieces of popcorn, her hand stopped halfway to her mouth, her eyes fixed on the screen, and her lips slightly parted. As Maggie watched, Alex licked her lips. The spell lasted until the scene cut away to the doctor, and Alex lifted the popcorn the rest of the way to her mouth.

An absolutely crazy thought ran through Maggie’s head, and she immediately kicked herself for it because she was being stupid. She was gay, and she was lonely because she was gay, and Midvale was too small to have a queer community. She was stupid because she was seeing things that weren’t there. Because she was lonely and very, very gay. That’s what happened with Elisa, and now it was happening with a girl who wasn’t just straight but was clearly uncomfortable with the fact that Maggie was gay.

She turned back to the movie and ignored Alex until the credits rolled.

Alex had seen Terminator 2 so many times she could recite the whole movie from memory. She’d always loved it, and she’d especially loved Sara Conner. But this time, when Sarah showed up, Alex felt that now-familiar lurch in her stomach she was learning to recognize as attraction. She
had no idea why it was hitting her this time when she’d never felt it before, unless it was her awareness of the fact that she was attracted to women.

It was a little overwhelming at first, but she got used to it as the movie went on, and it went from being overwhelming to being a sort of pleasant buzz. That, unfortunately, brought another problem with it. The less focused she was on Sarah Connor and her bare arms and bulging muscles, the more she could feel the weird tension radiating from Maggie.

She wasn’t sure what was causing it, but it hadn’t been there when the movie started, and she wondered if she’d done something. Whatever it was, it lingered until the end credits started to roll, at which point, she couldn’t take it anymore. She picked up the remote and stopped the DVD.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, looking over at Maggie.

Maggie looked back at her and shook her head. “No.”

“Are you sure? Did I do something?”

Maggie’s stared at her for a second, a look of shock on her face that made Alex afraid she had done something, but Maggie shook her head, and her expression changed. Alex felt a flutter in her stomach at the soft smile on Maggie’s face.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Maggie said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I’m just caught up in my own bullshit.”

“You’re had kind of rough week. You’re probably entitled.”

“A rough week?” Maggie asked, and Alex could hear a touch of laughter in her voice. “God, that’s an understatement.”

Alex shrugged, but before she could say anything, her phone chimed. She gave Maggie an apologetic smile as she grabbed her phone out of her pocket and flipped it open. Her smile widened as she saw the message from Susan.

Susan: Any progress?

Alex: I managed an actual conversation.


Alex: That’s one of those jokes I won’t get until later, isn’t it?

Susan: If you’re good, maybe I’ll explain it.

“Boyfriend?” Maggie asked.

The question was so completely unexpected, and her brain conjured up such a perfect image of Susan’s probable expression if she heard it, that Alex couldn’t stop herself from laughing. The confused expression on Maggie’s face at her reaction only made Alex laugh harder because it was absurd. Even before she’d realized she was gay, the idea of her texting a boy has been ridiculous.

“I say something funny, Danvers?”
Alex shook her head and had to reach up and cover her mouth for a moment to stop laughing. Once she was sure she could speak, she moved her hand. “Sorry. It’s just my friend Susan. I was picturing her face if someone had called her my boyfriend.”


“Hold on. I’ve got to tell her about this.”

“What? No!” Maggie said. She made a grab for the phone, but Alex had spent four years living with Kara and was a master of keep away from a superpowered sister. She dodged Maggie easily and kept typing one-handed.

Alex: She asked if I was texting my boyfriend.

Susan: Boyfriend!

Susan: I am insulted!

Susan: Show her this!

Alex saw the little picture icon pop up, and clicked on it without thinking about it, expecting a picture of Susan in something like her t-shirt and jacket outfit from the day before. That wasn’t what Susan sent.

Maggie wasn’t sure what was going on, and it was starting to drive her a little crazy. Specifically, the mystery that was Alex Danvers was starting to drive her a little crazy. Alex was pretty clearly uncomfortable around her. At first, she had thought Alex was just freaked out by the poor, homeless girl with the massive bruise on her face. Then, she had thought Alex was just freaked out by the poor, homeless, gay girl with the massive bruise on her face. But given how concerned Alex seemed to be over the idea of making her uncomfortable, Maggie was started to think that wasn’t what was going on at all.

She’d thought for a second that she had found a piece of the puzzle when she saw the look on Alex’s face as she read her text messages and replied to them, but she’d been completely baffled by the way Alex had broken down laughing at the mere suggestion that she was texting a boyfriend. Even when Alex had explained that she was texting a friend named Susan, Maggie hadn’t understood why Alex thought it was so hilarious, or why she thought Susan would find it funny, but Alex didn’t stop laughing as she sent the text telling Susan what had happened.

Three text chimes sounded in rapid succession, and after the third one, Alex stopped laughing, she stopped smiling, and she let out a low, guttural moan.

“Oh, God,” Alex whispered.

“Alex?” Maggie asked, a little afraid of what this Susan person could have said to cause such a sudden change in Alex’s mood.

Alex looked up at her and her face turned bright red. She reached up and covered her face with one hand and closed her eyes.

“Are you okay?”

Alex shook her head and held out her phone. Maggie took it a little hesitantly and glanced at the screen.
“Holy shit!”

The little two-inch screen on Alex’s Razr wasn’t the best screen for looking at pictures, but a gorgeous girl with short hair smiled out of the screen, wearing nothing but a bikini top and matching boy shorts as she stood on the beach, holding a volleyball.

She looked up at Alex, who now had both hands over her face and was blushing so hard she was turning a little purple. The phone chimed again, and Maggie glanced down. She didn’t mean to read Alex’s message, but it was right there, and it was short enough that she took it all in at a glance.

Susan: Boyfriend my extremely gay ass.

Maggie looked up at Alex, who was staring at her looking a little terrified. She held out the phone and Alex took it, holding it like it was a bomb that was about to go off. Alex glanced down at the screen.

“Shit.” Alex looked up, and Maggie could see the fear in her eyes, and suddenly, everything made sense. Alex’s being weird that first morning. Alex’s being clumsy around her. Alex’s having issues forming complete sentences. Alex’s having that book. Alex wasn’t uncomfortable around her; Alex was nervous because Alex was attracted to her.

“You’re gay?”

Alex gave a small, timid, little nod.

“Hey, it’s okay.”

Alex gave her a small smile, and a lot of the tension seemed to go out of her.

“Susan’s your girlfriend?”

“No,” Alex said with a shake of her head. “Just a friend.”

“Really?” Maggie wasn’t quite able to keep the amusement out of her voice. “Because the look on your face when you were reading her texts didn’t say ‘just a friend.’”

The blush crept back into Alex’s cheeks.

“You like her?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah. I think so, but…”

“But what?”

“This is all really new. I mean, before I figured it out, I never even understood why anyone would want to date. I tried it, but I was mostly just bored. And the couple of times I kissed guys, I really just wanted it to be over. But now, I’m not sure about anything. I don’t know how to tell the difference between thinking someone is attractive and wanting to date them, and I don’t have any idea how to tell if someone likes me back.”

“That last one is a tough one, but I’m pretty sure sending you swimsuit pics is a good sign.”

Alex chuckled. “Yeah.”

“How did you and Susan meet?”
“Her mom owns a bookstore and a café in Coast City. She helped me find some books, then asked if she could take me for coffee after she finished ringing me up.”

Maggie laughed. “You picked up a girl in a bookstore.”

Alex shook her head. “I mostly just stood there and gibbered like an idiot. I haven’t really gotten the hang of talking to girls yet.” Alex’s phone chimed again. She looked down and typed out a quick text. “Sorry,” she said as she looked back up.

“No problem. Got to keep her interested, right?”

Alex sighed. “I don’t think she wants to date me until she’s sure I’m not into someone else.”

“Why does she think you’re into someone else?”

Alex looked down, avoiding Maggie’s gaze and gave a half-hearted shrug. Maggie might not have known Alex very well, but she knew immediately that the girl was lying.

“You don’t have to tell me.” Maggie said.

“It’s stupid.”

Maggie stared at Alex for a moment. She could feel the confusion and misery radiating off the other girl and hated it because no one deserved that. She didn’t really want to say anything, but she knew she couldn’t let Alex suffer either.

“Trust me, however stupid you think it is, it can’t be worse than what I did the first time I ever really liked a girl.”

Alex looked up at her. “Her moms run a gay bookstore. I was there looking for books to help me figure out if I was really gay.”

“Ah. And you were wondering if you were gay because of a girl.”

Alex nodded.

“Who’s the girl? Because if it’s that singer Rhonda from Yab-Yum’s, you’ve got good taste.”

Alex shook her head and looked away. “It’s not her.”

“Well, who…” Maggie stopped mid-sentence as she realized she already knew who it was. Alex was attracted to her, and Alex was avoiding looking at her while she talked about the girl who made her realize she might be gay. “Oh.”

Alex pulled her legs up so her knees were just under her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs.

“Alex, when did you meet Susan?”

Alex shrunk down a little and mumbled, “Yesterday.”

Maggie closed her eyes because she couldn’t keep looking at Alex hunching down like that. It felt a little too much like watching herself huddling under the bleachers the night she’d given Elisa that stupid fucking card.

“I’m sorry,” Alex said, and the words hit Maggie almost as hard as her father’s hand had. She
opened her eyes and saw Alex with her face buried between her knees. She reached out, putting her hand on Alex’s shoulder.

“Don’t be. Alex, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But something is wrong, isn’t it?”

Maggie wished for a moment that Alex wasn’t so perceptive, because there wasn’t really any way out of this but to tell the truth. “How much do you know about what happened to me?”

“Most of it, I think. I was worried about what was going to happen to you before I knew Mom was going to let you stay, and I wanted to help. I knew you and Elisa Wilkey were friends, so I asked her if she knew what happened. I thought maybe if I knew, I could figure out some way to help. She told me you gave her a Valentine’s card and that she gave it to her dad, who called your dad. It wasn’t hard to figure out what happened from there.”

Maggie closed her eyes again. There’d been some small part of her holding out hope that Elisa’s dad had found the card on his own. Hearing that Elisa had given it to him made her feel a little sick to her stomach, but she put that aside until she could deal with the situation in front of her. Because Alex didn’t deserve to get hurt just because she had the worst timing in the world.

“I knew I was gay before my family moved to Midvale. If fact, it’s kind of the reason we moved here. I never told anyone back in Blue Springs that I was gay, but when you get to be a certain age and you’ve never looked at boys, or dated them, people start to put it together. Being Latina didn’t exactly make me the most popular kid in school. Being the daughter of the sheriff didn’t help either. Being gay on top of it just painted an even bigger target on my back. I started getting in fights, and dad had no idea why. He thought it was because I was Latina. I knew from the way he treated my Aunt Juanita that he wouldn’t be happy if people thought I was gay, and I didn’t expect much different from what happened if he found out I actually am gay. After I punched the Principal’s kid in the face, it looked like I might get expelled. So, when my dad got offered the Sheriff’s job here, he took it. He made me swear I would stay out of trouble here, and I did.

“Being the new kid was kind of a blessing. No one really knew anything about me, and I figured if I could just make it through one year, I could go to college, and I could be myself there. But then I met Elisa. My first day in this fucking town, I met Elisa Wilkey. I had a crush on her after five minutes. We hit it off, and I spent every spare moment with her for seven months. I fell in love with her, and I fell hard, and I did something I promised myself I wouldn’t do. Not until I was out on my own. I told her I loved her because I thought she loved me back.

“I was wrong. I was so wrong.”

She squeezed Alex’s shoulder gently. “Alex, you’re great. You are. You’re smart, you’re beautiful, you’re brave, a little weird, but you deserve someone who will love you, and that’s not me. Not right now. I just got my heart broken, and it’s going to be a long time before I’m over that. I have no idea when I’m going to be willing to even think about dating again. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “I do.”

“You sure?”

Alex nodded. “I’ve got to say though, this sucks. I’ve been gay for four days, and this is the second time I’ve been dumped.”

Maggie laughed, and Alex reached out and took her hand, giving it a squeeze.
“I’m sorry that she didn’t love you back,” Alex said.

“Thank you.”

“Want me to punch her in the throat for you?”

“Um, thanks, but no.”

It was a little past noon when Eliza and Kara finally came in from the backyard garden that Eliza had been tending ever since she and Jeremiah bought the house. There really hadn’t been enough work to keep them out all morning. It wasn’t as if there was a lot of weeding to do in the middle of winter, and the winter vegetables would need another couple of weeks before they were ready for harvest, but the lack of work hadn’t stopped them from puttering around for hours because the Sunday gardening was their time together, and over the past year, it had become one of Eliza’s favorite times of the week. She got to watch Kara open up and come alive as they discussed botany, biology, ecology, entomology, and all other sorts of scientific subjects that somehow related to the garden. She enjoyed every minute of watching Kara getting to use the vast amounts of scientific knowledge she’d been forced to set aside when she arrived on Earth in favor of trying to blend in as a normal teenager.

Today, though, the conversation had veered away from the hard sciences into the soft ones, mostly sociology and cultural anthropology, although they had roamed through political science, linguistics, and theology as well. Kara had wanted to know details about public policy on queer issues, along with the history, cultural imperatives, and religious beliefs tied up in sexuality and gender. Kara’s questions were deep and insightful, and in more than one case, pointed, none of which surprised Eliza, even if her choice of subject matter had. It shouldn’t have. Kara was never as naïve or unperceptive as people thought. She picked up on things, and it was also possible that Alex had talked to Kara before she’d talked to Eliza.

Kara had been frustrated by the gaps in Eliza’s knowledge on the subject, and truthfully, Eliza was frustrated and disappointed in herself for those gaps. She’d always considered herself well-informed on the topic, for reasons which were both deeply personal and incredibly painful, but under Kara’s questioning, she’d very quickly discovered that her knowledge was largely superficial. Something which made her feel like she’d failed people she cared about, both past and present. By the time they finally decided to head inside, Eliza was already making plans to correct the gaps in her knowledge.

She took a few minutes to get cleaned up, and once she was done, she glanced into the den and saw Alex and Maggie watching a movie before she headed downstairs to start lunch. She’d just decided on a pasta salad when the doorbell rang. She headed towards the door, wondering who it could be. Kara beat her there. She looked through the peephole and frowned.

“Who is it?” Eliza asked.

“I don’t know. Some guy in a black suit.”

Eliza felt a chill run through her. She pushed Kara aside and glanced out of the peephole, and the chill turned into cold terror.

“Get upstairs. Tell Alex to get dressed, but you listen, and if I tell you to go, you grab Alex and Maggie and you fly straight to your cousin, and you don’t come back here for any reason, do you understand?”
“Why? Who is he?”

“Go!” Eliza said, pointing upstairs. “Now!”

Kara vanished up the stairs at super-speed. Eliza took a deep breath, hoping Kara listened to her instead of charging downstairs to help if this took a turn for the worse, then she opened the door and smiled at the man who killed her husband.

“Director Henshaw,” Eliza said.

“Doctor Danvers. We need to talk.”

“About what?”

“Something best discussed inside.”

Eliza stepped back, making room for Henshaw to come inside. Henshaw stepped past her and waited as Eliza closed the door. She led the way into the living room, opting for that over the kitchen because she knew sound carried better from the living room up the stairs. She doubted it would make a difference, but if Kara and the girls needed to get away, she wanted to make sure they heard the warning.

She sat down, and Henshaw sat down opposite her.

“Why are you here?” Eliza asked without preamble. “We had an agreement that you wouldn’t come back.”

“Yes, we did, and I’ve respected that agreement. But circumstances have changed.”

“I don’t see how,” Eliza said. She wanted to say more, but she was mindful of the fact that Kara was listening.

“I’m talking about Ms. Rodas’s presence in your home.”

“What about Maggie?” Eliza asked.

“Dr. Danvers, you have a teenage girl you know nothing about living under the same roof as Kara. That doesn’t strike you as dangerous?”

“I know everything I need to know about Maggie, and Kara is the one who brought her home in the first place.”

“I’m aware of that, and Kara’s compassion is admirable, but how could you possible know everything you need to about a girl you met five days ago?”

“I know she was thrown out by a father who isn’t worthy of the title. I know the only thing she did wrong was to fall in love with the wrong person. I know that she’s strong, that she’s proud, and that she’s kind. I know both of my daughters care about her, and that she needs help, because her parents are worthless excuses for human beings. So I know enough to know that she’s welcome to stay here for as long as she likes.”

“Dr. Danvers, I understand your desire to help the girl, I do, but there are other options. The DEO can make arrangements to have her placed in a group home. We can even make sure she can stay there until graduation, and then she can move on with her life.”

“That’s not going to happen.”
“Dr. Danvers-”

“If you think, even for a moment, that I would even consider letting that girl go to a group home, you haven’t done your homework nearly as well as you should have before coming here.”

Henshaw let out a frustrated sigh. “Dr, Danvers, this is putting your family at risk.”

“You’ve known her for five days.”

“What’s your point, Director Henshaw? Maybe you’ve forgotten that I agreed to take Kara in sight unseen, that she became a part of my family before I ever laid eyes on her.”

Henshaw reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I could set her up in an apartment. Assign an agent to serve as her guardian until she turns 18. Then she could take over the apartment. The DEO will even foot the rent until she graduates.”

“No.”

“Look, we both want what’s best for the girl and for Kara.”

“I remember what you think is best for Kara. And I wouldn’t trust you to care for a potted plant, much less a scared, lonely, hurt, little girl. If you think I’m going to let you take any one of my girls out of this house, let me make it perfectly clear that you will do so over my dead body.”

“I’m not going to change your mind, am I?”

“Over my dead body, Director.”

“At least let me speak with Ms. Rodas. Let her choose for herself.”

“No.”

“Dr. Danvers, please.”

“Director, the last time you were in this house, you dealt with my husband. He wanted to handle the situation himself, and I made the mistake of letting him. I won’t make the same mistake again. If you or any of your agents come anywhere near my girls, any of my girls, I’m going to do what I should have done that night: call Kara’s cousin and let him deal with you.”

Henshaw stood up and held out a business card. “If the situation gets out of control…”

“Then I will call literally anyone else in the entire world before I call you.”

Henshaw sighed and put the card away. Eliza followed him to the door, locking it behind him.

She barely had time to turn around before Kara came pounding down the stairs and wrapped her in a bone-crushing hug.

Maggie had known pretty much from the start that the Danvers weren’t a typical family. Kara was adopted, Alex was a little weird, though that turned out to be an acute case of gay, and Mrs. Danvers was a little crazy. But when Kara came running into the den and told Alex to get dressed because they might need to go to see her cousin, Maggie knew something was wrong. The way Alex ran for the bedroom while Kara had knelt down at the top of the stairs hadn’t done anything
to make the situation even a little bit less suspicious, but the fear she saw on Alex’s face when Alex came back a couple of minutes later made her wonder what the hell was going on.

The three of them waited at the top of the stairs for a few minutes before they heard front door open. Kara started down the stairs as soon as the door closed, and Alex was right behind her. Maggie followed, wanting to make sure she heard any explanation for whatever the hell had just happened.

Mrs. Danvers hadn’t been very forthcoming. She’d just hugged Kara, then Alex, and for a moment, Maggie thought Mrs. Danvers was about her hug her, but she apparently settled for squeezing Maggie’s shoulder, before she led them all into the kitchen. Maggie, Alex, and Kara sat down while Eliza started cooking a pasta salad. Maggie wasn’t sure what was going on, but she picked up from Alex and Kara’s expressions that asking questions might not be the best idea.

Saying the lunch that followed was awkward was an understatement. Dinner her first night in the Danvers house had been relaxed by comparison. Kara kept glancing at the door, and every time she did, Alex seemed like she was ready to murder someone. Mrs. Danvers just leaned over her food and ate slowly, looking like she was trying to work out the meaning of life, and didn’t like the answer she was coming up with.

“Maggie,” Mrs. Danvers finally said.

“Yes?”

“You’re probably wondering what just happened,” Mrs. Danvers said.

“Yeah.”

“If I tell you, can you promise you won’t tell anyone?”

“Yes.”

“It’s important, Maggie. You absolutely cannot tell anyone. And you can’t ask questions. Can you do that?”

Maggie considered it for a moment. She glanced over at Alex and Kara, saw the worried expressions on their faces, and wondered what could possibly be so serious. But there was never really any doubt about her answer; the Danvers had helped her, taken care of her when she needed it. If they needed her help now, of course she would give it. “Yes.”

“Kara is in a sort of witness protection program. She’s a refugee, and there are people out there who would hurt her because of her family. The man who was at the door was an FBI agent. He’s unhappy about you staying here.”

Maggie felt a knot of fear settling in her stomach and wondered if everything that had happened over the last few days was about to come crumbling down around her. If the FBI didn’t want her here, they’d make her leave, and she didn’t have anywhere else to go.

“I told him you aren’t going anywhere. I told him you were a part of this family now, and that this was your home for as long as you want it to be.”

The knot of fear in her stomach vanished, replaced by a lump in her throat and tears in her eyes. Mrs. Danvers had just called her family. Had just said this was her home. She didn’t understand it at all. Didn’t understand why someone who barely knew her would do any of the things Mrs. Danvers had done when her own parents had tossed her out like so much garbage.
“Thank you,” Maggie said, struggling to get the words out.

“You don’t need to thank me,” Mrs. Danvers said, and Maggie could hear anger in her voice. “I made a promise I intend to keep, and no one is going to stop me from doing it. Not your parents, and not Hank Henshaw.” Mrs. Danvers looked up at her. “Maggie, I know this man. He’s not one to give up easily. He may approach you directly, and he may offer you all sorts of things to get you out of this house. I am not going to make this decision for you, but please, please believe me when I say that you absolutely cannot trust him.”

Maggie wanted to ask so many questions. Why was Kara in witness protection? Had the fire that killed her parents been arson? Was it even a fire? Were there people looking for Kara? Did this have something to do with her asshole cousin? Was it why Eliza would be upset if she found out Kara was selling her paintings? Did this have something to do with her? Was it why Eliza would be upset if she found out Kara was selling her paintings? Did this have something to do with her? Was it why Eliza would be upset if she found out Kara was selling her paintings? Did this have something to do with her?

All of those questions ran through her head, but she promised she wouldn’t ask, so she didn’t. But there was one question she couldn’t hold back, no matter how afraid she was of the answer.

“Am I putting Kara in danger by being here?” Maggie asked. She was terrified of the answer because she didn’t want to leave. She was stunned by how much she wanted to stay after just a few days. The thought of having to go made her want to throw up.

“I won’t lie to you. You deserve better than that. Having you here is a risk. But, Maggie, the only way you could put Kara in danger is if you tell people about her.”

“I won’t,” Maggie said without a moment’s hesitation.

“Good. But that doesn’t just mean you can’t talk about Henshaw or witness protection. It means you can’t tell anyone about anything strange you might see.”


“It’s okay. I know this is a lot to take in. I had hoped it wouldn’t come up, but I should have expected something like this, and I’m sorry I didn’t.”

“It’s okay. Mrs. Danvers, you’ve done more for me that I had any right to expect.”

“Bullshit!” Mrs. Danvers snapped.

Maggie wasn’t sure whose reaction was funnier. Alex and Kara both sat there, staring at Mrs. Danvers with absolutely gobsmacked expressions on their faces, while Mrs. Danvers reached up and covered her mouth with her hand. Maggie did find out where Alex’s overactive blush reflex came from when Mrs. Danvers turned as red as a tomato.

Mrs. Danvers took her hand away from her mouth. “I’m sorry. What I meant to say was, I’m doing what any parent should do. And I might be a little angry that your parents failed you so miserably. Maggie, you have every right to expect the adults around you to provide you with a home filled with people who love you and support you. I know I’m not the best mother in the world, and God knows, I’ve made mistakes, and I will probably make more of them, but you are part of this family now, and I promise you, I’ll do my best to make sure you have all of that. I’m just sorry for what you had to go through to end up here.”

“Thank you,” Maggie said, not able to find the words to express the feelings that were starting to overwhelm her.

“I need a few minutes. Do you think you girls could clean up?”
“Yeah,” Alex said.

Mrs. Danvers got up and left the kitchen.

“I’ll do the dishes,” Kara volunteered.

“I’ll help,” Maggie said.

“I got it,” Alex said.

“You sure?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah. I need to talk to Kara about something anyway.”

“Okay,” Maggie said, a little relieved. She was pretty sure she needed a few minutes to herself almost as much as Mrs. Danvers.

“What did you want to talk about?” Kara asked as Alex carried the dishes over to the sink.

“Psych class.” Alex sat the dishes next to Kara, then moved around to the other side and grabbed a towel to dry them with.

“Oh. Did you figure things out?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I did.”

“That’s good. You still want to go see that movie?”

“I think I’d like that. It sounds like it would be my kind of thing.”

Kara leaned towards Alex, bumping their shoulders lightly. “I’m happy for you.”

Alex smiled. “Thanks.”

“So… Do you think Maggie likes you back?”

Alex looked over at Kara, who was grinning like she just found Eliza’s secret Oreo stash.

“No,” Alex said. “Pretty sure she’s not interested.”

Kara frowned. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little disappointed, but I’m okay with it. I’m working through the books I got and just kind of figuring out what it all means, but I feel better than I have in a long time. I kind of get it now. Why there was this part of me that didn’t seem to work right. It’s like I finally know who I am.”

“A girl without a girlfriend?” Kara asked in a teasing tone.

Alex narrowed her eyes and glared at Kara.

“Alex, no,” Kara said. She started backing away from the sink, but she wasn’t quite fast enough to
avoid the splash of dishwater that soaked her shirt. “You suck!”

Alex stuck out her tongue, making Kara laugh as she stepped back up to the sink.

“Mom knows,” Alex said.

“I figured she had to at least suspect. She pulled me aside and started asking me all these questions about how they felt about it on…” Kara stopped and glanced over towards the door. “How they felt about it back home.”

“What did you tell her?”

“The same thing I told you. We didn’t have categories back home.”

“How did she take that?”

“It took her a bit to get it, but once she did, she asked me if I’m attracted to girls.”

Alex stopped in the middle of drying a saucepan, and looked over at Kara, feeling horribly guilty all the sudden. She’d spent the last few days trying to get her head around the idea that she might be gay, and it had never once occurred to her that Kara might have the same sorts of feelings.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t even think to ask.”

“You had a lot on your mind.”

“No excuse,” Alex said. “Are you?”

“Yeah. I had a terrible crush on my dance instructor. Vayla Kon-Lor.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“When I got here, I didn’t know it was something people would consider abnormal,” Kara said. “Back home, it was something private. By the time I realized it wasn’t considered normal here, it didn’t really seem important. I liked Kenny, and people were weird about it, so I didn’t say anything.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Alex, you don’t have to be sorry,” Kara said. “I know this is a big deal for you, and I want to be supportive, but the fact that I like boys and girls isn’t… It’s not this big thing for me.”

“Okay.”

“Should I not mention this in front of other people?”

“Maybe don’t talk about it at school. I know I’m gay, but I’m still trying to figure out what that means, and I’m not really ready to try to explain it to a bunch of morons.”

“I can do that. What about Maggie?”

“Would you hate me if I said she already knew?”

“You told her first?” Kara asked, sounding a little hurt.

“Not exactly.”
Kara looked at her, and Alex winced.

“Now’s probably a good time to tell you about Susan.”

“Who’s Susan?”

Eliza sat on her bed, trying to hold back tears.

Hank Henshaw had been in her house. Hank Henshaw wanted to take Maggie away. And she had been scared enough that she had come within a hair’s breadth of exposing Kara’s existence forever, just to keep her away from Henshaw. To keep all of her girls away from that monster.

She had known that she was getting emotionally invested in Maggie. She’d known from the moment she realized that the girl had been kicked out that the situation hit way too close to home and she was going to have trouble being reasonable about it. When she found out it was because Maggie was gay, she knew it was going to dredge up awful memories for her. She just hadn’t expected two of the worst periods of her life to collide so spectacularly.

More than anything right now, she wanted Jeremiah. She wanted the person who was supposed to be there for her for the rest of her life. Instead, she got the monster who took him away. The monster who was trying to take away a girl who reminded her far too much of why she hadn’t spoken to anyone in her family but her cousin Daniel in decades.

Her phone rang, and she took a deep breath, trying to steady herself before she flipped the phone open. “Hello.”

“Hey, Eliza,” Clark said.

“Hi, Clark,” Eliza said, wincing slightly at how rough her voice sounded.

“Are you okay?” Clark asked. “You sound kind of rough.”

“I’m not having a good day, and I’m really missing Jeremiah right now.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to catch you at a bad time.”

“It’s okay. It’s actually good that you called. The DEO paid me a visit this morning.”

“WHAT?” Clark asked, and she could hear the shock in his voice.

“Hank Henshaw showed up. He’s unhappy about Maggie moving in.”

“Why?”

“He’s afraid Maggie will expose Kara.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“Make sure he doesn’t come back here.”

“I will.”

“Did you need something?”

“I wanted to let you know that one of my friends paid a visit to Sheriff Rodas and his wife.
Maggie’s sister will be safe.”

“You sound awfully sure of that.”

“I can’t go into detail, but neither the Sheriff or his wife will ever be able to lay a hand on the girl in anger.”

“There are a lot of ways to hurt a child that don’t involve hitting her.”

“I know,” Clark said. “But there are limits to what I can do.”

“Thank you for trying.”

“Of course. Is there anything else I can do?”

“You could visit Kara.”

Clark sighed.

Eliza snapped her phone shut before she could hear whatever excuse he was going to give this time.

Alex dropped down onto her bed and took out her phone. She glanced over to Kara’s bed where she was busy reading one of the books Alex had picked up in Coast City. Sure that Kara was distracted, Alex flipped open her phone and pulled up her text thread with Susan.

Alex: Hey

Susan: Hey

Susan: You okay?

Susan: You kind of disappeared earlier.

Alex: Yeah, sorry.

Alex: Maggie saw the comment about your gay ass.

Susan: SHIT!

Susan: I am so sorry!

Alex: It’s okay.

Alex: We talked.

Susan: I’m guessing it didn’t go well?

Alex: It didn’t go the way I wanted.

Susan: I’m sorry.

Alex: I don’t know how to feel.

Alex: I didn’t really expect her to like me back.
Alex: But hearing her say it still hurt.

Susan: She’s an idiot.

Alex: No, she’s not.

Alex: She’s just got a lot of shit going on.

Alex: She said she’s not over the girl she gave the card to.

Susan: Ouch.

Susan: For both of you.

Susan: I mean, I get it.

Susan: But I still feel bad for you.

Alex: Pretty sure I’ll live.

Alex: Kara and I are going to see Imagine Me and You Friday night.

Susan: You’ll love it!

Susan: Lena Headey is gorgeous.

Alex: So is Linda Hamilton.

Alex: I rewatched Terminator 2 this morning.

Susan: Oh, god. Those arms!

Alex: I know.

Alex: Not as good as the girl in the bikini I saw later.

Susan: Yeah. She’s pretty hot.

Alex: And modest too.

Alex: I blushed so hard I thought my head was going to explode.

Susan: Bet you were adorable.

Alex felt the heat rising in her cheeks again and shook herself a little. She had to learn to get through a conversation with a girl without turning into a tomato. Of course, that was easier said than done. She didn’t have any better of an idea of how to navigate romance now than she did before she realized she was gay. The only difference was, now it felt like it actually mattered.

Of course, now she also had someone she could talk to about it.

Alex: Can I ask you a question?

Susan: Yeah, of course.

Alex: Does this get any easier?
Susan: You want a comforting lie or the truth?
Alex: The truth.
Susan: It gets less confusing.
Susan: Some days, it will be the best part of your life.
Susan: But some days, it will suck beyond the telling.
Susan: Mostly that’s because of assholes like Maggie’s dad.
Susan: It’s the hardest when it’s people you love.
Alex: How do you deal with it?
Susan: Make friends who are queer.
Susan: Build a community.
Susan: Build a family.
Susan: People like us are big on found family.
Susan: We do better in groups.
Alex: Stronger together.
Susan: That’s a good way to put it.
Susan: Where’s that from?
Alex: Something my sister says.
Alex: Want to hear something funny?
Susan: Sure.
Alex: When I came out to my sister, she told me she likes girls too.
Susan: She’s gay?
Alex: Bi, I think.
Alex: She hates the labels.
Susan: God, that is such a bi girl thing to say.
Alex: What?
Susan: Sorry. A little inter-subculture tension there.
Susan: But bring your sister along next time you come to the store.
Susan: We’ll throw her to my sister.
Alex: The glare-y sister in the fishnets and nose ring?
Susan: Only one I have.
Alex: I’m not sure Kara’s ready for a goth girl.
Susan: Sorry, I’m fresh out of starter lesbians.
Alex: Starter lesbians?
Susan: Yeah.
Susan: Tennis players
Susan: Girls who change their own oil.
Susan: That one super-hot cheerleader who never has a boyfriend.
Alex: Why do I feel like I should be on that list?
Susan: On no. You are definitely not on that list.
Alex: Why not?
Susan: That’s not a question I should answer while we’re doing the whole just friends thing.
Alex stared at the words on her phone’s tiny little screen and felt her stomach trying to do flips at the implications. Susan liked her. She’d been pretty clear about that right from the start. Alex had understood why Susan wouldn’t want to get involved when the Maggie question was still floating around, but that had been settled.
Alex: We don’t have to.
Alex: Do the whole just friends thing, I mean.
Susan: Yes, we do.
Susan: You need a friend right now more than you need a girlfriend.
Susan: And I would be really happy if Maggie would take that job.
Susan: But she’s dealing with her own shit.
Alex: What happened to ‘you know where to find me’?
Susan: You do, and I’m not saying never.
Susan: I just want to make sure you have someone you can go to.
Susan: More than I want to kiss you.
Susan: Which is a LOT.
Alex: Okay, the noble self-sacrificing thing is making this harder.
Susan: Sorry.
Alex: Don’t be.
Alex: It feels nice, being put first.

Susan: You deserve it.

Alex: It means a lot.

Susan: My mamas raised me right :)

Alex: Yes, they did.

Alex: I should probably head to bed.

Susan: Good night.

Alex: Good night.

Susan: I still reserve the right to flirt outrageously!

Alex: I reserve the right to flirt back.
Chapter Summary

Maggie gets a visit from the 'FBI', Susan gives Alex some advice, Maggie's dad causes problems, Eliza gets backstory.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning. Homophobia, Court Proceedings involving homophobic families, mentions of abuse, drug use, shitty families, conversion therapy and AIDS. This chapter has some fluff, but it also goes a little dark.

Monday, February 20, 2006

Mrs. Danvers woke Maggie up early Monday morning and sent her straight to the shower. Maggie hadn’t been sure why and had grumbled the whole time because she never got enough sleep and losing a half hour she’d been expecting put her in a foul mood. When she’d come down, dressed and ready for breakfast, she had, instead, found Mrs. Danvers sitting at the table with a bunch of brand-new makeup. Mrs. Danvers had told her to sit down, and as soon as she did, Mrs. Danvers started working on her face, first with some kind of red cream, then with an orange pencil, then with a foundation, followed by a concealer, lipstick, blush, eye shadow, liner, eyebrow pencils, and lipstick. Maggie did her best not to fidget since she’d asked Mrs. Danvers to get her something to cover the bruise. She just hadn’t expected it to be so involved.

When Mrs. Danvers finally held up a mirror, Maggie had almost cried. The bruise was gone, and while there wasn’t really a way to hide the stitches, without the bruise, they drew a lot less attention. Best of all, despite all of Mrs. Danvers’ work, it looked like she wasn’t wearing any makeup. She looked like herself again. And if she needed any further confirmation, it came when Alex took one look at her and promptly dumped a glass of orange juice down the front of her shirt. Something that had Maggie smiling, Kara and Mrs. Danvers struggling not to laugh, and Alex just shaking her head with a resigned sort of expression on her face.

She’d walked to school that morning with Alex and Kara and felt different. Felt like, for the first time in a long time, she didn’t have to worry about what would happen at school. Mrs. Danvers knew she was gay and accepted her. Alex knew she was gay and liked her. Kara didn’t know yet, but Maggie knew that when she told her, Kara wouldn’t care. She had a home where she could go and be safe and be herself without having to worry that someone would hate her for it. She had people who cared about her, who wanted her to be part of their family, just the way she was, and it made all the difference in the world.

There were still whispers as she walked to class. She didn’t know if they were just left over from Friday, or if there was some new, fresh gossip going around, but she didn’t care. She felt invincible, like nothing in the world could touch her as she walked into Ms. Mercer’s first period English class. Elisa Wilkey was there, glaring at her just like she had been on Friday, but Maggie
just smiled and took her normal seat.

Elisa kept glaring the whole class.

Alex smiled as she spotted Kara and Maggie sitting at their usual table and headed over, taking the seat next to Maggie and across from Kara. Maggie gave her a glance as she sat down, and Alex shrugged. “I figure it’s safer if I don’t have you in my line of sight while I’m eating.”

Maggie stared at her in confusion for a moment before it clicked. Alex saw the exact moment Maggie made the connection, and the laugh that followed was loud enough that everyone in the lunchroom turned to see who was laughing and what they were laughing about. Alex didn’t care because Maggie was beautiful when she laughed, and Alex couldn’t tear her eyes away.

“Funny, Danvers,” Maggie said before she turned back to her lunch.

Alex grinned as she picked up her fork and attacked the meatloaf on her plate, feeling a little warm inside because Maggie was still smiling. Even the glare Eliza Wilkey was giving her from across the cafeteria didn’t faze her.

Maggie sat down in her usual seat in Mrs. Fulton’s class, cheerily ignoring the glare that Elisa was giving her. She wasn’t really looking forward to an hour of Mrs. Fulton’s droning monotone, but there was something vaguely satisfying about how angry her very existence seemed to make Elisa.

The whole thing still hurt, more so now that she knew for sure that Elisa had given the card to her dad. And it galled her that she actually kind of missed Elisa. But after the conversations she’d had with Alex and Mrs. Danvers, it felt different than it had on Friday. It didn’t feel like there was something wrong with her anymore. It didn’t feel like she had done something wrong.

“Mrs. Fulton?” a voice Maggie recognized at the receptionist from the school office said over the intercom.

“Yes?” Mrs. Fulton asked.

“Is Maggie Rodas in class?”

“Yes, she is.”

“Can you please have her collect her things and come up to the front office?”

“I’ll send her now,” Mrs. Fulton said.

“Thank you.”

“Maggie,” Mrs. Fulton said.

Maggie shoved her book back into her backpack, then went up and collected a hall pass from Mrs. Fulton before heading for the office. She wondered the whole way what was going on, and a small part of her wondered if she would find her dad or her mom waiting there for her. She couldn’t think of any other reason she’d be called to the office. She hadn’t been in any fights; she was getting straight A’s in all of her classes; and Mrs. Danvers had even written her a doctor’s note to cover the two days she’d been out.

When she got to the office, there were two people there. The receptionist who’d called her up, and
a tall woman in a dark suit with long, curly brown hair, cheek bones to die for, and green eyes that looked like they could see into your soul.

“Here she is,” the receptionist said.

“Maggie Rodas?” the woman asked in a slight southern accent.

“Yes.”

“Come with me, please,” the woman said, before she turned and headed for a room off to the side. Maggie followed her. The woman stopped just inside the door, letting Maggie into the room before she closed it. “Please, have a seat.”

The room was a larger conference room, and Maggie wasn’t sure where the woman wanted her to sit, so she just grabbed the closest seat to the door and waited. The woman took the seat next to her, and turned to face her, then reached into her jacket and pulled a wallet out of her breast pocket. Maggie felt her heart sink the moment she saw it.

“Ms. Rodas, I’m Special Agent Noel Neill with the FBI,” the woman said as she flipped the wallet open to show Maggie her ID. “I know this must seem a little scary, getting called to the office to talk to an FBI agent. But I promise you’re not in any kind of trouble.”

“What’s all this about?” Maggie asked, already knowing this had to be some attempt to get her out of the Danvers’ house.

“That’s a good question, but before I answer it, I need to ask you something,” Agent Neill said. “Can I trust you to keep a secret?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said.

“It’s about the Danvers,” Agent Neill said.

“What about them?”

“The FBI keeps a very close eye on them. Not because they’ve done anything wrong. We’re trying to protect them.”

“From what?”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, I can’t tell you that. But what I can tell you is that we only want what’s best for them.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“You’re putting them in danger by being there. Now, I know you don’t mean to. Everything we know about you says you’re a good kid who’s just had a bit of bad luck. Some trouble with kids picking on you back in Nebraska, and what happened with your family. None of which is your fault. We don’t think you’d intentionally do anything that would hurt them, but, Ms. Rodas, you don’t have to mean them harm to put them in danger. All it would take is a careless word, an unguarded comment at the wrong time, and they could get hurt or worse.”

“I wouldn’t ever do anything to hurt them.”

“Not intentionally. But you don’t even understand what kind of danger we’re trying to protect them from.” The agent folded her hands in front of her. “Maggie, I know you’re in a bad place right now,
and I know that the Danvers must seem like a miracle. You get kicked out by your parents. You’re scared, alone, no money, nowhere to go. And along comes this family who takes you in, feeds you, gives you clothes, a phone, a computer. They even get your old stuff back from your parents. And right now, they must seem like your only hope. But sweetie, we can help. We can get you emancipated. We can have the papers today. We can set you up in an apartment, give you money to live on while you finish high school, even pay for college.”

“If I agree to move out,” Maggie said.

“If you agree to move out and never talk about anything that happened in that house. And doesn’t mean you can’t still be friends with Alex and Kara. You can still talk to them all you want.”

“Hank Henshaw sent you, didn’t he?” Maggie asked.

Agent Neill’s face froze for a second, but she nodded. “Yes, he did.”

“I think I’m going to go back to class now.”

“Wait, please.”

“Why? Why is all of this such a big deal?”

“I can’t tell you why the Danvers need our protection, but there is something you should know before you make your decision.”

“What’s that?”

“Sweetheart, if I tell you this, you cannot tell Alex or Kara what I’m about to say. Not ever. Do you understand?”

Maggie nodded.

“Jeremiah Danvers worked for the FBI. Dr. Danvers never told Alex and Kara that. Jeremiah died while he was on assignment for the FBI. A plane crash killed him and a number of other agents. Dr. Danvers blames Agent Henshaw because he recruited Jeremiah, and he was in command when Jeremiah was killed.

“She probably told you that you couldn’t trust Agent Henshaw. But trust me, Agent Henshaw and all the rest of us only want to keep the Danvers safe. Dr. Danvers isn’t thinking clearly. She’s looking for someone to blame, and she’s blaming Agent Henshaw, because it’s easier to do that than to admit that her husband died due to an accident.”

“I’m sorry, but you think telling me this—that you got Mrs. Danvers’ husband killed while he was working for you—is going to make me trust you?”

“Well, I admit, I had hoped telling you the truth would earn your trust.”

“I’m going to go back to class.” Maggie reached for her bag, but before she could stand up, Agent Neill spoke again.

“There’s something else you need to consider.”

“What’s that?” Maggie asked with a tired sigh.

“I didn’t want to bring this up. I had hoped to convince you without mentioning it, but Maggie, think about how much you’re costing them.”
Maggie frowned as she looked at Agent Neill. “What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that Dr. Danvers has already spent in excess of 6,000 dollars on you. All those clothes, the new furniture for your bedroom. Putting the old furniture into storage. The computer, the extra food, the makeup you’re wearing, the cell phone. I don’t even know how much the lawyer’s bill for helping her get custody of you is going to be, but it won’t be cheap. And do you know how Dr. Danvers spent her morning?”

“No,” Maggie said.

“She was at the bank, trying to figure out how to pay for your college. She was taking money out of the account where the life insurance payout she received when Jeremiah died went and putting it into a college fund for you.”

“What?” Maggie started to say Mrs. Danvers wouldn’t do that, but she knew immediately that Mrs. Danvers was probably doing exactly that.

“Dr. Danvers is an amazing woman. Generous to a fault. And I don’t want to talk out of turn, but there are things in her past which would make her especially sensitive to your situation. She will do whatever it takes to give you anything you need, no matter how much it costs her.”

“But we are offering you everything she is. A safe place to live while you finish high school. We’ll pay for your college—anywhere you want to go, as long as you get accepted. We’ll pay for medical school, law school, whatever you want. Even your housing, food, clothes, and transportation while you’re in college.

“Maggie, you can have any future you want. And we can give it to you so you don’t have to take away part of Alex and Kara’s to get it.

“Now what do you say?”

Maggie stared at her for a minute, taking in everything she said. How much money she was costing Mrs. Danvers, the ways she was putting Kara at risk. She didn’t want to do either of those things, but just like it had before, the thought of leaving make her want to throw up. She couldn’t. She couldn’t lose another home.

She stood up, and grabbed her backpack, slinging it over her shoulder.

“I’m going back to class. You tell your boss to leave me the fuck alone, and you stay the hell away from me.”

“Maggie, I know this is a big decision,” Agent Neill said as she pulled out a business card, “but please, think about it. For their sake.”

Maggie stared at the card for almost a minute, the same sick feeling churning in her gut as when her papi told her she wasn’t his daughter anymore, but finally, reluctantly, she reached out and took it. She glanced up at Agent Neill, and she must have been more upset than she thought because for just a second, she could have sworn the woman’s eyes were red.

She turned and left without another word.

Alex stood near the bike rack, waiting for Kara and Maggie. Her last class of the day was near the front entrance to the school, so she almost always made it to the bike rack first, and today was no different. Or it wasn’t until Elisa Wilkey showed up and got right up in Alex’s personal space.
“What the hell is your deal, Danvers?” Elisa asked.

“What are you talking about?” Alex asked, even though she had a pretty good idea why Elisa was upset.

“You know what I’m talking about. Why are you hanging around with Maggie?”

“Because I want to. Because she’s surprisingly awesome for someone who used to hang out with your dumb ass.”

“She didn’t ‘used to hang out’ with me. I told you.”

“You told me you’re a fucking idiot,” Alex said, cutting her off before she could announce Maggie’s sexuality to the small crowd of people around them. “I could really do without the constant reminders.”

“Don’t you care-“

“No. No one cares, Wilkey. You are literally the only person in the entire school who gives a shit.”

“Is there a problem here?” Maggie asked from somewhere off to the side, and Elisa looked like she’d been slapped. She turned towards Maggie, and Alex watched a couple of different expressions play across Elisa’s face before she settled on anger.

“No,” Elisa said. “I’m just telling your new friend here what kind of person you really are. Because she clearly didn’t get it the first couple of times I told her.”

Alex raised her hand and gave Elisa a little shove. Not enough to hurt her or knock her down, but enough to get her attention and to move her back a couple of steps. “No, I got it,” Alex said as she stepped past Elisa. “You guys ready to head home?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said.

The three of them started home, Alex and Kara keeping Maggie in the middle. She wasn’t sure if keeping Maggie in the middle was intentional on Kara’s part, but something about the way Elisa kept coming up to her and challenging her about Maggie was starting to scare her just a bit. She wasn’t sure why Elisa cared that she was hanging out with Maggie, but she didn’t seem like she was going to let it go anytime soon.

“What was that about?” Kara asked.

“Me,” Maggie said. “Elisa hates me.”

“Because she’s a bitch,” Alex said.

“She’s not a… Well, yes, she kind of is,” Maggie admitted. She glanced over at Kara and took a deep breath. “She and I were friends, but I liked her as more than a friend, so I put a card in her locker on Valentine’s Day telling her that I had feelings for her. She kind of freaked out and gave the card to her dad, who told my parents. That’s why I got kicked out of the house.”

“Your parents kicked you out because you’re gay?”

“Yes.”

Kara shook her head. “This whole planet sucks.”
Alex looked over at Kara, who had a slightly panicked look on her face after realizing what she just said, but Maggie just laughed. “Some parts of it aren’t so bad. It’s a lot easier if you’re straight though.”

“Yeah,” Kara said.

Alex watched as Maggie looked at Kara. She couldn’t see Maggie’s face, but there was a shift in her body language.

“Are you gay?” Maggie asked.

“No.” Kara shook her head. “I like both.”

“Oh. So, bi?”

Kara shook her head. “I don’t like the labels. I don’t feel like any of them really apply to me. But I think, if I had to pick, maybe pansexual.”

“I haven’t heard that one,” Maggie said, which made Alex feel like less of an idiot because she’d never heard it either. “What’s it mean?”

“The way Alex’s book describes it, it’s when you’re attracted to people without their gender being a factor.”

“How long have you known?” Maggie asked.

“I had a crush on my dance instructor when I was eight. She was small and thin, with beautiful blonde hair, and she was so graceful and every move she made was like a dance,” Kara said, and Alex had to bite her lip because the only word she could think of to describe the way Kara was talking was ‘dreamy,’ and she was going to bust out laughing any second.

“That sounds like a nice way to figure it out,” Maggie said.

Alex turned to Maggie. “How did you figure it out?”

“I had a crush on my best friend. I kept wanting to punch her boyfriend every time he touched her.”

“What happened?” Kara asked.

“Some of the kids in school figured out I’m gay because I kept turning down guys who asked me out. She heard the rumors and didn’t want anything to do with me anymore.”

“Not much of a friend,” Alex said.

Maggie shrugged. “I’ve never had a lot of luck in that department.”

“Well, you’ve got us,” Kara said.

“Kara’s right,” Alex said.

“Thanks. That means a lot.”

Maggie lay in her bed, staring up at the ceiling and thinking about the business card in her backpack. She knew she was being manipulated. Could feel it in her gut. There was something off about Agent Neill she couldn’t quite put her finger on. But just because Agent Neill wasn’t what
she pretended to be and had ulterior motives coming out her ass didn’t mean she was wrong. Taking care of Maggie wasn’t Mrs. Danvers’ responsibility, and Mrs. Danvers was spending a frightening amount of money to do it. Maggie had known that, even before Agent Neill had started giving her numbers.

Maggie hated it. Hating needing the help. Hated being a burden on someone who was being so kind to her. And if Agent Neill was telling the truth, Maggie had the option not to be. She could accept the FBI’s offer without losing anything. She could still finish school. She could still go to college. She could still have a future. Hell, she could still be friends with Alex and Kara.

It should have been an easy choice. Emancipation so she could live alone and do as she pleased. An apartment to live in until she left for college. A full ride to any school that would accept her. She could become the cop she’d always dreamed of being. Hell, she might even make it into the FBI if she wanted.

But however easy it should be, the thought of leaving made her stomach turn. She wasn’t sure why. A week ago, she would have jumped at everything Agent Neill was offering. The opportunity to get out on her own, to have the freedom to do whatever she wanted. Of course, a week ago, she’d been miserable. She’d spent every day afraid her dad would find out she was gay and living for the minutes and hours she could spend with Elisa. Now she was safe. Mrs. Danvers knew she was gay, accepted it, and was angry at the way she’d been treated because of it. And Alex and Kara were both queer too. For the first time in her life, she had a place where she felt welcome and accepted, and she was being asked to walk away. To give it up.

The bitch of it was, she knew she should do it. She knew she should walk away. Even Mrs. Danvers had admitted that it was risky for her to be there. That it put Kara in more danger than she was already in. And there was a nagging guilt gnawing away in her gut because she knew Kara was breaking rules put in place to keep her safe. She knew she should tell Mrs. Danvers about the paintings, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t bring herself to break Kara’s trust. Not after what had happened to her when she’d put her trust and faith in Elisa Wilkey.

The bed shifted slightly, making her jump a little. She looked over to see a fluffy black cat standing on the bed next to her, staring at her with impatient eyes.

“Hey,” Maggie said.

“Meh!” the cat demanded.

Maggie reached out, a little hesitantly, and started petting him. He walked right up onto her stomach and lay down, curling into a ball and purring.

Alex heard her phone chime and set down her book before she started digging for her phone. She pulled it out of her pocket and flipped it open to see a message from Susan.

Susan: How was school?

Alex: Mostly good. Elisa Wilkey got up in my face.

Susan: Why?

Alex: She doesn’t like me and Kara hanging around with Maggie.

Susan: What the fuck?
Alex: I know. It makes no fucking sense.
Alex: I mean, I get her not wanting to hang around Maggie.
Alex: Actually, that’s a lie.
Susan: Still got a crush, huh?
Alex: Would you hate me if I said yes?
Susan: No.
Susan: I still have a thing for the girl who made me realize I’m gay.
Alex: I hate her already.
Susan: Don’t waste the effort. She’s straight.
Alex: Ouch.
Susan: Yep.
Alex: What I meant was, it makes sense for Elisa not to hang out with Maggie, but why would she care if other people do?
Susan: No idea.
Alex: I thought you knew everything.
Susan: I know everything about being gay.
Susan: Straight people are a mystery I don’t want to solve.
Susan: Because stupid hurts.
Alex: LOL!
Susan: Be careful around her, okay?
Alex: Around Elisa?
Susan: Yes.
Alex: I’m not scared of her.
Susan: You should be.
Susan: She could out Maggie to the whole school.
Alex: SHIT!
Alex: I didn’t think about that.
Susan: I figured.
Susan: I also figure you’re not in the kind of school where being out would be safe.
Alex: I don’t know.

Alex: I think Maggie, Kara, and I are the only not straight people at school.

Susan: I promise you you’re not.

Susan: But the fact that you think you are says a lot about your school.

Susan: Please be careful.

Alex: I will be.

Alex: Thank you.

Susan: I hate saying you’re welcome for something like that.

Susan: But I want you, Maggie, and your sister to be safe.

Alex: Thanks for looking out for me.

Susan: Someone has to do it.

Alex: I’m glad it’s you.

Susan: I don’t hate the job.

Alex: I’m glad about that too.

Tuesday, February 21, 2006

The walk to school Tuesday morning was a lot more cheerful than the day before. The day before had been comfortable enough, knowing that everything would be okay if she told Kara, but now she had told Kara and she had told Alex, and it was all out in the open, and they accepted her, and she felt free. The situation wasn’t perfect. There were still secrets. The card in her backpack still weighed on her, and she still had no idea why Kara was in witness protection, but those were details for another day.

Kara spent most of the walk cheerfully abusing both Faulkner and Joyce and denouncing the entire concept of stream of consciousness writing as incomprehensible gibberish. Maggie personally agreed, and she had a sneaking suspicious Alex did too, but listening to Alex give her sister a hard time kept her smiling right up until they rounded the last corner and the school came into view.

That part was a lot less fun because the first thing she noticed was one of the big SUV’s the Sheriff’s Department used sitting right out in front of the school. And if the number on the back was any indication, the person sitting inside was her dad.

“What is he doing here?” Alex asked.

“I don’t know,” Kara said. “Should we go in the back way?”

Alex’s eyes narrowed. “Fuck that.”

Maggie looked back and forth between Alex and Kara. She couldn’t let them get into trouble because of her. She owed them that.
“Why don’t you guys go ahead without me,” Maggie said. “He won’t give you any trouble if we’re not together.”

Kara and Alex both looked at her like she had suggested going to one of Mrs. Fulton’s afterschool study sessions.

“What are you talking about?” Kara asked.

“Yeah. Why would you think he would give us less trouble if there were no witnesses around?” Maggie’s brow furrowed. “You think he’s here for you?”

“Unless that Spencer kid has tried to free the frogs in the biology lab again,” Alex said.

“Why would my dad be after you two?” Maggie asked.

Alex stopped at that. “Your dad is a deputy?”

“My dad’s the sheriff. You didn’t know?”

“No. I figured Mom didn’t call the sheriff because the entire department is fucking useless.”

Maggie was a little shocked by the bitterness in Alex’s tone.

“I can’t believe this,” Kara practically growled.

Maggie turned towards her, and Kara looked furious. For just a second, Maggie could have sworn her eyes were glowing.

“Kara!” Alex’s voice rang out, slightly shrill in a panicked sort of way.

Kara closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again, she still looked mad enough to chew metal and spit nails.

“Why did you think he was here for you?” Maggie asked.

“The department doesn’t like us very much,” Alex said. “We’re the reason Sheriff Collins is in jail. And the reason the entire department had the DEA crawling down their throats for months.”

“What do we do?” Kara asked through clenched teeth.

Alex looked at the SUV for a minute, before she reached down, and threaded her fingers through Maggie’s hand. “We protect what’s ours.”

Kara took her other hand. “Stronger together.”

“Damn right,” Alex said.

Before Maggie could figure out what was going on, Alex and Kara both started towards the school, pulling her along with them. They made it about halfway across the parking lot when the door to the SUV opened up and her dad stepped out. He looked furious, and Maggie wanted to turn around and run away, but she couldn’t. Alex and Kara both still had a firm grip on her hands and were still leading her forward.

“Guys,” Maggie said.
“It will be fine,” Alex insisted.

Her dad looked at her with pure hatred in his eyes, and she felt the double toasted bagel she’d had for breakfast trying to crawl back up out of her stomach as he marched towards them.

“Margarita,” he snarled as he came to a stop in front of them. “You think you’re going to get away with it?”

“You’re in our way,” Alex said.

He turned towards Alex. “Get out of here.”

“No.”

He took a step towards Alex. “Do you know who you’re talking to?”

“Yes. Do you?”

Maggie saw the twitch in his lip. The one that was always there right before he started yelling. Saw his hands curl into fists. He turned back towards her.

“CPS came to the house yesterday,” he said. “There’s going to be an investigation. They’re accusing me of mistreating my own kids!”

“I wonder why.” Alex practically sneered as she said it.

Maggie saw it before it happened. Something about the way his shoulders moved, just like they had before he’d hit her the week before. She didn’t hesitate. She stepped in between him and Alex and closed her eyes, waiting for the blow, but it never came. When she opened her eyes, she saw his hand stopped a couple of inches from her face, Kara’s hand locked around his wrist.

He was staring at Kara in shock, and Maggie knew how he felt. She looked over at Kara, and the expression on her face was absolutely frightening.

“Let’s go,” Alex said, taking Maggie’s hand again. “Kara.”

Kara stared at him for a few seconds longer, and Maggie wasn’t sure she was going to let go, but then the look on her face changed, became a little less scary, and she let go of him with a shove. He staggered back and fell, landing hard on his ass. Kara reached down, taking Maggie’s hand again. They walked around him as he sat there in the middle of the parking lot and headed for the school.

Neither of them let go of Maggie’s hands until they were inside the school.

“Dr. Danvers,” Marissa said. Eliza looked up from the microscope to see what her administrative assistant wanted, but she knew immediately when she saw the woman behind her.

“It’s okay, Marissa,” Eliza said.

Marissa nodded, and left her alone with the FBI agent who’d come to the house the night Kara and Alex had been run off the road by Sheriff Collins.

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember your name,” Eliza said.

“Special Agent Noel Neill, Doctor Danvers,” the woman said with an accent that reminded Eliza just a bit of where she grew up. It wasn’t a proper Atlanta accent, but any hint of the south would
normally bring a smile to her face.

“I’d say it’s a pleasure, but somehow, I doubt it will be.”

“I’m afraid that’s probably truer than you realize. There was an incident this morning at the school.”

“What kind of incident?” Eliza asked, doing her best to tamp down the fear, and hoping that Alex, Maggie and Kara were all okay.

“Nothing serious, this time. But Kara did use her powers in front of witnesses.”

“How is that not serious?”

“Just a little bit of strength and speed. Nothing outside the normal bounds of human ability, though not the kind of thing you normally see in a teenage girl.”

“What happened?”

“After they saw her on Friday, five of Ms. Rodas’s teachers filed a report with Child Protective Services. A CPS caseworker showed up at the Rodas home yesterday. Sheriff Rodas was a mite unhappy about that and went to the school this morning to confront Maggie, apparently under the impression that she called them. Your daughters were with her at the time of the confrontation. Sheriff Rodas took a swing at Alex. Maggie stepped in the way, but Kara caught his arm by the wrist before he could make contact.”

“He tried to hit Alex?”

“Yes, ma’am. But Dr. Danvers, we have a problem.”

“Of course we do. The sheriff just tried to assault my daughter.”

“And Kara assaulted a police officer.”

“You just said she was defending Alex.”

“Yes, she was,” Agent Neill said, “but you and I both know that Kara even getting charged would be a complete disaster.”

“What about Sheriff Rodas? Has he been arrested?”

“No. Dr. Danvers, I understand that you’re upset, but I need you to listen to me. Now, I know you’ve already had this discussion with Director Henshaw, and I understand that given the history you two have, that he might not have been the best person to speak to you about this.” That, Eliza thought, was quite the understatement. “But this incident happened because you took in Maggie. I sympathize with her circumstances, and I understand, given what happened with your cousins, why you want would want to help this girl. Surely, though, you have to realize that having her in your house is a danger to both Alex and Kara.”

“I am not throwing her out on the street.”

“No one is suggesting that. And I know better than to suggest a group home, either. But her staying in your house is not a viable option, and you know it. Now, I have already had a conversation with Maggie. I have explained to her that the FBI is prepared to hand her a set of completely legal emancipation papers, to set her up in an apartment until she is ready to go to college, and to give
her a full ride to any college in the country that would accept her. I have also explained to her that it is perfectly fine for her to remain friends with you and your daughters.” Agent Neill’s posture grew more formal as she drew herself up to her full height. “But her living in that house, 24/7 cannot continue.” She had the audacity to try a soft smile. “Dr. Danvers, it would be better for everyone involved if you sat down with Maggie and told her she should accept what we are offering.”

“Agent Neill, I will tell you exactly the same thing I told Director Henshaw. Over my dead body.”

“Dr. Danvers—”

“That girl needs a home,” Eliza said. “She needs a place full of people who care about her. She needs someone who tells her there is nothing wrong with her and who she is or who she loves. She is part of my family. I did not plan it. I did not go out looking for another child. But a child came to me, scared, bruised, bleeding, betrayed by the people who should love her unconditionally. I will not ignore that. That girl will have a home with me until the day she dies, just like my other two daughters. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to see about a restraining order. Or maybe three, if I find out you or Director Henshaw have approached Maggie again.”

“Dr. Danvers, I understand your position. I do. And given the circumstances of your cousin’s death—”

“Don’t talk about my cousins like you understand a god-damned thing what they went through,” Eliza said.

“Okay. Then I’ll be blunt. If Maggie finds out that Kara is a Kryptonian, we have no way of predicting what her reaction will be. She could tell people. She could tell the press. And if she does that, it will surely get your entire family killed. You know this, but you are allowing your past to cloud your thinking. You are creating a situation that is endangering the safety of Kara, Alex, and Maggie, and it has to stop.”

“Get out,” Eliza said her voice trembling with barely controlled rage. “Get out, and you tell Director Henshaw that Maggie is not the only one who’s capable of talking to the press.”

“Dr. Danvers, please—”

“Out! Or I will call security and have you thrown out.”

Alex waited at the usual spot by the bike rack after school, but she was paying a lot more attention to what was going on around her than usual. She wasn’t sure who she was more worried about—Elisa Wilkey or Maggie’s dad—but she was watching for both of them. Elisa could do a lot of damage; Susan’s warning had made her realize that. But Maggie’s dad could do a lot more, and every time Alex thought of him, she thought of Sheriff Collins, and Kenny, and how much she and Kara both lost because of Collins’ greed and their own carelessness.

The thought of losing Maggie was unbearable. It made Alex physically ill. It was a fear born out of what happened that morning and made worse by a day spent turning the memory over in her head. She’d taken more than her share of punches in the last year because Kara was right; she liked punching people, liked decking the jerks who picked on Kara or the boys who tried to grope her or the jackasses who still held a grudge because of the quarterback, and sometimes when she punched some deserving asshole, they punched back. So she hadn’t been afraid of getting hit. She’s actually expected it when she got up in his face because she knew before she ever laid eyes on him that Sheriff Rodas was the kind of bastard that liked hitting people who he thought couldn’t fight back. All you had to do was look at Maggie’s face to know that. But when Maggie stepped between
them, ready to take the hit Alex had been getting herself ready for, Alex’s heart had stopped and it hadn’t started beating again until Kara shoved the asshole away from them.

The sight of Elisa Wilkey coming out of the school dragged Alex away from the memories of the morning, and made her tense up, bracing herself for the confrontation, but Elisa seemed content to glare as she passed. After Susan’s warning, Alex was just as happy to leave it that way, even if she did itch to punch her in the face.

“You know, if you were Superman, glaring at her like that might work,” Maggie said. Alex turned away from Elisa to see Maggie and Kara approaching. Maggie was grinning at her own joke in a way that made Alex’s stomach do backflips, but poor Kara had a slightly strained look on her face at the mention of her absent cousin.

“We should get going,” Kara said.

Alex nodded, glad to be getting away from school grounds. “Good idea.”

The three of them started walking, and just like they had done the day before and that morning, Kara and Alex put Maggie between them so she’d be easier to protect.

“I have to stay late tomorrow,” Kara said.

“Why?” Alex asked.

“The midterm art show is next week. Ms. Rafaque asked if I could help hang the pieces for the acrylics class, and I could use the extra credit.”

Alex rolled her eyes. Maggie gave her a curious look. “Kara got a 98 on her first assignment, and now she’s convinced she’s going to fail the class”

“I am not!” Kara said with a huff.

Maggie looked over at Kara. “How’d you do on the other assignments?”

“I did okay.”

“She means she’s gotten 110% on every single painting after the first one.”

“Oh. If she’s doing that poorly, I can see why she’s worried about failing.”

“I’m not worried about failing,” Kara said. “Acrylics are just harder than oils. They don’t mix as well, and I can’t ever get the colors quite right.”

“So, what your saying is, your acrylics only look like masterpieces, instead of something you could mistake for a photograph?” Maggie asked.

Kara looked down at the street and a small blush colored her cheeks.

“You want us to wait for you?” Maggie asked.

“No. I’ll be at least a couple of hours.”

“All the more reason to wait,” Maggie said. “Wouldn’t want you walking home alone.”

Alex smiled, warmth filling her at the way Maggie was looking out for Kara.
“I’ll be fine. I’ve walked it by myself plenty of times.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. In fact, you guys should ride the bike tomorrow.”

Alex understood immediately. She and Kara never road the bike to school because she was afraid one of the idiots at school would mess with it, but after what happened this morning, Kara was worried about them making the trip without her and figured they would be safer on the bike.

“But then you’d have to walk alone both ways. Not going to happen.”

“It’s not a problem.”

“We’ll walk,” Maggie said, her tone inviting no disagreement.

Kara glanced over at Alex, but she couldn’t do anything but shrug. It wasn’t like they could tell Maggie it was safer for Kara to walk home alone than it was for Alex and Maggie to walk home together.

Eliza sat on the couch in her living room, turning her phone over in her hands. She’d made a mistake. She knew that. Had known it the moment the door had closed behind Agent Neill. She shouldn’t have kicked the woman out until she had all the details on what had happened that morning. How had Agent Neill found out about the incident? Was Alex or Maggie hurt? Was there enough evidence to bring charges against Sheriff Rodas?

She should have waited, but the moment Agent Neill had brought up what had happened with Daniel and David, she’d lost it, and now she had to fix that mistake.

She flipped her phone open and dialed Clark.

“What’s wrong?” Clark asked without preamble.

“I had a visit from an FBI agent today. Or a woman who claims she’s an FBI agent. I’m not sure which.”

“What did she want?”

“She wanted me to tell Maggie to move out. You were supposed to take care of this.”

“I thought I did.” There was an angry undertone to Clark’s voice that Eliza had never heard before, which made her think he had actually tried this time.

“Well, whatever you did, it didn’t take. She admitted to approaching Maggie yesterday. She offered to get her emancipated, get her an apartment, and pay her way through college if she moved out of the house.”

“I’m sorry, Eliza,” Clark said.

“You always are,” she said, and even though she knew she should, she couldn’t quite bring herself to regret the words. “I need help from your friend in Gotham right now. Can you get him on the line?”

“Bruce, or…?”
“The other one,” Eliza said.

“What for?”

“Agent Neill said that Sheriff Rodas tried to hit Alex this morning. Kara stopped it, but a grown man carrying a gun attacked one of my daughters. If there’s evidence, I want it.”

“Give me a moment,” Clark said. The line went silent for a couple of minutes, then Clark came back. “Still there?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Dr. Danvers,” Batman greeted her.

“Batman.”

“Clark filled me in,” Batman said. “The FBI doesn’t have an Agent Noel Neill.”

“I thought that might be the case. Any chance you can check the DEO?”

“That will take a little longer.” There was silence on the line for a few minutes. “No Noel Neill there, either. Probably a cover ID.”

“Any agents currently in Midvale?”

“Nothing on the books,” Batman said. “That just means whoever is running the op is sufficiently paranoid.”

“Check Hank Henshaw.”

“His location is simply listed as ‘on assignment’.”

“Damn.”

“I might have something.”

“What?”

“CCTV footage from the school parking lot. The angles aren’t great, but I’ve got one camera that gets a clear shot of Rodas’ face, and another angle that gets all three of the girls,” Batman said. “You have an email.”

“Thank you,” Eliza said.

“It won’t hold up in court,” Batman said. “Not unless you can get the school to release the footage to you.”

“What are the chances of that?”

“Without a court order, low.”

“Agent Neill said Maggie’s teachers had reported Rodas to CPS,” Eliza said. “Would that help?”

“It might. Dr. Danvers, I know a good private detective who’s licensed in California. If you’d like, he could be there by tomorrow. We could have him keep an eye on Sheriff Rodas. Build a case against him.”
“Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Yes,” Batman said. “I’ll also make sure the CPS case worker is aware of the incident at the school and of the CCTV footage.”

“Thank you.”

There wasn’t any response for a moment, but then Batman said, “No child should be without a home, Dr. Danvers, and you’ve taken in two orphans, despite the danger. You have my respect. And if you ever need it for anything, my help.”

There was a click, and Batman was gone.

“Is he always that much of a drama queen?” Eliza asked.

“That was actually tame by his standards,” Clark said, a hint of a laugh in his voice. “I’ll make a couple of calls about keeping the DEO away from Maggie. See if I can make it stick this time.”

“Thank you, Clark.”

“You know I’ll always do whatever I can,” Clark said.

“I know you’ll do… No. You know what, I’m not having this conversation again. Thank you for the help you’re willing to give.”

“Call if you need anything else.”

Eliza closed her phone, because she knew she was never going to get what she really needed, which was for Clark to show up and act like he was Kara’s family. That was a battle she was never going to win.

She glanced at the clock. School had let out half an hour earlier, so the girls would be home any minute, which meant she was going to have another conversation she didn’t want to have.

Maggie knew something was wrong the moment she saw Mrs. Danvers’ car in the driveway. The frowns on Alex and Kara’s faces just confirmed it. “I’m guessing this isn’t good.”

“Mom home before five on a day she had to work is never good,” Alex said.

The three of them headed into the house. They stopped in the foyer and kicked off their shoes, putting them on the rack by the door.

“Girls, can you come into the living room?” Mrs. Danvers called out.

All three of them glanced at each other. For a second Alex and Kara looked like they were considering making a break for it, but both of them sighed and headed towards the living room. Maggie followed them, but they were barely through the doorway before Alex let out a small yelp as Mrs. Danvers yanked her into a hug.

“Are you okay?” Mrs. Danvers asked as she let Alex go and started checking her over for any damage.

“I’m fine.”

Mrs. Danvers finished her inspection, making sure for herself before she pulled Kara into a hug.
Maggie couldn’t help but notice that the inspection Kara got was a lot shorter, just a quick once-over. She didn’t have a lot of time to wonder at the difference before she found herself being hugged.

“Are you okay?” Mrs. Danvers asked again as she gave Maggie the same inspection she gave Alex.

“I’m fine.”

“Good. Sit. All of you.”

All three of them sat down on the couch. Maggie somehow ended up in the middle, though she wasn’t entirely sure how that happened. Mrs. Danvers sat down in one of the easy chairs across from them, and Streaky appeared out of nowhere and crawled into Kara’s lap.

“So tell me what happened in the parking lot at school this morning?”

“What do you mean?” Alex asked.

“Alex,” Mrs. Danvers said, the warning in her tone so clear Alex actually winced.

“It wasn’t their fault. They were just trying to protect me,” Maggie said, because she couldn’t let them take the blame for her.

“Sweetheart, I’m not looking to blame anyone. I just need to know what happened.”

“My dad was waiting for me when we got to school. He started yelling, accusing me of calling CPS. He was upset because there’s going to be an investigation. He told Alex and Kara to go away, but they wouldn’t leave me alone with him. He got mad and took a swing at Alex. I got in the way, but Kara caught his arm before he could hit me. Mrs. Danvers, I know you said no fighting, but I didn’t. I was just trying to get into the school.”

“It’s okay, Maggie,” Mrs. Danvers said. “I’m not mad at any of you. I just needed to hear your side of it.”

“Our side?” Alex asked.

“I had a visit this morning from the FBI agent who was here the night Sheriff Collins tried to run you two off the road.”

“What?” Maggie asked, sure she hadn’t heard that right. She looked at Kara, then at Alex.

“You remember what I said this morning about the Sheriff’s deputies hating us?” Alex asked.

“Yeah,” Maggie said. Because she did remember it now that Alex had reminded her, but it had kind slipped her mind after everything that happened with her dad.

“Do you know what happened to the last Sheriff?” Alex asked.

“He got caught running drugs or something.”

“Yeah, by Kenny Lee. Kenny was our friend—or, Kara’s friend mainly. But he had this telescope, and he hooked a camera up to it. He loved taking pictures, and he got a picture of Sheriff Collins selling drugs out of the evidence locker, so Sheriff Collins killed him. Kara and I both wanted to find out what happened. I guess we spooked Sheriff Collins, and he tried to run us off the bridge.”

Maggie stared at Alex, completely stunned. The last Sheriff had apparently tried to murder her and
her sister not that long ago, but this morning, she’d gotten right up in the new Sheriff’s face and mouthed off to him. To protect Maggie. And she was just sitting there, talking about it like it was nothing.

Maggie couldn’t get her head around it. Couldn’t get her head around Alex. The girl who realized she was gay and was out to her family a couple of days later, who talked about someone trying to murder her and her sister like it was an annoying homework assignment, and got in the face of someone she knew was violent to protect someone she’d known less than a week.

She turned to Mrs. Danvers, looking for help, for answers, and Mrs. Danvers seemed to understand if the expression on her face was anything to go by. “She’s always been like that. I just buy Tums in bulk and thank god Kara came along to reign her in a bit.”

Maggie looked over at Kara and tried to process what Mrs. Danvers was implying—that the girl who went on rants about math and pancakes and the legitimacy of vegetable-based deserts and who thought slabs of frozen chocolate chip cookie dough dipped in chocolate was a great snack to eat with double shot lattés was the calming influence.

“It wasn’t a big deal,” Alex said with a shrug of her shoulders and a dip of her head. “We were fine.”

Mrs. Danvers glared at Alex. “You almost died. Twice.”

“Twice?” Maggie mouthed, looking at Alex.

Alex opened her mouth to say something, but Mrs. Danvers cut her off. “Girls, I need you to listen to me.”

“Okay,” Alex said.

“In California, teachers are legally required to report any signs of child abuse. Five of Maggie’s teachers reported her injuries to CPS after they saw her at school on Friday. I know none of you are the type to run away from a problem, but right now, I need all of you to stay away from Maggie’s dad.” Her gaze lingered for an extra few seconds on Alex. “I cannot stress enough how important it is that you don’t do anything to antagonize him. Right now, I have legal custody of Maggie only because he signed an agreement giving it to me. But he is still her parent, and without a court order he can take custody back at any time. If it were anyone else, I wouldn’t care, since there’s no way he could get a court date fast enough to have Maggie removed from the house before she turns 18. But he’s the Sheriff, which makes the entire situation a lot more difficult.”

Maggie felt her stomach twist itself into knots as a lump formed in her throat. She knew her father. He would never admit it—he liked to talk about honor and dignity and earning respect—but he was a vengeful man when his pride was wounded. Midvale was the Danvers’ home. It was where Alex and Kara grew up. It was where Mrs. Danvers worked. It was where their life was. Her father could destroy that life if he wanted to. She had already put them on his radar, but if she left now, got away from them before he got really mad, maybe it would be enough. Maybe he would leave them alone.

“I’ll go,” Maggie said.

“What?” Alex’s brows shot up as she turned to the side to face Maggie head-on.

“I’ll leave.”

“Maggie, that’s not what I’m asking,” Mrs. Danvers said.
“It’s okay,” Maggie said, even though it wasn’t. She didn’t want to leave. She felt more at home here than she had since before she realized she was gay. But she couldn’t be selfish. Not after everything they had done for her.

Mrs. Danvers got up and came over to Maggie. She knelt down in front of her and took Maggie’s hands in her own.

“Maggie, I don’t know what Agent Neill said to you yesterday, or what your parents have been saying to you for years, or even what you might be thinking about yourself. But we want you here. All of us.”

“But-“

“No buts,” Mrs. Danvers said. “Maggie, I keep trying to tell you, this is your home for as long as you want it to be. And I will not let anyone—not your father, not the FBI, not anyone—take it away from you.”

Maggie squeezed Mrs. Danvers hands as her eyes filled with tears. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I am. What did Agent Neill say to you yesterday?”

“She told me I was putting Kara in danger, even if I didn’t mean to. And she told me how much money you’ve been spending because of me. That you had dipped into the insurance money you got when your husband died to set up a college fund for me.”

“Sweetheart, I know your heart is in the right place, but I wish you would stop worrying about money. Agent Neill told you the truth, but she twisted it. I did move the money from one of Jeremiah’s life insurance policies into a college account for you, but we had three life insurance policies, and he had death benefits from the government because of his job. And, honestly,” she said, a smile pulling up the corners of her mouth even though Maggie thought it seemed tainted with lingering sadness, “he was never the one bringing home the big money. I loved my husband, but the man only had one PhD. I have six, and I get paid what I’m worth. So money isn’t an issue. The reason I used the insurance money was because it was what I could get to the fastest. That’s all.”

Maggie forced herself to nod, even though the idea of having multiple pots of money to draw from—none of them an issue—was absolutely foreign to her.

“And as for you being a danger to Kara, all of us are. Any one of us could say the wrong thing at the wrong time, or make a mistake and draw the wrong kind of attention. That’s why I didn’t want to tell you at first. That’s why I still haven’t told you the details. You can’t let something you don’t know slip. But Maggie, we still want you here. All of us. So, unless you want to leave, please stop worrying about anything that woman said.”

“Maggie.” It was the first time Kara had spoken since they’d been called into the living room, and Maggie nearly twisted her neck in her hurry to turn to look at her. “I trust you,” Kara said. “And I don’t want you to leave.”

Maggie felt a hand rest on her shoulder and turned around to see Alex looking at her. Alex didn’t say anything, but she didn’t really need to; the look in her eyes said it all.

“Okay,” Maggie said.

“Good.” Mrs. Danvers clasped her hands together and pulled herself up and out of the chair. “Now, I’m going to go call the lawyer, and see if we can do anything about this.”
Eliza sat in her little lab office combo upstairs with her laptop open in front of her, and dialed Debra Walters’ number.

“Hello, Doctor Danvers,” Debra answered.

“Ms. Walters,” Eliza said.

“Please, call me Debra.”

“Only if you call me Eliza.”

“Done. Easiest negotiation this week. Now what can I do for you?”

“Sheriff Rodas showed up at the school this morning. He started yelling at Maggie, and took a swing at one of my daughters.”

“Which daughter?”

“Alex. She’s the older one. Maggie stepped between Alex and Sherriff Rodas to protect Alex, but Kara caught his arm and stopped him from hitting them.”

“Excuse my French, but fuck.”

“I had the same reaction,” Eliza said.

“Do you know why he was there? Did something precipitate the incident, or is this a continuation of the initial incident between him and Maggie?”

“Five of Maggie’s teachers filed abuse reports with CPS.”

“Where in the school did it happen?”

“The parking lot.”

“Do you know if the parking lot is covered by CCTV?”

“Yes, and there is footage. I can send it to you, but the copy I have comes from the same source as the files Bruce emailed you.”

“Send it,” Debra said. “I’ll have a subpoena ready by morning so we can get something we can actually use in court.”

Eliza hit send on the email she already had waiting. “You should have it.”

“Watching it now.” There were a couple of minutes of silence before she spoke again. “Eliza, you do not want to go to court with this.”

“Why not?”

“Kara shoved Rodas.”

“It was self-defense.”

“No. Catching his arm before he hit Maggie qualifies as self-defense or defense of others. But she deliberately put him on his ass, and that’s assault. If he weren’t a cop in uniform, I’d say roll the dice because almost any judge would look at what happened and figure the bastard got what he
deserved. But he is a cop, and he is in uniform, and assaulting a police officer is a whole other ballgame. If Rodas’ lawyer isn’t a complete idiot, Kara would be arrested, at the very least. She might even go to jail.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. Look, Eliza, I hate to ask an indelicate question here, but how are you set for money?”

“I can cover whatever you bill.”

“That’s not why I’m asking. Mr. Wayne left explicit instructions that all bills were to go to him, and if you don’t like it, that’s just too bad. You’re my client, but Mr. Wayne puts more money through my firm in a year than I want to think about. The issue isn’t what you can pay me. It’s how much you can afford to drop into a trust fund for Maggie.”

“At the moment, not a lot. I moved most of my liquid assets into a college fund and a savings account for her.”

“How much was that?”

“300 thousand in the college fund, and 75 thousand into the savings account,” Eliza said. “I have another 75 right now.”

“That’s better than I expected,” Debra said. “And it should be plenty. Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Do I have your permission to disclose the information and documentation you’ve given me at my discretion?”

“Do whatever it takes.”

“Give me an hour. And Eliza, if Maggie is wearing any makeup, have her wash it off.”

“Okay.”

Alex glanced up from the essay she was writing on Macbeth as Maggie walked in, and she had to force herself not to flinch. The bruise on Maggie’s face was a mix of yellow and green with a little blue around the edges of her stitches. Eliza did such a good job of covering it with makeup in the mornings that Alex had almost forgotten it was there, and seeing it again made her wish she’d punched Maggie’s dad in the face that morning.

“You okay there, Danvers?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah. I just got used to it not being there,” Alex said, too angry to be anything but blunt.

“So did I. Though I don’t miss the makeup; it itches.”

Alex laughed a little, and Maggie smiled as she sat down across the table, where her pre-calc textbook was.

“Where’s Kara?” Maggie asked.

“She’s upstairs. Streaky was complaining bitterly, so she took him for some quality lap time.”
“That cat is spoiled.”

“He is, but she found him right after she got here, so I kind of get it. He was her first friend on… in Midvale.”

“I figured that would be you. You two seem really tight.”

“That’s… more recent that I like to admit. We didn’t really get along until Kenny died. I think afterwards, the only thing we had left was each other.”

“Sometimes one person is all you need,” Maggie said. “I just wish I’d made a better choice when I picked mine.”

“Well, you definitely traded up when Kara brought you home.”

“Pretty sure of yourself there, Danvers.”

Alex shrugged. “I’ve been gay less than a week, and I’ve got girls sending me bikini pics. I must be doing something right.”

Maggie laughed and shook her head. “Beginner’s luck.” She looked down and her textbook, and the humor vanished. “I’m never going to get this,” she said with a sigh.

“Get what?”

“This whole fucking unit.”

“Let me see?” Alex pushed aside her copy of *Macbeth* and the essay she was working on, and Maggie slid her pre-calc book across the table. Alex took it and looked at what Maggie was working on. “Ugh. “Parametric equations. Mrs. Fulton did a terrible job with these.”

“How is that different from the rest of the course?”

Alex smiled. “It’s not, but these are actually pretty easy once you get the concept down.”

“Can you show me?”

“Yeah.” Alex slid the book back over to Maggie, then got up and moved around the table to sit next to her. “Okay, you remember functions, right? Y is equal to f(x).”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s all this really is, but instead of Y being a function of X…”

Math had never been Alex’ favorite subject, but when Maggie scooted in closer as she explained it, and Alex felt the familiar flutter in her stomach, she started to think Kara was right about it.

Eliza flipped open her phone the moment it rang.

“Hello,” she said.

“Tell me you have online banking set up,” Debra said.

“I do.”

“Perfect. How quickly can you get to the Vale County Court House with Alex, Kara, and Maggie?”
“Twenty minutes, give or take.”

“Take your laptop, the copy of the temporary custody agreement, and the paperwork for the accounts you opened for Maggie. I think I worked a goddamned miracle, but this is going to be tight. You need to get there as fast as possible. Tell the security guard you’re there to see Judge Simmons in family court. Tell them she’s expecting you for an emergency hearing in chambers.”

“Thank you.”

“Go, Eliza. Now.”

The ride to the courthouse was quiet. All three of them could feel the tension radiating off Mrs. Danvers, and none of them seemed to know what to say to break it. The security checkpoint was a relief, since it meant the wait was almost over. Once Mrs. Danvers told one of the security guards they were there to see Judge Simmons, he led them up to the third floor where he knocked on a door.

A middle-aged woman in a blouse and slacks opened the door. “Dr. Danvers?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Judge Corrine Simmons,” the woman said. “Please, come in.” She stepped back to make room for them to come inside. All of them filed into the room and sat down in the chairs arranged in front of the desk. Alex took the seat to the far right, Mrs. Danvers took the far left, and Kara took the seat to the right of Mrs. Danvers, so Maggie ended up seated between Kara and Alex again. There was another woman in a suit sitting in the corner behind some sort of computer. Judge Simmons took the seat behind the desk.

“This is Jackie,” Judge Simmons said. “She’s a court reporter. Since this is an official hearing, everything will have to be recorded, but since this is family court and a matter concerning a minor, the records will be sealed. Before she starts recording, I want to give you a brief idea of how this is going to go. Debra Walters called me and gave me a lot of details about the case. Unfortunately, for reasons I won’t get into, most of it cannot be entered into the record, so I’m going to ask you a series of questions. Some of them may be very personal, but I need each of you to answer as completely and honestly as possible. The information that does go on the record has to be sufficient to justify any decision I make, and if you don’t answer fully and truthfully, it will limit what I can do to help. Do you all understand?”

“Yes,” all of them said.

“Good. Now, Maggie, Alex, and Kara, correct?” Judge Simmons asked, pointing to each of them as she named them. They all nodded. “Okay. Maggie, a lot of the questions are going to be very personal for you. Would you like to have Alex and Kara wait outside until we need their testimony?”

“No,” Maggie said. “I’d prefer it if they stayed.”

“Okay. If you change your mind at any point, just let me know.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Judge Simmons reached over and dialed a number on her phone. “Debra, you there?” she asked when the phone picked up.
“I am,” a woman, presumably Debra, said from the other end.

“This call is being recorded.”

“On both ends,” Debra said.

“Jackie, we’re starting now,” the judge said. Jackie nodded and placed her hands on the keyboard.

“All of you please raise your right hands.”

They all raised their hands.

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?”

Four ‘I do’s sounded out.

“Let the record show that at this time, Eliza Danvers, Margarita Rodas, Alexandra Danvers, and Kara Danvers are all sworn in,” Judge Simmons said. “Let the record show that Margarita Rodas will be addressed as Maggie during the remainder of the hearing. Let the record show that Debra Walters, council for the petitioner, is attending by telephone.”

“Maggie, I apologize for this, but the questions are going to be fairly blunt,” Judge Simmons said. “According to the documents Ms. Walters submitted, your parents recently discovered you that you’re a lesbian and kicked you out of the house, following a confrontation in which your father struck you across the face, resulting in a large bruise and a gash on your lip. Is that correct?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Maggie said.

“When did you first realize you were a lesbian?”

“I was 14. I fell in love with my best friend.”

“Did the two of you become romantically involved?”

“No. She had a boyfriend.”

“Did you discuss the issue with your parents?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I was afraid to. My dad had made some comments about a gay couple in town. Someone kept vandalizing their house and their cars. Spray painting slurs. Throwing a brick through the window. Every time something happened, my dad would say that he…” Maggie had to stop and take a deep breath, because the memory was never pleasant. “He said he wished those filthy faggots would just leave town.”

“How did your mother react to that?”

“The first time, she asked him if there was some way he could make them leave. Sometimes, she would just agree with him. Sometimes, she would say how much she hated that my sister and I might see that ‘lifestyle.’”

“Did you feel unsafe in your home?”

Maggie closed her eyes and nodded. “Yes.”
“Was there anywhere you felt safe?”

“No. Some of the people at my school figured out I was gay. Or maybe just suspected. They started harassing me about it. So I started getting into fights because they would jump me in the halls. I was afraid of being attacked at school and afraid to tell my parents why I was getting into fights because they might believe the rumors.”

“How did your parents find out that you’re a lesbian?”

Maggie gripped the arms of her chair and swallowed, trying to keep down the sandwich she’d eaten after school.

“I met a girl my first day in town. Her name was Elisa Wilkey. We just kind of clicked, and we started spending all of our time together. She didn’t have any other friends, and I didn’t really know anyone else. I was planning on leaving Midvale as soon as I graduated, so it didn’t seem worth the effort to try to get to know all these new people. We hung out together every second we could, and I started having feelings for her. From the way she acted, I thought that she felt the same way, so on Valentine’s Day, I put a card in her locker telling her how I felt. When I got home, my father told me Elisa’s dad had called him and told him about the card.”

“What happened then?”

Maggie shifted in the chair as the memory of it came back to her. The anger on her father’s face. The rage. She bit her lower lip, trying to keep from tearing up. She did not want to cry, not over him, but she wasn’t sure she could stop herself. In the end though, she didn’t have to. She felt something touch her hand and opened her eyes to see Alex threading their fingers together. Alex’s fingers squeezed her hand, and Maggie looked over and found Alex watching her. Alex gave a little nod of encouragement, and Maggie smiled and gave a nod back, then turned to look at Judge Simmons.

“He told me I had embarrassed and humiliated him. That I’d spit in his face. That he’d only moved here to give me a second chance after all the fights. That I had shamed the whole family in our new home. He hit me and told me I wasn’t his daughter anymore. Told me to leave and never come back.” Maggie took a deep breath, willing herself to continue. “I was too afraid to ask if I could get any of my things from the house. I didn’t have any money or a change of clothes or food. I couldn’t think of anywhere else to go, so I went to school. There’s a spot under the bleachers that’s pretty sheltered from the wind and kind of hard to see. Elisa and I used to sit under there and talk when we didn’t want to deal with people. I slept there, but I woke up in the middle of the night when it started raining. I was already covered in mud by the time I woke up.”

“This was the night of Valentine’s Day?”

“Yes,” Maggie said.

“Debra, do you know what the temperature in Midvale was that night?” Judge Simmons asked.

“Low was 45,” Debra said from the speaker phone. “It’s a wonder she didn’t die of hypothermia.”

Maggie rolls her eyes because the idea of dying because it was 45 degrees struck her as ridiculous. She was from Nebraska for Christ’s sake.

“What happened the next day?” Judge Simmons asked.

“I wanted to go into the school and use the showers in the gym, but I was afraid that if anyone saw me, they’d call my dad. Or call the police, which is basically the same thing. So I was going to
wait until after school was out and try to sneak in, since they don’t usually lock the building up until around 10. But Kara found me right after school let out. She got my gym bag out of my locker so I had a change of clothes, and then she took me back to the Danvers’ house, cleaned my cuts, let me shower, and made me lunch. Mrs. Danvers let me spend the night, and the next morning she talked me into letting her stitch up my lip. She asked me if I had anywhere to go, and when I said no, she took me out and bought me some clothes, then told me I could stay with them for a while. I thought she meant a few days, but the next day she went to the school to fill out a form so they would call her instead of my parents if something happened, and when I got home, she told me my dad had signed over custody.”

“Did you know the Danvers at all before this happened?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Ms. Walters tells me that there was some sort of incident in the parking lot at Midvale High today. Can you tell me what happened there?”

“Kara, Alex, and I were walking to school this morning, and when we got there, my dad was waiting. He came up and told Kara and Alex to go away. They refused, and he started yelling at me for calling Child Protective Services, saying I wouldn’t get away with it. That he was going to be investigated for mistreating his kids.”

“Did you report him to CPS?”

“No.”

“What happened next?”

Maggie glanced over at Alex, who gave her hand a small squeeze.

“I said, ‘I wonder why,’” Alex said.

The judge’s lip twitched, and Maggie could tell the woman was trying her best not to smile, which gave a little moment of relief. She’d been worried Alex would get in trouble.

“I could tell it made him angry,” Maggie said. “He looked like he did just before he hit me, so I stepped in front of Alex. He took a swing, but Kara caught his arm and kept him from hitting me.”

“Then what happened?”

“I pushed him,” Kara said. “I just meant to move him out of our way so we could get into the school, but he fell down.”

“Why were you walking to school? Why not take the bus or a car?”

“We only have one car that my mom uses for work, and it’s easier to walk than take the bus,” Alex said.

“What do you mean?”

Maggie looked over at Alex, who looked like answering that question was the last thing she wanted to do.

“Most of the people at school hate us. Me and Kara. Walking is easier than the bus because we don’t have to deal with the other idiots on the bus.”
“Why do you think they hate you?”

“Well, the fact that most of them won’t speak to us was my first clue,” Alex said.

“Alexandra!” Mrs. Danvers hissed.

Alex winced. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” the judge said. “I phrased the question poorly. What do you think makes them hate you?”

“Do you know anything about what happened to Sheriff Collins?” Alex asked.

“He went to jail for murder and drug-related charges,” Judge Simmons said.

“The boy he killed, Kenny Lee, was our friend. Kara and I were the ones who found the pictures Kenny took of Collins. But we also exposed a teacher who was sleeping with a student and the fact that the quarterback was smoking pot, which got him kicked off the team.”

“Has that caused you a lot of trouble at school?” Judge Simmons asked.

“Not really,” Alex said. “Most people just don’t want anything to do with us. We get a little grief, but nothing we can’t handle.”

“The grief you’re getting could get a lot worse if people find out you’re spending time with a girl who’s gay,” Judge Simmons said. “Are you two prepared to deal with that?”

“I’m gay too,” Alex said. “So, I’m going to have to deal with it at some point.”

“I see,” Judge Simmons said. She turned and looked at Kara. “What about you Kara?”

“Alex is my sister, and Maggie is my friend,” Kara said. “I can deal with whatever I need to.”

Judge Simmons turned to Mrs. Danvers.

“What about you, Dr. Danvers? Are you ready to deal with the reality of two gay children in your home?”

“When you have children, you love them. Gay, straight, transgender. You love them however they are.”

“Why did you decide to take Maggie in?”

“She needed a home.”

“A lot of kids need homes, Dr. Danvers.”

“Most of them don’t show up in my kitchen, beaten and bloody.”

“You could have called CPS. They could have taken her to a group home.”

“Like hell,” Mrs. Danvers said. Maggie turned to look at her and was completely floored by the anger on her face.

“Dr. Danvers, would you explain yourself?” Judge Simmons asked.

“I’m sorry, Judge Simmons. I’ve… I have… I had two cousins. Twins. David and Daniel. They
were both gay. One of the neighbors saw David kissing his boyfriend and told my uncle, so he kicked David out of the house. Daniel left with him. They were picked up by the police a few weeks later and put in a group home."

Mrs. Danvers closed her eyes and gripped the arms of her chair so tightly that her knuckles turned white. “The person who ran the group home was religious. He tried to ‘cure’ them. Daniel still has scars down his back from where the belt split his skin when he was beaten. David… David starting doing drugs. Heroin, mostly. He was in and out of prison and rehab for years, but he could never kick the addiction, and he was a gay man using IV drugs in the eighties. He was 25-years old when he died. We were never sure if he caught the virus from a partner or from sharing needles. But he never would have started using drugs if it weren’t for the things that happened to him in that group home. He never would have been in a group home if his parents hadn’t kicked him out or if any of the rest of my family were worth a damn.

Mrs. Danvers opened her eyes and looked over at Maggie. “When I came home last Wednesday and saw Maggie in the kitchen, I knew something wasn’t right. When I found out that she’d spent the night sleeping under the bleachers, I had a pretty good idea what had happened. But sending her to a group home was never an option. Letting her go into the foster care system was never an option. Maggie needed a home, and I have one, and so she will have one for as long as she wants to be there.”

Maggie looked at Judge Simmons, waiting to see what her reaction to what Mrs. Danvers said would be, but the woman didn’t show any emotion on her face. She just sat there, staring at Mrs. Danvers for almost two minutes, and when she finally did speak, Maggie still wasn’t sure if things were going the way they wanted or not.

“Dr. Danvers, Debra tells me you have some financial records for me,” Judge Simmons said.

“I do,” Eliza said.

“I think it’s time we looked at those.”

They’d been sitting for almost an hour while Eliza and Judge Simmons went over bank records, insurance policies, Eliza’s will, and dozens of things Alex had lost track of. Not that she’d been paying a lot of attention in the first place. She’d been watching Maggie, who looked like she was going to be sick. She hated not being able to do anything about it, but all she could do was sit there and hold Maggie’s hand, so that’s what she did, keeping their fingers laced together and squeezing to remind Maggie she was there any time it looked like Maggie was getting lost inside her own head. If it had been Kara, she would have put her arm around her and held her, but she wasn’t sure if Maggie would want that, and it didn’t really feel like the best time to ask.

“Maggie,” Judge Simmons called out.

“Yes,” Maggie said. Alex turned back to Judge Simmons but gave Maggie’s hand a squeeze to let her know she was still there.

“There are two petitions in front of me right now. One of them is a request for an emergency custody order giving Dr. Danvers permanent custody of you. The other is a request for emancipation, which would make you a legal, independent adult a little more than a month early,” Judge Simmons said. “I need to ask, are you interested in either of those options?”

“Yes. I want to stay with the Danvers.”
“Okay. Then I’m going to lay this out for you as plainly as possible. The petition for custody is denied. If I could, I would grant it, but I would have to make an attempt to reach your relatives back in Blue Springs, and if any of them wanted custody, the law says they would get it, and that could take weeks, or even months. In the meantime, your father could rescind the custody agreement he signed with Dr. Danvers and demand you leave the Danvers home. And I can’t issue a restraining order against a custodial parent without an evaluation from Child Protective Services or without clear evidence of abuse. I have that for your father; Ms. Walters has provided me with a recording of a conversation in which your father admits to hitting you. However, we have no clear evidence of abuse by your mother, aside from your testimony, which means that she could still approach you and demand you leave the Danvers home.

“What I can do is declare you an emancipated minor. Effectively, that will sever parental authority. You would be a legal adult for all intents and purposes. I can then issue a temporary restraining order against Sheriff Rodas which will prevent him from coming within 100 yards of you or the Danvers.”

“Could I still live with the Danvers?” Maggie asked.

“Yes. Normally, you would have to show means of independent financial support in order for me to sign the emancipation decree, but I’m making an exception given the circumstances. I’m not sure how much attention you were paying to the discussion Mrs. Danvers and I were having, but she’s set up a college fund and a savings account for you. I am going to grant the emancipation on the condition that she provides me with documents proving that the college fund and the savings account have been transferred to your sole control within 14 days. If I don’t have that proof, the emancipation decree will be revoked. But given how much Mrs. Danvers has accomplished in the last seven days, I don’t think that will be a problem.”

“It won’t be,” Mrs. Danvers said.

“Is that what you want, Maggie?”

“Yes,” Maggie said without hesitation.

Judge Simmons picked up a gavel off her desk. “Then, Ms. Rodas, you are now legally an adult, with all of the rights, privileges, and responsibilities thereof.” With that, she banged the gavel on the desk.

The ride back from the courthouse was just as quiet as the ride to the courthouse had been, but the mood in the car could not have been more different. Instead of tension, there was relief. Instead of worry, there was happiness. What Mrs. Danvers had done for her, what all the Danvers had done for her, was amazing. It was also a little bit heartbreaking. Hearing Mrs. Danvers talk about her cousins had been hard. Knowing that what had happened to her had happened to other people made her angry. But it had also made her understand why Mrs. Danvers had taken her in and given her a home, and it made her even more grateful than she had been.

The best part, though, was that she didn’t have to worry anymore. She didn’t have to worry that her father would do something to hurt her or the Danvers. He couldn’t come near them. He couldn’t make Mrs. Danvers kick her out. He couldn’t take away her future anymore. She could live her life the way she wanted to, and no one could take that away from her now.

She felt something brush against her hand, and she looked over to see Alex giving her a curious
look. She smiled and tapped the stack of papers in her lap with one finger. Alex seemed to understand because a smile spread across her face. Maggie reached over and threaded her fingers between Alex’s, squeezing her hand tightly. Her smile got a little bigger when Alex returned the squeeze.

She didn’t let go until it was time to get out of the car.
Of Fathers and Rainy Days

Chapter Summary

Alex and Maggie get caught in the rain, and Child Protective Services pays the Danvers home a visit.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning. Homophobia, bulling, past minor sexual assault, child abuse.

Wednesday, February 22, 2006

When they got to the bridge Wednesday morning, the strange tension Maggie had always noticed while they were crossing it made a lot more sense. She was still a little unclear on how exactly Alex and Kara had avoided getting run down on the narrow bridge, and even a year after the fact, finding out that someone had tried to murder Alex and Kara both terrified and infuriated her.

“You okay over there?” Alex asked as they stepped off the bridge.

“Yeah. Still just a little freaked out that someone tried to kill you.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Alex said.

“Attempted murder isn’t a big deal?”

“She just means it was over really fast,” Kara said. “The actually attempted murder part wasn’t nearly as bad as the everyone yelling at us like it was our fault part.”

“She’s right,” Alex said. “Once Mom got done hugging us so hard I basically cracked a rib, the yelling was epic.”

“She said you almost died,” Maggie said.

“She overreacted,” Alex said.

“Twice. She said you almost died twice,” Maggie said.

“Yes, the gun was a little scarier than the car,” Alex admitted with a nod of her head.

“Gun?” Maggie didn’t even care that her voice cracked on the word.

“Sheriff Collins was going to shoot me, but Kara hit him in the head with a chunk of concrete. He didn’t wake up for two days. It was awesome.”

Alex looked over at Kara with a huge smile on her face. Kara shrugged and looked down at the ground as a bright red blush colored her cheeks.
“Wow, Kara,” Maggie said. “Solving crimes, saving lives, knocking out the bad guys. If you learn how to fly, Superman will be out of a job.”

Kara let out a loud, painfully uncomfortable laugh. “That’s ridiculous! People can’t learn to fly. I mean, Superman can only fly because he’s an alien from another planet, and I’m totally not an alien. I’m-“

“Kara!” Alex cut in. “It’s just a joke.”


Maggie looked back and forth between Alex and Kara, wondering what the hell just happened and feeling like she was missing something important.

Eliza looked over at the phone on her desk when it started ringing, wondering who was calling her. Most of her staff knew she preferred email or face-to-face interaction, and her boss pretty much left her alone as long as she kept getting results. Which meant this was very likely bad news.

She reached over and picked up the received. “Hello.”

“Is this Dr. Danvers’ office?” a woman asked.

“Yes it is,” Eliza said, hoping no one was going to try to schedule a checkup or a flu shot. Again.

“Could I speak with Dr. Danvers, please?”

“Speaking,” Eliza said, starting to get a little annoyed.

“Well, that makes this easier. Dr. Danvers, my make is Nicole Oswald. I’m a Case Worker with the Vale County Office of Child Protective Services. Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

“Of course.”

“It’s my understanding that, per a temporary custody agreement, you are currently acting as Maggie Rodas’ legal guardian. Is that correct?” Nicole asked.

“I’m afraid your information is out of date, Ms. Oswald. Judge Simmons in the Vale County Family Court signed a declaration of emancipation for Maggie yesterday afternoon.”


“I have a very good lawyer.”

“Apparently. That makes my job a little easier at least. Is Maggie still staying with you?”

“She is.”

“I would like to meet with the both of you, if that’s possible. Also, with your daughters, Alex and Kara.”

“May I ask why?”

“I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but that has been a report of possible abuse filed with CPS regarding Maggie.”
“Five reports was my understanding.”

“If I asked you how you came by that information, would you tell me?” Nicole asked.

“No.”

“Well, that was clear. Dr. Danvers, while I admit to a certain degree of relief that Maggie is already out of the Rodas household given what I’ve already learned in my investigation, I am afraid that I still have to consider the safety of Maggie’s sister and whether or not she should be allowed to remain in the Rodas home, which means I have to speak with Maggie and get the details about what happened to her. I want to talk to Alex and Kara because they may have noticed something about the situation you have missed.”

“Ms. Oswald, would you mind if I got my attorney on the line with us?”

“If you feel the need,” Nicole said.

“I do.”

“Okay.”

“Hold on one moment.” Eliza put Nicole on hold and dialed Debra.

“Debra Walters office,” a woman said.

“This is Eliza Danvers. Is Debra available?”

“One moment.” There were a few seconds of hold music before someone picked up.

“Hey, Eliza,” Debra said. “Everything okay?”

“I’m not entirely sure. I have a CPS Case Worker on the other line. She’s asking to interview Maggie, Alex, Kara, and me. I informed her that Maggie is now emancipated, but she says the interview is to determine if Maggie’s younger sister can stay in the Rodas home.”

“That’s a reasonable ask,” Debra said. “I’d prefer to be present for the interview, but I’m five hours away.”

“I know, but I’m concerned about letting her speak to Kara.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Several. None of which I can discuss over the phone.”

“Okay. I’m going to take it as a given that anyone who has Bruce Wayne paying their legal expenses probably has a pretty good reason for withholding information. My best recommendation is to allow the interview but to insist on being present for both Alex and Kara’s.”

“That might work. Also, I’d like to give her the recording of the meeting with Sheriff Rodas.”

“That is a good idea. Bring her on the line.”

Eliza merged the two calls. “Ms. Oswald?”

“Yes,” Nicole said.
“I have Debra Walters on the line with us,” Eliza said.

“Hello, Ms. Oswald,” Debra said.

“Hello, Ms. Walters,” Nicole said.

“Ms. Oswald, my client is willing to allow you to speak with her daughters provided she is present. You can speak to Ms. Rodas at any time at Ms. Rodas’ discretion, as she is now an emancipated minor.”

“That’s fine. How soon can we conduct the interviews?”

“I’m usually home around 5:30, if you’d like to meet today,” Eliza said.

“That will work.”

“Do you need the address?” Eliza asked.

“I have it. And thank you for cooperating, Dr. Danvers.”

“Ms. Oswald,” Debra said before she could hang up.

“Yes?”

“May I have your email address? I have a number of items which may be of interest to Child Protective Services, including a recording and transcript of the meeting where Sheriff Rodas both agreed to sign over custody of Maggie and confessed to hitting her across the face, photographs taken of her face last Friday, and a recording and transcript of the emancipation hearing last night, along with a copy of the restraining orders which bars Sheriff Rodas from coming within 100 yards of Ms. Rodas, Dr. Danvers, Alex Danvers, and Kara Danvers.”

“My email is nicole.oswald@cdss.ca.gov.”

“Files are inbound.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’ll see you this evening Ms. Oswald,” Eliza said.

“See you then.”

“How did it go at the office?” Alex asked as she sat down at the table across from Maggie and Kara.

Maggie shrugged. “She looked a little annoyed that I was updating the information again, but she filled out the paperwork. I kept your mom as an emergency contact, but the school has a copy of the emancipation papers, so my dad can’t withdraw me or anything.”

“Good. You give them a copy of the restraining order?” Alex asked.

“Yeah. I’m not sure how much good it will do though.”

“Judge Simmons said he would be arrested if he came near any of us,” Kara said.
“Yeah. I remember, and it sounded great at the time. But who’s going to arrest him? The people he works for?”

“Good question,” Alex said.

Maggie shrugged. “Maybe I can call that FBI agent.”

“Please don’t,” Kara said.

Maggie was a little shocked at how small Kara’s voice was when she said it. She looked over at Kara, who had her arms wrapped around herself. “Kara?”

“Kara, it’s okay,” Alex said. “Maggie isn’t going to call her.”

Maggie looked over at Alex, who shook her head, then turned back towards Kara. “Alex is right. I was just joking. I swear.”

Kara closed her eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “Sorry. I just don’t like her.”

It seemed like there was a lot more to it, and Maggie really wanted to ask her what it was, but the look on Alex’s face made it clear that she should wait and ask Alex when Kara wasn’t around.

Alex took out her cell phone and flipped it open. She’d felt it vibrate in her pocket during sixth period but hadn’t gotten a chance to check her messages since then, so she figured waiting for Maggie was the perfect time to do it. She smiled when she sat there was a message from Susan.

Susan: Hey, everything okay?

Alex: Yeah. Why?

Susan: I didn’t hear from you yesterday. Was worried you got dumped again.

Alex: Thanks for the vote of confidence.

Susan: Alex, you are beautiful, brave, smart, funny, charming, and you look great in leather.

Susan: But it took you 20 minutes to get out a complete sentence when we met.

Susan: You are a big gay mess.

Alex: You are a big gay jerk.

Susan: Sorry. I’ll be nice.

Alex: I’m getting better.

Susan: I know.

Susan: Seriously, are you okay?

Alex: Yeah. Just Maggie had some serious shit go down yesterday.

Susan: Is she okay?

Alex: Yeah.
Alex: I probably shouldn’t tell you about it since there’s a good chance you’re going to meet her.

Susan: Probably. But if you want to talk, I’m here.

Alex: Thanks.

Alex: Got to go.

Susan: Bye

Alex closed her phone and slipped it into her pocket as Maggie came down the steps at the front of the school.

“Susan?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah. You ready?”

“You sure Kara will be okay?”

“She’ll be fine. Come on.”

Maggie looked up at the cloudy gray sky. “You sure we shouldn’t take the bus?”

“You really want to ride with those assholes?”

“No.”

They started home, leaving the buses and the school behind. Alex made sure to walk on Maggie’s left so that she was between Maggie and the road.

“Can I ask you a question?” Maggie asked once they were out of sight of the school.

“Sure.”

“Why did Kara get so upset when I suggested calling Agent Neill?”

“She looks like Kara’s mother.”

“Oh.”

“It wasn’t a big deal at first,” Alex said. “But she was kind of harsh with Kara, and a few weeks later, Kara started having nightmares about her mother showing up and telling her all these things she’d done wrong.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. It got pretty bad for a while. I think hearing that she was back in town has kind of put Kara on edge. I’m pretty sure she was up half the night painting. That, or she just decided to bathe in paint thinner in the middle of the night.”

“Damn.”

“Don’t tell Mom. She knows Kara has nightmares, but Kara doesn’t like to tell her what they’re about.”

“Why not?”
Alex sighed because she didn’t even begin to know how to talk about it. How could she explain that Kara was operating on an entirely different set of social standards and had some weird cultural hang-ups where Eliza was concerned? “It’s complicated.”

“I’m starting to get the feeling that a lot of things about Kara are.”

They walked in silence for a while, and Alex felt herself tensing up as they approached the bridge. She hadn’t crossed it without Kara since that night. It only got worse as the bridge came into sight. She kept glancing over her shoulder, making sure there was nothing behind them. By the time they actually got to the bridge, she was beginning to wonder if she would actually be able to make it across, when she felt Maggie take her hand, threading their fingers together.

“I’ve got you.”

Alex felt the tension melt away. It didn’t disappear completely, but she could focus on the feel of Maggie’s hand in hers until they got across the bridge.

“You okay?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah.”

“Maybe it was a bigger deal than you want to admit?”

“Maybe.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“No,” Alex said, which was a lie, but she couldn’t because she had to keep Kara’s secret.

“If you change your mind…”

“Thank you.”

They walked in silence for a while, but Alex watched as the sky got progressively darker.

“We’re not going to make it, are we?” Maggie asked, her gaze following Alex’s up to gray storm clouds gathering overhead.

“I don’t think so,” Alex admitted. “Sorry, you were right; we should have taken the bus.”

“Not your fault. I’m worried about Kara though. If the rain doesn’t let up, she’ll have to walk all the way home in it.”

“I’ll text Mom. She can pick her up on the way home.”

“No chance you have an umbrella in your bag?”

“No. Just my books and a first aid kit.”

“You carry a first aid kit?”

“Have you met my mother?”

“Point taken,” Maggie said. “What did Susan want?”

“She was just checking in. Everything was so crazy yesterday I didn’t get a chance to text her. She
was worried.”

“You and Kara don’t really do the casual friends thing do you?”

“Not really. I mean, I never did. Back when I was friends with Josie and Vicki, I hung around with other people but mainly because they hung around with Josie and Vicki. But Josie stopped speaking with me after I got her boyfriend arrested.”

“For what?”

“He was our history teacher.”

“Yikes.”

“Yeah. No regrets. Vicki and I were still friends for a while, but we had this big fight because she was still hanging around with Josie, and after that it just didn’t seem worth it. Besides, I have Kara.”

“Just you and her against the world, huh?”

“Kind of. I talk to Rhonda sometimes.”

“The girl in the band at Yab-Yums?”

“Yeah. She was in one of my classes freshman year. We were pretty tight, but she’s a year ahead of me, and last year, she did early enrollment at Vale County Community College, so she missed all the drama. She actually high-fived Kara when she found out Kara got the quarterback busted for smoking pot.”

“She sounds cool.”

“Yeah. Rhonda’s definitely something else.”

Maggie looked over at her with a big grin on her face.

“What?” Alex asked.

“You’re totally into her.”

“What?”

“Rhonda’s definitely something else,” Maggie mimicked in a kind of breathless voice.

“I don’t sound like that!”

“You totally do.”

Alex stopped, and since they were still holding hands, Maggie had to stop too.

“Alex?” Maggie asked.

“I’m an idiot.” Suddenly it hit her why she was always so eager to make it to Yab-Yums on the first Saturday of every month.

“You had no idea, did you?”

“I… No. I mean, I had worked out that I kind of had a thing for Vicki, but… God. How many girls
have I been crushing on and not even realized it?"

Maggie started laughing, and Alex tried to glare at her, but she couldn’t. Maggie’s smile was too gorgeous, and those dimples, and the sound of her laugh, and Alex’s stomach was doing flips again, which is why she started laughing. Because it was ridiculous. She was exactly the big gay mess Susan accused her of being. The poor lesbian with a crush on more girls than she could count.

“God, the look on your face,” Maggie said.

Alex opened her mouth to say something, but she felt an ice-cold drop of rain hit her face, and she looked at Maggie. “Run!”

They made it about ten steps before the sky opened up.

By the time they made it the last two blocks to the house, Alex and Maggie were both soaking wet and freezing cold, but instead of running up to the front door, Alex led Maggie around the side of the house and unlocked the side door into the garage.

“What are we doing in here?” Maggie asked.

“Saving ourselves a couple of hours’ mopping.” Alex grabbed a bag off one of the shelves and opened it. “Dry bag,” Alex explained as she stripped off her hoodie and dropped it in. She pulled off her sweater next, and Maggie’s eyes went wide, because Alex’s soaking wet t-shirt clung to her body, and HOLY SHIT Alex was taking off her shirt.

“STOP!” Maggie squeaked.

Alex stopped and looked at her, which didn’t help because she had her shirt pulled halfway up, and sweet Mary mother of God, how did Alex have abs like that?

“Oh!” Alex said as realization finally hit her. She promptly started turning bright red and dropped the hem of her shirt, which didn’t help because it was too late—the image of a perfect set of abs was already burned into Maggie’s brain. “I’m sorry. I just… um… I mean, it’s usually just me and Kara stripping out of our wetsuits after we’ve been surfing.”

Surfing? Alex surfed? God, why was she even asking? Of course Alex surfed because the universe hated her that much. She did not need to think about Alex surfing. She definitely did not need to think about Alex peeling herself out of a wetsuit. She needed to think about something else. Anything else. Anything except Alex in a bikini. Anything except Alex in a bikini or Alex in the shower washing the saltwater out of her hair.

Okay, thinking was bad.

Maggie swallowed. “It’s okay,” she said, though the words came out in a high, squeaky voice that made her want to die.

“Um…” Alex walked over to a shelving unit and grabbed a couple of big, fluffy beach towels off the shelf. She called them back over and handed one to Maggie. “Just turn around and… you know…”

“Right,” Maggie said. She turned her back to Alex and started taking off her clothes.

The next few minutes were a weird kind of torture. Every time she heard the wet splatter of a piece of clothing hitting the floor, her mind conjured up an image of a progressively less-clothed Alex.
The fact that she was stripping too didn’t help, because her brain was helpfully suggesting all sorts of ways they could warm up once they finished getting out of their clothes. The fact that they would have the house to themselves for hours didn’t help at all.

She had to remind herself that she shouldn’t be thinking like that. A week earlier, she’d been giving Eliza that stupid fucking card. She’d thought she was in love, and if she was, shouldn’t she be nursing a broken heart, and not thinking about what Alex’s abs would feel like under her hand, or what it would be like to kiss her in the rain?

She dropped her underwear on the pile of clothes and picked up the towel, wrapping it around herself. Then she took a deep breath and reminded herself that Alex was her friend, and they were living together, and she had already shot Alex down, so the fact that her hormones had finally caught on to the fact that Alex was hot didn’t change the fact that she needed to keep it in her pants.

“Is it okay if I turn around now?” Alex asked.

“Yeah,” Maggie said. She turned around, and the sight of Alex standing there, her wet hair plastered to her head, wrapped in a towel and nothing else was easily the hottest thing Maggie had ever seen in her entire life, and dear God, how far down did those blushes go?

“What… um… what should I do about my clothes?” Maggie asked, kicking herself for babbling like a 12-year-old with a crush.

“I’ll get them. You should go get dry.”

“Right.” Maggie knew she should help, but instead she ducked around Alex and headed for her room before she could do something stupid.

“Alex?”

“I’m in the den,” Alex called out. She turned away from the French doors leading out to the balcony as Maggie came into the room wearing a flannel shirt and a pair of jeans.

“You didn’t come back downstairs,” Maggie said.

“Sorry.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” Alex lifted the blanket she had across her lap and patted the seat next to her on the sofa. Maggie sat down, and Alex spread the blanket over both of their laps. “Just thinking about my dad.”

“Oh.”

Alex glanced over at Maggie, and it clicked what she’d just said as soon as she saw the frown on Maggie’s face. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I just don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.”

Alex shrugged. “Neither do I.” She turned and looked out at the balcony through the glass panels in the doors.

“When it rained like this, Dad and I loved coming up here to watch the storm roll in from the ocean. It used to drive Mom nuts.”
“I get that. Sitting in a room with a bunch of big windows during a storm is a bit unnerving.”

“Let me guess. You’re worried about tornadoes.”

“I grew up eight miles from the Kansas-Nebraska border, so yeah, I’m worried about tornadoes.”

“Mom grew up in Atlanta. She’s terrified of storms.”

“What about your dad?”

“Coast City, born and raised.”

“How the hell did he end up in Midvale?”

“Surfing. He moved here because the surfing is amazing.”

“Your mom went for that?”

“Mom could surf circles around Dad. But sailboarding is her thing.”

“Your mom sailboards?”

“Surfs, sailboards, rides motorcycles.”

“Adopts orphans. Not the typical soccer mom.”

“No. I wish we got along better.”

“You and your mom?”

“Yeah.”

“You two seemed to be doing fine.”

“Right now,” Alex said. “I’m just kind of picturing the fit if we’d gotten the floor wet.”

“I did notice she’s kind of picky about the house.”

“I don’t get her sometimes. I literally lit the kitchen on fire once when she was trying to teach me how to cook, and she shrugged it off as an accident. But I forgot to take my shoes off one day and got a half-hour lecture on taking care of things.”

“Ouch.”

“It was easier with my dad. And I miss him, but I can’t stop wondering what he’d think of me if he were here.”

“You mean about your being gay?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah. I mean, it’s stupid, right? He’s gone, so it doesn’t really matter. But…”

“But you loved him and wonder if he would still love you.”

Alex nodded her head.

“You shouldn’t let what happened with my dad make you think your dad would be the same. I don’t think your mom would have married him if there was even a chance he’d have a problem
“with a gay kid.”

“You’re probably right. I just wish he was here so I could ask him.”

“How did he die?”

“Plane crash. He always worked a lot. The place Mom works is here in town, but Dad worked at this place on the outskirts of Coast City, so he was gone a lot, but right before he died, he took this job based out of National City, so he’d fly out on Sunday night and get home late on Friday. I hated it, but he said it was really important. Then he left on a business trip and just… never came home.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s been two years. But some days, especially days like today, I have moments where I just expect him to walk into the room, sit down, and ask me about my day.” Alex felt a tear roll down her cheek and reached up to wipe it away, feeling more than a little embarrassed. “I’m sorry.”

“Come here.” Maggie slipped an arm around Alex’s shoulders and pulled her close. Alex couldn’t bring herself to put up any resistance and rested her head on Maggie’s shoulder. “You don’t have anything to be sorry about.”

“I shouldn’t be crying about my dad when you’re going through all this crap with your family.”

“That’s bullshit. You lost your dad. Mine’s just an asshole.”

Alex laughed and looked up to see Maggie smiling at her, and her breath caught at the sight of those dimples she was quickly coming to love.

“Tell me about him?”

Alex closed her eyes so she could think without the sight of distracting dimples and warm brown eyes. “He was a big man. Not tall, but solid and strong. When he hugged you, it was the best feeling in the world. He was smart and tough and brave.”

She kept talking, telling Maggie about her best memories with her dad, while Maggie held her and the rain beat down gently outside the windows.

Eliza pulled into the driveway at 5:25 PM. She’d skipped out of work 15 minutes early in order to have time to pick Kara up from school since it had still been pouring down rain. Fortunately, the rain had stopped by the time she got to the school, but the sky was still a dark, angry gray that threatened more to come. Eliza was relieved to be home before the storm started again.

She’d barely gotten the car in park when another car pulled in behind her. She glanced up and saw a woman she didn’t recognize behind the wheel and knew it must be Nicole, the caseworker from Child Protective Services.

“Kara, go inside and let Alex and Maggie know we’ve got company,” Eliza said.

Kara looked over her shoulder and frowned. “Who’s that?”

“Now, Kara.”

“Fine.” Kara got out and headed into the house while Eliza turned the car off, got out, and walked towards the other cat. The caseworker, a short, plump black woman with her hair in braids got out.
“Dr. Danvers?” Nicole asked.

“Yes. I take it you’re Ms. Oswald?”

“Nicole, please,” she said.

“Eliza.” She shook Nicole’s hand. “Is there anything I should know before we go inside?”

“No. I’ve reviewed the declaration of emancipation, so I’ve confirmed that Maggie’s a legal adult. Which means this is not a visit to evaluate the suitability of your home. Like I said on the phone, this is now entirely about the safety and wellbeing of her sister.”

“Okay. I just wanted to remind you, I will be present for your interviews with Alex and Kara.”

“Of course,” Nicole said, though she looked less than thrilled by that.

Eliza didn’t particularly care; she wasn’t going to let this woman anywhere near Kara without watching her like a hawk. She turned around and led her into the house. “The living room is through there,” she said, motioning to the doorway. “Girls, where are you?”

Kara appeared at the landing halfway up the stairs. “Does Alex have to come down?”

“All of you. We’ll be in the living room.”

“We’ll be there in a couple of minutes.”

“Hurry.”

Eliza headed into the living room, where Nicole had already taken a seat on one of the sofas. Eliza sat down in one of the easy chairs.

“I wanted to thank you for having your lawyer give me the recordings of the meeting with Sheriff Rodas and Principal Munroe, plus the hearing with Judge Simmons. Those are going to make my job a lot easier.”

“I’m glad we could help.”

“It will also make these interviews a lot easier.”

“Good. Maggie’s been through enough.”

“You’re protective of her,” Nicole observed.

“Someone should be.” The room filled with the sound of teenagers stomping downstairs, and Eliza looked over to see the girls coming into the living room. She was on her feet the moment she caught sight of Alex’s puffy, red eyes. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“It’s nothing,” Alex said. “I was just telling Maggie about Dad.”

Eliza felt her stomach twist a little as she realized exactly why Alex has been crying. She’d been so distracted by Nicole’s visit, it hadn’t even occurred to her that the storm might dredge up memories of Jeremiah. From there, it wasn’t much of a leap to realize that Alex was probably wondering how he would have felt about her being gay. She walked over, took Alex’s head in her hands, and kissed her on the forehead. “He would have been so proud of you, Alex.”

“You think so?”
“I know he would.” She pulled Alex into a hug. “We’ll talk later,” she whispered into Alex’s ear.

“Okay.”

Eliza let Alex go and took a step or two back. “Girls, this is Nicole Oswald. She’s a caseworker with Child Protective Services. She’s here to ask some questions about what happened to Maggie.” She turned around to face Nicole. “Emotions have been running high the last few days.”

“I can imagine,” Nicole said. “It’s always stressful adding a new person to a living space, even under the best of circumstances, and this hasn’t been.”

“We like having Maggie here,” Kara said.

“I’m sure you do,” Nicole said. “But that doesn’t mean it isn’t an adjustment.”

“It’s okay, Kara,” Eliza said. “Maggie isn’t going anywhere.”

“Your mother’s right, Kara. Maggie’s an adult now in the eyes of the law. She can choose to live wherever she wants. I’m here because we’re worried about Maggie’s sister, Micaela.”

“Is she okay?” Maggie asked.

“I can’t go into any details of the situation, but I can tell you that she was fine when I saw her Monday. But any time we receive reports of abuse, we’re required to ensure the safety of all children in the home. That’s why I’m here—to ask you some questions to make sure that your sister is safe.”

“What do you want to know?” Maggie asked.

“Why don’t you sit down. We can let the Danvers go in the other room while we talk.”

“Do they have to leave?”

“They don’t have to, but we prefer to do these talks one-on-one,” Nicole said. “It can be easier to talk about certain things if you don’t have other people around.”

Maggie glanced over at Eliza, and Eliza could see the fear and discomfort in her eyes. She reached out and laid a hand on Maggie’s shoulder. “I’ll stay, if you want.”

The relief was clear on Maggie’s face. “Please.”

Eliza gave Maggie a smile and squeezed her shoulder. “Alex, Kara, why don’t you wait in the kitchen?”

Both of them looked like they were about to argue, but Eliza hadn’t spent almost 18 years raising Alex without being able to stare her down, and when Alex sighed and left without arguing, Kara followed her lead. Eliza knew Kara would eavesdrop and tell Alex everything that was said, but she couldn’t do anything about it without raising questions that she couldn’t answer, so she took a seat in one of the easy chairs, and Maggie took the other.

Nicole pulled a voice recorder and steno pad out of her briefcase. She turned the voice recorder on, then flipped open the steno pad. “Maggie, I’ve heard a recording of the hearing yesterday and of the meeting between Dr. Danvers, your father, and Principal Munroe last Friday at your school. I understand that this must be very painful for you to talk about, and I don’t want to retread a lot of the same ground, but in order to do my job, I might have to ask you about some of the things that
were already discussed. Is that okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Since you were emancipated yesterday, the investigation into your status will be closed as soon as I add the declaration of emancipation to your file. However, because you were a minor in the custody of your parents when your dad hit you, we still have to conduct an investigation into whether or not your sister is safe in the Rodas home. Abuse of a sibling is often a sign that a child is also being abused or might be abused in the future. That’s why I’m here. To make sure Micaela is safe.”

“Mike,” Maggie said.

“What?”

“She goes by Mike.”

“I see.” Nicole made a note on her steno pad. “Maggie, do you think your sister is in danger?”

“I don’t know. I never asked her if she liked girls. I was afraid she would say something to my parents. If she’s gay, or bisexual or something, then no, she’s not safe.”

“Was there any violence in the house before the incident last week?”

“No,” Maggie said. “Dad yelled a lot, but he never hit me before.”

“What did he yell about?”

“I used to get in fights back in Blue Springs. I didn’t want to; I just wanted to be left alone. But some of the kids figured out I was gay and started attacking me. It got bad enough that I had to start fighting back. Everytime I got in a fight, Dad would be furious, but I couldn’t tell him why people were attacking me because I knew he’d lose it. When it happened, he would scream at me, slam doors, that kind of thing. The third time it happened, he took me to a lab and made me take a drug test. Not the pee in a cup kind. The one they do if the court orders it where they take hair and nail scrapings. The fifth time it happened, he took the door to my bedroom off the hinges. I didn’t have a bedroom door until they started getting ready to sell the house. When we moved here, he said he would do the same thing if I got in any more fights.”

“What sort of things did he say when he yelled?”

“That I was stupid. That I was ungrateful. That I was an embarrassment. That he was humiliated to have a daughter like me. That I shamed him in front of people after he spent years working to earn their respect.”

Eliza balled her hands into fists, squeezing them tightly, trying to remain calm as she listened to what Maggie was saying. It reminded her of the things that her family had said about Daniel and David, and it made her hate Oscar Rodas more than she already did.

“Did he yell before you started getting into fights?”

“Sometimes. He and Mom would fight, or Mike or I would get a bad grade. Anything that embarrassed him or that he thought people would look down on him for would set him off.”

“What about your Mom?” Nicole asked. “Did she ever hit you or yell at you?”
“She never hit me. But we fought. A lot. She didn’t like the way I dressed. She kept buying me makeup and would scream at me when I refused to wear it.”

“You’re wearing makeup right now,” Nicole observed.

“Because I have a huge green bruise on my face. I hated going to school and having everyone staring and whispering. I don’t even know how to do it. Mrs. Danvers has been putting it on for me every morning.”

“What didn’t your mom like the way you dressed?”

“She said I dressed like a boy. She kept trying to put me in dresses and skirts and frilly shirts and high heels. I like jeans and flannel shirts and work boots.”

“Does she fight with your sister?”

“All the freaking time. I’ll wear a dress if I have to. I can even walk in heels. I learned just to shut Mom up. Not Mike. You cannot get her into a dress. Last time Mom tried Mike waited until her back was turned and ripped the dress in half. Mom got so angry she started cussing in Spanish. Mike was grounded for a month.”

“How long has that been going on?”

“Since Mike was about three or four. Maybe longer. She hates dresses, hates Barbie dolls. Hates anything remotely girly. One time, she begged Mom to let her get her hair cut short, and Mom said no, so Mike took dad’s beard trimmer and cut all her hair off. Mom freaked out.”

“What did she do?”

“She yelled for hours. Grounded Mike until her hair grew back, which didn’t work, because Mike kept cutting it off the moment Mom’s back was turned. It went on for almost a year before Mom finally gave up. Mike wasn’t allowed to watch TV or to eat dessert the whole time.”

“Did your mom do that a lot? Take food away as punishment?”

“I guess? I mean, if she got mad, sometimes she would send us to our room without dinner. Once she heard that Bobby Miller, Reverend Miller’s son, asked me out. She asked me why I turned him down. I said it was because he was stupider than his dad. She took my dinner away, dumped it in the garbage, and made me sit at the table until they were all finished eating.”

“What was the longest you were without food?”

“The longest I went without food, or the longest between times my mom let me have food? Because Mike and I both kept food stashed in our room. A jar of peanut butter and a box of Saltines will go a long way.”

“The longest your mother ever went without feeding you.”

“Um… Four days, I think. That was after I beat up Bobby Miller.”

“Why did you beat him up?”

“He shoved me up against a locker, grabbed my breast, and tried to kiss me. Told me he could fuck me straight. I broke his nose and cracked one of his ribs. That’s when dad made me get the drug test.”
“Were there any other punishments besides grounding and not being allowed to eat?” Nicole asked.

“Mom made Mike pay for the dress.”

“How?”

“ Took away her lunch money. Lunches at Mike’s school were two dollars, so Mom would put ten dollars a week on her lunch card. She didn’t fill the card for three weeks to make up for the cost of the dress.”

“You said your dad took your door off because of a fight. Can you tell me about that particular fight?” Nicole asked.

“I was going to the bathroom and these four cheerleaders got in my way. They said…” Maggie stopped and closed her eyes, and it was all Eliza could to not to get up and pull Maggie into a hug. Instead, she reached over and took her hand, squeezing it gently. Maggie opened her eyes and looked over at Eliza.

“I’m here,” Eliza said.

Maggie nodded. ‘They said, ‘Dykes aren’t allowed in the girls bathroom.’ I tried to push past them, but they shoved me. One of them grabbed my shirt and tried to pull it off. I punched her and she fell down and started screaming. The other three tried to jump me, but I’d been getting attacked all the time for a year and a half at that point, so I could take them. I put all three of them on the ground.’”

“What happened after that?”

“I went to the bathroom. The principal was waiting when I came out. I tried to tell him what happened, but there were four of them, and they had a bunch of witnesses that said I jumped them for no reason as they were coming out of the bathroom, so I got suspended again.”

“Did you tell your dad they started the fight?”

“Yes.”

“He didn’t believe you?”

“He did. He assumed they jumped me because I’m Latina.”

“If he believed you, why did he punish you?”

“He never wanted me to fight back. He has this story he likes to tell about how he used to work in a factory with a lot of the guys in town, how they beat him up, broke his ribs, and called him a wetback, and how he earned their respect, so they elected him Sheriff. He thought I should just take it.”

“Why did he take your door down?”

“When we got home, he started yelling about how stupid I was. I told him I’d rather be stupid than a coward and slammed the door in his face.”

“And your mother didn’t do anything?”

“My mother never cared when he yelled, unless he was yelling at her.”
“Thank you, Maggie,” Nicole said. “I know some of that must have been hard to talk about.”

“Are we done?”

“Yes.”

Eliza let go of Maggie’s hand as she got up.

“I’ll be in the kitchen,” Maggie said.

Eliza nodded, not trusting herself to speak until Maggie was out of earshot. “Do you still need to talk to Kara and Alex?”

“No,” Nicole said. “Between the hearing transcripts from last night, the other material Ms. Walters sent me, and what Maggie just gave me, I have more than enough. I just need to interview Maggie’s sister. But I would like to ask you something.”

“Okay.”

“Axel mentioned her father,” Nicole said.

“My husband. He died a couple of years back in a plane crash. He and Alex were very close.”

“She’s still having trouble dealing with it?”

“Not most days. It’s the rain. Alex and Jeremiah used to love to sit in the den upstairs and watch the storms for hours. She always gets a little sad when it rains, and the last few days have been emotional for everyone.”

Nicole closed her steno pad and turned off the voice recorder, putting both of them back in her briefcase. “I didn’t expect half of what Maggie told me.”

“I didn’t realize how bad it was for her either. I knew she didn’t want to go back to Blue Springs, but I didn’t imagine…”

“I suspect we didn’t get the worst of it with the bullying. I didn’t push because it’s not relevant to the sister’s case, but you might want to consider finding her a therapist that has experience with LGBT issues and sexual assault.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to find someone that specialized in Midvale.”

“You’d be surprised,” Nicole said, taking out a business card and holding it out. “Email me. I can send you a list of recommendations. Therapists, grief counselors, whatever you think your girls might need.”

Eliza took the business card. “Thank you. Do you know what will happen with Mike?”

“It’s hard to say,” Nicole said. “Judges are reluctant to remove a child from a home when there isn’t physical or sexual abuse, and even if Mike is gay, a judge might not consider that a reason to remove her.”

“So, you can’t do anything?”

“I didn’t say that. There’s a documented incident of physical abuse, and if Mike confirms what Maggie said, then we have confirmation of emotional abuse. I’d expect anger management classes and parenting classes at a minimum, along with surprise visits and a handful of other measures. It
depends on which judge we get.”

Eliza nodded. “If you do have to remove Mike… I’m a licensed foster parent.”

“You would do that?”

“In a heartbeat,” Eliza said.

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

Maggie stepped into the kitchen and was practically tackled by Kara, who hugged her so hard Maggie was afraid she was going to break a rib.

“Are you okay?” Kara asked.

“I will be when I can breathe again.”

“Oh! Sorry!” Kara let Maggie go, and Maggie sucked in a breath.

“God, you’re strong.”

“Sorry,” Kara said again.

“You get used to it,” Alex said with a shrug.

“I think we might need to rename you,” Maggie said. “Saint Kara. Our Lady of the Bear Hug.”

“I said I was sorry,” Kara huffed.

Maggie smiled and pulled Kara into another hug. “I know, and it’s okay. I appreciate it. Just, maybe don’t break a rib next time.”

“Okay.” Kara returned the hug much more gently that time.

“How was it?” Alex asked.

Maggie let go of Kara and pulled a seat out at the table. “It was about like a trip to the principal’s office.”

“So big fun then,” Alex said as Maggie sat down. Kara dropped into the seat next to her.

“Yeah,” Maggie said with a smile. “I see you’re familiar with the experience.”

“Like Kara says. I really like punching people. I’ve been caught a time or two.”

“How are you doing?” Maggie asked.

“I’m good,” Alex said. “How about you?”

“I’m fine. A little worried about Mike.”

“Mike?” Alex asked.

“My sister.”

“What’s she like?”
“Tough. She’s totally butch too. Loves Star Wars, Transformers, Legos, football, baseball, and video games. Hates anything even remotely girly.”

“Are you guys close?” Kara asked.

“We used to be. She’s only 12, and after things went south with my parents, I started trying to keep my distance. I didn’t want them to take it out on her. Not that it did a lot of good. She got along with my mom even worse than I did.”

“I’m sorry,” Alex said.

“It’s not your fault.” Maggie looked over at Kara. “How was your art thing?”

“It was good. I got the whole class’ work hung for the show, and Ms. Rafaque said I did a really good job.”

Maggie couldn’t help but notice a touch of color in Kara’s cheeks, which reminded her that Kara had admitted to having a crush on a teacher when she was eight. She wondered for a moment if Kara’s obsession with extra credit had more to do with her teacher than any concern over her grade. “Not failing anymore?”

“Shut up,” Kara said, her cheeks coloring a little more.

“Girls.”

All three of them turned to see Mrs. Danvers coming into the kitchen. “She’s gone. She decided after hearing what Maggie had to say that she didn’t need to talk to you two.”

“Is she going to take Mike away from my parents?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. I don’t think she liked what she heard about your parents, but a lot of it will be up to the judge who hears the case.”

“Great,” Maggie said.

“I’m sorry. I wish there was more I could do.”

“It’s not your fault my parents are assholes.” Maggie stopped dead when she realized what she’d just said. “Sorry.”

“Given the circumstances, I’ll allow it. What would you girls like for dinner?”

“Pizza and potstickers!” Kara said immediately.

“Wings,” Alex chimed in.

“Italian,” Maggie added.

Mrs. Danvers smiled. “I think we can manage all of those.”
Alex: Kind of a rough day.
Susan: You okay?
Alex: Yeah.
Alex: Just missing my dad.
Susan: You haven’t mentioned him before.
Alex: He died a couple of years back.
Susan: I’m sorry.
Alex: Thanks.
Susan: What made you think of him?
Alex: It rained today.
Susan: I noticed.
Alex: Dad and I used to sit and watch the storms.
Susan: Sounds nice.
Alex: It was.
Susan: You just missing him?
Alex: Mostly.
Susan: I sense a but in there.
Alex: I’m wondering what he would think of me.
Susan: About you being gay?
Alex: Yeah.
Alex: My mom has been great about it.
Alex: But I keep wondering about Dad.
Susan: Because of what happened with Maggie?
Alex: Yeah.
Susan: You shouldn’t assume your dad would act like Maggie’s.
Alex: Maggie said that same thing.
Susan: You cheating on me with another wise old lesbian?
Alex: When do you turn 18?
Susan: August 24
Alex: I’m older than you.

Susan: Not in gay years.

Alex: Gay years?

Susan: Yep. In gay years, you’re barely a week old.

Alex: I’m not sure that’s a thing.

Susan: That’s because you are a tiny baby gay.

Susan: You don’t know the mysteries.

Alex: Right.

Susan: Maybe you should talk to your mom.

Susan: See if she knows how he would feel.

Alex: Mom said he would be proud of me.

Susan: There you go.

Alex: I’m not sure if she’s telling the truth.

Alex: What if she’s just telling me what I want to hear?

Susan: Do you think your mom would lie to you?

Alex: To protect me?

Alex: In a heartbeat.

Susan: Do you think your mom would marry someone who had a thing against gay people?

Alex: No.

Susan: Sounds like you’ve got an awesome mom.

Alex: She has her moments.

Susan: You should listen to her.

Susan: I mean, she was married to the guy for years.

Susan: She probably knew him pretty well.

Alex: I know.

Alex: But it’s just bothering me.

Susan: I get it.

Susan: You want my advice?

Alex: Please.
Susan: Believe what will make you happy.
Alex: But what if it’s not true?
Susan: It doesn’t matter.
Susan: You can’t ever ask your dad.
Susan: So you’ll never know for sure.
Susan: Which sucks.
Alex: This is help?
Susan: Wait for it!
Susan: So you have two choices.
Susan: You can believe your dad would hate you.
Susan: Or you can believe your dad would love you.
Susan: Believe what will make you happy.
Susan: Like I do.
Susan: I believe my sperm donor was Harrison Ford, and that’s why ladies find me irresistible.
Alex: LOL!
Susan: Seriously, your dad loved you, right?
Alex: Yeah.
Susan: Then trust that.
Susan: Believe in that love.
Susan: Enough people are going to hate you for who you are.
Susan: Don’t dig up ghosts and ask them to hate you too.
Alex: Thanks.
Susan: Feel better?
Alex: I do.
Susan: Good.
Alex: How did you get so smart?
Susan: Listening to my moms.
Susan: Aside from the Wonder Woman obsession, they’re pretty awesome.
Alex: Wonder Woman obsession?
Susan: Yes.

Alex: She’s really hot.

Susan: I KNOW

Susan: God, she’s gorgeous.

Susan: But listening to your moms argue about whether her ass or her tits are her best feature spoils it.

Alex: You are terrible.

Susan: You know you love me.

Alex: I *like* you.

Susan: I’ll take it.

Susan: I’ve got to go.

Alex: Me too.

Susan: Tell Maggie and Kara I said hi.

Alex: Will do.

Susan: Night.

Alex: Night.

Alex closed her phone and connected it to the charger.

“How’s Susan?” Kara asked.

Alex looked over at Kara, who was sitting on her bed with Streaky in her lap, re-reading one of Cat Grant’s books.

“She’s good. She says hi.”

“She seems nice.”

“She is.”

“I’d like to meet her sometime.”

“Maybe we can borrow the car one weekend and head up to the city.”

“Speaking of borrowing the car, do you think we should invite Maggie along Friday night?”

It took Alex a second to realize what Kara was talking about, but then it clicked. They’d made plans to go get cupcakes and see Imagine Me & You for movie night. The last few days had pushed it out of her head. “Do you want to bring her along?” Alex asked.

“Would you mind?”

“No, I’d like that.”
“We can still do cupcakes, right?”

“Of course.”

“Then we should ask her if she wants to come.”

“Okay. We’ll ask at breakfast. After I’ve asked mom if we can have the car.”

“Great!” Kara said, bouncing a little in her bed, making Streaky grumble.

Alex rolled her eyes, but she was smiling the whole time.
**Cars, Cupcakes, and Cluelessness**

Chapter Summary

Alex is a useless gay mess, Maggie is not much better, and Kara has opinions on cupcakes.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Minor reference to past sexual assault.

Thursday, February 23, 2006

Alex was a little surprised that she beat Maggie and Kara to the kitchen Thursday morning, but Eliza was the only one seated at the table. There were plates set out for Maggie, Kara, and her, and Eliza was already eating her normal plate of cut up fruit pieces and paging through the Lois Lane book Kara had been reading a few days earlier.

“Hey, Mom,” Alex said as she sat down.

“Morning, sweetheart.”

“Are you using the car tomorrow night?”

“I hadn’t planned on it.” Eliza looked up from the book. “Why?”

“Kara and I wanted to go see a movie, and we were going to ask Maggie if she wants to come along.”

Eliza smiled. “That shouldn’t be a problem. If I need to go anywhere, I can take my bike.”

“Thanks.”

“It might be time to go ahead and look at getting you a car,” Eliza said as she went back to her book.

“Really?” Alex asked, probably a little more excited than she should be, considering how much she loved her dad’s bike, but Kara was less likely to bruise her ribs in a car.

“I had planned to wait until you left for college because you have the bike. But with Maggie around, it’s probably a good idea to have a second car around.”

“What kind of car?”

“What kind do you want?”

“A Mustang GT Convertible,” Alex said without a moment’s hesitation. Her dad had owned a ’67
Mustang, and Alex had loved it, but Eliza had sold it not long after he’d died.

“Try again,” Eliza said without looking up from the book.

“Mazda Miata?”

“Think four-door.”

“Porsche Cayenne?”

“Alex,” Eliza said, and Alex didn’t miss the hint of a warning in her tone.

“Fine. Can it at least be red?”

“I think we can manage that. As long as you’re okay sharing with Maggie for a while.”

“Can I still use Dad’s bike when Maggie has the car?”

“Of course. Why don’t you take a look online and see if you can find something you like?”

“Okay. How much can we spend?”

“I’d appreciate it if you could keep it under 15 thousand.”

“I’ll see what I can find.” Alex turned around a couple of minutes later at the sound of someone coming up behind her.

“Morning,” Maggie said around a yawn.

“Morning,” Alex and Eliza both replied. Alex watched as Maggie sat down next to her.

“What?” Maggie asked. “Did I smudge my makeup or something?”

“No. Kara and I are going to see if a movie tomorrow night, and we were wondering if you wanted to come with us?”

“Sure.”

“Cool.”

“What’s cool?” Kara asked as she walked into the kitchen.

“Maggie’s coming with us tomorrow night,” Alex said.

“Awesome! Yab-Yums after?”

Alex looked over at Eliza, who gave her a small nod. “It’s not a school night.”

“1:00 AM?” Alex asked.

“Not a minute later.”

Alex sat down across from Maggie and Kara and looked down at her lunch in resignation.

“You went for the beef stroganoff, huh?” Maggie asked.
“Yeah,” Alex said, poking the dish in question with her fork.

“Bold choice. Were they out of cyanide capsules?”

“It was this or the pork chops. And I really don’t like eating shoe leather.”

“You know they have a salad bar, right?” Maggie said, pointing at her own plate.

“Salad isn’t food,” Kara said.

“Neither is that,” Maggie shot back.

“I’m going to agree with Kara on this one.” Alex took a bite of the stroganoff. It wasn’t great. It wasn’t even good. But it was far from the worst thing she’d ever choked down in the Midvale High School cafeteria.

“Alex,” Maggie said, “can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Who is the girl in the corner with the dirty blonde hair glaring daggers at us?”

Alex frowned and looked over her shoulder to see Vicki staring at her like she wanted to murder everyone in the room, starting with Alex.

“That’s Vicki Donahue,” Kara said.

“The Vicki Donahue?” Maggie asked.

Alex turned back around. “The one and only.”

“I can sort of see why you liked her. She’d be cute if she didn’t look ready to murder someone.”

“It’s a new look for her,” Kara said.

“What’s her problem?”

“I have no idea,” Alex said. “I haven’t talked to Vicki in months.”

“Because of the Josie thing, right?”

“Yeah.”

“It must have been a hell of a fight,” Maggie said. “If she glares any harder, she’s going to set something on fire.”

Kara let out an awkward laugh and Alex had to resist the urge to kick her in the shin.

“On the plus side, Wilkey’s still glaring at us too,” Alex said, pointing towards the girl who was sitting at a table a couple rows over from them.

Maggie laughed. “You know, if we keep this up, maybe we can get every girl in the school to hate us by graduation.”

“Please don’t,” Kara said. “I’ve got to come back here next year.”

Alex looked at Kara for a second, then turned to Maggie. “Just the seniors?”
Maggie shrugged. “Hardly seems worth the effort if it’s just the seniors. There won’t be anyone left to remember us when we’re gone.”

“Speak for yourself. Kara and I managed to get the quarterback suspended and both a history teacher and the town Sheriff fired and arrested all in one week,” Alex said.

“That would be hard to beat. I just had to get taken in by a bunch of overachievers.”

“What can I say? We’re amazing,” Alex said.

Maggie rolled her eyes and went back to eating her salad, but Alex couldn’t help but notice that Maggie didn’t disagree with her.

Alex lay back on her bed and stared at her phone for a minute, wondering if she really wanted to talk to anyone about this. But she couldn’t get it out of her head, and she didn’t know who else to turn to, so she pulled up Susan’s contact and typed out a text message.

Alex: You busy?

Susan: Not particularly.

Susan: Sitting in the café pretending I didn’t finish my paper on Macbeth a week ago.

Alex: Mind if I call you?

Susan: Go ahead.

Alex hit the send button, and a moment later, she heard Susan’s voice.

“Hey,” Susan said. “What’s up?”

“Something happened at lunch today.”

“Are you okay?”

“Mostly. I’m just kind of confused.”

“Okay. Confused we can work with. Tell me what happened.”

“You remember me mentioning a girl from school named Vicki Donahue?”

“The girl you imagined kissing to see if you were just gay for Maggie, or if you were gay for girls in general?”

“Yeah. I saw her in the cafeteria at lunch, and it made me wonder something.”

“What?”

“When you figured out you were gay, did you realize you had a thing for one of your friends?” Alex asked.

“No, but I had an unfair advantage because I was raised by a couple of lesbians. But that’s what happens to a lot of girls.”

“It does?” Alex asked.
“Yeah. That’s actually how a lot of girls figure out they’re gay. I’m guessing you had a thing for Vicki?”

“Yeah.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Yeah.”

“Go ahead.”

“I had two best friends. I met Josie when I was in third grade. We were really close and did everything together, but when I started high school, I met Vicki, and I don’t know. We just clicked in a way Josie and I never did. I mean, Josie and I were still close, but Vicki and I were attached at the hip. We did everything together. Spent as much of our time together as possible. I used to spend the night over at her house, and we’d sleep in her bed, curled up together.”

“What happened?” Susan asked.

“I found out Josie was sleeping with a teacher.”

“Fuck.”

“And I turned him in.”

“Good. That’s fucking sick.”

“Yeah, that was my reaction too. But Josie refused to speak to me after that, which sucked, and almost the entire school hated Kara and I because we also managed to get the quarterback suspended for drug use. But I had Kara, and I had Vicki, and I thought I’d be okay. But Josie did everything she could to make my and Kara’s life difficult. I didn’t care so much for me, but I got pissed that she was going after Kara too. Then I saw Vicki talking to Josie in the hall at school one day, and we got into a horrible fight.”

“Because you felt like she was betraying you?”

“That’s what I thought at the time. Now, I’m not so sure.”

“Why not?”

“I think I was jealous.”

“But you had no idea why you were jealous.”

“None.”

“God, that sucks.”

“I think maybe she’s still mad at me.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Maggie spotted her glaring at me today at lunch.”

“Was Maggie sitting with you?”
“Yeah.”

“As you sure Vicki was glaring at you?”

“She was looking right at us.”

“Are you sure she wasn’t looking right at Maggie, I mean?”

“Vicki doesn’t even know Maggie.”

“But she knows you’re spending a lot of time with her.”

“But what does that have to do with… Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“You think Vicki is jealous of Maggie?”

“You can be taught!” Susan cried out with a laugh.

“Come on. I’ve been gay a week. Cut me some slack here.”

“Eight days by my count.”

“You’re enjoying this.”

“Maybe a little.”

“Jerk.”

“I’m sorry,” Susan said, though the laughter in her voice didn’t make her sound particularly sorry.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I feel really bad. Josie was always the popular one. Vicki and I really only had other friends because we hung out with Josie, and Josie’s parents put her in a boarding school this year. I’ve got Kara, and I’ve got Maggie, and I’ve got you. Vicki doesn’t really have anyone, and that’s kind of my fault.”

“Do you want to be her friend again?” Susan asked.

“Maybe. I miss her sometimes. But my life is really, really different now.”

“I’d say start by figuring out what you want. Then, even if you don’t want to be her friend again, you should probably apologize.”

“You think she’d accept an apology?”

“No idea. But you need to apologize because you feel like you treated your friend badly, and it’s never going to sit right until you do something about it.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I know I’m right.”
“You’re also kind of arrogant.”

“I’m also kind of hot.”

“I can’t argue that one.”

“You enjoying the books?”

“Yeah, when I get to spend any time reading them. It’s been a busy week.”

“You gotten to the novels yet?”

“No. Haven’t gotten to the DVDs either.”

“Still going to see Imagine Me & You tomorrow?” Susan

“Yeah. Maggie’s going too.”

“Oh! Someone has a date!”

“No, Kara’s going to be there.”

“Just sit her a couple of rows in front of you so she can’t see you and Maggie making out.”

“Why does that sound like something you’ve done?”

“Because it is. I used to date a preacher’s daughter.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. My Moms are Episcopalian. They drag me to church every Sunday morning. The Episcopalians are pretty cool with the whole gay thing, but when I started dating the priest’s daughter, he insisted on a chaperone. My sister and I went on a lot of double dates that year. Of course, she was always too busy making out with her girlfriend to stop me from making out with mine.”

“Nice. Why did you guys break up?”

“The Church offered her dad a spot at a parish up in Central City,” Susan said. “15-year-old girls and long-distance relationships don’t really go together.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. We still text each other sometimes, but she’s dating the captain of the girl’s swim team.”

“Ouch.”

“I’ve got to go,” Susan said. “The place is starting to get crowded and Tammy needs some help.”

“Okay. Take care.”

“I will. Text you later.”

Maggie sat at her computer, staring at the paper she was working on for her American Government class without really seeing it. She had been working on it for almost two hours, and all she had gotten out of it so far was the realization that her teacher was an especially clueless straight white
The whole idea of the project was that you were supposed to write two papers on the same issue and argue both sides. Topics were drawn at random, and she’d been unlucky enough to get abortion. The pro-choice paper had been easy enough, but she could not for the life of her think of a single good reason to outlaw abortion, and so far, she had a title she didn’t like, and that was it. She was just about to turn the computer off and leave it for the weekend when she heard her door creak.

“Hey, Maggie?” Alex said.

Maggie turned around and felt her stomach start doing backflips. Alex was standing in the doorway to her bedroom, holding a few sheets of paper, wearing a pair of thin cotton pajama pants that clung to her hips and a tank top that showed off tanned, muscular arms that immediately called to mind the memory of tanned, muscular abs and one too many daydreams that went with them.

God, she was way too gay for this.

“Hey,” she said, somehow managing to keep her voice from squeaking the way it had in the garage the day before.

“You got a minute?”

“Sure,” Maggie said. “Come in.”

Alex walked into the room and sat down on the bed. “I wanted to get your opinion on something.”

“What?”

Alex held up the papers.

Maggie got up from her desk and took a seat next to Alex on the bed. Alex handed her the papers, and she looked down at them, flipping through them quickly. It was a stack of sales brochures for a bunch of cars.

“You want my opinion on economy cars?” Maggie asked, more than a little confused.

“Mom’s thinking about going ahead and buying me a car now, instead of waiting until I’m getting ready to leave for school. She’s been holding off because I have Dad’s bike, and Kara and I can take that anywhere we need to go, but with you here, she thinks it’s a good idea to have something big enough for all three of us.”

“You mom is buying a car because of me?”

“Sort of. It’s going to be my college car, but we’re going to put you on the insurance so the two of us can share it until I leave for school, and I figured since we’re going to share, I should probably get something you don’t hate.”

Maggie stared at Alex for a moment, not quite believing what she was hearing. “Okay, your mom is buying you a car, and you’re letting me pick it out?”

“You’re going to be using it too,” Alex said, and Maggie winced a little at the defensiveness she heard in Alex’s tone.

“I’m sorry. I just… I’m not used to people giving a shit what I want.”

“If it makes you feel better, we’re getting red.”
“Really? Lame. We should totally get black.”

“No way.”

Maggie smiled and shook her head as she looked down at the sheets of paper, each one with a different car on it. “No taste.”

“Says the girl who made me realize I’m gay.”

“Ouch,” Maggie said, smiling as she looked up at Alex. “That’s harsh.”

“You said it, not me.”

Maggie narrowed her eyes, and tried to glare, but she was pretty sure from the way Alex was grinning that it wasn’t even remotely effective. Probably because she couldn’t keep a smile off her own face. She looked down at the brochures again and immediately curled one up and tossed it in the trash. “We are not getting a Civic.”

“Oh, thank god,” Alex said. “Those things are hideous.”

“Right?” Maggie curled up the Ford Focus brochure and tossed it after the one for the Civic. More followed until there were only two left. “These don’t suck,” Maggie said. “I like the Rio5 better than the Spectra5.”

“Me too. That was actually my first pick.”

“Must be fate.”

“Or maybe I just have good taste,” Alex said, leaning towards Maggie.

“Well, you did take one look at me and realize you’re gay.”

“What girl wouldn’t?”

Maggie leaned towards Alex. “The ones that saw you first.”

“You saying you think I’m hot?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “I think I am.”

She watched as Alex glanced down at her lips and knew what was about to happen, knew she should get up, get away from Alex. But when Alex leaned in, Maggie’s breath caught in her throat, and her heart pounded in her chest, and the last thing in the world she wanted to do was stop it.

She saw Alex closer her eyes, felt Alex’s breath on her lips, and waited for the kiss. Her first kiss.

Alex jerked back and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Shit! I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I just… you… fuck!” Alex turned away, looking at the wall and wrapping her arms around herself. “Maggie, I’m sorry.”

“Hey.” Maggie reached out and put a hand on Alex’s shoulder. “Alex, look at me.”

Alex turned around, but she looked like she expected to get yelled at, and Maggie couldn’t stand it. She thought of the way Alex had cringed when Maggie had realized she was the girl that made Alex question her sexuality in the first place and found the same words coming out of her mouth.
“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Maggie said.

“But I did. You said you didn’t want… That you weren’t interested, and I was about to kiss you anyway.”

“But you didn’t,” Maggie said, doing her best to tamp down the disappointment she really shouldn’t be feeling, but Alex looked absolutely miserable, and she couldn’t let her suffer for something she’d wanted just as much, even if it absolutely could not happen.

“Alex, you are kind of amazing, and someday you are going to sweep some girl off her feet and be a wonderful girlfriend. But right now, for you, everything is new, and shiny, and you’re feeling all these things you’ve never let yourself feel before. I know. I’ve been there. And you get to feel all of that without having to be afraid like I was. I’m happy for you, I am. I’m so happy for you. I’m just not there anymore, and I can’t go there with you. I’m too messed up right now, and it wouldn’t be fair to either of us. But that doesn’t mean you’re wrong for having feelings.”

Alex gave her a weak smile. “I should go. I should tell Mom I picked out a car.”

“Alex…”

“No, it’s okay. I get it.” Alex picked up the brochure for the car they’d picked out and headed for the door. She stopped when she got there and turned around. “You’re pretty amazing yourself, you know. Elisa Wilkey doesn’t know what she’s missing.”

Maggie smiled. “Thank you.”

Alex smiled back at her. “You want me to close the door?”

“Please.”

Alex left, closing the door behind her. The moment it was shut, Maggie fell back on the bed, pressed a pillow over her face, and screamed. Because if Alex hadn’t backed off at the last second, Maggie was pretty sure things wouldn’t have stopped after one kiss.

God, what the hell was wrong with her? She always, always seemed to fall for the worst possible person. This could absolutely not happen. She could not fall for Alex because if she did and it went south, it wasn’t just a bad break up. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t risk losing another home.

Alex stepped out onto the balcony with a heavy bathrobe over her pajamas, sat down at the table with her phone, and typed out a text to Susan.

Alex: I am a complete fucking idiot.

Alex: I fucked up so bad.

She waited for a reply, but instead of a text, her phone started ringing. She hit the accept button and lifted it to her ear.

“What happened?” Susan asked.

“I tried to kiss Maggie.”

“I’m going to go out on a limb and guess that she wasn’t into it?”

“You’d be right. She definitely wasn’t into it. Which I fucking knew, because she told me on
Sunday she wasn’t interested.”

“Why did you try to kiss her then?”

“Mom is thinking about getting a second car. She was going to buy me one for college anyway, but she decided to move it up because I can’t fit Kara and Maggie both on Dad’s Ducati with me. I went down to Maggie’s bedroom because I figured if we’re going to share this for the next few months, I should get something we both like. We picked up a car, and we joking around, but I thought she was flirting with me, and I just leaned in to kiss her.”

“Then what?”

“Then I remembered the ‘It’s not you; it’s me’ speech from Saturday morning, and I got so embarrassed I must have jumped back six feet.”

“Fuck,” Susan said. “That had to be awkward.”

“You think?”

“How did Maggie react?”

“She was nice about it. She told me I would make someone a great girlfriend someday and that it wasn’t wrong to have feelings, but she’s not interested in me.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “I mean, I already knew she wasn’t, but hearing it again sucked. And I feel bad for trying to kiss her after she told me no.”

“But you stopped yourself, right?”

“At the last second,” Alex said. “I just remembered her saying she couldn’t love me, that she wasn’t over Elisa Wilkey, and she didn’t know when she’d be willing to date again, and I just kind of panicked.”

“Was Maggie mad or upset?”

“I don’t think so. I think she was worried about me.”

“Sounds like she’s a good person.”

“She is. Which makes this all harder.”

“I can imagine. It also sounds like you’re being too hard on yourself.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah, I do,” Susan said. “You made a mistake, but you corrected it, and you apologized. You did apologize, right?”

“I did. At least three times in the first 30 seconds.”

“Okay, maybe a little bit of overkill there, but you made a mistake, you corrected it before any damage was done, and you apologized, so no harm, no foul. Just remember to make sure it’s okay before you try to kiss anymore girls.”
“Thanks. I think I needed to hear that. Any chance you have some tips for dealing with the embarrassment?”

“I don’t think you’ve got anything to be embarrassed about. Seriously. You’ve been so brave through all of this. You figured out you’re gay a week ago, and you are already out to your family. I don’t think you get how amazing that is.”

“I think I’m mostly out because I suck at keeping secrets.”

“Alex, don’t put yourself down. You could have denied it. Pretended it never happened. Admitting to yourself that you’re gay is a huge step. Admitting it to other people… Some of us never get that far. But can I give you some advice?”

“Please! I got no idea what I’m doing over here.”

“I could tell you that it gets better, but I’d be lying. My moms have been gay as fuck for decades, and some days, it’s a miracle they make it through breakfast. But that kind of brings me to the advice: slow the fuck down.” Alex’s shoulders slumped. Apparently everyone was going to keep telling her how new and shiny things were for her. “I get it. Everything is exciting and new for you right now. Suddenly all the love songs make sense, and you’ve got all these feelings, and you’re looking at girls and it’s like, ‘Wow, how did I not notice that boobs are proof that God loves lesbians and wants them to be happy?’ But slow down. You don’t have to get a girlfriend right now, or tomorrow, or next week. You’ve got time.

“I know. I’m not looking for a girlfriend. I didn’t look for any of this. But once I realized I was gay, all this stuff I was feeling made sense. And Maggie is right there, and she’s tough, and she’s smart, and God, she’s beautiful. She’s so beautiful.”

“Jesus. You’ve got it bad.”

“I don’t think I realized how bad before tonight.”

“It might be a good idea to get away from her for a day. Give yourself a chance to adjust.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“You could come up to the city. I could tell my moms I need the day off.”

“I’m not sure that would help me get my head on straight.”

“Why not?”

“Do I need to send the bikini picture back to you? Because I can.”

“Oh,” Susan said. “I didn’t even think about that.”

“Lucky you. How the hell did I not notice there were so many freaking hot girls before?”

Susan let out a strangled laugh.

“Oh, shut up. I’m just… Fuck, I don’t know.”

“Horny,” Susan said. “The word you’re looking for is horny.”

“God, why am I talking to you again?”
“Because I am a great friend.”

“You’re a crappy friend who takes way too much joy in my pain.”

“Maybe, but I’m also right, aren’t I?”

Alex sighed. “Maybe a little.”

“A little?”

“Okay, a lot! Are you happy?”

“You know, if I didn’t think it would end in heartbreak and disaster, I’d offer to help you with that problem, but as luck would have it, this is a problem you can solve yourself.”

“I think someone would notice if I took that many showers.”

“Cold showers aren’t what I had in mind.”

“I know what you had in mind, but Kara and I share a room, so it’s in the shower, or not at all.”


“Only since random girls started sending me bikini pics.”

“I regret nothing.”

“Honestly, neither do I. It’s a good picture.”

“We should hit the beach sometime. If you think the picture is impressive, you should see the real thing.”

“You have a car?”

“No. Why?”

“I was going to ask if you wanted to come down one weekend once it warms up. The surfing in my front yard is great.”

“You surf?”

“Since I was old enough to carry a board.”

“I could probably borrow a car for a day.”

“Or I could come pick you up,” Alex offered. “That way you could stay the whole weekend.”

“When did you have in mind?”

“It’s usually warm enough by the middle of March as long as you have a good wetsuit.”

“That leaves me out.”

“We can pick one up for you. There’s a pretty good surf shop in town.”

“I’ll think about it.”
Alex sighed. “It’s late. I’ve got school tomorrow.”

“Go get some sleep.”

“And Susan…”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for being my friend. I’m not sure could get through this without you.”

“Glad to help.”

“Night,” Alex said.

“Night.”

Friday, February 24, 2006

Maggie walked down the hall leading to the cafeteria, only half paying attention to anything around her. She had somehow managed to make it through her morning classes without hearing a single word her teachers had said. She’d been too busy thinking about the night before, thinking about the feel of Alex’s breath on her lips and the way her heart had pounded in her chest when Alex had been about to kiss her. It was starting to drive her a little crazy because she knew she shouldn’t be thinking about what the kiss would have been like, and she definitely shouldn’t be thinking about what might have followed the kiss.

She couldn’t help it, though. So much had happened over the last week and a half, and Alex was so close to all of it, and she just could not get Alex out of her head. Awkward, babbling Alex letting her know breakfast was ready that first morning; embarrassed, blushing Alex holding out the phone with the picture of Susan on it; shy, nervous Alex admitting that Maggie was the girl who made her wonder if she might be gay; fearless, angry Alex getting up in Maggie’s father’s face; quiet, supportive Alex who’d held her hand through most of the hearing; sad, wistful Alex crying in her arms as she talked about her dad; soaking wet, insanely hot Alex wrapped in nothing but a beach towel after they’d gotten caught in the rain; and flirty, beautiful Alex leaning in to kiss her.

Every single version of Alex made her heart flutter and her stomach fill with butterflies. Every time she closed her eyes she was back in her bedroom, waiting for the kiss, and she didn’t want to leave because that moment made her feel wanted.

She glanced up as she entered the cafeteria and spotted Kara sitting at their usual table. Kara waved, and Maggie smiled and returned the wave before heading to get food. It was pizza day, so she skipped the salad bar and headed through the regular line. But even as she went through the motions of ordering food, her mind was still focused on the problem at hand.

She needed to figure out a way to get Alex out of her head. She liked Alex. Liked her so much it was a little scary. The idea of kissing her, of dating her, of trying to be with her was tempting, but it was just too big a risk for something that wouldn’t last, something with a built-in expiration date. Graduation was at the end of May. Alex would go off to college a few months after that. Even if she and Alex got together, they wouldn’t last past August. Maggie would fall in love, and fall hard, and Alex would go off to Stanford to become a doctor. She’d find some brilliant doctor girlfriend and wouldn’t have time for someone whose biggest ambition was to be a cop. It wasn’t worth the risk of losing another home for something that could only end with her heartbroken and alone.

She finished paying for her food and headed for their table, but as soon as she got out of the serving
area, she saw Pat Brice looming over Kara. The sight immediately had Maggie’s hackles up. Pat was one of the few people in the school she knew by name, and it wasn’t because she liked him. He’s tried hitting on her pretty much every day for the first month of their Economics class until she’d finally threatened to kick him in the balls if he didn’t stop.

She made her way across the cafeteria as fast as possible, knowing in her gut that Brice’s being anywhere near Kara couldn’t possibly be good.

“You okay, Kara?” she asked as she reached them.

“She’s fine,” Pat answered for her. “We were just making plans to go out tonight.”

Maggie sat her tray down next to Kara. “I didn’t ask you, asshole.” She looked right at Kara, who seemed a little panicked.

“Hey, don’t be like that,” Pat said.

“Kara already has plans tonight,” Maggie said, turning back to Pat.

“Yeah, but just with her sister. I’m giving her a better option.” Pat went to put an arm around Kara, but Maggie reached out and grabbed his wrist before he could touch her.

“There is no universe where a date with you is a better option than a root canal.”

“What is your problem?” he said, jerking his arm out of her hand.

“Kara?”

“Yes?”

“Do you want to go on a date with this loser?”

“No,” Kara said.

“See, that’s my problem, Pat. She told you no, probably more than once, and you just wouldn’t leave it alone. Now get out of here before I give you that kick I promised.”

“Jesus, are you ever not on the rag?”

Maggie took a step towards him, and he took three stumbling steps back to get away from her, then stopped and looked around, and saw half the cafeteria watching. His face turned a little red, and he turned around and stomped off.

“Thanks,” Kara said.

Maggie sat down next to her. “No problem.”

“I kept telling him I was busy, but he just wouldn’t listen.”

“Sounds like Pat. I had the same problem with him when I started here.” She looked up and saw Alex approaching the table.

“He used to hassle Alex too.”

“Who used to hassle me?” Alex asked as she sat down.
“Pat Brice,” Maggie said.

“That sleazy little shit bothering you?” Alex asked.

“Not me. He was trying to ask Kara out.”

Alex looked around for him, wearing the same expression she’d had on her face right before she tried to punch Elisa Wilkey the Friday before. “Where is he?”

“Maggie ran him off,” Kara said.

Alex looked over at her, and Maggie shrugged.

“It’s not a big deal,” Maggie said.

Alex didn’t say anything, but if the look on her face was anything to go by, Maggie was wrong, and it was actually a very big deal.

Maggie stared at the sign on the front of the building proudly declaring it, ‘Cupcake Paradise,’ as Alex pulled them into a parking spot right in front of the door.

“Really?” Maggie asked.

“Yes!” Kara said from the back seat. Maggie looked back at her, finding her bouncing slightly in her seat. Maggie turned to Alex next.

“Don’t look at me,” Alex said. “I prefer Smalcakes over by the mall.”

“Smalcakes doesn’t have mini-pies!” Kara said, giving a little pout.

“Mini-pies?” Maggie asked.

“You’ll see,” Alex said as she reached for the door handle.

The three of them got out of the car and walked up to the door. Kara was practically vibrating the whole way. When they got inside, there was no line, so Kara rushed up to the counter.

“Is she always like this when you guys come here?”

“Every time.” Maggie could hear the affection in Alex’s voice, and it brought a smile to her face. She couldn’t help it. Kara was nearly impossible not to like, and the way Alex and Kara were together made her a little envious. It was the kind of relationship she’d always wanted with Mike.

She followed Alex up to the counter and immediately saw what Kara had meant about mini-pies. There was a whole case full of little cupcake-sized pies of all sorts of flavors and varieties at one end, and Kara was currently staring intently at one labeled, ‘Chocolate pecan pie.’

A small, matronly woman appeared from the doors that presumably led to the kitchen as Maggie started scanning the choices in the case.

“Kara!” the woman said.

Kara looked up and smiled. “Hey, Angie!”

“What can I get for you?” Angie asked.
“I want a Chocolate Pecan Pie, a Death By Chocolate, a Birthday Cake, and a Red Velvet, and a scoop of Cookies and Cream ice cream, please.”

“Coming right up. How about you, Alex?”

“A French Toast cupcake, and a scoop of chocolate chip cookie dough,” Alex ordered.

Angie turned to Maggie. “Who’s your new friend?”

“This is Maggie,” Kara said.

“Hey,” Maggie said, giving Angie a little wave.

“Hello, dear. What would you like?”

Maggie looked down at the case and thought about it for a moment. She knew it would be a risky choice, but she really couldn’t stop herself. “I’d like the carrot cake with cream cheese icing, and a scoop of cookies and cream.”

“What?” A look of completely betrayal flashed across Kara’s face. “You can’t!”

Maggie smiled back at her. “Yes, I can.”

“But… but… it’s not cake, Maggie,” Kara whined. “It’s a vegetable lying about being cake! You can’t let it get away with the lie, or next thing you know, we’ll all be eating chocolate-covered Brussels sprouts!”

“I don’t think one cupcake is going to lead to the Brussels Sprout Apocalypse,” Maggie said.

“But it’s not just one cupcake. It’s on the menu. That means they make them every day and sell them to innocent people!”

Maggie turned back to Angie. “The carrot cake and a scoop of cookies and cream please.”

“You’re horrible!” Kara gave a little stomp of her foot and turned around to watch as Angie started putting together their order.

Maggie chanced a look over at Alex, who had both hands over her mouth to muffle the loud laugh that threatened to escape, her shoulders shaking and her eyes tearing up with the effort. Maggie smiled and held out a hand, and Alex immediately high-fived her.

“I heard that!” Kara yelled.

“How can you eat all of that?” Maggie asked as they walked away from the concession stand.

“Maggie,” Alex said, putting a bit more bite into her voice that she’d really intended. Maggie turned to look at her, and she shook her head. “Don’t do that.”

“What?” Maggie asked.

“It’s okay,” Kara said.

“No, it’s not,” Alex said.

“She didn’t mean anything by it.”
“What did I say?” Maggie asked.

“Kara already gets enough shit about how much she eats, but she can’t help it. She’s not greedy or whatever. Her metabolism runs really, really high. She needs a lot more calories than most people, or she’ll get sick. Mom had to get a medical accommodation put into place so she can eat in class if she needs to, and she still gets shit from her teachers about it.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I know you didn’t mean anything by it.”

“No, Alex is right. I shouldn’t have said it, and I’m sorry.” Maggie directed the apology to both of them.

Alex could see the regret on Maggie’s face and nodded. “It’s okay. Kara’s right too. I think I’m more sensitive about it than she is sometimes.”

“You’re just trying to take care of your sister. I get it.”

“Her sister who can take care of herself,” Kara grumped.

“My sister who shouldn’t have to.”

“Are we good?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah,” Alex said. “We’re good.”

“Then are you two finally going to tell me what this super-secret movie you’re dragging me to is?” Maggie asked.

Alex smiled. “See for yourself.” She pointed to the poster next to the door of theater eight.

Maggie looked over and stopped in her tracks. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “You know Kara and her romantic comedies.”

“Right. And I bet Kara is the only one who wanted to see this.”

“Well, if you don’t want to see it, I could run and get us tickets for Curious George,” Alex said.

“No, this is fine. I’m sure I can put up with it for Kara’s sake.”

“Okay, please don’t use me as an excuse to flirt,” Kara said. “It’s kind of gross.”

“What?” Maggie said.

“We weren’t flirting!”

Kara just rolled her eyes and went into the theater.

Maggie sat next to Alex so they could share a bucket of popcorn, still feeling embarrassed about what had happened outside. She’d been a little baffled by the way Kara ate since the day they met, but a medical condition made sense. She’d never heard of anything that could make a person need to eat like that, but whatever it was, she felt bad for making Kara feel awkward about it and made a mental note to do something to make it up to her and to Alex.
“Twizzlers?” Alex offered, holding the pack out.

“No thanks,” Maggie said, holding up her box of Reese’s Pieces.

“I’ll take one,” Kara said.

Alex held the pack out to Kara, who took two, which made Alex roll her eyes, but there was a grin on her face, which made Maggie smile too.

“How’d you find out about this, Kara?” Maggie asked.

“She has a subscription to Romantic Comedy Monthly,” Alex said.

“Funny,” Kara said. “I just check the coming soon page on IMDB for things I want to see. I wanted to see this one because Anthony Stewart Head is in it.”

“Giles is in it?” Alex asked.

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

“And Violet from Coyote Ugly.”

“I hate that movie,” Alex said.

“Sure,” Kara said with a roll of her eyes. “That’s why you watch it at least once a month.”

“You don’t get to talk, little Ms. ‘I’ve watched Teen Wolf so many times I have it memorized.'”

“Yeah, well, you’re the one who dragged us to a Marylin Manson concert.”

“Damn,” Maggie said.

“I think Kara wins this one.”

Alex turned and glared at her, but Maggie was saved by the lights’ going down in the theater, though she did hear a little grumbling from Alex. It lasted through the previews, but when the movie started, all three of them went silent, watching every moment, drinking it in.

The story started on Rachel’s wedding day and followed her as she fell in love with the florist who did the flowers, and Maggie had never seen anything quite like it. She smiled when Rachel and Luce looked at each other for the first time. Felt a little flutter when they fished the wedding ring out of the punch bowl. She just about melted when Luce put her hands on Rachel’s stomach to teach her how to project at the soccer match, but something inside her absolutely broke when Rachel showed up, telling Luce all the reasons they couldn’t be together before storming out. She started crying a moment later when Rachel rushed back in and kissed Luce like her life depended on it. She felt Alex’s hand slip into hers, felt their fingers thread together. She held on for the rest of the movie, not knowing how the story would end, but daring to hope. It wasn’t the first time she’d ever seen a lesbian in a movie or a TV show; it wasn’t the first time she’d ever seen a lesbian couple; but when the movie ended with them together, kissing in the middle of a crowded street, she let out a sob. Alex let go of her hand and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Maggie leaned in, letting Alex hold her.

They sat like that through the credits. None of them said a word until the lights came up, at which point Alex gave Maggie a gentle squeeze, then looked over at her. “You ready?” she asked.

Maggie nodded. She nearly changed her mind when Alex took her arm away, but Maggie forced
herself to reach up and wipe her eyes with her sleeve, then stand up. Then the three of them headed out of the theater. She didn’t think anything of it when she felt Alex take her hand again.

“Wait!” Kara said.

Maggie and Alex both stopped and looked at her.

“What is it?” Alex asked.

“I forgot my snow caps!”

“You didn’t eat them?” Alex asked.

“I was saving them for the drive. I’ll meet you at the car.”

She turned around and ran back into the theater before either of them could say a word.

“Should we go after her?” Maggie asked.

“Why would we do that?”

“Because there were two boxes of Snow Caps and a back of Sour Patch Kids sticking out of her jacket pocket.”

“Yeah, I noticed that too.”

“Then why did she run off?”

“I think she’s trying to give us a little time alone.”

“Oh,” Maggie said, feeling a little flutter in her stomach at the thought of time alone with Alex.

“Come on,” Alex said, giving their joined hands a little tug. “I’ll have a talk with her later. Let her know I’ve already made a fool out of myself twice.”

“You didn’t.”

“What?” Alex turned to look at Maggie, a confused expression on her face.

“You didn’t make a fool of yourself. You’re amazing.”

Alex smiled at her as they stepped out of the theater, neither of them looking where they were going until Alex walked right into someone.

“Hey! Watch where the fuck you…”

Maggie closed her eyes because she knew that voice, would know it anywhere. It had been the soundtrack of her heart every day for months, right up until the day its owner had destroyed her life. She turned towards the sound and opened her eyes to see Elisa Wilkey staring right at them. Elisa looked at her for a moment, then looked down at their joined hands, before looking up at Alex’s face. Elisa’s features twisted up in anger, and she glanced over at the poster next to the door, then back at Alex.

“Uh huh,” Elisa said. “Well that makes sense.”

“Elisa,” Maggie said.
“Don’t,” Elisa said, taking two huge steps back. She turned and looked at Maggie. “Let me guess. You’re in love.”

Alex let go of Maggie’s hand and stepped between them.

“What is your fucking problem, Wilkey?” Alex asked. “All you had to do was say no. It wouldn’t have been a big deal.”

“Right,” Elisa scoffed. “No one takes no for an answer. You should know that by now.”

“What?” Alex asked, but Elisa didn’t answer. She just turned around and stormed off. Alex turned around to look at her. “What the hell did she mean by that?”

“I don’t know,” Maggie said, but it was a lie because the pieces snapped into place perfectly for her, and she was pretty sure she knew exactly what Elisa was talking about.

Kara came barreling out of the theater a second later.

“Are you guys okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “Can we go?”

“Sure.” Alex nodded. “Let’s get out of here.”

The ride to the square was quiet. Aside from the little hiccup with Maggie commenting on how much Kara ate, it had been a really good night. Dinner was good. They’d gone to Provino’s, a little Italian place near the mall. The movie was amazing; it was the first time Alex had really understood what Kara saw in romantic comedies, and she’d found herself rooting for Rachel and Luce, which made her look forward to watching the movies Susan had recommended to her. The feeling of connection with the characters was something she didn’t get from most movies, and she couldn’t help but wonder how much of that was seeing people like her. The part where she got to put her arm around Maggie hadn’t hurt the experience either. Even Kara’s awkward attempt to fix Alex and Maggie up had been more amusing than anything else.

Everything was great, right up until she’d literally run into Elisa fucking Wilkey. She still didn’t understand Wilkey or her hatred for Maggie, but she knew it had soured Maggie’s mood, and she hoped that Yab-Yums would turn that around.

They parked about a block away from the square, but within sight of it, and Alex made sure to choose a well-lit area. She wouldn’t have worried about it normally, but she was probably less afraid of walking through a dark area at night that she should be—one of the advantages of having a sister who could throw muggers into orbit. But Maggie didn’t know about Kara’s abilities, so Alex had to make it look like they were just ordinary teenagers.

When they got to Yab-Yums, it was busy. There was a band on the stage, music filling the room, and the smell of coffee in the air. For a moment, Alex was worried that they wouldn’t be able to find a table, but Kara spotted a free one in the back corner and led them over. Alex sat down next to Maggie, with Kara on Maggie’s other side.

They had barely finished sitting down when Kim arrived, order pad in hand. “Hey.”

“Hey Kim,” Kara said in a cheerful tone.

“Hey,” Alex and Maggie both said.
Kim looked at Alex. “Missed you last Saturday.”

“Had to make a trip up to Coast City. I heard I missed Rhonda playing.”

“You did, but she’ll be here next weekend. You want your usual?”

“Just the coffee tonight,” Alex said. “Someone dragged us to Cupcake Paradise earlier.”

Kim smiled and turned to Kara. “You want your usual?”

“Yes, please. And can I get one of the chocolate-dipped biscotti?”

“Sure thing. Maggie?”

“Just a mocha, thanks.”

“Coming right up,” Kim said, already turning away.

Alex leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, listening to the music. The band wasn’t half bad. They were doing a cover of Darkening of the Light, which had always been a little goth for Alex’s tastes. But then, that described way more 90s music than you’d think. She’d listened to the whole album way too many times because it had been one of Vicki’s favorites.

“Like the music, Danvers?” Maggie asked.

Alex opened her eyes and looked over at Maggie. “I like the album it’s from. Not something I would have picked, but Vicki went through this whole goth phase.”

“It was a little scary,” Kara said. “The pale makeup and the bright red lipstick, and the whole vampire obsession.”

“It wasn’t that bad. I really liked the clothes.”

“Oh, yeah. I wonder why?”

Alex opened her mouth to reply, but her brain seemed to lock up as images of Vicki in a low-cut gown and corsets popped into her head.

“Is she blushing?” Maggie asked. “It’s hard to tell in this light.”

“She’s definitely blushing,” Kara agreed.

Alex narrowed her eyes at Kara. “I kind of hate you right now.”

“Consider it payback.”

Thankfully, Kim picked that moment to show up with their orders. Three plates appeared in front of Kara, two with the lumps of chocolate-covered chocolate chip cookie dough, and one with her biscotti, then her usual pumpkin spice latte. Maggie got her mocha, and Alex her Americano, and Kara got one of the envelopes.

“Which one?” Kara asked.

“The Rainbow Canyon. I could use a couple more.”

“I’ll bring them by Sunday afternoon. Usual time.”
“See you then,” Kim said.

Alex took a sip of her coffee to keep Kara from seeing the frown on her face.

“Don’t say it,” Kara said.

“I’m not.”

“Okay, I’m missing something,” Maggie said.

“She doesn’t think I should use the money to visit my cousin,” Kara said as she slid the envelope in her pocket.

“I also think you could get more money for the paintings if you waited until you were old enough to sell them to an art dealer.”

“They’re my paintings.”

“Which is why I’m not saying anything. And why I’ll get up Sunday morning and sneak them out of the house while you and mom are out back gardening. Just like I always do.”

Kara gave her a smile and nodded. “Thank you.”

“Always.”

Kara picked up her fork and started working on one of her pieces of cookie dough.

“Hey, Alex.”

Alex smiled at the sound of the unexpected voice and turned around to see Rhonda walking towards them. She was dressed the way she always was: a t-shirt, black cargo pants, Doc Martens, and a watch on a tooled leather cuff on her left wrist. “Hey, Rhonda.”

“Mind if I sit?” Rhonda asked.

“Go ahead.”

Rhonda pulled the fourth chair at the table out and sat down, directly across from Maggie. “Maggie, right?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Maggie said.

“Nice to see you again.”

“You too.”

Rhonda turned to Kara. “How’re things?”

“Good. You get the new tattoo?”

“Yeah.”

“You got a new one?” Alex asked.

Rhonda turned towards her. “Wanna see?”

“Sure.”
Rhonda smiled as she leaned back and lifted up her shirt and for a moment, Alex forgot what she was supposed to be doing as she stared at the exposed expanse of skin, but her eyes finally settled on the tattoo. It was a short section of lines like you would see on sheet music that followed the curve of the underside of her breast. The notes themselves were done in colors, cycling through red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple. “You like it?” Rhonda asked.

“Yeah,” Alex said, her voice a bit hoarse, and she cleared her throat.

Rhonda lowered her shirt. “The notes are the first line of the first song I ever wrote.”

“It looks great.”

“Thanks. It’s kind of a celebration.”

“What for?” Alex asked.

“I got accepted to the National City Music Conservatory for the fall semester.”

“That’s great!” Alex said.

Rhonda leaned forward, putting her left arm on the table and resting her chin in her left hand. “Of course, I’m not sure what I’m going to do without my biggest fan.”

“You’ll do fine,” Alex said. “You’re a great musician. You’re going to be selling out stadiums in no time.”

“That’s what I’ve always loved about you, Alex. You’ve always had so much faith in me.”

“Well, I have heard you sing. With a voice like yours, you’re going to be huge.”

“You know, I’ve got a gig tomorrow at a new club in down in National City. The club is normally 18 and up, but the owner’s my uncle. I’m sure I can get you in if you wanted to come. You could ride down with us and be back by Sunday afternoon.”

Alex smiled, picturing it. Seeing Rhonda play a real club and not a little coffee bar would be a lot of fun, and a trip to National City would be cool. She was about to say yes, when she remembered that she already had plans for tomorrow. “Damn.”

“What?” Rhonda asked.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“My mom is taking me to buy a car tomorrow. I have no idea how long it’s going to take.”

“Fuck. That sucks. Well, not the getting a car part, but that you can’t come to the show.”

“I know.”

“I guess I’ll see you next week,” Rhonda said as she stood up.

“You gotta leave?”

“Yeah. Gotta be up early to load the van and hit the road. It’s a long drive.”
“Alright, well, see you. And have a good show tomorrow!”

“See ya,” Rhonda said as she walked away. Alex watched her go until she disappeared out the front door, then turned back around to find Kara and Maggie both glaring at her.

“What?” she asked.
Saturday, February 25, 2006

Maggie sat in the passenger’s seat of Mrs. Danvers’ car as they drove back from the banks. They’d stopped at two. The first one had been her parents’ bank where she’d spent a good 45 minutes making sure her name was removed from the college savings account they had opened for her when she’d been born. She’d been tempted to empty the account before she removed her name from it, since the account was supposed to be for her, but Mrs. Danvers had talked her out of it. She’d said that there wasn’t any point in provoking her dad when she didn’t need the money, and in the end, Maggie had agreed, settling for severing the one legal and financial tie she still had to her parents.

Once they’d finished up there, they’d gone a couple of blocks over to talk to Mrs. Danvers’ banker. The experience had been quite a bit different. Instead of sitting in a cubicle with a man who’d tried everything to avoid doing what Maggie wanted, they had been led into a nice office where a well-dressed woman had bent over backwards to take care of everything. When it was over, Maggie had a college account and a savings account in her name only, with a ridiculous amount of money in both.

It was great because Maggie knew, as long as she finished high school and got accepted, she could make it through college without needing another dime, and the hug she’d given Mrs. Danvers once everything was finalized had dragged on for an embarrassingly long time before she could bring herself to let go. Mrs. Danvers had seemed to understand and had just smiled at Maggie before they’d gotten in the car.

Maggie’s good mood had barely survived the drive across the parking lot. By the time they pulled out onto the street, the ghosts of the night before were filling her with a confusing mix of emotions. The movie had made her happy in so many ways. Just seeing herself reflected on the screen, seeing someone like her get a happy ending had been amazing, and she still felt a bit of that glow, her mind going back to it over and over again. It was made all the better by the warmth that filled her every time she thought of the way Alex had held her hand or the way Alex had put an arm around her. But that just led to the anger and the jealousy she’d felt watching Rhonda flirt with Alex and the desire to punch Rhonda in her unreasonably attractive face for asking Alex to go to National City with her. Things she knew she shouldn’t be feeling because she’d told Alex she wasn’t interested. She’d told her that twice, and it had even been true the first time she’d said it.

Of course, all of that swirled around the thing she wanted to avoid thinking about. Elisa Wilkey’s
comment to Alex, which threw a whole other level of turmoil into the mix.

She’d known Elisa for months. She’d considered Elisa the best friend she’d ever had almost immediately. But she’d never known, never even suspected, and it made her feel like she’d failed Elisa. No matter how many times she told herself there was no way she could have known, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she should have, that she’d been a terrible friend. That she’d been too preoccupied with falling in love to notice that the person she cared about was in pain. Something made all the worse by the fact that she could have helped. Her dad was the fucking Sheriff. Maggie knew that locking the bastard who had hurt her up wouldn’t instantly make everything okay for Elisa, but if he was still running around free, if he was still at school and she had to see him every day, then getting him put away would have had to make her feel better.

She needed to make it right. She’d let Elisa down, and whatever came later, she needed to make it right. She had no idea if Elisa would talk to her, but she had to try. She wouldn’t be able to live with herself if she didn’t.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” Mrs. Danvers asked. “You’re awfully quiet over there.”

“Just thinking.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Have you ever gotten so caught up in your own shit… stuff, that you completely missed something going on with someone you care about?”

“All the time when I was younger. Honestly, I used to spend so much time in my head, sometimes I think it’s a miracle Jeremiah and I lasted more than one date. I had more than one relationship fall apart because I kept forgetting dates or forgetting to return phone calls or working all night. I don’t think I really got better about it until Alex came along. It’s kind of hard to get lost in your head with a baby crying all the time.”

“Alex cried a lot?”

“Oh, yeah,” Mrs. Danvers said. “I couldn’t put her down for the first six months without her screaming her head off. It drove me a little crazy. It drove Jeremiah a LOT crazy. Every time I’d hand her over for him to hold her, she’d start screaming. I think I learned to do everything holding a baby in one arm.”

“What happened?”

“One day, it got to be a little too much. I hadn’t had a single minute to myself for six months. So, I sent Jeremiah to the store to get some earplugs for both of us. When he got back, I put in a pair, and he put in a pair, and I handed Alex to him and went out back. I spent a few hours working in the garden, then I went upstairs and took the longest shower I’d had in months, then I took a nap. When I came back downstairs, Jeremiah was lying on the couch and Alex was sleeping on his chest. He told me later it took about three hours before she screamed herself out.”

“Three hours?”

“Alex was always stubborn.”

“That I believe.”

“She’s also protective, and loyal.”
“The protective part is going to get her into trouble if she’s not careful.”

“It already has. It cost Alex her two best friends.”

“Josie and Vicki, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What were they like?”

“Josie always had to be the center of attention. I think that’s part of why she liked Alex. Alex never felt like competition. And Alex hung around with Josie because Josie was one of the only kids who wasn’t put off by how smart she is.”

“What about Vicki?” Maggie asked.

“Vicki was something different. She was the complete opposite of Josie. She only really seemed to care about Alex. She was really quite shy around anybody else, but when it was just her and Alex, she came to life.”

“Honestly, I wasn’t surprised when Alex and Josie stopped talking. Josie had a selfish streak that never really sat right with Alex, and she could be cruel sometimes. They were never a great fit as friends. But I couldn’t believe it when Alex and Vicki started fighting. Especially fighting over Josie. I didn’t even think Vicki liked Josie.”

“People surprise you. Not in a good way, most of the time.”

Mrs. Danvers glanced over at her, then back at the road. “What Elisa Wilkey did to you was terrible, Maggie.”

“She had her reasons.”

“It doesn’t matter what her reasons were. What she did was wrong. What her father did was wrong. And most of all, what your parents did to you was wrong. You can choose to forgive them or not. That’s your decision to make. But don’t ever believe that anything could justify what they did to you.”

Maggie smiled at Mrs. Danvers. “Thank you,” she said, happy to be reminded that there were people who cared about her enough to be on her side. Even if everything suddenly felt a lot more complicated than it had the day before.

Alex sat on the couch waiting for her mom and Maggie to get back so that she and her mom could head to the car dealership. But she had time, and Kara and Maggie’s reaction to Rhonda the night before was bugging her. So, she pulled out her phone and sent a text to Susan.

Alex: You busy?

Susan: Not really. Besides, if my moms want me to work instead of talk to pretty girls, they can pay me.

Alex: So you think I’m pretty?

Susan: I think you’re gorgeous.

Susan: Now stop fishing for compliments.
Alex: Can I call you?

Susan: Nights and weekends are free.

Alex smiled and hit the send button on her phone.

“Hey,” Susan said. “What’s up?”

“I need to ask you a question.”

“Okay. What wisdom do you need, grasshopper?”

“Grasshopper?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, do you even own a TV?”

“Yes.”

“Look, never mind. Just ask your question.”

“Something happened with my friend Rhonda last night.”

“Alex, you dog!”

“Not like that! Well, maybe like that. I’m not sure.”

“If you’re not sure, you’re doing it wrong.”

“You’re terrible,” Alex said.

“I am, but you love me anyway.”

“I tolerate you.”

“I thought you said you liked me!”

“That was days ago.”

“You’re killing me. But seriously, what happened?”

“Kara, Maggie, and I went to Yab-Yums after the movie.”

“And Yab-Yums is…?”

“A coffee bar. Mostly theater and art geeks. Kara’s kind of the queen of all art geeks, so she found it. Rhonda’s band plays there some weekends.”

“Okay. Go on.”

“Rhonda came to our table for a bit, and after she left, Kara and Maggie both insisted she’d been flirting with me. I’m not so sure.”

“Well, what did she do?”

“She showed us her new tattoo, and then she asked if I wanted to go to National City for the weekend to see her band play.” Alex flinched slightly at what sounded like someone getting slapped. “Susan?”
“I’m here,” Susan said. “Where was the tattoo?”

“Just under her left breast.”

“Okay. What was the tattoo?”

“It was a line of music, like from sheet music. It kind of curved around her breast, and the notes were done in different colors.”

“Let me guess, red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple, right?”

“I think so.”

“Alex, I say this with love, but Jesus fucking Christ, you useless fucking lesbian. I can’t even help you. You are a goddamned lost cause. Is Kara there? Put Kara on the phone. I need to let her know that from now on, she is officially in charge of flirting for you because clearly you can’t be trusted to know how to do it yourself.”

“So… You’re saying she was flirting.”

“YES!” Susan shouted.

“God, I’m really terrible at this.”

“Yes. Yes, you are. Though, to be fair, you’ve been gay a week and a half. I’m sure it could have happened to anyone. Except for Kara, or Maggie, or Rhonda, who I will nominate for sainthood if she ever speaks to you again.”

“I’m going to die old and alone, aren’t I?”

“Well, that depends. How long have you known Rhonda?”

“About four years.”

“And how long as Rhonda been inviting you to her gigs?”

“Two years.”

“You’re probably not going to die old and alone. But not because you don’t deserve to.”

“HEY!”

“I’m sorry, Alex, but you have probably given that poor girl the world’s worst case of lesbian blue balls in history.”

“I hate you.”

“I probably deserve it. Honestly, I’m being a bit dramatic, but the color of the notes are the fucking rainbow flag.”

“Oh, shit. I’m an idiot.”

Susan let out a long-suffering sigh. “No, you’re not. You want to know the truth?”

“Please,” Alex said.

“You’re running into a pretty classic lesbian problem. Most girls are a lot more subtle than I am
when it comes to flirting. Hell, I’m nowhere near as brazen about it if I’m not sure the girl is gay and I don’t know for sure I’m in a safe place. I shouldn’t be giving you a hard time about this because society kind of sets us up to fail. And Rhonda’s probably been trying the frog in a pot approach, which never, ever works.”

“Frog in a pot?”

“Yeah. It’s like, if you put in a frog in a pot full of hot water, it will immediately jump out, but if you put it in at room temperature, and turn up the heat slowly, the frog will never notice you boiling it. Well, if you start out with really subtle flirting and more and more obvious about it over time, pretty sure you can show a girl the rainbow flag you had tattooed under your tit, and they’ll think you’re just being friendly.”

“And I’m the frog in this metaphor?”

“The very cute lesbian frog, yes.”

“That may be the weirdest compliment I’ve ever received.”

“That’s because you’ve spent your life hanging around straight people. Seriously though, I shouldn’t be giving you a hard time. A lot of girls have the same problem, so don’t feel bad about it, no matter how much shit Kara, Maggie, or I give you.”

“I still feel like I screwed up.”

“You didn’t.”

“But how am I supposed to do this if I can’t even tell if a girl likes me?”

“Alex, if you had realized what Rhonda was asking, would you have wanted to go with her? I mean, an overnight date is pretty advanced gay, and you’re still in the beginner class.”

Alex closed her eyes and though about it for a minute. She liked Rhonda, and now that Maggie had pointed out that she’d been crushing on Rhonda for a while, Alex could recognize that she was attracted to her. The thought of going on a date was kind of nice. Hanging out in a club, listening to music, or watching Rhonda play, and then hanging out afterwards. Kissing her. That thought filled Alex’s stomach with butterflies.

But an overnight date would probably lead to things other than kissing. Things Alex had only really thought about in fairly vague terms. Things that intimidated her a little because she really didn’t have a lot of idea how they would even work.

“No,” Alex said. “I mean, I like Rhonda, but no way I’m even close to ready for that.”

“So no harm done. If you like her, maybe ask her out for something a little more beginner-level gay, like coffee without Kara and Maggie along. Or, you know, just flirt a bit and leave it at that. Or just ignore it. You don’t have to be into a girl just because she’s into you.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?” Susan asked. “Alex, I grew up spending a ton of time in a gay bookstore, and I still spend most of my time out of school here. I see a lot of shit happen to queer kids because they think they’re supposed to feel a certain way or act a certain way. A big part of that the reason I backed off is because I don’t want you to feel like you have to go out with me just because I’m interested. I’m not saying you can’t go on a date with Rhonda if you want. I’m just saying you don’t have to if you don’t want to. The same way you don’t have to go on a date with Maggie or me if you don’t want to. A lot of being queer is about being with the person you want to be with.
Not who you think you’re supposed to be with. But a lot of queer kids feel like they have to jump into a relationship as soon as they have a chance because our options are a lot more limited when it comes to finding a partner. Don’t make that mistake, okay?”

“Thank you. I probably needed to hear that.”

“You need to slow down. Take some time and get over the huge crush you’ve still got on Maggie. I know everything is shiny and exciting, but just take it easy and get to know yourself. You’ve got time.”

“You said that before,” Alex pointed out.

“Yeah. Because it’s true. I don’t want you to get hurt if you rush into something.”

“I appreciate that.”

“I still think you should take a day and get away from everything.”

“You might be right, but it won’t be today.”

“Why not?” Susan asked.

“My mom’s taking me car shopping.”

“Nice! Know what you’re getting?”

“A Kia Rio5.”

“Cool. You’ll have to bring it up so I can see it.”

“How impressed will you be?”

“Not as impressed as you’re hoping.”

“Damn!”

“Buy a Subaru. Then I’ll be impressed.”

“Okay, seriously, what’s the deal with the Subarus?”

“I’ll explain Subarus, U-Hauls, and toaster ovens next time you come into the bookstore.”

“Or you could tell me now.”

“Nah. I have to preserve some of the mystery.”

“Well, you were wearing a bikini in the picture you sent, so there’s definitely some mystery left.”

“Alex, did you just ask me for nudes?”

“What? NO!”

Susan let out a huge sniff. “I’m so proud!”

“Susan!”

“My little baby lesbian, off to ogle girls.”
“Susan, stop!”

“You are too easy.”

“I’m hanging up now,” Alex said.

“Okay. Take care. Have fun car shopping.”

“You know they could have run into traffic,” Maggie said. “Or Alex could have decided to go for a drive.”

“They’ll be here,” Kara said.

Maggie rolled her eyes and gave a small shake of her head. Alex had texted almost half an hour ago that they were leaving the dealership, and five minutes earlier, Kara had dragged Maggie outside so they could see Alex’s car as soon as she got home. Maggie thought she was being a little ridiculous, but she was quickly learning that saying no to Kara was like trying to say no to a particularly cute golden retriever puppy. Possible in theory, but not in practice.

Maggie wouldn’t have minded if it hadn’t been so cold. It wasn’t like Nebraska in winter cold, but if was on the low side of 50, and Maggie hadn’t grabbed a jacket on her way out. She was just about to suggest they wait inside again when Mrs. Danvers’ car appeared.

“See!” Kara said, bouncing a little on her feet.

Before Maggie could point out the lack of Alex as Mrs. Danvers pulled into the driveway, a black four-door hatchback appeared and pulled into the driveway behind Mrs. Danvers car. Maggie saw Alex sitting behind the wheel, and one thought occurred to her. “She got black,” Maggie said.

“Apparently.”

Maggie stepped around Kara and headed down the driveway as Alex climbed out of the car.

“Hey,” Alex said, a shy smile on her face as Maggie stopped in front of her. “What do you think?”

Maggie looked at the car, then back at Alex. “You got black.”

“Well, yeah,” Alex said with a little tilt of her head. “Someone I like a lot told me red was lame, and I should get black. When I walked into the showroom, this was sitting right there, so I figured it must be fate.”

Maggie smiled. “You’re something else, Danvers. You know that?”

The smile on Alex’s face got wider. “Want to take her for a spin?”

“Really?”

Alex reached into her pocket, pulled out a second set of keys, and held them out to Maggie.

“All yours.”

Maggie reached up and took the keys. “Where should we go?”

“I know a place.”
“So, you want to tell me what this mystery destination is?” Maggie asked as she turned off the car.

“It’s a bookstore,” Alex said, unable to keep the grin off her face. This whole idea was probably stupid, but she’d been excited ever since she thought of it.

“We drove an hour and a half to get to a bookstore?”

“Book store and coffee shop.”

“Nerd.”

Alex just grinned as she opened the door. “Come on. I promise it’s worth it.”

Maggie got out of the car and followed Alex as they headed up the street.

“I’m surprised Kara didn’t want to come along.”

“I think she’s still trying to give us some alone time,” Alex said, feeling a bit of heat in her cheeks from the embarrassment she felt at the admission.

“Ah, that’s actually kind of sweet.”

“She tries. But I’ll talk to her. Let her know there’s no need.”

“I don’t mind spending time alone with you, Alex.”

Alex smiled as she looked over at Maggie. “Good to know. But I don’t want you to feel like anyone is pressuring you into anything.”

Maggie stopped walking so abruptly that Alex took another five steps before she realized Maggie wasn’t beside her anymore. She frowned and turned around. “Is something wrong?”

“No. You just keep surprising me.”

“Is that a good thing?”

Maggie smiled at her, and the sight of those dimples made Alex’s heart skip a beat. “It’s a very good thing.” Maggie took three steps closer to Alex. “And for the record, you’ve never made me feel pressured.”

“Not even the other night?” Alex asked, remembering her aborted attempt to kiss Maggie a couple of nights earlier.

Maggie shook her head. “No. Not even then.”

Alex couldn’t stop herself from smiling what she was sure was a big, dopey grin, but she didn’t mind because Maggie answered with a smile of her own and reached out to take Alex’s hand.

“Come on,” Alex said. “There’s someone I want you to meet.” She gave their joined hands a small tug as she turned and headed for the bookstore before she could do something stupid, like ruining the moment by kissing Maggie senseless.

Maggie spotted the bookstore while they were still a block away. The big rainbow flag hanging above the door made it stand out just a bit. It also gave her a pretty big clue as to whom Alex wanted her to meet, and Maggie had mixed feelings about that. One the one hand, Susan seemed to
be pretty cool from what little Maggie knew about her. On the other hand, she wasn’t quite sure she was ready to meet another girl who was into Alex when she really, really wanted to grab Alex and kiss her senseless more and more with every passing moment. The fact that she couldn’t really convince herself to disappoint Alex made the decision for her, and she followed Alex through the door of the bookstore with only a little hesitation.

The place wasn’t anything like what Maggie had imagined a gay bookstore would be like. It was bright and cheerful with colorful flags hung all over the place and wide aisles, music playing softly in the background. Paintings decorated the walls, and there were stuffed animals with rainbow flags sitting on top of some of the shelves. Maggie really wished they’d brought Kara along because she would have loved it.

Alex was scanning the place, looking for someone when a girl appeared in front of them, looking like the cat that ate the canary. She had long, curly hair that was too black to be natural and a silver ring through one nostril. Her outfit was great. Fishnets, DocMartens, a short skirt, a My Chemical Romance t-shirt, and a biker jacket with a teal translucent rubber fish hung from the left epaulette.

“Welcome back,” the girl said, looking right at Alex.

“Oh, hi,” Alex said, still scanning the room.

“I don’t think we were introduced last week,” the girl said. “I’m Tammy.”

“Alex.” She lifted their joined hands. “This is Maggie.”

Tammy’s face fell a little as she caught sight of their hands, then she looked at Maggie. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Maggie said.

Tammy turned back to Alex. “Can I help you find anything?”

“Actually, yes,” Alex said, finally focusing her attention on Tammy. “I’m looking for your sister.”

Maggie had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at the sour look on Tammy’s face. She went from a ‘Kara’s opening an order of potstickers’ to ‘Kara’s staring at an empty pizza box’ look so fast it was a wonder she didn’t get whiplash. “She’s over in the café,” Tammy said.

“Thanks.” Alex stepped past Tammy and headed for the small archway with the sign above it that read ‘The Gay Café’. Maggie followed, smiling the whole way.

“You know she was into you, right?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah, I noticed. She’s not really my type.”

“Not your type?”

“She’s too tall,” Alex said.

“She’s two inches shorter than… Oh, you bitch!”

“What? I’m having trouble hearing you down there.”

“I know where you sleep, Danvers.”

“I’ll leave a step stool beside the bed.”
“You’re asking for it.”

“Yeah, but you already said you’re not going to give it to me.”

Maggie opened her mouth to reply, but she couldn’t think of anything to say to that. Or rather, she could think of lots of things to say to that, but all of them involved ways she would like to give it to Alex. Which would not help. At all.

So instead she followed Alex through the arch into the café. The place was full of people, and there were only a handful of empty tables, but Maggie spotted Susan right away. She was standing behind the counter, glaring at a computer.

Alex squeezed Maggie’s hand, and Maggie looked over at her.

“Mocha, right?” Alex asked.

“Yeah.”

“Grab us a table?”

“Sure,” Maggie said, letting go of Alex’s hand reluctantly. She headed over and grabbed a table in the corner, sitting so she was facing the counter and could watch Alex and Susan. Alex stopped in front of the counter where Susan was muttering to herself as she glared at the computer. Alex said something, and Susan looked up. Maggie saw the instant Susan realized who was standing in front of her. The scowl on her face vanished, replaced by a huge grin, at the exact same moment the warm feeling Maggie had was replaced by the burning desire to get up and go stand between Alex and Susan. She swallowed the urge and watched as Susan and Alex talked for a minute. Alex turned and pointed at Maggie, and Maggie forced a smile onto her face as Susan looked over. Susan said something that made Alex laugh and shake her head, and made Maggie have to stomp down on her jealousy before she grabbed Alex and walked her right out the door. Alex reached for her wallet, but Susan shook her head. Alex finally shrugged and walked over to the table, sitting down across from Maggie.

“She’ll be over in a minute. She just has to get someone to cover the counter.”

“I don’t want to pull her away from her job.”

“It’s not really a job. Her moms own the place. She just helps out in her spare time.”

“Ah. Kind of sucks that she doesn’t get paid.”

“I know.”

Maggie spotted a short, muscular woman in a tank top and cargo pants walking into the café and swallowed as her mouth went dry. She apparently wasn’t subtle about it either because Alex immediately realized something was up.

“What?” Alex asked.

Maggie just nodded towards the woman, who had stepped behind the counter with Susan. Alex turned around to have a look and had a slightly more vocal reaction.

“Holy shit,” Alex said, drawing looks from a several tables, and more than one knowing smile from one of the ladies.
“I know.”

“God, those biceps.”

“I know,” Maggie repeated.

Susan said something to the woman, who looked over at their table. She smiled and said something to Susan that made her blush so brightly Maggie could see the color in her cheeks from across the room. Susan smacked the woman’s shoulder, then picked up a tray with three cups and a plateful of sandwiches on it and headed their way.

“If I hear one word from either of you about how hot my mom is, I will murder you both and dump the bodies in the bay,” Susan said as she sat the tray on the table.

“That’s your mom?” Alex asked.

“One of them,” Susan said as she passed out coffees. “Did I mention my moms met on a Marine Corps base?”

“Well, no,” Alex said. “And even if you had, I wouldn’t have expected them to look like a recruitment poster.”

“For lesbians,” Maggie added.

Susan gave them both an annoyed look.

“Sorry,” Maggie said.

Susan rolled her eyes. “It’s not like I haven’t heard it before. Usually from my other mom. I’m Susan by the way,” she said, as she held out her hand.

Maggie reached out and shook it. “Maggie.”

“Nice to meet you. Are you a vegetarian or a vegan?”

“No,” Maggie said.

“Good because our grilled tofu sandwiches are disgusting.” She pointed to the plate. “Pastrami on rye, turkey club on whole wheat, or BLT on seven grain.”

“Turkey club,” Maggie said.

“Ale?” Susan asked.

“Mind if I take the pastrami?”

“Grab a napkin and dig in.”

Alex picked up a napkin off the tray and put the sandwich on it. Maggie reached for one of the napkins too, but Susan blocked her hand.

“Not you,” Susan said, picking up the BLT. “Lady gets a plate.” She passed the plate with the turkey club over to Maggie.

“Um, thanks?”
“Why don’t I get a plate?” Alex asked.

“Because I’m not doing the extra dishes, and she’s cuter than you are,” Susan said before taking a bite out of her sandwich.

Maggie took one look at the indignant expression on Alex’s face and broke down laughing.

“Oh, God. You didn’t tell me there were dimples,” Susan said. “What the fuck, Alex? Warn a girl next time.”

“Hey. No one warmed me about the dimples either.”

Maggie looked at both of them, who were staring right at her with smiles on their faces and felt her cheeks start to heat up.

“Oh, shit! She’s cute when she blushes too.” Susan shook her head and looked over at Alex. “I’d think you were deliberately holding out on me, but I’ve seen what kind of disaster you are around girls. You were probably too busy hiding your face in your hands to notice.”

Maggie laughed again. “You’ve seen her do that too?”

“Yeah. Girl cannot handle a little flirting.”

“When she notices it,” Maggie said. “She’s not really good at the noticing part.”

“Hey! I noticed with Tammy!”

“That’s only slightly easier than noticing you’re getting mauled by a bear,” Susan said. “Tammy isn’t exactly subtle.”

“Neither was Rhonda,” Maggie said, making sure to get the same slightly breathless quality to her voice when she said Rhonda’s name that Alex’s voice had when she was talking about Rhonda a few days earlier.

Alex groaned. “I am never going to live that down, am I?”

“No,” Maggie and Susan both said at the same time. Maggie looked over at Susan, surprised that she’d answered.

“You know about that?” she asked, trying to stamp down the flash of jealously suddenly gnawing at her gut.

Susan looked over at Alex, who gave a resigned sigh and a small wave of permission.

“She called this morning to admit her shame,” Susan said with a grin as she turned back to Maggie. “We probably shouldn’t be too hard on her though. After all, she’s only been gay a week and a half.”

“And yet somehow I’ve been dumped three times.”

Maggie had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing at how pathetic Alex both looked and sounded.

“Well,” Susan said, “as one of the girls who dumped you, it’s not because you aren’t adorable.”

Alex glared at Susan. “You’re really not helping, you know that, right?”
“Wait. You dumped her?” Maggie asked, feeling her stomach twist a little bit.

“Yes,” Susan said dramatically. She lifted her right arm, pressing the back of her wrist to her forehead, and closed her eyes, and when she spoke again, it she sounded like the breathless heroine of a bad BBC production of a Jane Austin movie. “I dumped her first. It was a short, tragic romance. Half a coffee shop date before she was called away by cruel, cruel fate.”

“It was a text from my mom,” Alex grumbled.

Susan dropped her arm down, pressing her hand to her chest. “I could tell right from the start it wasn’t meant to be. She spent the whole time lamenting her unrequited affections for the damsel who first turned her eye to the fairer sex.”

Maggie broke down laughing, and Alex reached up and covered her face with both hands, which didn’t completely hide the fact that she was turning beet red.

“That’s NOT what happened,” Alex mumbled through her hands.

“Sorry. I’ve been stocking in romance most of the day. It has an effect on me.”

“You guys carry romance novels?” Maggie asked.

“Oh, yeah. Honestly, gay romance novels sold to lonely straight women on the internet are going to put me and my sister through college. But it’s the lesbian romance section that’s the reason I’m always broke.”

“Okay, this I have got to see.”

“Finish your coffee first. That shit doesn’t grow on trees you know,” Susan said.

Alex stared at the books in the Lesbian Sex section of the store, taking advantage of Susan and Maggie’s being distracted in the romance section to do a little shopping without either of them making her blush so hard she felt like her head was going to explode. Of course, shopping on her own did have its disadvantages. It left her with the problem of how to find what she was looking for because there were a lot of books on the shelf, and none of them were titled, ‘How Does Lesbian Sex Even Work?’ or, ‘So You’ve Just Realized You’re A Lesbian,’ or even just, ‘What You Probably Want To Do With Girls.’

She really could use some help, but even leaving aside the embarrassment of asking a girl she liked to help her pick out an instruction manual on how to have sex with girls, she didn’t want to interrupt Susan and Maggie, who were getting to know each other. She knew most people might be a bit jealous of how well Susan and Maggie were getting along, but it was kind of a relief to Alex. She liked knowing that Maggie would have someone beyond Kara and her to talk to. Because she knew they could both get lost in their own shit and because there were things that Maggie probably wouldn’t feel comfortable talking to her about, since Maggie knew Alex had a crush on her.

“Can I help you find something?”

Alex jumped a little at the unexpected question. She turned around, and promptly forgot how to breathe. The woman standing in front of her had warm, golden skin; silky brown hair shot through with golden highlights; and brown eyes so deep you could fall into them.

“Um…”
The woman smiled, which didn’t help, because it just drew Alex’s eyes to a pair of perfect lips covered in shiny pink lipstick and made her sure she was about to have a heart attack. “It’s Alex, right?”

“Um, yeah,” Alex managed to get out. “How did you know?”

“Well, you’ve managed to make quite an impression on both my daughters.”

“Oh! You’re one of Susan’s moms!”

“I’m Yatzka. I think you already saw Jenette in the café.”

Alex nodded. “Yeah.”

“Well, Alex, what are you looking for?” Yatzka asked.

“I, um…” Alex stared at Yatzka for a minute, not able to decide if this was better or worse than asking Susan for help. On the one hand, Yatzka knew what section she was in and wasn’t giving her a hard time about it, but on the other hand, Yatzka was the mom of one of the girls Alex kind of liked, and Alex was looking for a sex manual.

Yatzka seemed to understand and took pity on her. “It’s okay. We don’t judge anybody here, and I promise, I won’t judge you. We’re here to help people like you. People who need who need answers or guidance or even just a little entertainment that reflects who they are.”

Alex took a deep breath. “I don’t know how much Susan told you, but I really just figured out I’m gay.”

“She was pretty tight-lipped about what you talked about,” Yatzka said.

“Oh. Well, um, I did just figure it out, and this wasn’t really covered in health class at school. And the talk my mom gave me was kind of focused on boys. Not to mention completely mortifying. So I don’t really want to go back to her for advice on the subject.”

“Okay. So something nice and basic.”

“Please.”

“And your parents are good, right? They’re okay with your sexuality?”

“It’s just my mom, and yeah. I came out to her last Saturday.”

“That makes things easier. Sometimes we have to be careful of titles, so kids don’t accidently get outed. But if your mom’s good, there are a couple of books I can recommend. Just to be clear because gay gets used kind of as a catch-all by some people, are you exclusively into girls?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. So we’ll take anything that isn’t lesbian-focused off the list.”

“Um… Actually, if you have anything that covers both, that might be good. My sister… She likes both.”

Yatzka smiled. “Okay. Let’s see what we can find for you.”
“You know, I’ve got to admit, I never would have pegged you as the romance novel type,” Susan said as Maggie skimed the back of a novel called Tropical Storm about some sort of corporate takeover in Florida.

“Why not?” Maggie asked as she put the book back on the shelf.

“The way you dress. The way you carry yourself. The whole vibe you’ve got going. Most of the girls who come in looking for romance novels tend to be less soft butch.”

Maggie shrugged. “I’m not really the romance novel type. My mom used to devour the things. I tried to read one once and wanted to punch the guy by page 20. Never finished it. But if you’d asked me yesterday, I would have said I hate romantic comedies too. Turns out, I just hate straight romantic comedies. So, now I’m wondering how much other stuff I’d like if it was gay.”

“You guys saw Imagine Me & You, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a great movie, but you should make Alex let you watch the DVDs she bought last week.”

“Good stuff?”

“Yeah. I’d start with D.E.B.S., but Saving Face is definitely worth a watch too.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Maggie said, but she was already making plans for how she was going to spend the evening.

“Cat I ask you a personal question?”

“Sure,” Maggie said. “Not promising I’ll answer.”

“How are you holding up?”

“What do you mean?”

“Alex told me a bit about what happened to you.”

“I figured.”

“Don’t be mad at her. When she came in here last week, she was trying to get her head around the idea that she’s gay. She really needed to talk it out, and what happened to you was kind of front and center in her realization.”

“I’m not mad,” Maggie said. “A little embarrassed, but not mad.”

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed. You didn’t do anything wrong. If anything, you should be proud. Putting yourself out there like that took guts.”

“It was stupid. I knew how my parents would react if they ever found out I was gay, and I did it anyway.”

“It wasn’t stupid. You know, I walk around this place, and I talk to the kids who come in, and I volunteer down at the queer community center, and you know what happens if someone gives me a hard time about being gay? I come home to my two gay moms, and my gay sister, and I’m safe, and I’m loved, and I’m supported. It doesn’t take a lot of courage to be yourself when it’s safe and easy. But being yourself when it hard and scary and dangerous. That’s brave. And yes, it didn’t go
well. It went straight to shit, in fact. But you still did it. You were scared, and you did it anyway. Own that, because it is fucking amazing.”

Maggie felt the heat rising in her cheeks and had to look away from Susan because the way Susan was looking at her was just a little too intense. “Thanks,” she muttered. “It’s true. But it also brings us back to my original question. How are you holding up?”

“Honestly?” Maggie asked, as she stared blankly at the self of books in front of her. “Yeah. Alex is over on the other side of the store staring at one of my moms, which is both annoying and gross, but it also means she won’t hear anything you say. And I promise, whatever you say is just between you, me, and the bodice rippers.”

Maggie laughed and turned to look. Sure enough, Alex was staring at a beautiful woman who was pointing at a book on one of the shelves. Maggie turned back to Susan. “You promise you won’t say anything?”

“Not a word.” “I’m confused.” “About what?” “A lot of things.” Maggie glanced over to make sure Alex was still busy. “We ran into Elisa Wilkey coming out of the movie last night. Like, literally ran into her because Alex and I were too busy talking to each other to watch where we were going.”

“That couldn’t have been fun.” “No. She said something, and I don’t know what to do about it.” “What did she say?” “Alex asked her what her problem was. Said all she had to do when I gave her the card was say no, and it wouldn’t have been a big deal. Elisa looked right at her and said, ‘No one takes no for an answer.’”

“Shit. You think someone…?” Maggie nodded. “Shit,” Susan said again. “Yeah. I don’t know what to do.” “There might not be anything you can do.” “I know,” Maggie said. “But we were friends for months, and I had no idea. I feel like I let her down. She was my best friend, and someone hurt her, and it just feels wrong not to try to do something.”

“Goddammit.” “What?”
“It’s just… I can see why Alex likes you so much. After what Elisa did to you, most people wouldn’t give a shit about her.”

“But she was my friend,” Maggie said.

“Yeah. Your friend who outing you and got you kicked out by your parents. The fact that you still give a shit about her means you’re actually a good person. Which sucks because I kind of hoped I’d find a reason to hate you.”

“What? Why?”

Susan gave a pointed look towards the other side of the store where Alex was still staring at Susan’s mom and holding a stack of books.

“Oh. You like her?”

“Yeah. A lot. I mean, I meet a lot of girls working here, but she’s something special. And it sucks because she’s hung up on you.”

“I’m sorry.”

Susan shrugged. “It’s not your fault you’re gorgeous and smart and funny and brave and compassionate and kind. But I am going to blame you for the dimples; those are just excessive.”

Maggie reached up and covered her mouth to keep from laughing so loud the whole store could hear it. It took a few seconds for her to get it under control before she could speak again. “Alex didn’t tell me you were a great big flirt.”

“How would she be able to tell? Anything short of ridiculously blunt goes right over her head.”

“True,” Maggie said, remembering the way Alex had completely missed that Rhonda was flirting with her the night before.

Susan glanced over to the checkout, where Alex was now busy paying for her books.

“There’s only one thing for it,” Susan said as she looked back at Maggie. “You and I have to be friends.”

“Really? You tell me you wanted to hate me because the girl you like has a crush on me, and now you want to be friends?”

“Well, I the other option is a duel to the death. I can go get the swords, but I warn you, I’m in the running for fencing scholarships from UC National City and Stanford.”

Maggie reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone. “Well in that case, you better give me your phone number.”

Susan took her phone and entered her number into Maggie’s contacts. “There. If you ever want to talk, I’m always willing to listen.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. Now, what kind of romance novel are you looking for?”

“Got anything about cops?”
Susan smiled at her. “Oh, you are going to go broke so fast.”

“You sure your mom will be okay with this?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah,” Alex said as she pulled out of the parking lot. “Mom’s first rule of credit card usage: books are always okay.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. When we get home, I’ll show you the finished book bin.”

“The what?”

“Mom’s other rule about books,” Alex said. “If you’re not going to read it again, it goes in the bin. She takes it down to the used bookstore and unloads it every few weeks. The way Kara goes through books, it’s the only reason there’s any room left to live in the house.”

“She reads like she eats, huh?”

“That’s one way to put it. So, what did you think of Susan?”

“I liked her. She seems like a good friend.”

“I know it’s kind of weird. I’ve only known her a week, but she’s been a big help. Just having someone to help me sort things out. I was really hoping you two would hit it off. I thought it might be good for you to have someone to talk to who isn’t Kara or me.”

Maggie looked over at her. “I like talking to you and Kara.”

Alex smiled, and she felt the familiar flutter in her stomach. “We are pretty great.”

Maggie laughed and nodded. “You are. I don’t think I would have made it through the last couple of weeks without you.”

“You would have; you’re tough. I’m just really glad you didn’t have to.”

“So am I. Can I ask a nosey question?”

“Sure.”

“Is it really safe for Kara to be selling those paintings?”

“It’s better than the alternative,” Alex said as she pulled onto the highway.

“What do you mean?”

“Kara’s birthday is September 22nd. Her birth family... It’s hard to explain, but it’s just really, really important to her. And the first three years, her cousin sent her a gift and a birthday card. It wasn’t what she wanted, but it was enough to keep her from getting upset. I’m not sure, but I think Mom was calling him and reminding him. But this past year, we were all a little messed up. So much was going on, I think Mom just forgot to call Clark. So her birthday rolled around, and no present, no card, no nothing. The bastard couldn’t even send her a fucking email.” Alex pursed her lips, her grip tightening around the steering wheel enough that her knuckles turned white. “It was awful. Kara was heartbroken. I hadn’t seen her cry like that in years, and I’ve never seen Mom that mad. She called Clark and just laid into him. Kara heard it, and she decided something had to be
wrong. She tried to sneak out that night to go to Metropolis.”

“She tried to run away?”

“Not really run away. She just wanted to go see her cousin. I managed to talk her out of it, but it was close. Then he called the next day and fed her this load of bullshit about how busy he was, and Kara just lapped it up. A couple of weeks later, she got the idea to save up enough money to go visit since he was too busy to come here.”

“That’s when she started selling the paintings?”

“Yeah. I tried to talk her out of it, but Kara’s stubborn. Once she gets an idea in her head, there’s no talking her out of it. So I tried to make the most of it. Talked her into planning the trip for after she graduates. I figure, if she has a goal and a timeline, she’s a lot less likely to do something stupid.”

“Her cousin sounds like a complete asshole.”

“He’s a selfish bastard, but he’s got everybody completely snowed. Aside from me and my mom, pretty much everybody who knows him thinks he’s the greatest thing since sliced bread.”

“Your Mom doesn’t like him either?”

“They used to be friends. Mom used to teach at UC Coast City, and he was in one of her Intro to Biology classes. Whatever it was she liked about him went out the window after he pretty much abandoned Kara. She’s just better at hiding in than I am.”

“Okay. That explains why you haven’t ratted Kara out to your Mom, but why are the paintings dangerous?”

“Because they might attract attention. Honestly, that’s the only reason I haven’t gone after Kim with a baseball bat. Those paintings are probably worth 10 or 15 times what Kim is selling them for, and I’m pretty sure she knows it too. But she’s been really good about not telling people whose paintings they are.”

“Would your mom really freak out if she found out?”

“Kara and I would be grounded until our grandkids were on social security.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. It wouldn’t be pretty.”

“Aren’t you worried that she might see the paintings in Yab-Yums?”

“I have nightmares about it, but she’s never set foot in Yab-Yums. Hipster coffee bars aren’t really her thing.”

“Thank God for small favors.”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “As long as Mom never finds out, things will be okay. Right up until Kara actually goes to Metropolis and that fucker still doesn’t have five minutes to spare for her.”

“He really hasn’t visited her since she got here?”

“Not once. He’s talked to her on the phone a couple of times, and sometimes he talks to her on instant messenger, but that’s it.”
“Asshole,” Maggie said.

“Agreed.”

“I’m tempted to say let’s go to Metropolis and punch him in the face.”

“It’s on the agenda. Just not today.”

“Well, when you do get around to it, take me along.”

“I think I can manage that.”

Maggie winced a little as Mrs. Danvers pulled the last of the stitches out of her lip.

“Sorry,” Mrs. Danvers said.

“It’s okay. It just feels weird.”

“I know. The good news is, that’s the last one,” Mrs. Danvers said as picked the hand mirror up off the kitchen table and held it up.

Maggie took a look and frowned at what she saw. “It’s going to scar, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. It’s been a long time since I’ve done this kind of medicine. My gut says yes. A cut like that really needed to be stitched up within the first five hours or so. The good news is, if it does, it should be a fairly small scar.”

“Great. A small facial scar.”

“Look on the bright side. I have it on pretty good authority that chicks dig scars.”

Maggie burst out laughing.

Mrs. Danvers set the mirror down on the table. “Seriously, Maggie, this is California. You can’t swing a cat without hitting a plastic surgeon. If it leaves a scar and you’re not comfortable with it, we’ll get it fixed.”

Maggie nodded. “Okay,” she said, but she decided right then and there she could look like the Phantom of the Opera, and she wouldn’t say a word. There was no way she was letting Mrs. Danvers pay for her to get plastic surgery.

“Did you and Alex have a good time in Coast City?” Mrs. Danvers asked as she started packing up the first aid kit.

“Yeah. I might have gone a little nuts in the bookstore. Alex said it was okay, but I’m still a little worried about the bill.”

“Don’t be. I know we didn’t have a lot of time to talk when I handed you your credit cards, but the rules are simple. Books, food, and gas are always okay. If you need clothes, check with me first, which is only a rule so Alex doesn’t buy every leather jacket she sees. Movies are fine. Check before you buy concert tickets, and before you ask, no, you cannot go to Nine Inch Nails concerts three nights in a row.”

“Another Alex rule?”
“How did you guess?”

“I’ve seen Kara’s CD collection.”

Mrs. Danvers laughed. “You know, if Superman really wanted to be a hero, he would toss *NSYNC into space.”

Maggie smiled. “I feel bad for Alex. They have to share a room.”

“You know, out of all the mistakes I’ve made as a parent, I think that’s probably the one that will end up getting me put in a nursing home.”

Maggie let out another chuckle before asking, “Any more rules about the credit card?”

“Yes. The blue card is for living expenses for you, Alex, and Kara. The limit isn’t that high, so don’t go nuts, but you have two hundred a month that’s yours to do whatever you want with, and that’s on top of books, food, gas, and movies. If you have anything big you need, come to me, and we’ll discuss it. I have a different card for major purchases. If you have a hobby, and you need to get set up, make a list, and I’ll get you what you need to get started. The red card is for emergencies only.”

“Okay,” Maggie said. “I think I can handle that.”

“I know money’s a sensitive topic for you, but don’t worry about it. I don’t plan on treating you any differently than Alex or Kara. If you have any questions about whether something’s okay money-wise, ask Alex. She’s got a pretty good head on her shoulders. Don’t ask Kara.”

“Why do I get the feeling there’s a story there?”

“Because you know that, ‘Food is always okay,’ doesn’t mean you can put 500 dollars’ worth of chocolate on the card.”

“I’m not even going to pretend I’m surprised.”

“To be fair, 500 dollars isn’t a lot if you’re buying Godiva chocolate at the mall.”

“Yeah, my idea of expensive chocolate is getting Dove instead of Hershey’s.”

“How do you feel about barbecue?”

“I grew up 15 minutes from the Kansas border.”

“There’s a place down near the lab.”

“Good pulled pork?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Danvers said.

“What are we waiting for?”
Monday, February 27, 2006

Maggie gave a small wave as Alex, Kara, and her went their separate ways just inside the main entrance of the school. They’d gotten there early so that Alex could go by the office and get a parking permit for the car, which meant Maggie had some time before her first class started. She was tempted to use it to find Elisa and talk to her, but she wasn’t really sure she wanted to have that conversation at school. In fact, she was pretty sure she didn’t, but she also wasn’t sure how she could approach Elisa outside of school. Maybe the best approach would be to talk to her and see if she would be willing to meet up somewhere after school. She had no idea if Elisa would be willing to talk to her, much less be willing to be seen in public with her, but after what Elisa had said the other night, she had to try. After all the time they’d been friends, Maggie felt like she owed Elisa at least that much. She still knew Elisa’s routine by heart, so it wouldn’t be that big of a deal to track her down before first period.

She turned down the science hall and headed for her locker. Her mind was running a mile a minute as she tried to decide what to say when she talked to Elisa. She was so preoccupied with it that she didn’t see the writing on her locker until she reached for the lock. When she did see it—the word ‘Dyke’ written in big black letters—it felt like getting punched in the gut. She hadn’t had a slur written on her locker since she left Blue Springs. Her first thought was to clean it off before anyone else saw it, but then she got mad at herself because she didn’t have anything to clean it off with. Back in Blue Springs, she’d kept a bottle of nail polish remover and some paper towels in her locker, but she’d stopped when she moved here because she hadn’t wanted to explain to Elisa why she had nail polish remover in her locker when she never, ever wore nail polish.

“Fuck,” she muttered as she reached for the lock. She didn’t need this shit. Maybe Kara had some…

She stopped mid thought as panic filled her. She turned and took off at a run for the English hall and Kara and Alex’s lockers. She blew by Ms. Mercer at a dead run, ignoring her shouts to slow down, but the instant she spotted Kara, she knew she was too late. Kara stood in the middle of the hall, staring at the lockers, and there was no mistaking the anger and tension on her face. Maggie looked over at the lockers as she came to a stop. The words ‘Dyke Bitches’ were written in such
big letters that they covered both of their side-by-side lockers.

She reached out and put a hand on Kara’s shoulder, but Kara jerked away and turned towards her, and for a moment, Maggie could have sworn her eyes were literally glowing with anger. Kara closed her eyes and shook her head.

“How did you know?” Ms. Mercer asked.

“They got my locker in the science hall too.”

Ms. Mercer looked at Kara. “You’re Alex Danvers’ younger sister, right?”

“Yes. Kara.”

“One of the lockers is yours?” Ms. Mercer asked.

“And the other one is Alex’s,” Kara said.

“Where is she?”

“She’s in the office,” Maggie said.

“That’s good. Come on.”

“What? Are you kidding? We didn’t do anything!” Maggie said.

“I know,” Ms. Mercer said, her voice calm. “But I want to make sure you and Kara are safe while we figure out who did this and deal with them.”

Maggie stared at Ms. Mercer for a moment, not sure that was any more believable than the idea that they were going to be punished for someone else defacing their lockers. No one had ever given a shit when it happened to her back in Blue Springs, and she hadn’t expected Midvale to be any different.

“Come on,” Ms. Mercer said again.

Maggie didn’t argue the second time.

Alex rolled her eyes when the school secretary handed her another form to fill out. She wasn’t sure why she had to fill out five separate forms just to be able to park her car on campus. The whole thing was bordering on the ridiculous, but it was also Principal Munroe’s style. Alex hadn’t had a lot of contact with the man, but everybody knew he loved his rules.

She signed the last form and handed it over, along with the 15 dollar fee for the permit. The secretary took both, then handed her a maroon and yellow plastic mirror hanger for her car.
“Thanks,” Alex said.

“You’re welcome, dear.”

Alex turned to leave but stopped halfway to the door when it opened, and Ms. Mercer walked in leading Kara and Maggie.

“Hello, Alex,” Ms. Mercer said. “Could you go ahead and have a seat?”

“Um, why? What’s going on?”

“I’ll let Maggie and Kara explain. I need to go have a word with Principal Munroe. Just don’t leave the office for now.” Ms. Mercer stepped behind the counter. “Phyllis, would you keep an eye on them?”

“Of course,” the secretary said.

Alex looked at Maggie and Kara, wondering what could have happened in the 10 minutes they’d been apart to land all three of them in the principal’s office. Maggie and Kara sat down, and Alex sat down next to Maggie, keeping Maggie between her and Kara, the way they did on the walk to and from school.

“What happened?” Alex asked.

“Someone wrote ‘Dyke Bitches’ across yours and Kara’s lockers in Sharpie,” Maggie said, which earned a gasp from Phyllis. “Mine was apparently only big enough for ‘Dyke’.”

“Shit,” Alex said.

“Language, dear,” Phyllis said.

Alex turned around, giving her a look. “Really? Right now? That’s what you’re worried about?”

Phyllis gave her a sour look.

Alex turned around, and what she saw made her ill. There was such a look of resignation and misery on Maggie’s face that it broke her heart and made her want to find the person who did it and break their smug, self-righteous little face. She glanced over and saw the same anger she felt on Kara’s face. She took Maggie’s hand in her own, lacing their fingers together and squeezing.

“We’re here,” Alex said. “We’ve got you.”

Kara took Maggie’s other hand.

“Alex is right. Stronger together.”

Alex felt Maggie squeeze both their hands.

“It’s going to get bad for all of us,” Maggie said. “I’m sorry I did this to you.”

“You didn’t do this,” Alex said.

“This isn’t your fault,” Kara added.

“If I hadn’t come along, none of this would have happened.”
“If you hadn’t come along, I might not have ever realized I’m gay.”

“That might have been better. All being gay has ever done is make my life hell.”

Alex had to stop herself from wrapping both her arms around Maggie, and she had to stop herself from screaming at how unfair all of this was. Maggie hadn’t done anything wrong, but people kept trying to punish her for it. Alex might not be able to give any of the assholes the beating they deserved, but she’d be damned if she was going to let Maggie feel like that. “Maggie, look at me,” she said. Maggie looked over at her, and Alex sat up a little straighter.

“I’m glad I know. I’m glad because I get to have friends like you and Susan. I’m glad because someday I’m going to get to have a girlfriend, then a wife and kids and a family. I’m going to be happy. That’s because of you. So don’t you dare be sorry you came into my life. You are one of the best things that has ever happened to me.”

“Alex is right,” Kara said. “You’re our family, and you’re always going to be our family, no matter what. We’re going to get through this.”

Alex watched as Maggie’s eyes filled with tears, and she started crying. More than anything, in that moment, Alex wanted to lean forward and kiss the tears off her cheeks, to hold her in her arms and protect her from everything. She had to remind herself that the pull she felt towards Maggie was one-sided, and that wasn’t what Maggie needed from her right now.

“You know you guys are amazing, right?” Maggie asked.

Alex smiled. “We are pretty great. So can I punch Elisa Wilkey in the throat now?”

“I don’t think Elisa had anything to do with this,” Maggie said.

“What? She’s the only one who knew.”

“Yeah, I thought so too, but she didn’t see Kara with us at the theater.”

“She knows Kara hangs out with us,” Alex said. “It’s not that much of a stretch.”

“Girls,” Ms. Mercer called out.

All three of them turned to face Ms. Mercer.

“We’re pulling the security camera footage from this morning for the Science and English halls, so we’ll know who did this in a few minutes. But I wanted to make sure it would be safe for the three of you if I called your parents.”

Alex noticed that even though Ms. Mercer said she was asking all three of them, the question was directed almost entirely towards Maggie.

“I don’t live with my parents anymore,” Maggie said. “I live with Alex and Kara. I’m emancipated, but if you want to call Mrs. Danvers, that would be good.”

Ms. Mercer smiled and looked at Alex. Alex gave a small nod.


Eliza was packing up her laptop and getting ready to leave for work when her phone rang. A call that early was never a good sign, so she felt more than a little dread when she pulled out her phone,
but that dread turned to panic when she saw the school’s name listed under the caller ID. She flipped her phone open and lifted it to her ear.

“Dr. Danvers,” she said.

“Morning, Dr. Danvers. This is Julie Mercer. I’m Alex and Maggie’s English teacher. I’m not sure if you remember but we met briefly at the parent-teacher conference back in October.”

“I remember. What can I do for you, Ms. Mercer?”

“First, all three of them are okay. At least physically. But there has been an incident involving Alex, Maggie, and Kara.”

“What kind of incident?”

“Someone wrote profanities and homophobic slurs on their lockers in black marker.”

“You said they were okay physically.”

“Maggie seems to be having a hard time of it. When I went out to make sure it would be safe to call home about this, she was crying.”

“I’ll be there in 10 minutes. We have a restraining order against Sheriff Rodas. He’s not to set foot within a hundred yards of Maggie, Alex, or Kara. The order is on file at the school. When you call the Sheriff’s office, make sure they send someone other than him.”

“Thank you for letting me know that, but I believe Principal Munroe intends to handle this matter internally.”

“I see,” Eliza said. “I’ll be there in 10 minutes.”

“Alex, Maggie, and Kara will be in the office when you arrive.”

Maggie knew she must look like a complete mess. They’d been sitting in the office for close to 20 minutes, and she’d been crying on and off for about 15, but she couldn’t bring herself to let go of Alex’s or Kara’s hands to wipe the tears off her face.

It had been such a good weekend—Alex getting the car, the trip to Coast City, meeting Susan, spending Sunday on the couch, watching D.E.B.S., Saving Face, and But I’m a Cheerleader. She’d even spent some time texting with Susan.

She should have known the other shoe would drop eventually.

The door to the office opened, and Mrs. Danvers stormed in looking like she was ready to kill someone. When she looked over at them, her expression softened. She walked over and knelt down in front of Maggie, and before Maggie knew it, she found herself pulled into a hug. She finally let go of Alex’s and Kara’s hands and wrapped her arms around Mrs. Danvers, hugging her back.

“Are you okay?” Mrs. Danvers asked.

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “Just bad memories.”

Mrs. Danvers pulled back so Maggie could see her face. “I want you to listen to me, okay?”

“Okay.”
“This is not Blue Springs. I am not your parents. And I am not going to let this go unpunished.”

Before Maggie could say anything, Mrs. Danvers leaned up and kissed her on the forehead, then she looked over at Alex and Kara in turn. “How are you two?”

“Mad,” Kara said.

“Pissed off,” Alex answered.

Mrs. Danvers kissed Alex and Kara on the forehead as well. “I’m going to go have several very loud words with Principal Munroe. When I’m done, do you girls want to go to class or go home?”

Alex and Kara both looked at Maggie.

“We’ll do whatever you want to do,” Alex said.

Maggie looked at Alex and thought about it for a moment. She thought about going out there and having all the people looking at them, about hearing the whispered comments and the poorly hidden snickering, thought about spending the day tensed up, waiting for the attack, wondering if it would come from someone she knew she needed to be careful of or some new threat she didn’t expect. She thought about spending the day sitting and worrying that it wouldn’t be her that would get attacked, but that it would be Alex or Kara instead.

She knew she should stay. She knew running away was just going to make it that much harder to face, but she couldn’t do it. She just couldn’t. Not today.

“Can we go home?” Maggie asked. Even the words made her feel like a coward.

“Of course. Will you be okay to wait here while I talk to Principal Munroe?”

“Yeah. As long as I don’t have to go out there.”

Mrs. Danvers leaned in and kissed her on the forehead again. “I’ll make this as quick as I can.”

Eliza stood up and turned around, doing her best to tamp down the rage boiling up inside her. Maggie was just starting to heal after what her father had done and seeing her like this reminded Eliza far too much of the night Kara had brought Maggie home. The skittish, frightened girl who expected to be turned out into the street, who looked ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble. The version of Maggie Eliza had hoped to never, ever see again.

She looked over at the secretary who’d gone running for Principal Munroe the day she’d come in to file a Caretaker’s Consent Affidavit for Maggie and hated the woman a little bit. A tall, thin woman with long red hair stood behind her.

“Dr. Danvers,” the woman said.

“Yes. Ms. Mercer, right?”

“Yes. Principal Munroe is waiting.”

Eliza stepped around the counter. “Have you found out who did this?”

“Yes, a group of boys from the football team.”

“How many?” Eliza asked.
“Six.”

“Was Jake Howell one of them?”

“Yes. This way, Dr. Danvers.”

Eliza followed her into Principal Munroe’s office and had to squeeze her hands into fists to keep from saying something she knew she’d regret.

“Ah,” Principal Munroe said. “Mrs. Danvers.”

“It’s Dr. Danvers,” Eliza said. “We’ve had that discussion before.”

“Of course,” he said. “I’m sorry you came all this way. I advised Ms. Mercer that calling you was unnecessary, but she insisted. I can assure you the matter is being taken care of. We’ve identified the culprits, and they’ll be pulled out of their first period classes and dealt with appropriately.”

“And what do you consider appropriate?”

“A few days’ detention should settle the matter. After all, it’s a simple case of graffiti. Inappropriate, certainly, but hardly serious.”

“Detention? Are you serious? My daughters have been attacked.”

“Mrs. Danvers, you’re overreacting. No one was attacked. It’s a minor bit of graffiti.”

Eliza turned to Ms. Mercer. “What, exactly did the ‘graffiti’ say again?”

“‘Dyke Bitches’ was written across Kara and Alex’s lockers. ‘Dyke’ was written on Maggie’s.”

“I want them expelled,” Eliza said, turning back to Principal Munroe.

“Expelled? For graffiti? That’s ridiculous. They’re good boys who made a mistake. I can understand that it’s upsetting, especially given the Rodas girl’s… proclivities, but really, Mrs. Danvers, boys will be boys.”

Eliza stared at the man, forcing herself to resist the urge to punch him in the face.

“Mr. Munroe, do you like your job?”

“Very much.”

“Would you like to keep it?”

Principal Munroe paled slightly, perhaps finally starting to clue into the danger he was in. “Mrs. Danvers-“

“Dr. Danvers,” Eliza said. “You are going to call me Dr. Danvers. You are going to expel every one of the boys involved. You are going to arrange school-wide diversity classes and anti-bullying classes for the students and diversity training for every member of the faculty and staff, and you are going to make sure that the graffiti is removed from the lockers by tomorrow morning. If all of that is not done, Mr. Munroe, I am going to start making phone calls.”

“Are you threatening me?”

Eliza started down at the obnoxious little troll and decided that he wasn’t going to respond until
she had his feet in the fire. She reached into her pocket, took out her phone, and dialed Clark.

“Hey, Eliza,” Clark said.

“Hey, Clark,” Eliza said. “I know small town California isn’t really the Daily Planet’s beat, but how would you or Lois like a story about a high school principal’s giving hate crimes on campus a free pass with the excuse that ‘boys will be boys’?”

“What?” Clark asked, and Eliza could hear the anger in his voice.

“Mrs. Danvers!” Principal Munroe said.

“You want the story?” Eliza asked. “I doubt it’s Pulitzer material, but I think GLAAD has some sort of award for Journalism.”

“Yeah, Lois has two. But Perry would never go for it. Cat would, though.”

“Cat Grant?” Eliza asked, smiling as Principal Munroe lost a little more color.

“Yeah. She owns papers in every major market in the country, and she loves destroying misogynists and bigots.”

“How many papers in California?”

“I don’t know. Maybe 10. And the magazine.”

“Ten newspapers in California, and the national magazine.”

“Yeah.”

“Wait!” Principal Munroe called out.

“One moment, Clark,” Eliza said.

“Okay.”

Eliza lowered the phone.

“Mrs. … Um, Dr. Danvers, there’s really no need to involve the press. I’m sure we can reach a satisfactory agreement.”

Eliza lifted the phone back to her ear. “Clark, I’ll call you back.”

“You sure?” Clark asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll wait for your call before I get in touch with Cat.”

Eliza closed her phone and slipped it back in her pocket. “The students who did this will be expelled today, Mr. Munroe.”

“Dr. Danvers, I admire your determination to protect your daughters and Ms. Rodas. I do. But please, consider these boys’ futures. If they’re expelled, some of them will have their college acceptances withdrawn. Some of them will lose scholarships. If I expel them, it could ruin their lives.”
“First, Mr. Munroe, Maggie is one of my daughters, just as much as Alex or Kara, and if you think I will do anything less then what is necessary to protect all of my daughters, then you are an even bigger fool than I took you for. Second, I am thinking about these boys’ futures. I’m thinking about the fact that they’ve probably never once faced consequences for their actions. I’m thinking about all the people they will bully or harass. I’m thinking of the girls who will go on dates with them, not realizing they’ve never been told no once in their entire lives. I’m thinking about how they will spend the next few years, or even the rest of their lives, thinking that they have the right to hurt anyone they want. Third, I’m already being kinder than they deserve because under California law, what they did is legally classified as a hate crime, and punishable by up to a year in jail. Fourth, if you don’t expel them, I will call the Sheriff’s office, and I will press charges, and we can find out how easy it is for them to get into college with a hate crime conviction on their record. Fifth, if you don’t expel them, I will sue the school. I might not win, but I promise you, by the time I am done, there won’t be a school in the country that will hire you to scrub toilets, much less be a principal.”

“Dr. Danvers, please, take a moment and calm down,” Principal Munroe said. “Emotions are running high right now.”

“Yes, they are. Because one of my girls is sitting out there crying. Because less than two weeks after her own father beat her and kicked her out of the house for being gay, someone wrote a homophobic slur on her locker, and you want to let them off with a wink and a nudge and a slap on the wrist. Well, I’m not having it, Mr. Munroe. So you tell me: do I need to call Clark back and get Cat Grant’s phone number?”

“No.”

“They’ll be expelled?”

“Yes.”

“All six of them?”

“Yes.”

“By the end of the day?”

“I’m legally required to give 10 days’ written notice and then hold a hearing,” Principal Munroe said.

“Then I want them suspended until the hearing, and I want the hearing date set today.”

“Okay.”

“And the diversity and anti-bullying classes?”

“Just as quickly as we can make the arrangements.”

Eliza turned to Mercer, who looked like Christmas had come early. “Thank you for calling me.”

Mercer nodded.

Eliza turned and walked out of Munroe’s office. She was vaguely aware of Mercer following her, but she didn’t pay it much attention. She’d gotten what she needed, and now she just wanted to take care of her girls. Alex, Maggie, and Kara were still seated in the same spot, and she knelt down in front of them. “It’s taken care of. They know who did it, and they’ll be suspended until an expulsion hearing can be held.”
“Good,” Alex said.

“Will you girls be okay going home by yourselves? I have to go into the lab for a meeting, but I should be home by noon.”

Maggie nodded.

“We’ll be fine,” Alex said. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Eliza watched them go.

“They’re good kids,” Mercer said once they had left.

“They are,” Eliza agreed. “All of them have been through more than anyone their age should have to deal with.” She turned to look at Mercer. “Was there something you wanted?”

“Can I walk you out?”

“Sure.”

Mercer led the way out of the office and into a hallway that was far more crowded than it had been on Eliza’s way in.

“Kind of hard to believe all this happened and the day hasn’t even started yet.”

“I’m glad you were there,” Eliza said. “A lot of teachers would have just followed Munroe’s lead.”

“A lot of teachers forget our first duty is to our students.”

“You’re one of the teachers who reported Maggie’s injuries to CPS, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I was glad to hear that she’s living with you now.”

“We’re happy to have her.”

“How did that happen?”

“Kara. She’s always bringing home strays.”

“How many have you let her keep?”

“Just Maggie and Streaky.”

Mercer reached into her pocket and pulled out a pad of stickie notes and a pen and wrote down her name and phone number. “Here,” Mercer said as she offered Eliza the note. “In case you want to check on things without going through Munroe.”

Eliza took the note and slipped it in her pocket. “Are you sure? I don’t want to get you in any trouble.”

“I’m sure,” Mercer said. “Normally, I’m not a fan of getting kids expelled, but in this case, it’s the right thing. I don’t know if Alex or Kara are gay, but even if they aren’t, we’ve got 1,500 students. I may be an English teacher, but I know enough about statistics to know that Maggie isn’t the only gay kid in this school. You helped a lot of kids today. Made this place safer for them. I just hope Alex, Maggie, and Kara are ready for the blowback.”
“They’re tough. They’ve dealt with worse.”

“They shouldn’t have to deal with it at all, but with someone like Munroe in charge, no amount of diversity training is going to change things.”

“Can I?” Eliza said, pointing at the pad Mercer was still holding.

“Sure,” Mercer said, handing over the pad and pen. Eliza quickly wrote down her name and number, then handed the pad back.

“You’ll call if I need to wave my contact list in Munroe’s face again?”

“Absolutely,” Mercer said. “And if you happen to know anyone on the school board, feel free to actually make a few of those phone calls.”

“I don’t. But that is about to change.”

“Good.”

Maggie was out of the car before Alex finished putting it in park and through the front door of the house before Alex or Kara got out of the car. She stopped long enough to take off her boots, which gave them time to catch up. None of them said anything, but Streaky let out a yowl from his spot on top of the bookshelf, demanding attention. Kara reached up and scratched his chin.

Maggie set her boots on the rack by the door, then headed for her room. She threw herself down on the bed and grabbed a pillow, wrapping her arms around it and hugging it tightly as she squeezed her eyes shut, trying to close out the entire world. She curled her hands into fists, trying to stop another round of tears.

She’d barely settled in when there was a soft knock. She let go of the pillow and rolled over to see Alex in the doorway.

“Can I come in?” Alex asked, her voice hesitant.

Maggie nodded and sat up. Alex came over and sat down on the bed next to her, and just like she had so many times before, Alex took her hand and laced their fingers together.

“I’m sorry. It never occurred to me that anyone would see us at the movie.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It kind of feels like it is. I didn’t tell you what the movie was about. I didn’t give you a choice about whether or not you wanted to take the chance. I fucked up.”

“No. No. I would have gone, even if I’d known. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Neither did you.”

“I’m sorry this is happening to you.”

“Maggie, I don’t care what people at school think. I spent too long caring. I refused to even acknowledge that Kenny was my friend in public before he died. I have to live with that for the rest of my life, and I am not going to apologize for who I am or who I love ever again. I’m gay, and I don’t care who knows it. I am proud of who I am, and I want to walk into that school tomorrow and dare anyone to say something about it.”
“You really want to do that?”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “That’s exactly what I want to do, but I don’t want to make this harder for you.”

Maggie closed her eyes and squeezed Alex’s hand. “I um… Back in Blue Springs, I used to keep nail polish remover and paper towels in my locker. I spent a lot of time cleaning up stuff like what they wrote. Dyke. Spic. Bitch. Whore. Cunt. The janitors would just leave it. The teachers wouldn’t do anything about it. And if I left it, I had to look at it every time I needed something out of my locker. And I couldn’t go to my parents because if I did, they’d know, and I’d be out on the street.”

“This isn’t Blue Springs,” Alex said. “Mom knows, and she would never kick you out. And you saw Ms. Mercer. She was on our side. You’re not alone. You’ve got me, and you’ve got Kara, and if anyone messes with you, I’ll hold your jacket while you kick their ass.”

Maggie smiled, and shook her head. “Your mom said no fighting.”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “She’s told me that a few times too. But what Mom means is don’t start a fight. She’s not going to get mad if you’re protecting yourself.”

“You sure? She seemed pretty serious about it.”

“Yeah, trust me. I mean, it is Mom, so you will get the ‘I’m so disappointed in you’ speech because that’s what Mom does, but she’s not really mad unless the vein on her temple is throbbing.”

The smile on Maggie’s face got a little bigger. “She must have been furious this morning.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m surprised Munroe isn’t a grease spot.”

Maggie couldn’t help but laugh, and she squeezed Alex’s hand tightly in her own as she looked into her eyes. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make everything okay.”

“Just okay? I think I’m insulted.”

Alex had a huge smile on her face as she said it, and Maggie couldn’t look away from it. It felt magnetic, like it was pulling her in. She leaned towards Alex. She knew she shouldn’t, knew there were good reasons not to, but she couldn’t think of them, not over the frantic pounding of her heart. She heard Alex’s breath hitch, and the sound set her on fire. She tilted her head to the side as she leaned closer. Alex licked her lips, and Maggie was sure her heart was going to explode.

This was happening. This was really happening. She was about to kiss someone for the first time. She was about to kiss a girl for the first time. She was about to kiss Alex for the first time.

She closed her eyes just a moment before their lips met. She was shaking, her whole body trembling with anticipation at the thought of kissing Alex.

“Hey, Alex, Maggie,” Kara yelled as she came into the room.

Maggie jumped back so fast that she missed the edge of the bed, and landed on the floor, but she was still holding Alex’s hand when she went down and ended up pulling Alex down on top of her.
Alex stared down at her. “Are you okay?”

Maggie nodded, not trusting herself to speak with Alex lying on top of her.

“I… um… ah… did I interrupt something?”

“No,” Alex said with a roll of her eyes. “Not a thing.”

Maggie glanced over at Kara, who was standing in the door, blushing a bright shade of pink, and was a little surprised that the levels of sarcasms in Alex’s reply didn’t leave burn marks.

“I’m sorry,” Kara said.

Alex rolled off Maggie and sat up, her back against the side of the bed. Maggie scrambled up, much less gracefully than she would have liked, and sat next to Alex.

“Did you want something?” Alex asked.

“Yeah… I… um… I thought… We still have two of the movies you got from Susan left.”

“Right,” Alex said. “Why don’t you go pick one and start making popcorn? We’ll be up in a few minutes.”

“Okay. I’ll um… just go.” Kara backed out of the door and headed for the stairs.

“And no eavesdropping!” Alex yelled after her.

They both sat there, staring out the door of the room for almost a minute before Alex let her head fall back against the bed and closed her eyes. “Fuck.”

Maggie reached up and covered her eyes with her left hand. “That about covers it.”

“That wasn’t me this time.”

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “That one’s on me.”

She could feel Alex looking at her.

“What changed?” Alex asked. “The other night, you didn’t want… me.”

Maggie looked over at Alex. “I might have been lying about that part.”

“What?”

“Alex, this can’t happen,” Maggie said. “It doesn’t matter if I want it or not. This absolutely cannot happen. You and your mom and Kara, you’re the only family I have. I like you, Alex. I really, really like you. But how many people do you know manage to make it work with their high school sweetheart? I don’t want to imagine my life without the three of you in it, and I don’t want to trade my family for a couple of months spent making out until the hormones and the shininess wear off, and there’s nothing left but resentment and hurt feelings.” She reached down and took Alex’s hand, lacing their fingers together. “I’m sorry I lied. I just don’t know what to do. I like you. I like you a lot. But it feels like I shouldn’t, because two weeks ago, I was telling Elisa I loved her. And there’s the whole thing where we live together, and I know your mom is okay with my being gay, and she’s okay with your being gay, but I don’t know if she’d be okay with us dating, and I just can’t risk it. I can’t lose another family. I know that makes me a coward, but…”
“No, it doesn’t,” Alex said. “You’ve been through a lot the last couple of weeks. You lost your home, your parents, your best friend, your sister. Now this shit that’s going on at school. It’s okay to be scared, but you need to understand something: you are family. Mine, Kara’s, Mom’s. We love you, no matter what. If you don’t want to date, I’ll respect that. Just please don’t lie to me anymore. I thought I really messed up the other night.”

“Okay.” Maggie nodded her head. “No lies. I can do that.”

“Good.”

“I did mean most of what I said the other night,” Maggie said. “You are amazing, and you are going to be a wonderful girlfriend someday.”

Alex smiled at her. “So are you. Just know in advance that I am going to hate every single woman you date for the rest of your life.”

“Right back at you, Danvers.”

Alex: Are you around?

Susan: Sort of.

Susan: Technically, I’m in AP English Lit.

Susan: But I’ve read Frankenstein about eight times, so I’m not paying much attention.

Alex: I am fucking pissed.

Susan: Why?

Susan: What’s wrong?

Alex: I just finished watching Bound.

Susan: Um… Okay.

Alex: I just finished watching Bound with Maggie and Kara.

Susan: NO SHIT!

Alex: YES!

Susan: OMFG!

Susan: Shit, my teacher just asked me why I’m laughing.

Alex: I fucking hate you!

Susan: I told you not to watch that one with anyone else.

Alex: Yeah, like I was actually paying attention.

Alex: I was being gay.

Alex: You could have told me the sky was purple and I would have just nodded and said okay.
Susan: Oh, God.
Susan: Please stop.
Susan: If I keep laughing my teacher will take my phone.
Alex: You deserve it.
Alex: Is Better than Chocolate safe?
Susan: NO!
Susan: It's not as bad as Bound.
Susan: But definitely naked sexy times.
Alex: Thanks for the warning.
Susan: Why are you at home watching movies?
Alex: Long story.
Alex: Short version is, we got outed at school.
Susan: Shit! Are you guys okay?
Alex: Kara and I are good. Maggie’s having a hard time.
Alex: Someone wrote stuff on our lockers.
Susan: Fuck.
Susan: I’m sorry.
Alex: Mom bashed some heads.
Alex: The kids who did it are getting expelled.
Alex: But Maggie didn’t want to deal with school today.
Alex: So we all came home.
Susan: Damn.
Alex: Yeah.
Susan: Is there anything I can do?
Alex: Maybe check on Maggie.
Alex: I’m trying to help.
Alex: But things are complicated between us.
Susan: Okay.
Susan: Take care of yourself, and Kara and Maggie.
Alex: Always.

Susan: Hey. Alex told me what happened. You okay?

Maggie: No.

Maggie: And Bound didn’t help.

Susan: Yeah. Alex mentioned that too.

Susan: I warned her not to watch it with a crowd.

Susan: But she claims she was too busy being gay to listen.

Maggie: Being gay and stupid is a common problem in this house.

Susan: Okay, I’m sensing a story.

Maggie: I almost kissed Alex.

Susan: WHAT?

Maggie: We got home from school, and we were talking in my bedroom.

Maggie: She was holding my hand.

Maggie: She made me laugh.

Maggie: And she was smiling.

Maggie: You know the smile?

Susan: You mean the one that makes you weak in the knees?

Maggie: That’s the one.

Susan: Then what?

Maggie: Then I leaned over to kiss her.

Susan: What stopped you?

Maggie: Kara walked it on us.

Susan: Crotch-Blocked by the Sister

Susan: That sucks.

Maggie: I wasn’t sure if I wanted to kill her or thank her.

Susan: Kill the sister, kiss the girl. Easy choice.

Maggie: No, it’s not.

Susan: Why not.

Susan: You like Alex.
Susan: Alex likes you.

Susan: I mean, normally, it’s date, kiss, move in.

Susan: But you’re both a pair of useless lesbians, so moving in first is not unheard of.

Maggie: Living together is the problem.

Susan: Okay, not following.

Maggie: What happens when we break up?

Maggie: Alex, Kara, and Mrs. Danvers are the only family I’ve got.

Maggie: I can’t risk that for something that isn’t going to last.

Susan: What makes you sure it won’t last?

Maggie: How many people do you know who stay with their high school sweetheart?

Maggie: We’re both going to college in a few months.

Maggie: We might end up on opposite ends of the freaking country.

Susan: Okay. I get it.

Susan: I’ve been through that.

Susan: And it definitely sucks.

Maggie: I don’t know what to do.

Maggie: Alex is amazing.

Maggie: And she likes me

Maggie: And I like her.

Maggie: And it's not fair.

Maggie: I should be able to go on a fucking date without worrying about ending up homeless.

Susan: Yeah, you should.

Susan: And I think you’re underestimating Alex’s mom.

Susan: I don’t know a lot about her, but I don’t think she’d throw you out.

Susan: Maybe you should talk to her.

Maggie: Maybe.

Susan: You’re not going to talk to her, are you?

Maggie: No.

Susan: Maggie…
Maggie: How am I supposed to start that conversation?
Maggie: Hey, Mrs. Danvers, thanks for letting me live here.
Maggie: And buying me clothes.
Maggie: And a computer.
Maggie: And a bunch of furniture.
Maggie: And spending a ton of money on lawyers to protect me from my asshole father.
Maggie: I was just wondering if I can I also have your first-born?
Susan: That might not be the best way to phrase it.
Maggie: Two weeks ago I told Elisa Wilkey I was in love with her.
Maggie: And now I feel like this for Alex.
Maggie: What if this isn’t love?
Maggie: What if it’s just attraction?
Maggie: Or a crush?
Maggie: What if it’s just because I know Alex has feelings for me?
Maggie: How can you be in love with someone, and be in love with someone else two weeks later?
Maggie: How can I risk everything for something that might not even be real?
Susan: I swear the worst part of being a lesbian is all the fucking drama.
Susan: Maggie, you’re probably not in love with Alex.
Susan: But that doesn’t mean you can’t get there.
Susan: All relationships start at ‘hello.’
Susan: You’re a little past that.
Susan: But I’ll tell you the same thing I’ve told Alex
Susan: And maybe you will listen.
Susan: Slow down.
Susan: SLOW
Susan: THE
Susan: FUCK
Susan: DOWN
Susan: You do not have to figure all of this out today, or this week, or this year.
Susan: You’ve got time.

Maggie: Yeah.

Maggie: I guess.

Susan: Just one thing though.

Maggie: What?

Susan: If you’re not going to date Alex, you need to prepare yourself to watch her date other people.

Susan: Because that’s going to happen.

Maggie: Yeah.

Maggie: We already agreed to hate each other’s girlfriends forever.

Susan: Well, at least you’re prepared.

Susan: Fuck. Lunch break is over.

Maggie: Go.

Susan: I’ll text you after school.

Maggie: Okay.

Maggie: Thanks.

Susan: Any time.

Susan: And Maggie…

Maggie: Yeah?

Susan: Alex, Kara, and their Mom aren’t the only family you’ve got, okay?

Maggie: Thank you.

“Hello, Clark,” Eliza said.

“Hey, Eliza,” Clark said.

“Sorry it took so long to call you back. It’s been a busy day.”

“I gathered. You want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Members of the football team wrote homophobic slurs on Kara’s, Alex’s, and Maggie’s lockers. The principal was going to let them off with detention. Thanks to you and Cat Grant, they’ll be expelled.”

“Are they okay?”

“For now. They’re at home. I don’t know how things will go when they go back to school
“Why did they target Kara and Alex?”

“Because they’re spiteful little bigots. Because word has gotten around that Maggie’s gay and Alex and Kara have been spending a lot of time with her. Because Alex might have let it slip that she’s gay while someone was in earshot. I don’t know.”

“Wait, Alex is gay?”

“Yes, and Kara is bisexual, though she doesn’t like the term because apparently dividing people into different sexualities offends Kryptonian sensibilities somehow.”

“I suddenly feel out of the loop.”

“Well, maybe if you would come by once in a while, that wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Eliza-“

“Don’t. Just accept that I appreciate what you did today.”

“Eliza, we keep having this argument. I’m protecting Kara.”

“You’re being selfish. You know she’s selling her paintings to save up to come visit you in Metropolis.”

“What?”

“Her paintings. She does these beautiful oil paintings of Krypton. She’s selling them through a local coffee house for about 500 dollars a shot. She thinks I don’t know. She gets Alex to sneak them out of the house while she and I are out back gardening on Sunday mornings.”

“You’re letting her sell paintings of Krypton?”

“Of course not, Clark. I’m not an idiot. I’ve bought every single one of them through a friend who owns a gallery. They’re sitting in a climate-controlled storage room in Coast City. But Kara and Alex don’t know that. Kara is being reckless because she wants you in her life, and Alex is being reckless because she loves her sister. So unless someone who happens to know what Krypton looks like walks into a dingy little hipster coffee bar in a backwater town in California, it’s fine.”

“It’s still a risk,” Clark said.

“Don’t you think I fucking know that? I let it happen because at least this way, I know what’s going on. But I wake up every day, knowing that she feels like she has to sneak around behind my back because I won’t let her visit you because I can’t stand the thought of how heartbroken she’ll be if I tell her you’re the one who doesn’t want her to come to Metropolis.”

“Eliza, you know that’s not-“

“Bullshit, Clark. Bullshit. You’re able to find a way for Lois, and for Jimmy, and for everyone else you care about. So don’t tell me you’re trying to protect her. That’s an excuse because for whatever reason, you just don’t want to spend time with her. And I don’t have time to argue about this anymore. I called because I promised I would let you know what’s going on. You know, and I have to go take care of my daughters.”
“Hey, Mom,” Alex said.

Eliza looked up from her laptop to see Alex standing in the doorway to the living room. “Yes, sweetheart?”

“Can we talk?”

“Of course,” Eliza said. “Come sit down.”

Alex walked over and sat down on the couch next to her mom. “I think you need to have a talk with Maggie.”

“What about?”

“It’s about that no fighting rule.”

“Alex-“

“Mom, I know you get upset whenever I get in a fight. I mean, I’d say when one of us gets in a fight, but let’s face it; it’s always me, because you’ve got Kara too scared of using her powers to actually stand up for herself-“

“Alex-“

“It’s true,” Alex said. “I get that you don’t want her to hurt anyone, but half the time I get into fights it’s because someone is picking on Kara, and I kind of let it go because Kara literally can’t be hurt. At least, not physically. But Maggie can, and she’s afraid that if someone attacks her, and she fights back, you’re going to kick her out of the house.”

“I would never do that.”

“I know. And that’s what I told her. But, Mom, she’s already been kicked out of one home.”

“I’ll talk to her.”

“Good.”

“But, Alex, this doesn’t mean you’re allowed to get in fights.”

“I never start them.”

Eliza didn’t say anything, but she didn’t have to. Alex knew exactly what the look on her face meant.

Maggie looked up from the novel she was reading when she heard a soft knock and saw Mrs. Danvers standing in the door.

“Hey,” Mrs. Danvers said.

“Hey.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt.”

“It’s okay,” Maggie said, shoving a makeshift bookmark between the pages and moving the book to her nightstand.
“Mind if I come in?”

“Of course not.”

Mrs. Danvers came into the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. “So I just got chewed out by Alex.”

“What?” Maggie asked, wondering what on Earth could make Alex yell at her mother.

“Yeah. She seems to think I wasn’t clear on the ‘no fighting’ rule. With you, or Kara, but especially with you.”

“Oh. Mrs. Danvers—”

Mrs. Danvers held up her hand. “I think in this case she might have a point.”

“Okay.”

“Maggie, I want you to understand something. I don’t want you, or Kara, or Alex fighting because I don’t think fighting is the best way to solve problems. I also don’t want any of you fighting because people get hurt in fights and because you can get arrested, you can go to jail, you could even die. I know that sounds a little extreme, but I’m an MD. I saw all sort of things while I did my internship and residency. But there are two things I want you to understand.

“First, I never meant to say or imply that you can’t defend yourself if you get attacked. If someone is trying to hurt you, or if someone is trying to hurt someone else, and you’re trying to help, I’m not going to get mad at you for defending yourself. When I said no fighting, I meant don’t start fights, and don’t go looking for fights. If you can walk away, do it. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Maggie said.

“Second, I’m not going to kick you out. I’m not saying you can just break the rules any time you feel like it. The rules are there for a reason. But I promised you that you will have a home here for as long as you want it, and I take that promise just as seriously as I take Kara’s adoption. You’re a part of this family now. As far as I’m concerned, you’re as much my daughter as Alex and Kara are.”

Maggie sat for a moment, taking in what Mrs. Danvers had said. She felt a pressure in her chest, as if the weight of her emotions were pressing down on her, making it hard to breath. She didn’t understand why someone who was still basically a stranger to her could be so kind and caring when her own parents had tossed her aside like garbage.

She wanted to tell Mrs. Danvers how much it meant to her, but she couldn’t find the words, and she wasn’t sure she could have gotten them out even if she had found them. Instead she reached out, wrapping her arms around Mrs. Danvers and hugging her tightly. And when Mrs. Danvers hugged her back just as tightly, Maggie had to squeeze her eyes shut to keep herself from crying again.

“You’re safe here, sweetheart,” Mrs. Danvers said. “I know it might be hard to believe that, but we’ll keep reminding you until you do.”

“Thank you.”

Eliza sat down on the couch in the living room. She needed a moment to rest before she started thinking about dinner. It had been an emotional day, and it had left her exhausted, which wasn’t
really that surprising. Emotions were always harder on her than physical or mental labor, and today had been a rollercoaster since her phone had rang that morning. The call, the ride to school, the meeting with Munroe, the staff meeting, the argument with Clark, her talks with Alex and Maggie. All of it had left her feeling spent, like she was stretched too thin. She missed Jeremiah. Missed having someone to help carry the load. Missed having someone to talk to, someone to hold her while she dealt with her own feelings.

She had just closed her eyes when the text alert on her phone chimed. She sighed and took out her phone, wondering what fresh disaster was looming.

Julie: Hello, Dr. Danvers. This is Julie Mercer.
Eliza: Hello, Ms. Mercer. Is everything okay?
Julie: Yes. I hope I’m not bothering you, but I have some news I thought you’d like to hear.
Eliza: You’re not bothering me at all.
Eliza: What’s the news?
Julie: The expulsion hearings are scheduled for Friday the 10th.
Eliza: Thank you for letting me know.
Julie: Thank you for what you did today.
Eliza: I was just taking care of my kids.
Julie: I admit, I had an ulterior motive for texting.
Eliza: Oh?
Julie: I’ve been wanting to start a GSA club here at school.
Julie: I’ve had trouble finding students to get involved.
Julie: I wanted to ask if it would be okay if I approached Alex, Maggie, and Kara.
Eliza: Of course.
Eliza: I suspect you’ll have better luck with Alex and Maggie than with Kara.
Julie: Kara’s a shy one?
Eliza: Not really. I could be wrong. Just don’t take it personally if Kara isn’t interested.
Julie: I won’t take it personally if all three of them tell me to get lost.
Julie: Being out in high school is scary.
Julie: Which is why the school needs a GSA. To make it less scary.
Eliza: Thank you.
Julie: For what?
Eliza: For caring. For watching out for my girls. For trying to make it better.
Julie: That’s my job.

Eliza: If that were true, I should have all of their teachers texting me, asking for permission to help.

Eliza: I don’t.

Eliza: So thank you.

Julie: You’re welcome.
Things Wanted and Regretted

Chapter Summary

The girls go back to school, Maggie has a run in with Elisa Wilkey, Alex has a run in with Vicki Donahue.

Tuesday, February 28, 2006

Maggie walked into school on Tuesday braced for a day in hell. She, Alex, and Kara had talked after dinner, and all of them had come to a decision. They weren’t going to announce that they were gay, or pan in Kara’s case, but if someone asked, they weren’t going to deny it either. It was a little terrifying, if Maggie were being honest. She had spent so long being afraid of her parents’ finding out she was gay that the idea of being honest about it made her a little sick. But at the same time, it felt amazing; it was something she’d dreamed of for years. The freedom to just be herself, to be honest about who she was and what she wanted. It had been her Holy Grail since the day she admitted to herself that she was gay, and it was something she had never imagined she’d be able to have before she was in college, or maybe even until she graduated and got a job. She has happy that she could do it and even happier that Alex, Kara, and Mrs. Danvers had her back.

She wasn’t naïve enough to expect it to be easy, though. Not after everything she went through in Blue Springs, and not after what had happened yesterday. And she was right. From the moment she walked through the door, she felt the stares and heard the whispers, and it took a lot to keep walking when Alex and Kara turned and headed for their lockers in the English hall. Not reacting the way she did in Blue Springs was even harder, but she forced herself to keep her head up, to keep her face neutral, to keep her shoulders relaxed, and to act like she didn’t have a care in the world other than getting to class on time.

She made it all the way to her first period English class with Ms. Mercer before anyone said a word to her.

“Hey, Maggie,” Ms. Mercer said as Maggie walked into her classroom. “Come here for a moment.”

Maggie walked up to Ms. Mercer’s desk. “Is something wrong?”

“No. I was just wondering if you, Alex, and Kara could stop by after school. There’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Uh, sure. I’ll let them know.”

“Thanks. Alex is in my second period class. I’ll mention it to her as well. I just wasn’t sure if either of you see Kara during the day.”

“We all eat lunch together.”

“Perfect. I’ll see you all at the end of the day.”

“Okay.”
She took her usual seat at the back of the class and dug her textbook out of her bag, wondering what Ms. Mercer wanted to talk to them about. The request was a little odd, but Ms. Mercer had seemed to be on their side yesterday, so she wasn’t too worried about it.

She flipped her textbook open to the page she had marked, wondering how much she’d missed the day before. It didn’t really matter much; she’d read Macbeth three times already and watched two different versions on DVD, so she wasn’t in any danger of falling behind.

“It wasn’t me.”

Maggie looked up to see Elisa standing next to her.

“What?” Maggie asked.

“I said it wasn’t me. Your lockers. I didn’t do it.”

Maggie shrugged. “I never thought you did.”

“I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Except your dad and Alex.” Maggie regretted the words the moment they came out of her mouth, and she wanted to kick herself when she saw the look on Elisa’s face.

“I…” Elisa started, but then she stopped and shook her head. “Forget it.” She turned and started to walk away.

“Elisa, wait.”

“I said forget it.” Elisa walked over to what had become her new regular seat and sat down.

Maggie spent the rest of the class pissed at herself.

Alex walked into school Tuesday morning wearing her best ‘don’t fuck with me’ look. It was a look she’d spent months perfecting after she and Kara had become social outcasts, and she’d backed it up with a willingness to settle matters with her fists if pushed. The whole school knew better than to mess with Alex Danvers or her sister, unless they were willing to deal with someone who had roughly the same temperament as a rabid honey badger.

The look was never 100 percent effective, because people are stupid, but as a rule, it usually kept all but the most determined idiots away from her and from Kara, and honestly, that’s the way she liked it. And that morning, more than one person had taken one look at her and decided to get the hell out of her way. She didn’t really expect it to last because Midvale High was full to the brim with determined idiots, but she did make it through first period without anyone saying a word to her.

The surprise, when it came, wasn’t that someone came up to ask her about it; it was who came up to ask her about it. She was standing at her locker, swapping her American Government book for her English Lit Textbook when Vicki walked up to her.

“Is it true?” Vicki asked.

Alex looked over at her, a little shocked that Vicki was even speaking to her. “Is what true?”

“Pat Brice is telling everyone he saw you and Maggie Rodas out on a date Friday night,” Vicki said.
“The same Pat Brice that claimed Shannon slept with him sophomore year? Since when do you listen to anything that sleaze has to say?”

“Just tell me if it’s true.”

“Maggie and I went out on Friday night, but it wasn’t a date,” Alex said as she stuffed her English book into her bag.

“It wasn’t?” Vicki asked, and Alex couldn’t help but notice that she sounded a little relieved.

“No. I don’t usually take Kara with me on dates.”

“You don’t usually go on dates.”

Alex shrugged. “Can’t really argue that one.”

“So, you’re not gay?”

Alex stared at Vicki for a moment, wondering why, after they hadn’t talked in almost a year, Vicki was so interested in what Alex was doing. It didn’t make sense, but she’d already made the decision on how she was going to handle this, and she wasn’t going to back down just because it was Vicki of all people who was asking.

“No, I’m definitely gay. I just wasn’t on a date with Maggie.”

“You’re gay?”

“Yes. We just covered that.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Alex shrugged. “We haven’t really been talking a lot.”

“We were best friends for three years. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t know.”

“When did you figure it out?”

“A couple of weeks ago.”

“Because of Maggie?” Vicki asked.

“Vicki, why do you even care?”

Vicki stared at her for a moment before she turned and walked off without another word.

Alex sat down across from Kara and Maggie at their usual table in the lunchroom.

“The Salisbury steak? You really like your mystery meat, don’t you, Danvers?” Maggie asked.

“Better than that rabbit food you’re eating,” Alex said.

“At least I know what’s in the rabbit food.”

“Yeah. Vegetables,” Kara said with so much disgust that Alex and Maggie both laughed.
“You eat vegetables all the time,” Maggie pointed out.

“I eat cooked vegetables,” Kara said. “The Maillard reaction is a thing.”

“The what?” Maggie asked.

“Oh, God. Please don’t get her started on this,” Alex said.

“It’s science, Alex.”

“It’s food, Kara.”

“The way I remember it, those are two of her favorite things.”

All three of them turned at the unexpected comment, and for the second time that day, Alex found herself looking at Vicki.

“You mind if I sit down?” Vicki asked.

Alex stared at Vicki for a moment, thinking about how close they used to be, about how she’d felt about Vicki, even if she didn’t realize what it meant at the time, about the fight and the discussion she’d had with Susan about unfair she’d been to Vicki.

She wasn’t sure she was ready to unpack all of that, but it didn’t look like she was going to get to do it on her own schedule. If she turned Vicki away, she might not get the chance to give her the apology she knew Vicki deserved.

“Go ahead,” Alex said.

Vicki sat down next to Alex.

“Maggie, this is Vicki Donahue. Vicki, this is Maggie Rodas,” Alex said.

“Nice to meet you,” Maggie said without much enthusiasm.

“That’s nice of you to say, but I’m guessing ‘it’s nice that you aren’t glaring at me from across the cafeteria’ is probably closer to the truth.”

“Well, if we’re being honest, I do like that part,” Maggie said.

Vicki smiled and turned to Kara.

“Hey,” Vicki said.

“Hey,” Kara said through clenched teeth, and for a moment, Alex was worried Kara was going to melt Vicki’s face.

“Would you believe me if I said I’m sorry I was a complete bitch to you for three years?”

The glare on Kara’s face was replaced by confusion. “Um… I don’t know.”

“Well, I am. I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve any of it.”

“Thanks.”

Vicki turned to Alex. “Can we talk?”
“Sure,” Alex said.

Vicki glanced over at Maggie and Kara, then back at Alex. “I wanted to finish the conversation we were having this morning.”

“Okay.”

Vicki sat there, staring at her for a minute. Alex had the distinct impression that Vicki was waiting for something, but she honestly had no idea what. Finally, Vicki shook her head. “It’s a good thing you’re cute, because God help you, you’re not that bright.”

“HEY!” Alex said.

“You know, I never thought I’d say this, but I’m going to have to agree with Vicki on this one,” Kara added.

Alex turned to look at Kara. “What?”

“She wants to talk to you alone, dumbass,” Maggie said.

“Oh,” Alex turned back to Vicki, who just nodded. “Sorry.”

“You know what, I still remember where you live,” Vicki said. “Why don’t I drop by this afternoon? Say, around 3:30?”

“Okay.”

“You still have my number in your phone?” Vicki asked.

“No,” Alex admitted and immediately felt like an asshole when she saw the look on Vicki’s face.

“I’ll text you with my number. Call me if something comes up.”

“Right,” Alex said as Vicki got up and walked away.

Alex looked at Maggie and Kara. “What the hell was that about?”

“That was exact moment the universe decided that you are going to grow old alone in a small apartment surrounded by 12 cats,” Kara said.

——

“Hey,” Ms. Mercer said as Maggie, Alex, and Kara walked into her classroom. “Thanks for coming.”

“No problem,” Alex said.

Maggie hoped she was right. Ms. Mercer was nice enough, and she had seemed to be on their side the day before, but Maggie honestly wasn’t used to teachers being anything but another problem, so she wasn’t entire sure how this was going to go. It hadn’t seemed like a big deal that morning, but as the day went on, Maggie had gotten more and more nervous about the whole thing.

“Please, have a seat,” Ms. Mercer said.

All three of them sat down in the front row and waited.

“I wanted to talk to you girls about what happened yesterday. Just so you guys know, I already
talked with Mrs. Danvers about this and got her okay to approach the three of you.”

Maggie relaxed a little. If Mrs. Danvers had given her okay, then there was a really good chance that this wasn’t going to be anything bad.

“As I’m sure you can guess, what happened to you yesterday wasn’t the first instance of anti-LGBT bullying on campus. Several teachers here have been trying to do something about it for a long time, but we’ve run into some problems. Part of it is that there isn’t a visible queer population at the school, so some of the people involved in implementing the policy changes have insisted that there isn’t a need for change. That’s kind of what this is about.” She folded her hands on the desk in front of her and smiled at them. “I’ve wanted to start a Gay Straight Alliance Club on campus for years, but the problem has always been identifying which students might be interested in being founding members of the club. It’s a touchy subject, and if I were to approach the wrong students, it could end badly for everyone involved.

“Now, I don’t know if any of you are actually a part of the LGBT community, and I’m not asking, but I’m hoping the three of you would consider helping me found a GSA here at Midvale High. I think it’s something that would make us a better school, and I think it’s something that all of our queer students desperately need.”

Maggie stared at Ms. Mercer for a minute, not sure what to feel. What Ms. Mercer was suggesting was pretty much the exact opposite of what she, Alex, and Kara had agreed to. It would effectively announce to the entire school that they were gay. Or, well, not straight in Kara’s case.

She looked over at Alex, catching her gaze and seeing the same uncertainty there. Then she glanced over at Kara, who was pretty unreadable on the subject, before she turned back to Ms. Mercer.

“Can we think about it for a bit?” Maggie asked.

“Of course,” Ms. Mercer said. “I get that it’s kind of a big decision. But the sooner, the better.”

“Okay.”

It was 3:25 PM when Alex opened the door to find Vicki standing on the front porch. It had been a long time since that had happened, and Alex honestly wasn’t sure how she felt about it now. She had a lot of feelings where Vicki was concerned, and not all of them were good ones, but mostly, she was confused by Vicki’s sudden interest in talking to her again and Vicki’s interest in her being gay.

“Hey,” Vicki said.

“Hey,” Alex said.

“Can I come in?”

“Uh… yeah.” Alex stepped back, making room for Vicki to come inside, then closed the door, watching as Vicki took off her shoes and set them on the rack like it hadn’t been almost a year since she’d been there.

“Is there somewhere we can talk?” Vicki asked.

“The living room. Kara and Maggie are upstairs watching Xena.”
“Okay.”

Alex followed her into the living room. Vicki sat down on the couch, and Alex took a seat next to her, just like she used to.

“So this is probably really weird, right?”

“A little,” Alex admitted. “I mean, we don’t talk for months, but the day you find out I’m gay, suddenly you want to be friends again.”

“Sudden?” Vicki closed her eyes and sighed. “Yeah. Okay. I suppose it probably would seem that way to you.”

“What do you mean?”

Vicki opened her eyes and looked right at Alex. “You never asked me why I was talking to Josie that day.”

“What?”

“The day we started fighting,” Vicki said. “You never asked me why I was talking to Josie.”

Alex thought about it for a moment, not sure what it had to do with her being gay, but Vicki was right. She didn’t remember ever asking Vicki why she’d been talking to Josie. She’d just laid into her about it. “Why were you talking to her?” Alex asked.

“I needed some advice, and she was the closest thing I had to a friend besides you.”

“Why didn’t you just come to me?” Alex asked.

“Because I was scared. Actually, I don’t think scared is a strong enough word. I was terrified.”

“Of what?”

“Do you remember what happened that weekend?”

“I remember I spent the night at your house Friday.”

“Do you remember waking up Saturday morning?” Vicki asked.

“Not really. You know how I am in the morning.”

“Yeah. Cuddly.”

“What?”

“When I woke up that morning, you were practically on top of me. You had both arms wrapped around me, your face was buried in my neck, and our legs were tangled together.”

“Oh. I’m sorry?”

“I’m not,” Vicki said. “I thought I’d died and gone to heaven. I wrapped my arms around you, and I must have just laid there and held you for almost an hour. When you finally woke up, you looked up at me with this smile on your face, and all I could think about was how much I wanted to kiss you.”
“You wanted to kiss me?”

“Yeah. You asked me this morning why I cared so much about whether you’re gay or not. It’s because I’m gay, Alex. I woke up that morning, and I held you while you slept, and I had to stop myself from kissing you when you woke up, and it scared me. It terrified me. And I was afraid to come to you because…”

“Because you liked me,” Alex finished.

Vicki turned away, like she couldn’t even bare to look at Alex. “Like is not a strong enough word for what I felt for you. You were everything to me. You were the best friend I ever had. I never gave a shit about anything, as long as I had you. And when I realized what I was feeling, I went to the only other person who I could think of to get advice.”

Vicki started wringing her hands. It was a nervous habit she’d had as long as Alex had known her and Alex had to stop himself from taking Vicki’s hands in his own.

“It was stupid, going to her. I knew you’d get upset if you found out because she was doing everything she could to hurt you. But I didn’t know who else to go to. I couldn’t go to my parents because they never gave a shit about me or anything to do with me. I didn’t have any other friends because I’d never wanted them—not when I had you. I was desperate, and I thought she, of all people, wouldn’t judge me for falling in love with someone I wasn’t supposed to. So, I went to her, and I told her what I was feeling. She told me you would never understand. She told me you would freak out. That you would hate me. And then you saw us together, and you just got so mad, I thought maybe she was right.

“I was so scared of losing you that I couldn’t tell you the truth. I kept thinking you’d calm down, and we could be friends again, but you never… you never spoke to me again. By the time I realized you weren’t going to apologize it felt like it was too late to patch things up. Especially since I still couldn’t tell you why I was talking to Josie.

Vicki stopped wringing her hands and sat them on her lap. She took a deep breath and turned towards Alex. “Yesterday, I walk into school, and Pat Brice is telling everyone that you and Maggie are gay, and that you were out on a date. I didn’t know how to feel. I was hurt that you didn’t tell me, but I felt guilty about being hurt because it wasn’t fair to be mad at you for not telling me when I didn’t tell you. I was mad at myself for not telling you how I felt, and because I had to go through figuring all of this out without my best friend. I also kind of wanted to scratch Maggie’s eyes out because apparently I’m the jealous type, though I kind of knew that because I spent a lot of time not understanding why I wanted to punch Josie in the face every time I saw the two of you talking together. I kind of feel bad about that. Wanting to scratch Maggie’s eyes out because apparently I’m the jealous type, though I kind of knew that because I spent a lot of time not understanding why I wanted to punch Josie in the face.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Alex said. “I know I messed things up between us. I just, I saw you talking to her, and I got so angry that I couldn’t think clearly. But after I realized I was gay, I started thinking about it, and I realized I was jealous.”

“Of Josie?” Vicki asked, and Alex could hear the disbelief in her voice.

“Yeah. I know that doesn’t make a lot of sense. After everything that happened with Kenny and Sheriff Collins, you and Kara were really all I cared about, and when I saw you talking to her, it hurt so bad. I didn’t understand why, but I just got so angry, and when I stopped being angry, I still
couldn’t let it go. I’m sorry. If I hadn’t been so stubborn, maybe we could have worked it out.”

“Or if I had told you the truth.”

“You were my best friend. I should have trusted you.”

“Maybe we can just agree that we were both stupid and move on. I don’t really want us to sit here apologizing to each other until we die of old age.”

Alex laughed. “You know I’m stubborn enough to do that too.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Vicki said with a smile. “God, I loved that about you. The way you would narrow your eyes when you were about to dig your heels in about something. I don’t even know why Josie would argue with you once you’d done that because it was like trying to move a mountain. I didn’t know why I enjoyed watching you argue so much at the time, but I figured out later that it’s just incredibly sexy.”

Alex felt her cheeks start to heat up and bit her lower lip because she refused to turn into a blushing, gibbering mess in front of Vicki.

“I, um… I know you said you and Maggie weren’t on a date, but you guys spend a lot of time together,” Vicki said.

“She lives here.”

“What? How did that happen?”

“Her dad is an asshole. Kicked her out of the house. Mom took her in.”

Vicki shook her head. “What is it with your mom and orphans?”

“Long story.”

“Well, you and Maggie seem to be having an easier time of it then you and Kara did.”

“Kara and I are pretty close these days too.”

“Yeah. I don’t think anyone missed that after the second or third time you beat the crap out of someone for messing with her.”

“She’s my sister. It took me a little while to get the hang of that, but I wouldn’t have made it through what happened to Kenny—or what came after—without her.”

“I’m glad you two worked it out,” Vicki said. “Being alone sucks.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry I did that to you.”

Vicki shrugged and looked down. Alex watched as she fidgeted for a minute, playing with a charm bracelet she was wearing on her left wrist. “So, are you and Maggie, like, a thing?”

“No.”

Vicki looked up at her. “But you like her, don’t you?”

Alex shrugged. “Yeah.”
“And I’m back to wanting to scratch her eyes out.”

Alex laughed and shook her head. “That’s terrible.”

“A little. Why aren’t you two together?”

“Because she lives here.”

“Lots of girls would consider that a bonus.”

“Not Maggie,” Alex said. “She’s worried things would get weird if we tried it and it didn’t work out.”

“Her loss.” Vicki reached out and took Alex’s hand in her own, and Alex sucked in a breath at the contact. Everywhere Vicki’s skin touched hers felt electric. Alex’s mouth went dry when Vicki started slowly rubbing her thumb over the back of Alex’s hand. “Is this okay?”

Alex nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

“You know, I spent months dreaming about what it would be like to kiss you.”

“You did?” Alex asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“It was apparently loud enough for Vicki to hear though.

“Yeah.” Vicki looked down at their joined hands. “I kept telling myself not to. Telling myself it was stupid. You’re straight. We weren’t friends anymore. I needed to move on because it would never happen. I finally managed to stop. Well, not completely, but I went months without thinking about it more than once or twice a day. Until yesterday. Until I heard that you were gay. And I haven’t been able to think of anything else since.”

Vicki looked up, meeting Alex’s gaze.

“Can I kiss you Alex?” Vicki asked, so low Alex almost didn’t hear her.

“I…”

Vicki leaned forward, and Alex felt her heart hammering inside her chest.

“Say yes,” Vicki whispered. “Please, Alex. Please say yes.”

Normally, Xena was one of Maggie’s favorite shows, but she sat there staring at the screen without really seeing it because her mind was elsewhere. Specifically, it was downstairs in the living room where Alex was talking to Vicki. At least, she was really, really hoping they were just talking because the thought of them doing anything else made Maggie want to throw up.

She knew it wasn’t her business what Alex and Vicki did. She had rejected Alex three times. She had no right to be jealous. She had no right to wish it were her downstairs alone with Alex. And she definitely had no right to want to punch Vicki fucking Donahue in her perfect fucking face.

Except she was jealous, and she did wish she were downstairs with Alex, and she definitely wanted to punch Vicki fucking Donahue in her perfect fucking face.

“You know that blanket never did anything to you,” Kara said.

“What?” Maggie asked, looking over at Kara. Kara lifted one hand off of Streaky, causing the
spoiled little furball to meow in protest, and pointed towards Maggie’s hands. Maggie looked down and realized she had a length of the blanket in her hands and was busily twisting it like she was wringing someone’s neck. It didn’t take much thought to figure out whose.

“You want to talk about it?”

“No.” Maggie turned back to the TV, hoping to get lost in the show. “What do you know about her?” Maggie asked about 30 seconds later.

“That she wasn’t kidding about being a complete bitch,” Kara said.

“You don’t like her?”

“There’s a lot of history there. I don’t like who she was when I knew her.”

“Tell me about it?”

“She went to Northside Middle School. Alex and I went to Midvale Middle. Alex went to Midvale High for her freshman year, and the first day she came home talking about this girl she’d met. It was all she talked about for weeks until finally Eliza said it was okay for Alex to invite her over. She didn’t like me right from the start,” Kara said. “I don’t know why. Alex and I weren’t really close, but things got worse when Vicki showed up. Alex didn’t even want me in the same room when Vicki was around because Vicki didn’t want me anywhere near them.”

“Sounds like a real bitch.”

“Yeah. It got worse after Jeremiah died. Things between Alex and I got really, really bad. I didn’t like Alex at all, and Alex hated me. But then everything happened with Sheriff Collins. It didn’t really bother me that much. I mean, Kenny was the only person in the school who would actually talk to me anyway, and afterwards, I had Alex. I miss Kenny, but I never had friends after my parents died, so being a social outcast… I didn’t care. But Alex lost Josie and her whole crowd, and all she had left were Vicki and me. I tried to be okay with Vicki, because I knew how much Alex liked her, and she was different too. She tried to be nicer, but I could tell it was just because she didn’t want to upset Alex.”

“But then they fought?”

“Yeah. Josie wasn’t exactly Ms. Popular after everyone found out she was sleeping with a teacher, but she still had enough pull with certain people to make our lives hard. Alex saw Vicki talking to Josie one day, and they had this huge fight about it, and they never talked to each other again.”

“So, why is Alex downstairs talking to her now?”

“Because Alex is very gay, and Vicki looks like Vicki.”

“Alex isn’t that shallow.”

“I know. I might be a little mad at Alex.”

“Because she’s talking to Vicki?”

“Yeah.”

“She did apologize.”

“Yeah,” Kara said. “And the annoying part is, I know she meant it.”
“But you don’t want to forgive her.”

“Not really. Alex and I were terrible to each other. Alex was mean because her dad was dead, and she was angry at the world, and I was an easy target for her blame. I was mean because I watched almost everyone I ever loved die, and all I wanted was to live with Clark because he was the only family I had left. And instead I was here. I hated it here. Vicki wasn’t mean to me because she was angry. Vicki was mean to me because she didn’t want me around Alex. I didn’t care before Kenny because I didn’t want to be around Alex. After Kenny… After Kenny, I was terrified that Alex would choose Vicki over me. I know it’s terrible, but I was actually relieved when they fought.”

“I’m sorry.”

Kara shrugged. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“You like Alex, right?”

“I like both of you.”

“Yeah, but you don’t want to kiss me.”

“No.”

“But you do want to kiss Alex?”

Maggie considered lying about it, but she didn’t think Kara would have asked the question if she didn’t already know the answer. “Yeah.”

“And judging by what I saw yesterday, I’m pretty sure Alex wants to kiss you back.”

“I kind of got that impression too.”

“So why is Alex in the living room with Vicki, instead of with you?”

“Because we live together,” Maggie said. “Because I really like having you guys as my family, and it would get weird if Alex and I didn’t work out. Because I don’t think Mrs. Danvers would be okay with it.”

“She might surprise you.”

“Maybe. But-“

Kara picked Streaky up and sat him in Maggie’s lap. “Excuse me,” she said as she stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” Maggie asked as Kara headed for the door.

“To stop my sister from doing something stupid.”

Alex could hear her blood rushing, could feel her heart pounding in her chest, could smell Vicki’s perfume, and all of it felt overwhelming, like the moment was happening in slow motion and fast forward at the same time. She looked down at Vicki’s lips, and she thought of all the time they’d spent together. Sleepovers, study sessions, hangouts, days spent wandering through the square, or the mall, or out in the ocean, riding the waves. She remembered teaching Vicki to surf, and she
remembered helping peal Vicki out of her wetsuit. She remembered lying in bed with Vicki, and cuddling up to her, and spending part of a psych class daydreaming about kissing her. A daydream that could become very, very real if she just said yes.

She opened her mouth to do it, to whisper the ‘yes’ that Vicki wanted, but before she could get the word out, Kara walked into the room.

“Hey, Alex,” Kara said as Alex and Vicki jumped apart. “Do you know where the telescope is?”

Alex stared at Kara, not quite able to believe how terrible her timing was. She would have thought after yesterday Kara might be a little more careful about walking in on people.

Alex stopped and narrowed her eyes as she looked at Kara, who wasn’t showing any of the awkwardness she’d shown yesterday, even though it was probably even more obvious what had been about to happen. And then it clicked; Kara had done it deliberately.

“Probably where it always is,” Alex said.

“Right. I’ll go check.” Kara turned around and walked out of the room without another word.

“She did that on purpose, didn’t she?” Vicki asked.

“Pretty sure.”

“What the hell?”

Alex shook her head. “It’s Kara. I love her, but I have no idea what goes on in her head sometimes.”

Vicki sighed. “I think I do. I don’t think my apology at lunch did much good. Which is fair. I was a complete bitch to her.”

Alex wanted to argue the point, but she couldn’t. They’d both been terrible to Kara at times. It was something Alex still felt guilty about when she thought about it too much.

“I never could figure out why having her around bothered me so much. Not until I realized I was jealous.”

“Of Kara?” Alex asked because that was a little weird. Kara was her sister.

“Of Kara and Josie both. I just wanted to spend as much time with you as I could, and I hated sharing you. I put up with Josie because you two were so tight, but I never liked it, and I think Kara caught a lot of the anger I had at Josie.”

“You thought about this a lot?”

“Yeah.” Vicki shrugged her shoulders. “I had a bad time after we fought. I went to therapy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. My parents were… Well, you remember what they’re like. ‘Just put whatever you need on the credit card, dear.’ I’m not even sure they were listening when I told them I was gay, but they signed the consent form for me to see a therapist, so I’m not going to complain. It’s been good, though. It helped me figure out a lot of stuff. I even went on a couple of dates.”

“With who?” Alex asked.
“You know Tina Lupo?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened?”

“She got back together with her ex. Some tennis player over at Westminster Prep.”

Alex laughed.

“What?” Vicki asked.

“I’m sorry,” Alex said, not able to stop the laughing. “It’s just… starter lesbians.”

“Starter lesbians?”

“Tennis players, girls who change their own oil, and that one super-hot cheerleader who never seems to have a boyfriend.”

“Why do I feel like there’s a story there?”

“There is,” Alex said, finally managing to get her laughing under control. “I have a friend named Susan. She works in a gay bookstore.”

“Really? I didn’t think Midvale had one of those.”

“It’s up in Coast City,” Alex said. “She made a joke about starter lesbians, and when you told me a cheerleader was dating a tennis player…”

Vicki smiled. “Maybe you could introduce me some time.”

“Maybe.”

Vicki looked over at the door, then back at Alex. “You know, Kara isn’t here now.”

“I have noticed that,” Alex said, already having a pretty good idea where Vicki was going. She thought about it, about whether or not she wanted to kiss Vicki or not and found it a lot easier to process her feelings without the charged atmosphere that had been in the room a few minutes ago.

“We could, um, finish what we were doing,” Vicki suggested.

“I don’t think we should.”

The smile vanished from Vicki’s face, but she nodded. “Okay. I get it.”

“You’re really okay with it?”

“Yeah. I knew it was a long shot, and I’m not going to pretend I’m not disappointed, but we’re not friends, and we haven’t been in a long time. And honestly, when my therapist finds out what I did, she’s probably going to blow a gasket, but I had to try.”

“I’m sorry. I just…”

“You like someone else,” Vicki finished for her. She reached out and took Alex’s hand again, but this time, there was no slow caress. She just held it and squeezed.
“It’s okay,” Vicki said. “But if you want to make it up to me, there is something I’d really like.”

“What’s that?”

“I’d really like to have my best friend back.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I think I’d like that too,” Alex said.

Maggie: Are you busy?

Susan: Not especially.

Maggie: I need some advice.

Susan: Giving baby gays advice seems to be my job description these days.

Susan: What’s up?

Maggie: I want to punch someone in the face.

Susan: Welcome to my world.

Susan: But who and why?

Maggie: Some girl Alex used to be friends with.

Susan: Well, that answers the who, now on to the why?

Maggie: Because I’m apparently the jealous type.

Susan: I never would have guessed.

Maggie: Please tell me I didn’t do something rude on Saturday.

Susan: You didn’t.

Susan: But if you ever decide on a career in poker, expect to be very, very poor.

Maggie: I’ll keep that in mind.

Susan: So, why are you jealous?

Maggie: Word got out that Alex and I are gay.

Susan: Yeah. I heard.

Maggie: So this girl walks up to Alex today at lunch and tries to get Alex to talk to her alone.

Maggie: Only, this is Alex, so she doesn’t get it.

Susan: Sounds about right.

Maggie: So she pretty much invites herself over after school.
Maggie: And now they’re in the living room.

Maggie: Talking.

Susan: And you’re in your bedroom thinking about punching this girl in the face.

Susan: Because you wish it was you and Alex… Talking.

Maggie: Yes.

Susan: That sucks.

Maggie: Tell me something I don’t know.

Susan: I wish I could.

Susan: But I told you yesterday that this would happen.

Maggie: I know.

Susan: She’s a ridiculously attractive lesbian.

Susan: She’s single.

Susan: And whether she wants to be or not, she’s out.

Susan: I’m pretty sure every gay girl at Midvale high who has the guts is going to be after her.

Susan: Or, at least the ones who aren’t after you.

Maggie: Me?

Susan: Yeah, you.

Susan: I don’t know if you’ve looked in the mirror lately, but you’re really freaking hot.

Susan: And those dimples of yours are going to break a lot of hearts.

Susan: If you weren’t already taken, I’d have given it a shot.

Maggie: I’m not taken.

Susan: Bullshit.

Susan: If you weren’t taken, you wouldn’t be thinking about punching some girl in the face.

Maggie: Fuck my life.

Susan: You want my honest advice?

Maggie: Yeah.

Susan: I think you should go into the living room and kiss Alex until she forgets that girl exists.

Maggie: That is not helpful advice.

Susan: I said it would be honest advice.
Susan: I never said it would be helpful.

Maggie: I can’t. You know I can’t.

Susan: I know you’re afraid.

Susan: I know it’s a pretty legit fear.

Susan: But if you want some advice that’s actually useful, talk to Alex’s mom.

Susan: Tell her what you’re feeling.

Susan: See what she thinks.

Maggie: I don’t know if that’s a good idea.

Susan: I think you should try it before you make both of you miserable.

Maggie: I’ll think about it.

Alex walked into their bedroom to find Kara sitting in bed with Streaky in her lap as she read a book. “What the hell, Kara?”

Kara looked up from the book she was reading. “You and Vicki enjoy your talk?”

“Like you weren’t listening to the whole thing.”

Kara shrugged and looked back down at her book.

“Seriously? You’re not even going to lie about it?” Alex asked.

“Why should I?”

“What is your problem?”

“Vicki is a bitch.” Kara looked up from her book again. “You know I don’t like that word, but Vicki even admitted it this afternoon at lunch. And maybe I don’t want to go back to you hating me for just existing in the same room as you.”

“Hey, that is not going to happen.” Alex walked over and sat down on the bed next to Kara. “You are my sister, Kara. You and Mom and Maggie are my family. Nothing is going to get in the way of that.”

“Not even Vicki’s boobs?”

“Eh,” Alex shrugged. “I’ve seen better.”

“Yeah. On Maggie.”

“Susan too.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” Kara said.

“No, you don’t.” Alex pulled out her phone and brought up the picture of Susan in the bikini, then held it out for Kara.
“Oh, wow,” Kara said as she looked at the picture. “Those are nice.” She looked up at Alex. “You think Susan likes blondes?”

Alex snapped the phone shut. “NO!”

Kara reached up and covered her mouth as she laughed so hard Alex saw ice crystals forming on her hand. “Oh, you should have seen the look on your face.”

“Brat,” Alex said as she slipped her phone back in her pocket.

“Hey, you’re the one hogging all the pretty girls,” Kara said. “Seriously, you can’t have Susan and Maggie.”

Alex stared at Kara for a moment, then stood up. “You know, I just realized I need to go talk to Susan and Maggie.”

“Alex!”

“I’m kidding.” Alex sat back down and reached out, resting a hand on Kara’s leg, which earned a chirp of complaint from Streaky. “Kara, you are my sister. You and I come as a set. Always.

“I’m not going to lie, though; I have really, really missed Vicki, and I want to try being her friend again. But I promise you, part of the deal is that she has to be good to you too. Because you are one of the most important things in my life. You are my favorite person, and if she ever treats you the way she used to, I will kick her to the curb so fast, you’ll think I’m the one with super-speed.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Kara said.

“You better. But I think it’ll be okay. You heard what she said after you left?”

“Yeah.”

“The eavesdropping thing is not cool, by the way.”

Kara shrugged. “I regret nothing.”

“Well, just this once, thank you. You stopped me from doing something stupid.”

“Well, I know that, silly.”

Alex narrowed her eyes. “I know where you sleep.”

Kara stared back at her. “I can throw you to the moon.”

“That is so not fair.”

Kara smiled.

“Are we okay?” Alex asked.

“Yeah. I just need my sister.”

“I need mine too. This is all really confusing, and I can’t do it without you.”

“You don’t have to,” Kara said. “You never, ever have to.”
Maggie frowned when she heard the knock on her door. She wasn’t really in the mood for company. If she had been, she would have still been upstairs with Kara. On the other hand, the only people who would be knocking on her door were Alex, Kara, or Mrs. Danvers, so she couldn’t really ignore it. She got up, walked over to the door, and opened it.

“Hey,” Alex said, a hesitant little smile on her face that made Maggie’s heart flutter.

“Hey,” Maggie said, not able to stop herself from smiling back.

“So, um, you have a minute?”

“Sure.” Maggie stepped back to make room for Alex to come inside. Alex took a seat on the bed. Maggie sat down next to her and looked down at the floor, bracing herself for news she really didn’t want to hear.

“I thought we should talk.”

“We don’t have to. I’m the one who said we couldn’t be together, so I don’t have any right to complain. If you want to date Vicki, that’s your business.”

“I don’t.”

Maggie looked up at her, and Alex smiled a little wider.

“I don’t want to date Vicki.”

“Oh, thank god!” Maggie felt like she could breathe freely for the first time since lunch. Alex laughed, and the way her face lit up made Maggie smile again.

“God, we’re going to be really bad at this ‘just friends’ thing, aren’t we?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “I think we are.”

The smiling faded off Alex’s face, and she looked down at the floor. “Vicki wants to try to be friends again.”

“Is that something you want?”

“Yeah. I’ve missed her a lot.”

“Is Kara okay with it?”

“Okay might be a strong word, but she’s willing to give Vicki a chance. More for my sake than Vicki’s, but I’ll take what I can get. I told Kara, and I’m telling you, you guys are my family. You two come first. I like Vicki. I like her a lot. But if she says or does anything to hurt you or Kara, promise me you’ll tell me.”

“I think I can do that.”

“Don’t let Kara cut her any slack, either,” Alex said. “Kara will take a lot of crap if she thinks not taking it will hurt me.”

Maggie leaned over so her shoulder bumped Alex’s. “I really like that you take care of Kara.”

“I like that you do too.”
Alex reached out and took Maggie’s hand in her own, lacing their fingers together. Maggie glanced down at their hands, then up at Alex, who was sitting there with her eyes closed. The silence stretched out between them, and the longer it lasted, the heavier it became, until the weight of it was a physical ache in her chest that made Maggie feel like she was being crushed, but also left her feeling strangely hollow at the same time, like Alex was the only thing that could ever fill her up again.

“I don’t want to date Vicki,” Alex said. “I don’t want to date Rhonda.”

Maggie closed her eyes as what Alex wasn’t saying squeezed her heart like a vice.

“I don’t want you to date Vicki, or Rhonda,” Maggie said.

“I should go.”

“Please don’t.” Maggie opened her eyes and found Alex staring at her. “Please stay.”

Alex nodded. “As long as you want.”

Eliza was a little surprised by how quiet the house was when she got home. It was so quiet that if Alex’s car hadn’t been in the driveway, she would have been sure the house was empty.

The first sign that the house was actually occupied was the lack of Streaky on top of the bookshelf, which meant he was probably somewhere curled up in someone’s lap. The second sign was the light spilling out of Maggie’s bedroom. Maggie, unlike Alex and Kara, was really good about turning out the lights when she left a room, so Eliza was sure Maggie was probably in her bedroom.

She walked down the hall to check on Maggie. What she found when she peeked into the bedroom brought a smile to her face and melted her heart. Alex was lying on her back in the middle of Maggie’s bed, and Maggie was lying against Alex’s side, her head resting on Alex’s shoulder while they held each other in their sleep.

She knew most parents would be upset if they came home and found their daughter curled up in bed with someone, but Eliza couldn’t help but be happy. The sight reminded her so much of the way Jeremiah used to hold her when they slept, and she remembered how safe and loved she’d always felt pressed against his side with his arms around her. She wanted, more than anything in the world, for her children to be happy, and Alex and Maggie both looked very, very happy in that moment.

She stepped back, careful not to make any noise as she turned and headed for the kitchen, leaving them to finish their nap in peace.
Wednesday, March 1, 2006

“Hey,” Vicki said as she approached their usual lunch table.

“Hey,” Alex said, giving Vicki a small smile as she looked over at her.

“You guys mind if I sit with you?”

Alex’s smile got a little wider at the fact that Vicki had asked, instead of just assuming. It was a good sign because however much Alex might like the idea of having Vicki back in her life, she knew a lot of it depended on how well Vicki could get along with Maggie and Kara. The fact that Vicki was checking in and making sure her presence was okay made Alex hopeful that this could work.

She glanced over at Kara, who gave a small nod, then at Maggie, who shrugged. “Have a seat,” Alex said.

Vicki smiled. She put her tray on the table, then sat down next to Alex. Alex noted that Vicki was careful to leave a bit more space between them than she had the day before.

“Thanks,” Vicki said, addressing her statement to Maggie and Kara. “Really.”

“No problem,” Maggie said.

“So you guys looked like you were discussing something big and Earth-shattering when I walked up. Can I ask, or is it a big secret?”

Alex looked over at Kara, who just shrugged.

“I don’t care either way.”

Alex looked at Maggie.
“It would affect her too,” Maggie said.

“Okay, before I was just being nosey. Now I’m genuinely curious. What’s up?”

“Ms. Mercer asked if we’d like to be the student sponsors for a GSA club on campus,” Maggie said.

“Really?” Alex couldn’t remember Vicki’s being that excited since the day she’d offered to teach her how to surf.

“Yeah,” Alex said.

“That would be great!”

“You think so?” Maggie asked.

“You think so?” Maggie asked.

“Yes. I mean, I’m terrible at making friends, so I don’t know for sure, but we can’t be the only gay kids at Midvale High.”

“You must be doing something right if you’re dating cheerleaders,” Alex said.

Vicki winced. “Not really. We met in a doctor’s office. And she kind of asked me out.”

“You got picked up in a doctor’s office?” Maggie asked.

“No. That’s just where we met. She asked me out a couple of days later.”

“So the four of us and your cheerleader friend,” Alex said. “That’s five people in the whole school.”

“There has to be more,” Vicki said. “Even the most conservative statistical modeling puts the percentage of the population that’s gay at around five percent, and some estimates are closer to 10, which means that there’s somewhere between 70 to 145 other students here who are gay. Even on the low end, that’s almost four times as many people than the entire football team.”

“Oh, God,” Maggie said.

“What?” Vicki asked.

Maggie looked at Alex accusingly. “You didn’t tell me she’s a math nerd.”

Alex looked over at Vicki, who looked down at her lunch tray as her cheeks started to redden. “I didn’t know she was into math.”

Vicki hunched down a little, but Kara perked up.

“You like math?” Kara asked.

“Yes. I… I want to be a mathematician.”

“Really?” Kara’s face lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Yeah.” Vicki looked up at Kara. “I just… I think it’s beautiful. I mean, Mrs. Fulton is a terrible teacher, so I went online, and there was this professor who had videos of his entire Calc 1 class on his website, so I watched them, and it was just amazing. He did this proof that the derivative is the tangent to a curve using the fundamental theorem of calculus, and it was… I don’t even know how
to describe it.”

“Poetic,” Kara said. “I’ve seen the video. Professor Ding at Metropolis University, right?”

“Yes! I loved it. I must have watched it a dozen times. The way he stepped through the theorem, reducing H again and again.”

“Yeah,” Kara said excitedly. “Did you watch the whole series?”

Vicki smiled and raised her fists. “I will fight you,” she said in an exaggerated accent right out of a bad kung fu movie, which for some reason caused Kara and Vicki to break down into hysteric.

“Why do I suddenly feel like I’m in the twilight zone?” Maggie asked.

“I don’t know,” Alex said, looking back and forth between Kara and Vicki, “but I’m right there with you.”

“Dr. Ding…” Vicki managed to gasp out between laughs. “He’s this little five-foot-tall Chinese professor. He does this thing…” That was as far as Vicki got before she looked over at Kara, and both of them started laughing again.

It took them almost two minutes before they stopped laughing, and for a minute, Alex thought Vicki was going to pass out.

“Why didn’t you tell me you liked math?” Alex asked.

“I was embarrassed. You know how Josie was. I figured I’d never here the end of it, and I wasn’t sure you’d want to hang out with me if you knew I was a great big nerd.”

“Vicki, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel like that.”

Vicki shrugged. “I don’t think you did. Honestly, you were a better friend than I was. But, um, that’s how I knew Kenny. We took Pre-Algebra, Algebra, and Geometry together at Northside.”

“You knew Kenny?” Kara and Alex both asked, and Vicki looked down at her tray again.

“Yeah. I… That’s one of the reasons I wanted… That’s one of the reasons I went to therapy. I felt terrible about the way I treated him. I couldn’t even admit I knew him, that we used to be friends, because I was afraid.”

Alex reached over, putting a hand on Vicki’s shoulder. Vicki looked up at her. “You’re not the only one who made that mistake.”

“Yeah. But you and Kara put his murderer in jail.”

“That doesn’t make it better,” Alex said.

The table was quite for a few minutes. Alex turned back to her lunch, and Vicki sat there, staring at her untouched food. It was Kara who finally broke the silence. “What branch of mathematics do you want to specialize in?”

“Differential Calculus,” Vicki said. “I love Dynamic Systems. There’s this Russian mathematician and this Ukrainian physicist at National City University who are modeling neurons. They’re working with leeches right now, but their goal is to model the entire human brain mathematically using Partial Differential Equations.”
“Cool. What math class are you in now?”

“Um…” Vicki turned bright red. “I’m taking Vector Calculus and Linear Algebra as online dual-enrollment classes at National City University.”

“Your parents agreed to that?” Kara asked, sounding a little envious.

“They don’t know.”

“How can they not know?” Maggie asked.

“Because I’ve been signing their names on school paperwork for so long that if the secretary ever saw their actual signatures, she’d think they were forgeries.”

“You forged your parents’ signatures so you could take extra classes?” Maggie asked.

“You know, it doesn’t sound nearly as cool when you put it that way.”

“Actually, it kind of does,” Kara said.

Vicki blushed even harder.

Maggie shook her head. “They’re both nerds,” she said, but Alex didn’t miss the affection in Maggie’s voice.

When Maggie walked into the English hall after school, Alex, Kara, and Vicki were already there, but the scene was nothing like what she expected. Alex stood off to one side with a vaguely disgruntled look on her face, while Kara and Vicki stood together, talking to each other with intense looks on their faces.

“I created a monster,” Alex said as Maggie stopped next to her.

“What are they talking about?” Maggie asked.

“Nth dimensional surfaces over Nth plus one-dimensional volumes, I think.”

“Do you have any idea what that means?”

“No fucking clue. If you want to know about the flow of K plus ions through potassium channels, I’m your girl, but…” she gestured helplessly.

“I kind of don’t, but thanks for asking.”

Alex smiled. “You’re going to sit there and tell me you’ve never geeked out over anything?”

“Nope.”

“Right. And all those books in your room on forensics are just there to hold your bookshelf down.”

Maggie felt her cheeks heat up a bit and glared at Alex. “Come on. We’re actually here for a reason.”

“Nerd.”

“Takes one to know one,” Maggie said as she walked across the hall. She opened the door to Ms. Mercer’s classroom, and Ms. Mercer looked up from the papers she was grading, smiling as the
four of them traipsed into the room.

“Hey,” Ms. Mercer said.

“Hey,” Maggie said.

“Who’s your friend?” Ms. Mercer asked.

“Vicki Donahue,” Vicki introduced herself. “I’m in Ms. Kendie’s English Lit.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Vicki.”

“Nice to meet you too.”

“Did you girls come to a decision?”

“We want to do it,” Maggie said.

“All four of you?”

“Yes,” Alex said.

“That’s great.”

“So, what do we need to do?” Maggie asked.

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Thursday, March 2, 2006

The knock on the door came as Eliza was packing up her laptop to head into the lab. The girls had left for school a few minutes earlier, and the part of Eliza that was always on alert for threats to her family wondered if the timing was just a coincidence.

She checked the peephole and saw a man standing on the porch, waiting patiently. She’d never seen him before, though she couldn’t help but notice that he had the kind of bland, generic features that were hard to remember once you looked away from his face. He could have been anybody. A fact that made her hesitate to open the door. When she finally did, she left the chain on. She wasn’t under the impression that it would do a lot of good against someone who was determined, but it would buy her a couple of seconds, at the very least.

“Eliza Danvers?” the man asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“Vic Sage,” he said. “I’m a private investigator. Your friend in Gotham sent me.”

“Which friend?” Eliza asked. “I know a few people in Gotham.”

“This one is distinctive. Real drama queen. Thing for Gothic architecture and lurking in the shadows. Likes bats.”

“Ah. That friend. Hang on.”

She closed the door and took off the chain, then opened it again.

“Come in.”
“Thank you,” Vic said as he stepped inside. “Is there somewhere we can talk?”

“The kitchen is through there,” Eliza said, pointing the way. “I’ll be right in. I just need to let my employer know I’ll be running a little late.”

“Of course.”

He headed towards the kitchen while Eliza pulled out her phone and sent Clark a text saying, “Vic Sage in house. Check it with Gotham.” Another text went to her assistant Marissa saying that she’d be running late, then she followed Sage into the kitchen.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” Eliza said. “I honestly forgot my friend was sending you.”

“Not a problem. I understand that it’s been a rough couple of weeks for everyone involved.” Vic sat a black plastic file box on the table. “Before we begin, Dr. Danvers, I’d like to explain a little bit about myself.”

“Okay.”

“I’m a former government investigator. I’ve been in private practice for a number of years, and I’m actually licensed in all 50 states. Your friend is quite the detective, but his skills are somewhat narrower in focus than mine. He’s a brilliant criminal investigator. Probably the best in the world. But I am an investigator in a more general sense, which is why he sent me. This type of case is outside of the wheelhouse of your friend’s normal associates.”

“Now, as to the way I like to work. When I am investigating a subject, I learn everything I can about them, through every method I can reasonably employ. I do as much as possible above board because what I do is only beneficial if the information I find is admissible in court. However, I do have access to channels of information that are not admissible in court. I pursue those avenues as well because they can often tell me what information I need to look for through channels that would not taint the evidence in the eyes of the law.”

He reached up and placed a hand on top of the file box. “In this case, there are two sets of files. The files in the manila folders are all information obtained through perfectly legal channels open to any private detective and are completely admissible in a court of law. The second set of files, which are in red folders, are things found through channels a private detective would not have access to.”

He opened the file box and took out two stacks of folders. He set the manila folders in front of Eliza and the red folders in front of himself. “To be clear, were I working this case for anyone else, you would never see the red files. You would never know the red files exist. However, I’ve learned over the years that when Gotham calls, it’s best to present all information. I will go through the information in the red files with you, so you are aware of it. I cannot, however, allow you to keep the red files. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” Sage said as he reached up and popped the latches on the file box. “Then let’s get started.”

Maggie walked down the hall, heading to her second period class, but her mind was drifting. She’d spent most of the morning trying to focus, to think about school and classes and college applications and club charters and all the things she should be thinking about, but her brain refused to cooperate. So instead of all of those things, she’d spent the vast majority of the morning thus far
daydreaming about what it had felt like to be held by Alex while she drifted off to sleep, what it had felt like to wake up wrapped in Alex’s arms, and how much she had wanted to roll on top of Alex and kiss her and feel her and touch her.

She wasn’t sure why she couldn’t get it out of her head today. The memory hadn’t haunted her the day before, but it had filled her every thought since she’d woken up that morning, and the way Alex had kept giving her shy glances all through breakfast and on the drive into school hadn’t helped at all.

She wanted to feel Alex’s arms around her, wanted Alex to hold her, to feel herself pressed against Alex’s side again so much it was a physical ache, and she was so caught up in the need and the desire that she never saw it coming. She just felt something heavy and solid slam into her and felt a flash of pain as she hit the lockers, the dial from one of the combination locks’ digging into her back. She heard the echo as the books she’d been carrying hit the vinyl tiles covering the floor.

She stared at the person who’d slammed into her, a six-foot mass of solid muscle wrapped in a letterman jacket, who stood glaring at her.

“Watch where you’re going,” he growled.

“You walked into me.”

He took a step towards her, getting right up in her personal space, and for a moment Maggie was back in Blue Springs, ready to fight the whole fucking school. She braced herself, picking her targets as she waited for him to throw the first punch. He wasn’t a fighter. If he were, he wouldn’t make it so easy. He’d left himself open for a kick in the balls, and Maggie had learned years ago to go for the field goal. Then, once he was down, a couple of punches in the kidneys. He’d be peeing blood for a week, and she’d be making a run for the nearest classroom. As long as there were no teachers in the hall, she’d get away with it. No self-respecting jock was going to admit to getting their ass kicked by a five-foot-three girl.

“Why can’t bitches like you take a joke?” he asked. Then he turned and walked way.

Maggie let out a sigh of relief.

“Fucking dyke,” he called over his shoulder, just loud enough for her to hear.

Maggie took a step towards him, every inch of her body and every instinct in her honed through years of trying to survive in Blue Springs itching to beat him until he begged for mercy and was afraid to set foot in the same room as her. Instead she forced herself to stop, to bend down and calmly pick up her books, then to stand up and walk in the other direction.

Maggie sat on her bed, staring at the wall in front of her. She knew she should be doing her homework or working on the club charter or doing any of a dozen different things, but she couldn’t get today out of her head. The thoughts that were stuck in there were a lot less pleasant than the memory of Alex’ arms around her. It was easy enough to understand what happened. The football team knew she was one of the people responsible for what happened to the team members who were getting expelled. They were starting to retaliate and had decided that Maggie was the easiest target. It wasn’t hard to guess why either. She was new; she was smaller than Alex or Kara; and she didn’t have Alex’s reputation as a fighter or the promise of Alex’s wrath if they came after her. They didn’t know Maggie was a fighter. They didn’t know the damage she could do.

Maggie didn’t want to have to educate them.
“Are you okay?”

Maggie looked over, and her heart skipped a beat at the sight of Alex standing in the door to her room. It was stupid really. There was no reason that just the sight of Alex should do this to her. Except it did. Because the sight of Alex brought back memories of being held, being wanted, being cared for. The sight of Alex made her chest ache with want.

“I’m fine,” Maggie lied.

“Mind if I come in?”

“Please,” Maggie said because she was too weak to say no right now, even if she should. “I’d like that.”

Alex smiled, and Maggie’s stomach did a backflip. Alex walked over and sat down on the bed next to her, and Maggie’s heart tried to beat its way out of her chest just to be closer to Alex.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Alex asked.

“No.” And she didn’t. She didn’t want it to taint a single moment with Alex.

“How can I help?”

It wasn’t the question Maggie had expected, but God, it was the one she needed to hear, and she knew the answer immediately. “Do you think you could just hold me?”

“Like the other night?”

Maggie nodded.

“Of course.”

Alex scooted down and stretched out on the bed, tucking one of the pillows under her head, then looking expectantly at Maggie, who wasted no time stretching out beside Alex. She pressed herself against Alex’s side and wrapped an arm around her waist. She felt Alex’s arms wrap around her as she settled her head on Alex’s shoulder and relaxed for the first time since that idiot had slammed into her that morning.

“Better?” Alex asked.

“So much better.” Maggie shifted slightly, tightening her grip on Alex.

“You’re okay,” Alex said in a voice barely above a whisper. “I’m here. You’re safe.”

“Maggie,” Alex said in a soft voice.

Maggie stirred a little in her sleep and pressed closer to Alex’s side. Alex squeezed Maggie tightly and wished she didn’t have to wake her up. She wasn’t sure what had happened after they’d parted to go to their first period classes, but she had noticed something was off the moment she first saw Maggie in the lunchroom. Maggie hadn’t said anything about it, but Alex could feel the tension, and when lunch ended, she hadn’t said anything. She’d just walked Maggie to her fourth period class, which was in exactly the opposite direction of her own fourth period class. It had absolutely been worth the tardy slip she’d gotten, if only for the way Maggie had looked at her when they’d gotten to her classroom. A look that made her desperately want to lean down and kiss Maggie, though she’d settled for giving Maggie’s hand a quick squeeze before running the entire length of
the school in a futile effort to make it to class on time.

She didn’t know what happened, but she knew it was bad, and it killed her that she couldn’t fix it. Almost as much as she hated the fact that they needed to get up if they didn’t want Eliza to see them like this. It had been a minor miracle that they hadn’t gotten caught Tuesday night, and Alex made a mental note to always close the door when she came into Maggie’s room from now on.

“Maggie,” Alex said again.

“Five more minutes,” Maggie whined as she shifted even closer.

Alex knew she should wake her up, but when Maggie tucked her face against Alex’s neck, Alex decided to let her sleep. After all, when you had a sister with super-hearing, an open door wasn’t an insurmountable problem.

“Kara,” Alex whispered, “could you come down and close Maggie’s door? Quietly.”

Kara appeared a few seconds later with a huge grin on her face. She pulled the door closed so softly it didn’t make a sound.

Alex closed her eyes, and a few minutes later, she joined Maggie in sleep. Neither of them woke until Kara knocked on the door almost two hours later to let them know dinner was ready.

Maggie: Help!

Susan: If I can.

Susan: What’s up?

Maggie: How do you know if you’re in love?

Susan: Does the thought of being without them make you feel like you want to die?

Maggie: Yes.

Susan: Do you find it endearing when she does things that would make you want to kill anyone else?

Maggie: Yes.

Susan: Do you want her there even when you want the entire world to fuck off and leave you alone?

Maggie: Yes.

Susan: Congratulations. It’s love.

Maggie: Fuck my life.

Susan: Love is usually considered a good thing.

Maggie: This is not usually.

Susan: It probably could be if you talked to Alex’s mom.

Maggie: I’m still trying to talk myself into it.
Susan: Well in the meantime, tell Auntie Susan what happened.

Maggie: Alex and I slept together.

Before Maggie could finish typing out the next message, her phone started ringing. Maggie rolled her eyes and answered the phone.

“Slept in the same bed. As in actually slept. Not sex. Which you would have known, if you’d have waited 30 seconds,” Maggie said.

“Okay, first, you put that all in one text so my little gay heart doesn’t explode. Second, I need a minute while I hate you.”

“Tell me when you’re done,” Maggie said.

“Fuck. It’s not going away. Give me details. I’ll hate you more once we’re off the phone.”

“After Vicki left the other night, Alex came into my room, and we talked. She told me she wasn’t interested in dating Vicki or Rhonda, and I kind of admitted I didn’t want her to date Vicki or Rhonda, and she was going to leave, but I asked her to stay. We talked for a while, and we stretched out on the bed and fell asleep.”

“Was there cuddling?” Susan asked. “You better tell me there was cuddling.”

“So much cuddling. My head on her shoulder, and her arms around me.”

“God, I would hate you less if you’d just had sex with her.”

“It happened again tonight. I had a terrible morning, and Alex picked up on it at lunch. She walked me to my first class after lunch, and when we got home, she just held me until we both fell asleep.”

“If you tell me you still haven’t kissed her, I swear I’ll drive down to Midvale and lock you two in a closet until you’re on a first name basis with her tonsils.”

“You might want to borrow a car then.”

“I swear both of you are trying to kill me.”

“You keep telling us both to take it slow.”

“I also told you to talk to Alex’s mom.”

“I know,” Maggie said. “I’m just… I’m still scared.”

“Scare of Alex’s mom, or scared of Alex?”

“Can I be both?”

“Yeah, you can.”

“I’m scared that I’ll ask Mrs. Danvers, and she’ll say no, I can’t date Alex. And I’m scared that she’ll say yes, and I’ll date Alex, and Alex will figure out what I mess I am and hate me for it. And I’m scared that she’ll say yes, and I’ll date Alex, and it will be great, and then we’ll go to college where she’ll meet someone incredible and forget about me. And I’m scared that she’ll say yes, and I’ll date Alex, and Alex will realize she doesn’t want some girl from the middle of nowhere, Nebraska, whose biggest ambition is to be a cop when she could have Vicki the math genius, or
Rhonda the musician, or you and whatever amazing thing you’re going to be.”

“You’ve afraid of not being enough,” Susan said.

“How could I not be? My own parents threw me out like I was trash.”

“Okay, first of all, your parents are sacks of shit. And if I ever meet them, I will say that to their faces.”

“I’d actually pay to see that,” Maggie said.

“Second, you said yourself that she told you she wants to be with you. Not Vicki, not Rhonda, not me. She wants to be with you. So you just have to decide if what you feel is worth the risk of getting hurt.”

“What would you do?”

“If I were in your shoes, Alex and I would already be on chapter nine of that sex manual she doesn’t think we know she bought. But then, Alex wouldn’t be my first girlfriend, so I’m probably not the best yardstick to go by.”

“I kind of hate you right now.”

“I get that a lot.”

“Why can’t this just be easy?”

“I don’t know. You’ve got a really shitty deal, and I wish I could do something to make it better. Just, whatever happens, remember you’ll always have family.”

“Thanks,” Maggie said. “That means a lot.”

“Even if you did steal my girl.”

“Hey, I saw her first.”

“Details.”

“I made her realize she’s gay.”

“You made her wonder if she’s gay. I made her sure.”

“God, you’re terrible.”

“You love me,”

“I like you. Sometimes.”

“I’ll take it.”

Friday, March 3, 2006

Eliza looked up at the sound of a knock, and a smile spread over her face as she saw William Magnus standing in the doorway to her office.

“William! I didn’t know you were in town.”
“No reason you should,” William said. “This is completely unplanned.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Not unless you’ve stopped being one of the most brilliant bioengineers in the world.” William walked into the room and sat down in one of the chairs in front of her desk. “Paul called me and complained. He said you’ve been missing a lot of work lately.”

“I see,” Eliza said.

“I was concerned because you barely took any time off when you lost Jeremiah, so hearing that you’re suddenly taking unexpected days off was enough to get me to drive down.”

Eliza shook her head. “Always with the dramatic gestures.”

“Well, with a name like Magnus, subtlety was never going to be my strong suit. So what’s going on with my favorite scientist?”

“Family issues.”

“Nothing serious I hope. Alex and Kara are okay?”

“They’re fine. I just have a third daughter now.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize you were planning on adopting again.”

“Neither did I,” Eliza said. “Maggie got thrown out by her parents, so I took her in.”

“Now, see, that sounds much more like the Eliza I know. Do you need any help with the adoption proceedings? I know several very good lawyers here in town.”

“I’m not going through a full legal adoption.”

“Why not? Is it money? Because your benefits package will cover all the expenses.”

“It’s not money. She turns 18 on March 29th, and if I filed paperwork today, the earliest I could get a court date would be sometime in July. Also, Alex would murder me in my sleep.”

William laughed. “She got over you adopting Kara.”

“Eventually. But she wasn’t dating Kara.”

“Ah… Yeah. I could see how that would make a difference.”

“Just a bit. Maggie’s a good kid who had the bad luck to end up with really terrible parents. The time I’ve been taking has been to deal with legal issues and matters at school. I helped get her emancipated and got a restraining order issued against her father so her parents couldn’t cause her any trouble. I’ve also met with Child Protective Services regarding the safety of Maggie’s sister. It’s all been within my accumulated personal time.”

“Eliza, don’t worry about it. I didn’t come down here to call you on the carpet for taking a couple of personal days. I came to check on a friend who is too stubborn to ask for help when she needs it.”

“I’ve gotten a lot better about that.”
“A lot better than completely terrible is still pretty bad,” William said. “I’ll talk to Paul and remind him that he is the Facility Manager, and you are the Lead Researcher. I will also remind him what happened the last time you were unhappy with a Facility Manager.”

“I think what happened the last time I was unhappy with a facility manager is probably why Paul calls you every time I breathe funny. He’s trying to establish a paper trail in case we get into a fight.”

“Well that’s because Paul doesn’t know you are the only reason I passed organic chemistry. That is a debt which can never be repaid.”

“I don’t know. You did a pretty good job of it when you helped me get through digital instrumentation.”

“I’m still not ready to call it even,” William said. “If you need any more time, you take it, and if Paul gives you any trouble, call me directly. I’ll deal with it.”

“Thank you.”

“Good, and if there’s anything I can do to help, let me know.”

“Actually, now that you mention it, there might be. Do you have any pull with the Vale County School Board?”

“Eliza, I own the company that employs 60 percent of Vale County. I have pull with everyone.”

Eliza smiled. “How would you feel about helping me get someone fired for being an incompetent, sexist little worm?”

Maggie spent the entire morning waiting for another attack, because one thing Blue Springs had taught her was that there was no such thing as an isolated incident. She didn’t let herself get lost in her thoughts. She didn’t daydream of the hours she’d spent wrapped in Alex’s arms. She kept her head up; she watched everyone; and most of all, she kept her distance so she’d have more time to react if anyone tried something again.

She made it through her first three classes without issue, and she actually started to relax a little as she headed for the lunchroom, looking forward to a few minutes with Alex. She stayed alert, didn’t let her focus slip, but smiled the whole way because time with Alex was quickly turning into one of her favorite things, and she wanted all of it she could get.

The whole way, she kept thinking maybe Susan was right. Maybe she could just talk to Mrs. Danvers. Maybe… Maybe she could get Alex to do it with her. It wouldn’t be so scary if she didn’t have to do it alone. It was Friday night. If they talked to Mrs. Danvers tonight, then they’d have the whole weekend.

“I said no!”

She heard the shout as she came around the last corner before the lunchroom. The hallway was mostly empty, but halfway down, Kara was backed against the lockers lining the walls as Pat Brice loomed over her.

“Come on,” Pat said. “You just need a guy to show you what you’re missing.”

He reached for her about the same time Maggie started to run. She’d taken two steps when
someone reached between them and shoved Pat back. Maggie stopped, stunned by the sight of Elisa Wilkey stepping between Pat and Kara.

“Stay the fuck away from her!” Elisa shouted.

“Aww, babe. Don’t be jealous. If you want another go-“

Maggie flinched at the snapping sound when Elisa’s fist connected with Pat’s face. Pat staggered back, blood streaming down his face from his now crooked nose as Elisa screamed and fell to her knees, curling around the fist she’d used to hit him as tears poured down her face.

“You bitch!” Pat screamed. He stepped towards Elisa, raising his hand to hit her, and Maggie started running again, but there was no way she could reach them in time.

Something happened, though Maggie wasn’t exactly sure what. She was sure she was about to watch Pat hit Elisa, then Kara and Pat sort of disappeared, and there was a hollow bang from across the corridor, and Kara was there, pinning Pat against the now dented bank of lockers on the far wall with his feet dangling a good foot off the ground.

“Don’t you touch her!” Kara said, her voice a low growl.

Maggie dropped to her knees next to Elisa, resting a hand on her shoulder and bending forward to look at the hand she had hit Pat with. It was turning red and two of the knuckles were split open and bleeding.

“KARA!”

Maggie turned at the sound of Alex’s voice and saw Alex standing next to Kara, and some sort of weird light shining on Pat’s face.

“He was going to hurt her,” Kara snarled.

“I know. But she’s safe, and you need to put him down.”

Kara’s fist tightened in the front of his shirt as she pulled her free hand back to punch him.

“/!zharrvi/” Alex shouted.

Maggie had no idea what Alex had said, but it worked. Kara stopped and looked over at Alex, and Maggie saw where the weird light was coming from. The entire area around Kara’s eyes was glowing bright white.

“You’re attracting attention.”

Kara closed her eyes, and the glow faded away. She took a deep breath and let go of Pat, who dropped down to the ground, whimpering but not moving. Kara turned around, walked over to Elisa, and knelt down in front of her. “Are you okay?”

“It hurts,”

Kara pushed her glasses up on top of her head and looked at Elisa’s hand intently.

“You broke the third and fourth metacarpal,” Kara said. “Somebody needs to get a teacher.”

“I’ll go,” Maggie said.
“No! Don’t leave me,” Elisa looked up at Maggie. “Please.”

Maggie moved forward and knelt down next to them. “Okay, I’ll stay.” She looked at Kara. “You go.”

“Is that what you want?” Kara asked.

Elisa nodded. With that, Kara got up and ran for the lunchroom.

Maggie wrapped an arm around Elisa’s shoulder and pulled her close. “Is this okay?”

Elisa nodded and leaned into Maggie.

“I’ve got you,” Maggie murmured.

Elisa’s sobs were the only answer.

Alex stood in the corridor outside the lunchroom, barely able to keep from screaming at the absolute disaster in front of her. Kara had used her powers. Kara had used her powers in school. Kara had used her powers to body slam someone into a bank of lockers hard enough to dent them. Kara had been about ready to melt someone’s face off. Kara had used her powers in front of Maggie.

Kara had used her powers in front of the security cameras.

Alex pulled out her phone and moved away from the rapidly forming crowd, already dialing her mom as she ducked into one of the bathrooms.

“Alex?” Eliza answered.

“Kara used her powers,” Alex said in one breathless go.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. One of the football players hurt a girl. Broke her hand. Kara slammed him into the lockers hard enough to dent them. Her whole face was lit up with her heat vision. I got her to let him go, but she used her X-ray vision on the girl’s hand. Maggie saw the whole thing, and I’m pretty sure the security cameras got a good look too.”

“Damn it! How could you let this happen?”

“Let it happen?” Alex asked, unable to believe the words coming out of her mother’s mouth. “How about I wasn’t fucking there! I was going to lunch, and I walked into the middle of it.”

“How many people saw?”

“The girl who was hurt, the guy Kara body-slammed, and Maggie were the only ones in the hall when Kara’s face was lit up like a damn Christmas tree.”

“Where’s Kara now?”

“She went to get a teacher.”

“Okay. Make sure she doesn’t do anything else. I’ll take care of the security footage, but make sure she doesn’t talk to anyone until I get there. Same for you and Maggie.”
Eliza got up and closed the door to her office as she dialed Clark, hoping like hell he answered because she did not want to call her backup option. Fortunately, he picked up on the second ring.

“Hey, Eliza,” Clark said.

“Get Batman on the phone. Don’t argue. There’s no time. Kara’s about to be exposed unless we have his help.”

“Hold on.” The line went silent for a moment, then Eliza heard it reconnect.

“What do you need?” Batman asked.

“I need all the security footage from Midvale High School today gone and for the system to not be recording for the rest of the day, or until someone checks it,” Eliza said.

“One minute,” Batman said.

The silence stretched out for an eternity, and it was all Eliza could do to not ask what was taking so long.

“Done.”

“Thank you.”

“Just tell me I didn’t destroy evidence of a crime.”

“You didn’t.”

“Good. Do you need anything else?”

“No.”

There was a click as Batman disconnected.

“What the hell is going on?” Clark asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Eliza said. “I just know Kara used her powers on a boy at school.”

“Good God, is he okay?”

“I don’t know. I’m hanging up now so I can go find out.”

Maggie held Elisa as she cried, taking care not to touch her injured hand. She wasn’t sure, but her gut told her the tears and the sobs didn’t have anything to do with the pain in her hand. Pat’s disgusting comment, combined with what Maggie had already pieced together from what Elisa had said at the movie theater, told a story, and if Maggie could have done it without letting go of Elisa, she would have walked over and kicked out Pat’s teeth.

She kept an eye on him as she held Elisa. He was awake, and he’d tried to get up a couple of times, but every time he moved, he let out a pained noise and fell back down, moaning.

They weren’t alone, either. The hall was quickly filling up with kids standing around staring, and
Maggie kept looking around, wondering where Alex had gotten to. She finally spotted her pushing through the crowd and felt a wave of relief as Alex knelt down next to her.

“Mom’s on the way,” Alex said. “Don’t say anything to anyone about what happened until she gets here.”

“Okay.” Maggie wanted to ask so many questions. How have Kara moved like that? Why did her face light up the way it did? How was Kara that strong? But she remembered her promises. Don’t ask questions. Don’t talk about anything weird she saw. They were small prices to pay for a family.

“Maggie,” Elisa said.

Maggie turned back to her. “I’m here,” she said. “I’ve got you.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry,” Elisa said again. “Please, I’m so sorry.”

“I know.” Maggie pressed a kiss to Elisa’s temple. “I forgive you.”

Elisa reached out with her good hand and grabbed the front of Maggie’s shirt.

“Here we go,” Alex said.

Maggie looked around and saw Kara leading Ms. Mercer through the crowd.


“Her hand is broken,” Maggie said.

Ms. Mercer stared at her for a moment, then looked over at Pat. “What happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” Maggie said.

“Maggie…”

“She’s hurt,” Maggie snapped. “Just call a fucking doctor already. You can blame people later.”

Ms. Mercer flinched away from her, but she reached into her pocket and pulled out a cell phone, and that was enough.

There were two ambulances pulling up in front of the school as Eliza reached the front door. She knew the moment she saw them that things were worse than she’d expected, and she’d already expected them to be pretty bad. She pulled one of the doors open as a woman Eliza didn’t know opened the other one. Two teams of paramedics rolled stretchers inside. The woman let go of the door and led the paramedics into the school. Eliza considered going to the office and signing in the way she was supposed to but dismissed it. She needed to make sure her girls were okay; everything else was secondary.

Following the paramedics turned out to be the right decision because they led her right to her girls and the scene of an absolute nightmare. There was a boy lying on the ground, moaning in pain as a teacher knelt beside him. On the other side of the hallway, Maggie sat on the floor, cradling a girl Eliza didn’t recognize in her arms. The girl’s hair was shaved on one side, long on the other, and
she was wearing black lipstick and lots of eyeliner. One of her hands was swollen and red, while the other was clutching desperately at the front of Maggie’s shirt. A Sheriff’s deputy and a bunch of adults Eliza assumed were teachers or administrators, including Julie and Principal Munroe, were clustered throughout the hallway. Alex and Kara stood off to one side, Alex with an arm around her sister as Kara leaned against her.

Alex spotted Eliza and nudged Kara. Both of them walked over to her as Eliza watched the paramedics work.

“We need a scoop board,” one of the paramedics working on the boy said. One of the EMT’s took off back the way they’d come at a run, and Eliza felt a chill go through her. If they needed a scoop board, they were worried about even lifting him onto a stretcher.

“Hey,” Alex said.

“Don’t say anything to anyone,” Eliza whispered to Alex, knowing Kara would hear as well.

“Got it. Maggie knows too.”

“Good,” Eliza said.

“No!” the girl with Maggie shouted.

Eliza looked over, and one of the paramedics was kneeling in front of her. The girl had practically crawled into Maggie’s lap.

“It’s okay,” Maggie said. “I’m here.”

“Ma’am, we need to take you to the hospital. That hand is in bad shape. Probably broken,” one of the paramedics said.

The girl looked at Maggie. “Don’t leave me.”

“Okay.” Maggie looked up at the paramedic. “I’ll ride to the hospital with her.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I can’t transport a minor who isn’t injured without parental consent.”

“She’s been emancipated,” Eliza said. “She’s a legal adult.”

The paramedic looked at Eliza, then back at Maggie, and Eliza could see the hesitation.

“I’m Dr. Eliza Danvers. I was Maggie’s legal guardian prior to her emancipation, so if it makes it easier, you have my permission to take her, but the way that hand is swelling, you’ve got a possible nick in one of the palmar arteries. If you don’t transport the girl now, the hand could be permanently damaged. Take them both and go.”

The paramedic nodded.

“Ma’am,” he said to the girl, “if your friend comes with you, will you go?”

The girl nodded, and this time, when the paramedics reached for her, she let go of Maggie and allowed them to help her onto the stretcher.

“Maggie,” Eliza said. “You have your credit cards?”

“Yes.”
“The red one. Anything you need.”

Maggie nodded as she took the girl’s uninjured hand. The paramedics left with Maggie walking alongside the stretcher as the EMT who’d disappeared earlier came running back with a scoop board. He quickly split it in half, and he and the paramedic tending to the boy worked a half under the boy from each side before locking them together and lifting the whole thing onto the stretcher. After they had him strapped down they headed for the door, following the team that had left with Maggie and the girl.

Once they were gone, Principal Munroe walked over to her. “What are you doing here, Mrs. Danvers?” he asked.

“One of my daughters called me,” Eliza said.

“I’ll bet. You can wait in the office while we talk to them.”

“I don’t think so. You’ll speak to them with me present, or you’ll speak to them with me and my lawyer present, or not at all.”

“Fine.”

“Good. Now, I’ll need a few minutes alone with them before we start.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then we’re leaving. We’ll come back on Monday with my lawyer.”

Principal Munroe turned around to look at the Sheriff’s deputy. “Do something.”

The deputy shrugged. “What?” he asked. “Sir, they took a girl out of here with a broken hand. The kind of injury you’d get from punching someone in the face if you didn’t know what you were doing. The boy had a crooked nose. The kind of thing you’d get from getting punched in the face. It looks to me like the girl punched the boy in the nose, and he stumbled and fell against the lockers. Banged himself up. None of the other girls look like they were fighting.”

Principal Munroe looked over at the dented lockers. “You think he did that by falling?”

“I don’t know, sir, but I know that isn’t something a teenage girl did,” the deputy said.

Principal Munroe turned back to Eliza. “Fine. The three of you can sit in the conference room in the office while we pull the security footage from this corridor. Then we’ll see what really happened.”

Eliza closed the door to the conference room, then turned around to face Kara and Alex, who were already sitting at the table. She took a seat across from them. “Tell me what happened.”

“I was going to lunch when Pat Brice came up to me. He asked me on a date. I told him no, but he got in my way and wouldn’t let me by. I said no again, but he backed me up against one of the lockers. He said he’d seen me, Alex, and Maggie at the movies Friday night. He said I was too pretty to be gay. That I just needed a guy to show me what I was missing. Then he tried to touch me. Elisa got between us.”

“Elisa?” Eliza asked. “That was Elisa Wilkey?”

Kara nodded. “She got between us. Told Pat to stay away from me. He said…”
Eliza braced herself, because she could tell whatever she was about to hear wasn’t going to be pretty.

“He said, ‘Don’t be jealous. If you want another go-’ and then Elisa punched him in the nose. I heard the bones in her hand snap. She broke his nose too. He called her a bitch and tried to hit her, so I pushed him up against the lockers.

“I got so angry,” Kara said. “I could feel my heat vision, and I would have punched him if Alex hadn’t stopped me.”

Eliza closed her eyes and took a deep breath to try to tamp down the anger she felt. This Pat Brice boy had tried to sexually assault Kara, and Elisa Wilkey had ended up getting hurt, and if they weren’t careful, Kara might very well end up exposed. “Okay. The good news is, the security footage isn’t an issue. I made a couple of phone calls before I got here. All they’ll find is that the system has been offline for hours.”

Alex breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“We’ll talk about all of this later, but Alex, you said Maggie saw it?”

“Yeah. And Elisa and Pat.”

“Okay,” Eliza said. “There’s nothing we can do about that right now, so we’ll worry about it later. Right now, though, we need to discuss what we’re going to tell them when they come in here, so listen carefully.”

“I’m sorry,” Eliza said.

Maggie smiled and squeezed Elisa’s good hand. “I got that the first fifty times you said it.”

They were sitting in one of the bays in the ER, waiting on the X-rays, and Elisa hadn’t stopped apologizing the whole time they’d been there.

“I know… I just… I…”

She couldn’t get the words out and broke down into tears again. Maggie reached up, pressed a hand against her forehead, and ran in back over her hair again and again. The simple touch seemed to help calm Elisa down, and after a couple of minutes, she stopped crying.

“You need anything for the pain?” Maggie asked.

“No.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah.”

“Pat… He was the one, wasn’t he?” Maggie asked. “The one that wouldn’t take no for an answer?”

Elisa nodded. “He lives next door to me. We moved into the house right at the start of the summer before freshman year, and I didn’t know anybody. He was nice to me. I thought he was my friend. We hung out together for months, and he asked me out for Valentine’s Day. I was so excited. It was the first date I’d ever been on. When we got home, his parents were still out, so he invited me in. We started to kiss, but he wouldn’t stop. I begged him to, but he wouldn’t stop.”
Maggie closed her eyes and had to fight down the urge to be sick because everything that happened made sense. The best friend, Valentine’s Day. God, it was no wonder Elisa had freaked out.

“When I… It brought it all back, didn’t it?” Maggie asked.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I acted the way I did.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry I brought all that up again.”

“You didn’t mean to.” Elisa closed her eyes as more tears spilled down her eyes.

“What is it?”

“I don’t want you to go.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“You have to,” Elisa said. She opened her eyes and looked at Maggie. “If my dad sees you… It’s already going to be bad.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s going to be so mad.”

“Because you got hurt?”

“The money. He’s going to be mad about the hospital bill. He’s going to be so mad.”

“Elisa, does he hit you when he gets mad?” Maggie asked.

She nodded. “He… He got so mad when he found your card. I’d only ever seen him that mad once before. When I told him about what Pat did.”

“You told him?”

“Yes.”

“And he hit you?”

“He said I was a whore. He…” Elisa closed her eyes and shook her head.

“It’s okay. It’s okay.” She sat there for a moment, holding Elisa’s hand, her mind turning over everything she’d learned before coming to a decision.

“Elisa, do you trust me?” Maggie asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m going to step outside for a minute. I need to make a phone call.”

“Okay.”

Maggie stood up and stepped through the curtain than closed off the bay they were in. She took out her phone and dialed Mrs. Danvers.

“Hello, Maggie,” Mrs. Danvers said. “I’m with Principal Munroe right now. Is this urgent?”
“Very,” Maggie said. “Do you still have the phone number of that woman from Child Protective Services?”

“Yes.”

“Can you text it to me right now?”

“Okay. Do you need anything else?”

“I’m at Midvale General. Please get here as soon as you can.”

“Okay. Are you safe?”

“Yes,” Maggie said. “It’s Elisa I’m worried about.”

“I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

“Thank you. I’ve got to go.”

“Bye.”

Mrs. Danvers hung up, and a few seconds later a text alert popped up. Maggie dialed the number.

“Nicole Oswald Speaking,” Ms. Oswald said.

“Ms. Oswald, this is Maggie Rodas. I’m sorry to bother you, but how soon can you get to Midvale General Hospital?”

“Maybe 15 minutes depending on traffic,” Ms. Oswald said. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, but I need your help.”

“Okay. Can you tell me what with?”

“A girl who’s being beaten by her father.”

“I’m on my way. Can you give me her name?”

“Elisa Wilkey,” Maggie said. “She was hurt at school. I rode in the ambulance with her. She’s afraid her father will hurt her because of the hospital bill, and the school has probably already called him and told him where she is.”

“Okay. Find the nearest nurse or doctor. Tell them to find the resource officer and to tell the resource officer that there is a minor in imminent danger of bodily harm from a family member. When the resource officer gets there, give them my name and phone number, and tell them everything you told me.”

“Okay.”

“I’m getting in my car. I’m going to hang up so I can drive.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Kara’s eyes lit up as Eliza fished a couple of protein bars out of the bottom of her purse. Kara had gone through the entire box in her backpack during the meeting with Principal Munroe, much to Munroe’s annoyance. Eliza had ended the meeting at the two-hour mark when she got Maggie’s
phone call, again to Munroe’s annoyance, but Principal Munroe had no evidence contradicting the version of events that Kara and Alex had given him, since somehow the school’s security system had gotten turned off the night before.

“Take your sister and get her some food, then go home,” Eliza said to Alex. “We’ll talk when I get there.”

“What about Maggie?” Alex asked.

“I’m going to Midvale General to pick her up, but we might not be home right away. If we’re not home in time for dinner, call and order something. Under no circumstances are either of you to leave the house.”

Alex got that mulish look that said she wanted to argue, but she didn’t. She just took Kara and headed for her car. Eliza headed for her own, wondering how big a disaster was waiting for her at the hospital.

Maggie looked up when the curtain pulled back and sighed in relief when she saw Ms. Oswald standing there.

“Maggie,” Ms. Oswald said. “It’s good to see you again.”

“You too,” Maggie said, which was kind of a lie because she really wished this wasn’t happening. “This is Elisa.”

“Hello, Elisa. I’m Nicole Oswald. I’m a caseworker with Child Protective Services.”

“Hey.” Elisa looked over at Maggie. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “You can trust her, I promise.”

Elisa looked back at Ms. Oswald. “How do we do this?”

“Let’s just start at the beginning. Do you mind if I record this?”

Maggie sat back and watched as Ms. Oswald took out her voice recorder and steno pad. She listened as Elisa began to go through everything that her father had done to her. It was painful to listen to, painful to realize how long her friend had needed help, but Maggie was happy that she had finally found a way to help her.

“Excuse me,” Eliza said to the triage nurse at the admissions desk of the Midvale General ER.

“Yes?” the nurse replied.

“A girl named Elisa Wilkey was brought in a couple of hours ago with an injured hand. My daughter Maggie Rodas rode with her in the ambulance.”

The nurse stiffened a bit at the mention of the Wilkey girl’s name. She relaxed slightly when Eliza said she was there for Maggie, but the reaction still put Eliza on edge.

“It will be just a couple of minutes, ma’am, but I’ll have someone come out for you. Can I just get your name?”

“Dr. Eliza Danvers.”
“Thank you, Dr. Danvers. Just have a seat.”

Maggie held Elisa’s good hand the whole time she talked to Ms. Oswald, but she’d gotten progressively angrier with every word. She’d known Elisa didn’t like her dad and was mostly indifferent to her mom, but she’d assumed it was a situation similar to her own. She’d never realized how bad it was. She suspected part of it was that Elisa had gone to great lengths to make sure Maggie never met her parents, but Maggie couldn’t help but feel like it was her fault. She’d let her own feelings get in the way of seeing what was happening to her friend, and the fact that she hadn’t even noticed how desperately Elisa needed help made her sick.

All three of them looked up as the curtain drew back, and the hospital’s resource officer stepped into the bay.

“Excuse me,” she said. “There’s a Dr. Danvers out front, asking for Maggie Rodas.”

“That’s me,” Maggie said.

“Should I bring her back, or do you want to go out to her?” the officer asked.

Maggie looked over at Elisa. “Is it okay if she comes back?”

“Is she Alex and Kara’s mom?” Elisa asked.

“Yeah.”

“What is she doing here?”

“She took me in after my dad kicked me out. I thought you knew.”

Elisa shook her head. “I knew you’d been spending a lot of time with Alex and Kara. I didn’t know you were living with them.”

“We haven’t been talking much.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Maggie said. “Can she come back? That way I won’t have to leave.”

“Okay.”

Maggie looked over at Ms. Oswald, who gave a small nod. Then she looked at the officer. “Bring her back, please.”

“Okay.” The office slipped out of the bay, pulling the curtain shut behind her.

Maggie looked over at Ms. Oswald. “Can you help her?”

“Yes,” Ms. Oswald said.

“You can?” Elisa asked.

“Definitely. We’ll have to see what the doctors say about your hand because if they want to operate, they’ll most likely keep you overnight, but I can promise you, whatever happens, you won’t be going home to your parent’s house.”
The relief on Elisa’s face was enough to break Maggie’s heart and make her wish she’d been a better friend.

“Thank you,” Elisa said.

“Can you do anything about Pat Brice?” Maggie asked.

“I don’t know,” Ms. Oswald said. “I’m going to try. I’ll get the police involved, as well as the District Attorney, but honestly, I don’t want to get your hopes up. It’s been so long since the attack, I doubt they’ll do anything.”

Maggie wanted to say something, but she was the daughter of a Sheriff, and the answer didn’t really surprise her. But she also knew that Pat had to be somewhere in the same hospital, and she had a sudden burning desire to find him and beat him to death.

“It’s okay,” Elisa said. Maggie looked over at her and squeezed her hand.

Ms. Oswald shook her head. “No, it’s not. He belongs in jail, and I wish I could put him there, but right now we’ll have to settle for making sure you’re safe.”

The curtain opened again, and Mrs. Danvers stepped inside the bay.

“Dr. Danvers,” Ms. Oswald said. “Good to see you again.”

“Likewise, Ms. Oswald.” Mrs. Danvers turned towards Elisa. “And you must be Elisa Wilkey.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Elisa said.

“Then I owe you a thank you,” Mrs. Danvers said.

“For what?”

“For protecting Kara.”

“Is she okay?” Elisa asked.

“She’s fine. Don’t you remember what happened?”

“Not really,” Elisa said. “I was in so much pain after I hit him. All I really remember before the paramedics got there was Maggie holding me.”

Maggie didn’t miss the relief on Mrs. Danvers face, and she had a pretty good idea of why it was there.

“That’s okay, sweetheart. How’s your hand?”

“It hurts. They’re deciding if I need surgery.”

“I’m sorry you got hurt.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you and Ms. Oswald finished talking, or do Maggie and I need to give you some privacy?”

“We’re done for now,” Ms. Oswald said.

“Would it be okay if we stayed with Elisa for a while?” Maggie asked. “I don’t want to leave her
alone.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Danvers said. She looked at Elisa. “Would you mind if I sit with you a while?”

“No.”

Mrs. Danvers took the seat next to Ms. Oswald, and the four of them settled in for the wait.

It took the doctors another half hour to decide whether or not to operate. In the end, they decided that since a small bleed in a palmar artery wasn’t closing on its own, they needed to go in. They were also going to put in plates and screws to hold the bones in place while they healed. It was a decision Eliza had agreed with after she saw the X-rays.

They had all stayed until Elisa was taken for surgery, but once she was gone, Nicole led them outside.

“What will happen when she gets out of surgery?” Maggie asked.

“They’ll keep her overnight,” Nicole said. “Maybe until Sunday, depending on how well she’s recovering. I’ll try to have a foster placement for her by the time she’s released, but she might spend a few nights in a group home.”

A small shudder went through Eliza when she heard the words group home. She knew she shouldn’t do it, that the situation was too messy already, but she wouldn’t have been able to live with herself if she didn’t offer.

“I could take her,” Eliza said. “At least until you find a foster placement.”

“No,” Nicole said.

“Why not?” Maggie asked.

“I can’t place her in a home where there’s an elevated potential for conflict. Your history with her is too fraught. I know that you care about her, and she obviously cares about you, but a few days ago, the situation was completely different. I understand why, but the girl needs a low stress environment, and being in the same space as you right now could do more harm than good.”

“That’s not true!” Maggie said.

“Maggie,” Nicole said, “Elisa has been hurt very badly, and she may have come to realize you never intended her any harm, but your feelings for her caused her to relive a serious trauma. I know that’s hard for you because you care about her, but right now, she needs a completely safe environment. I’m going to see to it that she gets that. I’m also going to make sure that she gets therapy to help her deal with her experiences. But I wouldn’t be doing either of you any favors by placing you in the same home. I’m going to do my best to make sure she remains in Midvale High, but there’s still the matter of her assaulting another student. She may face suspension or even expulsion for that. So we’ll see. What I will do is make sure any foster parents are aware of you and okay with you visiting if Elisa wants you to.”

Eliza put her hand on Maggie’s shoulder and gave it a small squeeze.

“If there’s anything I can do,” Eliza said.

“I’ll be sure to let you know,” Nicole agreed.
“What about my sister?” Maggie asked.

“I’m still working on it. We’re doing everything we can to make sure she’s safe.”

“When will you know?” Maggie asked.

“Soon. I want to make sure there are no surprises when we get in front of a judge.”

“Is she okay?”

“She’s doing fine. She misses you.”

“She does?”

“Yes,” Nicole said. “She asks about you every time I see her.”

“Tell her I said I love her?”

“Of course. I have to go back in and wait for Elisa’s parents to show up. With luck, we’ll have the court order before she’s out of surgery.”

They rode home in silence, and Maggie was grateful for that. Her mind was running a mile a minute as she tried to process everything that had happened that day, but she wasn’t sure how to deal with any of it.

Pat Brice had raped Elisa. Elisa had told her father. Her father had blamed her, beaten her and called her a whore. Her father had been beating her for as long as she could remember. And Maggie hadn’t even known it was happening. She’d been Elisa’s friend for months and had missed all of it.

After spending the afternoon with Elisa, Maggie understood a little better what Alex must have been feeling when Vicki had approached her. The feeling of relief from an ache she hadn’t even realized she felt. She didn’t know if it would last, didn’t know if Elisa would end up at a different school, or even if, once the shock of today wore off, Elisa would still want anything to do with her. But for a few hours, she’d had her friend back. For a few hours, it had been Maggie and Elisa against the world again. It was different than before, but Maggie hated walking away from Elisa today just as much as she had before the card.

She was also exhausted and wanted to be home. She wanted to get some food because she still hadn’t had lunch, and then she wanted to curl up in bed with Alex and take a nap. Which she probably couldn’t do because she still hadn’t talked to Mrs. Danvers.

She glanced over at Mrs. Danvers, wondering if it would be a good time to have that talk but decided that right after Kara had beat the ever-loving shit out of someone probably wasn’t the best time for the ‘I want to date your daughter’ conversation. Especially given that Kara had handed out the well-deserved ass kicking at school.

That was another thing she needed to get her head around. She had thought the strange things she wasn’t supposed to talk about would be things like Kara’s insane appetite or her fraught relationship with her cousin or the fact that Kara would occasionally mutter to herself in different languages when she was working on something, and what kind of kid knows seven different languages? Eight if you count whatever language Alex had used to talk Kara down when she’d been about to cave Pat’s face in. She hadn’t expected whatever it was she’d seen. Teleportation, maybe.
Don’t ask questions was the rule, but Christ.

Of course, the Metropolis connection suggested an answer, but it was too crazy, and she was sure she was just grasping at straws. Superman was supposed to be the last of his kind. The idea that he had a cousin and was a colossal dick to her was… something. Maggie didn’t know what, but it wasn’t anything good.

They pulled into the driveway, and Maggie took a deep breath, because she wasn’t sure what was going to happen when they got inside, but she had a feeling everything was about to change again.

“I’m proud of you,” Mrs. Danvers said.

Maggie turned and looked at her. “What?”

“What you did today. Elisa hurt you badly, but you were there for her. You helped her, even when you didn’t have to. And I am so very proud of you.”

“She’s my friend,” Maggie said. Because it was true, and because Maggie didn’t feel proud. She felt like she’d failed Elisa for months, and she hated it.

Mrs. Danvers just smiled at her. “Come on. Let’s go inside before Kara and Alex explode.”

“Okay, I know I’m not supposed to ask questions, but is that something that could actually happen? Because I’m kind of flying blind here.”

Mrs. Danvers laughed. “No. Come on. It’s time you know the truth.”

“Yeah,” Maggie said as she climbed out of the car. “That’s not ominous at all.”

She made it halfway to the porch before the front door opened and Alex came out to meet them. Maggie walked right up to her and pulled Alex into a hug. She knew she shouldn’t, not right in front of Mrs. Danvers before they’d had the talk, but she couldn’t stop herself any more than she could stop the tears that welled up in her eyes when she felt Alex’s arms around her. It felt like coming home.

“Are you okay?” Alex asked.

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “You?”

“Depends on how hard Mom kills us,” Alex said as she pulled out of the hug.

“I’m not killing anyone,” Mrs. Danvers said. “Where’s your sister?”

“She’s hiding in the closet upstairs.”

Mrs. Danvers sighed. “She hasn’t done that in a while.”

“Not since before Kenny.”

“Come on,” Mrs. Danvers said. “Let’s go inside.”

The three of them stepped into the house, and Mrs. Danvers closed the door. “You girls go into the living room. I’ll go get Kara.”

“Okay.” Alex led the way into the living room.
Maggie would rather they had gone to her bedroom to curl up together, but she settled for sitting next to Alex on the couch.

“Is Elisa okay?” Alex asked.

“Her hand is pretty messed up. The end of one of the broken bones cut an artery, so they have to operate. They’re going to put screws and pins in to hold the bones together while they heal.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. Once she’s healed, one of us needs to teach her how to throw a punch.”

“So, are you and she… I don’t even know how to ask this.”

“We talked,” Maggie said. “She didn’t give her dad the card. He found it.”

“What about the rest?”

“Later. It’s a lot to go through, and I have a feeling that whatever the story with Kara is, it’s going to take a while.”

“Okay.”

“So, Kara…” Maggie said.

“We should wait for them.” Alex reached down and took Maggie’s hand, lacing their fingers together. “Just remember, whatever you hear, she’s still Kara.”

“Whatever I hear, you, Kara, and your mom are my family,” Maggie said. “Nothing will change that.”

“Good. Because I don’t want to imagine my life without you in it.”

Maggie smiled and gave Alex’s hand a squeeze. She really, really wanted to lean over and kiss her, but the sound of Kara and Mrs. Danvers’ heading down the stairs stopped her from doing it. She looked over at the door and saw them come into the room. Kara took a seat on the other side of Alex, and Mrs. Danvers sat down in one of the easy chairs.

“I know you must have a lot of questions,” Mrs. Danvers said in what Maggie was sure was the biggest understatement she’d ever heard, “but I need you to promise that what you’re about to hear won’t leave this house.”

“I promise,” Maggie said without hesitation. She leaned forward so she could look Kara in the face because Kara probably needed to hear it more than Mrs. Danvers did. “I promise.”

Kara smiled at her. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Maggie said. “I know you didn’t do it for me, but what you did today meant a lot to me.”

“What happened at school today?” Mrs. Danvers asked. “I’ve heard Kara and Alex’s versions of it, but I’d like to hear yours.

Maggie turned back to Mrs. Danvers. “I was heading to lunch, and I’d just gotten to the hall outside of the lunchroom when I heard Kara yelling at Pat Brice, ‘I said no.’ He had her backed up against the lockers and was sort of looming over her. He said she just needed a guy to show her
what she was missing and went to grab her breast. I tried to stop it, but I was too far away to reach
them.”

“Elisa came out of nowhere and shoved him back and told him to stay away from Kara. He said… He said, ‘Don’t be jealous. If you want another go…’ and Elisa punched him in the face. She fell down, clutching her hand. He called her a bitch and went to hit her, and Kara… I don’t know. I didn’t see her move, but once second, she was standing against the lockers on one side of the hall, the next she had Pat pinned against the lockers on the other side of the hall.

“Alex showed up around that point. She said something to Kara. Kara looked over at her, and the area around her eyes was glowing a bright white, like it was backlit. Kara was furious that Pat had tried to hurt Elisa, but Alex said something in another language, and Kara dropped Pat. The glowy eyes thing stopped then, and she went to get a teacher while I stayed with Elisa. Alex disappeared for a while, I assume to call you. Then other people started showing up.”

“Did anyone else see what happened?” Mrs. Danvers asked.

“No. At least, I don’t think so. The hall was empty.”

“Good.” Mrs. Danvers took a deep breath, then glanced over at Kara before looking at Maggie again.

“Kara isn’t actually in witness protection. She’s an alien. She’s from the same planet as Superman.”

“So Superman is the cousin who’s the raging dick?” Maggie asked.

“Yes,” Alex said.

“Hey!” Kara protested.

Mrs. Danvers reached up and covered her face with both hands. Given the way her shoulders were shaking, Maggie was pretty sure it was to keep herself from laughing. Maggie looked over at Kara and Alex. Kara looked like she couldn’t decide whether to pout or smile, but Alex looked like Christmas had come early.

“Yes,” Mrs. Danvers said as she lowered her hands. “Superman is the cousin in question.”

“Okay,” Maggie said. “But the story is that Superman came here as a baby right as his planet blew up, and Kara is younger.”

“I’m not. I’m actually almost 13 Earth years older than he is. Krypton is just over 2,000 light years from Earth. It’s a long trip, even in one of our best ships, but Kal-El and I came in personal transport pods. The trip was supposed to take two years, and we were supposed to be in stasis most of the trip. Only my pod got knocked off course. I left at the same time, but I landed 24 years later than he did.”

“So how old are you?” Maggie asked.

“Forty-two.”

“And you’re still stuck in high school. That’s got to suck.”

“You have no idea. I have the equivalent of PhDs in Math, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Geology, Meteorology, Astronomy, Computer Science, Linguistics, Engineering, Philosophy, and
Theology.”

“So, you’re a Super nerd?” Maggie teased.

“I can also melt your face just by glaring really hard.”

“Point taken.”

“You’re taking this really well,” Mrs. Danvers said.

“I’m exhausted, hungry, a little punchy, and honestly, Kara being an alien who’s the same age as my mom is probably the only thing I’ve found out today that doesn’t make me want to punch someone in the face.”

“You mean what you found out about Elisa’s dad?” Mrs. Danvers asked.

Maggie looked over at Alex and Kara. Mrs. Danvers already knew part of the story because of her visit to the hospital, but Alex and Kara hadn’t heard any of it. “Alex, do you remember the conversation we had with Elisa outside the movie theater Friday night?”

“Yeah.”

Maggie looked over at Mrs. Danvers. “Alex and I were coming out of the theater. Kara had forgotten something and went back for it, and Alex bumped into Elisa. Literally. Elisa assumed we were on a date and said something about it. Alex got up her in face and asked her why she’d made such a big deal over the card I gave her. She said all Elisa had to do was say no, and it wouldn’t have been a big deal. Elisa said, ‘No one takes no for an answer.’”

Mrs. Danvers sucked in a breath, and Maggie knew she understood exactly what Elisa had implied with that comment.

“So when Pat said, ‘If you want another go’, I knew. When we were waiting at the hospital, she told me Pat lives next door to her. When her family first moved to Midvale the summer before she started high school, she’d made friends with him. He took her on a date on Valentine’s Day, and…”

“He raped her,” Mrs. Danvers finished for her.

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “She told her dad what happened. He blamed her and beat her up pretty bad. And it wasn’t the only time he’s beat her up.” Maggie looked over at Alex and Kara, both of whom looked horrified. “When she told me, I called Mrs. Danvers for the phone number of the lady from Child Protective Services. I called her, and she came to the hospital. She’s going to find Elisa a foster home so her dad can’t hurt her anymore. The way she reacted to the card was because of what Pat did. It brought back all the memories, and she just freaked out. Also her dad beat her when he found the card.”

“She didn’t give it to him?” Kara asked.

“No,” Maggie said. “I don’t know how he found it, but she didn’t give it to him.”

“They’re going to arrest Pat, right?” Alex asked.

“Maybe,” Maggie said. “Ms. Oswald is going to try, but she said that because of how long it’s been, the cops and the DA probably won’t do anything.”
“Even if they arrest him, he probably won’t go to jail,” Mrs. Danvers said. “If Elisa didn’t report it at the time, there’s not going to be any evidence.”

“I should have put him through the wall,” Kara said.

“Kara,” Mrs. Danvers said.

“It’s not right. He hurt her, and he’s just going to get away with it, and he’ll hurt someone else.”

“I know, sweetheart. But at this point, unless he confesses, there’s no way to prove what he did.”

Alex didn’t look any happier with that than Maggie was, but Maggie could practically feel the anger radiating off Kara.

“Sometimes I really hate this planet. Back home, I would have just challenged him.”

“Challenged him?” Maggie asked.

“To a duel. I’d like to see him hurt a girl with a Sunblade through his chest.”

“You know,” Maggie said, “we really need to introduce you to Susan. I think you two would get along.”

Kara looked over at her with a curious expression.

“She’s up for a fencing scholarship at UC National City.”

“Think she’d let me borrow a sword?”

“Kara,” Mrs. Danvers’ tone carried a clear warning.

Kara sighed. “I know.”

Silence filled the room, heavy and thick, as if no one knew quite what to say next. Maggie still had questions, so many questions, but she was honestly too tired to ask any of them. Besides, the hunger was starting to border on painful, and she didn’t want to think about today anymore. “Can we get some food? I didn’t get lunch, and I’m starving.”

“Of course.” Mrs. Danvers nodded, already pulling herself up and out of the chair. “Why don’t I fix you a sandwich, then we can decide what to do about dinner.”

“Thanks.”

Once Mrs. Danvers headed to the kitchen, Alex turned to Maggie. “Are you okay?”

“Tired. All I want is to get some food, and then curl up and get some sleep.”

“Why don’t you go lie down. I’ll bring you your sandwich.”

“That’d be great.” Maggie let go of Alex’s hand as all three of them stood up. She stepped around Alex and pulled Kara into a hug. “I’ve got a ton of questions, but right now, I really need food and sleep.”

“Okay,” Kara said.

Eliza closed her eyes and sighed when the ringtone she’d set for Clark sounded. She did not want
to deal with that right now, but she didn’t exactly have a choice, so she picked up the phone and answered it.

“Hello, Clark,” Eliza said.

“Can you tell me what the hell is going on out there?” Clark asked. “Kara’s name just turned up on a police report.”

“And Alex’s too, I would imagine.”

“Yes, so again, what the hell is going on out there?”

“A boy tried to sexually assault Kara in the middle of the hallway at school. Another girl stepped in to defend her and got hurt. The boy tried to hit the girl who helped Kara, so Kara put him halfway through a wall.”

“Christ. How many people saw?”

“Just Alex, Maggie, and the boy. The girl Kara was protecting was too distracted by the broken bones in her hand to see what happened.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Eliza said. “Kara and Alex both told the principal that Kara shoved the boy when he tried to hit the girl, and he fell against the lockers. They haven’t had a chance to question Maggie yet, so I’ll coach Maggie to make sure that she tells the same story, but I can’t really stop the boy from telling them what happened when they question him.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“What do you mean, take care of it?” Eliza asked.

“I mean, I’ll take care of it the same way I took care of protecting Maggie’s sister. I know someone who can fix it so all he’ll remember is Kara pushing him.”

“You’re going to have someone mess with his mind?”

“We don’t really have a lot of choice. It’s either that or move Kara.”

“Excuse me? Did you say ‘move Kara’?”

“She can’t be found out.”

“Clark, Kara is my daughter. If you come here and try to take her away, you will find out exactly how far I am willing to go to protect her, even from you.”

“Eliza-“

“No. I have put up with a lot from you, Clark. Because you used to be my friend. Because you are supposed to be Kara’s family. But you gave up any right to have a say in who she is or where she lives when you abandoned her.”

“I didn’t abandon her!”

“Yes, you did. You dropped her off here with barely a thank you and see you later, and you haven’t been to visit her once in four years. That boy, the one she attacked, he’s a rapist. That’s why the
girl was so quick to defend Kara. She was afraid he’d do to Kara what he did to her and who knows how many other girls. Kara was a hero today, and so was Maggie. And you are treating it like a problem to be solved. Like an inconvenience. The way you always treat Kara.”

“Damn it, Eliza, I’m sick of being treated like the bad guy here.”

“Then stop being the bad guy,” Eliza said. “She’s a little girl. She lost her entire world, and you’re the only piece of it she has left. She needs you to be a part of her life—not just a memory and a bunch of newspaper clippings pasted into a scrapbook.”

“She needs me to protect her.”

“Well, you’re doing a damn fine job of it, threatening to take away her family again,” Eliza snapped. “How many times does she have to lose everything before you decide she’s safe?”

She hung up before he could answer and just barely resisted the urge to throw her phone across her bedroom.

Maggie opened her eyes at the sound of her door opening. She glanced over at the clock on her bedside table and saw that it was a little past 11:00 PM. She looked over at the door and smiled as she recognized the silhouette of the person creeping into her room.

“Hey,” she said, making Alex jump a little.

“Hey. Is it okay that I’m here?”

Maggie lifted the covers. Alex took the hint and climbed into bed next to her, and Maggie immediately pressed herself against Alex, while Alex wrapped her arms around Maggie.

“God, I needed this,” Maggie said as she settled her head on Alex’s shoulder.

“I would have come sooner, but I was waiting for Mom to turn off her lights.”

“How long can you stay?”

“Mom always sleeps late on Saturdays, so I can stay all night if you want.”

“I want,” Maggie said. “I definitely want.”

Chapter End Notes

Translated from the Kryptonian:

!zharrvi

Don’t!
A Day of Firsts

Chapter Summary

Kara goes shopping, Alex gets busted spending the night in Maggie's room, Eliza lays down some new rules, and Maggie gets an invitation.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Mentions of rape, threats of violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, March 4, 2006

Despite all the teasing from Alex and Eliza about the possum incident, Kara knew she was a good driver. Really the whole incident, if you wanted to call it that, stemmed almost entirely from the difference between Kryptonian and human reflexes. Kara could react to things that a human wouldn’t even have time to register, and that difference had led to more than one last second swerve to avoid hitting a possum or, more often, a squirrel. Alex and Eliza also both knew that, so teasing aside, neither of them hesitated to actually let Kara use the car when she needed it. That meant when Kara had asked Eliza before bed the previous night if she could take the car the next morning, Eliza hadn’t even thought twice about it. Kara was under no illusion that she would have gotten that same response if Eliza had any clue what Kara had planned, but with a little luck, Eliza would never find out.

Kara’s first stop was the surf and dive shop. She picked up a solid black wetsuit, dive boots, dive gloves, a dive hood, a pocket weight belt, a patch kit, several 10”x10” squares of wetsuit tape, several rolls of wetsuit tape, and a 65 liter drybag with a detachable backpack harness. Then she stopped by the motorcycle shop and picked up a black neoprene full face mask and a motorcycle helmet. After that, she headed to Walmart.

Her first stop was the toy section. It took a bit of looking, but she found a mask with a build in voice changer. She picked up a huge knife and a sharpening stone in sporting goods, a heavy bastard file and a Dremel tool in hardware, a sewing kit, a couple of bolts of fabric, a utility knife, and some assorted odds and ends.

Her next stop was the electronics supply shop where Alex bought most of the parts for her tinkering. Kara picked up a couple of speakers and a few items she would need, trying not to feel annoyed at how primitive and bulky human electronics were.

Her last stop was the hobby shop, where she picked a couple of vacuform model kits, modeling glue, some filler compound, various grits of sandpaper and modeling paints, and an airbrush kit.

All in all, between the five stores, she spent 1,000 dollars out of the Metropolis vacation fund, and she felt every penny of it like a piece of her heart was being ripped out slowly, but it would be worth it. It had to be worth it.
She was home by 10:30 AM, and a quick check with her X-ray vision confirmed that Eliza, Alex, and Maggie were still in bed, so she went to work. She took care of the knife first because it was the one thing whose purpose she couldn’t hide from Eliza. She used the knife and a bit of super-speed to grind down the blade to the right shape, while a slow stream of freeze breath kept the metal from getting hot enough to lose its temper. Once she was done, she had a passable copy of a Kandoran Fang Dagger. The handle was wrong, but she thought Father Rao would forgive her under the circumstances. Especially if she used it well.

Once the knife was finished, she used the 10 x 10 sheets of wetsuit tape to make two patches, each three layers thick. She used the utility knife to carefully and precisely cut out the /vish/ coat of arms. Then she laid it on the uncut patch and trimmed that into the standard diamond shape, creating a single patch, which she applied to the center of the wetsuit’s chest. Then she used the wetsuit tape to cover all of the branding and logos on the suit she was creating for herself.

She heard people starting to move around the house and did a quick check with her X-ray vision to make sure no one was heading towards the workroom she shared with Alex. No one was, but she went ahead and put the knife and the wetsuit into the dry bag, just in case.

The next step was the helmet. She started with the mask with the built-in voice changer. She wasn’t really that thrilled about sounding like General Grievous from Revenge of the Sith, but she didn’t have time to design her own voice changer from scratch, so she worked with what she had. She pulled the voice changer from the mask, then opened the model kits and got out Alex’s heat gun and the Dremel tool. She remolded the models easily enough, since they were made from thermal plastics, and turned them into an encloser for the voice changer and the speakers, fitting that into the motorcycle helmet along with the battery pack. Then she sanded the helmet and used the airbrush kit to repaint it a flat matte black before setting it aside to dry.

The last thing she did was to take out the sewing kit and the fabric and start working. No one would ever call her a gifted seamstress, and truthfully she had no desire to be, but she was a scion of the House of Ze, a direct descendent of the War Queens. She could cut and sew a war cloak from memory before she was five Earth years old. She could spin and weave the fabric by the time she was six. Some Houses might have considered such skills base, things for the worker caste, but in the House of Ze, they were tradition, and her mom had not let her ignore them simply because she wore the El coat of arms.

It took time to finish, even with super speed. Every cut had to be perfect; not a single stitch of the embroidery could be out of place. At home, it would have taken days. Here, with her powers, it took almost three hours, but when she was done, she packed the war cloak into the dry bag and used a light touch of her heat vision to finish drying the paint on the helmet before reassembling it and putting it in the bag with the rest.

When she was done, she checked the clock. It was 2:23 PM on a Saturday afternoon, and Kara had her first super-suit. Now all she had to do was wait.

Maggie woke up slowly, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth as she snuggled into the soft, warm body under her. She knew she shouldn’t get used to this. Even if Mrs. Danvers was okay with her and Alex’s dating, Maggie doubted she would be okay with Alex’s sleeping in Maggie’s bed every night. Which was a problem because Maggie had been absolutely hooked after the first time she’d woken up in Alex’s arms and never, ever wanted to wake up any other way.

“I don’t want to get up,” Alex whined.

“You don’t have too,” Maggie said.
“Tell that to my bladder.”

“Do you think it would listen?”

“Probably not. I’ve been telling it that for 20 minutes, and I think it’s tired of hearing it.”

“Then I should probably let you get up.”

“Probably a good idea.”

“You could always come back.”

“I like the way you think. What time is it, anyway?”

Maggie looked over at the clock. “11:30.”

“Shit!” Alex let go of Maggie and sat up, dumping Maggie off her.

“What?”

“Mom’s usually up by 11:00 on Saturdays.”

“Shit! How dead are we?”

“I don’t know! I’ve only been gay two and a half weeks. I’ve never snuck out to spend the night with a girl before.”

“Shit!” Maggie climbed out of bed, her heart pounding in her chest. Mrs. Danvers could not find out this way. Maggie still needed to talk to her, to get her approval, because she wanted this, wanted to try to date Alex even with the risks, and that wasn’t going to happen if she pissed Mrs. Danvers off. “Shit! Shit! Shit! We are so screwed. Why the fuck didn’t we set an alarm?”

“I’m sorry! I was in bed cuddling a beautiful girl. I cannot be held responsible for being an idiot.”

Maggie looked over at Alex, who was smiling at her and surprisingly calm, given how freaked out she was a minute ago.

“What?” Maggie asked.

“It’s just, this is probably the first time I’ve ever been this close to one of Mom’s ‘I’m so disappointed’ speeches and still thought whatever I did to earn it was totally worth it. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Alex walked over and slipped her arms around Maggie. “If she catches us, if she yells at us, I don’t care. You needed me last night.”

Maggie hugged Alex back. “I wish we could just stay like this forever.”

“I wish we could too. But I do have a plan.”

“Okay.”

“You go out first. If the hall is clear, you let me know, and I’ll slip upstairs. If Mom is in the hall, you get her to go into the kitchen.”
“How?”

“Ask her to make you pancakes.”

“That might work.”

“It will definitely work.”

Maggie let go of Alex reluctantly. She walked over and opened the door, then stepped out into the hallway, which was completely empty. “It’s clear.”

Alex slipped out of Maggie’s room and tip-toed up the stairs, being careful to skip the one stair that creaked. Maggie breathed a sigh of relief as Alex reached the top of the stairs and headed for the bathroom to take care of her own bladder, which was still complaining.

Once she was done in the bathroom, she walked down to the kitchen to get some breakfast and found Mrs. Danvers sitting at the table, reading the paper.

“Morning,” Mrs. Danvers said.

“Morning,” Maggie replied as she walked over to the fridge. She got a couple of sesame bagels out and dropped them in the toaster. She set the toaster to burnt and pushed the levers down, then grabbed a plate and waited on her breakfast.

“Morning,” Mrs. Danvers said again, and Maggie glanced around to see Alex coming into the kitchen.

“Hey, Mom,” Alex said in a cheerful tone.

Maggie watched Alex as she walked over and started to fix herself a bowl of cereal. Something which shouldn’t have been particularly captivating, but somehow, Maggie was transfixed. When Alex reached up to get the box of strawberry-filled shredded Mini-Wheats off the top shelf, her shirt rode up, exposing a narrow strip of skin, and Maggie thought her heart was going to explode. She turned around and stared at the toaster because it was the only way she could think of to keep Mrs. Danvers from seeing her practically drooling over Alex.

She grabbed her bagels as soon as they popped up and sat down at the table, trying her best to focus on anything other than running her fingers over Alex’s abs or slipping her hand up Alex’s shirt as they lay in bed together. Something which was made that much harder when Alex sat down next to her and smiled.

“Alex,” Mrs. Danvers said in a tone that sent a chill down Maggie’s spine, killing her daydream about surfing-toned muscles more effectively than a bucket of ice water.

“Yes?” Alex asked, a confused expression on her face at the scolding tone in Mrs. Danvers voice.

“You know the rule about always letting me know where you are,” Mrs. Danvers said without looking away from the paper.

“Yes?”

“I know everything is new and exciting for you and Maggie right now. I’m happy for both of you, and I respect the fact that you are both old enough to make your own decisions. But in the future, if you’re going to spend the night in her room, let me know. When I found your bed empty last night, I almost had a heart attack.”
“Um… sorry,” Alex squeaked.

Maggie looked over at Alex, then back at Mrs. Danvers, not quite sure she believed what she’d just heard.

“You’re not upset?” Maggie asked.

“I’m very upset,” Mrs. Danvers said. “‘Always let me know where you are’ has been a rule since Alex was old enough to go somewhere without me. It’s gotten a bit more lax as she’s gotten older, which is why she didn’t get chewed out when, ‘I’m taking Dad’s bike out,’ turned into, ‘I’m going to Coast City,’ a couple of weeks ago, but she knows, ‘I’m not sleeping in my own bed,’ is still covered.”

“Oh, I meant you’re not upset about Alex and me?”

Mrs. Danvers closed the paper and sat it down on the table. “You thought I’d be upset about you and Alex dating?”

“We’re not. Not officially. I… At first, I was kind of caught off-guard that she was gay, and then I was afraid it would mess things up, but then I realized I really, really want to, but I thought I should talk to you first, but…”

“But talking to the parents is always scary,” Mrs. Danvers said.

“More like terrifying.”

“Sweetheart, you can always come to me about anything. I admit, I’ve got concerns, but they’re the same concerns I’d have if you and Alex were dating other people. Although, I will say, holidays might be a little awkward if you two break up, but if we got through Kara and Alex’s first few years, we can survive an awkward Thanksgiving or two. Whatever happens, Maggie, you and Alex are my children, and we’ll get through it together.”

Maggie sat there, having a hard time trying to breathe past the lump that had formed in her throat. She didn’t know what she had done to deserve this, to deserve someone like Mrs. Danvers, who loved her and accepted her unconditionally, but she didn’t have the words to tell Mrs. Danvers what it meant to her, so she got up, walked around the table, and hugged her as tightly as she could, and when Mrs. Danvers hugged her back, it was all she could do not to cry. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie.”

Maggie let go and sat back down. She took a bite of one of her bagels to give herself a moment to process what she was feeling because it was overwhelming.

“So…” Alex said.

Maggie looked over at her and knew instantly what was about to happen. She swallowed her food. “If you ask me on a date before you’ve even had a shower, I swear I’ll tell Susan so she can judge you.”

“But would you still say yes?”

Maggie narrowed her eyes, glaring at Alex. “Yes.”

“Good to know,” Alex said, a smug little grin on her face.
“One other thing,” Mrs. Danvers said, making Alex and Maggie both turn to look at her.

“Yes?” Maggie asked.

“I know the local drug stores are pretty limited, so I ordered gloves, lube, and dental dams for you online. You will wait for them to arrive, and if you do have sex, you will use them.”

Maggie stared at Mrs. Danvers as she picked her paper up. When Mrs. Danvers opened the paper, hiding herself from view, Maggie looked over at Alex, who was blushing so hard she was starting to turn purple.

Alex: Please tell me I can call you.

Susan: Call away.

Alex hit the call button, and Susan picked up immediately.

“Tell me you kissed her,” Susan said.

“Not yet.”

“I would scream, but honestly, I’ve accepted that you’re both hopeless and will die virgins.”

“Fine. I won’t tell you that we talked to my mom this morning.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“I didn’t think either of you would ever work up the nerve. I had this mental imagine of the two of you planning your wedding and trying to figure out how to keep your mom from finding out.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“You two totally got busted cuddling, didn’t you?”

“No. Worse. I slept in Maggie’s room last night. Mom noticed.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“I know.”

“How many years are you grounded for?”

“None,” Alex said. “Mom was pissed that she found my bed empty in the middle of the night and didn’t know where I was, but she was cool with it once she figured it out. She said that Maggie and I are old enough to make our own decisions, but if I’m going to sleep in Maggie’s room, I need to let her know.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope.”

“You are the luckiest bitch in the world.”

Alex laughed.
“I think I hate you,” Susan said.

“I hope not. I need your help.”

“With what? You’re into Maggie. Maggie’s into you. You have you mom’s blessing, which, under the circumstances, basically counts as her mom’s blessing. Why the hell are you even talking to me for when you could be in her room making out like cheerleaders on prom night?”

“Because I want to do this right,” Alex said. “I want to take her out on a date and let her know how amazing she is and treat her the way she deserves to be treated.”

“Oh, God. I hate Maggie so much right now.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you are sweet and thoughtful and romantic and kind of perfect.”

“Um… Thanks.”

“So what do you need my help with?”

“What do I do about the date?”

“What do you want to do about the date?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I don’t know a lot about her. I know she likes motorcycles, horror movies, buckwheat pancakes, carrot cake, burnt toast, romance novels, Bonsai trees, and salad. How am I supposed to turn that into a date?”

“God, you are useless,” Susan groaned. “Perfect and adorable, but useless.”

“Why do you think I called?”

“What do you like to do for fun?”

“Um, I like going to concerts. I like going to Yab-Yums when they’ve got a band, but I can’t take her there today because Rhonda is playing, and I don’t want Maggie to think I’m spending our entire date paying attention to another girl. Kara and I play paintball and laser tag sometimes, and there’s a pool hall near the square.”

“Okay, pool halls are inherently skeevy. You can take her there and do the ‘let me show you how to shoot pool’ thing sometime, but not on an official date. Paintball and laser tag are fine for later dates, but you want this to be romantic. Good catch on the Yab-Yums thing, because I would have had to slap you if you missed that one. It’s a little last-minute to find a concert, and they aren’t really high on the romance anyway.”

“So, what do I do?” Alex asked.

“You said you live on the beach, right?”

“Yeah,” Alex said.

“You have a table and a couple of chairs you can put out on the sand?”

“Yeah.”
“Then here’s what you’re going to do.”

Maggie sat in her room, her stomach churning as her mood flipped back and forth between excited and nervous. Mrs. Danvers was okay with her and Alex dating, which was fantastic because Alex was amazing. But it had been hours since breakfast, and Alex hadn’t asked her out yet. She was starting to worry that she’d done something wrong, or that Alex had been so mortified by Mrs. Danvers’ ordering them safe sex supplies that she’d changed her mind about the whole thing.

Or maybe she’d misread things and Alex wanted to be asked out. That could be it. Alex wasn’t super girly but she wore makeup and jewelry, so she was definitely more girly than Maggie, so maybe she wanted to be asked out. Except she was totally going to ask Maggie out at breakfast, but Maggie had told her to wait.

Why had she been so stupid? She’d told her to wait because she didn’t think she wanted to be asked on her first date ever over breakfast, in pajamas, in front of Mrs. Danvers. She’d wanted it to be special, and romantic, but it was Alex, and Maggie was pretty sure it would be special no matter how Alex asked her, so she should have just let her ask. Then she wouldn’t be sitting here waiting.

She should just go upstairs and ask. It wasn’t like Alex was going to say no.

There was a knock on the door, which broke Maggie out of her runaway train of thought. She got up and walked over to the door, her heart hammering in her chest because she knew exactly who it was. She opened the door and found Alex standing there, looking a little terrified.

“Hey,” Alex said.

“Hey”

The two of them stood on opposite sides of the doorway, staring at each other, and Maggie wasn’t sure what to do. Should she say something? Should she wait for Alex to say something?

“Um…” Alex’s face immediately started to flush a light shade of red. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Sorry. I don’t know why this is so hard all of a sudden.”

Maggie reached out and took Alex’s hand in hers. “If it helps, I’m going to say yes.”

Alex opened her eyes and smiled. “Would you like to go out with me?”

“Yes,” Maggie said.

“Tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Seven?”

“Yes.”

“Great. How does Italian sound?”

“I love Italian.”

“Okay.” Alex squeezed Maggie’s hand. “See you at seven.”

“See you then,” Maggie said.
Alex let go of her hand and headed for the stairs. Maggie closed the door and leaned against it, doing her best to resist the urge to scream with excitement because she had a date with Alex.

Alex rushed up the stairs and found Kara sitting in the workroom with her sketchbook. “I need your help.”

Kara looked up from her sketchbook. “What is it?”

“I need the table and two of the chairs from the back patio moved down to the beach.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve got a date with Maggie.”

“What?” Suddenly Kara’s sketchbook was on the table with her drawing supplies, and she had her arms around Alex, hugging her so tightly Alex was afraid Kara was going to break her ribs. “This is great!”

“I can’t go if you break my ribs.”

“Oh!” Kara said, letting her go. “Sorry!”

“It’s okay. I know you get excited.”

“Totally! This is awesome! You and Maggie are perfect for each other!”

“I hope so,” Alex said, feeling a little of her earlier hesitation coming back. “Will you get the table and the chairs?”

“Of course! You want me to take the tiki torches down too?”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Well, I am a genius. Is there anything else you need?”

“Not really,” Alex said. “I’ve got to run to the store and get a pan of lasagna, some garlic bread, and tiramisu, but I should have enough time to make dinner.”

“What? No! You cannot feed Maggie frozen lasagna and store-bought garlic bread on your first date!”

“It’s either that or takeout because I can’t boil water without causing a disaster.”

“Nope. This is not happening on my watch. Does Eliza know about the date?”

“Well, not specifically, but she knows Maggie and I are kind of a thing now.”

“Perfect.” Kara picked Alex up and turned her around, then put a hand in the middle of her back and marched her across the hall to Eliza’s lab/office, reached over her shoulder, and knocked on the door.

“Kara, what are you doing?” Alex asked.

“Helping. Now, hush.”

Eliza opened the door. “Yes?”
“Alex is planning on getting a frozen lasagna, store-bought garlic bread, and grocery store tiramisu for her date with Maggie,” Kara said.

Eliza stepped back, making room for Alex and Kara to get by her. “Why don’t you two come in, and we’ll see if we can fix this.”

Maggie: Help!
Susan: If I can.
Susan: What’s up?
Maggie: Alex is taking me on a date!
Susan: Congratulations.
Maggie: Please don’t hate me.
Susan: I don’t.
Susan: I’m happy for both of you.
Susan: What do you need help with?
Maggie: I don’t know what to wear.
Susan: What are your options?
Maggie: I have a couple of old dresses my mom got me from before and a couple of suits.
Susan: Are you comfortable in the dresses?
Maggie: Sort of.
Maggie: I don’t hate them like my sister does, but I like suits better.
Susan: Then wear a suit.
Maggie: Are you sure?
Maggie: She asked me out.
Maggie: She might expect me to wear a dress.
Susan: Maggie, stop.
Susan: Alex wants to go out with you.
Susan: This date is about getting to know you.
Susan: If you want this to work, be yourself.
Susan: Wear the suit.
Maggie: Okay.
Maggie: Thank you.
Susan: No problem.
Susan: Just take care of that girl.
Maggie: I will.

How do I look?” Alex asked.
““You look great,” Kara said.
““You’re sure?” Alex asked as she studied herself in the mirror. She was wearing charcoal suit pants with a gray pinstripe and a matching vest over a white oxford with the top button open and the sleeves rolled up to just below her elbows. It was a look she’d always liked on herself, but she wasn’t sure if Maggie would like it. “Maybe I should wear a dress.”
““Alex, stop worrying. Maggie is going to love it.”
““You really think so?”
““Well, she has seen you first thing in the morning, so anything is bound to be an improvement.”
Alex glared at Kara. “I know where you hide your chocolate.”
““Alex, she likes you. Also, if you don’t go right now, you’re going to be late.”
Alex looked over at the clock and was horrified to see that she only had five minutes left. “Is everything ready?”
Kara pulled off her glasses and looked through the wall. “Eliza’s just coming up from lighting the candles and the torches now, but you need to go.”
Alex headed for the door.

Maggie checked her reflection one last time. She was wearing one of the suits Eliza had gotten her: a lightweight black single-breasted wool suit with satin lapels that could probably double as a tuxedo and a cream-colored scoop neck blouse. It was a good look. Nice without being too formal if she left it unbuttoned. In that moment she kind of wished she’d let Eliza get her some makeup, but she kept reminding herself of what Susan said: Alex liked her. Alex wanted to get to know her. She needed to be herself, and Maggie Rodas didn’t wear makeup.

There was a knock on the door. Maggie took a deep breath. She could do this. Alex liked her. She liked Alex. They’d spent plenty of time together. This was no different.

She walked over and opened the door, and holy shit, this was different.

If Maggie hadn’t already known she was gay, she was pretty sure the sight of Alex in a white button-down and a pinstriped vest would have made her realize she was very, very gay. Her mouth went dry, and she might have whimpered. If the smirk on Alex’s face was anything to go by, she definitely whimpered, but God, she didn’t care because Alex was gorgeous.

“You like the outfit?” Alex asked.
Maggie nodded, which made Alex smile.

“You look amazing,” Alex said softly.

“You do too.”

“Thanks.” Alex reached out and took Maggie’s hand. “Come on,” she said as she started towards the door.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise,”

They were almost to the front door when Mrs. Danvers called out, “Girls, wait a minute!”

They both looked up to see Mrs. Danvers coming down the stairs, camera in hand.

“Mom, what are you doing?”

“My girls are going out on their first date. I need pictures.”

“What? Mom, no.”

“Mom, yes. It won’t kill you to let me take a couple of pictures.”

The way Alex was blushing, Maggie wasn’t sure about that.

Mrs. Danvers lifted the camera. “Now smile.”

Maggie looked at the camera, expecting to feel nervous, but she didn’t. She was going on a date with Alex, and Alex’s mother wasn’t upset. She was so excited about it she wanted to get pictures. Maggie wasn’t quite sure how to describe what she felt, but it was overwhelming.

“Maggie?” Alex asked.

She turned to Alex, surprised to find the world was going a little watery. “I’m sorry.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Maggie said. “I just never thought I would get this.”

Alex pulled her into a hug, and Maggie hugged her back, squeezing tightly, not sure she ever wanted to let go.

“Just wait until we go to prom.”

Maggie laughed, and the tears in her eyes spilled down her cheeks. “Don’t think you we should get through this date before you start planning another?”

“It’s going to be a good date,” Alex said as she let go of Maggie. She reached into a pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, using it to wipe Maggie’s cheeks.

“You carry a handkerchief?”

“Have you met my mother?” Alex asked, as if that explained everything. Which, when Maggie thought about it, probably did.
“Once or twice.”

“There,” Alex said. “No more tears. Can’t have you crying in pictures of our first date, can we?”

“Happy tears.”

Alex tucked the handkerchief back in her pocket and turned to offer Maggie her arm. Maggie smiled as she rested both her hands on the inside of Alex’s elbow, and looked back at Mrs. Danvers, who was standing there with a warm smile on her face. Mrs. Danvers lifted the camera and took a couple of pictures before finally lowering the camera.

“Ready?” Alex asked.

Maggie looked over at her, and the sight of Alex smiling at her like that took her breath away. She barely heard the click of the camera.

Kara sat at her computer, typing as fast as the primitive thing could keep up with. She was used to it by now. It had been years since she had access to a proper computer. Decades, if you counted her time in the Phantom Zone. But tonight, she was under a time crunch. She needed to do this while Eliza was distracted. Eliza didn’t check up on her and Alex’s computer usage that often, but it happened from time to time. Kara knew Eliza had learned to accept a bit of her disregard for what humans considered cybersecurity, but there were limits to what she could get away with, and Kara was pretty sure that what she was about to do would get her grounded at least until college. Especially if Eliza figured out why Kara was doing it.

She burned through the firewall at Midvale General Hospital like her heat vision through an ice cube and pulled up patient records. A quick check showed Elisa Wilkey was still in the hospital and that a guard was posted outside her room to keep away her father. She was scheduled for release Sunday afternoon. Kara marked her account paid in full and sat up a small subroutine to make sure any additional charges to her account were also marked paid in full. Elisa had been hurt defending a member of the House of El, and the House paid its debts. Elisa would not see financial ruin because of what she’d done.

Next, she pulled up Pat Brice’s records. Scheduled for release tomorrow. Looked like she’d broken two of his ribs and cracked five others. Nothing permanent. Nothing particularly bad. Painful, but nothing that would put his life at risk, as long as Kara was careful. She made note of his room, thankful that it was private because that would make this easier, then she logged out of the hospital system.

She would go tonight after everyone was asleep.

Human justice might have failed Elisa Wilkey, but the House of El would put it right.

Maggie was a little surprised when Alex led her past the cars in the driveway, but Alex just smiled at the curious look and give a small nod in the direction of the beach. Maggie turned and looked, spotting a table set up of the sand and lit by a ring of burning tiki torches surrounding it and a couple of candles in red jars scattered along the table. As they got closer, she could make out more details. There were two place settings, each with a champagne flute, and a champagne bucket on the near side of the table with a bottle sticking out of it. Maggie could hear music playing as they stepped into the sand.

Alex led her to the table and pulled out her chair for her. Maggie watched as Alex opened a large
Maggie reached across the table for Alex’s hand, giving it a squeeze. “So far, you’re doing great.”

Eliza had to work to resist the temptation to step out into the upstairs patio and watch as Alex and Maggie had dinner down on the beach. She knew they deserved their privacy, but there was a part of her that was sad to be missing such a huge moment in their lives. More than that, though, she missed having Jeremiah to share moments like this with. Two of her daughters were out on their first date, and it felt like so many other moments she and Jeremiah had shared. Alex’s first day at daycare, her first day at school, her first sleepover, the day they adopted Kara, the day they first sent Kara to school.

She had shared so many milestones with him, but the longer he was gone, the more he would miss, and even thinking of that hurt. He was going to miss Alex and Maggie and Kara going to prom, graduating, going to college, getting their degrees, getting jobs, getting married, having kids. He was going to miss the rest of their lives. She wouldn’t have anyone to share those moments with, and that tore at her, making her feel his absence in a way she hadn’t since that day she’d come home to find that she’d somehow acquired another daughter.

“I just like the feel of the Triumph better,” Maggie said. “The Ducati is all power, no elegance. You spend more time fighting the bike than you do riding it.”

“I like the power,” Alex said. “That rush you get, knowing that you’re just holding it back, just containing it. It feels like the first swell of a wave under you, when you know it’s just about time to stand up on your board.”

“Are you going to turn everything into a surfing analogy?”

“Probably. Honestly, I can’t wait until the water is warm enough. If we get you a good heavyweight wetsuit, we could probably go out in another couple of weeks.”

“You know I grew up in Nebraska, right? I have no idea how to surf.”

“I know, but I’m really looking forward to teaching you.”

“You are, huh? You sure you’re not just trying to get me into a bikini?”

“Well, the thought had crossed my mind, but honestly, I just want to show you what it’s like. It’s peaceful out there. Quiet. Just you and the board and the wave. It’s the closest you’ll ever get to flying.”

“It sounds amazing.”

“It is. You’ll see.” Alex picked up her glass and took a sip of the sparkling grape juice. “What about you. What do you like to do?”

“Running.”
“Running?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “I used to run track and cross country in middle school. I even made the track team in high school. I got kicked off for fighting sophomore year, but I loved it. It’s kind of like the way you describe surfing. It’s just peaceful. Quiet. You’re out there, and your heart is pounding, your legs are pumping, and the world just goes away.”

“You know, if you want, we could go running.”

“Where?”

“The beach stretches for miles in both directions. We could give it a try tomorrow. See how you like it.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“Yeah. I mean, if you think you can keep up.”

“Oh, you did not just say that.”

“I did.”

“Did you miss the part about me running track?”

“No, but that’s been years. I went to state with the swim team in October.”

“You were on the swim team?” Maggie asked, as her mind started supplying images of Alex in a bathing suit.

“Yeah. The school doesn’t have a surfing team, and I needed some sort of extracurricular for the college applications.”

Maggie looked down at her plate, a sinking feeling settling into her gut at the thought of college applications. She knew her SAT scores and GPA were good, but she had no idea if that would be enough. “Is that important? Having something like that on your application?”

“I don’t know,” Alex said. “Mom thought so. That’s why she got Kara into all of the art stuff.”

“Great.”

“Hey.”

Maggie looked up at Alex.

“You’ve got the track stuff, and you’re going to be a charter member of the Midvale GSA club. You’ll do fine.”

“You think they’ll count the GSA?”

“Some schools might not, but would you really want to go to one of those schools?”

Maggie smiled because Alex had a point. If the school didn’t like that she helped found a GSA, they probably wouldn’t like her being gay all over their campus. “How is it you always know how to make me feel better?”

“Lots of practice. Kara has some really bad days, and she won’t go to Mom about it. Some sort of
Kryptonian thing about not showing weakness before the Head of House. And it’s not like we can just take her to a therapist.”

“You’re a good sister.”

Alex shrugged and looked away, clearly not comfortable with the praise. “I try. I didn’t always.”

“Hey,” Maggie said, making Alex turn to look at her. “You are a good sister now. That’s the best you can do.”

Alex smiled at her. “You’re not so bad at making me feel better.”

“It’s important to have things in common.”

“Well, I hope we have a love of tiramisu in common, or dessert is going to be a disappointment.”

“You got tiramisu for dessert?”

“Yeah.”

“I love tiramisu. I’d never eat anything else if I could get away with it.”

“Well then, you’re in luck,” Alex said as she stood up. She cleared off their dinner plates and set out dessert plates before lifting a cake box out of the picnic basket. “It’s not homemade.”

“Because you can’t cook.”

“And because I wanted you to actually enjoy it.” Alex opened the cake box, revealing a large tiramisu.

Maggie looked up at Alex. “You’re pretty good at this whole date thing.”

“Good to know.”

“I know I’m just guessing here, but I think you liked it,” Alex said.

“I don’t know,” Maggie said. “I might need a fourth piece to decide.”

Alex reached for the cake knife. “I can cut you another piece if you’ve like.”

“Please don’t. If you do, I’ll try to eat it, and I don’t think I can I’ll make it back to the house if I have another bite.

Alex sat the cake knife back down and took Maggie’s hand in hers. “I’m really glad you changed your mind about giving this a try.”

“I don’t think I ever really stood a chance of saying no to you.”

“Well, I am pretty great. But you’re pretty great yourself.”

“You’re not going to try to tell me it was love at first sight, are you? Because I know that’s a lie.”

“No. It took until fourth period the next day before I started daydreaming about kissing you.”

“Really? That quick?”
“Yeah, it was embarrassing. I got so spaced out my Spanish teacher noticed and yelled at me.”

“Is that why you shoved a spoon full of yogurt up your nose? You were trying to impress me?”

“Oh, God,” Alex said, feeling the heat in her cheeks. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

“Never. We’ll be old and gray, and I’ll still be telling the story of how you were so smitten with me, you forgot how to use a spoon.”

“So you’re saying we’re still going to be together when we’re old and gray?”

“I hope so. Because I don’t want to imagine my life without you in it.”

Alex squeezed Maggie’s hand, remembering saying the same thing to Maggie the day before when Eliza was about to tell her the truth about Kara.

“I’m not ready for this to be over,” Maggie said.

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve got miles of beach in either direction, it’s a nice night, and it’s still early.” Alex stood up.

“Walk with me?”

“I’d love to.”

Maggie leaned into Alex as they walked towards the house. She noted with a little sadness that the table, chairs, and the ring of torches where they had eaten dinner were gone, almost as if the whole evening had been a dream. Alex’s arm around her shoulder was the only tangible proof that the night had been real, that she had gotten to go on a wonderful date with a beautiful girl, and that their family was happy for them. It was like something out of a fairytale, and even after dinner and the long walk on the beach, she felt a little too much like Cinderella coming up on midnight.

They stopped on the porch, and Alex let go of her so they could turn to face each other.

“Tonight was…” Alex trailed off, and Maggie could see her searching for the words.

“Wonderful,” Maggie finished for her. “Tonight was wonderful.”

“You think so?”

“I do. I can only think of one way it could be better.”

“What would that be?”

Maggie looked down at Alex’s lips, which seemed to be enough of a clue because Alex reached up, cradling Maggie’s head in her hands as she leaned in for a kiss. When their lips touched, it was electric. Maggie felt it everywhere. It was an ache to be touched, to be held, to just be with Alex and never let go.

The kiss ended too soon, but when Maggie opened her eyes, the way Alex was looking at her, like she was the most precious thing in the world, made it worth it.

“I’m not ready for this to be over,” Maggie said. “Stay with me tonight? Just stay and hold me,
Please. I don’t want to be alone.”

“I’d love too.”

“How was the date?” Kara asked as soon as Alex walked into their bedroom.

“Still going on,” Alex said as she started to undress. “I’m going to stay in Maggie’s room tonight.”

“Wow. That must have been some date.”

Alex looked over at Kara, who had a huge grin on her face. “Not like that,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Maggie just doesn’t want to be alone after our date.”

“Oh. So you traumatized her.”

Alex glared, which made Kara start laughing.

“I still know where you hide your chocolate,” Alex said as she pulled on her pajamas.

“I know where Eliza keeps the photo albums.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Touch the chocolate and find out.”

Alex glared for another moment, but she couldn’t keep it up. She walked over and hugged Kara tightly. “Thank you for helping out tonight.”

“I was happy to.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too,” Kara said. “Now go get your girl.”

Maggie sat on the bed feeling nervous about the prospect of spending the night with Alex, which didn’t make a lot of sense. She and Alex had slept in the same bed the night before. But this felt different. Heavier, somehow. Maybe it was because there was no more pretense, no more pretending they didn’t both want this, no more ‘we can’t do this,’ no more ‘we can’t do this yet.’ They had both admitted what they wanted. They had been on an amazing date. They had kissed, and Maggie was under no illusion that the first one would be the only one they shared tonight.

There was a soft knock at the door, and Maggie rushed over to open it. When she did, she found Alex standing in the hall in her pajamas, a shy smile on her face.

“Hey,” Alex said.

“Hey,” Maggie said, not able to stop herself from smiling.

“Can I come in?”

“Please.” Alex stepped inside and Maggie closed the door behind her. When she turned around, she found Alex staring at her with concern on her face.

“You’re shaking,” Alex said.
“Just a little nervous.”

“You don’t need to be. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable or pressured. We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“I want to,” Maggie said as she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Alex. “I want everything with you. That’s why I’m shaking. I want this so much, and I’m scared because I never get what I want.”

“I’m scared too. I’m so scared that you’re going to change your mind or realize I’m not enough for you.”

“Not enough for me? Alex, you’re amazing.”

“It’s hard to feel that way when your little sister can fly.”

“I don’t want to kiss your little sister.”

“You better not.”

“I really, really want to kiss you.”

“I think that’s a great idea.”

Kara waited until everyone was asleep before she pulled the dry bag onto her back and climbed out of the window in her and Alex’s bedroom. She hated that she had to do this in the dark. Hated that she had to hide what she was doing. On Krypton, it wouldn’t even have been an issue. On Krypton, she would have issued a challenge and faced him with live Sunblades in her hands, not skulked around in the dark.

She knew Eliza would be furious if she found out what Kara was about to do. She knew Kal would be upset too, which hurt more than Eliza’s potential anger. Eliza wouldn’t understand, and Kara was okay with that, but Kal should, and the fact that he wouldn’t was a reminder of her own failure. Kal was her cousin, but there was so much he didn’t understand about what it meant to be Kryptonian and what it meant to be a member of the House of El.

Alex would understand, though. Kara wasn’t sure how she knew that, but she did. She knew in her gut that Alex would understand, and that would be enough. Alex would have her back. She hoped, if it came to it, Maggie would understand too.

Kara dropped off the roof of the house and hit the ground running at super speed. She ran up the coast almost five miles to a large outcropping that jutted out into the ocean a few hundred feet. She climbed out to the seaward face and into a small cave she found almost two years earlier right after Jeremiah had died. She had spent months expanding the inner chamber, opening it up carefully with heat vision and her hands, until it was big enough and the walls smooth enough. Then, she’d carefully carved prayers and scriptures into the walls, turning it into a sanctuary for herself.

Tonight, it would serve a different purpose.

She stripped off her clothes, and then pulled on the suit she’d made for herself, clipped the dagger to the belt, and rolled the war cloak up into a tight bundle. Once she was ready, she flew out of the cave and headed for the hospital.

She touched down on the roof and used her X-ray vision to find Pat’s room and plot a path to it.
She pulled on the war cloak, slipped through the roof access, and used a combination of super speed and X-ray vision to get to his room unnoticed.

Once inside, she moved one of the easy chairs, bracing it against the door, then made sure the call button was out of reach. She switched the voice changer on and stood next to the bed. Using a bit of X-ray vision, she made sure his ribs were set and properly taped; she didn’t want to puncture one of his lungs, after all. But once she was sure she wouldn’t inadvertently kill him, she reached down and got a good grip.

“Patrick Brice!” she shouted, her distorted voice echoing through the room as she lifted him out of the bed and slammed him against the wall.

Pat jerked awake, screaming in pain. It took him a moment to focus in the dark, tears rolling down his face, but he finally stared into the visor of her helmet.

“How many girls said no to you?” he asked, and Kara could hear the fear in his voice and the frantic pounding of his heart.

“I am /vish/.” Kara said. “I am the hand of justice, here to make you answer for your crimes. You have raised your hand against the innocent. You have taken what was not offered or freely given. You have violated the bodies of those who trusted you, and for that, blood is owed.”

“What are you talking about? I haven’t done anything wrong!”

Kara drew the dagger and drove it into the wall next to his head.

“Liar! You’re a rapist.”

“No, I’m not!”

Kara narrowed her eyes. He obviously wasn’t afraid enough. She wanted to do this without anyone knowing, but the whole point was to make him confess. If worse came to worse, she figured dangling him from 30,000 feet would make him afraid enough, but she still had other options to try first. She pressed one hand to his throat to hold him in place, then ripped the hospital gown off him.

“What are you doing?”

“How many girls said no to you?”

“Don’t! Don’t hurt me!” he begged. “Please, stop!”

She raised the visor on her helmet as she called up the heat behind her eyes, filling the room with a harsh white glow.

“How many girls asked you to stop? How many begged you not to hurt them?”

“What do you want from me?”

Kara let loose with her heat vision running it over his chest with just the lightest touch. Enough to feel it, enough to hurt, but not enough to leave a burn. Pat still screamed the whole time.

Kara heard someone trying to open the door, beating on it frantically, signaling that any chance of this passing unnoticed was gone, but she still had a job to finish.

“Confess,” Kara said. “Call the police. Tell them everything. The name of every girl who ever said no to you and everything you did to them. Confess everything you did to hurt them. Confess every
crime. Or I will come back. And I will pass sentence for what you have done.”

Kara didn’t wait for an answer. She grabbed the dagger and pulled it out of the wall, then used super speed to put the chair back where it belonged, opened the door, and slipped past the nurse and orderly trying to get into the room. She sped up the stairwell to the roof where she sheathed the dagger, took off the war cloak, and was in the air before Pat hit the floor.

Ten minutes later, after a quick stop at the cave, Kara climbed back in through her window. She offered a silent prayer of thanks to Rao that Eliza hadn’t noticed her absence and crawled into bed.

Chapter End Notes

Translated from the Kryptonian:

vish
A member of the Kryptonian military guild who serves as a law enforcement officer.
I.E. A Cop
Sunday, March 5, 2006

Maggie woke up slowly, content in the feel of strong arms wrapped around her, a warm body pressed against her, and a muscled thigh between her legs. She snuggled closer to Alex, memories of the night before warming her just as surely as the heat of Alex’s body or the blanket wrapped around them.

The night before still felt like a fairytale. The date, but more so what came after. They hadn’t done much, not really. A lot of kisses, a lot of touches, hands which grew bolder as the night grew longer, but in the end, there were lines they weren’t ready to cross, and for once, they both seemed content to take Susan’s most frequent piece of advice and slow down, though Maggie knew Alex was more responsible for that than she was. Alex had been so careful with everything she did. Every time her hand drifted to some new place, she’d looked Maggie in the eye and asked if it was okay. Maggie had said yes, every time. She would have said yes to anything Alex asked because Alex treated her like she was the most precious thing in the world.

When she had settled into Alex’s arms at the end of the night, sleep slowly overtaking them both, Maggie couldn’t imagine ever being as happy as she was in that moment anywhere outside the circle of Alex’s arms. Alex made her feel safe. Alex made her feel cherished. Alex made her feel loved. It was a feeling that had lingered though the night and one Maggie was reluctant to leave behind just because the sun was shining in through her window.

“I’m getting used to waking up like this,” Alex said, her voice still thick with sleep.

“Me too. I think I was hooked after the first time.”

Alex pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I think I was too.”

“Think they would let us rearrange our schedules so we had all the same classes, and I could just spend the whole down sitting in your lap, while you held me like this?”

“I don’t see Principal Munroe going for it.”

“That’s because he’s an asshole.”

“We could drop out,” Alex said. “Stay here for the rest of our lives.”
“They would be short lives. I’m pretty sure your mom would kill us.”

“Probably. It would be worth it though.”

“You really think so?”

“I do. I’m even sit through one of Mom’s ‘I’m so disappointed in you, Alexandra’ speeches.”

Maggie laughed and pressed a kiss to Alex’s neck. “Got any plans for today?”

“I was thinking about hanging out with my girlfriend.”

“You didn’t tell me you had a girlfriend. Is she hot?”

“Totally. She has these dimples that make me swoon every time she smiles.”

“Sounds like you really like her.”

“I do.”

“Well, I hope she’s not the jealous type.”

“I don’t know,” Alex said. “Are you the jealous type?”

“Extremely. I’m planning on tossing Vicki and Rhonda off a bridge.”

“That’s probably fair. Should I warn Susan you’re coming for her?”

“No. Susan gets to live, but she’s on thin ice.”

“So you’re saying no more bikini pics?”

Maggie narrowed her eyes. Alex laughed and leaned down to kiss her, at which point they both discovered morning breath was actually a thing.

“Okay, I think we just found a reason to get out of bed,” Maggie said.

“Yeah. Maybe we should get breakfast while we’re up.”

“Good idea. Think Kara would make pancakes?”

Alex smiled as she walked into the kitchen, a little surprised to find Kara there with the pans already set up.

“Morning,” Kara said as she added six more pancakes to one of the platters she was filling. “You have a good night?”

“Yeah.”

Kara smirked at her, and Alex rolled her eyes and opened the cabinet to get them some plates.

“You and Mom finish the gardening early?” Alex asked.

“Yeah.”

“How’d you know Maggie wanted pancakes?”
“I heard my name. I did my best not to listen, but that always gets my attention.”

“Sorry. You didn’t have to drop everything to make us breakfast.”

“I don’t mind. Besides, Eliza isn’t here, so if I didn’t, one of you might try to cook, and we might need this house later.”

“Funny. Where’s Mom?”

“She went into town to do a little shopping.”

“At 11 o’clock on a Sunday?”

Kara shrugged. “Home Depot run. We’re going to start planting the spring vegetables next week, and we’re out of fertilizer. She wanted a couple of bags of topsoil too.”

“Now that does sound like Mom. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” Kara said as she poured another batch of pancakes onto one of the griddles.

“Have you looked at Berkeley at all?”

“Like, the college?”

“Yeah.”

“Not really. I was mostly looking at Stanford and National City University. Why?”

“I’ve been looking at it,” Alex said as she started to set the table.

“Should I start looking at it too?”

“Might be a good idea. They have a good bioengineering program.”

“So do Stanford and NCU,” Kara said.

“Yeah, but Maggie wants to go to Berkeley or SFSU.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll take a look,” Kara said.

“Take a look at what?” Maggie asked as she came into the kitchen.

“Berkeley,” Alex said.

Maggie stopped and looked at Alex. “I thought you wanted to go to Stanford.”

Alex shrugged. “Berkeley’s got a good program. I still want to go to National City University for Med School and my PhD, but-”

Alex didn’t get to finish her sentence, because Maggie grabbed her and kissed her. She normally hated being interrupted, but she decided in this case, she didn’t really mind so much.

“Get a room,” Kara said.
Maggie broke off the kiss, looking a little embarrassing, and Alex turned and glared at Kara.

“What?” Kara asked, a beatific smile on her face as she carried over two of the pancake platters. She sat the platters on the table. “Strawberry for Alex and buckwheat for Maggie.”

“You made me buckwheat pancakes?”

“If you tell anyone, I swear I’ll melt your face.”

Maggie let go of Alex and pulled Kara into a hug. “Your secret is safe with me.”

Eliza smiled as she walked around the house, carrying the last of the bags of soil to the shed. She could have had Kara do it, but honestly, she enjoyed the task. It felt grounding in a way her day-to-day work didn’t. She lived in a world of microscopes and gene sequencers. Work that was very rarely tangible and left her far too tempted to live inside her own mind when she already had a tendency to get lost in there. The weight of the bags, the strain of her muscles, even the ache in her knees that she got when she was gardening all connected her to the real world.

Once, she could have relied on Jeremiah for that. A touch on the hand, a hug in the morning, a kiss at just the right moment, or a few hours behind a closed bedroom door to connect her to the world outside the microscopic realm of DNA, genetics, and bioengineering. Another reason to miss him and to long for the things she lost.

She dropped the bag of soil on top of the others, then went over to the workbench in the corner of the shed and looked through the seed stock she’d picked up. A few varieties of squash, some potatoes, lots of beans and greens, tomatoes, and some carrots. A lot of stuff Kara wasn’t going to want to eat, but that was about half the stuff they took out of the garden anyway.

Once she was satisfied they had everything they would need for the next week, she locked up the shed and headed into the house, looking forward to relaxing and maybe getting a chance to ask Alex how her and Maggie’s date went. Thought she suspected from the fact that Alex had slept in Maggie’s bedroom that she already had a good idea.

The house was relatively quiet when she went inside, and she found all three of the girls sitting around the kitchen table with their books spread out in front of them.

“Homework?” she asked as she opened the fridge and started taking things out to fix lunch for herself.

“Yeah,” Alex said. “Figured now was a good time.”

“Are you girls hungry?”

“Yes!” Kara said.

“No,” Alex and Maggie said.

“Kara just made us some pancakes,” Alex explained.

“Kara, would you like a sandwich?” Eliza asked.

“Yes, please.”

Eliza fixed a couple of sandwiches and handed one to Kara before she sat down.
“I’m going to need to use the credit card,” Alex said.

“What for?” Eliza asked.

“College application fees.”

“I thought we already paid those.”

“I want to apply to Berkeley.”

“Okay,” Eliza said. “When’s the application deadline?”

“March 15th. I’ve filled out most of the application already. I just need to pay the application fee and to have my SAT and ACT scores sent over.”

“Okay.” Eliza wondered what brought on the sudden interest in Berkeley when Alex had been set on going to Stanford for years, but it did bring up a question she’d been putting off. “Maggie, do you know what schools you want to apply too?”

“Berkeley, National City University, and San Francisco State.”

Eliza smiled. She probably should have guessed by Alex’s sudden interest in Berkeley. “Feel free to use the credit card for the application fees and anything else you need. And let me know if you need any help with the application packets.”

“Okay.”

“Eliza?” Kara asked.

“Yes?”

“I was wondering if it would be okay if I applied for early enrollment.”

“You don’t want to finish high school at Midvale high?” Eliza asked.

“Not really. I kind of hate it there. I thought I’d apply to Midvale County Community College and National City University.”

“Not Berkeley or Stanford?” Eliza asked.

“Neither one does early enrollment. I thought I could take a maximum course load this summer, and both semesters next year. If I test out of three classes, I would have 60 credits and could transfer into wherever I wanted as a junior.”

“Okay. Send the applications. We can make a decision once we see if you’re accepted,” Eliza said, knowing there was pretty much zero chance either school would turn Kara down. It brought up a new problem, though. If Alex and Maggie wanted to go to Berkeley, and Kara wanted to go to NCU, Eliza wasn’t sure what she’d do. There was no way she was going to let Kara move to National City alone, and she wasn’t sure relocating would be an option for her. William liked her a lot, but she wasn’t sure that affection would extend to paying for her to relocate her entire research project to National City. Especially since Magnus Labs didn’t have any facilities in National City.

Of course, the ideal would be for all three of them to go to the same school, but Eliza somehow doubted she would be that lucky. She would just have to deal with it when it happened.

The knock on the door surprised all of them.
Kara turned and pushed her glasses up, and all the color drained from her face. “It’s Agent Neill,” she said.

“Upstairs, now,” Eliza said. “Kara, keep an ear out. If I say go…”

“Head for Metropolis. Got it.”

All three of them hurried for the stairs, while Eliza headed for the door. She took a deep breath and opened it to find Noel Neill standing there.

“Dr. Danvers, I need to have a word with Kara,” Agent Neill said.

“About what?”

Agent Neill looked over both her shoulders before saying, “This is not a conversation we want to be having on the front porch. Would you mind if I came in?”

“I would, actually.”

“Doctor, we can have this conversation now, or Director Henshaw can come have this conversation. The choice is yours.”

Eliza stepped back from the door to let Agent Neill in, then closed the door behind her.

“Living room,” Eliza said, pointing the way.

Agent Neill headed into the living room and sat down on the couch. Eliza took one of the easy chairs.

“What’s this about?” Eliza asked.

“A young man named Patrick Brice was assaulted in his hospital room last night. He was dragged out of bed, threatened with a knife, stripped out of his hospital gown, and attacked with heat vision.” She reached inside her coat, and pulled out a sheet of paper, then passed it over to Eliza.

Eliza unfolded it. Most of the sheet was filled with a sketch of a figure wearing some sort of robe and a motorcycle helmet, though a fourth of the page showed a sketch of the knife. Eliza didn’t have to guess who it was. Even if the heat vision hadn’t been a dead giveaway, the Kryptonian glyph on the front of the robe was.

“Now, it’s my understanding that the symbol belongs to the /vish/ , the closest thing Kryptonians have to the police. The dagger is a Kandoran Fang Dagger. The /vish/ carry them as a kind of badge of office.”

“How badly was he hurt?” Eliza asked.

“Not badly. Some bruising. The boy said his attacker told him that if he didn’t call the police and confess to every crime he’d ever committed, the attacker would come back and personally pass judgment.”

Eliza looked up from the paper. “Are you planning on arresting Kara?”

“No. The issue has been dealt with, and no one will come looking for Kara, but, Dr. Danvers, I need to speak to Kara because this cannot happen again.”

“Kara, Alex, Maggie, downstairs, right now!” Eliza shouted.
She waited as she listened to the sounds of her daughters coming down the stairs and tried to keep the mixture of anger and fear she felt from overpowering her. She wanted to ask Kara how she could possibly be so stupid, but that wouldn’t do any good because she understood all too well exactly what Kara was feeling. But that understanding didn’t do anything to alleviate the absolute terror she felt at the idea that the DEO might decide that Kara was a danger that needed to be contained, or the anger at the fact that Kara had put everything Jeremiah had died for at risk.

Kara was the first one through the door, and it only took one look at her face for any doubts Eliza might have had to vanish. She had that look on her face, the one Eliza saw only on very rare occasions, but which always meant that Kara had done what she believed was right, and that she expected Eliza to disagree with her. The one that meant she was bracing for a fight.

Eliza looked past Kara at Maggie and Alex. Both of them looked confused and nervous.

“Did either of you know?” Eliza asked them.

“They didn’t,” Kara said.

“Shut up, Kara,” Eliza said, and all three of the girls flinched at her words and her tone. Eliza looked at Alex and Maggie. “Did you know?”

“Know what?” Alex asked.

Eliza held out the sketch. Alex walked toward her with all the enthusiasm of someone approaching an angry bear and took the sketch. She looked down at it while Maggie looked over her shoulder, and Eliza saw the moment Alex realized what it was. Saw Alex’s glance over at Kara before looking back down at the sketch.

“Yeah,” Alex said, as she handed the sketch back. “I knew. Maggie didn’t.”

“No, she didn’t!” Kara said.

Eliza stared at Alex for a moment, and a surge of affection for her broke through the fear and the anger because Eliza knew without a doubt that Alex was lying to her to try to protect Kara.

“Dr. Danvers, why don’t we send Ms. Rodas back upstairs?”

“Maggie knows everything,” Eliza said.

“You told her?” Agent Neill asked.

“She saw Kara use her powers,” Eliza said.

“Dr. Danvers, I told you this would happen. I told you having her here was too big of a risk to take.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered if Maggie was living here or not. Kara was attacked at school and used her powers to protect another student.”

Eliza turned to Kara. “Where is it?”

“Hidden.”

“Can you get to it without your powers?” Eliza asked.

“No.”
“Can you get it in the daytime without being seen?”

“Yes.”

“How long will it take?”

“About five minutes.”

“Go get it,” Eliza ordered.

“Now wait a minute,” Agent Neill said. “She shouldn’t be using her powers at all. She can tell me where it is, and we can send a team to get it.”

“Kara, go get it,” Eliza said.

Kara turned and headed for the front door.

“Dr. Danvers—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Agent Neill.” Eliza looked over at Alex and Maggie. “You two, sit down.” Agent Neill scooted over to make room for Alex and Maggie on the couch. The two of them sat down next to each other, and Maggie took Alex’s hand in hers, squeezing it tightly.

The next five minutes passed by in complete silence. It was heavy and thick, and Eliza could feel the fear and uncertainty rolling off Alex and Maggie both, along with the anger and frustration rolling off Agent Neill. It all mixed with her own anger and fear to make the entire room cloying, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief when Kara came back in the door carrying a massive dry bag, which she deposited at Eliza’s feet.

“Sit,” Eliza said.

Kara took the other easy chair, as Eliza opened the bag. The first thing she found was a motorcycle helmet with a flip-up faceplate. She opened it and spotted a lot of modifications and some wiring.

“What does this do?”

“I installed an electronic voice changer.”

Eliza closed the helmet and set it aside before going through the rest of the bag. She found a wetsuit, a face mask, gloves, boots, a cloak, a belt, and finally, the knife.

“Where did you get the knife?” Eliza asked.

“I bought it at Walmart, and filed it down the right shape,” Kara said.

“How much money did you spend?”

“$1032.74.”

“Did you put it on the credit card?”

“No.”

“So, you used the money you got from your paintings?”

“What?” Kara asked, as her, Alex’s, and Maggie’s faces lost all color. “I-”
“Kara,” Eliza said in a warning tone.

“Um… yes.”

“Tell me exactly what you did.”

“When I borrowed the car yesterday, I went and got what I needed. I spent the morning putting the suit together. Last night, I waited until everyone was sleep, then I slipped out of the house and went to a spot where no one would see me. I changed into the suit and went to Pat Brice’s room at the hospital. I woke him up and told him to confess all the times he hurt girls.”

“What was the knife for?”

“It’s a Fang Dagger. The /vish/ carry them. It’s a symbol of law and justice and of the divine order of Rao.”

“And that’s what the symbol is? On the front of the cloak and the suit?”

“The /vish/ coat of arms,” Kara confirmed.

“Agent Neill said you used your heat vision,” Eliza said.

“Not enough to hurt him.”

“So you made a Kryptonian police uniform and weapon; you snuck out after curfew; you flew across town; you broke into the hospital; you threatened a patient with a knife; and you used your powers on him. Did I miss anything?”

“I hacked into the hospital’s system to make sure he was still there.”

“Anything else?”

“I drove the knife through the wall to scare him. And I told him that if he didn’t confess, I’d come back and pass sentence myself.”

“Anything else?” Eliza asked again.

“No. But Alex and Maggie didn’t know anything about it.”

Eliza looked over at Agent Neill. “Did she forget anything else?”

“No,” Agent Neill said.

Eliza turned back to Kara, looking at her as she considered what she’d just been told. Not once since she’d been told her husband was dead had she longed for him quite as much as she did in that moment. Eliza knew that by the standards of most people, she would be considered an overly permissive parent. Part of it was that she believed that the best way to be a parent was to teach your children right from wrong, then let them make their own decisions. Yes, you provided guidance and correction when they needed it, as well as love and support, but she’d grown up in a house and with an extended family that very much subscribed to the ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’ mentality, and all the draconian punishments and arbitrary rules had ever really taught her was how to lie and how to sneak around to avoid punishment, as well as a certain disregard for and distrust of authority in general.

She had dealt with Alex and Kara’s various transgressions over the years mostly with words and lectures. There’d been the occasional grounding, but those had been few and far between because,
for the most part, Alex and Kara had never been particularly wild kids. Now she wondered if that had been a mistake. If she’d been a bit stricter, a bit more heavy-handed with her punishments on the occasions when they were needed could this have been prevented?

That didn’t matter now, though. What Kara had done… Eliza understood it, but it was a miracle that Hank Henshaw wasn’t there with a capture team because Kara had used her powers to attack a human, to threaten a human. More than just being exposed, Kara had committed a crime. Several crimes. She’d taken the law into her own hands, and Eliza couldn’t allow that to stand because if she did, then Kara might do it again.

She took a deep breath as she decided on a course of action. She had always gone out of her way to avoid anything that struck her as cruel when she was doling out punishment, but this time, for the first time, Eliza went for something that she knew would hurt, because she had to drive the lesson home.

“How many paintings do you have at Yab-Yums right now?” she asked.

“Two.”

“Go upstairs, get the money, all if it, and bring it back down here,” Eliza said.

Kara got up and ran up the stairs at super speed. She came back a moment later with a rolled up manila envelope and handed it to Eliza. Eliza opened it and quickly counted the money inside: $6,967.26. She did a little math in her head.

“Yab-Yums is keeping twenty percent?”

“Yes,” Kara said.

Eliza took two one hundred dollar bills, out of the envelope and held them out to Alex, who took them with a confused expression on her face.

“You and Maggie go to Yab-Yums. Tell Kim that Kara won’t be selling any more paintings. Give her that to cover the commission on the paintings she has and bring them back home.”

Alex looked ready to argue. Kara looked like she’d just been slapped.

“Go. Now.”

Alex and Maggie got up. As the headed for the door, Alex reached over and gave Kara’s shoulder a squeeze.

Eliza waited until she heard the front door close.

“I thought we were past this,” Eliza said. “I thought you understood what a risk using your powers was.”

“He hurt people! He raped Elisa Wilkey, and he was going to get away with it!”

“I know. And that is terrible. But Kara, you broke the law. You assaulted someone, and honestly, it is a miracle that Agent Neill isn’t here to arrest you.”

“But—”

“No!” Eliza said, cutting off Kara. “I have tried to do this the easy way. I have told you time and again how dangerous it is for you to use your powers. Agent Neill tried to tell you how dangerous
it is. But you won’t listen to reason, and last night, you put yourself in danger. Worse than that, you put Alex and Maggie in danger.”

“They didn’t have anything to do with it!”

“I know, but you saw how quick Alex was to lie for you. What if she’d told the police that? She’s less than a month away from her 18th birthday. Maggie is a legal adult. If they were arrested, they could go to jail. They would have criminal records. Do you think Alex could get into med school with a felony conviction? And what about Maggie?”

Kara stared back at Eliza, tears welling up in her eyes, and the sight broke Eliza’s heart, but she had to drive the point home.

“It was reckless. Worse, it was selfish.” Eliza held up the envelope full of money. “This is gone. And you can’t apply for early enrollment to college. You’ll finish high school at Midvale High. You’re grounded until the end of the school year. You’ll leave the house only for school. You can attend the art club, and the GSA club meetings, but otherwise, you will be home. No movies, no Yab-Yums, no swimming, no surfing. We’ll revisit this at the end of the school year and see if you’re going to be grounded for the summer.”

“You’re wrong,” Kara said, and Eliza could feel the anger radiating off of her. “Elisa got hurt protecting me. I owed her.”

“Honey,” Agent Neill said. “I know you mean well, and I know you think you’re doing the right thing, but this isn’t Krypton. Your family would want you to be safe.”

“SHUT UP!” Kara yelled, jumping to her feet. “Don’t you dare talk about my family! You have no idea what they would have wanted. No idea what it means to be a Kryptonian. Elisa got hurt defending the House of El. The House owed her a debt. I paid it. I gave her justice when you failed her. That’s what my family would have wanted. That’s what my mother would have wanted.”

“Kara,” Eliza said. “Go upstairs.”

“I-“

“NOW, Kara!” Eliza snapped.

Kara vanished in a burst of super-speed, taking the dry bag, the suit, the robe, and the knife with her.

Eliza closed her eyes and counted to 10 before she looked over at Agent Neill. “You just couldn’t keep your mouth shut, could you?”

“I was trying to help,” Agent Neill said.

“If you want to help, go find evidence to convict that boy of rape.”

“That won’t be necessary. Patrick Brice confessed to raping seven girls over the last four years.”

“What will happen to him?”

“It’s hard to say. He turned 18 in December, so there’s no way his parents can get the confession quashed. The crimes were committed while he was a minor, but given the number of them, he’ll likely be tried as an adult. With a full confession on the record, his attorney will probably accept a plea deal. My guess is he’ll do some jail time and be a registered sex offender for the rest of his
“Good,” Eliza said.

“We agreed with you about the outcome, Dr. Danvers, this cannot happen again. You need to get that suit away from her, and you need to make her understand just how serious this is.”

“That would have been a lot easier if you had just let me handle it.”

“I-

“It’s time for you to leave, Agent Neill. I have to make a phone call. Because right now, there’s only one person in the world Kara is going to listen to.”

“How bad is this going to be?” Maggie asked as she took the painting from Alex.

“Bad,” Alex said as she reached into the back of the car and pulled out the second painting. “Mom doesn’t usually do punishments. It’s mostly a lot of ‘I’m so disappointed in you’ speeches. The occasional grounding. But this isn’t missing curfew or cutting class.”

“You jumped in pretty quick there, telling your mom you knew what Kara did.”

Alex closed the hatchback of the car. “Kara’s my sister. We’re in this together, whatever happens.”

“I feel like I let you guys down in there.”

“Why would you feel that way?” Alex asked as they headed for the door.

“Because I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t let us down. Things between Mom, Kara, and me are complicated. It’s harder for Kara to deal with Mom yelling at her. Kara considers Mom the Head of House, and that carries a lot of weight with her. Mom’s yelling at her about something triggers all sorts of Kryptonian cultural shit, and I don’t think Mom really gets that. The first time Mom really laid into Kara, Kara crawled into the back of the closet and cried for hours. She was sure Mom was going to throw her out. It was bad.”

“Jesus,” Maggie said as Alex unlocked the front door. “They really did that on Krypton?”

“Yeah. But you’ve got to remember, by the time the Head of House was even discussing a problem with you, you had fucked up on a major level. Like, traded an entire skyscraper for magic beans level of screw up.”

Alex opened the door, and they headed inside.

“Where are we putting these?” Maggie asked.

“Upstairs in the workroom.”

“Was she like that with your dad?”

“No. I wasn’t really sure why, but Kara pretty immediately latched onto the idea that Mom was the Head of House. She respected my dad but was a lot more willing to argue with him and a lot less afraid of him when he started lecturing.”
“Maybe Krypton was a matriarchy.”

“No. From what Kara said, it was more about House precedence and social standing. It didn’t make a lot of sense, honestly. I think Kara decided Mom was the Head of House because Mom had six PhDs to Dad’s one.”

“Weird way to decide who’s in charge.”

“Not on Krypton,” Alex said as they walked into the workroom she shared with Kara. She put the painting she was carrying down on one of the shelves with Kara’s other paintings, then took the one Maggie was carrying and added it to the shelf as well.

“That’s a lot of paintings,” Maggie said, her gaze tracking along the shelves.

“Yeah. No idea what we’ll do when she runs out of room. Come on. Let’s go find her.”

It didn’t take them long to do just that. The first place they checked when the left the workroom was Kara and Alex’s bedroom, and Kara was sitting on her bed, her eyes closed, her back against the headboard with Streaky curled up in her lap, hugging a pillow to her chest. Alex recognized it immediately as a bad sign. If Kara was hugging the pillow instead of the cat, it was because she was upset enough to worry about losing control of her strength.

“Hey,” Alex said.

“Hey,” Kara said without opening her eyes.

“How did it go?”

“She took the painting money. I can’t apply for early enrollment, and I’m grounded for the rest of the school year.”

“Shit.” Alex walked over and sat down on the bed next to Kara and slipped an arm around her. “I’m sorry, Kara.”

Kara leaned into her side as tears started to spill down her face.

“She doesn’t understand. I had to. Elisa got hurt protecting me. I had to.”

“I know. Your Mom would be so proud of you. Your whole family would be proud.”

Maggie sat down on the others side of Kara. “We’re proud of you, Kara.”

Alex pressed a kiss to the top of Kara’s head and whispered, “Come here.”

Kara shifted, causing Streaky to complain in protest and hop down as Kara curled up against Alex. Alex kicked off her shoes and lifted her legs, climbing into bed beside Kara, then she looked over at Maggie. “Come on.”

“You sure there’s enough room?” Maggie asked.

“We’ll squeeze in,” Alex said.

Maggie kicked off her shoes and swung her legs up onto the bed and wrapped her arms around Alex and Kara.

“We’ve got you,” Alex whispered. “And we’re not going anywhere.”
“Hello, Eliza,” Clark said, not bothering to hide the weary tone in his voice.

“I need you to come to Midvale.”

“Eliza, we’ve been over this. My coming to visit Kara risks drawing attention to her.”

“This isn’t about a visit. Agent Neill came to the house again today.”

“What? Why?”

“Because Kara broke into the hospital last night and threatened the boy who attacked her at school on Friday.”

“Eliza, what the hell is going on out there? Does this have something to do with Maggie? Because up until she showed up, everything was fine.”

“Are you kidding me? Are you fucking kidding me? Nothing was fine, Clark. Jeremiah is dead. Alex and Kara refuse to ride the bus because they’re social outcasts. Kara was sneaking around behind my back, risking exposure so she could get money to go to Metropolis and visit you. Alex and I could barely speak to each other without getting into a fight. Maggie’s probably one of the best things to happen to this family in years.

“Now, I know it’s inconvenient for you to be reminded that you have a family and that that family needs you, but right now, I need you to put on your cape and get your ass out here because as much as I hate to admit it, you’re probably the only person Kara will listen to right now.”

There was silence on the line for a few moments, and Eliza thought for a second that Clark had hung up on her, but finally he said, “I’ll be there after sunset.”

Eliza opened the door before Clark could knock. She didn’t say a word as he stepped inside. Just closed the door and led him into the kitchen. “Sit.”

Clark took a seat while Eliza got a couple of bottles of water out of the fridge. She sat across from him and passed him one.

“I usually sleep in on Saturdays,” Eliza said. “Kara asked to borrow the car yesterday morning. I didn’t think anything of it. Told her she could take it. She went to a few stores and bought what she needed to make a super suit, a /vish/ robe, and a Kandoran Fang Dagger. She put it all together, then last night after we were asleep, she went to the hospital and told the boy who attacked her that he needed to call the police and confess to having raped a fellow student and anyone else who had been a victim over the years or she would come back and pass sentence herself.”

“My God.”

“What do they do to rapists on Krypton?”

“Technically, the sentence for rape is about 75 Earth years in prison,” Clark said. “But most rapes didn’t go to trial.”

“Why not?”

“If someone in the House raped someone else in the House, it was handled within the House. The accuser and the accused both submit to a truth seeker. If the allegations are true, the rapist is given
a choice. Permanent exile from the House, or a duel with the House Champion by Kandor rules.”

“Kandor rules? What does that mean?”

“Kandor rules are simple. The fight is to the death. No mercy shall be asked or given, and the rapist has no option to name a champion. Usually, it’s a short, swift execution, but Kandoran duels can get ugly.”

“And if it’s not internal to the House?”

“It’s pretty similar. The Head of House for the accuser will approach the Head of House for the accused. A third House is sometimes brought in as an arbiter. The accuser and the accused are subjected to the truth seeker. The biggest difference is that if the accused is guilty, they aren’t given the option of exile. They only have a choice of whether they want to face their own House champion, or the victim’s House Champion.”

“So, what you’re saying is, Kara would have gone back and executed him.”

“She would have taken a weapon for him. Put it in his hand. Then, yes, she would have killed him.”

“No offense, but there are parts of Kryptonian culture that make me sick to my stomach.”

“That’s part of why I’ve stayed away.”

“What?”

“Kara is Kryptonian.”

“I had noticed that.”

“I’m not,” Clark said. “I mean, genetically, physiologically, yes. But I was raised on Earth by humans. Socially, culturally, morally, I’m a human. I thought placing Kara with a human family would help her adapt. I thought if she stayed with me, she would spend all her time trying to make me more Kryptonian instead of learning what it means to be human.”

“You know, that’s probably the first honest thing you’ve ever said about why you gave her up.”

“That’s not fair. I do have enemies, and I am afraid for her.”

“And if you wanted to, you would still find a way to be a part of her life, the same way you do with Lois, Jimmy, Chloe, Lana, and your parents.”

“Eliza-”

“I’m not having this argument, Clark. We’ve had it dozens of times, and I’m tired of it. You’re here because you are the one person on Earth that she might listen to. I need you to make her understand that she can’t ever do anything like this again.”

“I’ll try.”

“Up the stairs. Second room on the left. Watch out for Alex. She hates you about as much as Lex Luthor, and she’s spent more time studying Kryptonians close up.”

Maggie was getting used to waking up in bed with someone, but this time is was decidedly less
comfortable. Most of that was due to the fact that twin beds were definitely not meant to hold three
people, no matter how close they got, but there was at least a small part of her that admitted that
she was definitely not built to be the big spoon for a girl who was five inches taller than she was.
There was a teeny, tiny part of her that was currently being strangled to death by her pride as she
realized she wasn’t built to be the big spoon at all, but she was never, ever going to admit that.

She smiled as she looked over at Alex, who was cradling Kara, even in her sleep, and it made her
heart ache a little. She wasn’t sure how she’d wound up here, how she’d been so lucky as to find a
family like this, after the one she was born into cast her aside. Even if things were a little tense at
the moment, she couldn’t think of anywhere she’d rather be.

She looked over at the door as she heard someone approaching and knew from the sound of the
footsteps it wasn’t Mrs. Danvers, which made a knot of fear settle in her stomach. She didn’t know
of anyone else who should be in the house and couldn’t think of anyone Mrs. Danvers would let
wander around without her. She gave Alex a small shake. Alex opened her eyes, and Maggie
noded towards the door. Alex looked over at the door and frowned as she gave Kara a small
shake.

“What?” Kara asked.

There was a knock on the door before Alex could answer, and Kara looked over at it.

“Kara, it’s Clark,” a man said from the other side of the door.

Kara seemed to disappear out from between Alex and Maggie and reappear in front of the door.
Maggie felt a little shocked at the casual display of super-speed, but she didn’t really have time to
process it before Kara opened the door and threw her arms around the man standing there.

“Kal!” Kara cried out as she picked him up and spun around in a circle.

“Hey, Kara,” Clark said.

Maggie sat up and looked at him, then over at Alex, who looked ready to commit murder. “That’s
the cousin?”

“That’s the douchebag, yeah.”

The douchebag in question looked at Alex with shock on his face.

“Alex!” Kara said, glaring at her. “Apologize!”

“Not happening,” Alex said as she stood up. “At least, not until he apologizes for being an asshole
for the last four years.”

“Um… Do you think you girls could give Kara and I a few minutes to talk?” the douchebag asked.

“Oh, now you want to talk?” Alex said.

Maggie got up and laid a hand on Alex’s shoulder, ready to keep her from doing something stupid.
She might have only known Alex a couple of weeks, but she had a pretty good idea about Alex’s
normal reaction to anyone who hurt someone she cared about.

“Alex, stop it,” Kara pleaded.

“Four years she’s been right here, but you don’t care enough to show up once until she gets in
“Don’t,” Maggie said. Alex turned to look at her, uncertainty on her face. “He deserves everything you want to say to him, but Kara doesn’t.”

A little of the rage faded from Alex’s eyes, and she turned and looked at Kara. Maggie glanced over at Kara and saw the gratitude in her eyes.

“You want us to stay?” Maggie asked.

“It’s okay.”

“We’ll order dinner,” Maggie said. “Pizza and potstickers?”

Kara looked up at Clark. “Unless you’d rather have something else?”

“I can’t stay.”

Maggie watched Kara’s face fall and promoted Clark from douche to unmitigated asshole. Alex let out a low growl, reminding Maggie of what Kara said about how much Alex liked punching people. Since she really didn’t want Alex’s hand in a cast for the next couple of months, she put an hand in the small of Alex’s back and pushed her towards the door, doing her best to keep her out of punching range as they passed the Asshole of Steel.

Kara watched Maggie practically frog-march Alex out of the room. She felt a little sick at the knowledge that it was for the best. She hated that Alex was so angry at Kal. She hated it more because the anger was on her behalf.

“I don’t remember Alex being that rude,” Kal said.

“She’s not rude. She’s angry,” Kara said. “Come on.” She walked over to her computer desk and grabbed the chair, dragging it next to her bed. She sat down on the bed, leaving the chair for Kal.

“You know why I’m here?” Kal asked as he sat down.

“Eliza called you about what I did last night.”

“Yeah, she did.”

“A girl got hurt protecting me. We owed her a debt, and when I found out what he’d done to her, I had to do something about it.”

“Eliza told me what happened. But Kara, you should have let the cops handle this.”

“The cops? You mean like the cop that murdered my friend Kenny, or the one that beat Maggie and kicked her out of the house because she’s gay, or maybe the ones that spent months hassling me and Alex because we found evidence that their boss was selling drugs out of the evidence locker?”

“Kara, I know you’ve had some bad experiences.”

“Really? Who told you? Eliza, or Chloe?”

Kal sighed. “Kara, I’ve explained why I stay away.”
Kara stared at him for a moment, wanting to believe him. Wanting to believe he didn’t visit because he spent all his spare time helping people and protecting people. Wanting to believe he didn’t visit because the responsibilities he had as Superman meant he couldn’t spare the time. But there was a tiny voice in the back of her head, which sounded suspiciously like Alex, that pointed out that he had time for Lois and for Jimmy and for Chloe and for Lana, and the excuse rang hollow.

“Yeah, you’re busy.”

“I stay away because it’s dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“Yes. You know I have enemies.”

“Dangerous,” Kara said, as something clicked in her head. All the times she’d asked to visit Kal, and Eliza had said she’d see, and then told her it wasn’t a good time. She’d always assumed it was Eliza, but it wasn’t. Eliza had never let her visit because Kal didn’t want her there.

“If it’s so dangerous, why are you here now?”

“You know why. You knew before you did it that you shouldn’t have gone after that boy last night.”

“I knew it would upset Eliza. That doesn’t mean I shouldn’t have done it. The House owed a debt. You should understand what that means.”

“Kara, this isn’t Krypton.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Kara said. “If this was Krypton, I wouldn’t have had to do your duty.”

Kal drew back as if he’d been slapped. “You can’t go around breaking the law,” he said.

“You break the law every day. Both of us do. Just being here is breaking the law.”

“Kara, they have prisons for people like us. If you attack people, if you make them afraid of you, someone like Agent Neill will come for you, and it won’t be to talk. They’ll come, and they’ll lock you away, and I won’t be able to help you because I don’t know where the prisons are.

“If that’s not enough to make you understand what’s at stake or if you just don’t care what happens to you, then think about what they would do to Eliza, Alex, and Maggie. Because they would take them away too. They would spend the rest of their lives in some secret prison. No trial, no lawyers, no way out, ever. Is that what you want?”

Eliza watched as Clark walked into the kitchen, carrying the dry bag Kara had used to hold her suit. She could feel the hostility radiating from both Alex and Maggie, and judging by the way Clark looked at them, he could feel it too.

“She won’t do it again,” Clark said.

“What did you say to her?” Alex asked.

“What I had to.”

Alex balled her hands up into fists. Eliza saw it and reached over, putting a hand on Alex’s
shoulder. Alex looked over at Eliza, who shook her head.

“I wanted to talk to you about something before I left,” Clark said.

“Girls, why don’t you go check on Kara,” Eliza suggested. “I’ll let you know when the food gets here.”

Alex and Maggie both got up, giving Clark dirty looks as they left.

“They, uh… They don’t like me very much, do they?”

“No, we don’t.”

She probably shouldn’t have felt so much satisfaction at the look on Clark’s face, but she’d spent too long watching Kara suffer because of decisions Clark had made to pretend that she was anything other than furious with him.

Clark sat down across from her. “I think it might be a good idea to get Kara out of Midvale for a while.”

“No. You’re not taking Kara.”

“That’s not what I’m suggesting.”

“Then what are you suggesting? Because you were talking about moving her a couple of days ago.”

Themyscira. I talked to Wonder Woman. Told her about Kara, about everything that’s been happening. She’s willing to take Kara for the summer. I thought it might help. A couple of months where she didn’t have to hide who she was.”

“Alex leaves for college this fall. I’m not sure Kara will be willing to give up her last two months with Alex.”

“I thought about that. I told Wonder Woman how close Kara and Alex are, and she’s willing to take Alex along too.”

“What about Maggie?”

“I didn’t think to ask. I mean, I know she’s living here, and I know you had to tell her about Kara after she saw Kara use her powers, but—”

“Kara won’t go without Alex, and I don’t think either of them will go without Maggie. So why don’t you see if you can get her added to the invitation?”

“Okay.” Clark took out his phone and called one of his contacts. “Hey,” he said.

There was a brief moment of silence.

“Yes. Eliza wanted to know if Maggie could go as well.”

He reached up, pushing his glasses up onto his forehead so he could pinch the bridge of his nose. “No, I’m not saying that. Look, I… Okay, fine. Yes, you told me so. Yes, I know nothing about women. Yes, I should always listen to you because you are always right.”

He moved his hand, letting the glasses fall down in front of his eyes again, then looked over at
“What’s their last day of school?”
“Graduation is May 26th.”
“May 26th,” Clark repeated into the phone. “Okay. Thanks.”
Clark closed his phone. “She’ll pick them up on the 27th if they want to go.”
“So you didn’t think to ask about Maggie?”
Clark sighed. “There’s nothing I can say that will make you happy right now, is there?”
“No, but I wouldn’t mind hearing the truth about why you didn’t include Maggie.”
“Okay. The truth is, I thought taking in Maggie was a huge risk, and I was right. We normally go months without any sort of problem, but the last few weeks, we’ve been talking every couple of days, and it’s all because of Maggie. You barely know her, but now she knows Kara’s secret identity and mine. I’m upset that you told her the truth about Kara without checking with me, and I think telling her any more is downright reckless.”
Eliza sat there, looking at him for a moment, before she turned towards Kara’s bag. “What will you do with that?”
“That’s all you have to say?”
“As long as we’re where Kara could potentially hear us, yes.”
“I’m taking it to the Fortress.”
“Okay. Goodbye, Clark.”
“Eliza-”
“It’s time for you to go.”
With a shake of his head Clark got up and headed for the door.

Maggie leaned against the wall beside the front door of the house, staring down at the ocean as the waves rolled in. She would have killed for a cigarette right then. She’d never been a heavy smoker. Mostly just one every now and then when Elisa could swipe a couple from her dad, but the buzz had always been good for killing her temper and her nerves, and she had plenty of both, which made her feel like she was probably about to do something extremely stupid.
She looked over as the door opened and Clark walked out. She wasn’t sure he even noticed her as he stepped down off the porch, and she figured it was now or never. “Can I ask you a question?”
He turned around and looked at her, Kara’s bag hanging from one hand.
“Okay,” he said.
“What the fuck is your problem?”
“Excuse me?”
Maggie pushed off the wall and took two steps towards him. “I said, ‘What the fuck is your
problem?’"

“That girl up there loves you.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do. I hear it, every time she talks about you. She loves you so much. She worships you, and it’s breaking her fucking heart.”

“This isn’t any of your business.” Clark started to turn away.

“She probably saved my life the day we met. At the very least, she kept me from ending up living on the streets. I owe her everything I have. The clothes on my back, the food in my stomach, the roof over my head, my girlfriend, my entire future. I owe all of that to Kara. I have all of that because she was kind to me. She’s my family. So when someone hurts her, I make it my business.”

Clark turned back around. “I don’t want to hurt her. I’m trying to protect her.”

“By keeping your distance, right?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know I have a sister?”

“Mike. Her name is Mike. I thought it might be a good idea to keep my distance too. I thought, that way, when I pissed off my parents and they started on me, at least they’d leave her alone. So I get it. You’re trying to protect her. But you know what I figured out watching Kara the last few weeks? Mike didn’t need me to protect her. She needed to know that I gave a shit about her. She needed to know that her big sister loves her. Just like Kara needs you.”

Maggie took a couple more steps towards him, getting right up in his face.

“I can’t fix my mistake. I don’t know if I’ll ever get to see my sister again. But you are fucking Superman. You can be here any time you want. Kara doesn’t need you to take out an ad in the Daily Planet telling all the supervillains you have a cousin. She just needs you to show the fuck up and be her family.”

She didn’t wait to see if Clark was going to answer her. She turned around and headed back into the house, slamming the door behind her.

Alex opened the door to her and Kara’s bedroom and saw Kara curled up in a ball on her bed, shoulders shaking as she cried. It took a second to fight down the urge to go back downstairs and see just how invulnerable Clark really was. It was an easier decision than it might otherwise have been because the urge to comfort Kara was always stronger than the urge to utterly destroy the person who made her cry. Besides, reducing Clark to a grease spot was going to take planning, and she could hug and plot revenge at the same time.

She lay down behind Kara and wrapped an arm around her. Kara immediately rolled over and hugged Alex tight enough to knock the wind out of her as she buried her face in Alex’s shoulder.

“I want to go home,” Kara said.
The words pressed down on Alex’s chest like a lead weight. It wasn’t the first time she’d heard Kara say them, but it was the first time in a long time. The first time since Kenny. The first time since they’d really, truly become sisters, and the thought of Kara wanting to leave was crushing.

“I’ve got you,” Alex said.

“I just wanted to do the right thing.”

“I know. You did good, Kara. I don’t care what Mom or Clark say. You did good.”

“I don’t know if I can do this without you here.”

“You can. You’re strong, Kara. You can do anything you want.”

“I kept hoping if I got into NCU on early enrollment, you and Maggie would decide to go with me.”

Alex thought about it for a moment. The three of them getting an apartment off-campus together, taking all the same freshman bullshit classes together. Spending their free time hanging out. It sounded perfect, if she were honest.

“When’s the deadline for NCU Applications?”

“End of the month,” Kara said.

“Let me talk to Mom.”

“She’s so mad.”

“She’s scared. It’s always hard to tell the difference with her.”

“Maybe she should be scared. Clark said they have special prisons for aliens. He said if I scared them, they’d lock me up, and they’d lock you, Eliza, and Maggie up too.”

“He said what?” Alex asked, not able to believe even someone who was as big an asshole as Clark was could be that deliberately cruel.

“He said they would lock us up, and he wouldn’t be able to help us.”

Alex pressed a kiss to Kara’s forehead. “He’s just trying to scare you. You’re safe here, Kara.”

The door opened, and Alex and Kara sat up as Eliza came into the room.

“Where’s Maggie?” Eliza asked.

“She’s out front,” Alex said. “She said she needed to get some air.”

Eliza pulled Kara’s desk chair over beside the bed.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” Eliza asked Kara.

“I’m fine.”

“No, she isn’t,” Alex said.

“Alex,” Kara said.
“Do you know what that asshole said to her?” Alex asked, not even bothering to try to hide her anger.

“Alex, language,” Eliza said.

Alex rolled her eyes. “He told her that if she used her powers again, the government would come lock us all up. Kara, you, me, and Maggie.”

“He what?” Eliza asked, and there was no mistaking the shock in her voice or the anger written across her face.

“Wait here,” she said as she stood up. She started towards the door, moving so fast she almost ran into Maggie as she came into the room. “Did you see Clark out front?”

“He’s gone,” Maggie said. “I saw him take off through the window in the den.”

Alex couldn’t see her mom’s face, but she knew her well enough to see the anger in her body language.

“Have a seat, Maggie,” Eliza said.

Maggie walked over and sat down on the bed. She took Kara’s hand and gave it a squeeze, then shot Alex a worried look as she nodded her head towards Eliza. Eliza stood still for a moment, and Alex didn’t have to be close enough to hear her to know that she was reciting Pi. It was something her mother did any time she was having trouble controlling her temper. Alex started to worry after a minute, because it usually only took her mom 20 or 30 digits before she was ready to launch into the ‘I’m so disappointed’ speech, but she had to be at least 50 digits in before she finally dragged Kara’s desk chair over next to the bed and sat down.

“Kara, I’m sorry. If I had known he would say something like that to you, I never would have asked him to come.”

“Is it true?” Kara asked.

Eliza went stiff, and Alex felt a small knot of fear in her stomach. “There’s an organization that hunts down aliens. They’re called the DEO, or the Department of Extranormal Operations. They’re the ones that hold the aliens Superman captures. Agent Neill and Agent Henshaw work for them.”

“They do? So the DEO knows about me?”

“Yes. Kara, that’s why I have always wanted you to be careful about using your powers. We worked out a deal with them before Jeremiah died, but part of the deal was that you not use your powers.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Kara asked, and Alex could hear the hurt in her voice.

“I didn’t want you to worry. Kara, we took you in so we could give you as normal a childhood as possible. One where you didn’t have to worry about supervillains and secret government agencies. I know we can’t give you what you lost when Krypton was destroyed, but sweetheart, we wanted to give you a home where you felt safe and happy. I didn’t think we could do that if you were afraid that men in suits were going to show up and take you away.”

“You should have told me,” Kara insisted.

“You’re right. I should have. I didn’t because I wanted to protect you, but you’re right. I should
have told you what I was trying to protect you from.”

“I’m sorry I put you in danger.”

“I know, sweetheart. But if I tell you that Pat Brice confessed to what he did to Elisa Wilkey and those other girls, will you promise no more Kryptonian justice?”

“Yeah, I promise.”

“Good.”

“Does this mean I’m not grounded anymore?” Kara asked.

“No. You’re definitely grounded. Nice try though.”

“Should have waited a couple of days,” Alex said.

Kara shrugged.

“There is something I wanted to talk to you girls about,” Eliza said.

“What is it?” Alex asked.

“Clark thought it might be good for Kara to spend some time somewhere where she doesn’t have to hide who she is. He explained everything to Wonder Woman, and she invited the three of you to spend the summer on Themyscira with the Amazons. Do you want-”

“YES!” Maggie said.

Alex and Kara both looked over at Maggie.

“What? I’m gay. There are Amazons. What did you expect?”

Kara looked at Alex. “You’re not allowed to fight the entire island just because your girlfriend is a hornball.”

“I’m not a hornball. It’s just… You know…”

“Amazons,” Alex said.

Kara turned to Maggie. “You’re not allowed to fight the entire island just because my sister is a hornball.”

“So, you girls want to go?” Eliza asked.

“Yes,” Alex said.

“Definitely,” Kara agreed.

“Okay,” Eliza said. “I’ll let-”

The doorbell rang, cutting Eliza off.

“We’ll talk more over dinner.”

“Did you want to talk about something, sweetheart?” Eliza asked as Alex carried the dishes over to
“You’re not being fair to Kara,” Alex said without preamble.

Eliza looked at Alex, a little taken aback by how blunt the statement was. Alex was never the most diplomatic person in the world, but she usually felt her way around a subject before going on the offensive, and if she was coming out swinging like that, it meant she was either really upset, really sure she was right, or both.

“What do you mean?”

“Telling her she can’t apply for early enrollment. I get grounding her. I get taking the money from the paintings. I think it sucks, but I get it. But stopping her from even applying for early enrollment just seems cruel.”

“She used her powers to attack someone. She deliberately let someone see her. If I can’t trust her when she’s here in Midvale where I can keep an eye on her, how am I supposed to trust her when she’s five hours away in National City?”

“So, what? Are you going to keep her here forever? Make her get an associate degree from Vale County Community College, then spend the rest of her life waiting tables at Yab-Yums or working at the art supply store?”

“No. Of course not. But another year-”

“Another year is just going to make it worse,” Alex said. “She was about to join the Science Guild on Krypton before she left. Hell, she was about to become the youngest member of the Guild ever. If she’d stayed on Krypton, she’d be the lead scientist at some research complex by now. She’s probably be on the Science Guild’s governing council too. She’s been to 12 planets spread out over 5,000 light years. You can’t expect her to be happy being stuck in high school in the middle of nowhere.

“She hates high school. She’s miserable there. And without Maggie and me there, she won’t have anyone. No one to talk to. No one to protect her from the bullies and the assholes. She’ll have to protect herself. You saw how that ended. At least in National City, she wouldn’t have to worry about the bullies. She’d have a chance to make friends. To be happy.”

“She’d be alone,” Eliza said.

“Maybe. But maybe not. I might not get into Berkeley or Stanford. Or I might just decide to go to National City University.”

“Alex, you’ve talked about going to Stanford for years.”

“So. I’ve talked about going to Berkeley since this morning, and that didn’t seem to bother you.”

Eliza looked at Alex and tried to think of a response, because Alex had a point. She hadn’t said anything about Alex’s decision to apply to Berkeley. But she didn’t really want to explain where when there was a chance Kara could hear her, because the answer would hurt Kara.

Eliza might not have her husband’s gift for empathy and emotional intuition, but she knew that she’d made demands of Alex that weren’t fair. That she’d forced Alex to make sacrifices for Kara. She knew that she’d hurt Alex along the way. When Alex had mentioned Berkeley, Eliza kept her mouth shut, because it was a way she could make up for that. It was a chance to let Alex make a decision for herself, instead of for Kara’s sake. It didn’t seem fair to ask her to give up the first
choice she’d made for herself in years, just for Kara’s sake.

“Are you really willing to give up the chance to go to school with Maggie just to go to National City and take care of your sister?”

“Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do? Isn’t that what you’ve told me to do? ‘She’s your sister, Alex. You’ve got to take care of her.’”

“Alex…”

“I want to go to school with Maggie, but not if I have to leave Kara here to be miserable when I could do something about it. And you know, maybe if Kara and I go to NCU together, Maggie would want to go with us. Or maybe Kara will change her mind. I don’t know. I just know you’re taking the choice away from all of us. It’s not fair to Kara, and it’s not fair to Maggie and me either.”

Eliza stood there, staring at Alex, and she couldn’t stop the swell of pride she felt in her chest at the way Alex had stood up for her sister. At what Alex was willing to give up for her sister. And she knew Alex was right. What Kara had done was serious, but she wasn’t just punishing Kara.

“Tell Kara she can apply,” Eliza said. “We’ll decide if she can go once we know who’s been accepted where.”

Alex knocked on Maggie’s door, a little nervous about the conversation she was about to have. She wanted to spend the night with Maggie again. Wanted to curl up with her and hold her through the night. But she couldn’t really talk herself into leaving Kara alone after everything that happened. She just hoped Maggie didn’t take it as a rejection when she told her she was going to sleep in her own room that night.

“Come in,” Maggie said.

Alex opened the door and stepped inside, stopping when she saw Kara sitting on the bed next to Maggie.

“Hey,” Kara said.

“Hey. What are you doing down here?”

“I figured Kara wouldn’t want to be alone, so I thought all three of us could crash in here tonight,” Maggie said.

Alex smiled and walked over to stand in front of Maggie.

“Kara, close your eyes,” Alex said.

“What? Why?”

“Because I’m about to kiss my girlfriend.”

“Right. Eyes firmly closed. Proceed,” Kara said, and Alex did just that.

Chapter End Notes
vish
A member of the Kryptonian military guild who serves as a law enforcement officer.
I.E. A Cop
Monday, March 6, 2006

Alex pulled the car into a parking space near the front entrance to the school. She’d made sure they arrived a little early so they wouldn’t have to park at the far end of the lot. It didn’t really make a lot of difference, but she figured it would give any assholes less of a chance to harass them before they got inside.

She glanced up at the rearview mirror to check on Kara and saw her sitting in the backseat looking more than a little miserable. “You going to be okay?” Alex asked, turning around to see over her shoulder.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

“If you need us, just come get us,” Maggie said. “To hell with the consequences, okay?”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

“If you need us, just come get us,” Maggie said. “To hell with the consequences, okay?”

“Thanks. I’m going to head inside. If you guys don’t waste any time, you can probably get in a good, solid 10 minutes of making out before you have to head to class.”

“Kara!” Alex said as Kara got out of the car. “We’re not going to make out!”

“Yes, we are,” Maggie said.

Alex looked over at Maggie. “We are?”

“Unless you can think of a better way to spend the next 10 minutes.”

“Uh… no.”

“You’re welcome,” Kara said before she closed the door.

Alex watched Kara walk towards the school for a second before she turned back to Maggie. “So…”

“You’re wasting time, Danvers.”

Kara climbed the stairs leading into the school with a little smile on her face. She’d been kind of down most of the morning, and she still wasn’t quite her bright, cheerful self, but seeing Alex and Maggie together, seeing them happy, made things a lot easier to bear. It also helped that Alex had gotten Eliza to change her mind about letting Kara apply for early enrollment. She knew it wasn’t likely, but at least until Alex and Maggie got their acceptance letters, she could dream of the three of them finding a nice little apartment off-campus in National City. She could dream of not being separated from another family, of not losing another home.
“Hey, Kara,” Vicki said.

Kara turned to see Vicki walking towards her, and to her own surprise, she found herself smiling a little wider.

“Hey, Vicki.”

“No Alex and Maggie this morning?”

“They’ll be here in a few minutes. They just had something to take care of.”

“Are you guys okay? I was worried. There were all kinds of rumors going around school after lunch on Friday. I didn’t want to bother you, but when I didn’t hear from you on Saturday, I texted. I never got a response.”

“You did?” Kara took her phone out, and sure enough, she had five text messages from Vicki, all on Sunday afternoon.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Are you sure you’re alright, though?”

Kara shrugged. “Yesterday wasn’t a good day.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Maybe visit me during my prison sentence. I’m grounded the rest of the school year.”

“Shit. Did you murder someone or something?”

“No! Of course not. That would be terrible, and not something I would do at all.”

“You sure? Because I don’t know. They say it’s the quiet ones you have to watch out for.”

Maggie sat down across from Kara and Vicki, who were talking about math again. She was happy to see a genuine smile on Kara’s face after everything that had happened yesterday, even if she had no idea what a Fourier transform was.

“You wacky kids behaving yourself, or am I going to get a math teacher in here to break this up?” Maggie asked.

Vicki laughed. “No. Things are pretty calm right now. You missed the heated argument over Lagrange vs. Euler notation.”

“It’s pronounced ‘Yooler,’” Kara said.

“No, it’s Oiler.”

“For someone so smart, you are so wrong.”

“Is this going to come to blows?” Maggie asked.

“No,” Vicki said. “If it gets too heated, we can always go back to abusing Newton together.”

“The man was the worst,” Kara said. “Seriously, the worst.”
“See. The one true universal constant. All mathematicians despise Newtonian notation.”

“Is that true, Kara?” Maggie asked.

“Yes. Literally everyone in the universe.”

Maggie laughed, and when she saw the grin on Kara’s face, she laughed even harder.

“Sounds like I missed a good one,” Alex said.

Maggie turned around to see Alex coming up behind her.

“Hey,” Alex said.

“Hey,” Maggie replied as Alex sat down.

“You two need some alone time?” Vicki asked.

Maggie looked at her and saw a teasing smile on her face. “I think we’re good.”

Vicki rolled her eyes. “At least tell me you two had a better weekend than Kara. She won’t tell me what she did to get grounded for almost three months.”

“I’m not telling either,” Alex said.

Vicki sighed. “Spoilsport.”

Alex just shrugged.

“Seriously, how was your weekend?”

“Sunday sucked, but Saturday was pretty awesome,” Alex said.

“What happened Saturday?”

Alex looked over at Maggie, and Maggie could see the question in her eyes. She didn’t even hesitate. She just nodded, giving Alex permission.

Alex turned back to Vicki. “I took Maggie on a date.”

Maggie watched Vicki’s reaction, not sure what to expect, but a little afraid she’d see hurt or anger. She wasn’t expecting the look of absolute delight or the ear-splitting squeal of joy.

“That’s awesome! Where did you take her? What did you do? I need details, and I need them now!”

Vicki’s excitement was so genuine it was infectious, and Maggie couldn’t stop herself from smiling. At least, until she saw the entire cheerleading squad march into the lunchroom in full uniform, complete with pom poms, and head right for their table.

“What the hell?” Maggie asked.

Vicki and Kara both turned around to see what Alex and Maggie were gawking at as the squad came to a stop right in front of Kara. One girl stepped forward.

“What’s going on?” Vicki asked.
The girl, Tina apparently, didn’t answer Vicki. Instead, she looked right at Kara. “Kara.”

“Yes?”

“Word is, you shoved Pat Brice into the lockers so hard you broke his ribs and put him in the hospital.”

Maggie could see Kara bristling. She sat up straighter, and her voice had a ring of power in it Maggie wasn’t sure she’d ever heard before.

“He was going to hit Elisa Wilkey,” Kara said. “She was on the ground with a broken hand, and he was going to punch her.”

Tina smiled. “Girls!” she said, and the squad shifted in a move that was obviously rehearsed. Two girls stepped forward, one standing on either side of Kara, while eight others spread out into a line on either side of Tina.

“Give me a K!” Tina shouted, and two of the girls on one end of the line dropped into a pose that formed a K.

“Give me an A! Give me an R! Give me another A!” Tina shouted, as eight cheerleaders spelled out Kara’s name with their bodies.

“What does it spell?” Tina asked as the two girls on either side of Kara leaned down and scooped her up, lifting her onto their shoulders.

“Kara!” the cheerleaders all shouted. The two carrying Kara started marching as the rest of the squad fell in behind them, all of them chanting Kara’s name as they marched around the cafeteria.

“What the fucking hell?” Alex asked.

“I’m going to go out on a limb here and say the cheerleaders didn’t like Pat Brice very much,” Vicki said.

Maggie’s eyes widened as she watched Kara’s lap around the cafeteria. “I think you might be right.” Maggie said.

The cheerleaders made three complete circuits of the lunchroom, and as they did, more and more teachers and administrators appeared in the room, all of them looking beyond confused. After the third circuit, they carried Kara back over to her seat, and carefully put her down on her feet, and then, one by one, every single one of the cheerleaders shook Kara’s hand. Several of them hugged her, and two of them kissed her on the cheek. Tina was the last one in the line. She shook Kara’s hand, then hugged her, and as she did, she turned and whispered something in Kara’s ear, then she pulled back and looked at Kara. Kara nodded, and Tina leaned in again, tipping Kara back and kissing her right on the mouth. It wasn’t a quick kiss either. It went on and on, and Maggie was pretty sure she heard Kara moan at one point before Tina lifted her back up and broke the kiss.

“On behalf of every girl at Midvale High, thank you.” Tina said.

Kara stood there, her face slowly turning bright red. “Um…”

Tina reached up and squeezed Kara’s shoulder, before turning away. She didn’t get very far though, because Principal Munroe was right there, glaring at her and Kara both.

“My office. Now,” he said, then turned to look at Kara. “You too, Danvers.”
“There she is,” Maggie said as Kara came through the front door of the school.

“She doesn’t look upset,” Vicki said.

“No,” Alex said, and Maggie could hear the amusement in Alex’s voice.

Kara practically strutted down the stairs, a smug look on her face, and it was all Maggie could do to keep from laughing.

“Hey,” Alex said. “How did it go?”

Kara held up a form that was sadly familiar to Maggie. “Three days in-school suspension.” Still, Kara wasn’t quite able to keep the grin off her face.

“What?” Alex asked. “That’s not fair! You didn’t do anything!”

“Alex,” Maggie said.

“What?”

“You’re kind of focusing on the wrong thing here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, your sister just made out with the head cheerleader in front of the entire freaking school. That’s worth a three day in-school.”

“Totally worth it,” Kara agreed.

Maggie held up her hand, and Kara high-fived her. “Totally worth it.”

Kara turned to Vicki and high-fived her too.

“Totally worth it,” Vicki said, but to Maggie’s ear, the words sounded a little forced, and definitely a lot less enthusiastic than she’d sounded when she was asking about Alex and Maggie’s date. Maggie wasn’t the only one who picked up on it either.

“Are you okay, Vicki?” Alex asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you used to date Tina.”

“Oh,” Vicki said, shaking her head. “No. I’m fine.”

“You went out with Tina?” Kara asked.

“Yeah, but it was only two times. She’s nice, and she’s hot, but it wasn’t a big deal. We’re still sort of friends.”

“Well, do you still like her? I mean, if you like her, I won’t… um…”

“Did she ask you out?” Vicki asked in a strained voice.

“No.” Vicki relaxed, but Kara wasn’t done. “Well, sort of. I mean, yes. She did ask. But you know, I’m grounded pretty much until the school year ends, so when I told her that, she asked if I was
allowed to have visitors over.”

“She has a girlfriend,” Vicki said.

“They broke up a few weeks ago. But Vicki, if you like her, I’ll tell her no.”

Vicki shrugged. “It’s not a big deal.” Her body language, however, screamed that it was a very, very big deal. “I’ve got to get going. I’ll see you later.”

“You’re not coming over today?” Kara asked.

“Not today,” Vicki said as she started towards her car.

Kara looked over at Alex and Maggie. “What did I do wrong? I said I wouldn’t invite Tina over if Vicki still liked her.”

“I don’t think the issue was with Vicki’s liking Tina,” Maggie said.

“Then why is she mad?”

“Because you are only slightly less clueless than your sister.”

“Hey!” Alex said.

“Come on. Let’s go. Kara can be a clueless pansexual at home.”

Maggie was leaning against Alex’s side, resting her head on Alex’s shoulder as they sat with Kara and watched an episode of Xena. She wasn’t really paying a lot of attention to the show. She was a little lost in the feel of Alex’s arm around her and Alex’s body pressed against her. She felt a little guilty, being so happy and content when Kara was looking less and less smug and more and more miserable the closer it got to the time when Eliza usually get home, but it was such a quiet, peaceful moment, she never wanted it to end.

When the doorbell rang, Maggie frowned. Her first thought was that it was probably Vicki, having calmed down from her little fit of jealousy, but Kara killed that idea quickly. She lifted her glasses and looked towards the door.

“It’s a Sheriff’s deputy,” Kara said.

“Stay here,” Alex said. “Kara, keep an ear out.”

Alex stood up, and Maggie and Kara both followed her as far as the top of the stairs. With the bend in the staircase, no one would be able to see them from the front door, but they should still be able to hear everything.

“Hello,” the deputy said when Alex opened the door. “Are you Margarita Rodas?”

“No,” Alex said.

“Is Ms. Rodas here?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I need to speak with her.”
“About what?”

“I’m afraid I can only discuss that with Ms. Rodas.”

“Do you have a warrant?”

Maggie looked at Kara, who was looking back at her with the same thought. Alex was going to get herself arrested.

“Ms. Rodas isn’t in any trouble, ma’am.”

Maggie rolled her eyes and started down the stairs. “Alex, it’s okay.” She stopped next to Alex and looked at the deputy. “I’m Maggie Rodas.”

The deputy held out a folded-up packet of papers.

“This is a subpoena, Ms. Rodas. You’re required to appear in Judge Simmons’ courtroom next Monday at 2:00 PM,” the deputy said.

“Why?” Maggie asked, taking the papers.

“I’m not sure. My job is just to deliver the subpoena. Details are inside. Have a good day, ma’am.”

The deputy turned around and left.

Maggie unfolded the subpoena and read it.

“What is it about?” Alex asked.

“It’s the hearing for my sister. They’re going to try to take her away from my parents.”

The three of them were sitting around the kitchen table doing their homework when Maggie’s phone rang. She looked at the caller ID and smiled when she saw Susan’s name. She flipped it open and hit the speaker button.

“Hey, Susan,” Maggie said.

“Hey, Maggie.”

“What are you up to?”

“Wondering if I need to drive down to Midvale and kill Alex.”

“Hey!” Alex said. “What did I do?”

“You’re on speaker, by the way,” Maggie said.

“Nice to know. And neither of you freaking called me, or texted me, so I figured the date was terrible, and I needed to kill Alex for doing something stupid.”

“Please don’t. It would make the kissing less fun,” Maggie said.

“Okay, so there has been kissing, which means Alex can’t have messed up too badly.”

“Why do you automatically assume I’m the one who would mess up?” Alex asked.

“She’s met you,” Kara said.
“Who’s that?” Susan asked.

“I’m Kara. I’m Alex’s sister.”

“Nice to finally meet you, sort of.”

“Nice to meet you too.”

“Also, Alex, Kara is right. I’ve met you, and I’ve met Maggie, and if someone was going to screw it up, it would have been you. Maggie would have just backed out of the date before it happened.”

“Hey!” Maggie said.

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

There was silence for a moment.

“See,” Susan said. “Listen to your elders.”

“We’re both older than you,” Alex said.

“Not in gay years. You’re both babies.”

“Well, not all of us where raised by two mothers,” Alex said. “Some of us had to wait for a gorgeous lesbian to move into the spare bedroom.”

“I hate you,” Susan said.

“The feeling is mutual,” Alex replied.

“So, tell me about the date.”

“It was great,” Alex said.

“Not you. Maggie, tell me about the date.”

“It was amazing,” Maggie said.

“Details, woman. I need details.”

“We had a candle-lit dinner on the beach. There was garlic bread, salad, fried ravioli, lasagna, and tiramisu for dessert. Then we went for a long walk on the beach.”

“That better not be it,” Susan said.

“No. She kissed me on the porch.”

“Was it terrible? I bet it was terrible.”

“It was definitely not terrible.” Maggie reached over and took Alex’s hand in her own. “It was electric. It was everything I imagined it would be, only better.”

“Really? That good?” Susan asked.

“Why do you sound so surprised?” Alex asked.

“Because she’s met you,” Kara said.
“Actually, it’s because most people’s first kiss is usually terrible,” Susan said.

“I um… I might have read a book,” Alex admitted, rubbing her hand along the back of her neck.

“If you learned that out of a book, we might need to go back to Susan’s store before the next date,” Maggie said.

“Not really. Kissing was just chapter two.”

“Okay, someone please high-five Alex for me,” Susan said. “Because that was smooth.”

“Shut up,” Maggie said.

“Hey, I’m just saying, positive reinforcement works,” Susan said.

“I figured that out after the second kiss,” Maggie said.

“How many kisses were there?” Susan asked.

“A lot,” Alex said, ignoring the way Kara was covering her ears, as if it might do anything

“She spent the night in my room,” Maggie added.

“I hate you,” Susan said.

“I don’t care.”

“If I’d spent all night making out with Alex, I wouldn’t care either.”

“If you spent the night making out with Alex, you wouldn’t have any teeth,” Maggie said. “I’m the jealous type.”

“Fair enough. But you could have stopped sucking face once in the last two days to let me know how the date went. The curiosity has been killing me.”

“Sorry,” Alex said.

“Yeah,” Maggie chimed in. “Saturday was great, but Sunday went to shit right after breakfast.”

“What happened? Are you guys okay?”

“I got in trouble,” Kara said. “It kind of spoiled everyone’s day.”

“What did you do?”

All three of them looked at each other for a moment, and there was a short moment of panic, but Kara turned out to be a better liar than Maggie expected. “I got caught sneaking out after curfew to do a favor for a friend.”

“Damn. That sucks,” Susan said. “What’s your sentence?”

“I’m grounded for the rest of the school year. It would have been worse if Alex hadn’t talked Eliza down.”

“Well, thank god for older sisters. Still a bummer though. I’ve been after Alex to drag you up to Coast City so I could meet you.”
“You mean so you could throw her to your sister,” Alex said.

“Hey, I might want to keep her for myself, since you and Maggie are both taken.”

“Do I get a say in this?”

“Of course, but before you decide, make Alex show you the picture I sent her.”

“I’ve seen it. It’s not bad.”

“Not bad? I think I’m insulted.”

“Kara’s got girls lining up for a chance to ask her out,” Maggie said.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said, looking over at Kara. “Can I tell her?”

Kara grinned and nodded.

“Tell me what?”

“Kara got a three day in-school suspension today. Ask me why,” Maggie said.

“Okay, why?”

“She was making out with the head cheerleader in the middle of the cafeteria in front of about a dozen teachers and the principal.”

“Holy shit! Really?”

“Yep,” Alex said.

“Was it worth it?”

“Totally,” Kara said. “Although I’m not sure Eliza is going to think so.”

“Eliza?”

“My mom,” Alex said.

“Okay, because I thought Eliza was the girl who outing Maggie.”

“That’s Elisa Wilkey,” Maggie explained. “Alex’s mom is Eliza Danvers.”

“That’s got to mess with your head,” Susan said.

“That’s why I call her Mrs. Danvers. Though Elisa and I have patched things up.”

“How the hell did that happen?” Susan asked.

“She broke her hand punching an asshole in the face when he tried to grope Kara. I rode to the hospital with her, and we talked about things.”

“Damn. Do you guys ever have a slow day?”

“Not really,” Maggie said.
“Shit. I’ve got to go. One of the girls who works in the store called out sick, and Mom needs me to cover her shift.”

“Okay. Take care of yourself,” Alex said.

“Bye,” Maggie and Kara both called out. Once the line went dead, Maggie closed her phone and looked back down at her homework.

“Okay, this grounding thing sucks,” Kara whined.

Maggie looked up at her. “Seriously? It hasn’t even been a day.”

“Yeah, but now I want to go meet Susan in person.”

Alex laughed, and Maggie looked over at her. “What?”

“I’m sorry, it’s just, one kiss from a cheerleader, and suddenly she’s the hornball.”

“I am not!” Kara said.

“So, you weren’t flirting with Susan just now?” Alex asked.

“That wasn’t… I…”

“Hornball,” Alex said in a smug tone.

Kara narrowed her eyes and glared for a second, but then an absolutely evil grin spread across her face. “Just remember that when we get to Themyscira, I’ll be single.”

Maggie suddenly wondered if you could smother Kryptonians to death with a pillow.

Eliza felt something off as soon as she stepped into the house. She wasn’t quite sure why, but there was a tension in the air that wasn’t usually there when she came home, though it was something that had been all too common the last couple of weeks.

“We’re in the kitchen,” Alex called out.

“I’ll be right there,” Eliza replied. She slipped her shoes off and sat them on the rack next to the door, then put down her purse and her laptop before heading into the kitchen. What she found there confirmed her suspicion that something was up. All three of them were sitting so they could see her when she came in. Alex and Maggie sat across the table from the door, while Kara sat at the foot of the table with Streaky in her lap, and all of them except Streaky looked tense, which made Eliza wonder what fresh disaster had happened today. “What’s wrong?”

“Two things,” Maggie said. She pushed a folded-up stack of papers across the table. “One of my dad’s deputies brought that by today.”

Eliza picked it up and read it. It was a subpoena for Maggie to appear in court for a hearing regarding the status of her sister. She looked up at Maggie. “Are you okay with this, sweetheart?”

“No. But if it will help Mike, I’ll do it.”

“Would you like me to go with you?” Eliza asked.

Maggie’s shoulders sagged with relief. “Please.”
“Of course. I’ll call Ms. Oswald tonight and make sure it’s okay.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, what else is going on?”

“Um…” Kara said. “Something happened at school today.”

Eliza pulled out one of the chairs and sat down, focusing on Kara. “What happened?”

Kara laid a form on the table and pushed it towards her. Eliza picked it up and read over it.

“Three days in-school suspension?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s says you were disrupting the learning environment.”

“That’s complete crap!” Alex said. “We were in the lunchroom.”

“What did you do in the lunchroom?”

“Kara didn’t do anything,” Maggie said.

Eliza closed her eyes and started reciting Pi. She got through about 15 digits before she was calm enough to continue. She looked at Kara again. “Sweetheart, what happened?”

“The cheerleaders heard what happened with Pat Brice. That I shoved him into the lockers. They came up to me at lunch and did a cheer, then they carried me around the lunchroom, chanting my name.”

“They did what?”

“Apparently, they really didn’t like him. He’d groped a lot of them, said all sorts of sleazy things. All the cheerleaders knew to stay away from him. They’d been complaining about him to the football coach and the principal for years, but nothing ever happened,” Kara said.

“And you got suspended because they carried you around the lunchroom?”

“Um, no… I think that was more about the kiss,” Kara said.

“What kiss?”

“After they put me down, all of the cheerleaders lined up to shake my hand and thank me. Some of them hugged me, a couple of them kissed me on the cheek, but the head cheerleader, Tina Lupo, was the last in line, and she kissed me on the mouth.”

“She kissed you?”

“Yes.”

“Without your permission?”

“Oh… Um, no. No. She asked if it was okay first. I said it was, and… I didn’t expect it to last quite that long. But when it was over, Principal Munroe was there, and he took us both to the office.”

Eliza closed her eyes again and reached up, pinching the bridge of her nose.
“Am I in trouble?” Kara asked.

“No.” Eliza dropped her hand and looked at Kara. “Sweetheart, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

The tension that had been visible in Kara since Eliza had walked through the door vanished.

“But next time you want to make out with a cheerleader, maybe don’t do it in front of Principal Munroe.”

“I didn’t know he was there!”

“Alex,” Eliza said.

“Yes?”

“Would you mind making a Big Belly Burger run for dinner?”

“I can do that. You want the Carolina special?”

“Yes. Extra cornbread and a piece of Red Velvet cake for dessert.”

“Got it.”

“I need to go make a phone call,” Eliza said.

“Nicole Oswald.”

“Hello, Nicole,” Eliza said. “This is Eliza Danvers.”

“Hey, Eliza,” Nicole said. “What can I do for you?”

“Maggie got the summons for the hearing today.”

“Ah.”

“I wanted to ask if it would be okay if I accompanied Maggie to the hearing.”

“That would actually be a good thing.”

“Why?”

“Because I expect the hearing will get ugly. And I think Maggie is going to need all the emotional support she can get.”

“How bad is it?”

“Bad enough that I’ve asked Judge Simmons to have extra security in the court room.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“I can’t go into details, but are you still willing to take in Maggie’s sister?”

“Absolutely,” Eliza said.

“Even if there are… complicated circumstances?”
“If she needs a home, I’ll take her.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“How strong is your case?”

“Not as strong as I would like.”

“I might be able to help with that.”

“How?”

“After the incident in the parking lot, I had a private investigator to look into Sheriff Rodas. I have the files from the investigator, and there’s a lot there.”

“And you would be willing to share those files?”

“Of course.”

“When can I get them?”

“You can come by tonight if you’d like.”

“I can be there in about an hour.”

“That will be fine. Did you find a placement for Elisa Wilkey?”

“Yes. I can’t go into details, but with a little luck, she should be back in school later this week.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Before I go, how quickly can you have a room ready for Mike?”

“Maybe two days,” Eliza said. “A few hours if she doesn’t mind sharing with Maggie for a couple of days.”

“She wouldn’t be able to share with Maggie.”

“Is there a reason?”

“Not one I can discuss. Just complicated circumstances.”

“I see. I’ll have something ready before the hearing.”

“Good. I’ll see you in an hour.”

“See you then.”

Tuesday, March 7, 2006

Maggie sat at their usual table in the lunchroom, trying her best to keep a smile off her face. Vicki was staring across the lunchroom at the table where everyone serving in-school suspension was required to sit. Kara and Tina were sitting next to each other, talking animatedly about something. Vicki was absolutely stewing, and Maggie was having a hard time not bursting out laughing. She knew she probably shouldn’t be taking quite so much joy in Vicki’s obvious distress, but the memory of passing an afternoon in a similar fashion while Vicki was in the living room throwing
herself at Alex was a little too fresh for Maggie not to enjoy it just a little.

Or a whole lot.

“You know,” Alex said after Vicki accidently snapped a plastic knife in half, “you could just tell Kara you like her.”

“What?” Vicki turned to look at Alex.

“Tell Kara you like her instead of sitting there choking on your feelings.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“I’m pretty sure your crush has made it into the gossip section of the Daily Planet at this point.”

Vicki put her elbows on the table, covered her face with both hands, and let out a groan. “This is terrible.”

“Can’t be worse than crushing on your straight best friend,” Maggie said.

“So much worse.” Vicki moved her hands so she could look at Maggie. “I didn’t think I had a chance with Alex because I thought she was straight. Which sucked really hard. But I might have actually had a chance with Kara, which is killing me. She likes math and science, and she’s smart and beautiful, and she likes girls, and I really, really like her, and I screwed it up before I even realized I wanted it.”

“Because of how you treated her before?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah. I was an absolute bitch to her. I’m lucky she’ll talk to me at all.”

“You know, I was pretty terrible to her too,” Alex said. “She forgave me.”

“Yeah, because you’re her sister. I’m just the bitch that used to make her life miserable.”

“You could still try,” Alex said. “Come by the house this afternoon and talk to her.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“The worst she could do is say no,” Maggie said.

“The worst she could do is decide she hates me and doesn’t want me around her or you guys anymore. Then I lose all of my friends.”

“So you’re just going to sit there and be jealous?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah. That I can deal with.”

“Isn’t that what got you into this mess in the first place?” Alex asked. “Taking your jealousy of Josie out on Kara.”

“Don’t use facts against me when I’m thinking with my ovaries and insecurities.”

“Vicki,” Alex said in an exasperated tone.

“I’ll think about it,” Vicki said, but judging by her tone, Maggie was pretty sure she actually meant ‘I’ll sit somewhere and throw a pity party instead of actually taking a risk.’
Wednesday, March 8, 2006

Alex: My life has taken a very weird turn.

Susan: That happens a lot when you’re gay.

Alex: Please tell me it’s not always this surreal.

Susan: That depends. What’s going on?

Alex: Two girls are fighting over my sister.

Susan: Seriously?

Alex: Fighting might be a strong word, but yes.

Susan: Fill me in on the details.

Alex: Vicki used to date Tina, the head cheerleader.

Susan: The one Kara was making out with?

Alex: That’s the one.

Susan: Awkward.

Alex: You don’t know the half of it.

Alex: Kara and Tina are both in in-school suspension together. So they are eating lunch together every day.

Susan: And Vicki is pitching a fit because she’s still got a thing for Tina?

Alex: No.

Alex: Vicki is pitching a fit because she’s got a thing for Kara.

Susan: Wait.

Susan: Vicki likes Kara?

Alex: Yes.

Susan: Vicki as in your ex-best friend who was your mutual crush that neither of you realized was gay?

Alex: Yes.

Alex: Though, to be fair, she knew. I was the stupid one.

Susan: And Vicki used to date Tina?

Alex: Yes.

Susan: And Tina is into Kara?

Alex: Yes.
Susan: Is Kara into either of them?
Alex: I don’t know.
Susan: How can you not know?
Alex: It’s Kara.
Alex: It can be hard to tell sometimes.
Alex: She really seems to like talking to Vicki, so I tried to get Vicki to talk to Kara, but that failed spectacularly.
Susan: Did you ask Kara if she wanted Vicki to talk to her?
Alex: No.
Susan: Might be a good idea.
Susan: Because there is no drama like lesbian drama.
Susan: And you’re about to start some.
Alex: Great.
Alex: Just what I wanted to hear.
Susan: I just want to know where you’re finding all of these lesbians.
Alex: I don’t know.
Susan: Well, if you figure it out, let me know. We could market this shit.

“Hey,” Alex said.
Kara looked up from the book she was reading. “Hey. Where’s Maggie?”
“Filling out college applications,” Alex said as she sat down next to Kara. “How are you holding up?”
Kara shrugged. “I’m fine. I don’t think it’s quite hit me yet. When the weekend comes, and I can’t go get sugared up at Yab-Yums, I’ll probably have a good cry.”
Alex smiled. “I’ve got you covered. I’m going to pick up a couple of packages of cookie dough and a big bottle of Magic Shell.”
“You are the best sister ever!”
“Yeah, don’t thank me yet. I might figure out a way to burn raw cookie dough and chocolate sauce.”
“If anyone could, it would be you,” Kara teased.
“Thanks for the vote of confidence. Can I ask you a question?”
“Of course.”
“Do you like Vicki?”

“Yeah. She’s a lot nicer than she was before, and it’s nice to have someone who’s into math to talk to.”

“And it doesn’t hurt that she’s hot.”

Kara’s eyes got big, and her cheeks got red. “Oh! You were asking if I like her like her.”

“Yeah.”

Kara shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, you’re right. She’s really pretty, and I like hanging around with her.”

“But?”

“But she was always so nasty to me before. Sometimes I catch myself waiting for her to say something mean. And it doesn’t help that you used to like her, so that’s kind of awkward.”

“Well, I am not interested in Vicki like that.”

“Not when you’ve got Maggie,” Kara said, grinning.

“I don’t think I’d be interested even if it wasn’t for Maggie. I still like having her around, but it’s not the same as it was. I don’t feel like I’m missing something when she’s not around this time. I just don’t like her like that anymore.”

“You almost kissed her,” Kara pointed out.

“And you stopped me. Which, thank you, and don’t ever do it again.”

“You’re welcome, and I make no promises.”

“Brat.”

Kara just smiled at her.

“So, what about Tina?” Alex asked. “You two seem awfully friendly.”

“Yeah,” Kara said in a much softer voice than she normally used.

“Oh, you definitely like Tina.”

Kara smiled. “Yeah. Tina’s really into art. She wants to be a painter.”

“And apparently, wants to kiss you a second time.”

“Third.”

“What?”

“She might have gotten the second kiss this morning before school.”

“Where? I saw you walk into the building.”

“There’s a spot under the stairwell in the east wing where no one can see you making out with the head cheerleader before you go to the ISS room.”
“Seriously?”

Kara nodded.

“You always have to one-up me, don’t you?” Alex asked. “I get a girlfriend, and now you’re dating the head cheerleader.”

“It’s not like that. Tina isn’t my girlfriend. We’re not together like you and Maggie.”

“Do you want her to be your girlfriend?”

“Is it horrible if I say, ‘not really’?”

“No. But can I ask why not?”

“She’s a senior. If I’m here next year, she’ll be gone. And she’s got a scholarship to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. If I do early enrollment, I’ll either be in Midvale or National City.”

“And you don’t want to get attached.”

“Is that terrible?” Kara asked.

“No, I get it. If Maggie hadn’t completely blindsided me, I don’t think I’d want to start dating right now either.”

“You got lucky.”

“Yeah, I did. But I don’t know how I’ll handle it if Maggie and I end up at different schools.”

Kara reached out and took Alex’s hand. “Will you promise me something?”

“What?”

“If it’s a choice between going to Berkeley or somewhere with Maggie, or going to NCU with me, I want you to go with Maggie.”

“Kara, you know there’s no way Mom will let you go to National City by yourself.”

“I know,” Kara said. “But you’ve already lost so much because of me. Given up things you shouldn’t have had to. I don’t want to be the reason you have to give up Maggie.”

“Kara, you’re my sister. You are one of the best parts of my life and my favorite person in the world.”

“Well, obviously. But I shouldn’t be your whole life, Alex. I love you, and I want you to be happy.”

“I can’t be happy without you.”

“You won’t be without me if we go to different schools. We’ll just make Eliza really glad she got the unlimited nights and weekends plan.”

Alex laughed and pulled Kara into a hug. “I love you.”

“I love you too. But if you screw things up with Maggie because you think you have to take care of me, I’ll throw you to the moon.”
Maggie was curled up against Alex’s side with her head on Alex’s shoulder and Alex’s arms wrapped around her. It was quickly becoming her favorite way to spend time, but for some reason, something felt off. There was a strange tension radiating from Alex that was keeping Maggie from getting comfortable.

“What’s wrong?” Maggie asked.

“I’ve just been thinking about college,” Alex said.

Maggie felt herself tense up, feeling a knot of dread settle into her stomach. She knew Alex had applied to Berkeley, but she also knew Alex had wanted to go to Stanford for a long time. It wasn’t really fair to expect her to give that up because of a girlfriend she’s had for less than a week, but there had been a part of Maggie that had really hoped that they would get a chance to see if this could last.

“You still want to go to Stanford if you get in?” Maggie asked.

“No,” Alex said. “My parents went to Stanford. They met there while they were in grad school. My going there was always more their thing than mine.”

“Then what are you thinking?” Maggie asked, feeling a little bit of hope creeping in.

“How attached are you to the idea of going to Berkeley?”

“I mainly want to go because it’s close to San Francisco. There’s a big queer community in the city, and Berkeley is pretty gay-friendly. When you’re a gay girl in the middle of Blue Springs Nebraska, both of those sound like heaven.”

“How would you feel about going to NCU?”

“You want to go to school with Kara.”

Alex nodded. “Kara and I talked about it yesterday. She said if I had to choose between going to NCU with her or going somewhere with you, that I should go with you, but even if she gets accepted for early enrollment, there’s no way Mom will let her go unless I go with her. I hate the idea of leaving her here to be miserable.”

Maggie shifted so she could kiss Alex. She’d intended it to be a short, comforting kiss, but Alex pulled her close and held her tightly, and she let the kiss go on as she threw a leg over Alex and climbed on top of her, straddling her. When Alex’s hands started to roam, she broke the kiss before she could lose her original train of thought and stared down at Alex. “I don’t care where we go. I just want to get a degree so I can be a cop. If we all get into NCU, and you want to go there too so we can all go together, then that’s what we’ll do. I would love for all of us to go together.”

“Really?”

Maggie nodded. “Yeah. I told you before, I don’t want to imagine my life without you in it. Not tomorrow, not six months from now, not ever.”

Alex pulled her down into another kiss, and Maggie went willingly, losing herself in the feel of Alex under her and between her legs, in the feel of Alex’s lips on hers, Alex’s tongue in her mouth, and Alex’s hands on her body. She moaned as Alex’s hand slid up her stomach, making it hard to think, and let out a little whimper of protest when Alex broke the kiss.
“Is this okay?” Alex asked as she palmed one of Maggie’s breasts.

“Yes. In fact…”

Maggie pushed herself up and sat on Alex’s thighs, then started unbuttoning her shirt. She smiled as Alex’s eyes followed her every move.

“Is this okay?” Maggie asked as she worked open the last button.

Alex nodded.

Maggie shrugged off her shirt and tossed it on the floor.

Alex reached up, her hands not quite touching Maggie, but so close that the anticipation was driving Maggie insane.

“Can I?”

“Please,” Maggie managed.

Maggie closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip as Alex touched her.

She felt one of Alex’s hands run over her stomach, Alex’s thumb trailing along the upper edge of her jeans as the other cupped her breast through the thin cotton of her bra.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” Alex said.

Maggie leaned down and kissed Alex, running her hands up Alex’s sides. Alex wrapped her arms around Maggie and rolled them over so she was on top and sat up, just like Maggie had been a few minutes earlier. She reached down and grabbed the hem of her shirt and started lifting it up. Maggie licked her lips as she caught sight of the abs she’d been daydreaming about since they day they’d gotten caught in the rain.

“Hey girls, the package from… OH MY GOD!” Mrs. Danvers yelled.

Alex turned towards the door so fast she overbalanced and rolled right off the bed, slamming down against the floor hard enough to shake the bed. Maggie rolled over and looked down at Alex.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Alex said as she got up, pulling her shirt back down in the process. She picked Maggie’s shirt up off the floor and handed it to her, then turned towards the door, where Mrs. Danvers was standing with her back to them.

“What the hell, Mom?” Alex asked. “Don’t you know how to knock?”

“Of course I do!” Mrs. Danvers said. “Do you two know how to close a door?”

“Did you need something, Mrs. Danvers?” Maggie asked, somehow managing to sound calm.

Mrs. Danvers held up a box over her shoulder. “The supplies I ordered for you arrived,” she said. “Just in time, from the looks of things.”

“We weren’t…” Maggie said. “I… um… You know what, can you just close the door on your way out?”

Mrs. Danvers took two steps backwards into the room and reached out, setting the box on the chest of drawers, then walked out of the room and closed the door behind her.
When Maggie walked into Ms. Mercer’s classroom Friday morning, the first thing she noticed was that Elisa was sitting in her old seat in the back of the room. Elisa gave her a nervous smile and tipped her head towards Maggie’s usual seat. Maggie returned the smile as she sat down.

“Welcome back,” Maggie said.

“How’s the hand?”

“Broken” Elisa said, holding up her right hand, which was wrapped in a cast. “They have to take the cast off tomorrow to remove the stitches, and then recast it. I’ll have to wear that for at least six weeks.”

“How bad was the surgery?”

“Not too bad. I slept through it.”

Maggie laughed and shook her head. “That’s terrible.”

“Yeah. But hey, I’m a cyborg now. I’ve got steel plates holding my bones together.”

“I’m sure you’ll be tossing cars around any minute.”

“Maybe just punching out assholes.”

“Maybe learn how to throw a punch without breaking your hand first.”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

“I’m full of those. So… where did you end up?”

“There’s this gay couple that lives off the square. They take in kids where are close to aging out of the system.”

“Are they nice?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah. I like them a lot.”

“I’m glad.”

“I owe you. I know I said this that day in the hospital, but I’m sorry. I just…”

“I know.”

“Do you think we could be friends again?” Elisa asked.

“Yeah, I would actually like that a lot.”

Maggie sat down across from Vicki and Kara, who were hunched over a notebook covered in equations. Kara had a pencil in her hand and was explaining something, but Vicki was just staring at Kara like she hung the moon. It was actually kind of cute in a vaguely doomed sort of way.
“Is this seat taken?” Elisa asked.

Maggie turned around to see Elisa standing next to her, a hopeful look on her face.

“Go ahead.”

Elisa smiled as she sat her tray down, then took a seat next to Maggie.

“Hey,” Kara said to Elisa.

“Hey.”

“I didn’t get a chance to say thank you last Friday.”

Elisa laughed. “I should be thanking you. That asshole would have knocked my teeth out if you hadn’t kicked his ass. Which was awesome, by the way.”

Kara blushed and looked back down at the notebook. “I just pushed him away from you.”

“Yeah. Pushed him right into the hospital.”

The color deepened, and Maggie saw one of Vicki’s hands curl up into a fist. For a second, she was worried that things were about to get ugly, but Alex arrived before anything could happen.

“Hey,” Alex said as she sat down next to Maggie. She leaned forward so she could look past Maggie and see Elisa. “Welcome back.”

“Um… thanks. I should probably say I’m sorry I was a complete bitch before.”

Alex shrugged. “I’m sorry I tried to punch you in the face that one day.”

Elisa held up her cast. “I can understand the impulse.”

Alex laughed. “If you want, I can teach you how to do that without breaking your metacarpals.”

“My what?”

“The long bones in your hand.”

“Oh.”

“Alex wants to be a doctor,” Kara said. “She’s been studying anatomy for years.”

Maggie turned to Alex, unable to keep a grin off her face. “Well, that explains a few things.”

Vicki snorted, and Alex started turning red.

“What?” Kara asked.

Maggie looked over at Kara, about to explain when she had a sudden flashback to Monday. Tina was walking up behind Kara. She wasn’t in uniform this time, and she only had two members of the cheerleading team with her, the ones who had kissed Kara on the cheek, but there was a definite sense of déjà vu. Kara and Vicki both turned around to see what Maggie was staring at about the same time that Tina came to a stop.

“Hey, Kara,” Tina said.
“Hey!” Kara replied enthusiastically.

“You remember Chantel and Elena?” Tina asked.

“Of course. You guys want to sit with us?”

“If that’s okay.”

“Oh, of course! Come on.”

Tina took the spot to Kara’s right, with Chantel and Elena on her other side. “So, Kara mentioned that you guys are starting a GSA on campus.”

“Yeah,” Alex said.

“Where do we sign up?” Tina asked.

“The first meeting is on Tuesday,” Maggie said. “Ms. Mercer’s room. We’ll be finalizing the charter and filling out the packet to get official approval.”

“Can we come?” Tina asked.

“Sure,” Alex said.

“Awesome!” Kara practically beamed at Tina.

Maggie couldn’t help but noticed that Vicki looked a lot less enthusiastic.

Eliza was packing up to go home for the day when her text alert chimed. She pulled her phone out, a little worried that some fresh disaster had hit. A worry which only increased when she saw that the message was from Julie.

Julie: You have a minute?

Eliza: Of course.

Julie: The expulsion hearings just ended. All six of the students involved in the graffiti incident have been expelled.

Eliza: Good.

Julie: Agreed.

Julie: But you should give the girls a head’s up.

Julie: The rest of the football team will know by Monday morning, and they’re going to be upset.

Eliza: I’ll let them know.

Eliza: Thank you for telling me.

Julie: Thank me by asking Kara not to put any more of them in the hospital.
Monday, March 13, 2006

Maggie stood in the door of the room that had, up until Saturday afternoon, been Mrs. Danvers’ office, looking in at what was now a comfortable if somewhat bare bedroom. A room intended for Mike.

Maggie had been more than a little surprised when Mrs. Danvers had knocked on her door early Saturday morning. Saturday was usually Mrs. Danvers’ day to sleep in, but she had hurried Maggie through getting dressed and eating breakfast, then dragged her out the door. Maggie had been confused when they pulled into the parking lot of a furniture store, but she’d nearly broken down into tears when Mrs. Danvers has explained that she’d brought Maggie along to help her pick the sorts of things Mike would like.

She shouldn’t have been surprised. Not after Mrs. Danvers had taken her in, and especially not after the way Mrs. Danvers had so casually offered to take in Elisa, even if that had been on a more temporary basis, but it had still been overwhelming when she realized that her sister might get the chance to grow up in the sort of home Maggie had found for herself.

“It’s time,” Mrs. Danvers said. Maggie turned around to find Mrs. Danvers standing there in a pastel blue pantsuit, giving her a reassuring smile. Mrs. Danvers reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll be right there with you.”

Maggie stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Mrs. Danvers, hugging her as tightly as she could. When she felt Mrs. Danvers hug her back, she had to fight to keep from crying.

“Thank you.”

“You’re family, sweetheart. We’re here for you. Always.”

Maggie felt a little bit of déjà vu as they went through security at the courthouse, but it was different. They weren’t arriving at the end of the day. The courthouse was busy, and instead of an escort, they got pointed towards the elevators and abruptly dismissed. They rode up to the third floor again, only this time, when they got off the elevator they followed a sign towards courtroom
Each courtroom had a small antechamber off the hallway filled with a seating area, and Maggie saw all sorts of people waiting, but as they came up to the courtroom they were looking for, Maggie didn’t even need to check the sign to know they were in the right place.

“Loba!” Mike screamed as she jumped out of her seat and ran towards her. Maggie barely had time to brace herself before a speeding 12-year-old slammed into her and tried to hug the life out of her, but she didn’t mind. She hugged Mike back just as hard.

“Hey,” Maggie said.

“I missed you so much,” Mike said.

“I missed you too, Cariño” She pressed a kiss to the top of Mike’s head, then pulled back to look at her. “You letting your hair grow out?”

Mike’s frown was the stuff of legends. “Mom and Dad won’t let me get it cut.”

Maggie glanced over at her parents, who were both glaring at her. She was pretty sure if Ms. Oswald and the lawyers weren’t there, they never would have let Mike hug her, and she could figure out her mom’s logic without putting any effort into it. Mike was a tomboy. More of one than Maggie, really. But Maggie had turned out to be gay, so they needed to stop Mike from being a tomboy. It was her mom’s way of trying to pray away the gay, although she suspected her mom had been doing a lot of that too.

Maggie looked down at Mike. “I’m sorry, Cariño.”

“I know it’s not your fault.”

“That’s because you’re awesome.” Maggie let go of Mike and turned towards Mrs. Danvers.

“This is Mrs. Danvers. I’ve been staying with her since…”

“Since Dad kicked you out?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “They told you, huh?”

“Yes. Proud of it.”

Maggie had to force herself not to flinch at that and to remind herself she had a new home and a family that actually gave a damn about her.

Mike turned to Mrs. Danvers. “It’s nice to meet you,” she said.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mike,” Mrs. Danvers said. “Maggie’s told me about you.”

Mike beamed at that.

“Micaela,” Sofia said. Maggie looked over at her mother, who had a sour expression on her face.

“That’s not my name,” Mike snapped.

“Don’t talk back to your mother,” Oscar said.

“How long have they been calling you Micaela?” Maggie asked.
“Started the day after they kicked you out,” Mike said, and Maggie could hear the anger in her sister’s voice.

“Come sit down,” Sofia said.

Mike looked back at Maggie.

“Come on, Cariño.” Maggie took Mike’s hand and led her over to sit down next to Ms. Oswald. “Ms. Oswald.”

“Maggie, Eliza, Mike” Ms. Oswald said.

“Nicole,” Eliza said as she sat down next to Mike.

Ms. Oswald gestured to the Asian woman sitting beside her. “This is Kelly Lynn,” Ms. Oswald said. “She’s the CPS attorney presenting our case.”

“Nice to meet you,” Maggie said.

“Likewise,” Ms. Lynn said.

Ms. Oswald pointed to a Latino man sitting on Ms. Lynn’s other side. “That’s Caesar Gomez. He’s Mike’s advocate.”

Maggie waved at him. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Mr. Gomez said.

Maggie looked over at her parents, not at all surprised by what she saw. Her mother was ignoring her, carefully looking anywhere else, while her father was glaring at her like this was all her fault. Their attorney was looked like he should be doing one of those TV ads telling you to call him if you’d been in a car crash.

Maggie smiled and looked at Mike. “You want to see something cool?”

“Sure.”

Maggie slipped her hand into her pocket and pulled out her phone.

“You got a phone?” Mike asked excitedly.

“Yep.” Maggie flipped it open, and pointed the camera at Mike, snapping a quick picture, then turning it around and so Mike could see.

“Cool!” Mike said. “Can we get one together?”

“Sure,” Maggie said. She started to turn to Mrs. Danvers to ask her if she’d take the picture for them, but the door to the courtroom swung open, and a group of people filed out. Three kids were in the group, all of them with tears on their face, and it sent a cold shiver of fear through Maggie.

A bailiff appeared at the door to the courtroom.

“Rodas,” he called out.

Everyone stood up and started towards the courtroom. Maggie had only taken a single step when Mike grabbed her arm. Maggie stopped and turned back to face Mike. “What is it?”
“You love me, right?” Mike asked.

“Of course.”

“Even if… If I’m…”

“Mike, I love you. Nothing will ever change that.”

“Maggie, Mike,” Ms. Oswald said. “We have to go in now.”

“Okay,” Maggie said. She put her arm around Mike and led her into the courtroom. They took a seat in the galley right behind the table where Ms. Lynn and Ms. Oswald sat. Mrs. Danvers sat down on Maggie’s other side, while Oscar, Sofia and their lawyer sat at the other table.

Maggie smiled when she saw Judge Simmons, the same Judge who’d conducted her emancipation hearing, looking down at them.

“This is an adjudication hearing to determine whether Micaela Rodas, hereafter referred to as Mike, will remain in the custody of Oscar and Sofia Rodas. I have Kelly Lynn presenting the petition for removal on behalf of Child Protective Services, Nicole Oswald as the CPS caseworker, Caesar Gomez as the Court Appointed Attorney for Mike, and Robert Jones representing Oscar and Sofia Rodas. The witness list includes Margarita Rodas, also known as Maggie, and Mike Rodas. Is all of that correct?”

“Yes, your honor,” all three of the attorneys said.

“Ms. Lynn, I see Dr. Eliza Danvers in the gallery. She’s not on the witness list for either side. Why is she here?” Judge Simmons asked.

“She’s here at Maggie’s request,” Ms. Lynn said. “Maggie is expected to give testimony as to the abuse which occurred in the Rodas home prior to her departure and has requested Dr. Danvers’ presence for emotional support.”

Judge Simmons turned to Mr. Jones. “Mr. Jones, do you or Mr. and Ms. Rodas object to Dr. Danvers’ presence?”

“We do not,” Mr. Jones said, “but we do object to the characterization of anything which occurred in the Rodas home as abuse.”

“This is family court, Mr. Jones. Don’t try to play to the jury here. There isn’t one. Understood?”

“Uh… yes, your Honor.”

“Good,” Judge Simmons said. “Then we can avoid wasting these people’s time and get on with it. Ms. Lynn, opening statement.”

Ms. Lynn stood up. “Your Honor, Child Protective Services believes the Rodas home is an unsuitable environment for Mike Rodas. There is a documented history of physical, emotional, and psychological abuse of both Mike and Mike’s older sister Maggie at the hands of both parents. There was also at least one incident of physical assault, which resulted in Maggie’s requiring several stitches and left her with what is very likely to be a permanent scar on her lip.

“We believe there is a significant risk of escalation in abuse towards Mike in the immediate future, and that removal from the home is critical to Mike’s mental and emotional wellbeing.”
“Anything else?” Judge Simmons asked.

“Not at this time,” Ms. Lynn said before sitting down.

“Mr. Gomez?” Judge Simmons asked.

Mr. Gomez stood up. “Mike is afraid of Mr. and Mrs. Rodas, both because of their prior behavior and because of what happened with Maggie when Mr. Rodas was informed that Maggie had made a romantic overture to a female classmate. Mike is afraid of being beaten and thrown out of the house in the same manner as Maggie and has specifically requested to be removed from the home.”

“Anything else?” Judge Simmons asked.

“Not at this time,” Mr. Gomez said before sitting down.

Mr. Jones stood up. “The allegations against my clients are completely unsubstantiated. Maggie Rodas has a long history of violence and of lying to cover up her behavior, which is well-documented in her records from Southern High School in Blue Springs, Nebraska, and was, in fact, involved in an altercation at Midvale High School just 10 days ago which sent two students to the hospital. What these girls are claiming as abuse is nothing more than attempts by increasingly worried parents to discipline children who were having more and more severe behavioral issues. The decision to remove their eldest daughter from their home came after she made inappropriate sexual advances to another student and was undertaken for the safety of their younger daughter. They sought to remove both a physical threat and an extremely negative influence from the life of their younger daughter. This entire investigation was triggered by Maggie’s reporting this so-called abuse in retaliation for being kicked out of the Rodas home.”

“Thank you, Mr. Jones,” Judge Simmons said. “I am curious, however. When did striking a teenage girl you outweigh by a good 70 or 80 pounds in the face while wearing a sharp edged ring and leaving her with a potentially disfiguring injury become an acceptable form of discipline?”

“Excuse me?” Jones asked.

“Well, you said that these incidents, which were being reported as abuse, were an attempt to discipline children who were having behavioral issues. So according to you, the cut Mr. Rodas gave Maggie, which required four stitches to close and which, from what I can see, has left a lasting scar, constitutes acceptable parental discipline. I’m simply wondering when that became the case.”

“Um…”

“You have reviewed all the evidence submitted by Child Protective Services, correct, Mr. Jones?” Judge Simmons asked.

“Yes, of course,” he said.

“Excellent. Then you can explain to me how inflicting a disfiguring injury is an appropriate response to finding out your daughter gave someone a Valentine’s Day card.”

Mr. Jones just stood there, without saying anything.

“No? Well, we can save that for later. Do sit down, Mr. Jones. Ms. Lynn, would you like to begin presenting your case?”

“Yes, Your Honor,” Ms. Lynn said. “I’d like to start by going through the transcript of Ms.
Oswald’s interview with Maggie on Wednesday, February 22, 2006.”

Judge Simmons quickly looked through a stack of files next to her and pulled one out. “I have it.”

“Let’s begin with the section on page two where Maggie describes what life was like for the children in the Rodas home…”

Maggie sat for the next hour and a half as Ms. Lynn went through the interview with Ms. Oswald, the transcript of Mrs. Danvers and her dad’s meeting with Principal Munroe, the hearing with Judge Simmons, and several interviews Mike had given to Ms. Oswald. A lot of the time was spent on how things had changed for Mike after Maggie had been kicked out, and the details made Maggie’s stomach churn. They were forcing her to grow her hair out. They’d taken away all of her ‘boy’ toys. No more Transformers, no Star Wars figures, no Legos. They’d bought her new clothes, stuff her mother thought was more girly. They had stopped calling her Mike and started calling her Micaela.

Mike spent the whole time leaning against Maggie’s side. Maggie had one arm around Mike’s shoulders while she held Mike’s hand, but she listened carefully to everything that was being said, paying attention to how Ms. Lynn was building her case. Ms. Lynn emphasized how harsh the punishments were for even minor infractions, and she came back again and again to Maggie’s fear of what would happen if her parents found out she was gay.

Maggie got a surprise when Ms. Lynn started talking about complaints that had been filed against her dad. There were dozens of them. Most of them were from Blue Springs, though there were a handful from Midvale, and there was a common theme. All of them were about her dad’s interactions with gay people. Slurs he had used. Dismissal of their issues. Failure to investigate. It painted an ugly picture of her dad as a homophobe.

It also painted a pretty clear picture of why, exactly, CPS wanted to remove Mike from the home. Maggie wasn’t surprised. She’s always kind of suspected. Mike was hardly a delicate little girl. She just hadn’t wanted to make assumptions, and she hadn’t wanted herself to start thinking about the idea of Mike’s being gay, in case she slipped and said or did something to tip her parents off. It was the same reason she’d always kept such a careful distance between herself and Mike, though not as much as she’d apparently thought, given the way Mike was clinging to her.

She leaned over and kissed Mike on the top of her head. Mike turned and gave her smile that could rival Kara on her best day.

“At this time, I would like to call Maggie Rodas to the stand,” Ms. Lynn said.

Maggie stood up, giving Mike’s hand one last squeeze before she let go and walked up to the witness stand. A bailiff was there with a Bible. She put one hand on it and raised the other.

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

“I do.”

“You may be seated.”

Maggie sat down as Ms. Lynn approached her.

“Ms. Rodas, according to documents in evidence, you were kicked out of the Rodas home when your father learned from another parent at your school that you are a lesbian. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Maggie said.
“How long had you known you were a lesbian at that point?”

“Since I was 14. Three and a half years.”

“Had you ever discussed your sexuality with your parents?” Ms. Lynn asked.

“No. Never.”

“Why not?”

“Because I was afraid to,” Maggie said.

“Why?”

“I had overheard my parents making homophobic comments about a gay couple in town. The couple got harassed a lot. Their house and their cars were vandalized with homophobic slurs. Bricks thrown through their window. I heard my dad say he wished those filthy faggots would leave town. My mother would agree with him or say how terrible it was that my sister and I had to be exposed to that ‘lifestyle.’”

“How did these comments make you feel?”

“Terrified. I didn’t know what they would do if they found out I was gay, but I was pretty sure it wouldn’t involve a coming out party and a cake.”

“Can you tell us what did happen when your dad found out?”

“I came home and my dad was there waiting for me. He wouldn’t let me in the house. He started yelling. He told me I had embarrassed and humiliated him. That I’d spit in his face. That he’d only moved here to give me a second chance after all the fights I’d gotten into back in Blue Springs. That I had shamed the whole family in our new home. He hit me and told me I wasn’t his daughter anymore. Told me to leave and never come back.”

“So your dad became violent?”

“Yes.”

“Because he found out that you’re a lesbian?”

“Yes.”

“Maggie, do you have any reason to think that your father regrets his actions or that he would do anything differently if he were in a similar circumstance with your sister?”

“Objection,” Mr. Jones said. “Calls for speculation.”

“Your Honor, Maggie is the only one who has direct experience with this situation. She’s the closest thing to an expert there is,” Ms. Lynn said.

“I’ll allow it,” Judge Simmons said.

“Maggie?” Ms. Lynn asked.

“He hasn’t done anything to make me think he’s sorry. He hasn’t apologized. He signed over custody to Mrs. Danvers when he’d never even met her before. And he tried to hit one of my friends.”
“Which friend is that?”
“Alex Danvers.”
“When did this happen?”
“A couple of weeks ago. Dad came to the school one morning, yelling at me, accusing me of reporting him to Child Protective Services. Alex mouthed off to him, and he took a swing at her. I stepped in the way, but Alex’s sister stopped him from actually hitting either of us,” Maggie said.
“And this was after he threw you out of the house?”
“Yes.”
“Maggie, what sort of things made your father angry?”
“Anything that embarrassed him, anything he thought would cause him to lose face, or anything he thought reflected badly on him.”
“And he thought your sexuality reflected badly on him?”
“Yes.”
“Maggie, you currently have a restraining order out against your dad, is that correct?” Ms. Lynn asked.
“Yes.”
“Why is that?”
“Because I’m afraid he’ll attack me again. He hit me, and he tried to hit one of my friends. The man carries a gun every day. What if he gets mad enough to use it?”
“So, you’re concerned about him getting violent again?”
“Yes.”
“Maggie, do you think your father would hurt Mike?”
“Objection,” Mr. Jones said. “Calls for speculation.”
“Your honor, Maggie has nearly eighteen years of firsthand experience with how Oscar Rodas treats his children. I’d say in this circumstance, she’s more than qualified as an expert witness on the subject.”
“Ms. Lynn makes an excellent point about the scope of Maggie’s knowledge on the subject, Mr. Jones. Objection overruled.”
“Yes. If she did something he thought embarrassed him, I think he would hurt her.”
“Do you think your mother would try to protect Mike if your father did become violent?”
“No. My mother would never do anything to protect anyone but herself.”
“No further questions,” Ms. Lynn said before she sat back down.
Mr. Jones stood up. “You have more than a passing familiarity with violence yourself, don’t you?”
“What?” Maggie asked.

“You mentioned that you’d gotten into fights back in Blue Springs. I’m curious. How many fights did you get into?”

“Objection,” Ms. Lynn said. “Relevance.”

“Goes to establish that Maggie is a threat to the safety of her sister,” Mr. Jones said.

“Mr. Jones, is your entire defense predicated on the idea that Mr. Rodas kicked Maggie out of the house to protect Mike?” Judge Simmons asked.

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“I’m going to ask you again, Mr. Jones, have you reviewed the evidence?”

“Yes.”

“Then how did you miss the fact that there is both a recording and a transcript of the same conversation where Mr. Rodas admits that he struck Maggie and threw her out because she was gay?”

“In that conversation, Mr. Rodas said he had another daughter to think of. That he wouldn’t allow Maggie to return because of his concern for Micaela,” Mr. Jones said.

“Mr. Jones, this hearing is to determine whether or not Mr. and Mrs. Rodas pose a threat to Mike. Not whether Maggie does. Do you have any questions for Maggie that relate to that?”

“Your Honor, this line of questioning—“


Mr. Jones turned back to Maggie. “What is your relationship to Alex Danvers?”

“Objection,” Ms. Lynn said. “Relevance.”

“Sustained,” Judge Simmons said.

“Your Honor—“

“Mr. Jones, do you have any evidence that Alex Danvers has ever met Mike Rodas or set foot in the Rodas household?” Judge Simmons asked.

“No,” Mr. Jones said.

“Then this line of questioning is closed. Do you have anything else?”

“No further questions,” Mr. Jones said.

“Ms. Lynn, any redirect?”

“No, Your Honor.”

“You can step down, Maggie,” Judge Simmons said.

Maggie stood up and walked back over to the gallery. She sat down next to Mike, who hugged her again. She put an arm around her and kissed her on the head again, ignoring the glares she was
getting from both of her parents.

“At this time, I would like to call Mike Rodas to the stand,” Ms. Lynn said.

“You promise you love me?” Mike asked.

“Always,” Maggie said.

Mike stood up and headed for the witness stand. The Bailiff swore her in, and she sat down.

“Hello, Mike,” Ms. Lynn said.

“Hey.”

“Do you understand why you’re here today?”

“To find out if I have to keep living with my parents,” Mike said.

“Do you want to keep living with your parents?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“They keep trying to make me be a girl.”

“What do you mean, Mike? That they want you to dress more like a girl?”

“No. I mean they want to make me a girl, but I’m not. I’m a boy, and I don’t want to-”

“Micaela!” Sofia cried. Maggie looked over at her mother, who was standing up, her face turning red.

“That’s not my name!” Mike shouted.

Oscar stood up and took two steps towards Maggie.

“This is your fault!” he yelled. “You did this. You corrupted your sister. You brought this sickness into our house!”

“Mr. Rodas!” Judge Simmons called out, banging her gavel down again and again.

“If you want her, you can have her,” Oscar said. “If this is how you want to live, you can take care of her. I won’t have either of you in my house.”

He turned around and looked at Sofia. “Come on. We’re leaving.”

“Stop!” Judge Simmons snapped.

Oscar turned towards the judge.

“You and your wife will sit back down, or I will hold both of you in contempt,” she said.

Maggie watched, and for a moment, she thought he might just walk out of the courtroom anyway, but he turned and sat back down, as did Sofia.

Maggie felt a hand on her arm and turned to see Mrs. Danvers looking at her. “It will be okay,”
Mrs. Danvers whispered.

Maggie nodded and turned to look at Mike, who was still sitting on the stand, looking terrified.

“Mr. Rodas, are you saying that you no longer want Mike in your home?” Judge Simmons asked.

“Yes,” Oscar answered.

“Mrs. Rodas, do you agree with your husband?”

“I don’t want anything to do with either of them,” Sofia said.

“Fine.” Judge Simmons turned to Mike. “You can step down.”

Mike stood up and ran across the courtroom, hugging Maggie tightly. Maggie wrapped her arms around Mike and hugged back as hard as she could.

“Do you still love me, Loba?” Mike asked.

“Yes,” Maggie said. “Nothing will ever change that.”

Mike buried her… his face in Maggie’s neck, and Maggie held him as he started to cry.

Maggie: HELP!!!

Susan: What’s wrong?

Maggie: Can I call you?

Susan: Yes.

Maggie hit the send button, and Susan answered before the second ring.

“What’s wrong?” Susan asked.

“I went to court today,” Maggie said.

“For your sister, right?”

“It was about Mike, yeah.”

“Maggie, what’s wrong?”

“Mike got up on the witness stand and told the whole courtroom she… um… he is a boy.”

“Holy shit. How did your parents react?”

“My dad blamed me. My mom just did whatever my dad said. They disowned Mike on the spot. They’re filling out the paperwork to terminate parental rights right now.”

“Holy shit.”

“You said that.”

“Sorry, it’s just, this is big.”
“Right. What do I do?”

“About what?”

“About Mike! I… she… HE! HE! He… He’s my brother. God, I just thought Mike was a lesbian. A really butch lesbian. I didn’t know… I don’t know what he needs from me. Does he need a new name? New clothes? Do I introduce him as my brother? What do I do? How do I not fuck this up, Susan?”

“Okay, first, you calm the fuck down.”

“Okay,” Maggie said. “I can do calm.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in the bathroom at the courthouse. I need to get back soon. I’m supposed to be peeing.”

“Okay. Look, here’s the deal. You’re going to go back in there. You’re going to ask your brother if he wants to be called ‘he’ from now on, and if he wants you to introduce him as your brother. If he says yes, that is exactly what you do, no matter what anyone else says. You’re also going to check with Mrs. Danvers and see if it’s okay if I come by tonight,” Susan said.

“Okay.”

“If it is, just text me ‘yes,’ and I’ll get the address from Alex and Kara. I’ll bring books to help. But remember, Maggie. You’re not in this alone. You’ve got family.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you know what’s going to happen to him yet?”

“The caseworker said she’s got everything cleared for him to come live with us. She has to inspect his bedroom, but if it’s okay, then he can move in tonight after they pick up his things.”

“Okay. Go back to Mike. You got this.”

“Right,” Maggie said. “I got this.”

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” Eliza asked as they pulled out of the courthouse parking lot.

“Yeah,” Maggie said.

Eliza suspected Maggie wasn’t really paying attention. Her focus was elsewhere. Probably on Mike, who had left with Nicole a few minutes earlier to go to the Rodas house and collect his belongings. Eliza had taken a moment to let Mike know that he only needed to bring the things he liked from his old home and that she would make sure he got whatever he needed later.

Truth be told, Eliza didn’t know how she felt. She’d gone into the courtroom expecting, or at the very least hoping, that she would walk out with another daughter. Not because she felt the need to have another child in her life, but because she knew enough about Maggie’s life prior to her arrival at the Danvers home to know that Mike needed a better home and because she wanted to give Maggie her sister back. To say she was shocked by what happened would be an understatement. To say she was nervous about what the next few months and years might hold was a massive understatement.
Eliza had a passing knowledge of transgender issues. It hadn’t been a particular focus of hers before, though, and suddenly it was going to be a major part of the rest of her life. She felt incredibly ill-prepared, both to have a 12-year-old son and to have a 12-year-old transgender child. She knew that she would do everything she could to take care of Mike and to see to it that he got what he needed, but she didn’t know what that looked like in the long run.

What she did know was that she was going to have to give William a call and have a talk with him about what the benefits package for Magnus Labs covered and, if necessary, to see about getting some amendments made to the coverage. She was also going to have to call the lawyer who handled Kara’s adoption and get the paperwork started for adopting Mike. That would be a lot easier since Maggie and Mike’s parents had signed away their parental rights, but she also needed to make sure that if she adopted Mike, it wouldn’t cause Maggie and Alex any issues if they decided to get married later. Which might be getting a bit ahead of things, but if she fucked up now and made it legally impossible for them to get married by adopting Mike, that wasn’t something that could be fixed later without doing serious damage to everyone involved.

She would also need to find a therapist that dealt with queer issues and gender transition and a doctor who handled the medical side of that. She suspected that would involve regular visits to Coast City. In fact, she was beginning to think that moving might be a good choice. If Kara and Alex wanted to go to College in National City, she might need to talk to William about relocating her research projects to National City or start looking for a new job. She’d hate to leave her research behind, but family came first, and if her family would have an easier time in National City, then it might be time to make a move. She could keep the house in Midvale. Hire a caretaker. Get a house in the suburbs or a condo downtown. Whatever would make things easier for Mike and the girls.

First, though, she suspected there were a lot of long conversations with Mike about what he wanted to do. Would he want to stay in Midvale? Would he want to stay at his current school? A legal name change would be pretty much a given, but when? They would almost certainly have to tell Mike the truth about Kara if he was going to be living there for years, but when? Before or after the adoption? How could they make sure Mike understood the necessity of keeping Kara’s secret?

All the questions swirled around in Eliza’s head, and she missed Jeremiah terribly, missed having someone to talk through these decisions with. She missed having a partner to help carry the load. She missed having someone who was better at dealing with emotional issues than she was to help her through moments like this.

Of course, there were other questions too. How were Alex and Kara going to deal with this? Especially Kara. She’d had this conversation with Clark back when she was worried about how Kara would react to Alex’s being gay, and she remembered him mentioning something called ‘reproductive realignment’ which sounded a lot like a sex change. Was that even the right term anymore? She would need to check on that.

“Thank you,” Maggie said, breaking the silence and Eliza’s runaway train of thought. She glanced over at Maggie.

“For what?”

“For taking in Mike. I know this isn’t what you expected.”

“It doesn’t matter what I expected. I agreed to take in a child. It doesn’t matter if that child is gay or straight or transgender or disabled. A parent should love a child however they are.”

“If my parents felt that way, none of this would have ever happened.”
"I know. And I’m sorry you had to go through all of this, but I am glad to have you and Mike both."

"Thanks for letting Susan come down too."

"I admit, I’m looking forward to meeting her."

"You’ll like her," Maggie said. "Just keep a bucket of ice water handy for when she gets too flirty with Kara."

"Is she really that bad?"

"No. I might be a little jealous because I know she and Alex like each other."

"But you still invited her down."

"Because she’s been a great friend. And because she grew up in the community, so she knows more about how to handle things, and I need that right now. I let Mike down. I kept my distance because I thought I was protecting him, but he’s had to carry all of this alone, and I need to fix it."

"You shouldn’t blame yourself, sweetheart," Eliza said. "You did the best you could in a horrible situation. And he obviously adores you."

"Yeah. I don’t know why, but I’m glad he does."

"I think you probably did a lot more for him than you realized."

"Maybe. I just hope that I don’t screw things up for him now."

"You won’t. We’ll all be there to help."

"Thank you."

Alex was on the porch waiting by the time Maggie and Mrs. Danvers reached it. Maggie wrapped her arms around Alex and hugged her as tightly as she could.

"Hey," Alex said. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I just got a bit of a surprise is all."

"What kind of surprise?"

"I’ll tell you in a minute. Where’s Kara?"

"She’s inside. I got a text from Susan, asking for our address. She said you’d explain."

"Inside," Mrs. Danvers said. "Mike will be here soon, and we have a lot to talk about first."

"Okay," Alex said.

Maggie let go of Alex, and the three of them stepped into the house and took off their shoes.

"Kara, come down to the living room," Mrs. Danvers called out.

A moment later, Kara came down the stairs, practically radiating excitement. "Is she here?" Kara asked.
“Not yet,” Maggie said. “Come on.”

Mrs. Danvers led them all into the living room. Maggie took a seat on the couch next to Alex and threaded their fingers together, which earned her a smile and a gentle squeeze from Alex. Mrs. Danvers took one of the easy chairs, and Kara sat down on Alex’s other side.

“Would you like to explain, Maggie, or would you prefer for me to do it?” Mrs. Danvers asked.

“I’ll do it,” Maggie said.

“Okay.”

“Mike is with Ms. Oswald from Child Protective Services right now. They’re at my old house, getting Mike’s stuff, and when they’re done, they’ll come here. Ms. Oswald has to inspect the room we set up, but after that’s done, Mike will be living here. But there’s something you should both know. During the hearing, Mike told us that he is transgender. We didn’t get a chance to ask Mike about how he felt about certain things, but he said it was okay to tell you. She’s bringing down some books for us to help. I didn’t know anything about it before today, so I’m a little nervous about how to handle this, but I really, really need your help because Mike doesn’t have anyone else.”

“Okay,” Alex said. “Maggie, you’re our family, so Mike is our family too. Besides, I got used to sharing a bathroom with an alien. I think I can handle a brother.”

“Hey!” Kara pouted.

“You hog the hot water. Which is totally unfair since you’re immune to cold.”

“I can still feel it. And it sucks.”

Maggie gave Alex’s hand a squeeze, and Alex turned to look at her. “Thank you,” Maggie said, then she looked over at Kara. “Are you okay with this?”

“Yeah. We had something similar on Krypton. It was called Reproductive Realignment, or Reproductive Phenotype Adjustment. It wasn’t a big deal there. Honestly, humans are just weird about anything to do with gender or sexuality.”

“What do you mean?” Maggie asked.

“Just the way you put people into boxes based on who they take as lovers or make such a huge deal over having your Phenotype adjusted. It’s bizarre than you make something so private such a huge part of your social identity.”

“What? You think we should just hide who we are?” Maggie asked.

“No. That’s not it at all. It’s hard to explain, but on Krypton, marriage worked differently. It wasn’t tied to sexual interaction or romance. Honestly, we didn’t really have a distinction between friendship and romance the way you do, and publicly acknowledging someone as your lover was considered a little vulgar. Marriage was a way to bond families and houses. Sex was something private, and commenting on someone’s anatomy or the changes they made to it was a fast way to wind up in a dueling chamber with a sword at your throat. And don’t ever get me started on your ideas about gender and how that aligns with your Reproductive Phenotype. The idea that which set of sex organs you have determines whether or not you’re fit to do a certain job or to lead a family borders on insanity.”
Kara shook her head in disgust.

“It’s all weird, and I’ve been trying to get my head around it for years. Those books Alex bought a couple of weeks ago help a little, but I still don’t get why humans care so much about all of it because the reasons I can think of as to why it matters don’t exist within the context of human society. You don’t have Great Houses, and you don’t form alliances through marriages and children. Not in any way that would justify so much emphasis on pair bonding.”

Maggie glanced over at Alex and Eliza who were both staring at Kara and looking a little stunned by her rant, but Kara wasn’t finished, and Maggie turned back to her when she started talking again.

“None of it makes any sense to me. Like, I get that the rules exist, but I don’t understand why. Alex likes Susan. Alex likes you. But the rules of your culture dictated that she had to select one of you. But why? I understand that the rule exists. I’m glad that she chose you because it bonds you more closely to our family, and I want you here. I just don’t understand why she had to choose in the first place.”

Maggie stared at Kara for a long time, feeling a little shocked at the frustration and confusion she heard in Kara’s voice. It was very easy to forget that Kara wasn’t human and that she’d grown up in a completely different culture. She felt guilty about how easily something so important about Kara had slipped her mind because most of the time, Kara seemed so normal.

Honestly, though, Kara’s alien nature might be a godsend. She seemed to be completely at ease with the news in a way Maggie herself wasn’t sure she felt. Kara’s comfort with it might be the best thing that could have happened because Kara was friendly and open and kind, and, most of all, she was fiercely protective.

Maggie hated to admit it, but Kara might be a better big sister for Mike than she was. “I’m sorry. Sometimes I forget you grew up on another planet.”

“It’s okay,” Kara said.

“It’s not. It’s important, and I messed up, but I promise I’ll get better at it.”

She didn’t quite understand the tears in Kara’s eyes, but she was pretty sure the hug that followed involved a little super speed.

“Alex, could you get the door?” Eliza asked.

“Sure.” Alex left Eliza and Maggie in the kitchen arguing over the ingredients for the tacos and headed out to answer the door.

“Hey,” Susan said when Alex swung it open. She held up to large bags. “I come bearing books.”

“Maggie will be grateful,” Alex said.

“I’ll bet.”

“Come in.”

Susan stepped into the house and Alex closed the door behind her. “Which way?”

“Kitchen,” Alex said, pointing the way. “Maggie’s trying to teach mom to make tacos.”
“Your mom doesn’t know how to make tacos?”

“Not according to Maggie.” Alex followed Susan into the kitchen, a little surprised to hear raised voices coming from that direction.

“I make them all the time,” Eliza sighed.

“That doesn’t mean they aren’t terrible,” Maggie shot back.

“Mom’s tacos are great,” Alex said.

“Really? Stabbed in the back by my own girlfriend.” Maggie turned to Susan.

“¡Que bueno que llegaste! Esta gringa está tratando de envenenarnos a todos,” Maggie said, which Alex was pretty sure translated as ‘Thank God you're here. This white lady is trying to poison us all.’

“¿Es eso un paquete de condimento de taco?” Susan asked. ‘Is that packaged taco seasoning?’

“Peor, es genérico.” ‘Worse. It’s store brand.’

Alex had to bite her lip to keep from laughing, both at what the two of them were saying and at the way Susan shuddered.

“Right, Maggie and I will make the tacos. Mrs. Danvers, you and Alex can sit.”

“You’re a guest.”

“Technically, I’m a delivery girl,” Susan said as she set the books on the table. ‘I’m just a delivery girl who has higher standards than ‘better than taco bell.’ But if you really want to help, you can dice up some white onion, tomatoes, and jalapenos for the pico. Alex, you grab some avocados.”

“Bad idea, unless you like your guacamole burnt,” Maggie said.

“Hey! I… actually, I can’t even argue with that.”

“We don’t let Alex cook,” Eliza said. “Our insurance isn’t that good.”

“That bad?” Susan asked.

“She set the curtains on fire trying to boil water to make spaghetti.”

“Wow,” Susan said as she started pulling jars of spices out of the cabinet. “That is bad.”

Alex sat down at the table as Susan, Maggie, and Eliza started working on dinner. She took a second to dig through the bags of books Susan had brought with her. The selection was pretty broad. There was a book on parenting queer kids, a book on parenting a transgender kid, a book on the transition process, a book on having a transgender family member, a book on laws concerning transgender people, a book on helping kids who’ve been kicked out by their family, and that was just in one bag.

“So, Susan, Alex said your parents own a bookstore,” Eliza said.

“Technically only one of my moms. My other mom owns the café. They run them as separate businesses for some reason that doesn’t make sense unless you’re a lesbian retired marine with an MBA, and they use me and my sister as slave labor to prop up their evil empire.”
“They don’t pay you to work in the store?” Eliza asked.

“They’ve offered. But honestly, if they paid me, I wouldn’t be able to run off in the middle of the day to help out my friends.”

“Or pick up poor, confused girls who aren’t sure if they’re gay,” Alex said.

Susan laughed. “Be honest, by the time I asked you if you wanted to get coffee, you already knew you were gay.”

“You do realize that’s my girlfriend you’re flirting with?” Maggie’s tone that bordered on outright laughter.

“Would you rather I flirt with you instead?”

“You know I’m still in the room, right?” Alex asked.

“You know Maggie is the scary one, right?”

“Maggie’s also the hot one,” Kara said as she walked into the kitchen.

“They’re both pretty hot,” Susan said as she started to turn around, “but, yeah, if I had to…”

Alex looked over at Susan, who was standing at the counter, facing towards the table, with half an avocado in one hand, a spoon in the other, and her jaw on the floor as she started at Kara.

“What? Do I have something on my face?” Kara reached up to check.

“Susan’s lips if you’re not careful,” Maggie teased as she looked at Susan.

“Huh?” Kara asked as Susan started to turn bright red.

Susan closed her eyes and shook her head. She turned around and put down the spoon and the avocado, then cleaned her hands on a dishtowel before turning back around. “I’m Susan. And I’m sorry. You caught me off-guard. In all the time I’ve spent talking to Alex and Maggie, neither of them bothered to mention that you’re the hot one.”

Kara’s face turned so red that for a moment Alex worried her heat vision was going to flare up. “I… um… oh…”

“You do remember that our mom’s in the room, right?” Alex asked.

Susan tilted her head and raised an eyebrow, her eyes never leaving Kara. “Worth the risk.”

Alex looked over at Eliza, expecting a little help, but she didn’t find it. Eliza had a hand over her mouth, and her shoulders were shaking with laughter.

Maggie had just set the pot full of spiced beef in the oven to keep it warm when the doorbell rang.

“Can you finish?” Maggie asked Susan.

“Yeah. Go.”

“Thanks,” Maggie said, as she headed for the door.

“Alex, Kara, why don’t you stay here,” Mrs. Danvers suggested as she followed Maggie. “We
Maggie checked the peephole and saw Ms. Oswald and Mike on the porch. She threw the door open and immediately found herself wrapped tightly in Mike’s arms for a long hug.

“Hey,” Maggie said as she wrapped her arms back around him. “You okay?”

Mike nodded, but something felt off. Maggie looked up at Mrs. Oswald. “Your mother said a few things. The deputy was reluctant to remove her since he works for your dad.”

Maggie hugged Mike a little tighter. “Whatever Mom said is la mierda, Cariño.” She rubbed Mike’s back.

“Maggie, why don’t you take Mike into the kitchen,” Mrs. Danvers said.

Maggie nodded. “Come on, Cariño. I have some people I want you to meet.” She led Mike into the kitchen, where Alex, Kara, and Susan were wall waiting. “Mike, this is Alex.”

“Hey,” Alex said.

“Hi.” Mike waved at her.

“This is Kara.”

“Hey, Mike,” Kara said. “Welcome home.”

“Thanks.”

“And that’s Susan over by the stove.”

“¡Hola, hermanito.”

Mike looked over at Susan, and Maggie could feel him freeze. When she looked down, his cheeks were so red they were practically glowing. “I… um… I like your hair.”

Susan smiled and reached up, running a hand through her hair. “It is pretty cool, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Mike said, sounding just a little breathless.

“Go ahead and have a seat.” Maggie pointed towards the empty chair next to Kara. Once he sat down, Maggie took the seat next to Alex.

“Alex and Kara are Mrs. Danvers’ daughters. They live here. Susan’s our friend. She lives up in Coast City with her moms.”

“Moms?”

“Sí,” Susan said. “Two moms, a sister who can’t decide between punk and goth, and two surly old tomcats.”

“Cool.” All of Mike’s attention was immediately focused on Susan.

Maggie made a mental note to explain to Mike that, one, Susan was very, very gay, and two, he was an infant. And based on the way he was looking at her, she needed to do it soon. Just not in front of everyone.
Eliza stood in the doorway and watched as Nicole walked around the room, looking at everything and making notes as she went.

“How is it?” Eliza asked.

“Better than I expected,” Nicole said.

“You said Mike needed a bedroom of his own.”

“I did, but I’m used to thrift store furniture on a good day. I didn’t expect fresh paint, a brand-new bedroom suite, and a computer that’s right out of the box.”

“Most people probably can’t afford it. I can, and the money is doing more good here than it is in the bank.”

“You’re a good woman, Eliza.”

“I try.”

“Are you sure you’re up for this? I know it’s not what you expected.”

“I didn’t expect Alex or Kara or Maggie either. Kids are always a surprise, even when you have nine months to prepare for them. And the only thing I signed up for was to be a parent for a child that needed one. Being a parent means you love your child, no matter how they are.”

“If everyone believed that, we wouldn’t be here.” Nicole pulled a folder out of her bag and held it out to Eliza.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a list of therapists and doctors who specialize in cases like Mike’s. Officially, I can’t encourage or discourage you from allowing Mike to transition. But I can say that outcomes for transgender children who are allowed to transition are significantly better. And you saw what he said on the stand today.”

“Don’t worry. If this is what he needs, then I’ll see to it that this is what he gets.”

“I was hoping you would say that.”

“Thank you. For putting Mike and Maggie back together.”

“If you’d been in those interviews with Mike, you would know that I couldn’t do anything else. Everything with the room is in order. I’ll get out of your hair and let you enjoy your evening with your family.”

“You could stay for dinner.”

“Thank you for the offer, but on a day like today, I need to go home and hug my son.”

“I understand,” Eliza said. “I’ll show you out.”

Maggie had been a little worried that dinner would be a repeat of the awkward mess of her first couple of nights in the Danvers home, but the atmosphere as she and Susan set dinner on the table couldn’t have been more different. Everyone was cheerful and relaxed.
Kara, as always, was excited about the food, but she also kept stealing glances at Susan when she thought no one was looking. Except, this was Kara, who was surprisingly horrible at anything approaching subtlety. Every time she looked at Susan, Alex and Mrs. Danvers both looked like they were going to break a rib trying not to laugh. Worse, Susan knew Kara was looking, and had stripped off her leather jacket, leaving her dressed in jeans and a white v-neck t-shirt.

To be fair, Kara wasn’t the only one looking. Maggie had snuck a peek or two herself while Susan was strutting around like a peacock. Poor Alex was doing everything in her power to look at anything but Susan, which made Maggie want to drag Alex into her bedroom and kiss the life out of her. And there was poor little Mike, who looked at Susan like she was Venus incarnate, and Maggie wondering for a moment if she was going to have to remind him to breathe.

Once Maggie and Susan had finished setting the food on the table, Susan took the seat at the foot of the table, which put her between Alex and Mike, and poor Mike turned tomato red. Maggie sat on Alex’s other side, which put her directly across from Kara with Eliza at the head of the table, and Maggie couldn’t keep the smile off her face. It felt like one of the holiday dinners back before Maggie had realized she was different. Back when she still looked forward to seeing her grandmothers and her aunts and uncles. Back before she had to hide herself.

“Would you mind if I said grace?” Susan asked.

“No. Of course not.”

Maggie saw Kara look over at Alex in confusion, but thankfully, both Mike and Susan had already bowed their heads. Maggie bowed her head as Susan began to pray. “Loving God, thank you for the food and drink before us, for the friendship and family which surrounds us, for the love and kindness in our lives, and for this time we have together in case it never comes again. Amen.”

Everyone lifted their heads, and they started passing around the food, filling taco shells and piling up plates with rice and beans. Alex and Kara both skipped the salad, which made Maggie roll her eyes. Susan and Mike’s eyes got a little big at how much food Kara was piling on her plate, but thankfully neither of them made Maggie’s mistake of commenting on it.

“That was a lovely prayer,” Mrs. Danvers said as she fixed herself a couple of chicken tacos. “Did it come from someplace in particular?”

“Mamá Yatzka wrote it,” Susan said. “She joined the Navy to pay for nursing school. Got assigned to a Marine Corps base since they don’t train their own medics. Met Mamá Jenette there, so they both got out after their first tour. Mamá Yatzka spent a few years doing Hospice care for AIDS patients. She wrote a prayer book while she was there.”

“Is she the one who owns the bookstore?” Mrs. Danvers asked.

“Yeah.”

“Why the change?”

“I don’t know the details. She won’t talk about it, and all Mamá Jenette will say is that there was a sharps scare. Mamá Yatzka gets freaked out around needles, though.”

“I can understand that,” Mrs. Danvers said. “When I was getting my MD, I did an internship and residency at Coast City General. Saw a nurse who’d been working ER for twenty years quit after she got stuck with a dirty needle. That’s half the reason I decided on research instead of practicing.”
“What religion is that prayer from?” Kara asked.

Maggie winced, and she felt Alex go a little stiff at her side, but if Susan thought the question was a little odd, she didn’t show it.

“We’re Episcopalian. My moms were both raised Catholic, but they converted after they realized they’re gay. Because, you know, the Catholic Church hasn’t quite gotten on board with the fact that the Dark Ages are over.”

“I can sympathize,” Mrs. Danvers said. “I was raised Southern Baptist.”

Alex looked over at Mrs. Danvers, and Maggie could see the shock on her face. “You used to go to church?”

“Yes. I stopped before I moved out of my parents’ house.”

“Oh,” Alex said, and Maggie made the same connection she suspected Alex had. That would have been around the time Mrs. Danvers’ family had kicked her cousins out.

The table started to slip into an uncomfortable silence, but Mrs. Danvers cut it off before it could settle in.

“Do you know what you want to do after college?” Mrs. Danvers asked Susan.

“I’m looking at applying to the FBI Academy after I graduate.”

“Really?” Maggie asked.

“Yeah. I wanted to join the Air Force, but I’m really bad at the ‘don’t tell’ thing. These days the FBI doesn’t care, so it seemed like a better fit.”

Maggie laughed, and she wasn’t the only one. Even Mrs. Danvers was grinning, though Kara seemed a little confused. Maggie made a note to explain the joke to her later if Alex didn’t beat her to it.

“What about you, Mike?” Mrs. Danvers asked. “You have any idea what you want to do when you grow up?”

Mike shrugged and looked down at his plate. He shook his head as he seemed to draw into himself, and it wasn’t hard to guess why, but it made Maggie hate her parents even more than she already did.

“He wants to be an artist,” Maggie said.

Mike looked up at her with wide, frightened eyes.

“Mom and Dad always hated the idea. Dad said he would end up starving, and Mom would talk about how he’d be wasting his life. But he’s really good.”

“Really?” Kara asked, bouncing in her seat a little. “What kind of art do you do?”

Mike looked over at her, blushing a little. “I like to draw monsters.”

Kara eyebrows shot up. “Monsters?”

“Yeah,” Mike said, excitement in his eyes.
“Kara’s a big old scaredy-cat,” Maggie said. “Couldn’t even make it through one of the Saw movies without hiding behind a pillow half the time.” Mike and Alex both laughed as Kara gave Maggie a disgruntled glare. “You should show Kara some of your drawings. She’s a pretty good artist herself, and I bet she’d love your dragons.”

The smile on Mike’s face vanished, and he dropped his eyes down to the table. “Dad threw out all my drawings.”

Mike’s words hit Maggie like a punch to the gut. Mike had been drawing his whole life, and Maggie had seen every one, from the poorly-filled coloring books up to the sketchbooks filled with the dragons and goblins and trolls that Mike adored. There were stacks of notebooks and sketchbooks filled with years’ and years’ worth of work, and her father had just thrown them out. Because of her. Because he’d found out Maggie was gay and was determined to make sure his younger child didn’t turn out the same way.

“I’m sorry, Cariño.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I’m sorry your dad did that,” Mrs. Danvers said. “I know it won’t really make up for everything you lost, but if you’d like, we can go by the art store tomorrow and pick up some supplies for you.”

“Really?”

“Of course. If you want to be an artist, you’re going to need lots of practice.”

“Mom, come on, you’re being ridiculous,” Alex grumbled as Mrs. Danvers came into the living room carrying a tripod and a camera bag.

“It’s a picture, Alex,” she said as she started setting up the tripod. “It won’t kill you.”

“Alex doesn’t like having her picture taken,” Maggie said.

“Really?” Susan asked, feigning shock. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Alex glared at them both. “Why did I ever introduce you two?”

“Well, I thought you were angling for a… And I’m not finishing that sentence with your mom in the room.”

“Wise choice,” Maggie said.

“I’d worry more about the 12-year-old. I had a life before I met Alex’s dad.”

“Woah!” Susan said. “Alright Mamá Danvers.”

“Why do I feel like I’m missing half the conversation?” Kara asked.

“Tell Alex to show you chapter 12 of the book she bought last time she came into the store,” Susan said.

“I read it yesterday. Chapter 12 was… OH!”

Susan grinned. “And she gets it!”
“I’m going to murder both of you,” Alex said, looking back and forth between Maggie and Susan. Mike rolled his eyes. “You know I know what you’re talking about, right?”

“No, you don’t, and you’re not allowed to know until you turn 21,” Maggie said.

“But-”

“One more word and I’ll make it 35,” Maggie said.

“You’re 17,” Mike grumbled.

“I’m a girl. We mature faster,” Maggie said.

“Kara’s 16.”

“I’m 40,” Kara said without missing a beat. “I just look young for my age.”

“It’s true,” Alex said. “She gets carded every time we send her on a beer run.”

Susan smiled at Kara. “You know, I’ve always had a thing for older women.”

“So have I,” Kara deadpanned.

Maggie snorted at the dumbfounded look on Susan’s face.

“Okay,” Mrs. Danvers said as she locked the camera in place on top of the tripod. “We’re all set. Everyone on the couch.”

It was a tight fight; the couch was designed to fit four people, and there were six of them. Seven, if you counted the cat. Mrs. Danvers took the middle spot with Alex and Kara on either side of her. Maggie sat on Alex’s other side with Mike in her lap, and Susan sat on Kara’s other side, while Streaky claimed his rightful place in Kara’s lap.

“Everyone say, ‘cheese’,” Mrs. Danvers said. She pressed the button on the remote, and the room filled with a flash. “One more. In three…”

Maggie looked over at Alex.

“Two…”

On an impulse, she leaned in.

“One…”

She pressed a kiss to Alex’s cheek just before the flash went off.

“Can I come in?” Maggie asked.

“Sure,” Mike said.

Maggie opened the door and stepped into Mike’s bedroom, smiling as she saw Mike sitting in bed, reading one of the books Susan had brought.

“You ready for bed?” she asked as she sat down on the edge of the bed.
“Yeah.” Mike marked his spot and closed the book, setting it on the bedside table. “I like it here.”

“So do I, Cariño. So do I.”

“So, you and Alex, huh?”

“Yeah,” Maggie said, smiling.

“Is she nice?”

“Very. I like her a lot.”

Mike smiled at her for a moment, but then the smile faded, replaced with a worried look. “You’re not disappointed in me, are you?”

“Never. I love you, Cariño. I’m sorry I wasn’t a better sister. I wanted to be. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

“You did. You always took care of me.”

“Not the way I wished I could.” Maggie leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Mike’s forehead. “Go to bed, Cariño. If you need me, I’ll be next door.”

“I thought your room was downstairs.”

“It is. But I wanted to be close tonight.”

“Close to Alex.”

Maggie laughed and shook her head. “You spend way too much time reading Mama’s romance novels.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m wrong.”

“Go to bed,” Maggie said as she got up.

“I’m going.” Mike lay down, pulling the sheets up around him. “I love you, Loba.”

“I love you too, Cariño,” Maggie said before she closed the door.
A Beautiful Dream

Chapter Summary

Everyone adjusts to having Mike in the house, while Eliza makes adjustments to the plans for the summer.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Mentions of Homophobia and Child Abuse, Transphobia.

Tuesday, March 14, 2006

Eliza watched as Maggie kissed Mike on the head before rushing out the door for school. It was such a simple thing, but it warmed her heart seeing the two of them getting to live together without being afraid. Mike, for his part, just watched his sister disappear out the front door, smiling the whole time.

The smile faded a bit once she was gone, and he looked back down at his plate.

“Is there something wrong with the food?” Eliza asked.

“I’m never very hungry in the morning,” Mike said.

“Not hungry, or do you just not like sausage and bacon? I know Maggie likes dry toast or double toasted bagels most mornings. Kara can talk her into pancakes sometimes, but she eats them without syrup.”

Mike looked down at the plate in front of him, and she could feel the discomfort radiating off of him and found a whole new reason to hate his parents.

“I like cereal in the morning.”

“What kind?”

“Grapenuts. I like it with milk and honey done in the microwave for a couple of minutes.”

“Okay,” Eliza said. “We can do that. We’ll do the art supply store first, then go to Walmart, get you some new clothes and hit the grocery section for enough to last you through to the weekend. Right now, though, all I have in the house is some jelly-filled shredded wheat, and some oatmeal. How do those sound?”

“Is the oatmeal instant?” Mike asked with a little dread on his face.

“No.”

“Oh.”
“Sweetheart, do you want oatmeal?”

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Of course not,” Eliza said. “Do you like oatmeal better than Grapenuts?”

“The real stuff, yeah. But not the instant.”

“Okay. Tell you what. We’ll get you some oatmeal and some Grapenuts, and you just tell me what you want in the mornings.”

“Really?”

“Really. As long as you come to breakfast with the girls, I’ll have plenty of time to make you oatmeal before I drive you to school.”

“Okay.”

“You okay over there?” Alex asked as they pulled into a parking space at the far end of the lot.

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “Just worried about Mike.”

“He’ll be fine.”

“Yeah,” Kara said. “Eliza will take good care of him.”

“I know. I just remember how scary the first few days after Dad kicked me out were.”

“You didn’t know where you were going to end up,” Kara said. “And you didn’t have a big sister looking out for you. Trust me. It makes a difference.”

Maggie shook her head. “I’m worried about when he goes back to school. It was hard enough being the gay kid. This is going to be a lot harder for him.”

“Maggie.” Alex reached out and held her hand. “Mike is our little brother too. We are all going to take care of him, and if anyone fucks with him, Kara will toss them into orbit.”

“Damn right,” Kara said.

“You know you guys are the best family I could ask for, right?”

“We are pretty great,” Alex said.

“And that’s my cue to leave before you two start making out in front of me,” Kara said as she opened her door.

“Mrs. Danvers,” Mike said.

Eliza looked up from the copy of CatCo Magazine she’d been reading and smiled. Mike stood in front of her, his hair freshly cut in an almost perfect copy of the style Susan had been wearing last night.

“It is okay?” he asked.

“It looks great,” Eliza said, smiling.
The dimpled smile on Mike’s face was bright enough to light up the entire salon.

Kara, Elisa, Vicki, Tina, Chantel, and Elena were already sitting at their usual lunch table when Maggie got there, but she was glad to see they’d left a spot for her and Alex to sit together. It was a little thing, but it made her feel welcome in the group. It was a reminder that the people at the table, even the ones like Chantel and Elena that she didn’t know very well, actually gave a damn how she felt, and it was such a new feeling that some days Maggie wasn’t sure how to process it.

“How’d it go yesterday?” Vicki asked.

Maggie shrugged. “It was terrible. I mean, I expected it to be bad, but my parents were even bigger assholes than usual. They disowned Mike right in the middle of the hearing.”

“Holy shit,” Elisa said. “In front of the judge and everything?”

“Yeah. Told me it was all my fault too.”

“Jesus Christ,” Elisa said, shaking her head in disbelief. “Do you know what’s going to happen to Mike?”

“He’s going to come live with us,” Maggie said.

“He?” Elisa asked.

“I thought you said you had a sister,” Vicki said.

“I thought I had a sister. That’s why my parents disowned him. They didn’t like finding out they had a son instead of a daughter.”

“None of you have any problem with that, do you?” Kara asked, and Maggie was a little surprised at the steel in her tone.

“No,” Tina said. Vicki, Chantel, and Elena all just shook their heads.

“No,” Elisa said. “I’m just… a little surprised. I never met anyone who was… um… I don’t know the right word.”

“Transgender,” Tina said. “And you probably have. You just didn’t realize it.”

Elisa gave a small shrug. “Maybe. I’m just glad she… Sorry. I’m glad he doesn’t have to live with your asshole parents anymore.”

“Thanks,” Maggie said.

It wasn’t perfect, but considering it was only four weeks to the day since she’d given Elisa that card, it was progress.

Eliza sat down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, her laptop, her phone, and the folder Nicole had given her the previous night. It had been a long day, made longer by how much she’d had to step on her temper, so Mike didn’t think the frequent bursts of anger were directed at him. But the more she interacted with him, the more she came to hate the Rodases.
After they had finished at the hair salon, where her usual hairdresser had gotten a 200 percent tip for calling Mike a handsome boy as she checked them out, they had headed to the art supply store. She’d told him he could get anything he wanted, but he had still cringed each time he added something to the cart, clearly expecting her to balk at every item. Several times she saw him put things back after looking at the price tag to start looking for cheaper options. Each time she’d told him it was okay to get the one he wanted, but the hesitation never really went away. She’d watched him carefully, and on a couple of occasions she had added things to the cart he’d clearly been too afraid to even ask for. She had wished, more than once, that she’d brought Kara along with her because Kara knew more about art supplies than she ever would. In the end, the only thing that really gave her pause were the markers, because 300 dollars seemed like a lot of money for a set of 72, but the clerk had assured her that not only were they the best markers on the market, they were refillable, and the nibs were replaceable, so they would literally last forever if you took care of them. So they went into the cart too.

After the art supply store, they’d stopped at Men’s Warehouse and ordered two suits for Mike, then headed to Walmart, which had been much less of a fight with Mike than it had with Maggie. Mike hadn’t paid any attention to the prices once she took him to the boy’s department and told him to pick out whatever he wanted.

They’d gotten home after lunch, and Eliza had spent a good part of the day putting together the art table and chair she’d bought for Mike and going through the things he’d brought from the Rodas house, deciding what to keep and what to throw out. The keep pile was depressingly small. Mostly school supplies, a couple of pictures of him and Maggie, and a tattered paperback book. No toys, none of Mike’s drawings. It filled Eliza with rage knowing that Mike’s father had deliberately taken away his toys and art because he didn’t fit some preconceived notion of who he thought Mike should be.

She made a note to find out which toys he wanted replaced and to order them as soon as possible. The art was gone forever, but she was determined to give him back as much of his childhood as she could.

She just had to make sure she took care of his future first. So she opened the folder and took out the list of therapists in Midvale who dealt with childhood gender transition. She didn’t know any of them, but one skill Eliza had been careful to cultivate, no matter how unnatural it felt to her, was how to network. She might not know any of the names on that list, but she knew plenty of psychologists and psychiatrists, and some of them would know those names. So she started making phone calls.

“You need to talk to Vicki,” Alex said to Kara as she put on her seatbelt.

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “I thought she was going to punch Tina in the face when you asked her if she had any plans this weekend.”

“I know,” Kara groaned. “It’s stupid though. I wasn’t even asking Tina to come over for a date. I wanted her to come over and meet Mike.”

“Maybe tell Vicki that,” Alex suggested.

“I shouldn’t have to. It’s not her business.”

“She likes you,” Maggie said. “Which doesn’t make it her business, but it does make it really unpleasant for her.”
“It’s stupid. I like hanging out with both of them.”

“But you don’t want to make out with Vicki in the stairwell,” Maggie said.

“No, I don’t.”

“Okay, definitely tell Vicki that,” Alex said. “Preferably before the next GSA meeting turns into Thunderdome.”

“You know, she’s your friend,” Kara said. “Maybe tell her she should stop macking on your sister.”

"Okay, first off, add 'macking' to the list of words you are never allowed to say again," Alex said. "Second, she's been too busy drooling over your math brain to say two words to me."

“She wasn’t drooling,” Kara grumbled.

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “That was Susan.”

“You think so?” Kara asked with a little more enthusiasm that Alex was comfortable with.

"Kara, you have a girlfriend," Alex said.

"Not really. Tina and I are just friends."

"With benefits," Maggie said.

"There better not be benefits," Alex said, her tone more than a little stern.

Kara rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. "Says the girl who hasn't slept alone in over a week."

"That's different."

"Really?" Maggie asked. "How is that different?"

"Yeah, Alex," Kara said. "How is that different?"

"Because Maggie's my girlfriend."

"So if I had a girlfriend, benefits would be okay?" Kara leaned back and took out her phone.

"What are you doing?" Alex asked.

"Texting Susan to see if she wants a girlfriend," Kara said.

"With benefits," Maggie added.

"I hate both of you."

"Well then," Maggie said, "no benefits for you."

__________________________________________________________

“Hey, Cariño,” Maggie said.

Mike looked up from the huge picture he was working on, and Maggie couldn’t stop herself from smiling. He had a huge grin on his face, along with a few charcoal smears.
“Hey, Loba.”

“What’cha working on?” she asked.

“Come see.”

Maggie walked over to look, and her breath caught at the sight of the picture. It was a wolf, its front legs spread wide, its head low, and its lips drawn back in a snarl as it stood in front of a half-grown cub, protecting it from something off the page.

“It’s beautiful, Cariño.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. Did Mrs. Danvers get you everything you need?”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “She let me get charcoal and pastels, and she even got me a set of Copic markers. She said I could go back and get paints if I wanted, but I thought I might ask Kara to teach me a bit first.”

“I bet she’d love to. And I love the haircut.”

Mike smiled. “Mrs. Danvers said I could get it cut however I wanted.”

“Well, you made a good choice. Don’t tell Susan, but it totally looks better on you.”

Mike laughed and looked away. “You don’t have to say that.”

“I mean it,” Maggie said as she reached out and ran a hand through his hair. “It makes you happy, Cariño, and you’re always beautiful when you’re happy.” She leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Go wash up. Kara’s making snacks.”

“What’s she making?”

“Egg rolls, I think.”

“Are they any good?”

“Yes. Kara’s a great cook. Just don’t eat anything she tries to bake.”

Mike hopped up and headed for the bathroom. Maggie waited until he was gone, then took another look at the drawing.

It wasn’t hard to see the symbolism. Mike had called her Loba, she-wolf, for years. The name came from a book he’d had for ages. It was about a girl who dressed up as a boy and went on adventures with a wolf who protected her from all sorts of monsters. It made her heart ache, knowing Mike looked at her like that, especially knowing how close she’d come to losing him.

She headed for the door, promising herself she’d never let that happen again.

“Hello, Eliza,” Clark said as he answered the phone.

“I need to talk to Wonder Woman,” Eliza said.

“Why?”
“Because she’s taking my daughters to an uncharted magic island in the middle of the Mediterranean for two months. There are details we need to discuss.”

“What sort of details,”

“The kind you don’t need to know.”

“Eliza…”

“Do you really want to have a conversation about what sort of feminine hygiene products I need to pack for them?” Eliza asked.

“Um… You know what. I’ll just give her your phone number and ask her to call you.”

“Good.” Eliza disconnected the call and sat at the new desk tucked into a corner of her bedroom. She only had to wait for about five minutes before the phone rang again. “Hello,” she answered.

“Hello, Dr. Danvers. This is Clark’s Greek friend.”

“Please, call me Eliza.”

“Only if you’ll do me the courtesy of calling me Diana.”

“I think I can do that,” Eliza said.

“Clark was a bit vague on the reason for the call and more than a little flustered. He said you needed to speak about the girl’s medical needs while they are in Themyscira,” Diana said.

“That’s because I told him I needed to ask you if the girls needed tampons while they were on the island.”

Diana laughed, and even over the phone, it was a musical sound. “Such a simple tactic, and sadly, so effective against men.”

“I’ve never had it fail.”

“What did you really wish to discuss?” Diana asked.

“Are you familiar with the term ‘transgender’ and what it means?” Eliza asked.

“Of course.”

“I thought you would be, but it’s better to ask than make assumptions,” Eliza said. “How much of Maggie’s situation did Clark tell you?”

“That she was kicked out by her parents after making a romantic overture to a female classmate and that you took her in.”

“That’s the short version, yes. She also has a transgender brother.”

“You mean a brother who was assigned female at birth and is transitioning to male?” Diana asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay. I wanted to make sure. The terminology is confusing to some.”

“Thank you for checking. His name is Mike. There was a hearing yesterday to determine if he
would be removed from the Rodas’ care. He announced on the stand that he was a boy, and the parents disowned him on the spot. They’ve signed a voluntary termination of parental rights.”

“I do not have words. To cast aside two children…”

“I know,” Eliza said. “I wish I could say I’m surprised, but I’ve seen much worse.”

“As have I. But lack of surprise does not preclude horror.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“What will happen to the boy?” Diana asked.

“I’m adopting him. Normally it’s a four-month process, but I’m acquainted with the judge involved, and I think we might be able to get it done before the end of the school year.”

“I can see why my friend in Gotham holds you in such high regard.”

“Mike needed a home. And he needs his sister.”

“True and true, but you also gave a home to his sister when you were not obligated. Kindness and heroism are no less kind or heroic because they are needful. What you have done was necessary, but of all those who could, you were the one who stepped up and did. Do not allow your horror at the failings of others to prevent you from recognizing the good you do in this world. It is not a sin to know your own worth, and doing so allows you to be of greater worth still.”

“You’re going to make me blush.”

“A breathtaking sight I am sure,” Diana said. “One I am sadly not there to enjoy. But tell me, Eliza, how can I help?”

“Maggie is supposed to go to Themyscira with you this summer, but she’s going to college as soon as she gets back,” Eliza said.

“Oh,” Diana said. “I see the problem.”

“I’m not sure what to do. I think Clark is right. I think Kara needs a break from pretending to be human. But I don’t think she’ll go without Alex, and I don’t think Alex will go without Maggie,” Eliza said.

“And you’re not sure that Maggie will go without her brother,” Diana said.

“Yes,” Eliza said.

“Understandable,” Diana said. “There is a great deal of wisdom in Clark’s idea. Giving Kara a space where she can be her true self, even for a short time, will make it easier for her to tolerate the mask she has to wear on a daily basis. I think, however, that you have a different problem with Maggie’s brother.

“Themyscira is a place for women. It was made so by the gods. Over the years, in times for need, there have been exceptions. Men have set foot there, under dispensation from the queen. And if I were to ask, I believe my mother would make an exception out of compassion for Maggie and her brother. I will say honestly that I believe it might do him more harm than good. To accept him into a space reserved for women might be taken as a denial of his manhood and a refusal to acknowledge the truth of who he is.”
“You may have a point,” Eliza said. “I didn’t think of that.”

“The good news is, we have time. Almost two months to find a solution. Speak with your children. Find out what they want, and we’ll proceed from there.”

“I’ll do that.”

“And save my number,” Diana said. “I suspect Clark has had enough tampon-related trauma for a good long while.”

Eliza laughed. “Sadly, it’s the only kind I can give him. If I hit him upside the head with one of my cast-iron skillets, it would do more damage to the skillet than to him.”

“As hardheaded as he is, I suspect that would be the case even when he was without his powers.”

“I suspect you’re right,” Eliza said. “It’s been a pleasure talking to you.”

“Likewise. I hope I won’t need another crisis to hear from you again.”

“I don’t think you will.”

Wednesday, March 15, 2006

“Are you ready?” Eliza asked Mike.

“Yeah,” he said.

Eliza reached down and took his hand. “Come on. It will be okay.”

Together, they walked through the front door of Northside Middle School. Eliza let Mike lead the way, and he guided them to the main office.

“You need anything before you head to class?” Eliza asked.

“No, I’m good.”

“Alright. Alex and Maggie will pick you up after school. I’ll be a bit late, but I should be home by six. I’ll see you then.”

“Okay,” Mike said. She watched him until he disappeared down the hall, then turned and walked into the office.

“Hello,” she said to the woman sitting behind the counter. “My name is Eliza Danvers. I’m the foster mother of one of your students as of Monday afternoon, and I need to get the records changed to reflect that.”

“Of course,” the woman said. “My name is Angelina. Which student?”

“Mike Rodas,” Eliza said. “Your records will have the name Micaela.”

“How do you spell that?” Angelina asked.

Eliza spelled the name out for her.

“Ah. Here she is. Do you have copies of the custody paperwork?”
“Yes.” Eliza handed Angelina a thick stack of papers, copies of the documents that gave her legal custody of Mike. “I also need to speak with the principal if he or she is available.”

“I’ll see if she’s available. Can I tell her what you’d like to speak with her about?”

“I need to see about making some special arrangements for Mike going forward.”

“What sort of arrangements?” Angelina asked. “If it’s about an IEP, those go through the district, not the individual school. I can give you the forms to fill out.”

“It’s not about an IEP,” Eliza said. “And I do need to discuss it directly with the principal.”

“It would be helpful if I know what the issue was.”

“I’m afraid it’s a private matter.”

“I see,” Angelina said. “Excuse me for a moment.”

Eliza watched as she got up and walked into an office off to the side. After a few minutes, she returned with a short blonde woman behind her. The blonde walked around the counter.

“It’s Mrs. Danvers, right?”

“Dr. Danvers,” Eliza said.

“My apologies. I’m Principal Turner. How can I help you?”

“Is there somewhere private that we could talk?” Eliza asked.

“My office. This way.”

Eliza followed her into the office and took a seat in front of her desk as Principal Turner sat down behind it. “I understand that this is about Micaela Rodas?”

“Mike,” Eliza said.

“Mike. If I can ask, how did you come to be Ms. Rodas’s foster mother? Did something happen to her parents?”

“I’m not sure if you’re aware, but Mike has an older sister, Maggie,” Eliza said. “Mike’s parents threw Maggie out of the house when they discovered she was gay. When that happened, I took Maggie in, and helped her get emancipated.”

“I see.”

“It triggered an investigation by CPS, which lead to a hearing on Monday. During the course of the hearing, it came out that Mike is transgender. His parents disowned him on the spot. I’ve been awarded custody, and I’m in the process of formally adopting him. Angelina has the custody and guardianship paperwork, but I wanted to discuss the school’s policy on transgender students in order to find out how best to proceed.”

“I see.” Principal Turner folded her hands together, centering them in front of her on the desk. “Dr. Danvers, I’m afraid this is something of a tricky topic.”

“I don’t see how. Mike is a transgender boy. I’m simply asking how we go about facilitating his transition within school policy.”
“Dr. Danvers, we don’t have a policy on this.”

“Well, make one. I can point you to suggested policy guidelines from a number of transgender advocacy groups.”

“Any sort of policy on this would have to come from the district.”

“I see,” Eliza said. “Well, Principal Turner, I trust that you will keep this discussion private until after I’ve had time to meet with the school board and make sure an appropriate policy is established?”

“Of course.”

“Then if you’ll excuse me, I have to go arrange a meeting with them,” Eliza said.

Maggie knew something was wrong the moment she saw Mike walk out of the school. There was something about the set of his shoulders that seemed wrong. It took a moment for her to realize what it was. He looked the way he used to when their parents had been yelling at him about cutting his hair too short or trying to get him to wear a dress or any of the hundred other ways they’d tried to force him into the mold of what they expected him to be.

She glanced over at Alex and knew she had spotted it too.

“Hey, Cariño,” Maggie said as Mike reached the car. He looked up at her, and Maggie didn’t even have to ask. She just stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, and he hugged her tightly in return.

“Rough day, huh, kiddo?” Alex asked.

Mike nodded.

“Want to talk about what happened?” Maggie asked.

Mike shook his head.

“Want to go for a ride on one of the motorcycles when we get home?” Alex asked.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Alex said. “We’ll just have to stop and get you a helmet and a jacket on the way home.”

Alex smiled as she watched Maggie helping Mike with his new helmet. Alex knew she’d technically violated the ‘check before buying clothes’ rule, but she was pretty sure Eliza would be okay with it. She’d let Mike pick the helmet and the jacket he’d wanted, and Mike had picked a helmet with a werewolf on the side and a classic asymmetric motorcycle jacket in the same style Susan wore. It looked good on him, and the way he spent the entire ride home just staring at the helmet in wonder, Alex knew she’d take the heat if Eliza was pissed about the credit card bill.

“There you go,” Maggie said as she finished getting the helmet adjusted.

“How do I look?” Mike asked.

“Pretty badass,” Alex said. “You ready?”
“Yeah.”

Alex climbed onto her dad’s Ducati, and Mike climbed on behind her as Maggie walked over to the button on the wall and activated the garage door opener.

“You bring my brother back in one piece, or else, Danvers.”

“Don’t worry,” Alex said. “Mike and I totally got this. Right, bro?”

“Yeah,” Mike echoed. “We got this.”

Alex backed the bike out of the garage, then started it up. She made sure Mike’s hands were wrapped around her, then started down the driveway. She checked to make sure it was clear before pulling out onto the street and twisting the throttle.

“Where are we?” Mike asked as Alex fastened his helmet to the bike.

“Swan Beach,” Alex said. “Come on.”

She led them down onto the beach, which they had nearly to themselves. There was a girl jogging and a guy playing frisbee with his dog, plus a lifeguard on the lifeguard stand, but no one else. Not that Alex had really expected there to be. It was a Wednesday in March, and the water temperatures were still a bit on the cold side for there to be a lot of people there.

“It’s a little early in the season,” Alex said, “but I love to come out here and surf sometimes.”

“You surf?”

“Yeah. A few more weeks, and the water will be warm enough that I can teach you and Maggie.”

“Cool.”

Alex lowered herself down onto the sand and patted the ground. Mike sat down beside her.

“What happened at school?” Alex asked.

“Nothing.”

“Okay.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.” Alex shrugged. “You’re a tough kid. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t. If you want to handle it yourself, that’s your business. I just want to make sure you know that you don’t have to handle it alone if you don’t want to. You’ve got a mom and three big sisters who will do anything for you.”

Mike looked at her for a minute before turning to stare out at the waves. He leaned against her, and Alex put an arm around his shoulder.

“Ms. Thornton said it was a shame I cut my hair,” Mike said after a while. “She said it made me look like a boy. I told her that was the point, and she said, ‘But you’re such a pretty little girl’.”

Alex leaned over and kissed Mike on the top of the head. “Ms. Thornton sounds like a clueless idiot.” It wasn’t the word she wanted to use, but she figured Mike could learn to swear in high
school like everyone else. “You are an incredibly handsome young man. I know that; Maggie knows that; Kara knows that; Mom knows that. It might take the rest of the world a little time to catch up, but they’ll get there.”

“I hope so,” Mike said.

“If they don’t, me, Maggie and Kara will punch them for you.”

“You might have to punch a lot of people.”

“That’s okay. I really like punching people. Just ask Kara.”

Thursday, March 16, 2006

“Hey, Eliza,” William said. “How’s my favorite scientist doing today?”

“Well, that kind of depends on you,” Eliza said. “I need to ask a favor.”

“What kind of favor?”

“Do you remember when I mentioned talking to Child Protective Services about Maggie’s little sister?”

“Vaguely.”

“Well, as it turns out, Maggie’s little sister is actually Maggie’s little brother. Which Maggie’s birth parents reacted to about as well as you would expect, given that I took her in after they beat her and threw her out of the house for being gay.”

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah. He’s smart. He told them from the witness stand in the middle of the CPS adjudication hearing. It was still horrible, but neither one of them tried to hit him.”

“I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess that you will be needing those adoption benefits after all.”

“You know me so well,” Eliza said. “But I’ve been reviewing the company’s benefits policy regarding gender transition, and I have to ask, what the hell, William?”

“Is it bad?”

“It’s a nightmare. I knew there might be a few details that we’d need to address, but I never imagined that it would be this bad.”

“I’m sorry. I had someone in HR write up the medical policies with instructions to be as inclusive as possible. I looked the policies over, and I thought they were pretty good. They cover hormones and reassignment surgery. I’m guessing there are gaps, though.”

“Ones you could drive a truck through,” Eliza said. “Puberty blockers are specifically excluded. There’s pretty much no coverage at all for transition of a dependent minor.”

“So how about we pretend that we did all the back and forth, and I just admit that I fucked up because I was too busy to research the issue in-depth and trusted my HR department not to be terrible, and you send me the proposal for a revised policy that I know you’ve already written, and
I’ll send it along to HR with instructions to have legal review it and have our insurance carrier update our coverage by the end of next week?”

“Sent. Now, about the favor…”

“That wasn’t the favor?”

“No, that was correcting a mistake,” Eliza said. “Favor implies something that shouldn’t have been done years ago.”

“Okay. What’s the favor?”

“How would you feel about opening a facility in National City?” Eliza asked.

“Is my alternative going to be losing you to one of my competitors?”

“Right now, that’s a solid maybe. Mike is going to finish out the school year where he is, but when I spoke to the principal about their policies on transgender students, I didn’t get a great response. I’m trying to schedule a meeting with the school board on the issue, but I have no idea how much traction I’ll get with them, especially while I’m campaigning to get one of their principals fired.

“Have you looked at private schools?”

“I have, but I don’t like what I’m seeing. Almost all of them have strong religious affiliations, which I already knew because I’d considered sending Alex and Kara to private school and decided against it for exactly that reason. Also, Kara has applied for early enrollment at National City University. I don’t want to say no when she gets accepted, but I also don’t want to send my 17-year-old daughter to National City alone, either.”

“I understand. Let me make some inquiries. If we can find an existing facility, I think we could be up and running the beginning of August and get you and your projects relocated by then. Is there anyone here you’d trust to take over as the lead for the Midvale facility?”

“I can give you two internal names and three external, all of which I’d be willing to sign off on.”

“Okay. I’ll get the ball rolling, but I’ll check back with you before I pull the trigger on anything.”

“Thank you, William.”

“Eliza, I’ve said it before: you’re the best bioengineer I have ever met. The money we’re making off your patents alone would justify almost any expense to keep you on the payroll and not working for the competition, but more importantly, you are my best friend. Anything you need, all you have to do is ask.”

“Hey, Alex, you have a minute?” Maggie asked.

Alex looked up from her homework to see Maggie standing in the doorway to her and Kara’s bedroom. “Sure. What’s up?”

“Come with me.”

Alex followed Maggie downstairs and into Maggie’s bedroom. As soon as they were inside, Maggie closed the door, and Alex smiled at the sneaking suspicion about what came next. Sure enough, Maggie looped her arms around Alex’s shoulders and kissed her, and Alex found herself melting into it, wrapping her arms around Maggie and pulling her close, so their bodies were
pressed together as they kissed. Maggie urged her backwards, walking slowly across the room until they bumped up against the bed. Alex broke the kiss long enough to sit down, only to have Maggie climb up onto the bed, straddling Alex’s legs as she kissed her again.

“God, I’ve missed you,” Maggie said.

“I haven’t gone anywhere.”

“I know. But I’ve been so busy with Mike, it feels like we haven’t spent any time together in days.”

“I understand. But we have all the time in the world.”

Maggie kissed her again, pushing Alex back down on the bed. “Kara’s teaching him how to paint. They’ll be busy for at least a couple of hours.”

Alex smiled up at Maggie. “Mom won’t be home until after six tonight.”

“I know,” Maggie said as she sat up and reached for the hem of her shirt. “And I locked my door.”

She pulled her shirt off, and Alex’s breath caught in her throat because this time, there was no bra on underneath it. Alex reached up, running her hands over bare skin. Maggie closed her eyes and bit her lower lip, moaning softly when Alex palmed one of her bare breasts.

“Is this okay?” Alex asked.

“Very.”

Alex smiled and pulled Maggie down to kiss her.

Kara sat on the stool watching as Mike worked. When Mike had asked her to show him how to paint, she’d been a little worried about how to approach it. Back on Krypton, she’d started out with digital painting and moved on to pigment on medium film later. The idea of painting on stretched cloth or paper had been odd to her when she’d first arrived, and it had taken a lot of getting used to. Earth’s digital painting tools were incredibly primitive compared to what Kara had learned on, and they were both expensive and incredibly fragile, so she had never picked it up. It might be something that Mike would enjoy, especially if he wanted to become a full-time artist down the road, but that didn’t solve her immediate problem of how to ease him into it.

Kara had practically cried the first time she’d tried a watercolor, and it had taken her months to develop any real skill with it. She didn’t want Mike to get discouraged. Kara herself didn’t care for acrylics—the way the colors blended never really seemed right to her—so she’d finally settled on oils.

She’d pulled out a blank 5”x7” canvas board and set it up on her portable easel, which she had adjusted to a good height for Mike. She walked him through the basics of color mixing before letting him loose. He used a bit of vine charcoal to do a rough sketch on the canvas, then he’d picked up the brushes and started filling areas with color. At first, he kept glancing over at her for reassurance, but the more he worked, the more absorbed he got until he was completely lost in the painting itself, while Kara just sat and watched the joy on his face.

“What do you think?” Mike asked when he finished.

“I think it’s beautiful,” Kara said as she looked at the sleeping wolf he’d painted on the canvas.
“It’s not as good as yours.”

“No, but I’ve been painting for years and years. This is your first time.”

“You think I’ll get better?”

“I know you will. We’ll get you your own easel, paints, and brushes next time we go to the art supply store, and we’ll get you a bunch of canvases. And we can sign you up for painting classes. All you need is practice, and we’re going to make sure you get plenty.”

“Do you still have your first painting?” Mike asked.

“No. I… You know what, let me show you something.”

Kara got up and walked over to the shelving unit and knelt down. She pulled out one of the first paintings she’d done after arriving on Earth, and brought it back over, setting it on her own easel.

“Who’s that?” Mike asked.

“That’s my mom. Her name was Alura.”

Mike looked over at her. “Mrs. Danvers isn’t your mom?”

“No. I’m adopted. Just like you’re going to be. And at about the same age. I lost all my old art too. That’s my first painting after I came to live here. I’d been painting for years and years by that point, but I didn’t have any pictures of my family. I didn’t have anything from home, really. Just this.” Kara took out her mother’s pendant.

“What is that?” he asked.

“It’s a pendant. It belonged to my mom. My dad gave it to her when they got engaged.”

“Were they nice?”

“Yeah. They were great.”

“What happened to them?” Mike asked.

“They died in a fire. That’s why I don’t have anything except my mom’s necklace. Everything else burned up.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I still miss them a lot, but I came here, and I have Alex and Eliza, and now I have Maggie…” Kara reached out and tapped the tip of his nose with her finger. “And you.”

Mike smiled as he let out a little laugh.

“I’m warning you, though. I’ve never had a brother before, so you’re going to have to be patient with me.”

Mike gave a dramatic sigh. “The things I do for people.”

Kara laughed and reached out, mussing Mike’s hair. “You know, we still have some time before Eliza gets home, and I have plenty of blank canvases. Want to try another one?”
“Yeah!”

Alex lay on her back in Maggie’s bed with Maggie pressed up against her side in what had long since turned into their normal cuddling position, and Alex was pretty sure had become their normal sleeping position at this point. It felt a little different, though, because this time, they were both topless, and the feel of Maggie’s bare skin pressed against her own was making it impossible to think. Not that she really wanted to think. She just wanted to lie there and enjoy the memory of what they had done over the last couple of hours while the almost-painful ache in her body at what they hadn’t done slowly subsided.

“You’re not mad, are you?” Maggie asked.

“No.” Alex reached up and cradled Maggie’s cheek in her hand, tilting her head so she was at the perfect angle, then she leaned over and kissed Maggie softly, lingering a moment before she pulled back. “I promise you, I’m not mad.”

“I just don’t want our first time to be something rushed in the middle of the afternoon while we’re worried about finishing before your mom gets home.”

“I told you the night we had our first date, I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable or pressured. We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. I’ll wait as long as you want.”

Maggie leaned in and kissed her again, and Alex whimpered as she felt Maggie’s hand running over her abs.

“You’re making it hard for me to be good,” Alex said. “You know that, right?”

“I can’t help it. I… Is it too soon to say I love you?”

“No.”

“Good. Because I do. I love you. I love the way you’ve been there for me. I love the way you take care of Kara. I love that you introduced me to Susan. I loved the way you were willing to be my friend even when I said I wasn’t ready for a relationship. I love the way you call me family. I love the way you’re ready to protect Mike. You make me feel like I’m worth loving.”

“I love you too,” Alex said. “I… You make me feel like I matter. I always feel like I’m not enough, but when you look at me, when you kiss me, I feel like I could touch the stars if I wanted.”

“Now you’re making it hard to behave.”

“Your birthday is the 29th, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What day is that?”

“It’s a Wednesday.”

“How about the weekend after, we get a hotel room for the weekend?”

“Isn’t that expensive?”

“A little, yeah. But I’ve got some money saved up. We could go up to Coast City Friday after school. Go out for dinner. Make a real date of it.”
“You think your mom would let us do that?” Maggie asked.

“I’m pretty sure she would. Especially since I’ve got enough money to pay for it.”

“You do?”

“You didn’t seriously think Kara’s the only one running a side business around here, did you?”

Maggie narrowed her eyes. “What have you been doing?”

“Nothing,” Alex said. “Certainly not soldering extra memory chips into people’s graphing calculators so that their formulas aren’t deleted by a RAM wipe.”

“You’re helping people cheat on math tests?”

“Of course not. I’m just improving their calculators. For 100 dollars a head.”

Maggie buried her face in Alex’s shoulder and started laughing.

“What do you say? Coast City for your birthday?” Alex asked.

Maggie lifted her head up and looked at Alex. “Yeah. Yeah, I like that idea.”

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“Mike, girls, can I see you in the living room?” Eliza called from the bottom of the stairs. She waited a minute until she heard them moving around, then headed into the living room to wait. A couple of minutes later, all four of them came piling into the room. Alex, Maggie, and Mike took the sofa, and Kara dropped into the second easy chair.

“What’s up?” Alex asked.

“I wanted to talk to all of you about your plans for the summer,” Eliza said.

“I thought we already had that worked out,” Alex said.

“We did, but that was before we knew Mike was going to be living here.”

“I just thought he…” Alex stopped. “Oh.”

“What is it?” Mike asked.

“Alex, Maggie and Kara were going to spend the summer with a friend of Kara’s cousin. But the place they’re going only allows women and girls. No boys.”

“Oh,” Mike said.

“So, I wanted to discuss some options. We’ve got four choices. The first one is everyone stays here for the summer. It’s the easiest option, but we made these plans for a reason, so I don’t think it’s the best. The second option is that Kara goes alone, while the rest of you stay here. The third option is that Kara and Alex go, while Maggie and Mike stay here. The fourth option is you girls all go, and if he wants, Mike can go to a local day camp for art or an LGBT-friendly summer camp.”

She watched as Maggie turned to look at Mike. “What do you think, Cariño? You want to do an art camp, or try summer camp?”
“Would I have to sleep in the girl’s cabins if I went to summer camp?” Mike asked.

“No. I talked to the people who run the summer camp. If you go, you’d be in one of the boy’s cabins.”

A smile spread across his face. “Does the summer camp have art classes too?”

“They do. Not as much as the day camp, but there would be other kids there like you there.”

“Really?”

“Yes, sweetheart.”

Mike looked over at Maggie. “Would it be okay with you if I went?”

“Of course,” Maggie said. “Is it okay with you if Kara, Alex, and I sneak off for a couple of months while you’re at camp?”

“Yeah. Where are you guys going?”

“It’s an island in the middle of the Mediterranean,” Eliza said before any of the girls could say anything. “Off the coast of Greece.”

“Cool. What’s there?”

“Tell you what,” Eliza said. “We actually need to talk about a lot of things you need to know if you’re going to be living here, so why don’t you hold off on those questions, and we’ll talk about all of it this weekend. Is that okay?”

“Sure,” Mike said.

“Great. Now, who’s up for Barbeque for dinner?”

“Eliza!” Diana said as she answered the phone. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

Eliza found herself smiling at the enthusiasm in Diana’s voice. “I’m calling to thank you for sending me that information packet about Camp Rainbow.”

“I gather that Mike met the idea with some degree of enthusiasm?”

“Once I told him he wouldn’t have to stay in the girl’s cabins, he got really excited about it,” Eliza said. “He spent all of dinner asking questions.”

“Wonderful. And the girls still wish to visit Themyscira this summer?”

“Definitely. Honestly, I wish I could go with them.”

“If you would like to join them, I can make the arrangements,” Diana said. “My sisters and I would welcome a mind and spirit as fierce as yours.”

“Flatterer.”

“I speak only the truth.”

“I wish I could. Unfortunately, I need to be reachable in the event that there’s an issue with Mike at camp, and it looks like I’m going to spend the summer moving to National City.”
“May I ask why? Clark said you were quite comfortable in Midvale.”

“I had a word with Mike’s principal when he went back to school yesterday. She’s unwilling to accommodate Mike’s transition without a policy in place from the school district, and so far the district hasn’t been very receptive to my attempts to set up a meeting to discuss the issue. I’m arranging a therapist for Mike, along with a doctor’s visit. If he decides to transition, which seems very likely, I think he might have an easier time in one of the private schools in National City.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I knew some adjustments would be necessary as soon as I found out Mike is transgender, but I admit, I will miss this place.”

“It’s unfortunate that the prejudices of others are driving you from your home. I wish I could help, but this is not the sort of battle I am equipped to fight.”

“You already have helped,” Eliza said. “The summer camp for Mike. Opening Themyscira to the girls for the summer.”

“Little things.”

“Now who’s refusing to acknowledge the good she’s done?”

Diana laughed. “You use my own words against me. A devious tactic, but your point is taken.”

“And on that note, I’ll let you go. I’ve taken up too much of your time as is.”

“Nonsense,” Diana said. “Talking to you is always time well spent, and you may call me for any reason.”

“I don’t want to intrude. I know how busy you must be.”

“You’re not an intrusion, I promise you. I have too few people I can speak with in such an unguarded manner, and almost all of them are men. I miss the company and conversation of women terribly when I am away from home.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Eliza said. “Honestly, I might not mind some company myself while the kids are away. It will be the first time I’ve been alone in the house for more than a weekend in over 20 years.”

“Then I shall visit.”

“I’d like that.”

“I should go,” Diana said. “But truly, call me any time, for any reason.”

“Good night.”

“To you also.”
Friday, March 17, 2006

“Hey, Kara!” Vicki shouted.

Kara turned around and saw Vicki running towards her, dodging students along the way. A small lump of dread settled into her stomach at the sight, and she wished she hadn’t turned around. She liked Vicki a lot. Something which surprised her, if she were honest. But enjoying the company of this newer, nicer Vicki didn’t translate into the same sort of romantic interest Vicki obviously had in her, and Kara was afraid that as soon as she told Vicki that, things would go back to how they were in the bad old days when Vicki hated her. She’d been sort of half hoping that if she ignored the problem, it would go away. That she could just avoid the issue until Vicki lost interest or they all graduated, but it looked like that wasn’t going to work.

“Hey,” Vicki said as she stopped in front of Kara.

“Hey,” Kara said.

“Do you have a minute?”

Kara considered saying no, but she decided against it. If Vicki had finally worked up the nerve to approach her, all Kara would be doing would be dodging the issue, and she didn’t see any point in delaying things now that they were inevitable. “Yeah. Of course. What’s up?”

“I… um…” Vicki stuttered, and as Kara watched, Vicki’s cheeks turned red. Vicki closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders, and when she opened her eyes again, Kara could see the determination in them. “I like you. A lot. I like you a lot. I don’t know if you feel the same way or not, but I never said anything to Alex and missed my chance with her, but I don’t want to make that same mistake with you. Because I really, really like you. I didn’t expect it, and I know I was awful to you before, and I know you probably hate me, but I just need to know if there’s any chance you feel the same way.”

Kara stared at her for a moment, watching the mix of hope and fear playing across Vicki’s face, and she hated that she was going to take that hope away from her, but she just didn’t feel that way about Vicki, and she knew she never would. She could bring herself to forgive Vicki; she could
even enjoy her company, but there was too much between them for her to ever open herself up to Vicki that way.

“I’m sorry,” Kara said. “I like you a lot, Vicki, but not the way you want me to.”

Kara watched as Vicki deflated a little, but it wasn’t anything like the dramatic blow up or the complete meltdown she’d half expected.

“Okay. I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

“It’s okay. I was only uncomfortable because I knew I couldn’t give you what you wanted. But I would really like it if we could still be friends.”

“I’d like that too.”

“But you have to stop glaring at Tina like you want to stuff her pom-poms down her throat.”

“I can probably manage that,” Vicki said. “After all, it only took me a week to stop daydreaming about strangling Maggie with her boot laces.”

Kara laughed and shook her head. “Walk me out?”

“Sure. I…”

“Alex!” Maggie screamed from somewhere out in front of the school.

Kara didn’t hear the end of Vicki’s sentence.

Maggie smiled as she spotted Alex leaning against the bike rack, checking her cell phone. It was a simple sight, something she saw four or five times a week, but for some reason it felt special. Maybe it was because of what they had said to each other the night before. Maybe it was because of the plans they had made. Maybe it was because Alex had accepted her and her brother as family. She didn’t know, and in the end she didn’t care. She just crossed the distance between them, and when Alex looked up from her phone, Maggie leaned in and kissed her. Alex hesitated for just a moment, but then wrapped her arms around Maggie and kissed her back.

“Hey,” Maggie said after she broke off the kiss.

“Hey,” Alex said. “What did I do to deserve that?”

“You were just yourself,” Maggie said with a smile.

“Well, I’ll have to be myself more often, if that’s the reward I get. No Kara?”

“She didn’t catch up to me at the usual spot said. I suspect Vicki might have something to do with that.”

“You think Vicki finally decided to talk to Kara?”

“Yeah, I think she might have.”

“Should we go rescue Kara?”

“We could. Or we could go to the car and make out like a couple of teenagers until Kara shows up.”
“I like your plan better.”

“I thought you—”

“Magarita!”

Maggie actually flinched at the sound of her father’s voice yelling her name. She hated herself for it, but a lifetime of instinct was hard to fight. She turned around, suddenly feeling like she was five years old and telling her mother she wanted to wear pants instead of a dress, or 16 years old and trying to tell her father the girls at school had started the fight, or every age in between and terrified of her father’s anger. She looked at him and was surprised to find he wasn’t in his uniform, but she felt a cold chill as she saw the fury in his eyes. She had no idea why he was there or what he was mad about, but she knew it was going to be bad.

“You can’t be here,” Alex said, but it didn’t slow Maggie’s father down at all.

He stopped right in front of Maggie and stood there, practically shaking with rage.

“Papi, you can’t be here,” she said.

“You ungrateful, selfish little bitch,” he snarled. “Do you know what you’ve done?”

“Papi, there’s a restraining order,” Maggie said. “You can’t be here.”

He took a step towards her. “I know there’s a restraining order. So does the County Commissioner. He walked into the station today and told me he couldn’t have a man who beats his children as Sheriff. He fired me. He took my job away in front of my men. He humiliated me because of your lies.”

“What lies?” Maggie asked.

“That I mistreated you. That I beat you.”

“You did. You hit me so hard Mrs. Danvers had to sew my lip back together.”

“Shut up!” he screamed. “I put a roof over your head. I fed you. I clothed you. I sent you to school. I gave you everything, and you spit in my face! You shamed me! You destroyed me, you destroyed my family, you ruined my name!”

“You did it to yourself!” Maggie yelled back. She knew it was a mistake the moment she did. She saw something in his face change, and she recognized it because she’d seen it before. She saw it just before he’d slapped her on Valentine’s Day. She saw it just before he took a swing at Alex a couple of weeks earlier. She saw it, and she stepped back, trying to get away as he raised his hand to hit her.

Alex must have recognized it too, because she stepped in between Maggie and her father the way Maggie had done the day her father had tried to hit Alex. He didn’t seem to care, or maybe he hated Alex too because he didn’t hesitate. He swung, just like he had before, and this time Kara wasn’t there to catch the blow.

The sound of his fist hand hitting Alex’s face rung out like a gunshot, and however brave and strong Alex was, he outweighed her by a good 60 or 70 pounds, and she staggered under the blow. She would have been fine if it had happened anywhere else, but they were right next to the bike rack, and her foot caught on one of the sections of steel pipe that formed the base of the rack, and she tripped. Maggie saw her start to fall and reached out for her, but the steps she had taken to get
away from her father put her out of reach as Alex fell, and she watched in horror as Alex’s head connected with the bike rack on the way down, and felt her stomach heave at the snap she heard.

“Alex!” Maggie screamed.

There was another crack, louder somehow, and Maggie turned towards to see her dad laying on the ground, the left side of his face mangled and bloody, bits of bone sticking through the skin. Kara stood over him, but not for long. She turned and rushed to Alex’s side, kneeling down next to her sister. Kara pushed up her glasses, and looked at Alex, and Maggie knew Kara must be using her X-ray vision to see how bad it was.

“Call an ambulance!” Kara ordered.

Maggie looked around at the students who were all staring blankly and reached for her own phone. She flipped it open and dialed 911.

“Hello, this is 911. Please state the nature of the emergency,” the operator said.

“I need an ambulance,” Maggie said.

“Okay,” the operator said. “I’m showing you at Midvale High School, is that right?”

“Yes. By the bike rack.”

“Why do you need an ambulance?” the operator asked.

“My dad is here. He hit my girlfriend. Alex. She fell and hit her head.”

“Your father hit your girlfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Where is he now? Are you safe?”

“He’s on the ground. Kara hit him and he’s on the ground.”

“Is he moving?”

“No.”

“Who’s Kara?”

“Alex’s sister.”

“Is Alex moving?”

“No,” Maggie said. “She’s bleeding. There’s a lot of blood. Please, I need an ambulance.”

“One’s on the way. Just stay with me.”

Eliza looked up from her microscope at the sound of the lab door opening. One look at Marissa’s face told Eliza that whatever her assistant had to say, it wasn’t good, and she could think of 100 different things it might be, each worse than the last, but she wasn’t prepared at all for what Marissa said.

“Midvale High is on the phone. Alex has been in an accident.”
Maggie sat in the waiting room of Midvale General Hospital’s ER, arms wrapped around herself as she tried to stop shaking, but she just couldn’t get it out of her head. She kept seeing it over and over again. Alex stepping between her and her dad. Alex getting hit. Alex stumbling over the bike rack. Alex falling. Alex hitting her head. Alex bleeding from where her head had hit the rack, and where the ring had sliced open her cheek. Alex in a neck brace. Alex strapped to a backboard. Alex being loaded into an ambulance.

All because of her.

Alex was hurt because of her. Because Maggie couldn’t keep her feelings to herself and gave that damn card to Elisa Wilkey. Because Maggie had been too scared to run that first night at the Danvers. Because she’d stayed, even after she’d been warned that she was a danger to the Danvers. Because she’d let herself fall in love with Alex and let Alex fall in love with her. Because Alex had tried to protect her. Because Alex had gotten between Maggie and her father after Maggie provoked him.

Alex was hurt, and it was her fault, and Alex might die, and it was her fault, and Kara might end up in some prison for aliens, and it was her fault.

It was all her fault, and she felt like she couldn’t breathe. Like the walls of the waiting room were closing in. She wasn’t even sure how she got there. She remembered calling for an ambulance. She remembered Ms. Mercer being there and pushing the students away from them. She remembered sirens and paramedics and Sheriff’s deputies. She remembered crying while they loaded Alex into the ambulance. She remembered the paramedics’ refusing to let her get in. She remembered Kara’s pulling her away. She remembered Kara driving them to the hospital. All of it was fractured and disjointed. Individual moments not connected to one another, none of which added up to a coherent whole.

Alex was hurt, and it was her fault, and nothing made sense anymore.

“IT will be okay,” Kara said, but Maggie knew Kara was lying to them both by the dead, hollow sound of her voice. “Alex will be okay.”

Maggie looked over at Kara, who was holding herself and rocking back and forth, and she wondered which of them Kara was trying to convince. Maybe it was both of them. Maggie wasn’t sure, but she knew Kara had been through this before. Seeing her family, her whole world destroyed in front of her eyes. She knew this couldn’t be any easier for Kara than it was for her, and she wanted to reach out, to put an arm around her, to offer any comfort she could. But what right did she have? She was the cause of their misery.

Kara should have left her under those bleachers.

She couldn’t even pretend that it was a surprise. Agent Neill had warned her. Had told her she was a danger to the Danvers. Had begged her to walk away. Maggie had ignored the warning and stayed because she was scared and lonely, and she wanted a family. Maybe her father was right. Maybe she was selfish. Maybe she was poison.

Eliza walked into the ER and headed straight for the admissions desk. The triage nurse looked up as she approached.

“How can I help you?” the nurse asked.
“My daughter was brought in by ambulance from Midvale High School,” Eliza said.

“What’s your name?”

“Dr. Eliza Danvers.”

“Thank you, Dr. Danvers. Your daughter’s name?”

“Alexandra Danvers. It may be under Alex.”

Eliza watched as the nurse pulled up the records. “One moment,” she said as she reached for the phone. She dialed a number and waited.

“Alex Danvers’ mother is here,” the nurse said. “Okay.” She hung up the phone and looked up at Eliza. “Dr. Callison will be with you in a moment.”

“Thank you.”

Eliza turned around and spotted Maggie and Kara sitting against the back wall of the waiting area. Both of them looked like they were in shock, and she started to go to them, but the door opened before she could, and a woman in scrubs and a doctor’s coat stepped out.

“Ms. Danvers?”

“Dr. Danvers,” Eliza said. “I’m an MD.”

“Well, that will make this easier and harder. I’m Dr. Madison Callison. I was the first doctor to see Alex when they brought her in.”

Eliza took a deep breath, and a knot of fear settled into her stomach at the phrase, ‘first doctor.’ First implied that things were bad enough that there had been more than one, which meant whatever had happened was serious.

“Dr. Danvers, would you like to sit down while we talk?”

“No,” Eliza said.

“Okay. If you change your mind, let me know.”

“Please, just tell me how Alex is.”

“Your daughter was struck across the face with considerable force by a man wearing a ring with sharp edges. The blow fractured her cheek and her jaw, and the ring sliced open her cheek. In and of itself, none of that is terribly serious. The cut is clean, and while painful, the fractures won’t cause any long-term issues. But the blow knocked Alex off balance, and she fell down. On the way down, she hit her head on a bike rack. The impact split her scalp, left her with a skull fracture that runs from her temple to behind her ear, a severe concussion, and a broken neck.”

“A broken neck?” Eliza asked.

“Fractures of the C1 and C2 vertebra. Fairly common in these types of head injuries, but in your daughter’s case, fairly severe. We don’t know anything definite yet, but given the location and severity of the fractures… Dr. Danvers, you need to prepare yourself for the possibility that your daughter might experience significant loss of function.”

Eliza closed her eyes as the reality of what she’d just been told sank in. Alex, her precious,
wonderful Alex, in a wheelchair, or worse, for the rest of her life. Her dreams of being a doctor
gone.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Danvers. We have her in surgery right now, and our best orthopedic surgeon and
neurosurgeon are working on her, but it’s going to take hours to get her into anything like a stable
condition, and it might be days before we have a prognosis. If you’d like, I can have someone take
you up to the surgery waiting room on the third floor.”

“Just… um… Just let me get my other daughters,” Eliza said.

“Of course. Just let the nurse know when you’re ready.”

“Thank you.”

“What happened?” Mrs. Danvers asked.

Maggie didn’t look up from the floor. She couldn’t bring herself to face Mrs. Danvers. She knew
she should answer, should tell her what happened, but even the thought of it made her want to
throw up.

“I don’t know,” Kara said. “I was inside the school talking to Vicki, and I heard Maggie scream.
By the time I got outside, Alex was already on the ground, and Maggie’s dad was about to hit her,
so I hit him.”

“Maggie’s dad did this?” Mrs. Danvers asked.

“Yes,” Kara said.

“And you hit him?”

“Yes.”

“How hard?”

“Harder than I meant to, but there was just so much blood, and Maggie was looking at Alex, and he
was going to hit her in the back of the head, and I got so angry. I broke his jaw. They took him in a
different ambulance.”

“Kara-”

“It was my fault,” Maggie said.

“What?” Mrs. Danvers asked.

“My dad was there because of me,” Maggie said. “He was mad because he got fired because of
me. The County Commissioner found out about the restraining order and fired him, and he came
there because he was mad at me.”

“Sweetheart, that doesn’t make it your fault.”

“I yelled at him,” Maggie said. “He was screaming at me, and I yelled back, and he snapped and
tried to hit me, and Alex got between us. He was trying to hit me, and Alex got hurt because she
was trying to protect me, and it’s my fault because he was only there because of me, and I tried to
catch her when she fell, but she was too far away, and it’s my fault.”
“Sweetheart, no. We got the restraining order because he’d done this before. Because he hurt you before, and he’d tried to hurt you again.”

“But he was only there because of me,” Maggie repeated.

“That doesn’t make it your fault. Maggie, no one is to blame for this but your father.”

Maggie looked up at Mrs. Danvers, who was staring back at her with kindness and compassion Maggie knew she didn’t deserve, and she couldn’t stand it.

Her stomach heaved, and she got up and ran for the bathroom. She didn’t make it.

“Dr. Danvers.”

Eliza looked up to see Marissa standing in the doorway to the waiting room with Mike at her side.

“I called Dr. Magnus,” Marissa said. “He said to take all the time you need.”

“Thank you, Marissa,” Elisa said. She looked at Mike. “Come here, sweetheart.”

Mike came over and sat down next to her.

“Where are Maggie, Alex, and Kara?” Mike asked.

“Maggie and Kara are up on the fourth floor. The doctors had to give Maggie something to help her sleep.”

“Why?”

“You know how much Maggie likes Alex, right?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, Alex got hurt today. Maggie saw it happen, and she got really upset about it. So upset it was making her sick. The doctors gave her a shot to calm her down, but it made her sleepy, so they put her in a room with a bed so she can rest.”

“What happened to Alex?” Mike asked, and Eliza could see the worry on his face.

“Alex fell,” Eliza said. “She hit her head on the way down, and it hurt her really badly. Bad enough she had to have surgery.”

“Is she going to be okay?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. I hope so because I know how much she was looking forward to being your big sister, but she’s still in surgery right now, and the doctors are going to do everything they can for her.”

“Dr. Danvers,” Marissa said. Eliza looked over at her. “Do you need anything else?”

“No, Marissa. Thank you.”

“Are you sure? I can sit with you for a while if you like.”

“It’s okay. Thank you.”
“If you need anything. Anything at all.”

“I have your number.”

Marissa nodded and turned to leave.

Eliza turned back to Mike. “Do you want to sit here with me or go upstairs and wait with Maggie and Kara?”

“I want to see Maggie,” Mike said.

“Okay.”

Kara sat in the chair next to Maggie’s hospital bed, replaying the day in her head. Alex had been hurt, and she hadn’t been there to stop it. Alex had been hurt because she’d let herself get so caught up in her personal relationships that she had failed in her duty to protect her family. If she hadn’t stopped to talk to Vicki, she would have been there to protect Alex and Maggie. If she hadn’t been distracted, she might have heard their raised voices before Maggie screamed and been able to reach them in time.

She saw the aftermath of her failure every time she closed her eyes. Alex, lying on the ground, the side of her head soaked in blood. Maggie, standing over Alex, her mouth still open in a scream. Maggie’s dad standing behind her a look of unmitigated fury on his face, his arm raised, ready to hit her again while her back was turned.

It hadn’t taken any effort at all to piece together what had happened. Alex had tried to protect Maggie, and Maggie’s dad had hit her because Kara hadn’t been there to stop him. She hadn’t been there to protect her sisters from a monster because she was selfish. Because she had let herself get lost behind the lie that she was human.

She had understood instantly what had happened, and she had turned and hit Oscar Rodas. Harder than she had intended, but not hard enough to be satisfying. Not when he had hurt Alex. Not when he had tried to take away Kara’s home.

Kara sat in her chair next to Maggie’s hospital bed and longed for Krypton, for the strength of her House and the surety of justice it brought with it. She longed to know that their doctors would make Alex whole again and that Oscar Rodas would pay for what he’d done, either in the courtroom or on the dueling grounds.

She looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps and took off her glasses, using her X-ray vision to see Eliza and Mike coming.

“Hey,” she said as they came into the room.

“Is she still sleeping?” Mike asked.

“Yeah,” Kara said. “Is Alex out of surgery?”

“No yet,” Eliza answered. “Mike wanted to see Maggie.”

Kara forced a smile onto her face, something she had long since learned to do no matter how much she was hurting. She got up and grabbed the other armchair, carrying it back over next to the bed, not bothering to hide her strength.
“Come sit with me,” Kara said to Mike, who hadn’t seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary. He just sat down in the chair next to Kara and looked at Maggie. Kara looked up at Eliza, but instead of the condemnation she’d expected, Eliza just had a blank look on her face.

“Will you be okay if I go back downstairs?”

“I won’t let anything happen to them,” Kara said.

Eliza merely nodded before she left.

Kara turned to Mike. “Do you have your drawing kit and your sketch book with you?”

“Yeah,”

“Why don’t you draw Maggie? I bet she’d stay still for you.”

——

“Dr. Danvers?”

Eliza opened her eyes and looked over to see a middle-aged Indian man and an older Asian woman standing in the door. “Yes?”

They walked in and sat down across from her.

“I’m Dr. Patel,” the man said. “I’m the chief of Neuro and Spinal surgery. This is Constance Nguyen. She’s one of the hospital’s crisis counselors.”

“Nice to meet you,” Eliza said.

“I wish it were under better circumstances,” Constance said.

“Dr. Danvers, is there anyone you’d like to have with you right now? A friend, a family member?” Dr. Patel asked.

“No. My husband died two years ago, and I don’t have any other family in California. It’s just my children and me.”

“Okay,” Dr. Patel said. “It’s my understanding that you’re an MD?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. The surgery went well. Your daughter is stable and out of immediate danger. We’re currently moving her to the ICU, and you’ll be able to see her within the half hour. But I want to set the correct expectation. Your daughter has extensive trauma to the head and the cervical spine. She fractured her C1 and C2 vertebrae. She was brought in intubated and is not breathing on her own. There is severe intracranial swelling. Indicators are mixed. The fact that she survived at all is something of a minor miracle. The fact that the respiratory distress began en route to the hospital is a good indicator. It means that it’s very possible that it was a result of post-trauma swelling and not severed nerves. That said, she’s not responding at all to reflex tests, which is not a good sign. There is a skull fracture on the right side of her head running from the temple to back behind her ears, which means we had to opt for a Lerman Minerva halo brace to stabilize. Your daughter will not be awake. We have her on a Propofol drip to induce a coma in an attempt to alleviate swelling. We’ve installed a feeding tube as well. We shaved her head, stitched both lacerations, wired the broken jaw, and did as much repair of the C1 and C2 as we could, but best case scenario, your daughter is looking at two more operations on her spine at least, and she will likely need cosmetic surgery to
repair the damage to her cheek and jaw, as well as to remediate any scarring.

“Dr. Danvers, it’s too early to give any sort of prognosis, but best-case scenario, your daughter has years of recovery ahead of her before she will be able to walk again. More realistically, you should be prepared for the possibility of full paralysis below the C2. We have no idea at this point if there will be any loss of cognitive function, but that is also a possibility. We’ll do everything we can, but in my expert opinion, you should begin looking for a long-term care facility that specializes in spinal injury rehabilitation.”

Eliza closed her eyes, shutting out the world around her, and started reciting Pi to herself, losing herself in the numbers, focusing on them instead of the tightness in her chest, the difficulty breathing, the pounding in her chest, the way her throat felt thick and the sound of blood rushing in her ears and the beating of her pulse in her eyelids. She clenched her fists, digging her nails into her palms as she recited the digits out to the first 100, then starting again.

“Dr. Danvers?” Doctor Patel said.

Eliza raised a hand waving him off.

“She’s having a panic attack,” Constance said.

“Yes,” Eliza said.

“How can we help?”

“Wait,” Eliza said. She took a deep breath, then started reciting Pi again.

The numbers came and with them came calm, came repetition, came rhythm and a wall against everything that threatened to overwhelm her.

Eliza sat next to Alex’s bed, crying quietly at the sight of the girl she barely recognized as her daughter. Her hair was gone, her cheek and the upper right side of her head were stitched closed, and she was wrapped in a Minerva Jacket to hold her head in a fixed position. There was a catheter in her head attached to a drain bag. A ventilator in her mouth, two IV’s, and more wires than Eliza could count. The entire right side of her face was one giant, angry, swollen bruise, and the parts of her that weren’t an angry red or a sickening blue were deathly white, and the only thing holding Eliza together at that moment was the Diazepam running through her veins.

Alex looked broken and small in a way Eliza had never seen her. Not her beautiful, brilliant Alex. Not her little star. Not her amazing daughter. From the moment she was born, Alex was always ready to take on the world, to fight, to yell and scream and be at the center of everything. Alex took care of people, protected people, and loved so, so fiercely.

A hospital bed was no place for Alex. She was too alive, too vital, too necessary to everyone who knew her.

Eliza couldn’t imagine the future Dr. Patel had warned her about. Couldn’t imagine a world where Alex’s future was snatched away, where she would live confined to a wheelchair where her dreams would be out of reach because her body was useless.

“Excuse me,” a nurse said.

Eliza turned to see her standing in the doorway to Alex’s room. “Yes?”
“There’s a man at the nurse’s station, asking for you.”

“Did he give a name?” Eliza asked.

“William Magnus.”

“Can you bring him in?”

“Of course.”

The nurse left and returned a moment later with William in tow. Eliza stood up and hugged him.

“I’m sorry it took so long to get here,” William said.

“You didn’t have to come.”

“Of course I did. You’re family, and so is Alex.”

Eliza let good of him and sat down. William sat down next to her.

“How bad is it?” he asked.

“Bad. The neurosurgeon didn’t come right out and say it, but he thinks she’s going to lose all function below the C1 and C2 vertebra.”

“I’m not a medical doctor.”

“She’s going to be a quadriplegic,” Eliza said. “She’s going to spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair.”

“I’m sorry. Eliza, I am so sorry.”

Eliza nodded. “Thank you.”

“We’ll do everything we can for her,” he said. “We’ll find her the best doctors, the best facilities—”

“Stop. Please, just stop.”

William stopped talking and reached out, taking Eliza’s hand. “I’m sorry. I always want to fix things.”

“I remember. But I don’t think this can be fixed.”

“How can I help?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Not yet.”

“Okay. Where are Kara, Maggie and Mike?”

“Down on the fourth floor. Maggie had a panic attack and had to be sedated. They put her in a room. Kara and Mike are with her.”

“Have they seen Alex yet?”

“Not yet. Tomorrow.”

Maggie woke up slowly, noting a number of strange things around her. She wasn’t lying down, not completely, more like reclining. Someone was curled up against her side, but the person was too small to be Alex. The bed felt weird, softer than her bed. She could tell without opening her eyes that the room was dim, but not completely dark.

She tried to remember where she was and why Alex wasn’t there, and let out a whimper as the answer to her second question danced before her eyes. Memories of Alex being hit, Alex falling, Alex bleeding.

“Shhh… It’s okay,” Kara said. “You’re safe.”

Maggie opened her eyes and looked down to see Mike pressed against her side, his head pillowed on her shoulder as he slept.

“He wanted to be close to you,” Kara said.

Maggie looked up and saw Kara sitting in an armchair next to the bed, her glasses nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s Alex?” Maggie asked.

“Intensive Care.”

“Is she going to be okay?”

“Yes,” Kara said, and Maggie was a little surprised by the absolute surety in her voice.

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

“Where’s Mrs. Danvers?”

“She’s in the ICU with Alex. She’ll be down soon, though. Visiting hours are almost over.”

“What?” Maggie started to sit up but stopped at a small complaint from Mike. “When?”

“About five minutes.”

Maggie dropped her head back to the pillow and closed her eyes, hating herself. It wasn’t bad enough that she was the reason Alex had gotten hurt in the first place. She had to be weak too, had to let them knock her out because she couldn’t stop crying, and now she wouldn’t even be able to go see Alex.

“This isn’t your fault, Maggie,” Kara said.

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not. It’s mine.”

“You weren’t even there.”

“Exactly. I should have been. I should have been there to protect both of you, and I failed. I’m sorry.”
“Kara, he wouldn’t even have been there if it weren’t for me.”

“This isn’t your fault, Maggie,” Kara repeated.

Maggie closed her eyes without answering Kara. She knew Kara was wrong, but she didn’t have the energy to fight her over it.

Eliza squeezed her hands into fists as she looked around Maggie’s hospital room. Kara was sitting beside the bed, and Mike was on the bed, curled up against his sister. Maggie and Mike both had their eyes closed, and Eliza nearly burst into tears at the sight because she wanted to go home, and that couldn’t happen until Maggie woke up.

William must have sensed her tension because he reached up and pressed his hand into the small of her back. She leaned into the comforting touch, trying to ground herself, but it didn’t do much good. The need to be out of the hospital still weighed on her, making it hard to breathe, and even the Diazepam she’d taken didn’t seem to be enough to keep it from overwhelming her.

“Maggie, Eliza’s here,” Kara said.

Maggie opened her eyes and looked over at Eliza, and Eliza almost cried with relief at the sight.

“Hey,” Maggie said. “I’m sorry about earlier.”

“It’s okay, sweetheart. How are you feeling?”

“I want to see Alex.”

“I know, but visiting hours are over for the night. You’ll be able to see her tomorrow.”

Maggie nodded, the motion sending tears rolling down her face.

“This is William Magnus,” Eliza said. “He’s my boss and an old friend.”

“Hey,” Maggie said.

“William, this is Maggie and her brother Mike,” Eliza said.

“Nice to meet you,” William said. “Hey, Kara.”

“Hey, William,” Kara said.

“Maggie, do you feel up to going home?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah,”

“Then I’ll go get the discharge started.”

William didn’t stay for dinner—something Maggie was grateful for, since she didn’t have it in her to even try to be sociable. He said something about heading back to Coast City and promised he would come back if Eliza needed him. Dinner was quiet, and Kara was the only one who really ate much. She finished two large pizzas and three orders of potstickers, but even so, she lacked her usual enthusiasm. She ate quickly and without any of the usual relish Maggie normally saw. Maggie understood. She managed to choke down a couple of breadsticks before her stomach protested, and after that, she spent the next half hour staring an empty plate.
When it was clear no one was going to eat anything else, Kara cleared away the food and sat back down.

“We need to talk,” Mrs. Danvers said, and Maggie felt a sinking feeling in her stomach because there had never been a good conversation that started with those words. She wondered, for a moment, if Mrs. Danvers had finally decided that Maggie was more trouble than she was worth. If she had, Maggie wouldn’t blame her, but she ached for Mike and the home he was going to lose.

“I…” Mrs. Danvers started. She stopped and closed her eyes, taking a deep breath before she began speaking again, but she kept her eyes closed, like she couldn’t bear to look at them as she told them what she had to say. “Alex broke her neck when she fell. It’s too early for a real prognosis, but it doesn’t look good. At best, Alex is looking at years of recovery time, but the doctors don’t think she’ll ever fully recover. They think she’ll go to be paralyzed from the neck down.”

Maggie closed her eyes, wishing she hadn’t had the breadsticks. The lump of food that had been sitting in her stomach suddenly felt like it was alive and trying to claw its way up out of her stomach. She’d done this. It was her fault. She’d provoked her father, and she’d ruined Alex’s life as a result.

“No,” Maggie said.

Maggie opened her eyes and glanced over at Kara, who looked angry.

“No,” Kara said again. She reached into her pocket and pulled her phone out. Maggie watched as Kara made a call and lifted the phone to her ear. “I need you,” Kara said. “I need you. Now.”

Maggie watched as Kara’s face twisted in anger.

“/.tulem tiv zrhythrev w dhoid chao vokai, eh ,kahl,ehl, 'lugem/” Kara yelled before she snapped the phone shut. “Kal-El is on the way.”

“Kara,” Mrs. Danvers said. “There’s nothing he can do.”

“Yes, there is.”

“Who’s Kal-El?” Mike asked.

“My cousin,” Kara said.

“Kara,” Mrs. Danvers said, a hint of warning in her voice.

“We were going to tell him tomorrow anyway. This is my fault, and I’m going to fix it.”

“It’s not your fault, Kara,” Mrs. Danvers said. “And it’s not something you can fix.”

“It is. I let myself get distracted. I wasn’t there to protect her. It’s my fault, but I will fix it.”

“It’s not your fault,” Maggie said. “It’s mine.”

“Neither of you are to blame,” Mrs. Danvers snapped. “Kara, how soon will he be here?”

“Metropolis to Midvale is about seven minutes at top speed,” Kara said. “Give some time for him to get up to speed and slow down… 10 minutes.”

Eliza nodded. “Then I guess we need to explain some things to Mike.”
Kara opened the door to let Kal into the house and felt an immediate stab of fury at finding Clark standing there. She wasn’t sure why it really mattered, except that she’d told him that the House of El needed him, and it felt like a bad sign that he wasn’t dressed as Superman. She tried to tell herself she was being unreasonable, but it didn’t feel that way. This had happened because she had lost sight of her own Kryptonian heritage. Maybe he was better at balancing the two than she was, better at managing the need to blend in with the truth of who he was, but it still felt like a bad sign.

She closed the door behind him and led him into the living room where Eliza, Mike, and Maggie were waiting.

“Mike, this is my cousin, Kal-El of Krypton,” Kara said. “Kal, this is my brother, Mike.”

“Kara?” Kal said. “What are you doing? You can’t just tell people that!”

“Maggie and Mike are family, Kal. And Alex is hurt.”

“What?”

“She broke her neck.”

“How bad is it?” Kal asked.

“She shattered her C1 and C2 vertebra,” Eliza said. “She’s not breathing on her own, and she’s been non-responsive to reflex tests. There’s severe intracranial swelling. It’s early, but the doctors are telling us we should be prepared for full paralysis below the injury site.”

“My God,” Kal said. The words hit Kara like a punch to the stomach. So human. So far from what he should be. Something else that was her fault. Something she couldn’t fix. She had to focus on what could be fixed. She had to focus on Alex. “I’m sorry,” Kal said. “God, I am so sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Kara said.

Kal looked over at her. “What do you mean, it doesn’t matter?”

“I mean, you have the Fortress,” Kara said.

“Kara-”

“We just need a life support pod. We’ll slip into the hospital, load her into the pod, and take her to the Fortress. It shouldn’t take the regeneration Matrix more than a few days to repair the damage.”

“Kara,” Kal said. “Think about what you’re saying.”

“I’m saying we help Alex.”

“Kara, you’re suggesting we kidnap Alex out of the hospital, then put her in an alien machine and hope it fixes her. The Regeneration Matrix is designed for Kryptonians.”

“It will work on humans. It works on most species.”

“Kara, no,” Kal said. “Even if it worked, how would be explain what happened? How would we explain how her broken neck just magically got better?”

“Who cares how we explain it? This is Alex. She is my family. My sister. She protected me. She cared for me. Her family sheltered me when you turned me away. She was there for me when you abandoned me. We owe her a debt, and we are going to pay it.”
“Kara, I’m sorry. We can’t do this.”

“Clark,” Eliza said, and Kara could hear the warning in her tone. “Do you have a way to help Alex?”

“Yes,” Kara said. “There’s a device at the fortress. A Regeneration Matrix. It will regrow damaged tissue. It can repair almost any injury.”

“It’s not that simple,” Kal said.

“It is,” Kara said. “You put a person in the chamber, and the Regeneration Matrix does the rest.”

“It’s never been tested on a human.”

“But it could heal her?” Eliza asked.

“It could kill her,” Kal said.

“No, it wouldn’t,” Kara said. “The technology is thousands of years old. It’s safe, and it will work.”

“Kara, no.”

“Maggie,” Kara said.

“Yes?”

“Take Mike and go upstairs.”

Maggie took Mike’s hand and led him out of the room. Kara waited, listening until she was sure they were in Mike’s room, then turned back to Kal. “You are going to help Alex, Kal, son of Jor. As the eldest of the bloodline, I demand it.”

“Kara, I understand you’re upset, and I’m sorry about Alex, but I can’t do this.”

“Then tell me where the Fortress is. I’ll do it myself.”

“No.”

“You are refusing to give help to my sister?”

“I’m sorry.”

Kara was across the distance between them as fast as her super-speed would carry her, and before he could stop her, she tore his shirt open, exposing the suit underneath. She grabbed the front, wrapping her hand around the upper left portion of the House of El Coat of Arms. “I’m asking one last time, Kal-El. Will you help my sister?”

“Kara, I can’t,” he said.

Kara pulled back with all of the strength given to her by the rays of the yellow sun, moving quickly and deliberately, and as she jerked her hand away, she tore the coat of arms from the front of his suit, leaving only a gaping hole where it had been. “As the eldest of the blood, I banish you from the House of El. I name you traitor, coward, and a blight on our Honor. I cast you out. From this moment until Rao’s light fades, you are no longer of the blood of Erok-El. May you die in the shadows, may the words go unspoken, and may you roam in darkness forever, never to feel the
blessing of Rao’s light.”

“Kara!” Clark said, a look of horror on his face as he realized what she had just done.

“If you ever put on the House of El Coat of Arms again, I will tell the entire world who you are. I will tell them every secret. I will tell them who you love, and where to find them. If you ever wear it again, I will burn your world to the ground.” Kara turned to Eliza. “I’m sorry. I brought this on you, and I can’t fix it. If you want me gone…”

“No! Kara, you’re my daughter, and I don’t want you to go anywhere.” Eliza walked over and kissed Kara on the head. “Go lie down. I’m going to have a word with Clark.”

Kara nodded. “If you need me, call.”

“It’s okay, sweetheart. Go upstairs.”

Kara nodded and turned back to Clark. “I don’t want ever want to see you again, Clark Kent of Earth,” Kara said before heading for the stairs.

Eliza watched Kara go, then turned around to look at Clark, who stood there in the middle of her living room with a stunned look on his face and a hole ripped in his suit.

“What just happened?” Clark asked.

“I think Kara finally realized that you’re not the person she’s always believed you were.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that she called out to the last living member of her birth family for help, and you looked her right in the eyes and said no.”

“Eliza, it’s not that simple.”

“Isn’t it? Kara’s sister, my daughter, is lying in a hospital with a broken neck and a severe head injury. She may never wake up. If she does, the chances of her ever walking again are so small they’re almost non-existent. Kara and Maggie both feel like it’s their fault. Maggie feels guilty because her father was the one who knocked Alex down. Kara because she was in the school, talking to one of her friends.”

“Maggie’s father did this?”

“Yes. He was fired because of the restraining order Maggie has against him. Turns out the county didn’t want a known child abuser as their Sheriff. He came after Maggie, and Alex got in the way.”

“Did he get arrested?” Clark asked.

“I don’t know. I think he’s still in the hospital.”

“Why is he in the hospital?”

“Kara heard Maggie’s screams from inside the school. When she got there, he was about to hit Maggie in the back of the head. Kara hit him.”

“She hit him hard enough to put him in the hospital?”
“Yes.”

Clark pushed his glasses up out of the way and covered his eyes with his hand. “I never should have brought her here.”

“What?”

“When her pod landed, Diana offered to take her to Themyscira,” Clark said. “I thought this would be better. I thought giving her a family was the best thing to do.”

“You’re saying bringing her here was a mistake?”

“If you’d asked me a month ago, I would have said it was a good decision. But I didn’t expect you to start taking in random kids off the street and exposing our identities.”

“Random kids off the street?” Eliza arched an eyebrow at him.

“Who is Mike? She calls me and demands I drop everything and come here, and as soon as I walk through the door, she’s telling some kid I’ve never met before my identity and calling him her brother.”

“He’s Maggie’s brother. His parents threw him out when they found out he’s trans. And Kara called him her brother because once the adoption goes through, he will be. And if you have a problem when me taking in random kids off the street, you probably shouldn’t have placed Kara with someone who was willing to adopt a super-powered alien she’d never met before.”

“I brought her here because I thought she’d be safe,” Clark said. “I thought you would protect her identity.”

“Bullshit! You brought her here because you couldn’t be bothered to take care of her.”

“That’s not true. My life is dangerous. I have enemies who could hurt her.”

Eliza shook her head. “This again. Your life is so dangerous every time Kara needs you, but it’s just fine for Lois and Jimmy.”

“They’re adults who can make their own decisions,” Clark said. “Kara is still a child.”

“Yeah. And you don’t want to be bothered with a child, even if you are all she has left of her homeworld.”

“That’s not fair.”

“You know what’s not fair, Clark? You really want to know? Not fair is Jeremiah’s dying because I took Kara in. Not fair is Alex’s spending the rest of her life in a wheelchair because I took Maggie in. Not fair is my raising Kara for you, shouldering the responsibility that should have been yours, and your coming into my house, looking me right in the eye, and refusing to help my daughter when she needs it.”

“I want to help, Eliza, I do. But I have no idea if the Regeneration Matrix will work on a human. And if it does, how are you going to explain how she recovered from a broken neck in a couple of days? What you’re asking of me could kill Alex if it fails, and it could expose Kara and I both if it works. If I’m exposed, if Kara’s exposed, I can’t help anyone. I’d spend the rest of my life doing nothing but trying to protect the people I care about. Superman only works if I can be Clark Kent, and Superman is too important for me to risk it. Even for Alex.”
“Get out.”

“Eliza—”

“GET OUT!” Eliza screamed. “Get out, and don’t ever come back!”

Maggie headed down the stars, anger boiling in her blood. Alex was in the hospital, and fucking Clark had a way to fix her, but he wouldn’t help. It hadn’t been hard to figure out that Kara wanted Mike out of the room because she was about to have words with her cousin, so she had taken Mike upstairs, and they had gone into Alex and Kara’s room to wait. Maggie knew she didn’t really have the right, but she wanted to be somewhere that felt close to Alex and sitting in Alex’s bed with Mike beside her was as close as she was going to get for a while.

When Kara had come into the room, clutching the S off the front of the Superman suit, it hadn’t taken much at all to figure out that he wasn’t going to help. That whatever Kara has said hadn’t been enough to sway him. Maggie didn’t think she would have any better luck, but this was all her fault, and she had to try. For Alex’s and Kara’s and Mrs. Danvers’ and Mike’s sake, she had to try. So she’d kissed Mike on the head, then headed down stars to try and talk to Clark. To make him understand.

She heard Clark and Mrs. Danvers arguing from the top of the stairs, but she couldn’t really make out what they were saying until she got to the middle landing on the stairs.

“They’re adults, who can make their own decisions,” Clark said. “Kara is still a child.”

“Yeah,” Mrs. Danvers said. “And you don’t want to be bothered with a child, even if you are all she has left of her homeworld.”

“That’s not fair.”

“You know what’s not fair, Clark? You really want to know? Not fair is Jeremiah’s dying because I took Kara in. Not fair is Alex’s spending the rest of her life in a wheelchair because I took Maggie in. Not fair is my raising Kara for you, shouldering the responsibility that should have been yours, and your coming into my house, looking me right in the eye, and refusing to help my daughter when she needs it.”

Maggie stopped dead in her tracks, the blood pounding in her ears, and the breadsticks she’d forced down threatening to come back up as she stood on the landing, shaking.

Mrs. Danvers blamed her for it.

She knew she deserved it; she knew it was her fault, but that didn’t make it any easier to take. It just made her understand what she had to do. She ran the rest of the way down the stairs and headed for her room, hoping Clark and Mrs. Danvers wouldn’t notice her. Once inside, she grabbed her backpack, and dug through it until she found something she had never planned on using. The business card Agent Neill had given her weeks earlier.

She flipped open her phone and dialed the number. It rang three times before someone picked up.

“Agent Neill Speaking.”

“Agent Neill, this is Maggie Rodas.”

“What can I do for you, Ms. Rodas?”
“I wanted to know if you still wanted to get me out of the Danvers house.”

“Has something happened?” Agent Neill asked.

“Yes. You were right. But I need some things if I’m going to agree.”

“What do you need?”

“I need to take my brother with me,” Maggie said.

Chapter End Notes

Translated from the Kryptonian:

.tulem tiv zrhythrev w dhoid chao vokai, eh ,kahl,ehl, 'lugem
The House needs your presence and your aid, Kal-El. Now!
Leaving

Chapter Summary

Maggie follows through on her plan. Eliza calls for help.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the last chapter of Taking In Strays. This ridiculous monster of a story which started out as a single scene I couldn’t get out of my brain took five months to write, and has taken almost as long to post, but I hope when you finish it, you think it’s worth the effort I put into writing it, and you put into reading it. I also hope you think the sequel is worth the wait when it arrives.

Saturday, March 18, 2006

Breakfast was actually worse than dinner the night before. Mike picked at his oatmeal, Kara seemed ready to burst into tears the whole time, and Mrs. Danvers looked like she was a million miles away—something Maggie could understand because she felt strangely disconnected from everything. She knew what she was going to do would hurt Kara because Kara still blamed herself. She knew it would hurt Mike because Mike had just found a home where he could be himself and a family who loved him. But she knew it was the right thing to do.

She’d destroyed Alex’s life just by being here, and she had no idea how much more trouble, how much more pain her presence could bring. All she knew was that any amount was too much. The Danvers had given her a home and a family; they had given her Mike back; and whether she’d meant to or not, she’d only repaid them in pain and misery and suffering. There was no way she could ever make it right, but she could minimize the damage. She could get as far away from them as possible and take Mike with her because he would draw down the same dangers and the same pain as she would.

Agent Neill had agreed to everything Maggie had asked for. She had arranged for every penny Eliza had given Maggie to be returned. Had arranged for repayment of everything Eliza had spent on her and Mike. Clothes, food, art supplies, furniture, storage costs. All of it. Maggie and Mike would have new identities waiting for them. The paperwork would show that Maggie had legally adopted Mike after their parents died. She would have a high school diploma, complete with transcripts and SAT Scores. She and Mike would get a full ride to college, and Mike would get a scholarship to a trans-inclusive private school, as well as all the medical care he needed to transition. They would also get a living stipend until Maggie graduated and found a job. It was a good deal, one that would make sure Mike never wanted for anything until he was old enough to support himself. One that would make sure their parents could never find them again.

“We’ll head to the hospital once everyone’s finished with breakfast,” Mrs. Danvers said.

Maggie swallowed hard, trying to fight down the urge to vomit because it was time. A little lie.
One that would protect the Danvers and her brother and destroy her. One that had to be done now, while she still had a way out, before Mrs. Danvers’ anger and resentment turned on them.

“You two should go ahead,” Maggie said. “I’ll take Mike in Alex’s car. That way if he wants to leave before you guys are ready, I can bring him home.”

Mike looked up at her, and she knew he could tell something was off, but years spent together trying to avoid problems with their parents meant that he could read her well enough to know she wanted him to stay quiet.

“That’s probably a good idea,” Mrs. Danvers said. “Kara, are you ready?”

“Yeah,” Kara said.

“I’ll take care of the breakfast dishes,” Maggie said. “You two go ahead.”

“We’ll see you two at the hospital then,” Mrs. Danvers said.

Maggie put Mike’s oatmeal bowl in the dish drain and turned around to see Mike staring at her.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

Maggie closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “We have to leave.”

“I want to know what’s going on before we go to the hospital. I know everyone’s keeping something from me.”

“No, Mike. We’re not going to the hospital.” She opened her eyes and looked at him. “We have to leave.”

He frowned in confusion for a moment before understanding spread across his face, followed by horror.

“No! No, I like it here. I like Mrs. Danvers and Kara and Alex. You’re happy here.”

“Mike,” Maggie sighed.

“Why do we have to leave? Mrs. Danvers treats me like I’m a boy.”

“Mike, please,” Maggie said, her voice cracking. “I don’t want to go either.”

“Then why?”

“Because Papi hurt Alex. He came to the school looking for me, and he was going to hit me, and Alex got in the way.”

“But why does that mean we have to leave?”

“Because it was my fault. He was there because of me. Because he got fired from work because his job found out I got a restraining order. Mrs. Danvers is too upset to figure it out yet. And we need to leave before she does.”

Mike closed his eyes and started shaking as he tried not to cry.

“I’m sorry, Cariño,” Maggie said. “I didn’t mean for any of it to happen.”
“I know. I just don’t want to go.”

“I wish we didn’t have to, but a woman will be here soon. She’s going to take us away. You’ll go to a school where they’ll let you be a boy. And you’re going to have the doctors you need. I’m going to take care of you, I promise. I’m going to take care of you the way I always should have, and I’m never going to leave you. But I need you to go upstairs and start getting your things together.”

“Can I take my art supplies, Loba?”

“You can take everything but your phone and your schoolbooks. Go on. Go get your things together.”

Mike got up and headed upstairs. Maggie looked around the kitchen for a minute, remembering that first day when she’d stuffed sandwiches in her bag when Kara wasn’t looking, expecting to get kicked out by Alex at any moment, and all the memories she since. Leaving was going to hurt so much, but she had to do it. Mrs. Danvers blamed her, and Maggie knew she had every reason to. She wanted to believe that it didn’t matter. That what Mrs. Danvers has said earlier was true—that she had a home here for as long as she wanted to stay, but those were promises made before Alex had been hurt. Promises made before Alex ended up with a crippling injury because of her. If Mrs. Danvers turned her out, Maggie knew Agent Neill’s offer would vanish instantly, so she had to leave while the offer was still on the table. For Mike’s sake and for the Danvers’ sake.

She stood up and headed into her room. She’d gotten her things ready the night before. Packed everything she was taking into garbage bags. She hadn’t packed much. Just the clothes Mrs. Danvers had bought her, the books she’d gotten from Susan’s store, and a thumb drive she’d loaded with the pictures Mrs. Danvers had taken the night of her and Alex’s first and only date and the night they brought Mike home, plus a few snaps she’d gotten here and there with her phone.

She took her phone out of her pocket reluctantly, flipped it open, and sent a text to Agent Neill. Just one word: “Now.” Then she sat the phone on the desk and left it behind, along with the life she could have had.

“Something’s wrong,” Kara said. “Maggie should have been here by now.”

Eliza nodded without looking away from Alex. She knew Kara was right, but there was a part of her that didn’t want to admit it. She didn’t want to deal with anything other than Alex, even though it had been almost two hours since they got to the hospital, and Maggie still hadn’t shown up. She wasn’t answering her phone either. They’d even tried calling Mike, but hadn’t gotten an answer from him, and Eliza couldn’t put it off any longer. She stood up.

“Let’s go check on them.”

When she saw Alex’s car in the driveway, she wasn’t sure whether she should feel relief or dread. She’d half worried that they’d been in a car accident on the way to the hospital, so seeing the car in the driveway put that fear to rest. But there was still the fact that Maggie and Mike weren’t answering their phones, and Eliza couldn’t get past the feeling that something was very, very wrong.

She parked beside Alex’s car, and she and Kara headed into the house. The moment the door was closed, Kara vanished, racing through the house at super speed, and almost before Eliza could tell she was gone, Kara was back.
“All their clothes are gone, plus Mike’s art supplies,” Kara said. She held up a stack of envelopes. “I found these on Maggie’s desk.”

Eliza took them and looked through them. One of them was addressed to her, one of them to Kara, and one to Alex.

Eliza handed Kara her letter, then walked into the kitchen, sat down, and tore open her own letter.

Dear Mrs. Danvers,

I don’t really know how to say this. After everything you’ve done for Mike and me, thank you doesn’t seem like enough, and after all the damage I’ve caused, I’m sorry feels like too little, too late.

I never said this to you when it would have mattered, but I love you. In a month, you have been more of a mother to me than the woman who gave birth to me ever was. You and Alex and Kara were the first real family I had aside from Mike, and I don’t want to leave. I want to stay with you so much. I wanted Kara to be my sister, and I wanted Alex to be my girlfriend, and I wanted you to be my mom. And I wanted Mike to grow up with a mother like you and with Alex and Kara as big sisters. I still want all of that, but I know how selfish it is to want that when I destroyed your lives just by being here. If you had never taken me in, Alex never would have gotten hurt. If I had listened when Agent Neill tried to tell me I was a danger to you, Alex would never have gotten hurt. Kara never would have risked herself the way she did. Kara never would have lost her cousin.

I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I never wanted anyone to get hurt. Especially Alex. Mrs. Danvers, you have every right to hate me for what happened, but please believe me when I say I never meant for any of it to happen. I love Alex. I’m in love with Alex, and I don’t know if that will ever go away.

I do know that I have to leave. I can’t be the reason any of you are hurt again, and I realize now that Agent Neill was right. My being here is dangerous. And for all of the same reasons, Mike’s being here is dangerous too.

I don’t know if you’ll worry about us. After what happened, I wouldn’t blame you if you were glad to see the back of us. But I promise you, you don’t need to worry. I called Agent Neill. I fixed everything I could. I can’t make Alex whole again, but in a few days, you’ll receive a cashier’s check with all of the money you gave me, plus every penny you spent on me and on Mike, including the cost of the furniture, the movers, and the storage building.

I wish I could say that will make everything right, that it will make it like we never crossed your path, but it’s the best I could do.

Part of the deal I made with Agent Neill is that I’ll have enough money to take care of Mike. I’ll see to it that he gets everything he needs. Food, clothing, art supplies, a private school where he can be himself, all the medicine he needs. You don’t have to worry about either of us.

I know I don’t have the right after what happened, but I’m going to ask for two more things. Both are small, and I hope you’ll find it in your heart to do them. The first are the letters. I’ve attached one for Kara and one for Alex. Please give them the letters. I wanted to say goodbye, but I couldn’t do it in person. You and I both know Kara never would have let Mike and me leave. The second thing is even easier. Don’t look for us. Agent Neill has promised that everything will be taken care of. Child Protective Services won’t come looking for Mike. You won’t get into trouble because he’s gone.

I hope, someday, you can find it in your heart to forgive me for the pain I’ve caused you, Alex, and
Kara, and that you will believe me when I say the weeks I spent with the three of you were the happiest of my life.

Goodbye, Mom.

Maggie

Eliza sat the letter down and closed her eyes, trying to fight back tears. She balled her hands into fists and started reciting Pi to calm herself down.

It didn’t help.

Kara took the letter from Eliza and sat down on the stairs. She looked at it and knew she didn’t want to open it, didn’t want to read it, because how could it say anything good? Maggie and Mike were gone. Her sister and her brother were gone. She’d lost Kal-El, she might lose Alex, and even if she didn’t, Alex would never be the same again, and now Maggie and Mike were gone, and she was afraid to open the letter because it would make it real. It would make another loss real.

She opened the envelope and took out the letter because as much as she didn’t want to, she needed to know what it said. She needed to know if Maggie and Mike were coming home, so she unfolded it and began to read.

Dear Kara,

I’m sorry I have to say goodbye this way. I’m sorry for a lot of things. I’m sorry you got in trouble because of me. I’m sorry you got outed to the school because of me. I’m sorry you lost your cousin because of me. Most of all, I’m sorry Alex was hurt because of me, and I’m sorry I have to leave.

The past month has been the best time of my life. I’ve been so happy and felt so welcome and so loved. Your finding me under the bleachers that day was a miracle, and I have no words for how much you, Alex, and Mrs. Danvers have meant to me. I only wish I’d been strong enough to say no to you when you offered to help me that day because if I had, I wouldn’t have destroyed Alex’s future.

I know you blame yourself. I know you think this is your fault. It’s not. It’s mine. He’s my father. He was there because I took out a restraining order. He was there because I cost him his job, and he attacked me because I provoked him.

I know you feel like you should have been there, but, Kara, you are entitled to have a life outside of protecting Alex and me. You have the right to have friends, to have a girlfriend or boyfriend, to fall in love, to have fun, to live your life for yourself. You didn’t do anything wrong, and I hope, more than anything, that you realize that. That you don’t give up on happiness for yourself because of what a horrible man did when you weren’t there. It wasn’t your fault, Kara.

I want so much to stay, to remind you of that. To make sure you understand that none of what happened is on you. I want to go to college with you in National City. I want to share an apartment with you and listen to you talk about how wonderful math is and see all the paintings you’re going to make and watch you be Mike’s big sister. Sometimes, I even dream of what it would be like to marry Alex, and I always imagine you, standing there by her side, one of those huge smiles on your face.

I want all of that. But it’s a selfish want. I should have left the day Agent Henshaw came to the house. The day I found out I might be a danger to you. I should have left the day Agent Neill came to me at school. But I was selfish. I wanted a home and a family, and all of you kept offering it to
me. I wanted it so badly, I never considered how much it might cost all of you.

I'm sorry. If I could take it all back, I would. I would give up every moment of happiness I had with you if it meant that Alex never got hurt. I would take her place in a heartbeat. But I can’t do that. I can’t fix what I did wrong. I can only leave before I bring down more pain and suffering.

I’m sorry, Kara. I know you lost everything once before, and now, I’ve taken so much more from you. I’m so, so sorry, but please believe me when I say I never meant for it to happen. I never would have stayed if I knew, and that’s why I have to leave.

Please, I know I have no right to ask anything of you, but, Kara, please don’t try to find us. Please just live your life. Be happy. Take care of Alex. When she wakes up, if she wakes up, tell her I love her.

I’m sorry, and I hope that someday you’ll find it in your heart to forgive me, but please know I will miss you and love you for as long as I live.

Maggie

“We have to find them,” Kara said as she came into the kitchen. “We have to.”

“I know,” Eliza said. “I just… I don’t know how.”

“I could go,” Kara said. “I could use my powers. See if I can find them.”

“It’s been too long. Agent Neill took them. She could be anywhere with them by now.”

“Then what do we do?” Kara asked.

“I… I could call your cousin,” Eliza said. “See if he could get Batman to help.”

“No,” Kara said. “No, I don’t trust him. If he won’t help Alex, I don’t trust him.”

“Then I don’t… wait,” Eliza said as it hit her. She didn’t need Clark to get a hold of Batman. She reached for her phone and dialed Diana.

“Eliza!” Diana said with her usual cheerfulness. “What a lovely surprise.”

“Diana, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be rude, but I need to reach your friend in Gotham.”

“What’s wrong?” Diana asked.

“Maggie has run away. She’s taken Mike with her.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Her father attacked Alex. She blames herself, and she thinks if she stays, Kara and I will be in danger.”

“Is Alex well?”

“No,” Eliza said. “Alex is… He knocked her down, and she hit her head as she fell. Her neck is broken. If she wakes up, she’s probably going to be paralyzed from the neck down.”

“Gods above and below. Are there any details that might aid in the search?”
“Maggie said she worked out a deal with an Agent Neill from the FBI for protection, but I think Agent Neill is an alias used by a DEO agent working for Director Hank Henshaw.”

“I will call Gotham and ask him to begin the search. Then I will come to you. I’ll be there within the hour.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Eliza said.

“Of course I do. One of your children is hurt, two more are missing. I could not call myself a friend if I did less. Have you already called Clark, or shall I?”

“Don’t,” Eliza said. “Don’t call Clark. He’s not welcome here.”

“I see. Very well. I will be there within the hour, and we will do everything we can to find your children.”

“Thank you.”

“Eliza?” Diana asked.

“Yes,” Eliza said as she looked at the two statuesque women standing on her porch. Diana, Wonder Woman, was unmistakable, but Eliza had no idea who the tall black woman with short blonde hair standing beside Diana was.

“This is Hessia,” Diana said. “One of my Amazon sisters.”

“Please, come inside.” Eliza stepped back, making room for Diana and Hessia to come in. Once they were inside, she closed the door, then led them into the kitchen. “Please, have a seat. Can I get you anything?”

“Water would be welcome,” Hessia said.

“For me as well,” Diana said.

Eliza grabbed three bottles of water out of the fridge and had just sat them in front of her guests when Kara came into the room.

“Hello,” Diana said. “You must be Kara.”

“Yes,” Kara said. “And you’re Wonder Woman?”

“Yes, though my friends call me Diana. This is Hessia.”

“Well met,” Hessia said.

“Well met,” Kara replied as she took a seat across from Diana and Hessia. Eliza sat in her usual spot at the head of the table.

“Batman is working to find Maggie and Mike as we speak, but Agent Neill, or whatever her name is, is proving very difficult to track down,” Diana said. “I’ve reached out to a friend who has reach inside the DEO, but they have been surprisingly reluctant to discuss the matter. We will keep looking until we find them, though. I promise.”

“Thank you,” Eliza said.
“I brought Hessia with me because she is one of our most skilled healers,” Diana said.

“A healer?”

“Yes,” Hessia said. “I know it might seem strange, but I studied with the god of healing himself, and we Amazons have access to many of our patrons’ blessings that are denied the world of man. If you would allow me to see your daughter, I might be able to help her.”

“She’s at the hospital,” Eliza said. “We can go now.”

Eliza sat next to Alex’s bed while Hessia looked her over, watching and listening as she made small, disgruntled noises here and there, until finally, she turned to Eliza.

“I have seen what I need to see, but we should not discuss this in front of anyone else,” Hessia said. “Is there somewhere private we could talk?”

“Yes.”

Eliza led Kara, Diana, and Hessia into a small private waiting room not too far from the ICU. It was intended for families of those in recovery, but Eliza had managed to borrow it by waving around her medical license and dropping William’s name—not something she would normally do, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

“Can you help?” Kara asked as soon as the door was closed.

“No and yes,” Hessia said. “Your doctors are, from what I gather, too optimistic in their prognosis. There is little chance Alex will ever wake up. Her injuries are beyond even Amazonian healing. However, there is a way to help her. A way that will see her whole again.”

“What is it?” Eliza asked.

“She can become an Amazon. We can take her to Themyscira and ask the patrons to grant her their blessings.”

“Will that work?” Eliza asked.

“It will depend. From what I understand, she fell in battle defending her lover.”

“Her girlfriend,” Eliza said. “I don’t think things had progressed that far between them.”

“A trivial difference,” Hessia said. “She fell defending a woman she loved. An act worthy of any Amazon. That alone will not be enough, but it is a promising start. If the patrons look on her and deem her worthy, then they will grant her their blessings, and she will become one of us. Her body will be mended, and she will be able to walk the world again.”

“When do we leave?” Kara asked.

“Easy, young one. Diana, do you wish to explain?”

Diana nodded. “If we do this, it will not be without cost. Alex will be an Amazon in truth. Her body will be whole, but different. She will be stronger and faster and will need time and training to master her abilities. She will not go there, become an Amazon, and return home in time for the weekend.”
“How long?” Eliza asked.

“A year and a day,” Diana said. “No less, though perhaps more, if she wishes to stay.”

“When do we leave?” Kara asked again.

“Eliza, the choice is yours,” Diana said.

“I won’t be able to go with her. Not until Maggie and Mike are found.”

“I will watch over her as if she were my own daughter,” Diana said to Eliza. “You have my word.”

“I’m going with her,” Kara said.

“Kara-” Eliza started to say, but Kara shook her head.

“I don’t care about school, or college, or any of it. I’m going with Alex.”

Eliza looked over at Diana.

“We will take her as well,” Diana said.

“Okay. How do we do this?”

Sunday, March 19, 2006

As it turned out, how they did this involved Wayne Enterprises loaning them a mobile ICU. Eliza carefully didn’t ask how Bruce Wayne got involved. She was beginning to have her suspicions, but it wasn’t something she really wanted to know. Instead, she watched as Alex was very, very carefully loaded into an oversized ambulance, which got a police escort to the local executive airport where Alex was loaded onto a private jet, which, suspiciously enough, had a crew composed entirely of insanely well-muscled women and an oddly shiny exterior. Eliza stepped aboard for a moment, long enough to kiss Alex’s forehead and hug Kara one last time before she stepped into the cockpit where Diana was preparing for takeoff.

“Will they be okay?” Eliza asked.

“No harm will come to them,” Diana promised. “You have my word. When you find Maggie and Mike, call the number I gave you.”

“Thank you,” Eliza said.

“Thank me if this works.”

“Thank you for even trying. Thank you for giving Alex a chance.”

“I could not live with myself if I did any less. It’s time.”

“Okay,” Eliza said. “Goodbye.”

Diana nodded, and Eliza headed for the door.

Monday, March 20, 2006

“We’re here,” Agent Neill said, shaking Maggie out of her thoughts. She looked up to see they
were parked in the driveway of a two-story house in a new development. Half the houses on the street were still in various stages of construction, and the house they were parked at was so new Maggie wasn’t sure the paint was dry.

“This is it?” Maggie asked.

“It is,” Agent Neill said. “We would have gotten you something a little closer to town if we’d had more time, but this is the best we could do on a weekend. Is there something wrong?”

“No, it’s fine.” Maggie opened the door and stepped out of the car. Mike did the same a moment later as Agent Neill popped the trunk. She went around to the back of the car and collected the suitcases that Agent Neill had bought them in a shop in Coast City, taking the two large ones that held their clothes and leaving the smaller one with Mike’s art supplies for him to get. Once he had it, they both followed Agent Neill up to the front door and into the house.

On pure instinct, Maggie set down her bags, then bent down and took off her boots, sitting them next to the door. She’d have to remember to pick up a rack for them the first time she went shopping. Mike did the same, but Agent Neill just waited until they were done, then led them into the kitchen.

She set a stack of manila envelopes in the counter. “Everything meets what we agreed to. A three-bedroom, just like you asked. It’s fully furnished. We’ve got you set up in the master, and Mike set up in the second largest bedroom. His art studio is in the third. There’s a car in the garage registered in your new name. He’ll be expected at school a week from today. You’ll start college this fall. This packet contains all of the paperwork showing that you’ve legally adopted him. There’s a driver’s license with motorcycle endorsement, passports for both of you, insurance cards, and a State ID card for Mike. Everything you need.”

“You’re sure no one can find us?” Maggie asked.

“I promise you no one will ever find you here.”

“Then I think we’re good.”

“Okay then,” Agent Neill reached into her pocket and pulled out a card. “This is the last time we’ll see each other, but if you need anything, you can call Agent Henshaw. He’ll help you with anything you need.”

“Right,” Maggie said. She took the card, not because she wanted it, but because she was probably going to need it.

“Honey,” Agent Neill said, “I am sorry. I know how hard this is for you, but—”

“I think we’d like to be alone.”

“Of course. I’ll just leave you be.” Agent Neill gave a small nod before she left.

“I don’t like her,” Mike said.

“Yeah,” Maggie nodded. “I don’t like her either.”

She reached out and pulled Mike into a hug, squeezing him tightly for a long time before she let him go.

“I love you, Cariño.”
“I love you too, Loba.”

“Why don’t you go find your room,” Maggie said as she let him go. “I’m going to sort all of this out.”

He nodded, grabbed the suitcase full of his art supplies, and headed upstairs. When he was gone, Maggie turned back to the pile of envelopes that contained all the pieces of their new life. The first one was labeled IDs. She opened it and dumped the envelope out. Her driver’s license and Mike’s ID card were on top. She picked them up and read the name.

Margarita Elena Sawyer and Miguel Juan Sawyer.

Not the names she’d wanted for them, but they would have to do.

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Thursday, April 14, 2006

“It’s April?” Alex asked, looking at Kara in disbelief.

“Yeah,” Kara said. “They had to wait until the night of the full moon to perform the ceremony.”

“But that’s almost a month.”

“Yeah.”

“I suppose that explains why Mom and Maggie aren’t here. They couldn’t leave Mike alone.”

“No.” Kara shook her head. “That’s not why.”

“Then why aren’t they here?” Alex asked.

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I was waiting for you and Maggie by the bike rack, like always. Maggie showed up without you, and she kissed me, and… Nothing. I don’t remember anything after the kiss.”

“Maggie’s dad showed up. He got fired from his job.”

“He deserved it.”

“Yeah, he did. But he blamed Maggie, and he started yelling at her. Screaming at her. He tried to hit her, but you got in the way.”

“Sounds like something I’d do,” Alex said with a laugh. Her expression darkened then. “Is that why Maggie isn’t here? Did she get hurt too?”

“No. You got in the way, and he hit you. You stumbled and tripped over that stupid bike rack, and you fell. You hit your head on the bike rack on the way down. That’s how you got hurt.”

“Okay. But what does that have to do with Maggie?”

“She blamed herself. She kept saying it was her fault. And when Clark wouldn’t help you…”

“You called Clark for help?”

Kara nodded. “There’s a machine in the Fortress. A Kryptonian device called a Regeneration Matrix. It’s a healing machine. I asked Clark to take you to the Fortress and use it on you. He
refused. It was awful. I... I banished him from the House of El.”

“God, Kara...” Alex watched, helplessly, as tears started to roll down Kara’s cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

“He deserved it.”

Alex, for her part, actually agreed with Kara on that. Clark deserved a lot worse after the way he’d abandoned Kara, the way he’d neglected her. Alex honestly hated him, but she also knew exactly how much he meant to Kara and how much it must have hurt for her to formally break ties with him.

She reached out and took Kara’s hands in her own. “You know you’ve still got me, right?”

“Even if what happened was my fault?”

“How was it your fault?”

“I was inside talking to Vicki,” Kara said. “I let myself get distracted. If I’d been there, he never would have laid a hand on you.”

“Kara, you didn’t do anything wrong. You can’t be with me every minute of every day.”

“But I should have protected you.”

“Kara, you are allowed to have a life. I want you to have a life.”

“You are my life, Alex. You’re the only thing about this planet that makes me feel like I belong here. When I saw you on the ground, hurt and bleeding, I thought I’d lost everything again. I can’t... I... If I ever lost you...”

“Hey,” Alex said. “You didn’t lose me. I am right here.”

“But you almost weren’t. I should have been there.”

“Kara, it’s not your fault. It’s no one’s fault but Maggie’s dad’s.”

Kara frowned and looked down.

“Hey,” Alex said, making her look up at her. “What’s wrong?”

“Maggie... She blamed herself too. She... She called Agent Neill. She took Mike.”

“What?”

“Alex, Maggie disappeared. The day after you were hurt. Eliza and I went to the hospital to visit you. Maggie was supposed to follow in your car with Mike, but she never showed up, and when we went home, she was gone.”

“No... No, Maggie wouldn’t do that.”

“She did,” Kara said as she got up. She walked over to the dressing table set against the wall and opened an ornate wooden box that was sitting on top of it, took out an envelope, and handed it to Alex.

“She left that for you,” Kara said.
Dear Alex,

I don’t know if you’ll ever read this. I don’t even know if you’ll ever wake up, but I hope the doctors are wrong. I hope you wake up and get well, and I hope you have the best life because I want you to be happy, and I want you to be loved, and I want you to have everything you’ve ever dreamed of.

But if the doctors are right, if you wake up at all, that won’t happen, and it’s all my fault. I am so sorry. I never meant for any of it to happen. I never meant for you to get hurt. Please believe that. Please believe that if I could take your place, I would in an instant.

Alex, I love you. I know a lot of people our age toss those words around, but I do. I love you so much. I love the way you’ve been there for me. I love the way you take care of Kara. I love that you introduced me to Susan. I loved the way you were willing to be my friend even when I said I wasn’t ready for a relationship. I love the way you call me family. I love the way you’re ready to protect Mike and accept him as your brother. But most of all, I love the way you make me feel like I’m worth loving.

You are the first person who ever made me feel like that, and I will never forget it. I will never forget you. I wish so much that I could stay. That I could spend my life with you. But staying is what caused all of this. Agent Henshaw warned your mother. Agent Neill warned me. Even your mother admitted that having me there was dangerous. I should have left so many times. The first time I saw your house, I knew I didn’t belong there, but I was cold and scared and hungry, so I stayed. That night, I knew I should leave, but I didn’t know where to go, so I stayed. I knew so many times that I should leave, but I stayed because your mom offered me a home, because all three of you offered me a family, because you offered me love, and because I loved you back so, so much.

I’m sorry I stayed. I’m sorry I was selfish. I’m sorry that I destroyed your life and your future because I wasn’t strong enough to leave when I should have. I know I don’t have the right to ask, but please, please forgive me for staying and for leaving.

Goodbye, Alex. I love you. Even if you hate me, even if you never want to see me again, please know that I will never stop loving you.

Maggie

Kara watched Alex read the letter. She could hear her sister’s heartbeat speed up, could see the tears filling her eyes. She knew Alex well enough to know that whatever the letter said, it was breaking her heart, and when Alex looked up from the letter, Kara could see the desperation on her face.

“We have to find her,” Alex said.

“We’ve tried.”

“Well, we have to try again.”

“Alex, we’ve been trying,” Kara said. “We’ve been trying for weeks. Batman, Robin, Nightwing, the Question, lots of others too. We can’t find anything.”
“Well, what about this Agent Neill? We can find her. We can make her tell us where she took Maggie.”

“We’re tried. We can’t find her, Alex.”

“But we have to. We have to find her and tell her it’s not her fault. We have to make her come home. We’re going to go away together for Maggie’s birthday, and she’s going to go to school with us, and the three of us are going to get an apartment together in National City.”

Kara sat down next to Alex and pulled Alex into her arms.

“She can’t be gone, Kara,” Alex gasped. “She can’t be.”

“I’m sorry.”

“She can’t be… The first sob cut off Alex’s words, and the sound tore at Kara. She tried to swallow past the lump in her throat as Alex broke down in her arms, but she nearly choked on her own grief. Alex’s sobs were too much like the sounds of Maggie’s sobs the day she’d found her under the bleachers, and just like that day, there was no way Kara could ignore them.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it. I wish I could give you a timeline on when the sequel will drop, but all I can say is, it’s going to be a while. I still have to finish A Plague of Righteousness, and write In The Shadow of Rao, both of which are going to be monsters, but The Long Way Home will come, and it will be awesome. Things you can look forward to when it comes. Alex as an Amazon Warrior, Maggie as the assistant director of the DEO, Kara as a woman who hasn’t spent almost a decade shunning her alien heritage, Donna Troy being an absolute bad ass, Clark getting a shot at making amends, Eliza being the best Mom, Wonder Woman being freaking amazing, and J’onn trying to make up for how horribly he wronged everyone in this story.

See you on the other side.

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