**YOUNG LOVE IN OLD CHICAGO**

**Chapter One**

I felt something nudge my arm as it rested on the antique two person desk, and looked over at Emmaline’s slate to see that she’d written *window shopping* down in the corner. She raised an eyebrow when I looked up at her. I smiled and nodded, already looking forward to walking down Chicago’s busy streets with her and seeing all the new things each shop would have on display. It was something we hadn’t done in awhile.

After glancing up at our stiff, round bellied teacher, Mr. Web, to make sure he wasn’t looking in my direction, I scribbled down *Francine’s Fancies first?* on the slate that sat in front of me. Then I pushed it a few inches to my right, where Emmaline could get a good look at it. That was my favorite dress shop in downtown. Emmaline read it quickly and then nodded.

“*Miss* Emmaline and Miss Alexandra, would you please pay attention!” Mr. Web suddenly boomed from the front of our gloomy classroom, causing us both to jump. I knocked my slate off the table, causing the rest of the class to jump as it banged against the cold floor, and Emmaline began wiping the chalk feverishly off of her slate before Mr. Web could come read it.

“Yes, sir,” I said as I leaned over to pick mine up.

“Sorry, Mr. Web,” Emmaline added.

Just then the bell rang, causing chairs to scrape noisily against the floor as every tenth and eleventh grader in the class stood up, began getting their things together, and making their way to the door in the back of the room. Emmaline and I were two of the first ones out, since our desk was so close to the door.

And the school’s two main doors weren’t far from our room. I reached out for one of the shiny handles when someone pushed me to the side and threw herself out of the doors. “Sorry, Alexandra,” a familiar voice called back. I caught sight of my sister’s long, dark blond curls before she was gone.

“Well Katy’s sure in a hurry,” Emmaline said as we walked outside and took the sidewalk to the right.

“She hates school, and she can’t wait to get to the park to see if she can get into one of the boy’s baseball games,” I answered as I admired the white blond curls that seemed to wrap themselves perfectly around Emmaline’s head.

Sometimes I felt like I stuck out horribly against her, the plainer of the two. Why she chose me—shy, socially awkward Alexandra—as her best friend when she moved to the city a year and a half ago, I’ll never know, but I’ll always be grateful. In spite of how outspoken and sure of herself she always seems, we fit together perfectly.

Although I’d lived in Chicago my whole life, I never really fit in well with anyone before she came along, well, except for Hayden. But since our parents are best friends, they practically forced us together growing up, and it’s not the same thing as having a best girl friend to do everything with.

Speaking of which… “Alexandra, wait up,” I heard his voice calling from behind me. Emmaline and I stopped and turned around to see Hayden jogging towards us. He looked a little silly running in his pressed brown suit. “I was going to ask if I could walk you home. Are you going to Emmaline’s?” he asked when he reached me. His reddish, brown eyes seemed to darken under the cloudy, gray sky.

“No, window shopping. We’ll just drop our books off at Emmaline’s on the way. I would invite you, but I doubt you would enjoy it very much,” I answered.

“Probably not, but are you sure that’s a good idea? It’s going to start raining any second.”

“I know. We’ll see what we can until it does.”

He gave me a strange look. “Well, take my umbrella, won’t you?” Hayden held his long black umbrella out to me.

“No, thanks. I love the rain,” I said with a smile.

He let his arm drop. “Alright. See you tomorrow then.”

We turned away from each other and Emmaline and I began walking back down the sidewalk again. “He likes you, you know,” Emmaline leaned closer to me to whisper.

“Of course he does. We’ve known each other since we were born,” I said.

“I mean he fancies you.”

“What?” I stopped walking to stare at her.

“He fancies you, Alexandra. I can tell.”

“That’s ridiculous. And he can have any girl he wants. Why would he bother with me?”

“I don’t know.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“Oh, sorry. You’re pretty and a lot of fun and everything. I just mean I don’t know why he likes you, but I know he does. He’s always sneaking glances back at you in class and asking to walk you home. It’s so obvious.”

We turned right and began walking down Emmaline’s street. Mrs. Marshall waved at us from her front porch, which she was busy sweeping.

“Hm. I’m not sure about that, but it doesn’t matter anyway. He’s too serious for me. And he just feels like my brother or something,” I said.

Emmaline let out a sigh. “I wish he would ask to walk me home sometime.”

“So just ask him to.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Yes you can. You’ve never been afraid to tell or ask anyone anything.”

“Yeah, well this is different.”

I felt a splash of cold water on my hand. Then another.

“Oh no, it’s raining. Guess we’ll have to put off shopping till tomorrow,” Emmaline said before she started to run. We were nearly to her house, which was at the end of the street.

“It’s only sprinkling. We can still go,” I said as I ran along beside her. The slender, two story houses lining both sides of the street moved steadily behind us.

“Yeah, but the clouds are so dark. That sprinkle will be a storm soon. I didn’t realize how bad it looked when we were still inside.” Emmaline turned and ran to her front porch. “Are you coming?” she asked when she turned around and saw me still standing on the sidewalk.

“I think I’ll go home and get started on that reading for English.” If it was going to storm, I wanted to be in my own bed, right under the window. That way I could really enjoy it. Thunderstorms have always been one of my favorite things. “Maybe I could leave my stuff here and get it on the way to school in the morning, though.” My English book was at home.

“Sure.”

I ran up to her house and handed her my slate and books.

“At least let me get you an umbrella,” Emmaline said as she opened the door to go inside.

“That’s okay. I’m right around the corner.”

Emmaline disappeared into her house and I walked on to the corner. My house was only half a block to the right. But if I went left, a quarter of a mile would take me to Michigan Avenue, and I could still peer into a few of my favorite shops before it began to pour.

A streak of lightning lit up the sky. I looked up at the clouds for a second as I considered which way to go. As thunder followed, I turned to my left and ran across the street before I took up a quick pace toward Michigan Avenue.

Leaning my head back, I opened my mouth and let a few raindrops fall into it. Then it began to come down harder. I walked faster.

Just as the first little shop came into view, the clouds seemed to break open and pour thick sheets of rain down over me all at once. *I can’t go in there looking like this.* Anne’s Bakery was only a few yards away, but the brown hair that usually fell nearly to my shoulders and curled under was now plastered against my neck, and my clothes looked like wet rags wrapped around my skin under the drenching rain. I began to wish I’d taken Hayden’s umbrella. *Nothing I can do about it now.* So I ran to the empty alleyway that ran between the bakery and a row of houses to hide under the shop’s awning until the rain let up.

Watching the distorted world through the falling rain and having the awning protecting me from it was comforting. Even though I could feel the first cold shiver pass over me, I was enjoying the moment.

Something dark was suddenly running toward me, but I couldn’t make out what it was through the constant flow of water until it was close. A man. He ran right through the waterfall in front of me and under the shelter of the awning before he noticed me. “Hello there,” he said. He wasn’t a man, well, not an old one anyway. He looked like he couldn’t have been much older than me, nineteen or twenty maybe.

“H, hello,” I stuttered. He was gorgeous. His stony gray eyes and the way his jaw jutted forward slightly made him look intimidating, but his smile was warm. He stood about a head taller than me.

“That really came out of nowhere, didn’t it?” he asked me as he shook his dark, soaking wet hair out of his face.

I only nodded since standing beside him, and alone with him, was making me incredibly nervous. Why did he have to find me looking so terrible?

“I don’t think I’ve seen you here before, but then again, I haven’t lived here for very long. I’m Mason,” he said in a deep voice that only made him more attractive. He reached his hand out to shake mine.

“I’m Alexandra,” I said, reaching out to shake it. I hoped it wasn’t shaking, because my heart was hammering and my nerves were going crazy.

When I looked down at his hand, I realized it was filthy. Dark water dripped away from his fingers. That’s when I noticed his clothes. Before that, I hadn’t been able to take my eyes away from his face. His once white shirt had grease stains all over it and his sleeves were rolled up. The top few buttons were undone, so the collar hung open. Everything was dirty and wrinkled. He was more of a mess than I was, which made me feel a little better.

“Oh, sorry,” he said jerking his hand away just before I could touch it. “You don’t want oil all over you. Just—distracted, I guess.”

“I don’t mind.” It felt like nothing he did could have bothered me in the least.

“I’m always covered in oil. I work for Benny at Swatches Auto Repair down the street.” That was odd. He ran up to me from the other direction.

“I know where that is. My father takes his car there when it has problems. But I’ve never seen you there before,” I forced myself to say.

“Yeah. I just moved to Chicago.”

“Right, you just said that. So what brought you here?”

He looked thoughtfully at me for a minute before he said anything, causing me to go over everything I’d just said in my head to try and figure out what I said wrong.

“Would you like to get out of this rain?” Mason finally said.

“Yes, but—I can’t go anywhere looking like this,” I said, looking down at my soggy stockings and boots.

“Don’t worry. No one will see you.”

I looked up at him. “Where is it?”

“I asked you a question first,” he said with a grin.

I knew it wasn’t a good idea to go to an unknown place with someone I’d only just met, but I couldn’t help myself. And I would probably never get the same invitation from a guy like him again. “Alright.”

“Come on.” Mason grabbed my hand and pulled me out into the rain. “I wish I had my coat, now, to keep the rain off of you,” he yelled back to me over the sound of water beating against ground.

All I could think about was his hand still holding mine. It almost felt like a dream, too perfect to be real.

We ran through the alleyway until it opened up to a busy road. Then we ran across that and into another alleyway.

“We’ll go up that ladder there,” Mason turned his head to say as he pointed to an old zigzagging ladder on the side of a building to our right. We reached it within seconds. Mason let go of my hand and we ran to the right and the left over and over again. The rusty staircase rattled dangerously under my feet.

When we reached the top, Mason pulled a bent-up bobby pin out of his pocket and began poking it around inside the doorknob. “You’re breaking in?” I asked.

“Not exactly. It’s abandoned.”

“Oh.” That didn’t sound good.

Mason put the bobby pin back in his pocket as he pushed the door open. It was really dark inside, but he put a hand on my back and gently pushed me in first. The door shut behind us—and then we were surrounded by darkness. If I was nervous before, it was nothing compared to what I felt now. “Um, w, where are we?” I asked.

“You’ll see,” his voice said from right in front of me. He must have moved around me without making a sound.

I heard a scratching sound and then a match lit up the darkness right in front of me. I saw Mason reach out for a candle holder on a small table and light the five tall candles it held. “Follow me,” he said before he turned away from me and began walking to the back of the long hallway we stood in.

I wondered if I should just leave. This was all so strange and the door was right behind me. I hadn’t heard the door lock, so it would have probably been easy to escape.

Mason stopped and looked back at me. “Are you coming?” I just stared at him for a few seconds. His face was eerie in the light cast by the candles. He smiled, which put me at ease somehow. “I promise it’ll be worth it,” he said.

So I began walking forward, past the closed doors lining both sides of the hallway, as he did the same.

At the end of the hall, Mason stopped in front of a door that was bigger than the rest and reached out to open it. There was a loud *creak*, and then the hallway was flooded with bright light and warmth. I had to squint at first. A stairway led up on the other side of the door.

“Just up here,” Mason said before he began to climb. I followed cautiously at first, but soon the heat of the upstairs room began to lure me in. I was so wet and cold. A few steps up, I could see a glass ceiling over the room. The violent rain beat harmlessly against it and ran down over the glass. It was beautiful. At the top of the stairs a glass room surrounded us. Long wooden flower boxes lined the floor in rows, but nothing was growing in them anymore.

“This looks like a greenhouse,” I said.

“It was built to serve as one,” Mason answered. “The top five floors of this building haven’t been used in years.” He walked over to a small sink in one corner and began washing his hands.

I looked up through the clear glass. “This place is amazing, but are you sure it’s okay that we’re here?”

“I thought you might like it.” So he wasn’t going to answer my question.

*What to say…* “Sooo, you’re working at the repair shop? Is your father a repairman?” I asked.

“Nope. It’s something I picked up where I used to live.”

“Did your family move here with you?”

“No. Just me.”

“So you moved here alone? If you don’t mind me asking, why did you decide to come to Chicago by yourself?”

“That’s…complicated.” Mason sat down on the edge of one of the flowerboxes and nodded at the one across from it, so I took a seat.

“Complicated how?”

He looked at me thoughtfully again, like he was hesitating, torn in how to answer my question. “Well…have you heard of Sydney Algoth?”

“Yes.” Who hadn’t? He was one of the newest and most well known gangsters in New York City. He was probably so well known because not long ago he was such an upstanding citizen, a beloved and trustworthy mayor of a small town in Illinois, born and raised right here in the USA. I think his joining the mob was kind of a shock for everyone. Usually mobsters came here on boats, off the streets, or were born into it. So after Sydney, people began to take a closer look at each other.

“He’s my old man.”

“What?!” I sat up straight. Was I really sitting there all alone in an abandoned building with a mobster’s son? Where no one could hear me scream? “Your father’s a gangster? Does that make you one too? That’s why you came here. Loads of gangsters are coming to Chicago. Why did you—”

“Calm down,” Mason said seriously. “I’m not part of the mob and neither is my dad.”

“You can’t be serious. Everyone knows your father is.”

“Just—stay here for a second, okay? I’m going to get something.” Mason stood up and walked over to the staircase before he descended out of sight.

I sat there trying to calm myself down. Why would he lie about not being a gangster? Men in the mob aren’t afraid of anything. He certainly wouldn’t be afraid of me. So he had no reason to lie. I was still terrified.

A couple of minutes passed by before I heard the door at the bottom of the stairs open and Mason’s heavy footsteps coming up. I watched the stairway anxiously, almost expecting to see machine guns in both of his hands when he reached the top. But all he was holding was a crinkled old newspaper.

“Read this first, then you can think whatever you want,” he said as he held out the paper to me. It was opened to page three and folded so that I was looking at the bottom half of the page. My eyes were instantly drawn to the picture I’d seen so many times in newspapers before, the picture of Sydney Algoth. For the first time I noticed the resemblance between him and Mason.

Mason took his seat across from me again as I began to read.

***Mayor from Illinois Gone Missing***

*Sydney Algoth, mayor of Shilling, IL, came to visit our fine city over the Thanksgiving holiday and has now been reported missing. After our own mayor received a call from the town’s secretary that Mr. Algoth had not yet returned and that they had not heard from him, police officers began to investigate. No one at the train station was said to have seen him on the day that he should have departed, and it has been confirmed that he never boarded a train to leave.*

I stopped reading and looked up at Mason. “Your father’s missing?”

“Sort of. When that was printed, everyone in New York heard about him and saw his picture one way or another. And then sightings of him began to be reported from around the city. They were all of him with the mob, though. So of course everyone assumed he was a member, and it was released to the press eventually. But I know my dad. He’s not in the mob,” Mason said.

I flipped the paper over and looked at the date on the top. December 8, 1931. “This paper’s a year old. Haven’t you even heard from him?” I asked. He shook his head. “What about your mother?”

“Died five years ago.”  
 “I’m sorry.”

I looked down at the paper as I turned it back to his father. What he said made sense, but I’d heard stories at school and at home about the crimes his father was involved in. Selling alcohol illegally and paying off cops to keep it quiet. There was even talk about him being involved in the murder of a young woman during a bank robbery. “I just don’t understand how this could turn into what people are saying,” I said, looking back up at Mason.

“I don’t either, but my dad’s not a gangster.” I could see in his eyes that he meant it.

Maybe I was still just overcome by his gorgeous face and the fact that he was talking to me. Maybe the way the rain I loved so much was surrounding me in a way that it had never done before did it to me, but I believed him, and the unnecessary fear I was feeling seemed to drain away.

“Here,” I handed the paper back to him. I didn’t need to read anymore.

“Do you believe me?” He seemed to hold in his breath as he watched me.

“Yes.”

He smiled. “Good, just don’t tell anyone my secret, okay? That’s why I came here. Everyone in Shilling thinks I’m involved with the mob. People’ve known me my whole life and suddenly I’m not welcome in the grocery store or the repair station I’ve worked at for nearly four years. No one knows me here, though, except for you.”

I felt honored. “So…why did you tell me?”

“I don’t know. But I can see something different in you. I feel like I can trust you.” His jaw moved forward as he chewed at his lip.

It was odd to sit there watching him smile at me. I wondered how he could know he could trust me, how I was lucky enough to be there with him when there was a whole city full of beautiful girls surrounding us. I began to wish the day would never end.

“Where are you staying, then?” I asked. He looked a little embarrassed as his eyes drifted around the room and then to the stairs. “Here?” I asked in realization. He nodded his head and wiped the drop of rain that was falling from his hair on his shirt, smearing both his cheek and shoulder with grease. “Well this place is beautiful. And it must be nice to have so much space all to yourself for free.” I wanted him to know that I could care less about where he lived.

“Thanks.”

We both watched the rain that still wasn’t letting up for a few minutes. I wondered if I should leave. “Do you like playing cards?” he asked suddenly, breaking the silence.

“Sure.”

“I’ve got a deck right here.” He began pulling a deck of cards out of his pocket. They were surprisingly clean.

We sat down on the floor and played different card games together as the rain continued to fall all around us. Gin rummy was his favorite, slapjack was mine.

When the sun began to go down, I knew I needed to get home. But I didn’t want to leave. I would probably never see Mason again unless my father needed his car fixed. And I knew I would never receive so much attention from a boy half as handsome as he was. He was so carefree and so much fun. “I guess I should go home,” I finally said when I knew I couldn’t put it off any longer.

“Would you like me to walk with you? You said it’s not far from here,” Mason asked as he scooped up his cards and shoved the mess into his pocket. We both stood up and began walking toward the stairs.

“I’ll be alright.” I didn’t think he really wanted to walk all the way to my house and then back. It was still sprinkling outside.

“Then you should take a coat to keep over you. I don’t have any umbrellas or I’d give you one.”

“How will I get it back to you?” I asked hopefully.

“You can keep it. There’s a lot of old coats in this place.”

“Okay.” My spirits fell.

Mason reached the bottom of the staircase and opened the door for me. He picked up the candles he’d left sitting beside it and lit them again. Then he opened the first door in the hallway to the left. An open window lit up a room full of dusty chairs and an old desk with papers all over it. Mason walked over to a closet and pulled out a giant black coat that he handed to me.

“Are those skates?” I asked when I saw a pair hanging by their shoelaces on one of the chairs.

“Yeah. Have you ever skated before?” Mason asked me.

“No. It looks like a lot of fun, though. Are those yours?” They didn’t look like they were as dusty as everything else in the room.

“They’re one of the few things I brought here with me. I would let you try them on but they would be way too big for you. I wear a size thirteen. What are you, a size six?”

“Seven.”

“Well, here’s a coat. Try to keep dry.”

I thanked him as we walked down the hallway. And then I was outside, turning back to take a last look at the door I knew he was right on the other side of. I would probably never be that close to him again. But I was freezing and the rain was hitting me. So I put the coat over my head and held it up with one hand while I used the other to cling to the handrail at my side as I began running down the slippery steps. I couldn’t wait to get home and call Emmaline so I could tell her what had happened after I left her house.

At home my father wanted to know whose coat I had with me, so I told them a little about Mason, leaving out his father and the breaking and entering. My mother, who’s the biggest gossip I know, wanted to know everything, but I kept changing the subject.

We sat around our oversized kitchen table that night, eating spaghetti and meatballs, as my mother kept trying to pry whatever she could out of me. I just kept shifting the subject over to Katy and the baseball game she’d played in and won with the winning homerun the day before. She was happy with this. My father was always irritated with how ‘unladylike’ she was, but I could see a bit of pride for his daughter in his eyes as well.

It was a relief when I finally got to go upstairs to bed so I could call Emmaline on our candlestick phone. It sat in the hallway, so I would have to be quick and quiet since I wasn’t supposed to be on the phone after eight. It was eight twenty. She answered on the second ring. “Emmaline, I’m glad I got you. There’s something I have to tell you,” I said as quietly as I could.

“What is it?”

I sat the coat Mason had given me beside the phone and noticed a small strip of paper sticking out of one of the pockets. Pulling it out, I saw *thank you* written on it. Was it a note from Mason?

“Alexandra, what’s wrong?” Emmaline asked.

“Nothing.” I put the piece of paper back in the pocket, deciding it must have been there before Mason gave it to me. He couldn’t have written it and slipped it in their in the little time it took him to get the coat for me. “I called you because when I left to go home today, I decided to go downtown for just a few minutes, but I got caught in the rain. And then this guy came out of nowhere…”

Also by April M. Marcom

*Alisha All Alone*

*Good vs. Evil High* (Coming Summer 2014)

**Young Love in Old Chicago**

Written By April Marcom

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This is a work of fiction. Any similarity this story holds to outside persons or

events are purely coincidental.

For all the Ballards, Marcoms, and Kellers who

fill my life with joy and love!

**Chapter One**

I felt something nudge my arm as it rested on the antique two person desk, and looked over at Emmaline’s slate to see that she’d written *window shopping* down in the corner. She raised an eyebrow when I looked up at her. I smiled and nodded, already looking forward to walking down Chicago’s busy streets with her and seeing all the new things each shop would have on display. It was something we hadn’t done in awhile.

After glancing up at our stiff, round bellied teacher, Mr. Web, to make sure he wasn’t looking in my direction, I scribbled down *Francine’s Fancies first?* on the slate that sat in front of me. Then I pushed it a few inches to my right, where Emmaline could get a good look at it. That was my favorite dress shop in downtown. Emmaline read it quickly and then nodded.

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“Yes, sir,” I said as I leaned over to pick mine up.

“Sorry, Mr. Web,” Emmaline added.

Just then the bell rang, causing chairs to scrape noisily against the floor as every tenth and eleventh grader in the class stood up, began getting their things together, and making their way to the door in the back of the room. Emmaline and I were two of the first ones out, since our desk was so close to the door.

And the school’s two main doors weren’t far from our room. I reached out for one of the shiny handles when someone pushed me to the side and threw herself out of the doors. “Sorry, Alexandra,” a familiar voice called back. I caught sight of my sister’s long, dark blond curls before she was gone.

“Well Katy’s sure in a hurry,” Emmaline said as we walked outside and took the sidewalk to the right.

“She hates school, and she can’t wait to get to the park to see if she can get into one of the boy’s baseball games,” I answered as I admired the white blond curls that seemed to wrap themselves perfectly around Emmaline’s head.

Sometimes I felt like I stuck out horribly against her, the plainer of the two. Why she chose me—shy, socially awkward Alexandra—as her best friend when she moved to the city a year and a half ago, I’ll never know, but I’ll always be grateful. In spite of how outspoken and sure of herself she always seems, we fit together perfectly.

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Speaking of which… “Alexandra, wait up,” I heard his voice calling from behind me. Emmaline and I stopped and turned around to see Hayden jogging towards us. He looked a little silly running in his pressed brown suit. “I was going to ask if I could walk you home. Are you going to Emmaline’s?” he asked when he reached me. His reddish, brown eyes seemed to darken under the cloudy, gray sky.

“No, window shopping. We’ll just drop our books off at Emmaline’s on the way. I would invite you, but I doubt you would enjoy it very much,” I answered.

“Probably not, but are you sure that’s a good idea? It’s going to start raining any second.”

“I know. We’ll see what we can until it does.”

He gave me a strange look. “Well, take my umbrella, won’t you?” Hayden held his long black umbrella out to me.

“No, thanks. I love the rain,” I said with a smile.

He let his arm drop. “Alright. See you tomorrow then.”

We turned away from each other and Emmaline and I began walking back down the sidewalk again. “He likes you, you know,” Emmaline leaned closer to me to whisper.

“Of course he does. We’ve known each other since we were born,” I said.

“I mean he fancies you.”

“What?” I stopped walking to stare at her.

“He fancies you, Alexandra. I can tell.”

“That’s ridiculous. And he can have any girl he wants. Why would he bother with me?”

“I don’t know.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“Oh, sorry. You’re pretty and a lot of fun and everything. I just mean I don’t know why he likes you, but I know he does. He’s always sneaking glances back at you in class and asking to walk you home. It’s so obvious.”

We turned right and began walking down Emmaline’s street. Mrs. Marshall waved at us from her front porch, which she was busy sweeping.

“Hm. I’m not sure about that, but it doesn’t matter anyway. He’s too serious for me. And he just feels like my brother or something,” I said.

Emmaline let out a sigh. “I wish he would ask to walk me home sometime.”

“So just ask him to.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Yes you can. You’ve never been afraid to tell or ask anyone anything.”

“Yeah, well this is different.”

I felt a splash of cold water on my hand. Then another.

“Oh no, it’s raining. Guess we’ll have to put off shopping till tomorrow,” Emmaline said before she started to run. We were nearly to her house, which was at the end of the street.

“It’s only sprinkling. We can still go,” I said as I ran along beside her. The slender, two story houses lining both sides of the street moved steadily behind us.

“Yeah, but the clouds are so dark. That sprinkle will be a storm soon. I didn’t realize how bad it looked when we were still inside.” Emmaline turned and ran to her front porch. “Are you coming?” she asked when she turned around and saw me still standing on the sidewalk.

“I think I’ll go home and get started on that reading for English.” If it was going to storm, I wanted to be in my own bed, right under the window. That way I could really enjoy it. Thunderstorms have always been one of my favorite things. “Maybe I could leave my stuff here and get it on the way to school in the morning, though.” My English book was at home.

“Sure.”

I ran up to her house and handed her my slate and books.

“At least let me get you an umbrella,” Emmaline said as she opened the door to go inside.

“That’s okay. I’m right around the corner.”

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A streak of lightning lit up the sky. I looked up at the clouds for a second as I considered which way to go. As thunder followed, I turned to my left and ran across the street before I took up a quick pace toward Michigan Avenue.

Leaning my head back, I opened my mouth and let a few raindrops fall into it. Then it began to come down harder. I walked faster.

Just as the first little shop came into view, the clouds seemed to break open and pour thick sheets of rain down over me all at once. *I can’t go in there looking like this.* Anne’s Bakery was only a few yards away, but the brown hair that usually fell nearly to my shoulders and curled under was now plastered against my neck, and my clothes looked like wet rags wrapped around my skin under the drenching rain. I began to wish I’d taken Hayden’s umbrella. *Nothing I can do about it now.* So I ran to the empty alleyway that ran between the bakery and a row of houses to hide under the shop’s awning until the rain let up.

Watching the distorted world through the falling rain and having the awning protecting me from it was comforting. Even though I could feel the first cold shiver pass over me, I was enjoying the moment.

Something dark was suddenly running toward me, but I couldn’t make out what it was through the constant flow of water until it was close. A man. He ran right through the waterfall in front of me and under the shelter of the awning before he noticed me. “Hello there,” he said. He wasn’t a man, well, not an old one anyway. He looked like he couldn’t have been much older than me, nineteen or twenty maybe.

“H, hello,” I stuttered. He was gorgeous. His stony gray eyes and the way his jaw jutted forward slightly made him look intimidating, but his smile was warm. He stood about a head taller than me.

“That really came out of nowhere, didn’t it?” he asked me as he shook his dark, soaking wet hair out of his face.

I only nodded since standing beside him, and alone with him, was making me incredibly nervous. Why did he have to find me looking so terrible?

“I don’t think I’ve seen you here before, but then again, I haven’t lived here for very long. I’m Mason,” he said in a deep voice that only made him more attractive. He reached his hand out to shake mine.

“I’m Alexandra,” I said, reaching out to shake it. I hoped it wasn’t shaking, because my heart was hammering and my nerves were going crazy.

When I looked down at his hand, I realized it was filthy. Dark water dripped away from his fingers. That’s when I noticed his clothes. Before that, I hadn’t been able to take my eyes away from his face. His once white shirt had grease stains all over it and his sleeves were rolled up. The top few buttons were undone, so the collar hung open. Everything was dirty and wrinkled. He was more of a mess than I was, which made me feel a little better.

“Oh, sorry,” he said jerking his hand away just before I could touch it. “You don’t want oil all over you. Just—distracted, I guess.”

“I don’t mind.” It felt like nothing he did could have bothered me in the least.

“I’m always covered in oil. I work for Benny at Swatches Auto Repair down the street.” That was odd. He ran up to me from the other direction.

“I know where that is. My father takes his car there when it has problems. But I’ve never seen you there before,” I forced myself to say.

“Yeah. I just moved to Chicago.”

“Right, you just said that. So what brought you here?”

He looked thoughtfully at me for a minute before he said anything, causing me to go over everything I’d just said in my head to try and figure out what I said wrong.

“Would you like to get out of this rain?” Mason finally said.

“Yes, but—I can’t go anywhere looking like this,” I said, looking down at my soggy stockings and boots.

“Don’t worry. No one will see you.”

I looked up at him. “Where is it?”

“I asked you a question first,” he said with a grin.

I knew it wasn’t a good idea to go to an unknown place with someone I’d only just met, but I couldn’t help myself. And I would probably never get the same invitation from a guy like him again. “Alright.”

“Come on.” Mason grabbed my hand and pulled me out into the rain. “I wish I had my coat, now, to keep the rain off of you,” he yelled back to me over the sound of water beating against ground.

All I could think about was his hand still holding mine. It almost felt like a dream, too perfect to be real.

We ran through the alleyway until it opened up to a busy road. Then we ran across that and into another alleyway.

“We’ll go up that ladder there,” Mason turned his head to say as he pointed to an old zigzagging ladder on the side of a building to our right. We reached it within seconds. Mason let go of my hand and we ran to the right and the left over and over again. The rusty staircase rattled dangerously under my feet.

When we reached the top, Mason pulled a bent-up bobby pin out of his pocket and began poking it around inside the doorknob. “You’re breaking in?” I asked.

“Not exactly. It’s abandoned.”

“Oh.” That didn’t sound good.

Mason put the bobby pin back in his pocket as he pushed the door open. It was really dark inside, but he put a hand on my back and gently pushed me in first. The door shut behind us—and then we were surrounded by darkness. If I was nervous before, it was nothing compared to what I felt now. “Um, w, where are we?” I asked.

“You’ll see,” his voice said from right in front of me. He must have moved around me without making a sound.

I heard a scratching sound and then a match lit up the darkness right in front of me. I saw Mason reach out for a candle holder on a small table and light the five tall candles it held. “Follow me,” he said before he turned away from me and began walking to the back of the long hallway we stood in.

I wondered if I should just leave. This was all so strange and the door was right behind me. I hadn’t heard the door lock, so it would have probably been easy to escape.

Mason stopped and looked back at me. “Are you coming?” I just stared at him for a few seconds. His face was eerie in the light cast by the candles. He smiled, which put me at ease somehow. “I promise it’ll be worth it,” he said.

So I began walking forward, past the closed doors lining both sides of the hallway, as he did the same.

At the end of the hall, Mason stopped in front of a door that was bigger than the rest and reached out to open it. There was a loud *creak*, and then the hallway was flooded with bright light and warmth. I had to squint at first. A stairway led up on the other side of the door.

“Just up here,” Mason said before he began to climb. I followed cautiously at first, but soon the heat of the upstairs room began to lure me in. I was so wet and cold. A few steps up, I could see a glass ceiling over the room. The violent rain beat harmlessly against it and ran down over the glass. It was beautiful. At the top of the stairs a glass room surrounded us. Long wooden flower boxes lined the floor in rows, but nothing was growing in them anymore.

“This looks like a greenhouse,” I said.

“It was built to serve as one,” Mason answered. “The top five floors of this building haven’t been used in years.” He walked over to a small sink in one corner and began washing his hands.

I looked up through the clear glass. “This place is amazing, but are you sure it’s okay that we’re here?”

“I thought you might like it.” So he wasn’t going to answer my question.

*What to say…* “Sooo, you’re working at the repair shop? Is your father a repairman?” I asked.

“Nope. It’s something I picked up where I used to live.”

“Did your family move here with you?”

“No. Just me.”

“So you moved here alone? If you don’t mind me asking, why did you decide to come to Chicago by yourself?”

“That’s…complicated.” Mason sat down on the edge of one of the flowerboxes and nodded at the one across from it, so I took a seat.

“Complicated how?”

He looked at me thoughtfully again, like he was hesitating, torn in how to answer my question. “Well…have you heard of Sydney Algoth?”

“Yes.” Who hadn’t? He was one of the newest and most well known gangsters in New York City. He was probably so well known because not long ago he was such an upstanding citizen, a beloved and trustworthy mayor of a small town in Illinois, born and raised right here in the USA. I think his joining the mob was kind of a shock for everyone. Usually mobsters came here on boats, off the streets, or were born into it. So after Sydney, people began to take a closer look at each other.

“He’s my old man.”

“What?!” I sat up straight. Was I really sitting there all alone in an abandoned building with a mobster’s son? Where no one could hear me scream? “Your father’s a gangster? Does that make you one too? That’s why you came here. Loads of gangsters are coming to Chicago. Why did you—”

“Calm down,” Mason said seriously. “I’m not part of the mob and neither is my dad.”

“You can’t be serious. Everyone knows your father is.”

“Just—stay here for a second, okay? I’m going to get something.” Mason stood up and walked over to the staircase before he descended out of sight.

I sat there trying to calm myself down. Why would he lie about not being a gangster? Men in the mob aren’t afraid of anything. He certainly wouldn’t be afraid of me. So he had no reason to lie. I was still terrified.

A couple of minutes passed by before I heard the door at the bottom of the stairs open and Mason’s heavy footsteps coming up. I watched the stairway anxiously, almost expecting to see machine guns in both of his hands when he reached the top. But all he was holding was a crinkled old newspaper.

“Read this first, then you can think whatever you want,” he said as he held out the paper to me. It was opened to page three and folded so that I was looking at the bottom half of the page. My eyes were instantly drawn to the picture I’d seen so many times in newspapers before, the picture of Sydney Algoth. For the first time I noticed the resemblance between him and Mason.

Mason took his seat across from me again as I began to read.

***Mayor from Illinois Gone Missing***

*Sydney Algoth, mayor of Shilling, IL, came to visit our fine city over the Thanksgiving holiday and has now been reported missing. After our own mayor received a call from the town’s secretary that Mr. Algoth had not yet returned and that they had not heard from him, police officers began to investigate. No one at the train station was said to have seen him on the day that he should have departed, and it has been confirmed that he never boarded a train to leave.*

I stopped reading and looked up at Mason. “Your father’s missing?”

“Sort of. When that was printed, everyone in New York heard about him and saw his picture one way or another. And then sightings of him began to be reported from around the city. They were all of him with the mob, though. So of course everyone assumed he was a member, and it was released to the press eventually. But I know my dad. He’s not in the mob,” Mason said.

I flipped the paper over and looked at the date on the top. December 8, 1931. “This paper’s a year old. Haven’t you even heard from him?” I asked. He shook his head. “What about your mother?”

“Died five years ago.”  
 “I’m sorry.”

I looked down at the paper as I turned it back to his father. What he said made sense, but I’d heard stories at school and at home about the crimes his father was involved in. Selling alcohol illegally and paying off cops to keep it quiet. There was even talk about him being involved in the murder of a young woman during a bank robbery. “I just don’t understand how this could turn into what people are saying,” I said, looking back up at Mason.

“I don’t either, but my dad’s not a gangster.” I could see in his eyes that he meant it.

Maybe I was still just overcome by his gorgeous face and the fact that he was talking to me. Maybe the way the rain I loved so much was surrounding me in a way that it had never done before did it to me, but I believed him, and the unnecessary fear I was feeling seemed to drain away.

“Here,” I handed the paper back to him. I didn’t need to read anymore.

“Do you believe me?” He seemed to hold in his breath as he watched me.

“Yes.”

He smiled. “Good, just don’t tell anyone my secret, okay? That’s why I came here. Everyone in Shilling thinks I’m involved with the mob. People’ve known me my whole life and suddenly I’m not welcome in the grocery store or the repair station I’ve worked at for nearly four years. No one knows me here, though, except for you.”

I felt honored. “So…why did you tell me?”

“I don’t know. But I can see something different in you. I feel like I can trust you.” His jaw moved forward as he chewed at his lip.

It was odd to sit there watching him smile at me. I wondered how he could know he could trust me, how I was lucky enough to be there with him when there was a whole city full of beautiful girls surrounding us. I began to wish the day would never end.

“Where are you staying, then?” I asked. He looked a little embarrassed as his eyes drifted around the room and then to the stairs. “Here?” I asked in realization. He nodded his head and wiped the drop of rain that was falling from his hair on his shirt, smearing both his cheek and shoulder with grease. “Well this place is beautiful. And it must be nice to have so much space all to yourself for free.” I wanted him to know that I could care less about where he lived.

“Thanks.”

We both watched the rain that still wasn’t letting up for a few minutes. I wondered if I should leave. “Do you like playing cards?” he asked suddenly, breaking the silence.

“Sure.”

“I’ve got a deck right here.” He began pulling a deck of cards out of his pocket. They were surprisingly clean.

We sat down on the floor and played different card games together as the rain continued to fall all around us. Gin rummy was his favorite, slapjack was mine.

When the sun began to go down, I knew I needed to get home. But I didn’t want to leave. I would probably never see Mason again unless my father needed his car fixed. And I knew I would never receive so much attention from a boy half as handsome as he was. He was so carefree and so much fun. “I guess I should go home,” I finally said when I knew I couldn’t put it off any longer.

“Would you like me to walk with you? You said it’s not far from here,” Mason asked as he scooped up his cards and shoved the mess into his pocket. We both stood up and began walking toward the stairs.

“I’ll be alright.” I didn’t think he really wanted to walk all the way to my house and then back. It was still sprinkling outside.

“Then you should take a coat to keep over you. I don’t have any umbrellas or I’d give you one.”

“How will I get it back to you?” I asked hopefully.

“You can keep it. There’s a lot of old coats in this place.”

“Okay.” My spirits fell.

Mason reached the bottom of the staircase and opened the door for me. He picked up the candles he’d left sitting beside it and lit them again. Then he opened the first door in the hallway to the left. An open window lit up a room full of dusty chairs and an old desk with papers all over it. Mason walked over to a closet and pulled out a giant black coat that he handed to me.

“Are those skates?” I asked when I saw a pair hanging by their shoelaces on one of the chairs.

“Yeah. Have you ever skated before?” Mason asked me.

“No. It looks like a lot of fun, though. Are those yours?” They didn’t look like they were as dusty as everything else in the room.

“They’re one of the few things I brought here with me. I would let you try them on but they would be way too big for you. I wear a size thirteen. What are you, a size six?”

“Seven.”

“Well, here’s a coat. Try to keep dry.”

I thanked him as we walked down the hallway. And then I was outside, turning back to take a last look at the door I knew he was right on the other side of. I would probably never be that close to him again. But I was freezing and the rain was hitting me. So I put the coat over my head and held it up with one hand while I used the other to cling to the handrail at my side as I began running down the slippery steps. I couldn’t wait to get home and call Emmaline so I could tell her what had happened after I left her house.

At home my father wanted to know whose coat I had with me, so I told them a little about Mason, leaving out his father and the breaking and entering. My mother, who’s the biggest gossip I know, wanted to know everything, but I kept changing the subject.

We sat around our oversized kitchen table that night, eating spaghetti and meatballs, as my mother kept trying to pry whatever she could out of me. I just kept shifting the subject over to Katy and the baseball game she’d played in and won with the winning homerun the day before. She was happy with this. My father was always irritated with how ‘unladylike’ she was, but I could see a bit of pride for his daughter in his eyes as well.

It was a relief when I finally got to go upstairs to bed so I could call Emmaline on our candlestick phone. It sat in the hallway, so I would have to be quick and quiet since I wasn’t supposed to be on the phone after eight. It was eight twenty. She answered on the second ring. “Emmaline, I’m glad I got you. There’s something I have to tell you,” I said as quietly as I could.

“What is it?”

I sat the coat Mason had given me beside the phone and noticed a small strip of paper sticking out of one of the pockets. Pulling it out, I saw *thank you* written on it. Was it a note from Mason?

“Alexandra, what’s wrong?” Emmaline asked.

“Nothing.” I put the piece of paper back in the pocket, deciding it must have been there before Mason gave it to me. He couldn’t have written it and slipped it in their in the little time it took him to get the coat for me. “I called you because when I left to go home today, I decided to go downtown for just a few minutes, but I got caught in the rain. And then this guy came out of nowhere…”

**Chapter Two**

It was hard to pay attention in school the next day. Between daydreaming about the day before and Emmaline whispering every question about Mason to me as it popped into her head, I just couldn’t keep my mind on what Mr. Web was saying. A couple of times he called on me to answer a question and I didn’t even hear him. Emmaline had to kick me under the table to get my attention. And then I had no answer to give.

“Are you alright?” Hayden asked me as we all walked outside with our lunches in our hands. He fell in step with Emmaline and me.

“I’m fine. I’m just having a hard time focusing.”

“I assume you didn’t make it to the shops before that downpour yesterday. You didn’t get caught in it, did you?”

We stepped outside and the cold wind began whipping against me, stinging my cheeks. “I wish we were eating inside today,” I complained, wanting to avoid the subject of Mason with Hayden.

“Alexandra got caught in the rain alright, but I wouldn’t say she got any window shopping done. More like boy shopping,” Emmaline said. I tried to turn my head to her and shake it inconspicuously to let her know not to say anything else.

“Boy shopping?” Hayden asked.

“I wasn’t really boy shopping, but I did get caught in the rain while I was trying to window shop. Someone just happened to get caught in it with me.”

“Does he attend our school?”

“I don’t think he goes to any school. He’s a mechanic.”

Someone bumped into me from behind, causing me to drop my lunch pail. The latch came open and my thermos fell out and began rolling down the sidewalk. “Why don’t you *pay a-ttention,* Miss Alexandra?” Marcy said, imitating the way Mr. Web had said it to me several times that day, as she walked around Emmaline and looked back at me.

“Why don’t you look where you’re going, you twit?” Emmaline snapped at her.

Marcy and I had attended the same K—twelve school since Kindergarten and I still didn’t know why she hated me so much, but she had always singled me out that way. Her ugly, thick glasses caught a glint of sunlight as she laughed and ran over to eat with her friends.

“Are you alright?” Hayden asked as he bent down and picked up my lunch.

“I’m fine.”

We went to sit in one of the few dry spots on the pavement. Even though it was mostly sunny, everything was still pretty wet.

As I bit into my apple, I felt grateful for Marcy’s cruelty for the first time. At least Mason was forgotten.

After we finished eating, Emmaline and I began making plans to go window shopping after school since we didn’t get to do it the day before. Hayden left about halfway through the lunch hour to go talk to his other friends.

When the bell rang, everyone was happy to be going back into school for once, just because it meant getting out of the bitter cold. For some reason it was easier for me to stay focused after that.

Katy was waiting for me in the hallway when the final school bell rang. Being in the ninth grade, her classroom was right beside ours. “Hey, Alexandra,” she said as soon I walked out of my classroom.

“Hey, Katy.”

“We’re going window shopping. Do you want to come?” Emmaline asked her. I knew she was just being nice because Katy’s my little sister, and we *both* knew what her answer would be.

Katy made a face. “No way. I just wanted to tell you that Mother told me to watch you so I could see this Mason character and tell her everything about him since you’re keeping your mouth shut so tight. I don’t really want to follow you around all day, though, so maybe I could just get a good look at him and then I’ll leave you alone,” she said to me.

I wasn’t really surprised. “That’s okay. I don’t think I’ll be seeing him again.”

“Good. See you later then.” Katy turned and hurried out the door.

Emmaline started to laugh. “You’re mother’s a hoot, having your sister spy on you like that.”

“I know. She just wants to have something new to talk to her friends about. I’m glad Katy told me, though.”

We started to walk outside when Hayden caught up to us. “I won’t ask about today, but maybe I could walk you home tomorrow, Alexandra,” he asked. “We could work on our homework together.”

“Sure.”

I looked at the end of the walkway leading away from our school and froze. There he was, standing on the sidewalk with two pairs of skates thrown over his shoulder. “Emmaline,” I whispered.

She stopped and looked back me. Hayden did the same. They both gave me peculiar looks. “What?” Emmaline asked.

“That’s him. That’s Mason.”

Emmaline followed my gaze until she saw him. He stood out against the kids milling their way around him in their nice school clothes with his messy, permanently grease stained shirt on. He looked cleaner, though. “Wow, you weren’t lying when you said he was a looker,” Emmaline said.

“Shh, and stop staring at him. Maybe he’s not even here to see me.”

Marcy and a couple of her friends walked past him. They were all staring and whispering, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Who?” Hayden asked. “That street urchin? What does he have to do with you?”

Mason saw me just then and smiled broadly. He began walking up the walkway. My heart hammered and my legs became shaky. Did he really come to see me? “Hey, Alexandra. I thought I’d take you skating since you’ve never done it before,” he said.

Joy pulsed through my veins. He *was* there for me. “Really? I would love that. Um, how did you know where to find me?”

“Yesterday you said you went to school in this neighborhood. It wasn’t hard to find.”

“Yesterday? So he’s the one you got caught in the rain with?” Hayden asked me.

“Yes.”

He stared at Mason for a minute, giving nothing away in his expression.

“Oh yeah, Mason, this is Emmaline and Hayden. And this is Mason,” I said, trying to break some of the tension.

“Nice to meet you,” Mason said.

“You too.” Emmaline beamed at him.

“Aren’t you two supposed to go shopping?” Hayden asked me. My heart fell.

“That’s alright. We can do it tomorrow,” Emmaline said.

“Are you sure?” I asked her.

“Absolutely. You go have fun with Mason and I’ll see you in the morning. I can take your books too. You don’t want to have to worry about those if you’re going to be skating.” She winked at me as she took my books and then turned to walk away.

“I guess I’ll see you later then,” Hayden said roughly before he turned to go the other way.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have bothered you,” Mason said a little dejectedly.

“No. I’m glad you came.” That was an understatement. “I’ve always wanted to learn how to skate.”

“Good. I was thinking we could go to the park east of here. It’s a good place to skate.” We walked across the street and turned left. The park wasn’t far.

“So is that Hayden guy your boyfriend or something?” Mason asked.

“No. He’s more like a brother, a really good brother. He’s a little dull, though.” He would have never taken me skating.

Mason nodded as we turned to our right. I could see the park just ahead. Pavement wrapped all around and crossed here and there. People were out for walks or sitting under shade trees. A few kids were there already. Katy was standing with a group of boys at one corner. It looked like they were planning on playing baseball, since several of them were already wearing mitts. “That’s my sister over there,” I said, pointing her out to Mason. Then I remembered that she was supposed to be keeping watch on me. That didn’t worry me, though. If she tore herself away from the game long enough to notice that I was there, she would do exactly as she said, take a quick mental picture of him and then ignore us the rest of the time.

“She—looks nothing like you.”

“We’re really nothing alike.”

“Is her name Katy?”

“Yes. Do you know her?”

“I’ve never met her, but I’ve heard guys at the shop talking about her. They say she’s the best player in the park and that it’s too bad she’s a girl.”

*Of course they did.* “What do you think?”

“I think it’s too bad she’ll have trouble getting into the major leagues just because of that.”

We stopped beside an empty bench. “Why don’t you sit down and I’ll lace you up?” Mason said as he squatted down and pulled the skates off of his shoulder to untie the laces. I sat down and kicked off my boots. A minute later, he slipped one skate on and then pulled the laces way too tight before he began to tie them.

I couldn’t believe I was there with him. He found my school so he could see me. Maybe he would come again, and again. That sort of ‘in a dream’ feeling began to well up inside of me, just like the day before.

“How did you get a pair in my size?” I asked him.

“Benny said his sister wore about a size seven, so he borrowed them from her.” He slipped the other skate on my foot and tied it just as tightly. Then he put his pair on.

“Alright, so you start slowly. You’ll be fine, I’m sure, but you have to learn to keep your balance before you can move,” he said as he stood up.

I tried to stand up, but the wheels began turning and I let out a little scream as I fell forward helplessly, right into Mason. I expected him to fall over backwards and break his neck, but he grabbed my arms and helped me to stand back up, hardly moving back at all. “Sorry,” I said.

“That’s okay. It’s always like that at first. Just try to stand steady.” He kept hold on me until it seemed like I could stand up on my own. “Now just try to walk in them. Once you’ve got that, you can try to skate.” He reached out and took my hand, keeping me steady as I shook and nearly fell this way and that.

His hand holding mine was helping and hurting the situation. It helped, because I couldn’t have stayed up for more than a few seconds without it. But at the same time, he was making me extremely nervous in a wonderful way, which wasn’t helping me stay steady at all.

I felt embarrassed flailing all over the place, like everyone in the park must have been staring and thinking how ridiculous I looked. But for some reason Mason wanted to skate with me. So I was going to skate.

I did eventually get it. I wasn’t skating backwards and in circles or anything, but I could move forward okay. Mason kept hold on my hand, though, which I was pretty happy about.

Mason talked about his parents as we skated. It sounded like his father was a good businessman and his mother was the best at everything she did, but still very humble. Her name was Anna Bell, and ravaging brain cancer was what took her in the end. I tried to paint the picture of my unusually good-natured gossip of a mother and my very serious but loving father.

An hour may have passed before I heard someone say my name and then felt her grab my arm. “What are you doing here?” Katy asked me as I fought to regain my balance and Mason let go of my hand to grab my arm and steady me.

“I’m learning how to skate,” I said.

“I can see that. But who’s this?” She looked up at Mason.

“This is Mason.”

“The rain guy?”

“Yes.” I could feel myself blush. I didn’t want him to know I’d told everyone about him.

“Hmm.” Katy looked him up and down. “Got it.” Then she ran off back to the crowd of boys that were walking away from the park.

“That was strange,” Mason said as he let go of me.

“Sorry about her. My mother asked her to keep an eye on you and tell her everything she found out. She’s just nosy.”

“So you told your parents about me?” He smiled.

“Yes. I didn’t tell them everything, though. Don’t worry about, you know.”

“I’m not. I trust you.” His words filled me with a kind of warm feeling. He had only just met me the day before and he seemed to trust me completely. I felt as if I could trust him in the same way, and I’m not someone who trusts easily.

“I bet you’re hungry,” Mason said.

I realized I was. It was hard to think about food or anything else when I was with him, so I hadn’t noticed before that. “A little.”

“I know it’s cold, but maybe you could go for ice cream.”

“That sounds great.” Ice cream was something I rarely ate, but it was my favorite dessert.

“Let’s get out of these skates.” Mason held my hand as we skated back to the bench. Then he helped me get my skates off before I slid my feet into my boots. Mason tied the shoelaces together and threw both pairs over his shoulder. Once we were both standing in our own shoes again, he glanced at my hand. I wondered if he would take it, hoped he would take it. But he didn’t. He started walking, so I walked along beside him.

“How about that ice cream parlor, Lotsa Sprinkles? It’s not too far from here,” Mason said.

“Okay.” As we walked he talked about the ice cream served at the only restaurant in Shilling, a little burger joint. I could tell he missed his hometown and I wondered if he would ever be able to go back.

At Lotsa Sprinkles, Mason bought us each a banana split. We carried them over to a booth beside a window where we could watch people walking by on the busy street outside. I doubted I would be able to pay attention to anyone outside, though.

After I slid into one side, Mason dropped the skates on the floor and sat down right beside me, leaving the seat across from us empty. I looked over at him in surprise. Was it possible he had some fraction of the interest I had in him, for me? “Would you rather I sat over there?” he asked when he saw the look on my face.

“No.” Of course not! I smiled over at him and took a bite of strawberry ice cream. Mason kind of leaned over as he rested his arms on the table and scooped out an enormous spoonful of vanilla ice cream.

I noticed the way his shirt kind of hung forward in the front due to the way he leaned over. He shook his hair away from his eyes. He seemed so perfect.

A rowdy group of boys walked in. One said something and they all laughed.

Mason just kept shoveling his ice cream in his mouth.

“So when exactly did you move up here?” I asked Mason.

“End of October. I got the job with Benny pretty fast, so I’m saving up every penny I can for a down payment on a house. Hopefully I can get into one soon. It’ll have to be small, but I can build on. I plan on getting out of, uh…where I’m staying now as soon as I can.”

He was saving up money for a house? I kind of figured he was staying in a vacant building to save up to get to New York. “Have you thought about going to New York to look for your father?” I asked. I was a little nervous about asking him, but I wondered how he could do nothing, knowing where his father was and that he’d been sighted with gangsters, especially since he knew his father wasn’t one of them. It sounded like he could be in real danger.

Mason set down his spoon, leaving half a scoop of ice cream in his bowl. He looked over at me sadly.

“I’m sorry. It’s none of my business,” I said, wishing I hadn’t said anything.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind telling you about it. It’s just hard to think about my dad without worrying.” Mason glanced at the noisy bunch of kids sitting in barstools in front of the counter. “For weeks, I woke up every morning thinking he would just show up. When I decided he wasn’t going to, I took a train to New York. That was about the same time he was sighted with members of the mob. I talked to the police and asked around on the streets, but nobody knew anything. New York is a rough place after dark…Two weeks after I got there I took a train home. I was running out of money and getting nowhere. I’ve called the New York City police station every week since that day. Still nothing. Once in a while there’s a new reported sighting or charge against him, but they haven’t found him yet.”

Mason stopped and stared out of the window at someone. When I turned my head I saw Hayden standing on the other side of the glass, staring at Mason. “Should you go say hi to your friend?” Mason asked.

I waved to Hayden. He waved back and gave me a very forced smile before he walked away. “It’s okay,” I said, looking back at Mason. “I would rather hear about your father.”

Mason smiled and turned his body so that it was facing me. For a second I really just wanted to lean into it, and rest my head on his shoulder. “There’s nothing else to tell. It’s a relief, I guess, every time he’s sighted or accused of anything. At least that way I know he’s still alive. When the cash my dad left behind and the money I made at my job before I was fired started running out, I packed up my stuff and came here. My dad has a bank account, but no one can withdraw from it except for him. And I figure he’ll need it more than me anyway if he ever comes back.”

“So you don’t have any other family, no grandparents or anything?”

He shook his head. “Dad grew up in an orphanage. Mom’s parents had her late in life and died before I was born. So I’m it.” I wanted to hold his hand or comfort him some way, but I was just too shy. Too afraid of rejection.

“Your ice cream’s melting,” Mason said. I looked back at the long bowl in front of me and realized he was right. So I finished eating it quickly as he picked up his bowl and shoved the rest of his ice cream into his mouth.

As I ate, I thought about how lonely Mason must feel, being all alone like that. I had both sets of grandparents still alive, one pair only an hour’s drive away. My Aunt Lucy and Uncle Mark had moved to the other side of Chicago two years before and I had lots of other relatives in Missouri. And most importantly, I had my parents and Katy to go home to. “Maybe you would like to come over for dinner tonight,” I said as the thought came to me.

“Really? You mean meet your parents?” Mason sat up straight as his eyebrows bent down.

“Um, well yeah, if you want to. I know my mother would love to meet you. She’ll probably ask you a hundred questions, though, so you don’t have to. I just—”

“I would love to come over for dinner.” The corner of his mouth rose up. “I’ll have to change, though. Maybe we could run by my place on the way. When do you usually eat?”

“Six or six thirty.” We both looked at the giant round clock hanging on the wall across the room. Five fifteen.

“We better go,” he said. So he picked up the skates and we walked several blocks over to the old staircase that led up to where he was living. I waited at the bottom for him while he went upstairs to change.

When he came back out he looked completely different. He was wearing a black suit with a clean, white shirt underneath. The only clear evidence of what he had just looked like were the grease stains on his fingers that refused to be washed away and the bits of black hair falling into his eyes. “How do I look?” he asked me as we started walking to my house.

“Great.” I tried to tell him what he could expect as we walked, like how blunt my sister can be and how my father always talks about sports over dessert.

When we walked into the foyer at home at five till six, my mother came to meet us as we hung our coats on the coat rack beside the door. She looked really excited when she saw Mason. “And who is this striking young man?” she asked as she kept her blue eyes locked on Mason’s face.

“This is Mason, Mother.”

She let out a little gasp and then smiled even wider. “Oh, it’s so nice to meet you, dear. I’m Mrs. Roomer, Alexandra’s mother. I’m so glad you’re here. You will stay for dinner, won’t you?”

“Yes ma’am, if it’s alright with you.”

“Of course. Alexandra mentioned you’re a mechanic. Tell me what that’s like.” My mother took Mason by the arm and led him to the pink flowery wallpapered kitchen, where she questioned him about everything she could think of as she cooked and then did the same in the dining room while we ate.

My father questioned him about his education, which is always a top priority in his eyes. I could tell he wasn’t very impressed with Mason’s highest grade level of completion being the eighth grade or with his chosen line of work, but eighth grade was higher than a lot of people finished, and he did seem to enjoy talking to Mason about football.

I mostly stayed quiet and let my family get to know Mason, hoping that he would feel comfortable. He did an excellent job of talking about his family, his hometown, and why he was there without saying anything I knew he wouldn’t want them to know.

My mother kept giving me and Mason approving smiles whenever I looked over at her. Mason was the center of her attention. He didn’t seem to mind this or the never ending questions, but I didn’t know if he was really enjoying it or if he was just being polite while he quietly counted down the minutes until he could escape.

When everyone was finished eating, my mother stood up and began stacking everyone’s plates to take to the kitchen. “It was so nice to have you over for dinner, Mason. I do hope you’ll come by again sometime,” she said as she reached out for his plate, politely letting him know that it was time for him to leave so we could get ready for bed. Everyone had had so much fun talking to him that two hours had flown by and it was nearly eight o’clock.

“I would love to come by again, but we’ve got a few big jobs coming in tomorrow. I’m afraid I’ll be tied up with work for a few days. Thank you for dinner, though, Mrs. Roomer. You’re a wonderful cook,” Mason said.

“Thank you, dear.”

He stood up to shake my father’s hand and wish him and Katy a good night before he turned to me. “I’ll walk you to the door,” I said.

Mason lifted his coat from the rack in the foyer. “Thanks for inviting me over, Alexandra,” he said.

“I hope my family didn’t embarrass you too much. I’ve never brought a boy over before.” I stopped and bit my tongue, wishing I hadn’t said it.

But he looked pleased with this. “Really?” I nodded my head. “I liked your family. They’re all really nice. I wish I could come see you after school tomorrow, but I’ll be working late, probably for the next four days at least.”

I felt excitement rush through me at what he said. *I wish I could come see you after school tomorrow…* Nothing would have made me happier. “So you’ll be working all week-end?” I asked. The next day was Thursday.

“Unfortunately. I’ll come meet you after school as soon as I can, though, if you don’t mind?”

“I don’t mind.” It was hard to keep the excitement I felt out of my face.

“I’ll see you later then.” He reached out and wrapped both arms around my back, pulling me close. This surprised me more than anything else had. It was more than I’d hoped for. I rested my arms on his back and laid my head against his chest. Bliss. Then he was pulling away and opening the door, and I was screaming inside my head for him to stay. “Good night, Alexandra,” he said as he stepped outside.

“Good night.”

#

Later, when I was changing into my nightgown in my upstairs bedroom, a piece of paper fell out of my dress’s pocket and landed gently on my bare foot. I bent down to pick it up. *Stay awake* was written on it in the same handwriting the *thank you* note had been. I held it in front of my face and stared at it. *Stay awake.* Was it from Mason? It had to be. There was just no way it could’ve gotten from his building to me accidentally. He must have slipped it in my pocket somehow without me knowing. And that meant that he wrote the note the night before, too. I wondered why he would be thanking me. The second note was even stranger, though. Stay awake? Why? *Maybe he’ll come see me tonight*. The thought sent a thrill and a shiver up my spine.

“I can’t go in this,” I said to myself, looking down at my warm nightgown and placing a hand on the curlers in my hair. But my mother would be in to tell me goodnight at nine, just before she went to bed.

So I climbed into bed and sat there with my blanket pulled up around me, wide awake. The moonlight poured in from the window right behind me, lighting up the pale yellow walls of my room.

I wondered how late he would come, or if he would come at all.

Fifteen minutes passed by before I heard my door open. “Still awake?” my mother asked quietly.

“Yeah.”

She moved across my room and sat beside me on my bed. “So, how serious do you think things are with Mason?” she asked.

“There’s nothing there, Mother.” Well, at least not from his side of things.

“Come on, Alexandra.” My mother went on for awhile, trying to get anything out of me that she could. And I kept telling her he was just a friend.

I wanted us to be more, of course. I found myself just as desperately attracted to Mason’s personality and the fun we had together as I was to his appearance, but I doubted he viewed me the same way.

When my mother realized she was getting nowhere, she gave me a hug and left to go to bed. I waited a few minutes to jump out of bed, put my dress back on, and pull the curlers out of my hair.

Then I got back into my bed and waited. The previous two afternoons played through my head. I closed my eyes and saw Mason’s gorgeous face. And I still couldn’t believe how things had gone. But how long could it go on? How long would it be until he realized he was too good-looking to be spending any time with me? How long would it take him to see his own flawlessness and to realize how full of flaws I was? How long…I would worry about that tomorrow. Tonight, I would be with him, a wakeful dream. Tonight…me…with Mason…

**Chapter Three**

I woke up to a distant sound. My heavy eyelids blinked a few times and I wondered if I had dreamed it. Then it came again, closer this time. I sat up with a start and felt my hair brush against my neck. It reminded me that I was supposed to be awake, waiting for Mason. I stood up in my bed and looked out of my window at the front lawn below. There he was, in his messy stained up shirt, holding a long branch in one hand. That had to be what he was scratching my window with.

Another thrill shot through me as he smiled up at me and waved me down. It felt like I was floating as I carefully inched my door open and then hurried down the stairs silently. I pulled my coat off the rack and walked outside.

He met me on the porch and wrapped both arms around me again. I felt a bag at his side lean against me. I hadn’t noticed it before. His arms were warm and strong. “I tried to stay awake. Sorry,” I whispered.

He let go. “That’s okay. I just—wanted to see you for a little while since I probably won’t see you for days…Will you come with me?”

“Where?”

“I want to show you the city.”

“But I’ve seen the city. I was born here, seventeen years ago on the fourteenth of this month.”

“Not like I can show you. Just come with me for a little while…It’ll be worth it, I promise.”

“But, it’s dangerous to be out after dark. I’ve heard of terrible things happening, especially to girls.” Rapists and muggers would be out.

And what if someone saw us? I could get in trouble and everyone would look down on me.

Mason moved closer to me, putting his face right in front of mine. His eyes shone in the darkness like two silver coins. I stopped breathing. “I promise you, no one will hurt you while you’re with me,” he said firmly. I felt his hand take mine. His palm pressed against mine and his fingers laced themselves through my own.

I nearly coughed as I struggled to breathe out, “Alright.”

He smiled, the light in his eyes remaining. We walked off the porch and through the yard to the sidewalk, his hand never letting go of mine.

The night air was still and icy, but adrenaline pumped through me, knowing that I shouldn’t be doing what I was doing.

“Mason?” I whispered.

“Yeah?”

“What if we get caught?” My parents would never let me see him again.

“Your parents check on you during the night?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then you’ll probably be fine. I won’t keep you up too late. And as long as we’re quiet we won’t wake up anyone out here.”

We turned left onto Emmaline’s street. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“You’ll see.” We made it halfway to my school before I started to shiver. Mason stopped and took off his coat to drape around the one I already had on. Then we continued to walk past the school and past the park, neither of us saying anything for fear of getting caught.

We didn’t pass another living soul.

So many things played through my mind as we walked—the places we could be going and what would happen when we got there. Hopefully, wherever we were going, we wouldn’t have to be afraid to say anything to each other.

We walked through an open field that stood alone in the middle of several neighborhoods, which were all a good distance away. Long blades of grass swung back and forth in the gentle breeze. The only other thing in the field was a giant water tower. Mason led me through the grass and over to one of the tower’s enormous legs. I looked up at the mountainous structure that towered over us. “Are we here?” I asked uncertainly.

“Sort of. There’s a leak, so a temporary lift is on the other side. We’ll take it up.”

“Up there? Isn’t that dangerous?”

“It’s safe enough for the guys that’ve been riding it up everyday.” He pushed the strap of his pack up on his shoulder and I wondered what was inside of it. “I’ve ridden on it. It was fine.”

I followed him to the other side and he led me to a phone booth sized cage with wires coming out of the top and attaching to something above us. Mason slid the door to the side and we climbed in. The door slid back into place with a loud *click*, locking us in.

“Ready?” he asked. I would never be ready to let that rickety box carry me up a hundred and fifty feet, but I grabbed a bar beside me and nodded. Mason grabbed one of the two levers beside the door and pulled it down. The cage began to tremble, and then with a great lurch and a deafening metallic scraping sound, it shot up.

I lost my footing and fell against Mason, grabbing onto his arm in the process. He put an arm behind my back and held me close to him. “Guess I should have warned you about that,” he said. My other arm still clung desperately to the bar. The cage rocked back and forth as it flew up higher and higher. I felt completely out of control, like the cables would snap at any second, sending us plummeting to our deaths.

“Are you alright?” Mason asked. I couldn’t answer. I just closed my eyes and leaned my head against him. “We’re almost there.” A few seconds passed by before we slowed down. And then we stopped. I realized I was trembling. “Alexandra, are you okay?” I refused to let go of the bar or his arm. “Are you afraid of heights?”

“N, no. Just that thing we rode up on.” I’d never been on a lift before. It was terrible.

“It’s not really built for women. Let’s get you out of here.” Mason kept an arm around me as he opened the door and helped me onto a wide landing with railing surrounding it that wrapped all the way around the top of the water tower. A couple of inches of open air separated the lift from the landing. Even though I felt a lot better on solid, sturdy ground, I moved up against the wall that held the water and sat down.

I was pretty sure being up there was illegal, but I was too afraid of the ride back down to worry about it. “Is there another way down?” I asked.

Mason sat down beside me and opened his bag. “There’s a ladder, but I don’t think that would be as safe. By the time you get to the bottom, assuming you don’t fall, you’d be exhausted.” He pulled a blanket out of his bag and moved closer to me as he wrapped it around both of us.

“What do you think of the view?” he asked, looking straight ahead of us.

I looked out for the first time at the lights of the skyscrapers in the distance. The differently shaped houses below almost looked like rows of strange, rolling hills. Everything seemed so peaceful from up there. “I love it,” I said. It was almost worth the ride up. “I’m glad I came with you.”

Mason slipped one arm around me under the blanket. I pinched the leg my hand was resting on to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. My panicky nerves from the ride up began to calm down.

“You did write the note telling me to stay awake, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Did you put the note that said thank you in the coat, too?”

“Yep.”

“I thought it was just left there by whoever used to own it. What were you thanking me for?”

He looked over at me. “Believing me. For making me smile…I’m grateful that you stayed after I told you who my father is. Most people wouldn’t have.” He reached up to brush my hair away from my face. I almost felt frozen in place by his gentle touch. Without even thinking, I reached up for his hand. He held onto me as he laid his hand on his leg.

“I have a confession to make,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Yesterday I was running through the rain to Swatches to see if I could pick up some extra work. I wasn’t planning on stopping until I got there, but when I saw you standing there, I felt drawn to you. And up close you were so beautiful.” I had to smile. “It’s been hard to stay away from you ever since.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m not really happy about the next few days. I would come see you every night, but I can’t keep you up like that, and I’ll be exhausted after so many straight hours of work everyday.”

“You think I’m beautiful?” I couldn’t get past this.

He laughed softly. “Of course I do. I could stare at you all night.” His thumb rubbed the back of my hand softly.

Playing his words over in my head, I was sure that I’d heard him wrong or that I had imagined them. Looking out at the city, I shook my head. “I must be dreaming.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because this can’t be real. I can’t believe someone like you would say something like that to me.”

“Who’s someone like me?”

“You’re more handsome than I deserve. You’re spontaneous and fun, two things that could never be used to describe me. I can’t believe you could think of me the way you just said you do.”

“Well I think you’ve got it all backwards.”

I wished that I did, but I seemed to be the only one seeing things clearly.

“Your hands were dirty that day,” I said as a thought came to me.

“What?”

“Yesterday, when you reached out to shake my hand, your hands were all dirty like you had been working on cars already.”

“Oh yeah, I told you they’re always that way. The oil and dirt never all washes away, and half the time I don’t even bother with it. Between work and sleep I don’t see a lot of people.

Mason let go of my hand and leaned forward to pull two thick slices of bread out of his bag, each wrapped in a napkin. “Do you like banana nut bread?” Mason asked as he handed one to me and then pulled his arm away to begin unwrapping the other.

“Yeah, it’s my favorite.”

“Me too. I picked these up on the way home at that bakery I met you beside yesterday.”

I bit into mine. “This is really good. I’ve never had their banana bread.” It was fresh and buttery. We sat in silence for a few minutes as we ate.

My mind began to wander to Hayden and what he would say if he knew I was on top of a water tower with Mason in the middle of the night. That was one thing he could never find out about.

“Thank you, Mason,” I said when I was finished.

“Sure.” He took my napkin and shoved it into his pack. He had finished his in a small fraction of the time it took me.

“When have you been up here before?” I asked him.

“I couldn’t sleep a few nights ago, so I got up and walked around the city. No one was here, so I rode the lift up.”

“Don’t you ever worry about getting in trouble with the police?”

“Nah, I figure I’ll just tell them who my old man is if I get into any trouble. Hopefully it’ll scare em enough to let me go.”

I gave him a peculiar look. He was planning to use his father’s name if he got caught doing something illegal?

He burst out laughing. “I’m only kidding.”

I laughed along. “Good, because that would never work.”

Mason stopped laughing and smiled over at me. “It might. A lot of cops are afraid of the mob. I wouldn’t try to use it to get out of trouble, though. I don’t really worry about it because I’m not hurting anyone. I’m not a vandal or a thief.”

“I know.”

He sat back against the wall behind me and put his arm around me again. “You really are beautiful, Alexandra.”

I scooted closer to him and laid my head on his shoulder. Knowing how he felt made me feel completely at ease with him. I still couldn’t believe it, that he felt the same way about me.

Mason wrapped both arms around me and laid his head against the top of mine. I inhaled deeply and silently wished on the brightest star in the sky that the night would never end, that he would never let go of me.

But a little while later I felt his arms withdraw, so I sat up and looked over at him. “I hate to do it,” Mason said, “but I should get you home. You need to sleep.”

“No, I don’t.” I would have rather stayed awake all night than have him leave me.

He smiled and stood up. “It wouldn’t be right for me to keep you up all night, and who knows how long you have before your parents figure out you’re gone, but I’ll walk you home.” I stood up reluctantly and waited while Mason stuffed the blanket back into his bag. I was still wearing his coat.

Then he took my hand and led me back to the lift. I could feel fear welling up inside of me as the memory of the ride up told me not to get in it. *I don’t have a choice*, I told myself. *It’s the only way down.* So I fought against my anxiety and stepped into the shaky box.

“Just hold onto me and it’ll be okay,” Mason said. He must have seen the fear in my face. I leaned against him and put my arms around his back. He pulled the lever that would send us down and then put his arms around me.

The box began to tremble, or was that me? There was the same tremendous sound, and then we were going down. I felt my grip on Mason tighten as I closed my eyes. “We’re halfway down, almost there,” Mason said soothingly. For a second I thought I would throw up. It felt like we were falling. “It’s almost over,” his voice came again. Then we began to slow down. A few seconds later we stopped. Something above us let out a low moan and then became quiet.

“I won’t make you do that again,” Mason said as he let go of me to slide open the door.

I held his arm as I climbed out and tried to stand steady. When I felt like I was okay we started walking home.

I waited until we reached the park to say anything. No one would be anywhere near us there. “Thank you for taking me up there, Mason. The lift was a little scary, but the view was really something.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you—” Mason stopped suddenly and pulled me behind a thick tree trunk, into the shadows.

“What are you—”

He put a hand over my mouth and pointed in the direction we had been walking in as he mouthed out, *policeman*. We leaned carefully around the tree to see a man walking towards us, Officer Cheery. If he found us he would have told my parents for sure. I felt the same fear I felt on the lift.

Mason and I leaned back behind the tree and stood perfectly still. He reached up very slowly and put his arm behind my back. Then I felt his fingers going up and down over it. I tried not to shiver. Mason pulled me around the tree when he saw Officer Cheery walking past us, trying to keep us always on the opposite side of the tree. Several minutes later we were on the other side of where we had started, waiting for him to get out of sight. “That was close,” Mason whispered when he was sure the policeman was gone.

“Yeah.”

I began to want to be home where it was safe. I didn’t want to leave Mason, but the close call and everything it brought to mind reminded me that we were walking a very dangerous fine line.

After that, we didn’t speak until I got home. Mason walked me to my door. I took off his coat and handed it back to him. “Thanks, Mason. I had a lot of fun…I guess I’ll see you later,” I said, feeling sad that it would be so much later.

“I’ll meet you after school as soon as I can.” He reached out to hug me, this time leaning down to kiss my cheek and holding me longer than before. The same protests screamed out inside of my head as he let go. “Good night, Alexandra.” He reached out to brush the hair away from my face again. The sweet moment of his fingers brushing against my skin was over too quickly.

“Good night, Mason.”

I turned away and walked into my house. I put my coat on the coat rack and went to sit down on the second stair. My fingers touched the spot on my cheek where he had kissed me and I smiled, wondering when his perfect lips would caress my own.

Suddenly a thought came to me and I reached into my dress pocket. I felt a small piece of paper and was immediately filled with anticipation. Standing up, I climbed the stairs as quickly and quietly as I could and then dashed into my room. I closed the door before I rushed over to my bed and turned on my lamp. It was Mason’s handwriting. But this was the most confusing one yet. *Don’t wander*. “Don’t wander?” I whispered to myself. What did that mean? Don’t wander from the city, from my home? It didn’t make any sense. Unfortunately, I knew that I would have to wait awhile to find out.

**Chapter Four**

“How did it go with Mason?” Emmaline asked me when I met her in front of her house the next morning. She handed me my slate and books, reminding me that I was getting behind on homework.

We began walking to school.

“Magical.” I told her as much as I could about the previous night before we got to school. The shock on her face was evident when I told her about him showing up in the middle of the night. I didn’t get to the notes he’d left in my pocket but I did get to the ride up on the lift.

With so many people around us once we were sitting at our desks, we moved on to talking about the mystery program that would be coming on the radio the next night.

As soon as Mr. Web began droning on, I had trouble staying awake. The lack of sleep from the previous night was getting to me.

When the lunch bell rang, I ate my sandwich quickly and left everything else untouched so I could lay my head on my desk and sleep through the rest of the hour. We had to eat inside because a light powdering of snow was falling.

After school Emmaline and I walked outside. “Maybe we can finally go window shopping today,” I said a little sleepily.

“I’ve been thinking about that. I know you told me yesterday that we would do that, but you also told Hayden you would do something with him,” Emmaline said.

“Hello, you two,” Hayden said as he walked up behind us.

“That’s right,” I said as my memory began waking up. “Maybe we could all do something together.”

“Why don’t we go to my house?” Hayden suggested. “We can eat something and get our reading and arithmetic done on the back porch. It’s enclosed, so we won’t be cold.”

“That’s a great idea. What do you think, Emmaline?”

“Okay. If you’re sure you don’t mind, Hayden,” she said.

“Of course not.” So we turned to the left and made our way to the neighborhood Hayden lived in. It was one of the most upscale neighborhoods in Chicago.

When I was a little girl, I always looked forward to visiting him because he had the finest toys and the backyard had been expertly designed by their gardener and landscaper. Little trees were cut into heart shapes and evenly planted around the grounds, and a garden of statues, flowers, and bushes with colorful berries stood in the middle of it all. It was always fun to explore. As I grew older it just felt like a second home.

His father and mine grew up together in Missouri, both in middle class families. Both graduated from college with business degrees. Hayden’s father moved to Chicago and hired a couple of new designers to create and market an original line of women’s dresses and accessories, calling it The Vimage Line. Within its first year his business took off, so he called my father and offered him a job. He and my mother moved to Chicago immediately, and two years later I was born. While my father has done really well here, Hayden’s has made a fortune.

We turned into Hayden’s neighborhood. The street was lined with enormous sweeping yards and long driveways that led up to immaculate mansions. We didn’t have to go very far to reach the white house with black shutters that he lived in. The front lawn was even more picturesque than usual with the life size figures of people in ice skates and reindeer wearing sleigh bells all over it.

“Alexandra and Emmaline are here, Mother,” Hayden called out when we walked in the front door.

“I’m in the kitchen,” she called back. We hung up our coats and followed the smell of cinnamon to the kitchen. “Hello, Hayden,” his mother said as she hugged her son. “Hello, girls. I just finished baking these cookies if you’d like some.” She held out a plate of sugar cookies.

“Thank you, Mrs. West. They smell wonderful,” Emmaline said.

“And your pink dress is lovely. It goes really well with your red hair,” I added. Even in the middle of winter she wore bright spring colors.

“Thank you, Alexandra.”

“Could we take some of these out on the back porch? We were going to do some homework out there,” Hayden asked.

“Of course. Take the plate and I’ll bring you some milk in just a minute.” We thanked her before we left to walk through the hallway that would lead to the back of the house. As we passed several family portraits hanging up on the wall, I thought of how much Hayden looked like his father. They both had that handsome, sophisticated look about them that the stars in the movies always had.

“Maybe you could spend the night over at my house tomorrow,” Emmaline said as we walked.

“Yeah, then we could listen to the radio show together,” I said.

“And we could finally go shopping. We could get new dresses to wear to the Winter Ball. It’s only a week away and we’ve never been to one before. It even falls on your birthday this year!”

“But most people go with a date, and if you don’t have one you have to sit around and wait for someone you don’t know to ask you to dance. Then you have to figure out what to say to him. And what if no one even asks you?” The whole thing just sounded scary.

“You worry too much. We don’t have to stay for that part. We could just go to see the Christmas show they put on in the beginning and then leave. It would be fun to dress up and do our hair to go to a ball.”

We walked through the door onto the porch and went to sit at the big, round glass top table in the back corner. A vase filled with thin branches, each dotted with purple or blue berries, had been placed in the center of it.

“Actually, Alexandra, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that,” Hayden said as he pulled my chair out for me. He did the same for Emmaline. “Maybe you would consider going with me. I would have asked you last year, but we were out of town.”

I stared at him in surprise. “You’re asking me to a dance?”

“Yes, I’ve always hoped I would be able to take you to your first dance.”

My mind was spinning. Was he asking me to go as his date? Of course he was. But that would leave Emmaline alone. And things were uncertain with Mason. I wasn’t sure what I was to him since he’d never actually said. Then a thought came to me. What if he asked me to go with him? What if I was able to go to Chicago’s famous Winter Ball with Mason? Maybe Hayden could go with Emmaline instead.

“Thank you for inviting me, Hayden, but could I think about it?” I asked him, hoping I wouldn’t hurt his feelings.

“Sure.”

“Here you are,” Hayden’s mother said in her singsong voice as she carried a tray with three glasses of milk on it to our table. We thanked her before she went back to the kitchen.

We ate a few more cookies before we got out our arithmetic books and began working on the problems we had been assigned. We spent a good two hours doing homework together. I had the most to do, so Hayden and Emmaline spent part of that time helping me with mine.

My mind wandered to the ball a few times. I imagined the fun Emmaline and I would have shopping for a dress, and Mason holding me close as we danced together all night long. I decided to try to bring the ball up to him somehow. Hopefully he would ask me to be his date.

When we were all finished, I started pulling my books together and stacking them up. “Thank you for helping me. I still need to read that book, *Handel Horror*, for Mr. Web, so I should probably go,” I said.

“I’ll walk you both home,” Hayden said as he stood up, leaving his books behind.

“Just give me a second,” Emmaline said as she got her books together.

We said good-bye to Hayden’s mother on the way out and then walked quickly toward Emmaline’s house. The snow from earlier that day hadn’t stuck, but it felt like it was even colder outside than it was when we left school.

“So you’re spending the night tomorrow, then?” Emmaline asked when we reached her house.

“Definitely.”

Hayden and I waved to her and then continued walking.

“I’m curious, why do you need to think about going to the dance with me?” Hayden asked as we turned the corner. “I thought you would have accepted.”

I cringed inside. “You kind of surprised me, and I was thinking how Emmaline would be going all alone if I went with you. She sounded like she was really excited about it.”

“But no one’s asked you yet?”

“No.”

“So it’s not because of Mason?”

It felt like answering honestly would have been mean. “I don’t know.”

I could feel him staring at me in the silent moment that followed, but I refused to look over at him. “You just met him and we’ve been together for years,” he said.

I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by that. “I know.”

“Okay, well why doesn’t Emmaline come with us?”

“She wouldn’t come if you and I were going together.”

“Then why don’t we all go together, as friends?” I shook my head. “It sounds like you’ve already made up your mind,” Hayden said.

“Not exactly.”

We reached my front porch and Hayden turned to face me. “Well…let me know when you decide. And call me if you need anything.”

“I will. Thank you, Hayden.”

He put on one of his forced smiles as he turned to leave.

#

School seemed to drag by slowly the next day. Emmaline and I spent lunch talking about the dance and we scribbled little notes about shopping on our slates throughout the day, nudging the other to read it before we erased it. Somehow Mr. Web didn’t notice.

I decided that I was definitely going to the ball. I wasn’t sure about all the details yet, but I was going. And I was really excited about going shopping with Emmaline right after school.

The sun was out and the air wasn’t nearly as cold as it had been the day before. On the contrary, it almost felt good outside.

When the school bell finally rang, Emmaline and I popped out of our chairs like pieces of toast and hurried outside. Neither of us could wait to ditch our books at her house and go shopping.

“Bye, Alexandra,” Hayden called out as we turned right onto the sidewalk. We waved back to him.

“That question about the dance really came out of nowhere for you, didn’t it?” Emmaline asked me quietly.

“Yeah it did, and I don’t know what I’m going to do,” I said.

“At least we know you’re going. So where should we start?”

“All the good dress shops are on Michigan Avenue. I say we start at the first one and work our way down.”

“Good idea. We need to see them all before we pick out the perfect dress, right?”

“Right.”

We walked quickly the rest of the way, dropped our books right inside Emmaline’s door, and then continued to hurry to Michigan Avenue. “Hannah’s is first,” I said as soon as the bright pink door came into view.

“Let’s go across the street to get a muffin first. I’m starving,” Emmaline said. So we crossed the street and walked into The Morning Deli to get two English muffins and some orange juice. “I love breakfast food in the afternoon,” Emmaline said as we took a seat. “So you said you want to wear green to the ball, right?”

“Yeah. That way it’ll match the green in my hazel eyes.”

“I think purple looks better on you. You should get a lavender dress and put a lilac in your hair.”

“Maybe. I guess you’ll want to wear blue. It always makes your blue eyes stand out.”

“I don’t know. Blue is the primary winter color, but red is the color of Christmas. I guess I’ll try on as many dresses in each color as I can.”

We both ate quickly and then went outside and crossed the street again.

Miss Hannah waved at us through the window when she saw us coming. She was standing behind the counter, putting a pile of black dresses on hangers. “Hello, girls,” she said, following the chime of the bell above the door when we walked in.

“Hello, Miss Hannah. We’re looking at dresses for the Winter Ball today,” Emmaline said.

“How exciting. I attended it last year and had a lot of fun. Would you like some help in choosing one?”

“No, thanks.”

“Let me know if you need anything, then.”

We went to look at the racks of dresses on the left side of the store since they were more formal. Emmaline picked out several blue dresses in every shade, and I picked out a few green ones and a light purple one with tiny violets lining the neckline. We took them into two dressing rooms that were right beside each other in the back. I inhaled the fresh scent Hannah’s dressing rooms always had, like someone had just scrubbed down every inch of it, as I pulled the first dress on. It was dark green and came in two pieces.

“This one’s too big,” I heard Emmaline complaining.

I looked in the mirror beside me and decided the dress I had on was hideous, but I walked out to show it to Emmaline anyway. “What do you think of this one?” I asked through the door of her stall.

“Hold on. Two of these dresses are too big even though I got them in my size.” Her door opened and she walked out in a long royal blue dress that trailed behind her a bit. “See? This one is the same size and it fits perfectly. I wish the companies making dresses would get it together.” She stopped and stared at my dress. “Oh, sorry Alexandra, but that dress—isn’t going to work.”

“I was thinking the same thing, but I thought I would get your opinion anyway. Go ahead and turn around.” She spun around and I saw long streaks of lighter blue reaching across the back. It fit every curve in her body perfectly. “Your dress is beautiful. If dress shopping wasn’t so much fun I would tell you to go ahead and buy that one.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep it in mind.”

We both went back into our dressing rooms to try on a different one. It was hard not to be jealous of Emmaline. Her figure was just as faultless as her face. There was just no way I would ever look as good as she did in that blue dress, even if I tried on every dress in the store.

I began to pull on another dark green dress.

“I was thinking today about what makes Mason so appealing,” Emmaline said through the wall.

“Yeah?”

“Maybe it’s the bad boy side of him.”

“Mason’s a good guy, Emmaline.”

“I know he’s a good guy, but he’s sort of a bad boy, isn’t he? Breaking into a place and living in it, taking you to the top of the water tower.”

“Keep it down.” I stepped out of my dressing room and looked around to make sure no one had heard her. Luckily, no one was nearby.

“Sorry. Look, I’m not judging him or anything. If I were in your situation, I wouldn’t be able to turn away from him either.”

Emmaline stepped out too, this time wearing a dark blue dress that went down nearly to her ankles. “That dress isn’t right for you, either,” she said.

I looked down at my green dress. “I know. Yours looks terrific, of course, but I like the other one better.”

“Me too. I really think you should try that purple one on.”

“Back to Mason. I can see what you’re saying, but that’s not what I find so appealing about him. He’s gorgeous. That drew me in right away. But he’s a lot of fun, too. He’s attentive. He gave me his coat and made sure I had something to eat last night. And he said I was beautiful.”

“Well, the bad boy image doesn’t hurt, right?”

I shrugged and walked back into my dressing room. She had a point. And she didn’t even know who his father was. Mobster or not, he added to the idea of Mason being a bad boy.

After taking the green dress off and putting the purple one on, I looked in the mirror and stopped to stare. It looked amazing. The delicate light purple material seemed to melt over my skin like liquid. Each violet was dusted with sparkling powder and had a purple gemstone in the center of it. The long skirt swept lightly against the floor and opened wide as I twirled around. *This is the one.* I smiled at my reflection.

“You know what we should do?” Emmaline said as her door opened. “We should go by Swatches and say hi to Mason.”

I opened my door and walked out. “I can’t do that, Emmaline. He may not want me to visit him at work. He didn’t ask me to come by.”

She didn’t respond. She just stared at my dress the same way I had. “That dress is perfect on you. Were there other ones?”

“You want to try on the same dress?”

“No. We can shop for dresses all day, but none of them are going to look as good on you as that one does. If that’s the last one, you should buy it now and spend the rest of the time shopping for shoes and something to put in your hair. Someone could come in here while we’re gone and buy it instead of you.”

“There were two others, but they were both too small for me.”

“I think you should get it, then.” Looking in the mirror on the wall, it was hard to disagree with her.

“I might. I’ll try on a few more dresses here and get it if nothing else looks right. I’m going to put these green dresses up and grab some more purple ones. I think you were right about wearing purple.” So I went back into the dressing room and picked up all the dresses to hang back on their racks. I kept the violet one, of course, and grabbed six other dresses to try on.

“Is that you?” Emmaline asked when she heard my dressing room door shut.

“Yes.”

“I still think we should go say hi to Mason. He showed up at school and at your house without being invited. I think he would be really happy if you went by to see him. We’ll say we’re shopping for dresses for the ball and then he’ll have to invite you.”

*Great minds think alike, I guess.* “I was hoping he would ask me, but then what about you?”

“Don’t worry about me. Maybe he could set me up with someone he knows, like someone he’s fixed a car for. Then we could ride with them to the ball.”

“Let’s worry about it after we’ve picked out our dresses.”

We both tried on at least ten more, but for me, none of them compared to the violet one. “I guess I’ll buy this one,” I said as we hung the others up. “Are you sure you don’t want to buy the blue dress you tried on first? That was the prettiest one.”

“There’s two in that size and I haven’t tried on any red ones yet. I didn’t like any of the ones they have here,” Emmaline answered. “It’s on the top of my list, though. Let’s go look at shoes.” We made our way to the back corner where we found rows of shoes and little padded chairs and tried on a dozen pairs of shoes each. I stuck with purple and black, but didn’t find anything I really liked. Emmaline didn’t have any better luck. So I paid for my dress and then we walked outside.

“The next one’s The Vimage Line, but there’s no way I can afford that place,” Emmaline said as we walked past the exquisite store with everything detailed in gold.

“If you really want one of their dresses I bet Hayden could get you one for free,” I said.

“I couldn’t ask him to do that.”

“Why do you have such a difficult time talking to him? He’s a really nice guy.” She never had that problem with anyone else.

“I don’t know. He just does that to me.”

“I wish he would ask you to the ball. It would solve all my dance problems.”

“Me too. There’s The Songbird. Let’s go look in there.” Inside, the walls were baby blue and had lifelike, little birds painted on here and there.

Emmaline picked out several dresses and I took a seat with mine just outside of her dressing room so I could see her in every one and give her my input. A couple were really pretty, but not as beautiful as the one at Hannah’s had been. “Oh well, on to the shoes,” she said after she’d tried on the last one. I found an open toed pair that matched the color of my dress perfectly, but there were plenty of pairs, so I decided to come back if I didn’t find anything else.

“What about gloves?” I asked, remembering that we each needed a pair.

“Oh yeah, my mother has a pair that will match your dress perfectly. You could borrow them,” Emmaline said.

“Alright, if you’re sure she won’t mind.”

“She won’t. She’s really excited that we’re going to the ball. Last night she went on and on about her first dance with my father. I’ll have to look for gloves after I find the dress I’m going to wear.”

We walked outside and continued to walk down Meridian Avenue. “Swatches is right down there,” Emmaline said at the first intersection.

“I know. I just don’t know if I should stop by.”

“You definitely should.” She lowered her voice as three women walked past us. “If he can come to your house in the middle of the night, you can drop by to see him at work.”

“I guess we could just go see if he’s not busy right now.”

Emmaline smiled and took my arm, leading me across the street and then to the right.

A car pulled out of the mechanic shop up ahead and a man with dirty hands stepped outside of the garage to wave. “That must be Benny. He’s cute,” Emmaline said as the man turned around and walked back into the garage.

I began to feel nervous as we got closer. What was I going to say?

Emmaline kept her hold on my arm as she walked right into the messy garage and looked around. Two cars were parked inside, one up on a lift. But I didn’t see anyone. “Hello?” she called out.

“Let’s try the office,” I said, wanting to get out of the garage since I didn’t know if we should be in there.

“No wait, give me just a minute,” a man’s voice called out from under the car on the ground. Something fell on the floor with a loud *clank* and then he stood up on the car’s far side. His young face was smudged with grease. He looked like he was about Mason’s age. “What can I help you ladies with?”

Emmaline looked over at me. I still didn’t know what to say. What if I asked Mason’s boss to see him and got him in trouble? Suddenly I wished I hadn’t come. “We’re here to see Mason if he’s not too busy,” Emmaline said.

“Sure thing. He’s out back pourin’ out some oil. He’ll be back in a minute.” He pulled a white cloth off of a shelf behind him and walked over to us. “So which one of you is Alexandra?” I felt my heart race at the thought of Mason talking about me at work.

“I am,” I said.

I watched the white rag become black as he wiped his hands on it. “I’m Benny. It’s nice to meet you.” He reached out his semi-clean hand to shake mine with. “Mason’ll be real happy you came by. And who’re you?” He reached out for Emmaline’s hand.

“I’m Emmaline, Alexandra’s friend. Do you own this shop?”

“Sort of. My dad passed it on to me two years ago when I turned twenty. He still owns it technically, but I run it and keep up with everything. I’ll inherit it when he passes on.”

The door in the back of the garage opened and Mason walked in carrying two empty buckets. “You’ve got visitors,” Benny said.

“Visitors?” Mason set the buckets down in the corner and looked over at us. “Alexandra.” I could hardly believe the way his face lit up when he saw me. He crossed the room quickly and came to stand right in front of me. “I’m glad you dropped by. I would hug you, but then you’d be as dirty as I am.”

“That’s alright. Emmaline and I were just out shopping for dresses, so we came by to see you.”

“The Winter Ball’s next Friday,” Emmaline said.

“Next Friday? That’s your birthday, isn’t it?” Mason asked me.

“Yes.”

He looked at me thoughtfully for a minute. Then he shook his head. “I wish I could take you, but I’m afraid I’ll be working. Week-ends are usually pretty busy around here since that’s when people need their cars the least.” My heart sank. I wouldn’t be going with Mason.

“Are you going with Hayden, then?” Emmaline asked me. I stared at her in shock. How could she ask me that right in front of Mason?

“Why would she be going with him?” Mason asked.

“Well, he asked her to go with him yesterday.”

“He asked you to the dance?” he asked me.

“I didn’t say yes.”

“Are you planning on it?” He looked really upset, which actually made me feel a little better.

“No. I’m not going to go with Hayden.”

“Maybe I could take a break for a few minutes, Benny,” Mason asked him.

“Sure thing. It was nice to meet you ladies.” Benny went back to the car he was working on and disappeared underneath it.

“Give me a minute to wash up,” Mason said. He walked over to a sink that was just inside the garage and rolled up his sleeves before he started washing his hands. Then he walked back over to us and took my hand. “Maybe we could all go get some pie.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Is that the dress?” he asked as we walked. My dress was well protected in its cover and draped over my free arm.

“Yeah. I still have to get matching shoes, though.”

“I bet it’ll be beautiful on you. I’d offer to carry it for you if my arm wasn’t so dirty…I’m just sick about this. I didn’t even know the ball was coming up, but there’s not much I could have done about it.”

“It’s alright, Mason.”

We went to a busy little diner and each ordered a slice of apple pie. Mason scooted his chair closer to mine when we sat down. Emmaline and I talked to Mason about the radio show coming on later. I wondered about the curious message he left in my pocket two nights before, but I wasn’t sure if I should bring it up in front of Emmaline. When we were finished Mason said he had to go back to work, so we all walked back together.

“I’m really sorry I can’t take you to the dance, Alexandra, but would you do something for me?” he asked as we turned onto the street Swatches was on.

“Yes.”

“Don’t go with someone else.”

I smiled at his serious face. “I’ll just go with Emmaline. We were only planning to go to the show at the beginning anyway. I won’t go with anyone else.”

We reached the auto repair shop. “Thanks. And if you’re in the area again, maybe you could drop by.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

He gave me a half smile and kind of an odd look. “Of course I wouldn’t.”

“Okay.”

He brushed my hair gently away from my face and leaned over to kiss my cheek. “Bye, Alexandra. It was nice to see you again, Emmaline.”

“You too,” Emmaline said.

Emmaline and I walked back toward Michigan Avenue. “Why did you bring up Hayden?” I asked her as we turned onto it.

“I thought Mason would get jealous and say he would take you to the dance no matter what.”

“It was kind of mean.”

“Sorry. But you wouldn’t be saying that if it had worked. Here’s Francine’s Fancies.” We went inside and shopped around, but found nothing we really wanted. We went into a few other stores and Emmaline found a pair of silver shoes with blue buttons on the side that she bought. But in the end, we went back to Hannah’s so she could get the first dress she tried on. And I bought the pair of shoes at The Songbird.

We hurried back to Emmaline’s for dinner, each with a dress in one arm and a bag containing a pair of shoes in the other. “We’ll have to eat dinner quickly to be able to hear the program on the radio,” Emmaline said as we walked to her house.

The mystery programs on the radio always had a cast of people telling a gripping story, full of suspense and complete with fantastic sound effects, sometimes airing a series over a certain period of time. ‘The Killing Plot’ would be starting that night and the broadcaster would announce how long it would run for after the first installment. The new mystery program was announced the previous Sunday night and Hayden’s mother had told me about it.

“Hello, Mrs. Porter,” I said when we reached Emmaline’s house and walked into the dining room to find dinner already on the table and her parents sitting there, waiting.

“Hello, Alexandra. I can’t wait to see your dresses on you. How about right after dinner?” Emmaline’s mother asked brightly. She had the same blond hair Emmaline did, but she let hers wave instead of curl.

“You’re late, Darling,” Emmaline’s father cut in. The heavy bags under his eyes made him look much older than he was. As a college professor of Physics, he spent many late nights planning lessons and grading papers.

“Sorry, Father. When we realized what time it was, we still had to stop to get shoes. We got here as soon as we could,” Emmaline said as we both sat down.

“We’ve only been waiting a couple of minutes, really,” her mother said. “And this is their first big dance. What’s the harm in getting home a little late?”

“Oh—I suppose so.” Emmaline’s father smiled at her mother affectionately.

“Here you are, Dears,” she said, passing the roast chicken carvings to us.

“Could we show you the dresses in the morning, Mother? We were hoping to listen to The Killing Plot on the radio after dinner. It’s just starting,” Emmaline asked.

“Of course.” She leaned forward and gave us both a mischievous smile. “Do either of you have a date yet?” she asked.

“Alexandra has two.”

“What?” her mother and I both asked at the same time.

“Go on, Alexandra. Tell them about Hayden and Mason.”

So the conversation was centered around me for most of dinner. After hearing about Mason and Hayden, Emmaline’s mother’s advice was simple. “A mechanic can support a family well enough, but he’ll never be able to provide quite like the next in line to own The Vimage Line.” I smiled and nodded, but didn’t take it seriously.

After dinner, Emmaline and I helped her mother with the dishes before we changed into our nightgowns and went into the living room to listen to the radio. Emmaline turned it on and adjusted the dial until she found the station we were looking for. A man was singing a song I’d never heard before. We each sat down on a puffy beige chair as I began to brush my hair.

“What do you want for your birthday?” Emmaline asked me.

“I just want Mason to take me to the ball. It would have been so much fun to put that dress on to go to a dance with him in.”

A cool breeze blew against me from a window that was left cracked open. The white, semi-transparent drapes danced around with it.

“Is there anything else?” Emmaline asked me.

“You don’t have to get me anything, Emmaline.”

“Yes I do. You’re my best friend, and you got me that perfume for my birthday.”

I tried to think of something, but my mind just kept wandering back to Mason. “If he can’t take me to the dance, then I wish he would just kiss me. That would be the best gift I’ve ever gotten.” *Yeah, my first real kiss would be from Mason…that would be the perfect birthday present…*But even after everything he said to me at the top of he water tower, I doubted that he wanted to kiss me.

Emmaline laughed. “Come on, Alexandra. I can’t get you either of those things.”

The singing stopped. *A special thanks to Renardo Hamming for singing for us tonight. Next, we will be beginning the chilling tale of The Killing Plot. In this new mystery, a simple visit becomes an unspeakable nightmare, and a man’s search for the woman he loves becomes a race against time for her very life,* the broadcaster began.

“Tell me later,” Emmaline said.

For the next forty minutes, we both listened to the beginning of ‘The Killing Plot’ before it was announced that it would come on every Friday night at the same time for the following four weeks. “I guess we’ll just have to skip next week and hope we don’t miss too much,” Emmaline said as she stood up to switch the radio off.

“That’s right. We’ll be at the Winter Ball. Maybe Hayden’s mother will tell us what happens. She’s planning to listen to it, too,” I said.

“What are you going to do about Hayden anyway?”

“I guess I’ll tell him I can’t go with him. I’m going with you instead.”

“I wouldn’t mind if he came too.”

“Mason would.”

We started walking up the stairs to Emmaline’s bedroom.

“We need to remember to ask your mother if I can borrow her gloves in the morning,” I said.

“That’s right. And I’ll need to pick up a pair in the morning. We can go shopping for something to put in our hair, too,” she said.

“Okay, I’ll just call my parents when I wake up to let them know I won’t be home until the afternoon.”

“You should go see Mason again tomorrow. Did you see how happy he was to see you?”

“I was a little surprised by that, actually.” For some reason, hearing his name brought his notes to mind and I wondered if maybe I had one in my pocket right then. Reaching for my side, I realized that I was wearing my nightgown.

When we reached her room, I picked my dress up off of the floor. “I’m going to the bathroom for a minute. I’ll be right back,” I said, taking it with me. I don’t know why I felt so protective of the little notes, but I did.

I shut the door behind me and stood leaning against it as I reached into my pocket and pulled out a little piece of paper. “How does he do that?” I whispered to myself. I felt the familiar excitement in holding up the note to see what Mason had written to me. *Tomorrow?* was all it said. “Tomorrow?” I shoved the strip of paper back in my pocket. “I wish these made more sense.” But maybe I would see him tomorrow, and finally find out what the two latest messages actually meant.

**Chapter Five**

“Breakfast,” Emmaline’s mother called through the door the next morning. Emmaline and I both dragged ourselves out of bed and stumbled down the stairs. Half the night had been spent awake whispering to each other.

“You two look awful,” Emmaline’s father said when he looked over the top of his newspaper at us as we walked into the dining room. He was already sitting at the table, eating a piece of toast.

“Just tired,” Emmaline told him as she slumped into her chair.

“That’s just how sleepovers go,” her mother said. “Bacon?” She held out a long platter covered with bacon and eggs, then another with toast. I nearly nodded off a couple of times as I ate.

“So how about the dresses after breakfast, girls?” Mrs. Porter asked.

“We’ve still got to go shopping for something to put in our hair. Is it alright if we do that right after we show you the dresses?”

“Of course. And you can show me later. I want to wait and see the complete ensemble.”

We ate in silence for a couple of minutes before I remembered that we needed to ask Emmaline’s mother about her gloves. “Don’t forget, you still need to get gloves,” I reminded Emmaline, hoping she would remember too. I didn’t feel right about asking her mother directly to borrow them.

“Oh yeah, Mother, can Alexandra borrow your purple silk gloves? They would go perfectly with her dress.”

“Of course. I’ll fetch them as soon as we’re finished eating,” her mother said.

Emmaline ate her last bite of toast and took a drink before she looked over at me and said, “Why don’t you just leave your dress here so we can get ready for the dance together and then leave from my house?”

“Alright.”

After breakfast, Emmaline’s mother went to find her gloves (which were the exact same color as my dress) and I called my parents to let them know we were going shopping again.

Half an hour later of washing up, fixing our hair, and getting dressed, Emmaline and I were headed downtown. It was cold outside again, so we walked as quickly and as close together as we could. “Let’s just go to The Chip. They have the best hats and bows,” Emmaline said.

“Too bad it’s so far away,” I said. It was worth it, though. They always had everything you could imagine to decorate your hair with. As soon as we turned onto the street where The Chip was located, I saw the steady stream of women and girls pouring in and out.

“It’s so busy today. We should have skipped a couple of stores yesterday and come here,” Emmaline said as we walked in. Bright lights lit everything up and made colors and rhinestones shine beautifully.

“The purples and blues are right next to each other. Let’s look at those first and then go on to black,” I suggested.

Slowly we worked our way through the crowd to the racks of purple and blue that just had to be in the middle of everything. “Try this on,” Emmaline said, handing me a purple hat.

“I’ll try it on, but I was thinking flowers, not hats.” I put it on my head, slightly to the right, and leaned back to see my reflection in one of the mirrors hanging high up on the rack. It was pretty, but it wouldn’t look right with my dress.

“What do you think?” Emmaline turned to face me, wearing the very same hat, but in blue.

“That looks great on you, and it will match your dress really well. I’m not getting mine, though.” I set the purple hat back on the rack and grabbed several hair clips with different purple flowers on them. I pulled a strand of my hair back and held each one up against it. “This is the one,” I said as I held a plum colored flower up against my hair.

“I think you’re right about the hat. That flower is perfect,” Emmaline said.

We took turns holding numerous hats, scarves, headbands, pins, and bows up against her hair in the mirrors. We were both leaning toward different hats for her when we started putting everything back up. “Back to black then,” she said when we were finished.

“Oh no, not you two,” a revolting voice said from behind us. We turned around to face Marcy. Her pale pink dress was way too big for her and looked like something a six year old would wear.

“Let’s go,” Emmaline said, taking my arm and pulling me away from her.

“You’re wasting your time shopping here. Nothing’s going to help Alexandra.”

My cheeks burned as I felt people turning to stare at us.

Emmaline stopped and turned around to glare fiercely at Marcy. “Just ignore her,” I said softly.

“No. This is ridiculous,” Emmaline said angrily. “You always pick on Alexandra when you’re the one with frizzy hair, enormous bug eyes, and the face of a fat pig. You’re the ugliest girl in school, Marcy. What’s wrong with you?” Now I knew everyone was staring.

And Marcy looked like she might kill Emmaline. I took a step back as she walked right up to her. But Emmaline didn’t move. Marcy reached back and pushed her hard. I grabbed Emmaline’s arm to keep her from falling over.

Anger flushed away my fear. “Don’t do that to her!” I shouted at Marcy. She just laughed as she turned around and began walking away.

Emmaline ran after her and kicked one of her legs from behind, causing her to fall to the side, right into the rack Emmaline and I had just been looking at. There was a loud crash as it began to tip over and hundreds of hairpins and clips fell to the floor. Several people scrambled out of the way and a woman screamed as it all came down on her.

Emmaline grabbed my arm again and pulled me several racks over, where we crouched down behind a dark sea of black hats. We watched Mrs. Clay, the store owner, come running out of the back of the store.

“Marcy Miller,” she shrieked. “What on earth do you think you’re doing?!”

Marcy began scrambling to get up. “It wasn’t me. It was her,” she said, pointing to where we had just been. Her jaw dropped and she looked around frantically.

“Who?”

“Emmaline, she and Alexandra were just here. She pushed me into it.”

Emmaline burst into a fit of quiet giggles. It was hard to keep from joining in.

“Stop lying and clean up this mess!” Mrs. Clay snapped.

“But, I didn’t—”

“Now!” Mrs. Clay walked past Marcy toward the back of the store, leaving her all alone to stand the heavy rack up and put everything back on it. The woman underneath it crawled out and walked out of the store seemingly unharmed.

Emmaline and I stayed behind the hats as we watched Marcy pick everything up as fast as she could before she left the store, both of us fighting the urge to laugh at her the entire time.

“That was amazing, Emmaline,” I said as I stood up straight and hugged her. “I’ll count that as my birthday gift from you. I doubt anyone else will get me anything better.”

Emmaline started laughing. “Alright, you’re welcome.”

I looked at the hats on the rack in front of us for the first time. A black one with a shiny, dark blue veil gathered and sown on the top caught my eye. “In fact, let my buy you a hat. I’ve never gotten to see Marcy squirm like that,” I said as I put it on her head.

She looked in the mirror and tilted her head. “You know what, this hat is perfect, but I’ll get it. I had just as much fun watching Marcy as you did.”

“Would you mind if we stopped by Swatches so I can say hi to Mason?” I asked after we’d each made our purchases.

“Why don’t you go ahead? I think Mason would rather spend time alone with you, don’t you think?”

“But we told your mother we would show her the dresses after we were done shopping.”

“I’ve still got to get gloves, so I’ll go do that and you can meet me back at my house when you’re finished. Then we can show her the dresses.”

“Alright.” I felt a little guilty walking away from her to see Mason, but I was also looking forward to being able to ask him about the notes. The mystery would finally be solved.

When I reached the repair shop, the garage door was closed. So I walked into the office uncertainly, wondering what I would say if I had to ask Benny if I could see Mason again and hoping that I wouldn’t be getting on his nerves. The bell above the door rang as I walked into the empty office. I waited nervously for a couple of minutes before Mason came walking through the side door. “Hey, Alexandra,” he said as his face lit up the same way it had the day before.

“Hello, Mason. Emmaline and I were out shopping again, so I thought I would stop by.”

He came to stand so close to me, it began to drive me crazy not to be able to reach out for him, but he was covered in grime as usual.

“Where’s Emmaline?” he asked.

“She went to buy a pair of gloves to wear to the dance. I’m going to meet her back at her house.”

“Good, maybe I can take an early lunch break and we can go get something to eat. Are you hungry?”

“A little.”

“Give me just a minute.” He disappeared through the side door. I heard Benny’s voice and then water running.

“So how cold is it out there? I haven’t been outside in a few hours, but it was freezing at sunrise,” Mason said as he walked back into the room and pulled his coat off of the hook on the wall. His hands were washed clean.

“It’s still pretty cold.”

He walked over to me and wrapped both arms around me, surprising me a little. It felt too good to worry about the mess. I leaned against him and took in a deep breath. “Don’t worry. The coat’s clean,” he said as he let me go.

He kept his arm around me as we walked to The Morning Deli and talked a little about his father.

“I missed out on breakfast this morning,” Mason said as we took a seat with our food. “I usually get brownies here at lunchtime since they’ve always been my favorite, but it’s a little early for that.”

“There’s something I want to ask you,” I said, before taking a bite of my banana nut muffin.

Mason looked up and swallowed down a half chewed mouthful of his mountain of pancakes. “You can ask me anything.” He reached over to hold my hand.

“I’m not sure what the note you gave me two nights ago meant, don’t wander.”

“I thought it was pretty clear. Don’t wander from me. I figured I wouldn’t see you for days and I didn’t want your heart to wander.”

*Aww.* I felt a little breathless. “That, that makes sense…That won’t happen, though.” This brought a gorgeous smile to his already gorgeous face. He scooted his chair closer to mine and let go of my hand so he could put his behind my neck and pull me closer to kiss my cheek before he went back to eating his pancakes. I took a small bite of my muffin.

Three small children ran behind my chair and to the door. “Hold on, children,” a woman called out as she hurried after them.

“What about the one that said tomorrow?”

Mason wiped his mouth. “I guess I should be a little more clear from now on…I just hoped you’d come by to see me today.”

“How do you do that, writing a note and putting it in my pocket without me ever knowing?”

He leaned toward me and said, “Magic.”

“What?” I said with a laugh.

“Magic. My old best friend loved to practice magic tricks. He taught me a few.”

“Will you show me, then?”

“Maybe someday. Wouldn’t it be more fun not knowing for now?”

I saw someone tall approaching our table from my side. “Oh, hello, Hayden. What are you doing here?” I asked when I saw his face.

“The Vimage Line is across the street. I was helping my father with something.”

“His father’s the owner of The Vimage Line,” I told Mason.

“Would you like to have a seat?” Mason asked Hayden through tight lips.

“No, thank you. I just wondered if I might have a word with Alexandra,” Hayden answered.

“Okay. I’ll just be a minute,” I said to Mason as I stood up.

Hayden went to stand beside the door to the deli before he turned back to me. “How long is this going to go on?” he asked in obvious irritation.

“What are you talking about?”

“This thing with you and Mason. I saw him kissing you through the window from all the way across the street.”

“He wasn’t kissing me.”

“How long, Alexandra?” Hayden wasn’t acting like himself at all, and I didn’t understand what he was so upset about.

“I don’t know. As long as he wants it to, I guess.”

“Is there a problem?” Mason asked from behind me. I hadn’t even heard him approach.

Hayden gave him a hard look. “I’ll see you tomorrow night,” he said to me before he walked outside and crossed the street.

“I’m sorry, Mason. I don’t know what that was about,” I said.

He put his hand on my back and led me back to our table. “What did he say?” Mason asked once we both sat down.

“He just wanted to know how long this thing between you and me would go on. That’s all he said.”

Mason looked at me thoughtfully and nodded his head. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him…as long as you wanted it to.”

“What about tomorrow night? What was he talking about?”

“My family goes over to his house for dinner every Sunday night. It’s a tradition we’ve had for as long as I can remember.” I looked down at the table. “He said he could see us from across the street.”

“Good.” I looked over at Mason, wondering why he thought this was good. It bothered me to think Hayden was just across the street, possibly watching me with Mason at that very moment. Mason scooted his chair even closer to mine so that there was no way possible it could get any closer.

*The jealousy tactic*, I thought with a smile. Usually I would have thought it was kind of cruel, but Hayden was being ridiculous. Mason ate his pancakes quickly and then kept his arm around me as we talked a little bit longer.

After that, I walked him back to Swatches and into the office. “Thanks for coming by,” he said once we were inside. He reached out to hold me for a long time.

“Thanks for the muffin.”

“Will I see you tomorrow? The shop won’t be open, but we’ll be here getting work done.” He hung up his coat on the wall beside one other one.

“I hope so. I’ll be at church in the morning. But there should be time for me to come by before we go to Hayden’s.”

“Bye, Alexandra.” He gave me a kiss on the cheek before he disappeared through the side door.

Reaching into my pocket, I felt nothing. I checked every pocket I had twice as I walked down the street—but they were all empty. Had he forgotten? Or worse—was he beginning to lose interest? *It was bound to happen eventually.* Disappointment consumed me as I walked to Emmaline’s house. Once I got there I tried to put on a happy face.

Emmaline answered the door in her dress when I knocked. She had on a new pair of dark blue gloves and the hat she‘d gotten at The Chip that morning. “You look terrific,” I said. “But what about your shoes?” She pulled me in and shut the door.

“I was waiting for you. The heels pinch a bit.” We ran upstairs and I began to feel a little better as I got dressed.

Emmaline’s parents waited in the living room for us. “You look amazing, girls,” Mrs. Porter said as we walked down the stairs.

“You can hardly call them girls, dear. Just look at them. They’ve become young ladies,” Mr. Porter said.

“Yes, perfect little ladies.” Emmaline’s mother used her apron to dab at her eyes.

“Don’t cry, Mother,” Emmaline said.

“I can’t help it. You’re both so beautiful…a, and you’re so grown up now, Emmaline…Oh, my little girl.” Emmaline’s mother came to give her a tearful hug, making me feel a little out of place.

“Maybe we should get out of these,” Emmaline said, pulling herself away from her mother.

“No, no, I’m sorry girls. You don’t have to change.”

“Actually, I’m a little tired. I think I’ll go home and take a nap,” I said with a yawn, still feeling the lack of sleep from the night before.

“Alright, thank you for letting me see the dress, Alexandra,” Mrs. Porter said. I nodded before I went upstairs, followed closely by Emmaline.

As soon as I left her house, the awful feelings of rejection began to set in again. I had been thinking of baking some brownies for Mason since he said they were his favorite, but now I wasn’t sure if I should.

My mother came to meet me at the door when she heard me come in. “It feels like I haven’t seen you in days,” she said as she hugged me. “Would you like to come help me in the kitchen?”

“I’m kind of tired. If you don’t mind, I think I’ll go take a nap.”

“Late night?”

“Yeah.”

She nodded and went back to the kitchen.

Once I was upstairs, I sat on my bed and went over everything in my head that had happened and everything that was said while I was with Mason that morning. *What did I do wrong?*

Glancing at my closet, I saw the coat he’d given me hanging loosely on a hanger. I went to take it off and then slipped my arms into it. It smelled like his place. I felt closer to him somehow. Then I hugged myself in it as I lay down and fell asleep.

#

Someone was shaking my arm. “Alexandra,” a faint voice said. “Come on. Wake up, dear. Dinner’s ready.” I sat up and rubbed my eyes as I was pulled out of a deep sleep. My mother was sitting beside me on my bed.

Pushing my blanket away, I stood up. My mother let out a little gasp. “You’re wearing Mason’s coat. I used to wear your father’s coat around the house when we were younger. Does that mean it’s getting serious?” She got that gleam in her eye.

“No, Mother. I seriously doubt things are going to get serious.” My own words stung.

I hung the coat up and then walked downstairs. The delicious smell of pot roast and buttered potatoes made me realize how hungry I was.

“Those worthless mobsters have struck again,” my father said, smacking the newspaper in front of him with one hand as I walked into the dining room. For some reason his statement startled me. “Another bank’s been robbed. Men like me are out, working for their money every day, and those mobsters pick up a gun and steal it from the bank. Lazy, vile—”

“That Henry Fago is handsome, though,” Katy said.

“What? Catherine Rose—do *not* talk like that about one of those men!”

“Okay, okay.”

My mother picked up the bowl of potatoes and began passing them around. “Your parents called today. They’ll be coming Christmas afternoon to stay for a few days,” she said to my father.

“That means we’ve got to figure out Christmas presents for them,” Katy complained.

“That’s right, dear.”

*Christmas presents?* I hadn’t even thought about them. *Maybe Emmaline and I can go Christmas shopping Monday after school.*

Suddenly there was a loud rapping at the door. “I wonder who that could be,” my mother said as she stood up to answer it. I pulled the roast closer to me and started cutting a piece off as I waited.

The door opened and my body went stiff when I heard Mason’s voice. “Good evening, Mrs. Roomer.”

“Mason, won’t you come in? We’re just having dinner,” my mother said.

“Thank you, but I’m a terrible mess. I just wondered if I could see Alexandra for a minute.”

“Of course, I’ll go get her.”

“Alexandra, you look like you’re going to be ill,” Katy whispered to me. I was still frozen in place. She began laughing as I stood up.

My mother entered the dining room with a broad grin on her face. “Someone’s here to see you, Alexandra,” she said. I wondered, as I walked past her, if she really had no idea that we could all hear every word they said.

I took my coat off the rack and closed the door behind me. Mason had his arms around me before I even had my coat on. They felt so secure, taking all my uncertainty away. “I forgot to give you a note. Hayden distracted me,” he said.

“It’s alright.” But it wasn’t. He couldn’t have known how much his notes meant to me.

Mason leaned back and took both of my hands in his. The sun was setting behind him in the purple sky, causing his dark hair to reflect it. I thought again of how impossibly good-looking he was, how lucky I was to have him there with me, holding my hands, and how badly it would hurt when his day of recognition came. “Benny had a headache, so I got off early. We’ll probably be paying for it tomorrow…I know it’s getting late, but I wanted to see you before I went home. Sorry I caught you during dinner,” Mason said.

“I’m glad you came by.” I looked down at my feet. “I did wonder why you didn’t write me a note…I was worried.”

He let go of one of my hands and put his on my cheek, gently lifting my head so I would meet his gaze. “You should never worry. Hayden just gets under my skin. It feels like he wants to wedge himself between us until I’m gone. I don’t want that to happen.” His silvery eyes seemed to flash as his lids became heavy with anger.

“That will never happen.” I put my hand over his and slid it down to my mouth so I could kiss his palm. Even though I could tell he had washed his hands, I could taste a hint of oil. “*You* should never worry either. I told you, Hayden just feels like my brother. His feelings are one sided.”

Mason smiled and held onto my hand as he let them both fall. He moved closer to me and leaned down. My heart fluttered as his lips moved toward mine. I wanted to taste his perfect lips more than anything. But the door opened behind me and Mason jumped back.

“Alexandra, you should come back in for dinner,” my father said.

“Alright,” I answered, trying to hide my frustration.

“Good night, Alexandra,” Mason said as he gave me a quick hug. “Good night, Mr. Roomer. Sorry to interrupt your dinner.”

“That’s alright. Can I give you a ride home?”

“No thanks. I can’t ask you to do that when you’ve just sat down for dinner.”

My father and I walked back inside. “I’ll come eat in just a minute, Father. I need to use the restroom first,” I said, wanting to see what Mason had written to me. Resting my hand inside my pocket, I could already feel the little piece of paper.

“Don’t be long. Your mother’s having us all wait for you.”

I hurried to the bathroom and shut the door before I took the note out. I held it up and read *I’m yours*. Smiling, I held it against my heart. For the first time, a note made perfect sense, and more importantly, he was mine.

**Chapter Six**

I woke up early the next morning to make a batch of fudgy brownies and slipped a note of my own, folded in half, into the chocolate squares that were piled high on the plate. Katy ran into the kitchen and stole a couple before I covered them. When we got home from church I took my brownies and began walking to Swatches.

Walking through Chicago on Sunday was always nice because, even on a cold winter day, families were out for walks in their Sunday best, bundled up in scarves and warm coats. And with Christmas getting close, windows were lined with holly branches, wreaths, and lights.

The sign hanging on the door said, *Sorry, We’re Closed* when I got to Swatches, but I pushed the door open and walked inside anyway, the cheerful bell ringing as I did so. “Could you get that, Mason?” I was relieved to hear Benny call out in the garage.

Mason walked through the side door and smiled when he saw me. “Alexandra, I hoped it would be you.”

I held up the heavy plate of brownies. “I baked these for you.”

“Thanks, just give me a minute to wash up.” He walked out of the room and reappeared after a couple of minutes. “I’d say let’s go get something to eat, but I would rather eat these brownies. You want to go out back with me?” Mason asked as he pulled his coat on.

“Alright.”

He walked to the back of the office and opened the backdoor. “Sorry it’s kind of a mess,” he said. It was a total wreck. Old car parts were scattered everywhere in the yard, some were dripping or lying in different colored pools of thick liquid. “We can sit over here.” Mason put his arm around me and walked over to an old picnic table where he sat down. So I sat right next to him.

“I called the New York City police this morning,” Mason said quietly as he uncovered the brownies.

“Yeah?”

“Still nothing.”

“Sorry they’re cold,” I said as Mason shoved half a brownie into his mouth.

He smiled and chewed it a couple of times before he swallowed. “These are the best brownies I’ve ever had.” He ate the rest of the brownie in his hand before he said, “You know, no one’s made me brownies since my mom. Thanks.” He leaned over to kiss my cheek. “Sorry.” He laughed as he reached up to wipe a smudge of chocolate from my cheek.

“That’s alright.”

He picked up another brownie and then saw the note I had placed underneath it. “I’m not even going to try to sneak that into your pocket,” I said as he picked it up and opened it. “There’s no way I could do it without you noticing.” I’d written *And I’m yours* on it, feeling safe to say it since he said it first.

I was a little nervous about the way he stared unchangingly at it for a long time. He looked over at me and put his arm around me, sliding me the short distance across the long seat we both sat on and pulling me closer to him. “Do you mean that?” he asked quietly.

“Yes.”

“No, I mean—Do you mean it, Alexandra, the way I did?”

I wasn’t entirely sure what he meant, but it didn’t matter. I meant it. If he would let me, I would be his. “Yes Mason, I’m yours.”

“Good.” He put the paper he held in the hand that wasn’t holding me against his side into his pocket and then ran his fingers through my hair. He reached up again and put his hand behind my head, pulling me closer to him. He was going to kiss me. I closed my eyes as I leaned my head up, more than ready for that kiss. It was slowly becoming all I wanted.

The back door flew open and Mason jumped. He punched the seat at his other side, muttering something I couldn’t make out. Luckily the door slammed shut behind Benny at that moment, so he didn’t hear it either.

Benny carried a box to the dead grass behind the picnic table and set it down. “Brownies…You are one lucky man, Mason. I’d give anything to have a pretty girl bake me some a those.”

“I am lucky,” Mason said, smiling over at me. “You want one?” he asked Benny.

“Yeah.” Benny sat down across from us and picked up a brownie.

I was surprised that it wasn’t very cold back there, but the wind was blocked by the building and tall wooden fence, and Mason was right beside me.

Benny ate one more and Mason finished nearly half the brownies before they both stood up. “I guess it’s back to work,” Mason said as he covered them back up.

“Those brownies are really good, Alexandra. Thanks for letting me have some, Mason,” Benny said.

We walked back into the office. “I’ll be back there in just a minute,” Mason told Benny.

“Sure thing.” Benny disappeared through the side door.

Mason set the brownies down on the desk before he hugged me. “Sorry we were interrupted,” he whispered.

“It’s okay. Benny seems nice.”

Mason pulled his head away to look at me, but kept his arms around me. “Maybe you should bring Emmaline next time.” He nodded toward the side door.

“You think Benny might like some company?” He nodded. “Emmaline would love that,” I said.

He kissed me on my cheek and then walked back into the garage, taking his brownies with him. *I guess the moment’s passed*, I thought, wishing my cheek hadn’t been where that kiss was aimed.

I looked at the clock above the door just before I walked out of the office. “I’m late,” I said, walking down the street as quickly as I could. My father’s car was pulling out of the driveway when I was nearly home. *Oh no*. Watching it coming closer, I hoped I wasn’t in trouble.

“Alexandra, we’ll be late for dinner,” my father said as I climbed in the backseat. “We were just coming to get you.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I just wasn’t watching the time.”

“Just don’t let it happen again, dear,” my mother turned to me and said with a smile.

The trip didn’t take very long in the car. My mother rushed us to the door as soon as we got there. Katy reached out to ring the bell as my mother said, “I love the tune it plays, don’t you, Ted? No one else I know has a musical doorbell.” We listened to it echo around the inside of Hayden’s house.

“It is something.”

The door was flung open and Hayden’s mother reached out to hug mine. “Sorry we’re late,” my mother said.

“That’s alright. Dinner’s just gotten to the table. Come on in.”

Hayden took the seat beside me at the dinner table as he always did, but he was unusually quiet that evening. No one else seemed to notice. Sunday dinner is usually made up of my mother and Hayden’s talking excitedly about everything that happened the week before, and that night was no exception.

“Will you take a walk through the garden with me, Alexandra?” Hayden turned to me to say when everyone was finished eating.

“Yes.”

He held out his arm as he stood up, so I rested my hand inside his elbow. The cold, night air swept over us as we walked out into his backyard. He didn’t say anything until we stepped onto one of the paths made up of little pebbles that wound itself around the yard and then through the garden. “I’m sorry I became so impatient yesterday. I would still like to take you to the dance,” he said.

I took a deep breath, not wanting to give him an answer. “I’m sorry Hayden…I can’t go with you.”

“Because of Mason.”

“No, not because of Mason. I’m going with Emmaline.”

“So you’re not going with Mason?”

“No.”

He finally smiled. “Will you go with me next year then? Certainly Emmaline will understand if you’ve made plans a year in advance.”

“Alright.” I wanted to think that Mason would be taking me the next year, but I wasn’t dumb enough to believe that he would still be around, dropping by to see me every chance he got, a year down the road. It would have been nice, though.

Hayden’s whole mood changed after that. We walked through the garden, talking about the time in the sixth grade when Katy came into our classroom to drop off a few papers to our teacher, Mrs. Valentine, and left a baby garter snake in the stack. It was hilarious to watch our teacher screaming and running to the back of the room, tripping over a stack of books and knocking my desk over on its side as she came down on it. Katy had said it was her birthday present to me. She knew how much we couldn’t stand Mrs. Valentine.

Hayden and I were still laughing about it when we went back inside and found our parents singing Christmas carols around the piano, which Hayden’s mother was playing. Six songs later we were all saying good night and then I was climbing into the back of our car.

“Isn’t that Mason?” Katy asked as we drove down Emmaline’s street. I leaned over to look out of her window. It *was* him—and Emmaline was standing on her porch, talking to him while he stood almost at her eye level on the ground.

“It’s a little late to be dropping by, isn’t it?” my mother said.

“Entirely,” my father answered.

I felt my chest constrict in a new way and suddenly wanted to take my shoe off and throw it at Emmaline’s head. What was she doing with him?

*Calm down. They’re just talking.* They did look completely different than he and I had the night before, standing as close together as we could. There was a good distance and a couple of porch steps between them.

Emmaline said something and Mason lifted an eyebrow. The sort of smile he always gave me lit up his face. It hurt to watch. *It’s got to be about Benny*, I tried to tell myself.

I sat back in my seat and tried to push them both out of my head. I was painfully aware of my mother casting glances back at me until we pulled into our driveway.

As I walked into my bedroom, I realized that I hadn’t even checked my pockets. Reaching into my coat pocket, I felt a tiny piece of paper. Pulling it out and turning my lamp on, I sat down on my bed to read it. *Wish I was holding you now.* “So I do,” I said to the tiny note with a smile, almost feeling his strong arms around me in the comfort those words gave me.

I opened the jewelry box that was beside my lamp and placed the precious strip of paper with the others, like gold coins, slowly piecing together my greatest treasure.

#

The next day Emmaline and I did go Christmas shopping after school, but first we went to Swatches. Benny closed the shop long enough for the four of us to go to the deli for sandwiches. It was nice to stand in line, leaning against Mason with his arms around me, holding me there, while Benny and Emmaline stood behind us, trying to make conversation. It reminded me how nervous I was the day I met Mason and how close we had become in less than a week.

The note I found in my pocket that night said *You’re so beautiful*.

On Tuesday, Emmaline and I went to her house after school to make chocolate chip cookies and then we took them to Swatches. Benny and Emmaline seemed to open up to each other as we sat on the picnic table behind the shop and ate cookies. It was nice, but I wished that Mason and I were alone…at least long enough to share a real kiss.

Mason leaned over and whispered, “We should finish everything up in the morning, so hopefully I’ll be there to see you after school tomorrow,” when I hugged him before Emmaline and I left.

I helped my mother with dinner when I got home and went upstairs to my room just before we sat down to eat. I pulled the newest note from Mason out of my pocket. *Stay awake*. I smiled as I put it under my pillow before I went back downstairs. Mason would be coming for me during the night.

#

This time I had no trouble staying awake, although I climbed under my blanket in my dress and pretended to be asleep when my mother came in to tell me good night. The image of Mason kissing me under the full moon that hung in the sky that night played through my head over and over.

When I was sure my mother was in bed, I sat up and looked out the window. For nearly two hours I watched the young trees blowing in the wind and the empty street below. Then I saw someone walking down the road, coming closer. I watched him for a minute, waiting for him to move out of the shadows before I was sure it was him. The thrill that only he could bring shot through me as I hurried silently down the stairs and grabbed my coat.

I ran down the sidewalk and wrapped my arms around his neck when I met him right in the middle of the street at the corner. He put his hand on the back of my head and held it against his shoulder. “Mm, you feel good,” he said quietly into my hair.

“So do you.”

“It almost feels like I haven’t seen you in weeks. We haven’t had two seconds to ourselves like this.” He let go of me and took one hand. “Do you want to come to my place, just for a little while?”

“Okay.”

We walked silently through the night until we reached the rickety old stairs. We had to climb them slowly to avoid making any sound. At the top, Mason used the same bobby pin to unlock the door. Then we were plunged into complete darkness. I felt him turn to face me as he put his arm behind me to hug me again. “It really does feel like weeks since you were here with me…that perfect rainy day,” he said.

“I know. I’m glad that that wasn’t the last time I saw you.”

He leaned back and then I felt his lips brush against my cheek. “I couldn’t let you go.”

A shiver passed over me, and then desire. I ran my fingers through his hair, having to find it in the dark, and then leaned up, hoping I would kiss his lips, but I got his jaw line instead. He laughed in a slow, deep voice. *My first kiss is a failure.* “Sorry,” I said, feeling humiliated.

“For what?”

I couldn’t answer.

“Alexandra—what are you sorry for?”

“I don’t know; I did that wrong.”

He put his hands on my face and ran his thumbs gently against my skin. “No, that was perfect.” I looked up to where I knew his face was, wondering if it was moving closer to mine, wondering if he would ever kiss me.

His head came to rest against mine for a second, and then I couldn’t feel him at all. “I can’t stand this anymore,” he said. His hand touched my arm. He felt his way down to my hand and then began leading me down the hall.

“Can’t stand what?”

“Not being able to see the most beautiful face ever created. You’re right beside me and I can’t even look at you.” A few seconds later a door was opening ahead of me and moonlight was washing over the tall roguish figure in front of me. He looked back and smiled. “That’s better.”

*This has to be another wonderful dream.*

Mason walked over to a thick blue blanket lying on the floor on the right side of the greenhouse room and let go of me to lay down on it. I wasn’t sure what to do. “Will you look at the stars with me?” he asked. I sat down and hugged my knees to my chest. Lying on the ground beside him wasn’t how I wanted to get my first kiss. “You can lay down. I’m not going to hurt you, Alexandra.” He laid his arm out beside him, indicating that I should lay on it.

I continued to stare forward. There were just some things I had to stand up for. “I can’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“This...intimacy...it wouldn't be right.”

Mason shot up and looked at me seriously. “That's not what this is.” He took my hand, which I realized was shaking a little. “I have a great deal of reverence for what you're so afraid of right now. And I'm glad that you obviously do, too. I would never ask you to do that, Alexandra. I may not be an upper class man, but I'm not that kind of guy...I just wanted to look at the stars with you; it's easier to do when you're lying down...But we don't have to if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“No…I don't mind.”

He laid down and held an arm out for me again. I rested my head on his shoulder and scooted up against him. He held me close with the arm I was lying on.

“Mason—I didn't mean to imply that I think or expect any less of you than I do of anyone else,” I said.

“I know you didn't.”

“Because I don't think of you that way. I think you're perfect—” I reached across my stomach to hold his hand. “—and I'm still waiting to wake up from this fantastic dream.”

He kissed my forehead. “If you're waiting to wake up to me being gone, it's not going to happen.”

“I hope not.” We just smiled at each other for a minute.

Mason looked up through the glass ceiling. “See that star there? It almost looks blue.” He pointed to the sky and I looked around until I saw it.

“Yes.”

“It kind of looks like the tip of an arrow. Look at the stars lined up under it and the way they branch out at the end...” We looked at and talked about the stars as we enjoyed each other’s company. And for the first time, the fear I always felt of him eventually getting tired of me wasn’t there.

Half an hour passed by before I felt Mason's hand squeeze mine. “I should probably get you home,” he said.

I looked over at him. “Not yet. I don't want to leave you.”

“I don't want you to either, but it's really late, and we don't want to fall asleep like this.”

“I'm not tired.”

“Neither am I.” Mason sat up and pulled me along with him. “But it wouldn't be right for me to keep you up all night. I've already been selfish enough in keeping you awake this long.” He stood, and helped me up before he hugged me. “I just had to see you.”

“It wasn't selfish at all. You have no idea how happy I was when I read your note, knowing I would be seeing you tonight.”

As I stared at him, the desire to kiss him began to return. In those few seconds it felt like all that mattered was kissing him. But when I leaned up, he took my hand and began walking to the stairs. *What did I do wrong?* I followed him into the dark hallway and then outside, trying not to think of the way he suddenly seemed so unwilling to kiss me.

He didn't say a word until we were standing on the sidewalk in front of my house. “I'll see you after school tomorrow,” he said as he pulled me close.

“So you'll be there when I get out?”

“Unless I get run over by a car on my way.”

I laughed. “I can't wait.”

He kissed my cheek and watched me walk into my house.

As soon as I shut the door behind me, I saw something that made my heart pound. I didn't want to see what I was seeing. I didn't want to believe that the kitchen light was on and that I was probably in the biggest trouble of my life. “Come along, Alexandra,” my father's voice called out.

I took a shaky breath and made my way to the dining area, not even bothering to take off my coat. Both of my parents were sitting at the table, my mother crying quietly into a handkerchief. Katy sat there, too, with her sleeping head resting on the table and a thin puddle of drool leaking from her open mouth.

“Sit down,” my father said, keeping his eyes fixed on his clenched fists. My shaking legs carried me to the empty chair at the table. “I would have expected better from you, Alexandra,” he said.

“I just went for a walk, Father. I couldn't sleep.” I figured it was best not to bring up Mason.

My mother gasped. “Now you're lying, too? Oh Alexandra, you've always been such a good child. You've never gotten into trouble...” She stopped to take in a deep breath. “Now you're running around in the night, having sex with a boy you just met!”

“I am not.”

“But you were with him. Katy—” She looked over at Katy and shook her arm.

Katy let out a snort as she jerked her head up. “Oh, hi Alexandra,” she said sleepily.

“Tell her what you saw,” my mother said.

“I just saw Mason walking up the road and then you walked away with him.”

“So you told them?” I said in shock. I never would have expected this from Katy.

“No, Mother came to check on us a little later and panicked when you weren't here. Father was going to call the police. It was the only way I could stop him.”

“Don't reprimand your sister. It's your own fault for sneaking out. I would say she did the right thing, but that would have been to tell us right away. She'll be punished for that later,” my father said.

“Come on. I didn't do anything.”

“Hold your tongue.”

Katy crossed her arms and sat back in her chair.

“What are we going to do with you now? You could be pregnant,” my mother said.

“No—”

“He'll marry her if she is,” my father said.

“No, I didn't have sex! I've never had sex. I wouldn't do that,” I interjected.

“Then just what were you doing?”

“Walking, looking at the stars.” My father glared. “I'm not lying.” I turned to my mother and took her hand. “I've never lied to you, Mother, you know that. Mason's been working so hard, he just wanted to take me for a walk, just me and him, so he asked me to stay awake and wait for him.” I turned to my father when I heard his heavy sigh. “I haven't done anything wrong.”

His eyes looked like they might pop out of his head as he pointed a shaking finger at me. “You left in the middle of the night to see this...this scoundrel!”

“He's a good man.”

“Alexandra,” my mother said as she pulled her chair around the table to sit right beside me. “I know you’ve never lied to me. Will you promise me that what you have said is the truth?”

“Yes, I promise.”

She let out an enormous, shaky breath and pulled me into a bone cracking hug. “I'm so relieved.”

“Lillian—” my father said.

“Ted, I know my daughter better than my own self. I wouldn't have expected her to go out during the night, but I know she's telling the truth. If you have any faith in me at all, you'll believe her too.” My mother looked at him with fiery, determined eyes I'd rarely seen before. My father stared back at her for a long time, as if they were deep in silent conversation.

My father finally pulled his gaze away and looked over at me. “You're grounded. You're not going to that dance,” he said.

“No!” my mother and I said at the same time. “It's her first dance and she bought a dress,” my mother said.

“And Emmaline's really looking forward to it. I can't back out on her,” I added.

“And you will *not* see Mason again,” my father said, looking back and forth at our pleading faces, showing no signs of mercy.

“No.” I burst into tears. *Anything but that.*

“That alone would be punishment enough,” my mother said. “Can't she please go to the dance?”

“No, no, no,” I said, hysterically. “I'll miss the dance. Ground me for as long as you want, just don't take Mason away.”

“He asked you to leave during the night with him. He’ll do it again. And who knows what other sort of things he’ll be asking you to do.”

“I’ll never do this again, please Father. I…” I choked on a great sob. “I’ll do anything you ask, just please let me keep seeing him.”

My father’s eyes softened as he watched me cry. “I’ll need to speak with his parents.”

“Why?”

“Because if things are so serious and you've been with him during the night—” I opened my mouth to object, but he only raised his voice. “—innocent or not—his parents should know what's going on, what sort of man their son is.”

“His mother's dead, though.”

“Where's his father, then? He never did say.”

I bit my lip and tried to think of a way out of this. What could I say to throw them off? His father's dead, too? No. “I can't tell you that,” I said.

“Why not?”

“Because I promised I wouldn't tell anyone.”

“Then you'll never see him again.”

“No!”

“Tell me who his father is.”

“If, if I tell you...will you let me continue to see Mason?”

“All I can promise is that if you don't tell me, you’ll never be allowed to see him again.”

I looked down at my hands as a tear fell on them. Certainly Mason would understand me telling them if it was the only way to keep seeing him. “Will you promise not to tell anyone else?” I asked, glancing over at my mother, knowing that this was the sort of information she lived for.

“I'm not agreeing to anything until you answer my question,” my father said.

My mother took my hand. “I won't tell anyone, Alexandra.”

“It's Sydney Algoth.”

“What?!” my father roared as a broken scream came from my mother, followed by a loud *bump* as she fell out of her chair and hit the floor.

“No way. He's my favorite gangster. How come you didn't tell me about him before?” Katy said.

“I don't ever want to hear you say anything like that again. Go to your room right now,” my father said to her.

“But I want to hear more about Mason's father.”

“Room NOW!”

“Fine.” Katy stood up and stomped out of the dining room.

“You're dating a member of the mob? This is worse than I thought. We're all in danger,” my mother said dramatically, looking up at me from the floor with terrified eyes.

“He's not in the mob, and neither is his father.”

Someone grabbed my arm and jerked me out of my chair. My father began dragging me out of the dining room.

“Ted, wait,” my mother called after him.

“Mason hasn't even spoken to his father since he went missing in New York City.” He began pulling me up the stairs. “They're not gangsters. Father, please, listen to me.” He pushed me into my room and locked it from the outside. “Father, wait!” I pounded my fists against the door. “Please...don't take him away from me.”

I leaned my head against the door and cried. I wished Katy hadn't said anything. At least if the police had been called, Mason wouldn't have gotten dragged into it.

Walking over to my closet, I pulled the coat Mason had given me off of its hanger and hugged it. After putting it on, I moved over to my bed and turned on my lamp. I reached into my pocket and pulled out what I was sure would be the last note I ever got from Mason. I blinked away my tears to read, *My heart is yours.* I burst into a fresh wave of tears, crying even harder than before. His heart was all I wanted. How would I ever give it back to him?

**Chapter Seven**

When I woke up in the morning, the sky reflected my mood perfectly—gray and depressing, hardly able to keep its tears from pouring out. Mason would be waiting for me after school, and I would have to turn him away. I couldn’t imagine anything worse.

I climbed out of bed and pulled a dress on. The lock on my door unclicked as I slipped my feet into my shoes and my mother walked in, looking like her usual self. “Your father said you can go to the dance,” she said with a smile.

As I walked past her, I made sure not to make eye contact. I hurried down the stairs, picked my books and lunch up off the little table at the end of them, and headed for the front door. “Wait. Alexandra, don’t you want breakfast?” my mother asked as she hurried down the stairs.

I opened the door and turned around long enough to say, “I want Mason,” and then left the house that felt more like a prison at that moment.

Outside… *Mason might be outside somewhere, breathing in the same icy air I am*. As my eyes began to tear up, I realized that I hadn’t even grabbed a coat. But the numbness and pain I felt made it seem unimportant.

I made it halfway to the corner before I heard a door slam and then Katy running after me. “Alexandra wait, I want to talk to you.” Usually in the mornings she left as late as she possibly could. “I want to talk to you about Mason’s father,” she said, walking beside me.

“Well I don’t. I can’t believe I can’t see him anymore.” I couldn’t hold the tears back anymore. I began crying and taking in deep breaths.

“But now you have a connection to the mob. I want to know where their headquarters are here in Chicago so I can go meet a few. Those guys are aces.”

My mind was too clouded by misery to think about how absurd what she’d just said was. “I told you everything I know last night. Mason’s father is Sydney Algoth and neither one is in the mob—and you can’t tell anyone, okay?”

“Sydney is. At least let me meet him.”

“I haven’t even met him. Mason doesn’t know where he is.”

“He’s in New York. Everyone knows that.”

I stopped to stare at her. “It doesn’t matter, because now I’m not allowed to see Mason.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re not even grounded. Father’s not going to know if you’re seeing him or not. I, on the other hand, am stuck at home for the next week. If I were you, I’d just keep seeing him.”

But she wasn’t me, and going against my father wasn’t something I would do. Sneaking away during the night might be considered disobedience, but it seemed innocent enough. And anyway, look where *that* had gotten me. I had no intention of going out and getting into more trouble.

I wiped my tears away and began walking up to Emmaline’s door, leaving Katy behind. As soon as Emmaline opened her door, I burst into tears again. “Bye, Mother,” she called into her house before shutting the door behind her. “What’s wrong, Alexandra?” I told her everything as we walked to school, being careful to leave out Mason’s father. It was still his secret. Katy ran ahead of us to get out of the cold. Emmaline didn’t say anything; she just kept her arm around me as we walked.

Once we were at school, I tried to calm down.

Hayden walked past me and glared back at me until he reached his chair, making me feel even worse. “Do you think your father called his and told him what happened?” Emmaline asked. I shrugged. It was something he would probably do.

“At least that takes care of your Hayden problem.”

“Hayden’s not a problem.”

“You know what I mean—”

Emmaline gasped as dark liquid suddenly began spilling all over her head. I stood up and jumped to the side as she let out a terrible scream. Marcy was standing behind her, pouring what smelled like coffee all over her.

“STOP IT!” I shouted, taking the half empty carton from her.

Everyone in the classroom turned to stare at us and a couple of boys began laughing.

“Give that back,” Marcy said, reaching out for it with her fat hands.

“No,” Emmaline stood up and pushed her to the side before she yanked it out of my hand. “I’ll give it back to her.” She ripped the top of what was once a milk carton open and threw the rest of its contents all over Marcy.

“What are you doing?” Mr. Web hollered as he walked through the door and caught some of the spray. Emmaline dropped the carton. “*Miss* Emmaline, explain yourself.” He pulled a handkerchief out of his coat pocket and began dabbing at his angry, red face.

“Marcy came in here and just started dumping this stuff all over me, Mr. Web.”

“I did not,” Marcy said.

“Then *why* is this stuff all over me?”

“You must have dumped it all over yourself.”

“ARE YOU CRAZY?!”

“Alright girls, calm down. Both of you go home and clean yourselves up. I’ll see you back here when you’re done,” Mr. Web said.

“Yes, sir,” Emmaline and Marcy said in low voices, each glaring at the other. Marcy bumped into Emmaline on the way out the door. Emmaline bumped her back just before they were lost from view.

“Go get a mop, Miss Alexandra,” Mr. Web said before walking up to the front of the classroom. As I walked down the still, empty hallway, I wondered if Marcy’s torrents of malice would be directed toward Emmaline instead of me from now on. It was difficult not to hope for. Emmaline could handle herself so much better than I could, after all.

As the morning wore on, and Hayden continued to cast angry glances back at me now and then, all I could think about was what I was going to say to Mason. Tears remained in my eyes most of the time, but I managed to keep them from spilling out.

Marcy returned just before lunch, which was spent inside due to the rain, and Emmaline came back just after. *You okay?* she wrote on her slate. Then she pushed it over to me as Mr. Web called the class to attention. A tear rolled down my cheek as I shook my head.

When the final bell rang I remained in my seat. “Come on, Alexandra, I’ll be with you,” Emmaline said, taking my elbow and helping me up. A few desks in front of us Hayden remained in his seat, too, I realized. I stood still, not wanting to face Mason. Emmaline picked up my books and pulled me outside. Without looking up, I could feel the cold, gray sky.

I kept my head down as I walked toward the sidewalk until I felt his arms around me. I didn’t have to see Mason to know it was him. “Maaason,” I said into his chest as grief washed over me.

“Alexandra, what’s wrong?” he asked as he ran his fingers through my hair.

“They, they were awake. I can’t—”

“This has gone on quite long enough,” I heard Hayden’s voice before I felt his hands on the sides of my waist, pulling me away from Mason. “Alexandra’s not to see you anymore.”

“Get your hands off my girl,” Mason said, his gray eyes flashing like lightning during a storm.

“I’m your girl?” I asked, forgetting my sadness in hearing him say officially that I was his girlfriend.

He looked at me like I was crazy. “Of course you are.”

“No, she’s not,” Hayden said.

“Yes, I am,” I said. Hayden gave me a hurt look. “Well, I was.” I looked down at the ground sadly.

“What are you talking about?” Mason asked.

“My parents were awake when I got home last night.”

“What?” Mason looked around at all the noisy kids coming out of school behind me. “Not here. Come on.” He put his arm around me and began leading me down the sidewalk, away from Hayden and the school.

I looked around for Emmaline and realized she was standing beside Benny, not far away. “Come on,” she said, taking his hand and walking away in the opposite direction. Benny looked at Mason for some explanation, but Mason was watching me. “See you tomorrow,” Emmaline called back to me.

“They were awake, Mason. They said the only way I could still see you was if they talked to your parents—”

“Did you tell them about my dad?”

“I told them I couldn’t, but they said I would never see you again, so I told them who he was but that it’s a secret. It was the only way I could keep seeing you.”

“Hey!” Hayden grabbed my hand and pulled me to the side, putting his other arm out to keep Mason away from me. “I told you to leave her alone.”

“And I told you to keep your hands off my girl.” Mason pushed Hayden to the side and came to stand in front of me.

Hayden’s shoes squeaked against the wet grass as he fought to regain his balance. He stood stiffly as he glared at Mason. “Look, Mason, she obviously hasn’t told you that we will be married someday soon, so you don’t—”

“No, you won’t.” Mason took a step toward Hayden.

“Wait, what are you talking about, Hayden?” I asked, moving closer to him.

“Our fathers have discussed our marriage for as long as I can remember, after dinner in my father’s office. Hasn’t your father talked to you about this?”

*Marriage?* I was stunned. For a few seconds I just stood there, sure I’d heard him wrong. He thought I was planning to marry him? Suddenly, the way he’d been acting about me and Mason began to make sense. “No…Hayden…I’m not going to marry you.”

His mouth opened, but no sound escaped. His eyebrows bent down. He walked up to me and grabbed both of my elbows firmly. “*Yes*, you are.”

“Hayden, stop.”

Mason grabbed one of Hayden’s arms and twisted it around behind his back. “Touch her again—and I’ll break your arm.”

I put my fingertips over my mouth nervously.

“Unhand me, you ruffian. I’ll have you arrested,” Hayden said.

I took Mason’s hand. This had to stop. He glanced at me before he let go of Hayden. Then he put his arm around me and began leading me away.

“Alexandra,” Hayden called out.

I reached back to rest my arm against Mason’s and held onto his hand, ignoring Hayden and his complete misconception of our future together.

“Alexandra,” he called out once more.

Tears began to fall again as I walked. *This is the last time I’ll feel his arm around me or his body beside mine.* Mason reached up to wipe them away, but said nothing.

I realized we were heading to where he was staying. He led me up the stairs and into the darkness. A door to our left opened and I walked into a room with a desk, a long couch, and a few stacks of boxes in it, all covered in dust. Mason led me to the couch and sat down, pulling me down with him.

Taking my hand and staring into my watery eyes, he said, “Now, tell me exactly what happened.” He watched me with concern, nodding once in awhile, as I told him everything that had happened the night before.

“I’m so sorry, Mason. I shouldn’t have told them about your father,” I said when I was finished.

“It’s alright. I would’ve told them, too, if I thought it was the only way to keep seeing you.”

“It only made things worse.”

Mason leaned over to hug me. “I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have asked you to leave last night.”

“But I wanted to see you…and now I’ll never be able to again.”

“Yes you will.” Mason let go of me and put his hands on my shoulders. “I’ll go talk to your dad and straighten this out. Just let me grab that paper I showed you.” He stood up and left the room for a long time. By the time he returned I felt a little better. “Come on, we’ll go right now,” he said, holding a hand out to me.

“What if it doesn’t help? What if my father still won’t let me see you?” I asked as I stood up.

Mason put a hand behind my back and pulled me against him. “It won’t matter. No one is going to keep you away from me.” He leaned down to kiss my cheek before he led me outside and down Michigan Avenue toward my house. Hope crept in as I walked.

Mason walked right into my house before he turned to me. “Will you please get your father?” he asked.

I nodded and turned around to find my mother walking towards us. “Hello, Mrs. Roomer,” Mason said. Her eyes filled with fear before she turned away and walked quickly back to the kitchen without saying a word.

At the top of the stairs, I passed Katy’s room and glanced inside. She was lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling. “What are you doing home?” I stopped to ask. I usually didn’t see her until dinnertime.

She looked over at me and smiled. “I’m grounded, remember? But I’m glad you’re finally here. There’s something I want to show you.” She got down on the floor and reached under her bed for something.

“It’ll have to wait. I need to talk to Father.” I left her rummaging through the buildup of junk underneath her unmade bed.

I knocked on the next door, my father’s office. “Come in,” he called out.

I opened it a crack and was met with a scowl. My father sat in his office chair with several papers in each hand. “Could you come downstairs for a minute? Mason wants to speak with you,” I asked nervously.

“Mason?” He slapped his papers down noisily against his desk before he walked past me.

“Did you just say Mason’s here?” Katy said, running out of her room and into my father. She was holding a large shoebox in her arms.

“Go back to your room,” my father said.

She rolled her eyes and went to stand just inside of her doorway, clearly wanting to hear whatever was said, if at all possible.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Roomer,” Mason said when he saw my father and me. “I’d really like to talk to you about Alexandra.”

“Let’s do it in the living room.” Mason took my hand as we followed my father to the brightly lit living area. My father sat in the brown leather armchair and we sat down on the matching sofa. He cleared his throat and glanced at our hands as he shook his head. Mason let go of me.

“I’m sorry that I upset you and Alexandra’s mother last night,” Mason said. “I’ve hardly seen Alexandra these last few days, so I wanted to spend some time with her. Certainly you can understand needing to see the person you care most about.”

I smiled over at him. *…the person you care most about.* His tender words played through my mind.

“Of course I can, but that doesn’t excuse what you asked my daughter to do.”

“You’re right, and I apologize. I promise that it will never happen again.”

“That’s all very fine, but it’s not what this is about, although it might very well be. This is about the company my daughter keeps. You’re tied to the mob. I can’t allow Alexandra to associate with you.”

“You have my solemn word that I am not associated with the mob in any way.” Mason held out the newspaper he’d brought. “I hoped you would read this.”

My father took the paper and sat back to read it. Mason smiled over at me as we waited. “Why are you showing me this?” my father asked when he was finished.

“My father is a good man. I haven’t seen him since before he left for that trip. He wouldn’t take off like that without saying anything to me. It’s not like him. So I know something’s wrong. And he wouldn’t join the mob, either. He’s always hated them,” Mason said.

“So have I. But he’s been sighted with them repeatedly. He and four other men entered a bank last month, each holding a gun, and took as much money as they could carry. Your father was there with a gun in his own hand. How do you explain that?”

“I can’t, and I’ll admit that it’s strange, but he’s not in the mob. And even if he was, that wouldn’t mean I am.”

“That’s true, but let’s say people found out he’s your father. Imagine what would happen to Alexandra. Imagine how she would be treated.”

“I’ve thought about that, but Alexandra’s the only person I’ve told. How would they find out?”

My father looked out of the long window across the room from him for a minute. I wondered again if he’d told Hayden’s father about Mason’s father.

He looked back to Mason. “It took a great deal of courage coming here to talk to me about this. A lesser man would have turned away, but I cannot allow you to continue seeing my daughter.”

“Please, Father!” I said desperately, feeling the tears return.

“Please, Mr. Roomer, there must be something I can do to regain your trust,” Mason said.

“Aren’t you listening? I can’t risk my daughter’s reputation. The longer you continue to date my daughter, the greater that risk becomes.”

“Alright, what if no one knows I’m seeing her? What if we keep it quiet? I could visit her here.”

My father’s eyes slowly narrowed. “That’s exactly how they work, isn’t it—secretly—without anyone knowing?” He stood up and came to shove Mason’s newspaper into his chest. “You sound exactly like one of them.”

“I’m not a mobster, and I’ll do whatever it takes to continue seeing Alexandra.”

“Alexandra, say good-bye to Mason. I won’t be changing my mind.”

“Please,” Mason said.

“Leave.”

Mason looked over at me in defeat. I felt tears spilling over my cheeks. Mason wrapped both arms around me. “It’s going to be okay,” he whispered in my ear.

“That’s enough of that,” my father said.

“If I’m never going to see her again, at least let me say good-bye,” Mason said without letting me go.

His words were agonizing. *…I’m never going to see her again*… I grabbed two wads of the back of his shirt and clutched him against me, afraid to let go, and sobbed heavily onto his chest. “I don’t want you to go, Mason,” I wailed uncontrollably. How would I ever get over him? There would never be anyone else like him, and no other man half as wonderful would ever want me.

“I know. It’s going to be okay,” he murmured as he slid his hands over my back.

“I said that’s enough.” My father grabbed my shoulder and pulled me away. “Now leave,” he said to Mason.

Mason nodded to my father before he walked out of the living room. I slumped back onto the couch and cried into my hands. I heard the door shut. It felt like so many doors shut in that instant, the door to my first relationship, the door to the dream I’d been living in since I met Mason, the door to any happiness at all.

Someone reached into my pocket. I looked up and saw my father standing beside me with a piece of notebook paper folded up in his hand. “He slipped this into your pocket. No doubt it’s some sort of criminal proposal or plan he wants to involve you in,” he said before he walked out of the living room.

“Wait, that’s my letter.” I ran after him and bumped into him when he stopped abruptly.

“No. Now go to your room until dinner.”

“But it’s my letter. You’ve already forbidden me from seeing him. Must you make my life even more miserable?”

“You’ll forget that boy in time and you’ll be fine—”

“No, I won’t!”

“YES, you will. Now go to your room.” He continued to the stairs and went into his office. I went to my room and lay on my bed to cry. It felt as if I would never be happy again, like the intense pain I felt would never end. I was his girl…

“Alexandra,” someone whispered. I looked at my doorway and watched Katy push it open slowly before she came to sit on my bed with the same shoebox she’d been holding earlier in her arms.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Shh. Father’s in his office. He’ll never know I left my room. I want to show you this.” She turned on my lamp before she opened the box and pulled out several newspaper articles she’d cut out. She began spreading them out over my bed. I realized they were all articles about Sydney Algoth. “I’ve been collecting these for months.”

“Why?”

“Because Sydney showed the world that anyone can move up in the mob. That’s why he’s my favorite.”

Lying on my stomach, I turned my head to face away from her. I didn’t want to think about Sydney. “It’s all his fault,” I said.

“What?”

“Everything. Mason’s in this mess because of him… And Father took the letter Mason gave me before I even got to read it.”

“A letter from Mason?”

“Yes, and it could have said anything.” He could have declared his undying love or asked me to run away with him. As unlikely as I knew these both were, the idea brought a smile to my face.

“This could be really important. What did Father do with it?”

“He put it in his coat pocket.”

“Put this under your bed. I’ll get the note.”

“But that’s impossible. He’s wearing his coat,” I said as I sat up to look at her.

“No it’s not, it’s easy.” She hurried out of my room and shut the door behind her.

I put all the newspaper clippings back in the box and shoved it under my bed, back against the wall. Then I went to my door and opened it a crack to look out into the hallway. For a couple of minutes I didn’t see anything. Then I saw Katy emerge from my parent’s bedroom at the opposite end of the hall. She tiptoed to her room with one of my father’s coats held against her. Was that the coat he’d been wearing? No. He only takes his suit coat off when he sleeps.

I went back to my bed, feeling the terrible pain return as I wondered what in the world Katy was planning.

Ten minutes later I realized it was sweltering. It had been getting progressively warmer since I lay down, but as I sat up, it really hit me. Sweat was beading on my forehead, so I wiped it away.

Moving to my door, I peeked out again and waited another several minutes before I saw my father walk out of his office and over to the thermostat. *His coat’s off.* I smiled as I thought of the daring and intelligence my sister possessed. “Katy—it’s hotter than an oven in here. Why did you leave your room and why did you turn the heat up so high?” my father asked as he turned the temperature down.

Katy poked her head out of her door. “Why are you assuming it was me?”

“Because it *was* you.”

“Well, I was cold.”

“Then put on a coat.”

“But my coat’s downstairs and you said not to leave my room.”

“You left your room to turn the heat up.”

“I was cold.”

“Then put on a…” My father looked down and shook his head. “Never mind. Just don’t turn it up again.” He started walking back to his office.

“Alright, but I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about the Civil War.” Katy walked out of her room and followed our father into his office. I saw the coat she’d taken from his room rolled up in her hands behind her back so that my father wouldn’t see it. They both turned to the left and disappeared.

I watched the empty hallway for about twenty minutes before Katy emerged from the office, walking out backwards. She was still talking to my father, so it seemed natural. “Thanks. I can never keep all the names and dates straight. I’ll finish that report right now.” A coat was folded up behind her back again, but I couldn’t tell if it was the one she’d been holding before. She turned around and hurried into her room, shutting the door behind her.

Since it was so hot, I changed into my nightgown and went to sit on my bed, wondering if she had my letter or not. At least it didn’t feel quite like all was lost anymore, now that there was the fragment of hope that I would be able to read his final note.

**Chapter Eight**

I refused to come to dinner later when my mother called us all down to eat. But my father said I could either come to dinner or miss the dance. So I came down, for Emmaline.

Katy seemed so unaffected, chattering away with my mother about what had happened at school that day, while I felt the burden of guilt and the fear of being caught, even though Katy had been the one to take the letter—hopefully, anyway.

As I picked up my corn on the cob, I remembered that there was something I had to ask my father, no matter how I was feeling. “I need to ask you something about Hayden, Father,” I said as I set the corn back down on my plate.

“Alright.” I hated the way he looked at me with such disappointment.

“Have you and his father been planning our marriage?”

Katy dropped her overloaded spoon, splattering the table around her with mashed potatoes, and began coughing uncontrollably. “Are you alright, dear?” my mother asked, as she hurried over to her and began patting her back. Katy picked up her glass of water and took a few gulps, then went back into a fit of coughing.

“I’m—I’m okay,” she said between coughs.

My mother picked up her glass and tried to hand it back to her. “Drink some more water.”

“I’m fine, Mother.” Katy took the glass and set it down in bits of mashed potatoes as she struggled to stop coughing.

My mother went back to her seat, but continued to watch Katy apprehensively.

“Not exactly,” my father began. “Of course we’ve talked about how nice it would be if you two ended up together. It’s something we’ve both hoped for since you were born. It would certainly be much better than you marrying…never mind.”

“Why? Are you going to be dating Hayden now?” my mother asked expectantly.

“No. He just said you and his father were planning our marriage,” I said, directing the conversation back to my father.

He looked at me thoughtfully and nodded before he spoke. “I can see how he could think that. We have spoken about it in front of him a few times. But it’s just talk. I believe we both know that we have to wait and see how things go. We’ve made sure you two grew up very close, but we certainly can’t force something like that on you. It wouldn’t be right. What exactly did Hayden say?”

“He said that you and his father had been discussing it for as long as he could remember and that it wouldn’t be long until we were married.”

My father looked like he was trying not to laugh. “I bet that came as shock to you, didn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“And I take it you told him that you weren’t going to marry him.”

“I did.”

“Thank goodness,” Katy said.

“Poor Hayden,” my mother said. “I wonder if they’re having the same conversation we’re having right now. Maybe I should call his mother after dinner.”

“That might be a good idea,” my father said.

I stayed silent for the rest of dinner and refused dessert to go to bed early. I really just wanted to be alone…to cry.

My clock told me that it was eight thirty when I heard everyone coming up the stairs. Half an hour later, when everything was silent, I heard a quiet *creak* coming from my door. So I turned my lamp on to find Katy coming into my room. She shut the door slowly and came to sit beside me on my bed.

“Did you get it?” I asked.

“Of course.” She took her slippers off and pulled a piece of paper out of one. “I told you it would be easy.”

“Thank you, Katy,” I said as I threw my arms around her.

“It was kind of a waste, though. There’s nothing good in there. But I bet it saves you a lot of trouble.”

“You read it?”

“Yeah.” She held it out to me and I started to unfold it, but stopped, not wanting to read it with her in the room.

Then a terrible thought occurred to me. “What happens when he realizes it’s gone? He’ll think I took it.”

“Do you really believe I didn’t already think of that? I put a fake note in the coat I switched with it, and luckily I put it in the right pocket. I figured if I got it wrong he wouldn’t think much about it.”

“You’re a genius, Katy.”

“Thanks, but I know that.”

“So what does the letter you wrote say?”

“It says he thinks you’re really pretty and that he had fun with you when he took you skating—a lot of boring stuff that I don’t know why he would be writing and slipping into your pocket. But I’m sure Father will just read it and throw it away or decide it’s harmless and give it to you.”

“But what if Father already read this one? He’ll know you switched it.” I looked down at the letter in my hand.

“Trust me, if he had read it, you would know. So you’re going to keep seeing Mason, right?”

“I can’t. I’m not allowed to.”

“Well Mason doesn’t care, and you shouldn’t either. Honestly, you two are nothing alike, and he’s a bit of a genius too, I’d say. He thought to write you that letter ahead of time.”

“He doesn’t care? Did he say that?”

“I’ll just leave you alone with your letter. Hopefully you’ll agree with everything it says, and I’ll still have my connection through you to the mob.”

“*Katy*, he’s not in the mob.”

She stood up and shrugged her shoulders. “Whatever you say.” It occurred to me, as she left my room, that maybe she was the one my parents should be worried about instead of me.

Carefully, I unfolded the note and began to read.

*Dear Alexandra,*

*I hope this isn’t the letter you find in your pocket. If it is, we’ve got a problem, but it’s nothing we can’t get through. I don’t mean any disrespect toward your parents, but I need you. I need to see your beautiful face, I need to look forward to seeing you, I need to know you’re mine. To me a father’s worry and demand not to see me anymore aren’t enough to justify losing these things.*

*And I have a confession to make.*

I stopped for a second as I remembered the last confession Mason had made, *…I felt drawn to you…It’s been hard to stay away from you ever since…* and hoped for another confession like that one.

*I lay awake at night and think of you. Besides seeing you, it’s the best part of everyday. It can’t become the worst. I can’t lay awake hurting and wondering what you’ve been doing. For some people it takes months or years or even a lifetime to know who they want to be with, but for me it only took a day. So tomorrow after school, I’ll be at Swatches. Bring Emmaline and we can all do something together there.*

*Try not to worry too much. The day will come when all this business with my father will be cleared up and things will get better. Please be there tomorrow. I’ll fall asleep tonight looking forward to seeing you, dreaming of your dark green eyes and the way your hair smells and feels against my cheek. This can’t be the end for us Alexandra.*

*Love, Mason*

With my emotions already running so high, I began to cry, even though his words were so sweet. He put some of my own thoughts and feelings into words perfectly. I needed him, too. As I wiped the tears away, I realized that it had hurt to breathe since the night before up until that moment, when the raw aching in my chest finally began to subside.

I closed my eyes and thought of his face—his gray eyes fixed on me—the light that filled them every time he saw me.

Could I really go against what my father had vehemently forbidden me from doing? Could I risk my reputation and the trouble continuing to see Mason might cause? In my mind he closed his silver eyes and leaned forward, tilting his head before he kissed me, something I still craved. “Yes,” I whispered to myself. “He is absolutely worth it.” No matter what my father said, I knew Mason, and I trusted myself to make that decision.

I opened my eyes and took all the notes Mason had given me out of my jewelry box. Then I opened the little drawer in the nightstand and put the notes and the letter in the front cover of one of my books. “You’ll be safer in there,” I said to them before I closed the drawer.

As I lay down and pulled my blanket up over me, I could feel my pain draining away. Tomorrow I would go to Swatches, and Mason’s heart was still mine to keep.

#

Feeling even better in the morning, I sat down with my parents for breakfast (as usual, Katy was still asleep) and gave each of them a good hug before I left for Emmaline’s.

Somehow, after feeling such intense pain, life just seemed sweeter.

“Good morning,” I said brightly when Emmaline answered the door.

“You…are you alright?” she asked, giving me a curious look.

“Yep, come on. I’ll explain while we walk.”

When I told Emmaline what Hayden had said the day before, she stared at me the same way I imagine I had stared at him. And for some reason, she seemed relieved to hear me say I was going to continue seeing Mason. She was probably just glad she wouldn’t have to listen to me cry about him for the next X amount of weeks…or longer.

In class I realized I hadn’t done the English assignment Mr. Web had given us to do the night before when it was time to turn it in. And I couldn’t seem to focus on anything he said throughout the morning.

When the lunch bell rang, Emmaline and I carried our lunch pails outside and sat on the sidewalk. “May I sit down?” Hayden asked.

“Sure,” I said. Although he sat down right beside me, he avoided making eye contact. What he’d said the day before seemed to hang painfully over us.

“We haven’t bought tickets for the dance yet,” I suddenly realized. “And it’s tomorrow night. What if they’re sold out?”

“I already got the tickets,” Emmaline told me.

“That’s a relief. Should I ask my father to drive us? We don’t want to walk there in our dresses.”

“I could drive you,” Hayden said. “I’m sure my father wouldn’t mind if I borrowed his car.”

“I’ve taken care of that already, too. All you need to worry about now is getting to my house tomorrow and getting dressed,” Emmaline said.

“Good.” I took out my sandwich and got about halfway through it before Hayden cleared his throat. I realized he hadn’t even touched his lunch.

“Could I talk to you alone for a minute, Alexandra…over there, maybe?” he asked, nodding to an empty spot in the schoolyard.

“Okay.”

“Or you could just stay here. I need to talk to Marcy anyway,” Emmaline said as she stood up.

“Marcy?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She left her lunch sitting where it was and headed toward Marcy and her little gang, who were all standing under a tree not too far away.

Hayden finally looked over at me. “I feel I should apologize for yesterday, but I’m just not sorry. I’ve been planning to marry you my whole life, Alexandra.” He laid his hand over mine as I rested it on the ground beside me. “Haven’t you even considered it?”

“Marriage isn’t something I’ve really thought about.”

“Well, now that Mason’s out of the picture, perhaps you will. Think of what it would be like if we married other people and lost touch with each other. We’ve always done everything together, less so since Emmaline moved here, but we still tell each other everything. Imagine life without that.”

“Hayden, that will never happen. We’re family.”

“It may feel that way, but we’re not really, not by blood or marriage, anyway.”

I didn’t agree with him at all. He would always be family to me, but I wasn’t quite sure what to say. An uncomfortable silence settled itself between us until Emmaline walked back over to the sidewalk.

“Are you done talking yet?” she asked. I looked over at Hayden, who nodded. “Good, act like I never left. If anyone says anything, I never got up, okay?” She kept casting quick glances at Marcy.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Just wait.”

Hayden slipped his fingers under my hand and pulled it onto his knee. “Will you come over Saturday? We could go on a picnic or take a walk together,” he asked.

I stared at his hand holding mine. It felt strange to hold a hand that wasn’t Mason’s. And while going over to his house Saturday sounded like fun, I didn’t want to give him the wrong idea. Luckily, before I could answer, a deafening scream came from somewhere behind Emmaline. Marcy was dancing around and reaching behind her back with both hands, screaming in terror.

“What did you do?” I asked Emmaline as I started laughing.

“I just walked past her and dropped a few worms down her dress. I had to get her back for yesterday.”

Hayden gave Emmaline a reprimanding look.

“Are you serious? How did you do that without her or anyone else noticing you?” I asked.

She smiled and shrugged. “I don’t know. I just scratched my head when I walked behind her and let my hand move out as it came down, dropping the worms at just the right time on the way.”

Everyone laughed as Marcy shot toward the school, still screaming her head off.

I took my hand away from Hayden’s to finish eating my lunch. Emmaline and I talked about the dance until the school bell rang, letting us know it was time to come back inside.

And when the final bell rang in the afternoon, Emmaline barely gave me enough time to pick up my books before she grabbed my hand and started dragging me to the door. Marcy stepped in her path before we could reach it. “Did you put those disgusting things on me?” she asked as she glowered at Emmaline.

“Those glasses? Or are you talking about that wilted hat on your head? Because I’m pretty sure you put both of those on yourself. I’m not sure why, but I am sure it was you.” Emmaline smiled innocently at Marcy.

I imagined myself standing in her shoes, trembling like a leaf.

Marcy just gaped at her for a moment, as I’m sure a few students behind us were doing. No one walked past us toward the door. Marcy’s lip curled as she balled up her fist and reached back. But before Marcy could hit her, Emmaline raised her slate and books and slammed them against the side of Marcy’s face, causing her to fall over and scream out as her glasses went sailing through the air.

“What’s going on back there?” Mr. Web called out as he hurried around his desk to see what all the screaming was about.

“Emmaline,” I said in disbelief.

“She was going to hit me. What was I supposed to do? Just stand there and take it?” She grabbed my hand again and pulled me out the door.

Outside, I saw why she was in such a hurry. Benny was standing on the sidewalk, rubbing his hands together to try and keep them warm. Emmaline let out a little squeal as she took off for him. Just before she reached him, she dropped her books to wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him. I stared as their lips remained locked together and realized that I’d spent so much time talking about Mason’s letter that morning that I hadn’t bothered to ask how things went with Benny. Really well, obviously.

“Who’s he?” Hayden asked, coming to stand right beside me and watching Emmaline and Benny.

“That’s Benny.”

“It looks like she’s going with him. Would you like to come over to my house?”

“Actually, we were all going to walk around the city together.”

Hayden put his arm around my shoulders. “We could make it a double date.” Why was he suddenly trying so hard?

I started walking toward Emmaline, forcing his arm away. I didn’t want Benny to go telling Mason about it. “I’m sorry, Hayden. I think Emmaline and I will go to her house after a little while.” I hated to lie, but I had to see Mason.

“Saturday, then?”

“I’ll be spending the night at Emmaline’s, so I don’t know what time I’ll be leaving. How about if I call you?”

“Alright.”

Just then, Marcy marched past us up to Emmaline, who was now smiling as Benny whispered something in her ear. “I’ll get you, Emmaline,” she said before she walked away.

“I’m sorry she’s being so mean to you,” I said, standing beside Emmaline. “I feel a little responsible.”

“It’s alright; it’s kind of fun, like having an evil nemesis.”

Hayden grabbed my arm, softly this time, and pulled me into a hug. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said. I became painfully aware of Benny watching me. I patted Hayden gently on the back before I pulled away.

“Bye, Hayden.”

Benny held Emmaline’s hand as we walked away. “So that’s Hayden,” Benny said.

“That’s him.”

“I can see why he makes Mason so jealous.”

“Well, I grew up with him. He just feels like a brother.”

“I’ve got a couple a brothers myself and neither one of ‘em looks at me the way he looks at you.” I really hoped Benny wouldn’t say anything to Mason.

Emmaline and Benny stayed busy with each other all the way to Swatches. I wondered if they would have even noticed if I turned and went into one of the shops we were passing.

Excitement shot through me when we turned off of Michigan Avenue and I saw Swatches up ahead. I walked quickly, getting ahead of my two oblivious companions, and jogged the last twenty feet to the office door. I pushed it open with numb fingers and found Mason sitting in a fold out chair, leaning forward with his head in his hands. He let out a heavy breath when he looked up and saw me. Relief flooded his face instead of the joy I usually saw. He stood up and hugged me. “I was afraid you wouldn’t come,” he said in an odd voice.

“Why wouldn’t I have come?”

He pulled me even closer. “Your father’s words might have gotten to you.” He pulled his head away to look at me. “You have your family and a future full of whatever you could want open to you, and that filthy rich jerk wanting to marry you. How important could I really be in that picture?” His tired eyes showed his pain and fear.

“Mason…you’re the most important part.” I rested my hand on his cheek as I leaned up to kiss it, his smooth skin warm against my lips. “My heart was broken until I read the letter you wrote me. It felt like I could hardly breathe without you.”

The door flew open and Emmaline stumbled backwards as Benny pressed her against it and continued to kiss her. She just wrapped her arms around his neck and struggled to move around so that the door could close behind her.

Mason and I looked at each other. He took my hand and led me out back. His coat was already on. We sat down beside each other on the picnic table. “Did Emmaline say anything to you about Benny?” Mason asked.

“No. I’m afraid I didn’t give her the chance, because I was so busy talking about you.”

He smiled at me. “Things were kind of reversed over here. I think things might have got a little out of hand with them yesterday.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure exactly, it just sounded like there was a lot of what’s going on in there right now.”

Mason yawned and rubbed his eyes. “Sorry, I didn’t get any sleep last night…I couldn’t stop worrying about you.”

“Why were you so worried?”

“It’s been driving me crazy not knowing if I was ever gonna to see you again. I wanted to come see you at school during lunch, but I thought maybe Katy might’ve seen me, and that would’ve gotten you in trouble.”

“Don’t worry about Katy. She’s obsessed with your father. In fact, she managed to get the letter you wrote me back from my father when he took it from me.”

Mason stared at me with wide eyes. “Did he read it?”

“No, Katy got to it in time.” I went into the big letter rescue and how much Katy wanted me to keep seeing Mason.

“At least half of your family still likes me,” he said when I was finished.

“My parents like you; they just don’t like the mob. And I think you’re right. Things will get better.”

“They’re already better.” He put both arms around me, one on the back of my head, holding it against his shoulder, and inhaled deeply. “You smell so good.”

“How could you wonder if I would come?” I leaned away from him enough to rest my hand over his heart. I fixed my eyes on it so I would be brave enough to say what I needed to say. “My heart belongs to you too, Mason. I would do anything to be with you.”

He reached up to hold my hand and used his other hand to run through my hair. “I’m glad you said that. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you. We’ll need to remember this if things get worse before they get better.”

“Worse?” How could things get worse?

The backdoor opened and Benny and Emmaline walked out. They came and sat across from us. Emmaline’s hair was a mess.

Mason let go of my hand to put his arm around me. “Do you guys wanna play some cards?” he asked, pulling a deck of cards out of his pocket.

“Okay,” Emmaline said. We played canasta and talked and laughed for a long time. Even though I didn’t regret coming there, I couldn’t get rid of the worry always in the back of my mind that my father would march back there at any second and drag me home to lock me in my room forever.

After several games, Benny went inside to get some ham sandwiches he’d bought at the deli earlier that day. “I figured we might get hungry,” he said as he passed them out. A glob of mayonnaise fell on Emmaline’s chin when she bit into hers and Benny leaned over to kiss it off, but she leaned down so he would kiss her lips instead. Their sandwiches were soon forgotten in their long kiss.

I looked over at Mason uncomfortably and he stood up to lead me to the office door. Inside, we sat down across from each other. “Thanks, I really didn’t want to sit there and watch that,” I said.

“Me neither.”

“So I guess you’ll be busy working on cars tomorrow?”

“And you’ll be busy at that dance.”

I looked down as I thought about the dance. “I wish you were coming with me.”

Mason set his sandwich down on the counter beside him and walked over to me. He held his hand out. “How about right now?”

I stared at his hand, feeling a little confused. “You want to dance right now?”

“Sure.”

I could already feel my nerves going crazy at the thought of dancing around to no music, all alone with Mason, but I could never turn him down. So I set my sandwich down beside his and took his hand. He kissed it before he held our hands out to the side and put his other hand on my back. He began humming a ballad as he moved to the side. I fought not to laugh at how silly I felt, but I couldn’t hide the smile. He seemed so at ease, though.

When he stopped humming after a few minutes, I laid my head on his chest, hoping he would keep going. I really didn’t want him to let go of me. So he started humming again, letting go of my hand to put both of his on my back. I closed my eyes and let myself sway back and forth to the sound of his voice and the movement of his body.

At some point I picked my head up to look up at him. He stopped to smile, so I leaned up to kiss him. But he turned his head so I would kiss his cheek. “Mason?” Why didn’t he want to kiss me?

“Maybe we should finish our sandwiches,” he said as he let me go. I struggled not to show how hurt I was as he retrieved both of our sandwiches from the counter.

“I’m sorry, I’m not hungry anymore,” I said when he handed mine to me. “You can eat it.” I took a couple of short steps backward and sat down in my chair. Mason sat back down and ate both sandwiches.

He didn’t want me. He may have written that letter saying that he needed me and stayed awake all night worrying that he wouldn’t see me again, but he didn’t want me. He wouldn’t even kiss me. I felt like crying as I sat there and beat myself up about it. I was never going to get that kiss.

When Mason was finished eating, he pulled his chair over beside mine and put his arm around me. I turned my head away. He put his free hand on my cheek and turned my head to face him. “You don’t understand yet.” He leaned over to kiss my forehead. “But you will soon.”

“Understand what?”

“I can’t tell you right now, but I will, I promise.” He wasn’t making any sense, but I guess there wasn’t really much I could do.

I looked at the clock on the wall behind me and stood up. “Emmaline and I should probably go,” I said.

“Wait,” Mason grabbed my hand and stood up to stop me from walking to the back of the shop. “You’re not leaving because of me, are you?”

“No, I just need to be home in time for dinner.”

“Then will you stay for at least another minute?” He took a step closer to me and laid my hand on his shoulder before he put his behind my back.

Remembering the way I felt at that time yesterday, knowing I would never see him again, I moved closer to him and rested both hands on his shoulders. “Okay.”

“What’s your best childhood memory?”

“My best childhood memory?” That seemed like a strange question.

“Yeah, I want to know everything about you.”

I stared at the blank wall at my side as I tried to draw on a memory. The first thing that came to mind was a day Hayden and I spent in his garden, following a little white rabbit around from a distance, absolutely convinced that he would lead us to the same wonderland a girl named Alice had come across in a book we’d read. We must have spent hours watching it. But Mason wouldn’t want to hear about anything that involved Hayden. So I told him, instead, about a stuffed lion I used to crawl under my bed with and talk to all the time. I told it everything I was happy or sad about, everything that scared me, every secret I kept hidden inside. He was never given a name. I always just referred to him as ‘my lion’ because he felt like part of me, like my arm, or my voice.

“Do you still have him?” Mason asked when I was finished.

“Yeah,” I raked through my memories again, trying to remember what I’d done with him. “He’s in my closet, up on the shelf…I haven’t played with that poor thing in years. I could never let him go, though. He might be the only toy I still have.”

“Maybe I could meet him sometime.”

“Okay,” I laughed. “What about you? What’s your best childhood memory?”

“That’s easy, fishing with my dad. My best friend Mark’s dad died when he was young, so we always took him with us. Even if we didn’t catch anything, we always had a lot of fun.”

The backdoor opened and Benny and Emmaline walked inside. “We should probably go, don’t you think?” Emmaline asked me.

“Yeah, thanks for the sandwiches, Benny,” I said as I let go of Mason. As much as I wanted that kiss, I was done trying to get it. But his arms tightened around me and I was forced into a hug, which I didn’t really mind.

“Don’t be angry, just be patient,” he whispered. I was forced to wonder what in the world he meant by that as I walked outside to meet the freezing air. The wind had picked up, making it even colder.

“So what happened with you and Benny yesterday?” I asked Emmaline as we began walking.

“Magic…isn’t that what you called your day with Mason not too long ago?”

“Yes, but it’s different with you two, you’re a lot more…physical. I have a feeling things didn’t go the same way with you and Benny.”

“You’re probably right. They must have gone much, much better.”

I waited for her to elaborate, but she just smiled distantly at the sky. “And?” I finally prompted her.

“We walked through the park and then went to his house to listen to the radio. When we were sitting on the couch, he just leaned over and kissed me and kissed me and kissed me. Magic.”

“Well I guess you’re lucky,” I said with a sigh. “Mason refuses to kiss me.”

“He hasn’t even kissed you yet?”

“No. I tried to kiss him just a few minutes ago and he wouldn’t do it. He said I didn’t understand but I would, which makes no sense at all.”

“Oohhh, I get it.”

“What?”

“Nothing, never mind. I mean I don’t get it.”

“Yes you do, what aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing, that just slipped out accidentally. I didn’t mean to say it because I don’t get it, okay?”

Emmaline was acting very strange. “…Anyway, I could have sworn he was trying to kiss me when I brought him those brownies, but now I’m not so sure…”

Emmaline seemed lost in thought the rest of the way home, so it was a quiet walk. Several people walking past us waved or said hello, but she didn’t even notice.

At home I became just as oblivious, tuning everyone out as I sat through dinner. Why didn’t he want to kiss me? Patient about what? *He should be the one kissing me*. He is the man, after all. *I know he was going to kiss me when I brought him those brownies.* And there was the letter he’d written me. He was sending me very mixed signals.

“Alexandra!” my father nearly shouted. I hadn’t heard any of whatever he had been trying to tell me.

“Sorry, Father.”

“Your mother was asking what you did after school.”

“Oh, Emmaline and I walked around downtown.” More lying. It felt awful.

“I’ll tell you what I did after school today,” Katy interrupted purposely, which I was grateful for. “Nothing. I sat in my room and did nothing.”

“Don’t complain. You’re only grounded until Monday,” my father said.

By the time I went up to bed, I was so irritated and confused about Mason, I didn’t even think to check my pocket for a note.

**Chapter Nine**

“Haaaappy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you…” I woke up to my parents singing from the end of my bed. Katy was standing behind them, struggling to keep her eyes open.

*The dance is tonight*, I thought as I sat up, filling with anticipation.

“Make a wish, honey,” my mother said as she came around to the side of my bed and held out a heavily frosted pink cake.

I wished for the only thing I really wanted for my birthday as I blew the candles out—to be kissed by Mason. But the thought only reminded me of how bad I felt that he didn’t want that to happen, so I decided to wish that Emmaline and I would have as much fun as we could later that night instead. *He’s not ruining the dance for me*, I decided, trying to ignore the still present tinge of depression.

“So what do you say? Should we have cake for breakfast?” my mother asked me when the last flame had been blown out.

“Yeah.” It was something we’d never done before, but I wouldn’t be there to celebrate later that day.

“Hurry down,” my father said as everyone left my room so I could get dressed. After pulling on a blue dress, I glanced outside at our frost covered lawn before I crossed my room and left it.

Downstairs, Katy finally perked up when a piece of cake was set in front of her. As we all dug into the cake, my mother talked about the day I was born and how happy she was the first time she saw me, just like she did every year on my birthday. The strawberry frosting spread over a vanilla cake was delicious. “You make the best cakes, Mother,” I said when I thought she was finished with her story.

“Thank you, dear.”

“The Watkins are having a garage sale,” Katy said.

“Really? I didn’t realize that,” my mother said. “Maybe I’ll go take a look in a little bit. Wouldn’t it be lovely if we could get those chandelier lamps they have in their living room, Ted?”

“I doubt they’ll be selling them. They were probably very expensive,” my father said.

“But they’re moving. Don’t people sell all kinds of things when they do that?” Katy said.

“What?” my mother asked in surprise. “Why would you say that, Katy?”

“Mr. Watkins was hammering a For Sale sign in the front yard while I was getting dressed. I saw him from my window.”

“Oh, how could Flora not tell me they were moving?”

“It must have come unexpectedly,” my father said. “Now hurry and open your presents, Alexandra. If I don’t leave soon, I’ll be late for work.” Two small white boxes and one larger red one sat in the middle of the table, so I picked up the smaller ones first. One contained a necklace with a silver butterfly charm hanging on it that my father had gotten me, and the other one held a set of different colored hairpins from my mother.

“Open mine. I got you the best one,” Katy said, sliding the bigger present across the table to me. I tore away the bright red wrapping paper and found a box of chocolates inside.

“Thank you, Katy. I love all my presents.” I stood up to hug each of them before I took my presents upstairs and dropped them on my bed.

Then I picked up my books and lunch and headed for the front door. My mother came outside right behind me. “I’m going to see the Watkins. You have a great day at school and at that dance.” She gave me a big hug. “Happy Birthday again, Alexandra. It’s so hard to believe you’re seventeen years old.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

We walked across the lawn together, listening to the crunching of the frozen grass underneath our feet. There was no evidence of any sunlight that morning. I stopped on the sidewalk and watched my mother walk across the street and into the Watkins front yard, which was littered with things for sale.

It really did look like they were selling everything. Two long couches sat in the grass, along with their kitchen table and chairs and several other pieces of furniture. Paintings and blankets covered with all sorts of things for sale were spread out over the yard. I spotted the two lamps my mother had mentioned over breakfast sitting on the kitchen table. I wondered what they were going to do without all their furniture when they moved into a different house, or even later that day.

But I figured my mother would tell me about it later, so I began walking to Emmaline’s. “Today’s the day of the dance!” she said excitedly when she opened her door.

“I know, I can’t wait.”

We sang ‘I’m in the Mood for Love’ as we walked to school, and wrote each other notes on our slates throughout the day. Luckily, the school’s heating system was having some problems, so it was colder than usual, which meant that Mr. Web was extremely distracted. Frequently throughout the day, he stopped teaching to complain about the cold and to go the office to check on what progress was being made to fix the problem. I wondered if there was anything we couldn’t have gotten away with.

Marcy must have been wondering the same thing, because she decided to throw a wadded up piece of paper at Emmaline’s head halfway through the morning while Mr. Web’s back was turned. They went back and forth, throwing the same piece of paper at each other, every time Mr. Web turned around or left the room, never getting caught. They gave each other some of the nastiest looks I’d ever seen. But after awhile, it actually started to look like they were having fun, drawing sniggers from other students and waiting for just the right moment to throw it. I wondered if maybe Marcy felt the same way Emmaline did, that it was kind of nice to have an arch-rival. Emmaline was such a better match for her than I was, since I never reacted at all, really.

At lunch, Hayden sat beside me outside and took a black velvet box out of his pocket. “Happy birthday,” he said, handing it to me.

“Thank you, Hayden,” I said as I hugged him.

“Happy birthday from me, too. I can’t believe I haven’t said that already,” Emmaline added.

“Thanks. You already gave me my present, though, so don’t feel bad.” I smiled as I remembered the sight of Marcy knocking over and picking up the rack at The Chip, red faced and humiliated.

I opened the little box and found a thin gold chain with a heart shaped stone on it. “This is beautiful, Hayden. It’s not a real diamond, is it?”

“Of course it is. It’s what you deserve,” he said, as he reached out and took the necklace from the box so that he could put it around my neck.

When he was finished, I held the heart in my hand and watched it sparkle in the sunlight. “Thank you…I love this.”

Hayden leaned over to kiss my cheek. “I’m glad. Think of me whenever you wear it, won’t you?”

“Of course I will.”

After lunch, the paper wad continued to be launched from our back corner to the window seat where Marcy and her best friend Elise sat, and students continued to keep their coats pulled tightly around them against the cold.

The last hour of school felt like torture, dragging on longer than it ever had before. I thought it would never end. So when the school bell finally did ring at the end of the day, I jumped out of my seat at the same time Emmaline did. “Oh my gosh, come on Alexandra,” she said, grabbing my elbow and pulling me outside.

We barely made it to the sidewalk before I heard Hayden calling after me. “Would you mind if I borrowed Alexandra for a minute?” he asked Emmaline when he reached us.

“Of course not,” she said, giving me a wink. “I’ll see you at my house.”

“Wait, he said it would only take a minute,” I said, not wanting to have to endure another uncomfortable conversation with Hayden.

“Actually, a few minutes may have been a bit more accurate,” he said.

“It’s okay, I’ll be waiting at my house with the dresses,” Emmaline said before she walked away.

*Darn*. I really just wanted to go with her and begin our week-end of fun.

“There’s something that’s been bothering me since yesterday, and I hoped I could talk to you about it,” Hayden said.

“Alright.”

“When I saw the way that man was kissing Emmaline, it was difficult not to wonder if you and Mason shared the same sort of thing.”

“I didn’t kiss Mason.”

“But did he kiss you?”

“No, not the way you’re thinking of.”

Hayden smiled as he took my hand and moved closer to me. “So I could still be the one to receive your first kiss?”

*No.* “I’ve never kissed anyone, if that’s what you mean.”

“Yes…that’s exactly what I mean. I should have done it a long time ago. It could have saved a lot of heartache.” With that, he leaned his head down to kiss me, ignoring all the curious eyes that were coming and going all around us.

“Hayden,” I said in surprise, leaning away and taking a step back. I figured it wouldn’t have mattered to Mason if I kissed Hayden or not, since *he* didn’t want to kiss me, but Hayden wasn’t the one I wanted. Mason was.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry, Hayden,” I said, shaking my head.

“Alexandra, I love you. I’ve always loved you. Why do you have to make this so difficult?”

“It’s…complicated.”

“Because of Mason?”

I looked down at my feet, unwilling to answer that question.

“I shouldn’t have let things go as far as they did with you two. That lowlife has taken the place in your heart that should have been mine…the place I thought was mine already.” Hayden moved closer to me and took my hand again. “I won’t give up on you, Alexandra. I’m truly sorry that I let this happen. It will never happen again, I assure you. In time, you will forget him and love me.” He leaned down and tried to kiss me again, but I turned away. So he hugged me instead. “Tomorrow?” he asked.

“Maybe.”

I could feel him watching me as I walked away, which wasn’t a pleasant feeling. The truth was that I did love him, and I *had* loved him my whole life too, but not the way he loved me. I almost dreaded having to see him again after what he just said, knowing it would only continue. But the walk to Emmaline’s began to take the weight he had just placed on my shoulders away as I thought of the fun we would have together that night.

Emmaline opened the door a second after I knocked. “It was hard, but I’ve been waiting on you before I put my dress on. Come on,” she said, taking my hand and dragging me to the stairs.

“Hello, Mrs. Porter,” I said as we passed her on the way up.

“Hello, Alexandra. Do be careful with her, Emmaline. You’re liable to pull her arm off.”

“Okay, Mother.”

She shut the door behind me and went to pick up the two dresses lying on her bed. “So, what did Hayden say?” she asked as she handed my dress to me.

“I don’t really want to talk about it.”

Emmaline stopped in the middle of getting ready to pull her school dress off. “This sounds serious. Now you have to tell me.”

“You’re not going to drop this, are you?” I asked with a sigh.

“Absolutely not.” She gave me the same sort of smile my mother gets when she knows she’s about to get a juicy bit of gossip, making it clear that I didn’t have a choice.

So I told her about my conversation with Hayden as we pulled on our dresses and helped each other with the zippers in the back.

“This is so romantic…two handsome men, hopelessly in love with you,” Emmaline said when I was finished.

“One handsome man in love with me, you mean. Unfortunately, it’s the wrong one.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Mason’s crazy about you.”

I walked over to her vanity and sat down. “I wish you were right about that. Do you have my hair clip?”

“It’s right in front of you. Let’s put in the curlers first.”

“My hair’s already curled at the ends.”

“But tonight’s special. We’re supposed to overdo it.” She grabbed a piece of my hair and began rolling it over a hot curler before I could even protest.

“Fine, but then I get to put curlers in your hair.”

“That’s the plan. My mother’s letting us use her makeup too, so I’ll go get that after I put these in.”

We spent the next hour doing our hair and makeup and getting excited. “Your father’s not home yet. Won’t he be driving us to the ball?” I asked as the time to leave came closer.

“Don’t worry. I told you it’s all been taken care of.”

“What about the tickets? Where are those?”

“Patience.”

I raised a suspicious eyebrow at her, thinking how strange she was acting. “Tell me what’s going on,” I said.

“I’ve got an idea. Why don’t we go listen to the radio until it’s time to go?” Emmaline picked up her shoes and ran out of her room without giving me a chance to ask any more questions.

*Oh well. We’re getting there somehow.*

Downstairs, Emmaline remained silent as we listened to a few songs before a knock came at the door. “Could you get that, Alexandra?” Emmaline asked me, trying to look innocent as she did a terrible job of hiding a wicked smile.

I heard Emmaline’s mother walking to the door. “Alexandra’s going to get it,” Emmaline called out.

“Alright.”

“I don’t mind getting the door, but why is it so important that I get it?” I asked. Something was definitely going on.

Emmaline just shrugged and turned her back to me.

So I made my way to the door and opened it slowly, keeping my body behind it in case something was about to jump out at me. When I saw who had knocked, I gasped and threw it all the way open. His enchanting face lit up when he saw me. “Mason,” I cried as I wrapped my arms around him.

“Happy birthday, Alexandra,” he said, handing me a handful of violets when I let him go. “Emmaline said you would like these.”

“Thank you, but what are you doing here?”

“I *was* planning on taking you to that dance tonight, but I can leave—”

“No! Don’t go.”

“I’m just kidding,” he laughed. “I’m not going anywhere without you tonight.”

I looked at the suit he was wearing, his unnaturally clean skin, and his shining dark hair he had slicked back, and realized I should have known why he was there the second I saw him.

“Hey guys, let’s get going,” Benny said, walking up on Emmaline’s front porch. “Where’s Emmaline?”

“I’m here.” She ran past me into his arms and kissed him. “Come meet my mother before we go.”

Benny grimaced as Emmaline pulled him toward the kitchen and looked back to mouth out *help* to Mason.

Mason just shook his head. “He’s lucky. I wish it was that simple for me with your mom.”

“I know. I’m just glad you’re here,” I said as I slid my arms around his waist and leaned against him, still hardly able to believe he was taking me to the dance.

“Me, too.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” I looked up at him.

“I wasn’t going to at first because of work, but I went to ask Emmaline what to get you for your birthday last Sunday and she said you just wanted me to take you to the Winter Ball. So I talked to Benny about it and he said we could work around it.”

“That’s why you were over there,” I said to myself as I remembered seeing them together outside of her house.

“You saw me?”

“Yeah, when we were driving home from Hayden’s.” An almost imperceptible change passed over his face in the second it took me to mention Hayden; then it was gone.

“I just stopped by her place for a couple of minutes after work. I figured she was the best one to ask what you wanted.”

“She said something and you looked really happy. Was it about the dance?”

Mason smiled mischievously. “That will come later.”

“Alright, let’s go,” Benny said, pulling Emmaline toward the door.

Her mother appeared behind them. “Have fun, girls,” she said.

As Mason took my hand and opened the door, I remembered I was still wearing the necklace Hayden had given me. “Give me just a minute. I’ll meet you outside,” I said, letting go of Mason and hurrying to the bathroom to take it off. For some reason, I just couldn’t wear it while I was with Mason.

After taking it off and setting it on the bathroom counter, I found Mason out front, standing beside a dark car I’d never seen before. He opened the back door when he saw me. “Is this Benny’s car?” I asked as I climbed in.

Benny and Emmaline were sitting in the front, lost in another one of their kisses.

Mason climbed in right beside me. “Yeah. Someone dropped it off to get the brakes fixed and never picked it up, so now it’s his.” He put his arm around me and reached into his pocket to pull out a small white box with a purple bow on top. “Present number two…this one was my idea.”

I opened the box and found a small golden trinket box with a rose painted on the top and thorns engraved around the edges. “This is beautiful. Thank you, Mason,” I said as I leaned up to kiss him on the cheek.

“You’re welcome.”

We both jumped when there was a loud *wham* and looked in the front seat to see that Benny had banged his head against his window when Emmaline leaned forward, still kissing him. He seemed completely unaffected as he pressed back against her.

“Benny,” Mason said, reaching up to put his hand on his shoulder. Benny stopped and looked back at him. “Don’t you think we should get going? The play starts in half an hour.”

“I guess you’re right, I just—” Benny leaned over to kiss Emmaline again. “—won’t be able to do this once we’re there. Just one more.” Emmaline giggled as he kissed her again before he started the car. “Alright, let’s go.”

Mason’s eyes swept over me as we drove under a streetlamp and light flooded the inside of the car. “You look…like an angel,” he said with a smile. He leaned toward my hair and took a few deep breaths. “You smell like one, too. I must be the luckiest guy alive.”

Feeling a mixture of disbelief and overwhelming bliss, I couldn’t piece together a response, so I just smiled.

“Aww,” Emmaline said, smiling back at us.

Benny glanced over at her. “You look pretty too,” he said. Emmaline scooted closer to him and put her head on his shoulder.

Returning my attention back to the gold box in my hand, I reached for the top to open it, but Mason put his hand over mine. “Wait until you’re home, okay?”

“Why?”

“Just, trust me.”

I nodded and slipped the box into my purse.

“Looks like we’re almost there,” Benny said, pointing to the cars that were backed up ahead of us. People wearing formal clothes were walking down the sidewalk on both sides of the road, all heading in the same direction. We slowed down and began inching forward with the other cars until we reached the massive parking lot.

It was difficult not to wonder if something was wrong, with the way Mason kept staring at me. He took my hand and helped me out of the car once Benny had parked.

“Do you have—” Mason began, looking back at Benny, but stopped when he realized Benny was too busy kissing Emmaline to realize someone was talking to him. “Never mind, I’m sure he’s got his tickets.” Mason held his arm out for me and waited until I took it to start walking toward the dance hall.

“Shouldn’t we wait for them?” I asked.

“Honestly, the only person I’m worried about going to the ball with is you. They’ll come in when they’re ready, and who knows how long that’ll be.”

Just ahead I could see the brightly lit building and hear Christmas music playing inside. Mason took two tickets out of his pocket and handed them to the ticket master at the front. “First time here, young lady?” an old man asked me as he tore our tickets in half and handed them back to Mason.

“Yes, sir.”

“This lucky young man here’s your boyfriend, then?” He winked at Mason.

“Y, yes sir.” I struggled to say, hoping that Mason didn’t mind.

“Well maybe if this here fella treats you well enough tonight, we’ll see you two here again on Valentine’s Day.”

I stared at him for a minute, not knowing how to answer.

“Thanks. You have a Merry Christmas,” Mason answered for me, leading me past the ticket master and through the glass doors behind him.

We entered a large foyer with restroom doors to the left and right and another pair like the ones we’d come in through right in front of us. A short man in a red suit opened these doors for us and offered a little nod.

Mason thanked him as we walked into the dancehall. A Christmas tree that must have been twenty feet tall stood in one of the back corners with a brass band playing at its base. People were taking seats in the many rows of chairs placed in front of the stage. Mason led me to one of the middle rows, since most of the front rows were full, and we sat down near the right end.

“How about Valentine’s Day? Will you come with me to the dance?” Mason asked as he put his arm around me and pulled me closer to his side.

“Really?” I asked, filling up with excitement.

“Yeah. This time I can plan around it, and I figure I better ask you before someone else does.”

“Of course I’ll go with you.” He gave me a little squeeze as I reached out to hold his free hand, which was resting in his lap, in both of mine.

I admired the gleaming, intricate orange and gold designs which were molded and painted across the white ceiling that seemed so unbelievably tall.

I felt Mason twisting around beside me. “Ten minutes until the show starts,” he said.

“I don’t even know what they’re showing. Did it say on the tickets?” I asked.

“Yeah, they went with a classic, The Christmas Carol.” He reached in his pocket and handed me one of the torn tickets, so I looked it over until I heard Emmaline call my name.

Turning around, I saw her and Benny walking toward the chairs, which were nearly full by then. I waved back and watched them take seats in the third row from the last one. “Her hair’s a mess again,” I said.

“I guess you’ll have to tell her after the show. I think it’s about to start.” The music stopped as he said this, and a minute later the lights began to dim. I leaned against Mason as the red curtains slid to the side and Ebenezer Scrooge stepped onto the stage.

It occurred to me as I watched the play that someone who knew my parents might be there and mention they’d seen me at the dance with someone, which could end up getting me into trouble. But I decided not to think about it and just enjoy the perfect night I was having.

During the brief intermission, I went back to Emmaline and asked, “Will you come to the ladies room with me?”

“Okay.” She waited until we were walking through the hall doors into the foyer to ask, “What’s going on?”

I pulled her into the bathroom and over to a mirror. She gasped and stared at herself in horror. “My hair is a disaster, and Benny saw it. Oh, why didn’t you tell me sooner?” she asked as she began running her fingers over it to try and get it to lie down evenly.

“The show started before I could.”

“I can’t believe Benny didn’t say anything…blinded by love, I guess,” Emmaline smiled at her reflection dreamily.

“You might want to talk to him about keeping his hands out of your hair when he kisses you. I’m going to go back to sit with Mason, so I’ll see you after the show,” I said before I left the restroom, wondering if she’d even heard me.

“Hey you,” Mason said, wrapping an arm around me when I sat down beside him. “That felt like forever.”

“I’m sorry. I was only gone for a couple of minutes.”

He put a hand on my cheek. “It felt like a lot longer.”

The impulse to kiss him pressed against me, like two heavy hands on my shoulders, but I pushed back, refusing to give in. If he wanted to kiss me, and I was sorely sure that he didn’t, he could do it himself.

I tilted my head down toward his shoulder as I allowed the force pressing me closer to him to win the battle, and felt his arms close in around me like a warm blanket on a freezing night, filling me with the powerful feelings only he could produce. I laid one arm over his and remained this way as the show began and then until it was over.

When the curtains closed, I sat up to applaud as the actors formed a line on the edge of the stage and bowed. Then a man with an unusually thick mustache and a matching pair of eyebrows walked over to the microphone that stood on one end of the stage, beside the stairs. “Weren’t they just fantastic? Let’s give them all another round of applause,” he said. The actors bowed again and the audience clapped even louder.

“That was amazing,” I said to Mason. It was the first time I’d seen The Christmas Carol performed and I couldn’t believe how the characters from the book came to life on that stage.

“We’d really like to thank you all for coming,” the announcer went on. “If you will, could we have you all move to the back of the room where refreshments are being served so we can move all of the chairs off of the dance floor?”

Mason took my hand and led me to the long tables that had been mysteriously set up against the back wall. They were overflowing with steaming pots full of soup and countless other dishes, deep bowls of red punch, blue glasses with white snowflakes swirling all over them, and tall stacks of plates and bowls. “They must have put this together during the show,” Mason said.

“I didn’t even hear anything,” I said. The delicious smells drifting towards us hit me just then and my mouth began to water as the band started playing again. “This night has been wonderful. Thank you for coming with me, Mason.”

“Thank *you* for coming as my date.”

“That stuff looks really good,” Benny said as he and Emmaline fell in step beside us.

“I’m going to head over to the ladies room for a minute. I’ll be right back,” Emmaline said before she walked away from us.

“I could use a bathroom break myself,” Mason said.

“I’ll go ahead and get in line. You’ll probably be back before I get to the table,” I said, looking at the rapidly growing line.

“I’ll be quick.”

Men in red suits moved quickly, carrying several stacked chairs at a time to the dining tables lining the side walls as Benny and I went to stand in line. “So what is it you love so much about Mason?” Benny asked, giving me an unsettling, crooked smile.

“Well…I love everything about him. It would be hard to name only one thing.”

“But what makes him so special you’d go to his place in the middle of the night?”

“Excuse me.” I glanced at the people in the line around us. Luckily, no one was paying us any attention.

“Emmaline said that’s why he can’t go to yer house anymore, cause yer parents found out.”

“I’m sorry, Benny, but I think that’s a little personal.” It certainly wasn’t something I wanted to discuss with him.

He began to stare at me in a way that caused me to shiver. “You do look a little like an angel.” He took a step closer to me.

“Thank you. Emmaline and I spent a lot of time picking out dresses and getting ready for this. It was almost as much fun as the ball has been so far.”

Without warning, Benny leaned forward to kiss me. “What are you doing?” I asked, jerking backwards. Fortunately, the people in front of us had moved forward enough that I didn’t bump into them. I was immediately hit by the stench of liquor on Benny’s breath.

“What? Mason and Emmaline aren’t here,” Benny said defensively.

“So?”

He reached out to stroke my cheek with the back of his hand. “Mason’s right about how soft your skin is, too...The way he talks about you, I almost expect a goddess every time I see you.”

I had to smile as the way Mason viewed me really began to sink in. It seemed that he had me on a pedestal the same way I had him.

Benny turned his hand over to lay his palm against my cheek. “Please don’t touch me,” I said as I pushed his hand away.

“Why not? I’m Mason’s boss. He won’t care.”

I seriously doubted that. “I care, and what about Emmaline?”

“What about her?”

“She’s your girlfriend.”

“No, she’s not.”

I stared at him with wide eyes. How was I going to tell Emmaline what I’d just heard? It would break her heart. “Well, she thinks she is, and it’s cruel the way you’re leading her on.”

He only leaned forward in another attempt to kiss me.

“Get away from me, Benny.” I turned around and kept my back to him for another minute or so before I saw someone walking toward me out of the corner of my eye.

Mason smiled as he came to stand right behind me, wrapping both arms around me. I crossed my arms to rest them over his. “That really did feel like forever,” I said, leaning back against him.

“See what I mean?”

“Yeah. Emmaline better hurry up. It’s almost our turn at the table.”

Just as I reached out for a plate, I heard Emmaline’s excited voice. “Looks like I made it just in time.” I didn’t turn around. I wished Benny hadn’t said anything to me and that I was still just as ignorant to what he was really like as she was.

We moved through the line and the four of us sat down together at an empty table. I avoided looking at or speaking to Benny, or even Emmaline, since she was with him. Mason began shoveling lasagna into his mouth as I started on my salad.

Most of the room’s lighting was focused on the center of the hall, which was obviously intended to be the dance floor. The only thing that kept us from sitting in darkness at the very edge of that light were the Christmas lights strung along the walls. Benny and Emmaline were sitting close together in the dim light, whispering and laughing, ignoring the food in front of them.

I knew I should say something to Emmaline, but not on the night of the dance. I couldn’t ruin it for her. I wasn’t sure about Mason, though. I wanted to tell him, but I didn’t want to cause problems with him at work.

“You okay?” Mason asked as he reached over to rub my back.

“I’m fine.” I tried to push it out of my mind.

Couples were already walking out onto the dance floor and moving gracefully to the music.

I looked over at Mason’s plate and realized he was already finished eating. “Sorry,” I said as I tried to fit as much salad as I could into my mouth.

“For what?” Mason asked.

Wishing I hadn’t filled my mouth so ridiculously full, I had to chew quickly and swallow it all at once to answer. “For being such a slow eater. I’m sorry you have to wait for me.”

“That’s alright. We’ve got all night, and I’m enjoying sitting here watching you.” The way he watched me as I ate made me extremely self-conscious.

“May I have this dance?” he asked when I was finished, holding a hand out to me.

“Of course.”

Mason led me into the swirling rainbow of dancing dresses and dark suits before he turned to face me. And then we were moving back and forth with them. It was different than it had been the day before. The music and the people created a certain atmosphere. The gloved hand I rested behind his shoulder and the other holding his hand felt different. “This is really nice,” I said softly, staring into his beautiful eyes.

“I’d say this has been one of the best nights of my life.”

“So why didn’t you tell me yesterday that you would be taking me to the dance? I could have looked forward to this all day.”

“Well…Emmaline said I should surprise you, and I figured she knows you well enough that I should listen to her. But you were so upset yesterday. I tried to give you a hint in the note I gave you.”

My feet slowed down and I looked down at the floor as I realized I hadn’t read it, or even thought about it the night before. “I forgot all about the note…because I *was* really upset.” *And I was so mean.* I looked back up at him as my feet began moving as they had before. “I’m sorry, Mason. I feel terrible.”

“It’s okay. You should really stop apologizing when you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I’m sorry, I mean…” I took a deep breath and tried to tell myself not to apologize again. “What did the note say?”

“See you tomorrow night. I figured it gave just enough away to make you feel better, since I can’t stand the thought of you being unhappy.”

“Oh.” I wished I would have remembered to read that note. The previous night might have gone so much better, even though Mason not taking me to the dance wasn’t what I was upset about.

“Where did you learn how to dance?” I asked, wondering if he’d ever taken someone to a dance before, since he seemed to be a natural.

“From watching my parents. They used to turn the radio on Sunday nights and dance together in our old living room. It’s easy enough to pick up. What about you?”

“They taught us in school last year, right around this time. Every day after lunch, we spent the rest of the day learning ballroom dancing for a week. My mother had already taught me, but that’s where I got to practice until I got it right.”

“With Hayden?”

That was exactly who I’d done all my practicing with, actually. It had been a relief to me that he never gave anyone else the chance to ask me to dance, not that they would have. “I’m sorry, Mason. I shouldn’t have said that,” I said, feeling guilty. I hadn’t really thought about how that sounded before I said it.

“I’m just glad you’re here with me.” He pulled me a little bit closer.

“Me too. There’s no one else in the world I would rather be with.” We danced silently, smiling at each other, for a few minutes.

“There’s one more thing I want to give you for your birthday.”

“More? You’ve already given me more than enough. Your bringing me here was all I wanted for my birthday and you’ve given me that.”

“Actually, Emmaline said there was one more thing you wanted. I have no doubt that it was what made me look so happy when you saw us…She said you wanted it more than anything else.” I could just see the happiness in the memory of whatever she’d told him in his eyes, the same look he had that night when I saw them.

Looking down, I tried to recall exactly what I told Emmaline the previous Friday night. *A kiss.* My feet became still and my eyes widened in embarrassment, knowing that he didn’t want to kiss me. How could she tell him that?

As I looked back up at him, he leaned forward and pressed his lips against mine. They were warm and soft. My mind began reeling as I melted against him. I couldn’t even tell if I was feeling my own heart pounding with pure ecstasy, or his; they were so close together. And then, too quickly, he pulled away.

Mason spoke quietly, his voice deeper than usual. “I’ve wanted to do that since I met you, Alexandra, but after what Emmaline said, I thought I would wait for your birthday.”

I just stared at him in surprise, my mouth slightly open, taking a few short breaths that seemed to reverberate through my racing thoughts.

“What’s wrong?” Mason asked, looking at me with concern.

I took a deep breath and tried to think of something to say, but the only thing my mind seemed capable of processing was that kiss—that sweet, wonderful, perfect kiss—my first kiss.

“I’m sorry, Alexandra. Did you not want…I, I should have asked you first, I just, I thought—”

I grabbed his neck, perhaps a little too forcibly, and leaned up to kiss him again. One hand worked its way through his dark hair and the other pressed against his back, pulling him closer. It became desperate the way I needed to taste him, and feel him. The people and dancing faded away as he held me and kissed me, his fingers spread out wide and digging delightfully into my skin. Electric heat pulsed through my veins…and then he was pulling away again…no—he was being torn away.

Someone screamed as a man threw Mason to the side. “Alexandra!” Hayden said, standing now where Mason had just been. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Me? What are you doing?”

“I came for you. You said you weren’t going to the dance with Mason. How could you lie to me?” He glared angrily at me, but behind it, I could see the deep devastation he was suffering at that moment.

“No, I didn’t. He surprised me.”

“You kissed him. You’ve lied to me about everything.”

“No. I haven’t lied to you about anything, not that it matters. Nothing gives you the right to come here like this.”

“This ends now. I’m taking you home.” Hayden grabbed my arm and tried to pull me toward the door, but Mason tackled him from behind, nearly knocking me over with them.

“Leave her alone,” Mason said as Hayden rolled over. Both of them stood up and glared at each other.

I walked over to Mason and felt his arm go around me. “Hayden, please leave us alone. I really just want to be with Mason.”

This time the anguish was apparent on his face. “No! He’s Sydney Algoth’s son,” Hayden shouted. Voices all around us told me that Mason’s secret was being passed around. Dancing had long since stopped.

**Chapter Ten**

“Hayden, no!” I said.

“He’s a mobster, Alexandra. You shouldn’t be anywhere near him.”

“No, I’m not,” Mason said in an angry voice.

The music stopped and I realized a few of the servers were headed our way.

“Sydney Algoth’s your dad?” Benny asked as he moved through the crowd toward us.

Mason looked around and sighed. “Yeah, but he’s not in the mob, and I haven’t seen him since his name got tied up with them. I have no part in the mob, either.”

Benny’s lips became tight as a throbbing silence surrounded us. “…Don’t you be coming around my shop anymore,” he finally said.

“Are you firing me?”

“Benny,” Emmaline said softly from beside him.

“And you don’t be coming around, neither,” he said as he jerked his hand away from her.

“What?!” Emmaline looked at Benny with the same heartrending expression Hayden still wore.

“I’m going to have to ask you all to leave,” one of the men in red said when he reached us.

“But he’s the one causing the trouble,” Mason said, pointing at Hayden.

“He’ll have to leave too, but we don’t allow your sort in this hall.” More men came to stand behind him.

Mason’s jaw clenched. “Fine. You should stay, though, Alexandra. This should be your special night.”

“No. You *all* need to leave.”

“This isn’t her fault.”

“It’s alright, Mason. I would rather stay with you,” I said, looking up at him. “Just let me get my purse.”

“Someone will get it for you. You really need to leave this hall,” the man in red said to me. I felt humiliated. I’d never been thrown out of any place before.

“I’ll get it for you, Alexandra. Then I’m taking you home,” Hayden said before he headed to the tables.

“No, you’re not.” Mason tried to go after him, but a few men moved to stand in front of him.

“Please leave, sir, or we’ll have to call the police.”

Mason took my hand and led me to the doors.

“Wait—Benny, wait for me,” Emmaline said as she and Benny walked behind us.

He ignored her until we were outside. “I said stay away from me. You three are going to need to find someone else to take you home,” he said.

“But Benny, you said you loved me. You can’t just leave me here,” Emmaline said in a shaky voice.

“I said stay away from me.”

Emmaline stopped on the sidewalk and watched him as bitter tears streamed down over her cheeks. “Emmaline, Benny’s not a good guy,” I said, going to put my arm around her. “When you were in the bathroom—” I glanced at Mason and decided it didn’t matter if I told him about Benny or not, since he didn’t work for him anymore. “—he tried to kiss me.”

“Are you serious?” Mason asked in disbelief.

“Yes. I could smell liquor on his breath, and then when I mentioned you and Mason he had the nerve to deny that you were his girlfriend. You’re really better off without him.”

“No…you’re lying. This is all your fault.” Emmaline pulled away from me and began sobbing.

Mason started walking away. “Where are you going?” I asked.

“He tried to kiss you.”

“Don’t leave.” Things were already bad enough.

Mason’s expression hardened when he looked behind me. A second later I felt someone take my arm and pull me toward the parking lot. “Come on, Alexandra,” Hayden said as I looked over to see who it was. My feet moved automatically as I was forced to follow him.

“I don’t want to go with you, Hayden. You’ve just destroyed Mason’s good name and cost him his job.” I pulled my arm away as hard as I could, but he kept hold as he turned to face me.

“Do you realize how much trouble you’re already in? Don’t make this worse for yourself.”

“I’m not in trouble.”

“What do you think your father’s going to say?”

Hayden finally let go when a fist collided with his face. He fell down against the long sidewalk and Mason stood over him. “I’ve tried to be patient, but you’re pushing me too far. Now LEAVE—ALEXANDRA—ALONE!” Mason shouted.

Seeing my purse lying on the ground at my feet, where Hayden had dropped it, I bent down to pick it up.

Hayden tried to kick Mason’s legs, but Mason moved out of the way. “You’re the one who’s going to leave her alone. She’s forbidden to see you. What part of that don’t you understand?” Hayden said as he stood up.

“No one is going to keep me away from Alexandra, especially not you.” Mason took my hand and started walking away.

“No!” Hayden took my other hand and pulled me toward him. “You’re not leaving with him. I’m taking you home right now.”

Mason pushed Hayden back and stood in between us. “Back off. If Alexandra wanted to go with you I wouldn’t stand in her way, but she doesn’t. She’s going with me.”

“Hayden,” Emmaline came over to him and clutched his arm, still in desperate tears. His expression softened only slightly when he looked at her. “Hayden, will you please just take me home?”

“Of course I will, just as soon as Alexandra agrees to come.”

“Do you want me to go with you, Emmaline?” I asked, unwilling to let her go home and suffer alone. I walked around Mason to put an arm around her, but she stepped to the side and gave me a truly hateful look.

“Benny’s gone because of your boyfriend, and you knew…You always knew and you didn’t even bother to tell me.” She waved toward the dance hall. “This is your fault. You ruined everything. Don’t you dare come back to my house again tonight.”

I felt my eyes tearing up. “What are you saying?”

“Talk about it in the car.” Hayden grabbed my wrist and began dragging me again.

“Let me go.” I tried to pry his fingers off of my arm, but he was too strong.

Again Mason’s fist came like a flash of lighting, striking Hayden in the nose, from which blood immediately began streaming. Hayden let out a terrible cry of pain as he fell to his knees. “Back off,” Mason said. “She doesn’t want you. Why can’t you understand that?… She’s with me, okay? And that’s not about to change.” He took my hand and began leading me away, yet again.

“Alexandra,” Hayden cried out. I looked back at the hand he held over his bleeding face, and the other one he reached out for me with. I felt sick, awful, heartless, even though my heart ached so terribly at that sight.

The tears I held over Emmaline began to fall, but I couldn’t go to him, not after what he’d just done to Mason. Mason would have to start all over again. Word that Sydney Algoth’s son was staying in Chicago would spread like wildfire, causing irreparable damage.

“I’m so sorry, Mason. This is all my fault,” I said.

“How could this possibly be your fault?”

“Because I told my parents your secret. My father must have told Hayden’s father. I should have known he would. I’m so, *so* sorry.”

“Have you told anyone where I’m staying?” he asked unemotionally.

“No.”

Mason turned down a dark alleyway, and then another, never saying a word. He was avoiding main roads, I realized. It was a long walk, but I did eventually see the backside of the gray building he lived on the top floor of. He led me up the stairs and into the same room he’d taken me to the last time I was there.

Moonlight poured in through the open window, revealing the tall candles on the candlestick holder he held. Mason let go of me to take a dark blanket from an open box and hang it over the window, blocking all outside light and sending us into complete darkness. “Mason?” I said nervously. With a scratching sound, a match lit up the room, and then the candles were all lit. He put a giant box on the floor beside the couch and set the candles on top of it as he sat on the couch. He patted the seat beside him, so I sat down.

“I wish that I could make things better for you. You don’t deserve to be thrown out of a dancehall or to have your reputation stained by the rumor that you’re dating a member of the mob…” He took my hand as he drew in a deep breath. “You deserve so much better…Maybe…we should stop seeing each other.”

“No!” I said desperately as I squeezed his hand and began crying again. “I don’t want to lose you. Nothing could be worse than that. I need you, and you said your heart is mine. I won’t give it back, and I won’t take mine back, either…Please, Mason.”

The searing pain of his words made me realize just how much I couldn’t live without him. How much I truly loved him. It wasn’t the kind of thing I would ever recover from. My first love. My first kiss. Both more powerful than I could have ever imagined.

In that terrible moment, I realized that I was truly in love with Mason, completely, unceasingly in love.

“Are you sure? Things like what happened tonight may happen again, and this relationship will be complicated for an unknown length of time.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care. All I care about is you; please don’t do this, Mason,” I said desperately.

He smiled and moved closer to me, the candlelight sending strange shadows across his stunning face. “I just wanted to give you the chance to walk away if that was what you wanted. But I probably couldn’t have accepted it in the end. I’m sure I would have been at your school Monday, begging you to come back to me.”

I wrapped both arms around his neck and cried softly into his shoulder. “I will never walk away from you, Mason.” Fear prevented me from telling him just how much I loved him.

Mason held me and buried his face in my hair, taking a few slow breaths.

“I wish I hadn’t said anything to my parents,” I said as I leaned back to look at his face, golden in the delicate glow.

He wiped my tears away. “I wish my dad would hurry up and get his name cleared, but there’s nothing either of us can do about it. This isn’t your fault. You were trying to protect me in keeping us together, which means a lot to me. So stop blaming yourself. Hayden’s the one that chose to announce my secret to all those people, not you.”

He pulled my hands to his lips and kissed them, then put his hand behind my neck, and pulled my lips to meet his. I felt the same intense heat wash over me as I reached out for him, pulling him even closer and pressing forward. I can’t say how long that kiss lasted, but it was perfect, replacing every concern and hurt I suffered with the taste of him, the man I loved. I felt a little breathless when Mason leaned back.

We shared a quiet smile and I wondered if the kiss was as wonderful for him as it was for me. “Thank you, Mason. That was the best gift anyone has ever given me.”

He took one arm away from my back to trace my lips with his thumb, so I kissed it. “Holding that back has been tougher than I would have thought, so I’m glad you liked it.”

“I thought you didn’t want to kiss me.”

“Are you crazy? I think any man in his right mind would give anything to have been the one to kiss you tonight.”

“I doubt that. No one’s even tried to until today.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Mason smiled before he kissed me again, something I knew I would never tire of. “Did Benny really try to kiss you, or were you just trying to make Emmaline feel better?”

I just nodded, remembering Emmaline’s harsh words. “I lost my best friend tonight,” I said, looking down at the floor.

“She was just in shock. She’ll be over it tomorrow and then she’ll need you to help her get over Benny…It’s a good thing he fired me. I couldn’t work for a guy that tried to kiss you behind my back like that.”

I hoped he was right about Emmaline.

“Maybe you should go ahead and open the box I gave you,” Mason said, looking at the purse beside my feet.

Reaching down, I removed the little box. Then I knelt on the floor so I could hold it up to the candles as I opened it. It felt like my heart stopped when I saw what was inside. A silver ring with a glittering emerald cut diamond stared up at me. I felt my eyes widen as I turned to Mason. Was it an engagement ring? Could I really be so lucky? “Mason?” I whispered.

“Read the inside of the box,” he said, offering a slight smile. I could tell he was nervous.

I moved the box around so that the light would shine right on the inside of the top. Something was inscribed on it. I had to look closer to read the tiny writing.

*I promise you, Alexandra, to stand by your side, physically or not, to remain yours alone, to do whatever it takes to make this work…whatever it takes…*

*Love Mason*

I sat beside Mason on the couch, but continued to stare at the ring. It became dark in the shadow cast by the sides of the box. “Mason?” I whispered again, still not understanding.

“You don’t like it?” Mason asked. I looked over at him and saw that he still looked nervous, perhaps even more so.

“I love it, but…” *How do you ask exactly what a ring’s purpose is?*

“It’s a promise ring. Since seeing each other is becoming so difficult, I wanted you to have this to wear. So when I’m not there, at least you’ll be wearing my ring and my promise that things will work out, that nothing will come between us being together, no matter how bad things get.”

I felt a mixture of emotion, joy in having that promise in the ring I would always wear, and the slight disappointment that he wasn’t proposing forever to me, even if this was the next best thing. As I smiled, he reached for the box and took the ring out. Very carefully, he removed the glove from my left hand and slid the ring onto my ring finger. It fit perfectly. “Thank you, Mason. I wish I had something to give you, but I promise to do the same.”

The anxiety in his face finally left. “Your promise is enough. I…” I could almost hear the perfect closing of that sentence. *I love you, Alexandra.*

“You what?”

“I…I guess I’ll have to find a new job tomorrow.”

“Oh.” My spirits fell slightly. I looked down at the ring on my finger and thought of how much it must have cost, the box too, but the inscription inside meant that the box could never be returned. I forced myself to take my beloved ring off as I fought to hold back new tears. Already I considered it my most precious possession. “Maybe it would help—if you took this back.”

“No, Alexandra, I need to know you’re wearing that more than I need the money, and I’ve got plenty saved up, anyway. I’ll be fine until I find another job.”

I let out an enormous sigh of relief inside as I put it back on and held it up in the pale light to admire. Mason pressed his hand against mine and let his fingers slide in between my own. “And it might finally give Hayden the message that you’re mine,” he said.

“Maybe,” I laughed. “But why did you want me to wait until I was home to open the box?” It would have driven me crazy if I had, not knowing what to think of it. I probably wouldn’t have even noticed the inscription in the box.

“For one thing, I didn’t want to do this in front of Emmaline and Benny…” He turned to stare into the tiny flames of the candles.

“What’s the second thing?”

“I don’t know…I guess…I thought you might think it was too much, or you might not want it. I guess I was scared of your reaction, but I had to give it to you. This is a tough situation, one where it would be so easy to let it pull us apart. This is my way of preventing that. I want to make sure you have no question in your mind about us or how things will work out.”

“Are you questioning it?”

“No. But time could change things, especially now.”

“Nothing will ever change things unless it draws us closer, I promise you that,” I said before I leaned up to kiss him.

Mason scooted over so he could sit right against my side as he put his other arm around me. “Things will get better,” he said as I rested my head against his shoulder.

“I know.” But it hardly seemed to matter as I sat there in that dark room, wearing his ring and feeling his strong arms around me. *How could things possibly get any better?*

**Chapter Eleven**

A couple of hours later, Mason and I walked through the dark streets toward my house. One of his hands held mine and the other was jammed into his pocket. Every time I looked over at him, I found him watching me, the smile that was already there becoming wider when our eyes met. Even as we passed under the shadows, his eyes seemed to reflect the silvery moonlight. My gloves were tucked away inside my purse, so I was able to keep running my thumb against my ring, reminding myself that it was there. It was far too late for me to just be getting home, but since my parents thought I was at Emmaline’s for the night, I wasn’t worried about it.

It was at the corner of Emmaline’s street and mine that I noticed the black and white car parked in front of my house, and Hayden’s father’s car parked in front of it, a little further up the street. “You have to leave now, Mason,” I said, trying to hide the panic I felt.

“What?”

“The police are at my house with Hayden.” Mason looked down the street at my house as I stared past him and shook my head. “I can’t believe he would do this, going to my father with the police.” I looked back at Mason, knowing that he was the one who was really in trouble. “You have to leave.”

“I can’t leave you to deal with this alone.”

“The police won’t be there for me. I can’t let you go take you to jail.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong. Why would I go to jail?”

“They’re there for some reason. Maybe Hayden reported you as a mobster or said you attacked him or made something up. Either way, I can’t let you walk into my house and take that risk. I need you to be free.”

“No. I won’t—”

I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him, more passionately than before. I felt his fingers press against my back as he pulled me closer, nearly lifting me off the ground. He didn’t loosen his grasp when I pulled my mouth away from his. “You have to go, Mason,” I said. Nothing was more important to me than making sure he was safe.

“No. I should have been there Tuesday night to protect you. I’m not leaving you this time.” His words were so sweet. I couldn’t say how much it meant to me to know he was willing to risk going to jail to try and protect me.

“I’ll come see you tomorrow if I’m not locked up in my room.”

“Alexandra, no.”

“Please, Mason, please go.” Who knew how long it would be until someone in my house walked outside and saw us there together.

He stared at me for a long time, and then finally let go of me as he leaned down to kiss me, slowly and gently. Even though our lips were the only thing that met, I felt myself quiver with pleasure. His fingertips brushed over my sides, beginning at the top and moving down very carefully. Then he turned away and walked quickly into the shadows of the trees.

Turning back toward my house, I took my gloves out of my purse and pulled them on. Aside from Mason being jailed, the only thing that could’ve made the night worse was having my ring stripped away from me.

Taking a deep breath and doing my best to slow my racing heart, I took the first step that would take me home to whatever terrible fate awaited me, wondering just how much Hayden had told them. Even after what he said at the dance, it never even occurred to me that he might go to my father like this, especially not with the police.

The night felt so much colder without Mason beside me.

I stopped on my front porch to take a deep breath…in, out…then I opened the front door and went to the living room. My mother sat beside my father and Katy on one couch, crying quietly into her handkerchief, while Hayden and a thick, graying police officer sat on the other. Hayden held my cold stare as my eyes locked on him. He had one black eye, but his nose looked fine.

“Alexandra, I presume,” the policeman said as he stood up to shake my hand.

“Yes sir,” I said almost inaudibly.

“I’m Officer Cox. Is Mr. Mason Algoth here with you?”

“What do you want with Mason?” it took all my courage to ask.

“He assaulted this young man here, who would like to press charges. So I’m afraid I have to place Mr. Algoth under arrest.”

Even though I knew it was coming, it felt like someone had poured boiling water into my chest, which slowly spread to my arms and face as I glared at Hayden.

“He’s not here, and Mason didn’t attack Hayden. He was only defending me against him.”

“What do you mean?” my mother asked.

“Hayden was trying to force me to go with him. He grabbed my arm and tried to drag me to his car.”

“So I could take you home,” Hayden said. “Mason could be dangerous. I was trying to protect you.”

“No—you—weren’t!” My own fierce voice surprised me. “You’re just jealous because I chose to love him instead of you.”

“Alexandra!” my father roared.

Hayden looked like someone had just struck him as he closed his eyes and leaned over slightly.

“It still sounds to me like an assault. He did issue the first hit,” Officer Cox said.

“The only hit, actually,” Hayden said, recovering from my words had done to him.

“Only because you missed when you tried to kick him.”

“What’s gotten into you, Alexandra, speaking this way?” my mother asked.

“This isn’t right, Mother. Mason is a good man, and I love him, and—”

“That’s enough,” my father said, rising to his feet. “You will tell Officer Cox where he can find Mason, and then go to your room. And if I ever hear of you seeing that boy again, it’ll be straight off to your grandparent’s house in Missouri with you.”

“What?” my mother and Hayden asked at the same time. I could only stare, openmouthed. “Don’t send our little girl away, Ted,” my mother pleaded.

“She’s not a little girl anymore, Lillian. She’s a defiant young woman, seeing a mobster behind our backs.”

“He’s not in the mob!” I said.

“You will hold your tongue.”

“Just try and calm down,” Officer Cox said to me. “Now, tell me where I can find Mr. Algoth.”

“But he hasn’t done anything wrong. If he hadn’t been there, Hayden would have dragged me all the way to his car and forced me into it.”

“You mean to say Mr. West here would have kidnapped you if Mr. Algoth hadn’t been there.”

“If that’s what you want to call it.”

“How can you say that?” Hayden asked me.

“Look at what you’ve done. Mason lost his job and now everyone thinks he’s part of the mob, so now everyone thinks I’m seeing one of them. And you’re at my house with a police officer. Emmaline’s not speaking to me and I’ll probably be shipped off to Missouri. You ruined my life.” I felt hot tears stinging my eyes.

“I…I…”

“Let’s stay on track here,” Officer Cox said. “Mr. West wants to press charges against Mr. Algoth. I’ll go down to the dancehall and talk to anyone who might’ve seen something and I’ll take down their account of what happened. But right now, I’d really like to speak with Mr. Algoth, so if you could just tell me where I might find him…”

It didn’t matter what he said. I knew Mason would be treated unfairly because of who his father was. Even the accounts given by any witnesses would be given unfairly. “I don’t know where he is.”

“You tell Officer Cox where Mason lives right now,” my father said, taking a step closer to me.

I was extremely grateful that I had always been careful not to mention going to Mason’s house. It made the split second decision I had to make a lot easier. “I don’t know where he lives.”

“Don’t you dare lie to me, young lady. You will tell us where he lives right now.”

“I visit him at work or he comes to see me after school. I’ve never been to his house.”

“You—”

“That’s alright now, Mr. Roomer,” the police officer said. “Just as long as your daughter here understands that withholding information from the law is a punishable crime.” He looked at me questioningly.

I felt my body become tense as I nodded. Nothing he said could get me to tell him anything. I gave one of Mason’s secrets away already and I was *not* going to make that mistake again.

“I think Mr. Algoth’s workplace might be a good place to go looking for him. I’ll drop by tomorrow.”

“He doesn’t work there anymore, remember?” Hayden said.

“Yes, but his boss will probably know where he lives. Where is it that he worked?” Officer Cox asked me.

“Swatches Auto Repair.” I knew Benny wouldn’t have any idea where Mason lived.

“Now you go to your room, and your mother will bring you breakfast in the morning,” my father said to me.

“Fine.” I didn’t care. Being all alone in my room was all I really wanted right then, anyway.

“May I have a word with her before I go?” I heard Hayden ask my father as I climbed the stairs.

“Yes, of course, Hayden.”

I didn’t wait for him. Instead, I hurried to my room and shut the door behind me before I pulled off my gloves and traced the perfectly cut, rectangular diamond on my ring with my finger.

Just as I sat down on the floor against the door, a knock came from right behind me. “Alexandra?” Hayden called out. I ignored him. What he did to Mason, and to me, was unforgivable. “Alexandra, I know you’re angry, but would you please open the door?”

“Go away, Hayden.”

“Look, I’m…I’m sorry.”

His apology surprised me enough that I stood up and opened the door a crack. “I’m not the one you should be apologizing to. What you did to me may be terrible, but what you did to Mason is much worse. If word that he’s in the mob spreads all over the city, no one’s going to hire him and he’ll, he’ll…” *He’ll have to leave town and start all over again.*

My eyes began to water. I couldn’t stand the thought of him leaving, but he couldn’t just stay in Chicago until he was living on the streets and starving to death. “But that’s what you wanted, isn’t it?” I glared at Hayden, hating him for what he’d done.

“That’s not what I wanted. I just saw you kissing Mason and lost all reason. Love makes you do crazy things…It could never work out between you two, anyway. It’s better that it ends now. Say what you want, but his father’s in the mob. I know it and you do too, deep down.”

“So what if he is? What’s that got to do with Mason? I love him, and if you love me the way you say you do, then you should understand why I need to be with him and how serious what you’ve done is. Besides that, when my father sends me to Missouri—”

“I won’t let that happen. And he said he would send you only if he ever caught you with Mason again. That’s *not* going to happen now that the police will be looking for him. You won’t see him again, will you?”

I refused to agree or disagree. He just didn’t deserve my response.

Hayden pushed his way through the door and put one hand on my back as he pulled me close to him. “If you were sent to Missouri, I would still come see you. I would stay all summer so we could have the same fun we did during summers of old. Mason couldn’t do that, because you have no history with him and no future either. What do I have to do to open your eyes?”

He might have been my lifelong best friend, a vital part of my past and of myself even, but Mason had my heart…he was my heart. And Hayden was doing his best to destroy that. I reached up and around behind me to grab his wrist and pull it away from me as I stepped back. “I love Mason, and I will never forgive you for what you did to him. I never want to see you again.” Part of me wanted to take back the words as soon as I said them, but the other part, the prevailing part at that moment, meant it wholeheartedly.

“Alexandra…” Hayden began to cry. He looked down at my hand as I let him go and stared in shock. “Is, is that a ring…from Mason. You’re wearing his ring?”

“Be quiet, for goodness sake. Someone will hear you,” I said as I slid the diamond around so that it was underneath my finger. “And don’t say a word to anyone.” With that, I pushed him out of my room and slammed the door.

I yanked Mason’s coat off of its hanger in my closet and wrapped it around me before I went to lie down on my bed. I looked at the simple band on my finger. I would have to wear it this way at home, always being careful to conceal the diamond. To my parents it would appear to be just another piece of my jewelry.

The words I’d said downstairs and then to Hayden only moments before played through my mind, making me feel even worse. I hated who I was down there. I hated lying. I hated how rude I was to everyone and what I’d said to Hayden. Even though I was so angry with him, I couldn’t live with myself if I never saw him again.

In a lot of ways, I needed him the same way I needed Mason. Before Mason, Hayden would have been the one I trusted with my deepest secrets. He would have been the one I would have turned to for comfort when I was feeling miserable about something the way I was right then. Emmaline was my best friend too, but the years of trust built between Hayden and myself made our bond stronger than the one I had with her. I hated to think I may have shattered that trust in one night.

Sitting up, I considered going after him, but I just couldn’t. Imagining how Mason must’ve been feeling right then was just as easy as imagining the hurt I had just caused Hayden, but Mason didn’t do anything to deserve it. None of what happened that night was his fault. And my loyalty was to him now.

I heard an engine start outside and wondered if it was Hayden or Officer Cox. Instead of getting up to look out of my window and see, I reached in my pocket and pulled out the little piece of paper I knew would be there.

*Never forget tonight, my angel*. I knew I never would. It had become the best and worst night of my life, leaving me wanting to forget it as much as remember it.

#

Saturday was spent locked in my room.

My mother brought me breakfast and informed me that a necklace was hanging on my doorknob, as she held out the necklace Hayden had given me for my birthday. After going to the bathroom and then being locked back up in my room, I sat on my bed with the necklace in my hand. I decided to put it on. Holding the diamond in my right hand and holding the ring on my left hand up, I wondered why it all had to be so difficult between them. Why couldn’t Hayden just accept my being with Mason and go on being my best friend? My only friend, since Emmaline still wasn’t talking to me.

When my father brought up dinner, he told me that I would remain locked in my room through the week-end and every day after school the following week, which was made worse by the fact that school would only be held Monday, since Christmas break began Tuesday. So I would be spending a lot of time in that room. I couldn’t see how Mason and I would get around this. If I only got to leave the house for school, how would I ever see him again? And could I really risk being sent away…

At midnight I lay awake in the dark, thinking of Mason, when I saw my door open slowly by the light coming in through my window. I sat up and watched Katy creep into my room with something held against her chest before she shut the door just as carefully behind her. “Hey, Alexandra,” she whispered as she sat down on my bed and turned on my lamp.

“Hello, Katy.”

She held out a pink pillowcase to me. “I brought you some food since you can’t get it whenever you want anymore.”

“Thank you. I was starving a few hours after lunch today.” I reached out to hug her.

“So how are you doing?” Her green eyes showed real concern, which didn’t happen very often.

“Awful.”

“I’ll bet, but when your time spent in here is over, it’ll seem like it flew by. And tomorrow night won’t be so bad in here.”

“Why not?” The next night was dinner at Hayden’s, but I was *not* going to that.

“Because Mason’s coming over to see you.”

“What?” I sat up straighter as joy swept over me.

“I saw him today and he told me to tell you that.”

“Really? What else did he say?”

She kicked off one of her house shoes and pulled out a little note which she handed to me. “He must have seen me walking to the park or something because he walked up to me as soon as I got there. He asked if you were okay and what happened last night, so I told him you were locked in your room and Hayden called the police because he assaulted him. I told him to keep his head down and try not to get caught.”

“You didn’t tell him what I said, did you?” I asked in horror, remembering that I’d told everyone that I loved him twice the night before.

“I told him you said you didn’t know where he was or where he lived, even when the police officer threatened you. He also asked about Hayden and I told him how he chased you upstairs and left crying like a baby.”

That hurt.

“He was happy about that, but I could tell he was really worried about the police threatening you. Anyway, I guess you’re pretty lucky. I don’t think you could shake him if you wanted to.”

I smiled and rolled my ring around to show Katy the stone. “He gave me this promise ring.”

She reached out and held my hand up to the light. “That’s some diamond. I really hate all that mushy couple stuff, but even I’d swoon if a boy gave me that thing.”

“Don’t tell mother and father, okay?”

She raised an eyebrow at me. “Do you really think I would?”

“No…Sorry.”

“So you’re going to keep seeing Mason, right, even though the police are looking for him and you might get sent to Missouri?”

“Of course I am. Are the police really looking for him, though? Are you certain?”

“Mm-hm. Father called the station after dinner and they confirmed that he’s being charged with assault.”

I let out a sigh. “Poor Mason.”

“I’ll try to check on you tomorrow. Let me know if you need anything.” Katy patted my knee before she stood up.

“Wait, do you think you’ll see Mason again tomorrow?”

“Maybe. It really depends on him.”

“Can I give you a letter to give him, just in case?”

“Sure.”

I reached in the drawer beside my bed and pulled out a pencil and paper and began writing.

*Dear Mason,*

*Katy just gave me your letter, but I haven’t read it yet. I just wanted to let you know I can’t wait to see you tomorrow night and that I miss you terribly. I showed my ring to Katy and I could tell she loved it.*

*I should also warn you that our front door and the door to my room will be locked. I don’t have any rope for you to climb, so I don’t know how you’ll get in. But I’ll look forward to seeing you then.*

*How could I ever forget last night? It doesn’t matter how it ended. It was wonderful, because you were with me, and you truly gave me the best birthday gift imaginable. What could I possibly give you that will compare when your birthday comes around?*

*Until Tomorrow Night,*

*Your Angel*

I folded it up and handed it to Katy. “You won’t read it, will you?” I asked her.

“After reading the first letter he gave you, I don’t think I’ll be reading any more of your letters.”

“Thank you, Katy.”

She nodded as she slipped the letter into her shoe and then left my room.

It made me sick to think the police were out looking for Mason, just because he stopped Hayden from forcing me to go home with him.

It suddenly occurred to me that Mason might have been watching my house earlier that day and seen Katy leaving it. If he did, he would have followed her to the park and spoken to her there. I stood up in my bed and slid my window open, letting the frosty night air fill my room. I leaned my head out and searched the darkness, hoping to see some sign of him, but he wasn’t there. So I closed my window and sat back down in my bed.

I knew that I would at least feel closer to him in reading his letter. So I held it under the lamp as I opened it.

*Dearest Alexandra,*

*I wish now that I had kept my temper with Hayden. Maybe things would have gone differently. I’m so sorry that you were threatened last night because of me. It’s almost enough to make me tear myself away from you, so that you can be safe, almost. But there’s nothing that could happen, nothing in this world, that would be worth that. Thank you for what you did for me. I don’t want to say too much in case someone else sees this, but hopefully you and Katy have talked.*

*That being said, I’ll just remind you that things will get better. No matter what happens, or how long it takes, things will get better. I know I keep saying that, but I don’t want you to forget it. And I don’t want you to change your mind or let it be troubled with any doubts.*

*Last night was torture when I got home, but knowing that you’re wearing my ring and letting the better part of last night play through my head got me through it. You got me through it, Alexandra. I can’t stop thinking about what it was like to kiss you, not that I’ve tried to. It’s something I’ve thought about since the day we met in the rain. You even taste like an angel, heavenly. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before and I never will again. Even in the storm that surrounds me constantly with my dad, it’s impossible to be upset, because I know you share the same commitment to me that I have to you.*

*Thank you, Alexandra, for everything.*

*Love,*

*Mason*

I let the paper rest against my heart as I lay back in my bed. “I should have said more,” I said to myself. “Or less.” If someone saw my letter, they would know he was coming over the following night. But my worry quickly faded away. Katy knew what she was doing. As I leaned up to hide the letter with the others, I thought of how amazing she was, and how grateful I was for my sister.

**Chapter Twelve**

My mother brought me a couple of biscuits smothered in gravy just before she and the rest of my family left for church the next morning, leaving me behind without a word. I wondered if my parents had decided I was a lost cause.

When they returned home, I watched Katy hand my mother her Sunday hat before she ran off to go find something better to do than hang around the house. The hat’s blue ribbon seemed to wave to her in the wind.

Half an hour later, when my mother brought me up a bowl of tomato soup and let me use the restroom, I could tell she’d been crying. She set the bowl beside my bed while I was gone, and then met me just inside the door with a warm hug when I walked back into the room. “I hate keeping you locked up in here, Alexandra. It’s just killing me,” she said in a shaky voice.

I wanted to tell her that it was okay, but it really wasn’t.

She put her hands on my shoulders as she moved away. “But it’s for your own good. We have to keep you away from Mason.”

I forced myself not to say anything.

“Hopefully, this will only go on until Christmas. We’ve postponed putting the tree up since your father’s been so busy at work. He said we’ll do it tomorrow night, though, so I’m hoping he’ll let you come down for that. I just wanted to let you know.”

I nodded, but continued to stay silent until she left, and then all I felt like doing was staring vacantly out of my window at the gray December sky. A few times I walked around my room or pulled out a book to read, but I always returned to the window.

An hour before it was time to go to Hayden’s, it started to rain. Katy came running toward the house not long after. I sat and wondered if Mason would still come in spite of the heavy downpour.

A few minutes later, Katy brought me a sandwich in her wet clothes. “Good luck,” she whispered as she handed it to me and then turned to walk away to her room, leaving me to wonder if she’d given Mason my letter.

I ate the sandwich quickly, and then went back to staring at the dreary world outside.

Perhaps it was the seclusion, or maybe it was the gloomy sky I’d spent hours watching, but for whatever reason, I began to ask myself if Mason was really worth risking everything for. The pain it was causing and would continue to cause my parents. My reputation. Being forced to leave Chicago. Even though everyone was mad at me there, it was home, and I hoped things would eventually smooth over. But I knew almost as soon as the question came to me that he was worth it. He had proven himself so completely to me; I decided that he was worth anything I was forced to endure.

Looking down at my hand, I slid the ring around so I could see it. I smiled as I thought of how lucky I was to have it, like part of him was there with me…his promise that he was mine.

I turned to my nightstand and opened the little drawer to take out the gold box he’d given me. Then I opened it to reread the message inside several times. It almost felt like he was there with me, the ring and box a constant reminder that everything would work out in the end. As long as I still had him, I knew it would be alright.

It seemed unfair that I had so much that he had given me right there in that room, and I was yet to give him anything. I felt powerless to do anything about it, though, since I was confined at the moment. Then, I had an idea…

The front door opened below, so I went to my window to see my parents hurry to their car. The blue rimmed clock on my wall told me it was five o’ clock, fifteen minutes earlier than we usually left. I wondered if Katy was staying behind until I saw her running after them with her shoes in one hand and her coat in the other. Her Sunday hat was on her head again, the blue ribbon waving good bye to me this time.

My mother looked up and saw me in my widow as the car pulled away, so we waved to each other sadly.

I continued to stare out the window, my attention now focused on the empty streets. “Please let him come. Please let him come,” I kept muttering to myself, knowing I should really be wishing he would stay home, with the freezing rain coming down so hard an umbrella would be next to useless.

For ten minutes this went on before I saw someone running down the sidewalk toward me from way down the street. It was Mason! He ran across Emmaline’s street without even stopping to look before he crossed it. Water fell from his black hair and soaking wet clothes. Rope was wrapped loosely around one of his shoulders.

I opened my window as he ran across my front yard. He smiled up at me as the heavy drops of water pounded against his breathtaking face. “Catch this and tie it to something,” he cupped a hand halfway around his mouth to shout before he pulled the rope off of his shoulder and tossed one end up to me. I caught it on the second throw and tied it four times around one of my bed rails.

“Oh,” I said as I remembered I was wearing Hayden’s necklace. As quickly as I could, I took it off and put it in my jewelry box.

Then I leaned out of my window, feeling cold spray hit my face and shoulder, and waved for Mason to come up.

The head of my bed lifted a foot off the floor before it wedged itself against the wall when he started to climb, causing me to fall off of it. I screamed as I fell through the air and then hit the ground on my side. “Ouch,” I said as I got up and held a hand over my throbbing hip. I knew I should have seen it coming, but I don’t always think clearly when Mason’s around.

I pulled the blanket off of my bed and stood at its side to look out of the window. Mason was already halfway up. His hands moved steadily over the rope, higher and higher, as he drew closer to me. I moved out of the way as he climbed through my window and then threw my blanket around his shoulders as he pulled the rope in.

When it was all in, he shut the window and turned to smile at me. Taking my face in his hands and lifting his shoulders slightly, he leaned forward to kiss me, being careful to keep the rest of his body away from mine. Freezing water dripped from his hair onto my forehead and down over my eyes, but something about his kiss kept me warm.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I said as he leaned away and pulled my blanket around him. “I was afraid you wouldn’t come because of the rain.”

“It wasn’t that bad. And I figured I was safer climbing up here under the cover of rain, anyway. I take it you talked to Katy.”

“Yes. Did you see her today?”

He shook his head and reached an icy hand out, as a shiver passed over him, to wipe the water off of my face. “Sorry about that.”

“I don’t mind, but you’re so cold.” I went to my closet and pulled out another blanket before I helped Mason to my bed and wrapped it around him. Water was already seeping through the first one.

“Alexandra, you’ll have nothing to sleep with tonight,” he said as he shook the second blanket off.

“I don’t care about that, and my mother will get me another one. I’ll tell her I opened the window for some fresh air and the rain got in.” Standing right in front of him, I leaned over and reached around him to pick up the blanket and wrap it around him again.

He reached out to let his hand run gently over my cheek, and then my neck, and then around the collar of his coat, which I still wore. I felt embarrassed, afraid he would think I was too obsessed with him. “You’re wearing my coat,” he said with a smile.

“It’s—comforting. You can wear it home, though. It’s dry.” I really hated to think of losing it.

“That’s okay. It won’t take that long to get home at a run and I’ve got plenty of dry coats there. I’m glad you’re wearing it.”

I smiled and sat down beside him, remembering that there was something I wanted to give him. “I was thinking today about how fortunate I am to be surrounded by so many of the things you’ve given me. I have your notes and this ring…” I held it up to look at it for only a second. “…and I wanted to give you something.”

Standing back up, I went to my closet to move some things around on the top shelf. Behind a box full of string, yarn, and needles, I saw my lion lying on his side. His mane was worn and shabby, but his black eyes still shone brightly as they peered at me. “I wanted to give you this,” I said as I pulled it down and went back to sit beside Mason once again. A week ago I would have felt silly handing him to Mason, but things were different now. “He’s kind of old and worn out, but he knows me better than anyone else—inside and out. He’s no promise ring, but he is part of me…You could take him with you.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” I handed my lion over to him, feeling a certain pain in my heart at the thought of giving him away, even though I hadn’t played with him in years. But I trusted Mason with him.

“He's perfect, something I can hold at night while I'm thinking about you. Thank you, Alexandra.” He leaned over to kiss my cheek as he took the stuffed lion. Then he held my lion up and turned him over carefully as he studied him. “I really appreciate this…really. I promise I'll take good care of him…But I feel really bad about Friday night. I wish I had been there.”

“No, Mason, if you were there that night you wouldn't be here now.” I reached up to run my fingers through his hair. “I would never see you if you were in jail...and I need to see you.”

He leaned over to kiss me. “The worst part of being all wet is I can't hold you, no matter how bad I want to.”

He might not be willing to get me wet, but I was. So I took his hand and stood up, pulling him with me as he set my lion down on the bed. I slipped my hands through the opening between the edges of the blanket where they met and tried to put my arms around his waist, but he stepped back. “No, Alexandra. I don't want you to be wet too.”

“But I don't mind.”

“I do. It wouldn't be right for me to let you get all wet and cold when I can help it.”

“I'll change later.” I moved forward and tried to slide my hands in again.

“No,” he said, pulling it tightly shut.

“Please.”

His eyes almost looked heavy as he smiled at me and sighed. “Oh, Alexandra…” Even though he shook his head, he opened his arms and the blanket out wide to let me in, wrapping them both around me as I slid my arms around him. “I’m afraid I can't refuse you anything.”

The rain tapped softly against my window in the sweet silence. It sounded like it was slowing down.

“Can I ask you something?” Mason asked, still holding me close inside the blanket.

“Of course.”

“What did you say to Hayden?”

I laid my head against his chest and stared out the window, not wanting him to see me if I started to cry. “I told him I never wanted to see him again.” Even though I was still furious with Hayden, I wished I hadn’t said it. I couldn’t take it back, but maybe I could still make things right. But what about what he did to Mason? It was just as bad as what I’d said.

“Are you okay?”

I shrugged my shoulders, assuming he didn’t really want to hear about it.

One of Mason’s arms slid up, resting his hand on the back of my head, as the other slid up and down over my back, both tightening around me. “I’m grateful, but I’m also sorry. As much as I can’t stand that guy, I know he’s probably important to you. I hate for you to have to go through all this just because of me.”

“It’s okay.” I turned my head to look up at him, surprised and comforted by his understanding.

“So how long do we have before your parents get home?”

“We usually come home around seven thirty or eight, so…” I looked over at my clock. Five forty-five. “Two hours if we’re lucky.”

“Two hours…What should we do with them?”

“I’ve just been staring out the window most of today, but that probably sounds boring. I think I have The Checkered Game of Life and an old Mansion of Happiness game in my closet if you want to play one of those.”

“Actually, I think staring out the window sounds fun, if you don’t mind me asking you a few questions.”

“Questions?”

“Yeah. There’s still so much I don’t know about you.”

“Okay, if you’ll answer them for yourself, too.”

“Deal.” I moved to his side within the blanket as we moved to the window.

“What do you want more than anything else in the world?” Mason asked me.

That was something I had to stop and think about. Right then, I wanted my parents to accept Mason and allow me to keep seeing him. And having things return to what they were before with Emmaline and Hayden would have been nice, but these things were too easy and too obvious. Mason wanted more than that, I knew. *What would my answer have been when I still had those things?* “True love,” I said. “The kind that lasts forever. The kind you can build a family with…That must sound typical for a woman, though. I can’t imagine many would want much else.” It made me nervous to be saying this to him, like I was asking him for these things, but I loved the way he smiled at me after I said it. “What about you? What would you like to have more than anything?”

His smile dimmed as he stared out of the window before he spoke. “Well…what you want sounds pretty good, and it’s definitely one of the things I want most. But if I could have anything, I would just have my dad come home.”

Wishing that I’d left that question one sided, I reached across my stomach for the hand he had around my waist. He smiled at me and kissed my forehead.

“What’s your favorite color?” he asked.

“I don’t know. It changes between yellow and pink…”

We spent at least an hour going back and forth with questions. We only stopped when I heard Mason’s stomach growl. “Are you hungry?” I asked him, thinking of the food Katy had given me, which was now hidden underneath one of my dresses in my bureau.

“I’m okay. I can eat when I get home.”

“Are you sure?” I pulled myself away from Mason and the blanket to walk over to the bureau. “Katy brought me some homemade bread and cookies last night. We can eat those.”

“That sounds great.”

I pulled out the pillowcase and handed it to him. We sat down on the floor and each began eating a piece of bread.

“I guess I’ll try to find another job tomorrow. It shouldn’t be too hard,” Mason said between mouthfuls.

I wanted to tell him not to, that this might get him arrested in the end. But I felt like it wasn’t my place to say anything, and he would have to support himself somehow.

We mostly ate in silence after that. Mason kept trying to hand the pillowcase back to me after every piece of bread and cookie, but I refused to take it, insisting that he eat it all, since I knew how much he could eat. I wasn’t really hungry anyway, and Katy would probably bring me more later that night. Even with my insistence, he refused to eat more than half of it.

“How about that Game of Life?” Mason asked when he was finished.

“Alright. Just let me find it,” I said excitedly. The Checkered Game of Life used to be one of my favorite games and I hadn’t played it in a long time. So I put the pillowcase up and went in my closet, where I started pushing things around on the top shelf—a stack of magazines, a bag full of cloth scraps and ribbons, a couple of light bulbs—“There it is.” My fingers could barely reach the small stack of games, so I tried to press them against the side of the box and force it to slide closer to me, but with no luck.

“I’ll get it,” Mason said from right behind me. I hadn’t even realized he was there.

“Thank you,” I said as I moved to the side.

He held back the other games easily as he slid out the one we wanted. “I should warn you, I always win this game,” Mason said as we went to sit down in same spot in the middle of the floor.

“Really? When we play, it’s always me or my father who wins. Katy says it’s because we’re afraid to take risks.”

“Well, sometimes risks are worth taking…” I knew he meant the risks we were taking together. “…but if playing safe is what wins the game, then I’d say you’re just the better player.”

We started playing and had so much fun that we forgot to watch the time. So when I heard a car pull up outside, I looked at Mason in alarm. We both turned to look at the clock. Seven thirty-eight. “Is that your parents?” he asked calmly.

I jumped up and ran to my window. I wouldn’t have thought it was possible, but I became even more terrified. “Yes.”

Turning around, I saw Mason shoving all the game pieces back into the box chaotically. He smiled at me and I wondered how he could remain so calm. “Would you hand me the rope and I’ll put the game up? I’ll just hide in your closet until they go to sleep. It’ll be fine.”

My hands shook as I tried to untie the rope. A car door shut outside, then another. The knots were extremely tight since Mason’s weight had been put on them. I was still struggling with the first knot when the front door opened below. Panic continued to rise inside of me.

“What’s wrong?” Mason whispered from right behind me.

“I can’t get it.” I could feel tears welling up and my voice trembling.

“Let’s try this.” He grabbed the knots and slid them down to the bottom of the center bedrail they were tied to and set my pillow up to hide it.

He stopped to stand right in front of me, offering a reassuring smile, before he picked up the game sitting on my bed and dashed soundlessly to my closet, shutting the door behind him.

The door to my room opened a second later and my mother walked inside carrying a covered plate of food. I felt the panic return, knowing Mason was hiding in my bedroom with my parents home. “Hello, dear,” my mother said as she crossed the room and set the plate on my night table. “Hayden’s mother sent this for you.”

“So she’s not angry with me?” I asked.

“I don’t think so. Hayden hasn’t really talked to anyone about what happened with you two Friday night. Do you want me to—” She stopped and put a hand on my shoulder when she noticed my clothes. “Alexandra, you’re all wet. What happened?”

“I just opened my window for a minute and the rain came in. Umm—my blankets got wet, too. Could I have another one?”

“Of course, but why haven’t you changed? It stopped raining at least twenty minutes ago.”

I hadn’t even noticed. I just shrugged.

“Look, I know you’re upset about Mason, and I know that you think you’re in love with this boy, but—”

A loud crash came from inside my closet as I struggled to take in a breath, feeling my chest constrict as a new kind of fear overtook me.

“What in the world?” My mother started walking towards it.

“Wait,” My chest still felt tight as I hurried after her. “I had some games out and may have put them up a little carelessly. They probably just fell off the shelf. I’ll pick them up later.”

“Don’t you think we should at least check to make sure everything is alright?”

“It’s fine, Mother.”

But she stepped around me and opened my closet door. I half expected Mason to run through it and flee the house after what he’d just heard. It would take him longer to fall in love with someone like me, if that was even possible. But all we saw, as my mother pulled the string to turn on the hanging light bulb, was my Checkered Game of Life scattered all over the floor. I realized part of one of Mason’s shoes was visible from underneath my longer hanging dresses, and realized he was standing behind them. Luckily my mother didn’t seem to notice.

“I guess you were right. Let’s just clean this up and put it away properly,” she said as she bent down and picked up the board.

“That’s alright. I was thinking of taking it out again, anyway.” I bent down and picked up everything desperately, shoving it all into the box as fast as I could before I carried it to my bed and then tried to go back to my closet to shut the door.

“What was I saying now? It was something I really wanted to talk to you about…Oh yes, Mason. I know you think you love him, but—”

“I really don’t want to talk about this right now, Mother.” My face felt like it was on fire and I was beginning to feel queasy. Mason was right behind her, listening to what she was saying.

“You’re not shy about this now, are you?”

I nodded my head, willing to do anything to stop what she was saying.

“Well, you weren’t shy about it when you announced it to all of us Friday night, including Hayden and that police officer. Is that why Hayden was so upset?”

“Mother, please, I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Alright. Go ahead and change while I get you another blanket, alright dear?”

I hurried to shut my closet door and then began changing when she left my room with the two wet blankets. My eyes remained fixed on the door to my closet, still afraid that Mason would run out of it and jump from the window any second. I wished that that door would never have to open, that I would never have to find out what his reaction would be.

“Here you are, dear,” my mother said, entering my room a couple of minutes later.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She reached out to give me a hug. “I know you don’t want to talk about Mason, but trust me. Your heart will heal. In time you’ll meet someone else and fall in love, and then he’ll only be a memory.”

I said nothing as she left.

The second my bedroom door closed, the closet door opened. My hair brushed against the front of my shoulders as I looked down at my feet, already feeling a lump pressing against my throat. I wished that I was anywhere but there, that I could transport myself an hour into the future, when he was gone and this horrible moment was over.

I heard his footsteps cross the floor. “Alexandra,” he whispered.

I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the place on the floor where he now stood, or utter a response. I was frozen by fear.

“Alexandra,” he whispered again, putting a hand on my cheek and lifting it so that I was forced to look up at him.

Tears rushed to my eyes as they met his. He had never looked so serious. *He’s leaving me.*

“I love you, too,” he leaned over to whisper before his lips pressed themselves against mine. As they withdrew, he wrapped his arms around me and leaned his head against the side of mine, inhaling deeply.

I was at a complete loss for words. *He loves me…* A tear rolled over my cheek. *He loves me…*

He lifted his head to look down at me. “I should have said it when I gave you that ring.” He reached behind his back to pull my hand around and kiss it. His whispering voice intensified that perfect moment. “But I was a coward; I was so afraid of losing you…When I found you in the rain that day, I knew that I wanted to be with you. It felt like everything happened exactly as it should have. And then…when I took your hand while we were skating, I knew that I loved you. For me, it only took a day.”

I could feel my eyebrows still held up in surprise. “You, you love me?” I still couldn’t believe it.

He laughed softly. “Of course I do.” He wiped my tear away with his thumb and then laid my hand on his shoulder before placing his behind my back, letting the tips of his fingers run slowly over my arm and shoulder on the way, but I hardly felt it.

“How could you love me?” I just couldn’t make sense of it.

He gave me a peculiar look. “How could I not? You make me happier than I’ve ever been. I’ve felt things when I’m with you that I’ve never felt before…And you’re so beautiful…When I’m not with you, all I can think about is you. I love you, Alexandra.” He leaned forward and kissed me until I thought my legs would give way.

We both jumped back when my door creaked open. I looked over with fearful eyes to find Katy standing at my door. She looked just as surprised as she shut the door behind her. “You scared me to death,” I said, putting a hand over my heart.

“Hey, Katy,” Mason whispered.

“Hey. Not that I’m not happy you’re here, but you should probably leave,” Katy said to Mason. “My parents said I could come in here for a little while, but they’ll be checking to make sure I’m not in here for too long. Alexandra’s not supposed to be having any fun.”

“He can’t climb out of my window while they’re awake. What if they see him?” I said quietly.

“They’re in their room right now. I’ll go stand by your door and knock if they come out, okay?”

“Thank you, Katy.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Mason said.

Katy nodded and turned toward the door, but stopped and turned back to face us. “I can’t believe I almost forgot the reason I came in here. You know where he lives, right?” she asked me.

I looked over at Mason, not sure if I should say anything or not. “She knows,” he answered for me.

“Okay, so I know how much you want to see Mason and how hard that is now, so I’ve come up with an early Christmas present for both of you. Tomorrow, you be wherever it is you’re staying, Mason, and Alexandra, you plan to go there when school closes early. Just be home the same time you always come home. I’ll stay out of the house until then and Mother will never know they let us out early.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

She smiled and shrugged. “It’s not much fun if you know what to expect. Just be ready, okay?”

“Thank you, Katy,” I wrapped my arms around her. “You’re the best sister in the world.”

“You too, and I was supposed to give this to you if I saw you today.” She pulled my letter out of her shoe and handed it to Mason.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Sure.” She hurried out of the room as Mason began to open the letter.

“Shouldn’t we hurry?” I asked him.

“Yeah, it’s just hard to wait to read something you wrote. But I guess I’ll have to.” He folded it up carefully and then put it in his pocket.

Mason leaned over to resume the kiss Katy had interrupted. Then he pressed his forehead against mine and whispered, “I love you, Alexandra.”

I smiled and rested my hands against his neck. “I love you, too, Mason.” It felt good to look him right in the eye and say that.

“I love hearing you say that.” He kissed me one more time before he drew away.

I opened my window as he slipped my lion into his shirt so his hands would be free for the climb down. As I threw the rope out of the window, I remembered that I couldn’t get it untied. “What do I do when you’re outside? I can’t get the rope free,” I asked.

“Why don’t we just leave it there? Then, when I come back, it’s already there waiting for me.” He grinned. “Like Rapunzel.”

“But that story had a sad ending.”

“No, it didn’t. They ended up together.”

“But he was blinded and she was cast out to a foreign land.”

Mason put his arms around me. “I think it’s obvious that our problems are very different from theirs, but the ending will be the same.”

He leaned down to kiss me one last time, and then climbed out of my window, stopping to smile at me before he let himself down.

Again, my bed lifted off the floor. I forgot how loud it would be when it slammed down. As soon as it did, I began pulling the rope up as fast as I could.

Katy knocked on the door as I pulled the last bit in. I waved at Mason and shut my window before I slid the rope down and pulled my pillow up to conceal it. “Are you alright?” my mother asked as my father said, “What in the world was that?” just outside of my door.

“Sorry. I accidentally slammed Alexandra’s door on my way out,” Katy answered.

My father opened my door and came inside. “That didn’t sound like a door slamming.” He looked around my room.

“Alexandra, you haven’t even touched your food,” my mother said, entering the room behind him.

“I was just about to eat it.” I picked up the plate and realized I would need a spoon. “But I’m not sure I can eat this meatloaf and corn without a spoon. May I go get one?”

“Well, it probably is about time for a bathroom break.” She looked over at my father.

“Go ahead. Just come back to your room when you’re finished,” he said.

“Yes, Father. Thank you.”

As I walked down the stairs, I thought about Mason and me as Rapunzel and her Prince Charming. They did go through a lot, more than Mason and I had, but the closing of their story wasn’t just the two characters ending up together. They were happily married. Could the same thought have occurred to Mason? Nothing would have made me happier than spending forever with him, but it was hard to believe he could want the same thing.

Then again, he was getting very good at surprising me.

I remembered that I hadn’t checked for a note when I was walking out of the bathroom, so I rushed to the kitchen to get a spoon and then back up to my room.

No one was anywhere to be seen. *Maybe they won’t lock me in tonight.*

I wasn’t exactly sure when Mason slipped his notes into my pockets, so I reached into the one on the dress I was now wearing and felt a little piece of paper. This one was a bit larger than the others and was folded over twice. I opened it to find a strange drawing. A thick black M had been drawn with heavy dashes on top of or underneath every point, and a thin gray A overlapped it with curly ends wrapping around it at the bottom. The A began just as high up as the M, but was slightly shorter on the bottom, the curls resting against the top of the dashes at the bottom of the M. Twenty something tiny objects were drawn around them—a raindrop, a key, an apple… The only thing that really stood out to me was the tiny letter H drawn in the bottom right corner. *Hayden.* But besides that, nothing made any sense at all.

**Chapter Thirteen**

Warm sunlight draped itself around my face the next morning. I woke up in Mason’s coat again, remembering what he had said the night before. But the peace and warmth of this memory were quickly replaced by anxiety in knowing I would have to go to school that day. Emmaline hadn’t called or stopped by all week-end and Hayden was probably afraid to. I forced myself to climb out of bed and get ready for school.

Since I wasn’t in any hurry, I decided to wait at the kitchen table for Katy. My mother took off her lacy apron and sat beside me for a little while. When she realized I wasn’t going to say anything, she left me alone.

“What are you still doing here?” Katy asked when she walked into the kitchen.

“Emmaline’s not talking to me, so I thought we could walk to school together,” I said.

“That might be fun. We haven’t walked together in at least three years.”

“Here you are, dear,” my mother said, bringing Katy a plateful of pancakes.

“Thanks.” Katy ate almost as quickly as Mason did, and then we were saying good bye to our mother and heading to school.

“So can you give me any hint of what you’re planning?” I asked her. At least I knew I wouldn’t have to spend all day at school.

“I’ll just say you’ll be glad you’re not in my classroom today. So what’s the deal with Emmaline? Why is she so mad at you?”

“I don’t know. She was mad that I didn’t tell her Mason’s secret. She didn’t say it, but she might have had the same problem with Mason that everyone else does.”

A cold breeze twirled my hair about and caused both of us to pull our coats tighter around us.

“Well, whatever it is, she’ll get over it eventually. Girls are just overly dramatic, most of them, anyway. I think drama’s a waste of time.”

“I hope you’re right.” I walked past Emmaline’s house without stopping.

“Do you want to play I Spy?” Katy asked me. “We used to play every morning on the way to school, remember?”

“Okay.” I hoped it would take my mind off of my dread. We played all the way to school, and it did help a little.

Katy put a hand on my shoulder just outside of my classroom and said, “Don’t worry. You’ll be out of here before lunchtime.” It didn’t help.

As I forced myself to walk into the room, I quickly realized Emmaline wasn’t in her seat. The thought that she might still be waiting for me at her house made me feel better for the two seconds it took to realize she was sitting at the desk in the front of the room with Jack, a kid who couldn’t seem to keep himself out of trouble. Mr. Web had him sit in the front so he could keep a better eye on him. Sitting beside him meant that he would do everything he could to distract and make Emmaline miserable throughout the morning. But it was also the only free seat in the classroom, which meant that she would rather endure this than sit beside me. So I took my lonely seat and tried not to cry.

“Hey, Alexandra,” Marcy said in a cruel voice. “Elise said she saw you at the dance.” I felt my heart rate quicken as I tried to ignore her. If she was there then she knew. “So you’re dating Sydney Algoth’s son, huh? That’s low, even for you.”

Every head turned to stare at me, except for Emmaline’s and Hayden’s. I received dirty looks and nervous stares. A few people looked like they were waiting for me to correct her, but I said nothing.

“You’re dating a mobster?” Jack asked. “My father’s business shut down because of them.”

Luckily, Mr. Web walked into the room just then, so the conversation was cut short. But I could still feel the hateful eyes fixed on me, even though I kept my head down. When I looked up during Arithmetic lessons, Jack held up his slate with *STREET TRASH* written across it in giant letters that I knew the whole class could see. Ten minutes later, I chanced another glance at the chalkboard Mr. Web was writing on and caught sight of Marcy’s slate, where she’d written *sleaze*. After that I was careful to keep my eyes on the desk where I sat alone.

Would it be this way from now on, everyone despising me, thinking of me as filthy garbage? I didn’t think I could face another day like this. The only way I managed not to cry was to keep picturing Mason. I just had to hold out for whatever Katy was planning.

Another excruciating hour passed by before I heard screaming and the sound of people running through the hallway just outside.

“What in the blazes?” Mr. Web said as he crossed the room.

I turned to the door as he opened it to find Katy standing there with a hand raised and ready to knock. Her calm smile seemed so out of place with the students running in terror behind her. Her own teacher let out a shrill scream as she raced past her toward the main doors.

“Hello, Mr. Web,” Katy said. “I thought you should know that several coral snakes were just found in our room. You might want to let your class go early until they can get the problem under control.”

“Coral snakes? You can’t be serious. How in the world did they get in here?”

“I don’t know, but it would probably be safer if everyone left the building. I’m going to let the rest of the teachers know.”

She winked at me before she left, and I knew she had been the one to release them inside the school. But poisonous snakes? Even Katy wouldn’t risk someone’s life just to end school early. I would ask her about it later.

Mr. Web’s face was pale when he turned around to face us. “Now everyone just remain calm—”

At that moment, Elise screamed so loudly I had to cover my ears. Then she tore out of the classroom, leaving her books and coat behind. A few others followed without giving Mr. Web the chance to dismiss us.

He hurried up to his desk, shouting, “What are you all waiting for? Class dismissed!”

I grabbed my books and rushed to the door. I couldn’t get to Mason fast enough. But before I left, I looked back at Hayden and found him still sitting in his chair, watching me. Feeling awful, I let myself be pushed out of the door with the rest of what was left of our class. Emmaline didn’t even look my way as she moved past me through the main doors. Then I was outside in the freezing cold.

Hugging my books to my chest, I hurried to Mason’s building. I was extremely grateful for Katy as I walked. The day might have been unbearable if she hadn’t let all those snakes loose. But there would be more days like that, I knew. Maybe I should just ask my mother to home school me or let me leave it all together. But would it become like it had been at school everywhere I went, the way it did for Mason in Shilling. Would I end up being driven from Chicago?

I began to climb the staircase on the side of Mason’s building, faster and faster, fighting back tears as I went. As soon as I knocked on the door, it opened, and Mason stood there smiling at me with the dark hallway behind him. And for some reason, I started to cry.

“Oh, Alexandra,” he put his arm around me and led me into the first room off to the left. “They knew, didn’t they?”

“Elise saw us at the dance. Everyone hates me now.” We sat down on the couch and I dug my face into Mason’s chest.

“I was afraid this would happen…I’m really sorry,” Mason said.

My voice was muffled against his shirt as I spoke. “It’s, it’s not your fault. I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I can’t go to a school where things are going to be like that every day, but it’s the only school I’ve ever gone to.”

Mason brushed my hair out of my face as I looked up at him. “Trust me, I know how that feels. I just wish I could take all that away from you.”

“You can.” I wiped my tears away and leaned up to kiss him. He slid both arms around me and gave me the slowest, sweetest kiss I could have imagined. My body felt light as all my troubles seemed to lift away.

“Better?” he asked.

“Mm hm.”

“So what did Katy do?”

“She let coral snakes out all over her classroom. It’s amazing she can do that without anyone noticing.”

“Coral snakes? Aren’t they deadly?”

“Yes. I can’t believe she would really set them loose in a room full of people. Everyone was running down the hallway, screaming all the way out the door.”

Mason started laughing. “I wish I could’ve seen that.”

“It *was* kind of funny,” I laughed along. It was so much easier to do that now that I was with him.

“Your sister is really something.”

“Yeah, she is.”

Remembering the strange note he’d left with me the night before, I took it from my pocket and handed it to Mason. “This one left me a little confused. I assume the A’s for Alexandra and the M’s for Mason, but I can’t figure anything else out.”

“Really? I hoped it would make sense to you. You’re right about what the letters stand for. The M’s stronger, holding the A up. The A’s softer, clinging to the M always. I tried to draw something with two parts that would be incomplete without either one, just like us.”

“Aw, Mason…But what about all these little drawings, like that apple there?” I pointed to the tiny apple resting on one of the curls at the end of the streak running through the center of the A.

“That represents the Big Apple, where my dad is. That wrench represents Benny. He fired me and turned Emmaline against you. Each thing represents something that’s up against us.” He stopped to focus on my eyes. “But together, the two in the center of it all stand against it, unshakable, like us.”

Looking back to the paper, I could almost feel the weight of everything pressing against us. “Why does this have to be so complicated? Why does the world have to be against us?” I asked, feeling my eyes tear up. It just wasn’t fair.

Mason took both of my hands and held them in between us as he smiled. “Complicated love is the best kind. It’s unpredictable. It’s exciting. So many people say they would do anything for love, but very few get the chance to test that. You and I are lucky enough to know—what we have *can* stand against anything.” He leaned over to kiss my cheek. “And things will get better.”

I looked over and smiled at my lion, who I realized was sitting on the box in front of the couch, watching us.

It occurred to me that maybe I should stop dwelling on everything that was wrong. I didn’t know when I would see Mason again and I didn’t want him to have to remember me crying and feeling miserable until that day came.

“How did the job hunt go?” I asked with a weak smile, remembering that he was planning to do it that morning.

“Well, it could have gone better.”

“What happened?”

“Benny made sure every mechanic around here knew about me.”

“So…what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I can’t start over again, though, not after you.”

I smiled easily at this. Everything was stacked against us, but it didn’t matter. Because I knew that he would never run away.

“I’ve got an idea,” I said. “Why don’t we go play cards in the greenhouse, just like the day we first met? We could share my lunch. I had my mother pack an extra sandwich and I put the chocolates Katy got me for my birthday in there, too.”

“Chocolate sounds pretty good right now.” Mason picked up my books and took my hand to lead me down the dark hallway, my other hand carrying my lunch.

In the warmth and sunlight of the greenhouse, the mood changed completely as we laughed and ate on the same blanket we’d laid on the night all the trouble began. Streaks of light danced across Mason’s dark hair and brought out the happiness his face showed every time he looked at me.

He devoured half of everything and waited patiently while I ate, something that almost felt routine for us.

“You can keep these for later,” I said when I was finished, holding out what was left of the chocolates.

“But you got those for your birthday.”

“It’s alright. You love chocolate.”

He leaned over to kiss me. “No, I love you. I want you to keep those and I’ll go get the cards.”

As I watched him walk down the stairs, it was hard not to feel a little lightheaded. *He loves me.* I didn’t think I would ever get over hearing him say that.

“What do you want to play?” Mason asked when he reentered the room.

“We could play slapjack since that’s your favorite game.”

“I’m surprised you remember that.” He sat down across from me and started dealing out two stacks. “The first day we came up here your hands were shaking so badly, and I couldn’t figure out why you were so nervous.”

“I hoped you wouldn’t notice.”

“It was hard to miss, but I thought it was cute. Here you go.” Mason handed me half of the deck and we flipped over the first cards.

“So what are you doing for Christmas?” he asked as we flipped over the next cards.

Thinking about this made me think about what he would be doing, spending Christmas all alone in an abandoned building. I didn’t want to answer. “We’re decorating the tree tonight. I wish you could come,” I said.

“Me, too. But are you going to be out of town?”

“No.” Christmas Eve would be spent at Hayden’s and my grandparents would be coming Christmas Day.

“I’ll come see you the night of Christmas Eve, if that’s alright. I’ll come before midnight so I can be the first one you’re with on Christmas day.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve been planning on it since the dance. I just keep forgetting to talk to you about it.”

“I would love that. I’m looking forward to it already.” I just wished I could get him something for Christmas, but I was confined to my room. I might be able to get something for him on the way home if I was quick, but I wanted to put thought and meaning into it.

I gasped and slapped the Jack I’d just laid down. Mason’s hand came down a split second later. He laughed at me as his fingers curled around my hand and he pulled it to his lips. “This game gets you excited, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“Well it certainly makes me a little jumpy.”

I picked up the stack of cards and laid another one down, then another. It was difficult every time a Jack came up to let go of Mason’s hand.

After a couple more games, we decided to move to the room we started in, since it was the only one with a working clock. Only one hour remaining. We played gin rummy, since it was my favorite game, and Mason told me a few Paul Bunyan tales his father had always told him on their camping trips in the past.

When I checked the time again it was nearly two o’clock, which is when school would be getting out. “Mason,” I looked over at him to find him watching me.

“I know,” he said. He took my cards from me and set them on the table with his. Then he put his arms around me and pulled me across the couch closer to him. “Don’t wander,” he whispered into my neck.

“Oh, Mason, I promise you, I will never wander.”

“Good,” He let go and leaned back. “because I would hate to think your mother was right, that you could fall in love with someone else and I could just become a memory.” He smiled, but I could see in his eyes that he meant it. I wondered how someone like him could be so worried about someone like me.

“She was wrong. I could never love anyone else this way.” Because in my mind, he was it. My heart was set on him. There was just no way I could ever love another man.

He put his hands on my cheeks to kiss me. “I’ll find a way to build a better life for us. Things *will* get better,” he said.

*A life…for us?* It almost sounded like he wanted the same thing I did.

“I know.”

Mason stood and picked up my books and lunchbox. Putting them both in one arm, he held out his free hand to me. Reluctantly, I took it and let him lead me into darkness.

As I reached for the door that led outside, Mason’s hand tightened around mine. “Wait.” I turned back to him as he let go of my hand to put his arm around me. His warm lips felt their way across my cheek to my lips, and then he pressed against me as he kissed me. I felt my books at his side. He took a deep breath before he pulled away. “I love you, Alexandra,” he said in a low voice.

“I love you too, Mason.”

He moved around me and opened the door. He smiled in the fresh light and held my things out to me. “Christmas Eve night…”

I smiled and nodded, but I already wanted to cry, knowing I wouldn’t see him for so long. Once I walked out that door, I walked back into the real world, where I was imprisoned in my room and everyone despised me.

“I wish I could walk you home,” Mason said.

“Me too.” Taking my things from him, I walked outside. Every step was difficult.

Once I was on the ground, I looked up at the top of the stairs. Mason stood in the open doorway, still watching me. We shared a smile and a wave, and then I turned away and began walking home.

As I walked down the crowded sidewalk, I glanced in a window and saw a Christmas display with a baby doll in a toy crib and a teddy bear sitting on a rocking horse. A shiny silver picture frame with a Santa hat on one corner and a picture of two little boys opening presents in it set in the middle of the toys, giving me an idea.

The dancehall always had a photographer moving around at every event, taking pictures of everything. My mother told me they kept albums full of these pictures for people to come back and look through. Maybe they would let me look through the one from the night of the dance and borrow a picture to have it copied. Well, Katy would have to do it for me, since I was banned from the dancehall. Even though I knew they may have destroyed any pictures with Mason in them or may not have taken any pictures of us at all, I hurried into the store and bought a frame just like the one in the window.

I was in such a hurry to get home as I walked out of the shop that I almost didn’t notice Hayden walking toward me, staring right at me as he did. I stopped as the pain I’d felt each time I looked at him that day hit me again, and waited. His eyes never left mine. “Hayden,” I said when I thought he would keep walking past me. He stopped right beside me. “Hayden, I’m sorry. I’m not happy about what you did, but I shouldn’t have said what I said. If I never saw you again, it would break my heart.”

He just stared at me for a minute. “You’re honestly risking everything just to see Mason?”

“What?” How could he know that? I felt terrified at the idea of him following me there and going to tell my parents.

“You didn’t go home after school, obviously. So you must have gone to see him.”

“Please don’t tell my parents.”

“I’m not going to say anything. In spite of what you might think, I really don’t want you to be sent to Missouri.”

“Thank you, but—”

“What about the lies? We’ve always been honest with each other. How could you lie to me like that?”

“I didn’t lie to you.”

“You said you weren’t going to the dance with him.”

“I wasn’t. I really need to get home, though. If you don’t mind walking with me, I’ll try to explain it to you.”

He nodded as he began walking beside me.

“Mason said he couldn’t take me to the dance because of work, but when he asked Emmaline what to get me for my birthday and she told him how much I wanted him to take me to the dance, he talked to Benny and worked it out. He surprised me by showing up to take me to it. And that’s where he kissed me for the first time.”

“But you said you would stop seeing him.”

“No, I didn’t, not to you. It was something you just assumed.”

We walked past several stores in silence. I was still angry for what Hayden had done, and I wasn’t ready to forgive him, but I needed him not to be mad at me, especially since everyone else was. And it was hard to stay mad at someone I was so close to. I hoped Emmaline was feeling the same way about me.

“I suppose I can accept your apology, if you can accept mine,” Hayden said, looking over at me.

But it wasn’t that easy for me. “Will you drop the charges against Mason?”

“Alexandra,” Hayden stopped in his tracks. “He attacked me. You saw what he did. How can you ask me to drop the charges?”

“No, he didn’t. He was only trying to protect me.”

“That’s what I was doing.”

“No, you were just being jealous.”

Hayden took a deep breath. “Fine, we’ll agree to disagree. I really don’t want to fight with you anymore.”

“Me neither.”

We walked past Emmaline’s house and I saw her sitting on her front porch, looking away from us. “Emmaline,” I called out, hoping I could somehow make up with both of my best friends. She picked up her head and I could see that she was crying. I waved as she stood up, but she didn’t wave back. She turned around and went in her house.

“Did she tell you why she’s so mad at me when you drove her home?” I asked Hayden as we turned at the corner.

“She said she was angry that you kept that secret from her and that you were dating part of the mob all this time, but I don’t think that’s what it was. I think what she was really upset about was Benny. She mumbled something about him when she was getting out of the car.”

I nodded as we reached my front yard. It occurred to me that maybe if I came home with Hayden, my mother wouldn’t make me go straight to my room.

We stopped on the front porch and Hayden took my hand as I reached out for the doorknob. “There’s something I want to ask you,” he said.

“Alright.”

He moved to stand in between me and the door and held my left hand up. “Are you really planning to marry him?” My ring sparkled in the sunlight.

“This isn’t an engagement ring, and he hasn’t asked. It’s only a promise ring.”

Hayden smiled for the first time as he let go of my hand. “Why didn’t you tell me that before? You knew that was what I was asking.”

“I’m sorry,” I looked down at my feet. “I was just really angry and still in shock about what my father said.”

He nodded and opened the door. “Let’s just put it all behind us.”

“Sounds good.” All I wanted was for things to go back to normal. If only Mason could have been part of that ‘normal’.

“Mother, Hayden’s here,” I called out. The house smelled strongly of gingerbread.

She met us halfway to the kitchen. “Oh Hayden, I’m so happy to see you.” She came to give him a hug. “And I’m glad you two made up. Could you give me a hand with something?”

“Of course, Mrs. Roomer.”

“We’re decorating the Christmas tree, finally. Ted’s bringing home a tree, so if you could carry the box of decorations for me, I would really appreciate it…” Their voices faded away as they moved through the kitchen and into the utility room.

I went to the living room and sat down on the couch while I waited.

“…I don’t think that will be a problem. I’ll just call my parents and let them know,” Hayden was saying when they came into the room.

“Wonderful. I’ve got to go check on the cookies. Alexandra, you don’t have to go to your room today, dear. You can stay out here with Hayden,” my mother said before she left the room.

Hayden sat down beside me on the couch. “Your mother asked me to stay and help decorate the tree, but I thought I should ask you if you minded before I called my parents.”

I didn’t mind, but I wondered what Mason would think if I was at home, decorating our family’s Christmas tree with the man who had done so much damage. But this man was also family to me, as much my brother as Katy was my sister.

“Are you okay with us just being friends? I love you too, Hayden, but that’s all we’re ever going to be.”

He smiled and took my hand. “I’ll try to be okay with it.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “But now that I know that’s not an engagement ring, Mason’s still only temporary.”

“No, he’s not.”

“We’ll see. So you’re okay with me staying?”

“Of course I am. I missed you all weekend.”

He reached out to hug me before he went to call his parents from the phone upstairs.

The front door opened. “I’m home from school,” Katy called out.

“Hello, dear,” my mother’s voice moved with her to the front door. “We’re decorating the tree when your father gets home, so don’t go anywhere, okay? Alexandra’s in the living room with Hayden.”

“Hayden?” I could hear the irritation in her voice. I listened to her feet getting closer as Hayden’s came down the stairs. They both entered the living room at the same time.

“So…the rat’s here.” She gave Hayden a nasty look.

“It’s alright, Katy. He’s staying to decorate the tree with us.”

Katy moved closer to me so I could hear her speak quietly. “So I got you out of school early just so you can spend the day with *him*?”

“No, I went to Mason’s and I saw Hayden on my way home. He’s not going to say anything about it to anyone,” I whispered back.

She looked over at Hayden in obvious disbelief. Then she turned to go up the stairs. I felt bad that she might be mad at me. So I planned to talk to her about it later when I talked to her about the snakes.

“I knew she was the one responsible for those snakes. How else would they have gotten into the school?” Hayden said as he sat down beside me. “She’s been calling me a rat all weekend.”

A car pulled up outside, so we got up to look out the window. A tree was tied to the top of my father’s car. “I better go give him a hand,” Hayden said before he left the room.

“Father’s home,” I called out to my mother.

“Would you go let Katy know?” she called back.

“Okay.” Upstairs, I knocked on her door. “Can I come in, Katy?” No answer. I opened the door slowly and peeked inside. Katy was lying on the floor, rummaging around under her bed. “Father’s home.”

She looked up at me and asked, “How can you forgive him so easily?”

“Well, everyone at school knows about Mason, so they think I’m some sort of dirty associate to the mob or something. You and Hayden are the only ones who don’t, and Hayden is thoroughly convinced that Mason *is* in the mob.”

“That doesn’t change what he did.”

“That’s true, but I said some pretty terrible things to him and we’re both sorry. There’s no reason to go on fighting.”

“Did he drop the charges, then?”

*Darnet.* “No.”

“Then what’s he doing here?”

“I know you’re mad at him, but just don’t be mad at me, okay? I can’t have anyone else hate me right now.”

Katy stood up and walked past me through the doorway. “I’m not mad at you, Alexandra.”

“Katy, wait,” She stopped halfway to the stairs. “Did you really let loose all those poisonous snakes?” I asked quietly.

“No,” she laughed. “I just got a bunch of scarlet king snakes. They’re almost identical to coral snakes. And when you start screaming about coral snakes and pointing at them moving under desks and along the wall, people panic. It was as easy as pie.”

I laughed as we walked down the stairs together. “I don’t know where you got them from, but that was genius. Mason thought so, too.”

We found my father and Hayden setting up the tree in the living room. My mother carried a plate full of gingerbread cookies in and walked over to the radio to turn on a station playing Christmas music. It was a really nice afternoon with everyone singing along to the carols as we decorated the tree, even with the obvious tension between Hayden and Katy. We tossed silver tinsel all over the tree when we were finished. Then, my mother went back to the kitchen to cook dinner while we sat down and my father stood beside the tree to tell the same Christmas stories he told us every year, the same stories his father told him.

By the time my mother called out, “Dinner” we were all starving.

“There’s something we need to discuss, Alexandra,” my father said as I took my seat at the table. “You’ve spent an entire weekend locked up in your room and I realize you won’t be sneaking around the house with Mason, so I think you should be allowed to move around the house freely from now on. But you must still remain in the house until Christmas Day. Hopefully, that will be long enough to break you of that boy. Secondly, I talked to Hayden about it and you will be allowed to leave the house if he is with you. He will pick you up and drop you off at the door. I know I can trust him, so I’m confident that you will not be able to get into any trouble that way.”

Hayden smiled when I looked over at him in the chair beside me. I wondered if he was happy because he thought this could be his ‘chance’ with me or if he was just happy that we could spend the lost time together.

“Thank you, Father,” I said, feeling happy about it myself.

“Will you come over to my house tomorrow?” Hayden asked me. “I can come by in the morning to pick you up and we can figure out what we want to do when we get there.”

“Alright.” Since he seemed to understand that we were only friends, it sounded like fun. And I really did want to get out of the house.

As we ate dinner together, I was extremely grateful that things felt so natural for the first time in days.

When I climbed the stairs at the end of the night and took out the note that said *I love you*, I thought about how terrible the day had started and how well it had turned out. *And tomorrow will be even better*, I thought.

If only I could have known.

**Chapter Fourteen**

A flaming red afternoon sun set over a tall white arch. As I walked over a dusty path to get a closer look, I read the silver letters that had been engraved in the arch—*SHILLING*. Beyond this, I only saw a thick mist, veiling a hidden countryside.

Sharp ringing came from somewhere and I noticed the corner table with a phone placed on its top sitting right in front of the left foot of the arch. Looking around me, I didn’t see anyone, so I went to answer the phone. “Don’t you dare enter that city. It’s dangerous,” my father’s voice said on the other end.

“What?” Feeling the fog seeping in, I couldn’t remember what I was doing or why I was there.

“Alexandra, it’s alright. I’ll keep you safe,” Mason’s voice came from inside the fog, and then I knew why I had come—to be with him. Without giving it a second thought, I dropped the telephone’s mouthpiece and ran into the blinding vapor. And then everything began to spin.

Something was just up ahead…an enormous black dog. I stopped, but it had already heard me. Red eyes and barred teeth turned toward me. As I screamed and turned to run away, it gave chase. Even with the blinding fog between us, I could hear him coming.

The fog seemed to come and go in thick bursts, pressing against me like the chilling hands of a thousand ghosts. I tried to scream again, but nothing came out, making me even more afraid.

To my left, I saw Emmaline watch as I ran by. I nearly fell over as I stopped and rushed back to her. “You have to run!” I shrieked, yanking on her arm as hard as I could. But it felt heavy and stiff, like stone. She lifted her other hand to her mouth and blew. As it opened, yellow sparks ignited, and then enormous bees were flying out of her hand and chasing me too.

“Mason,” I screamed, running from the bees and the dog.

“Alexandra,” he called back. It came from my right, so I turned. Five seconds and terrified leaps later, I ran into his open arms. He seemed to appear out of nowhere as he twisted around so that his back would be facing the onslaught. He flinched and squeezed his eyes shut as everything hit him from behind, but I knew I was safe.

He opened his eyes when it was over and smiled down at me. “Alexandra,” he said softly.

“Yes?”

“Alexandra,” he said again, but the voice was different this time. “Alexandra, wake up.”

My eyes opened just a crack to see my father sitting beside me on my bed. They felt unbearably heavy. I began drifting off. “I know it’s early, but you need to see this,” his distant voice said. Mist was beginning to encircle me. “Are you awake? Alexandra,” My father shook my shoulder and I woke up with a start.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, as I forced myself to sit up.

“Mason’s father is on the front page of the newspaper.”

“What?” Now I was wide awake. “What does it say?”

He simply handed me the newspaper he was holding. I saw a picture of Sydney Algoth shaking hands with a man I didn’t recognize. The print in the parentheses under the picture told me that Sydney was shaking the hand of the mayor of New York City. *Hero Undercover: Sydney Algoth Breaks Down the Mob* was written in big bold print above the picture.

*Sydney Algoth, the man long thought to have been a key member of the mob, is now being hailed as a hero. He recently stepped forward with enough evidence to take down numerous large and small members of the mob (the names of which will be released at a future date). In addition to this, he has recovered an enormous amount of stolen and illegally obtained money with records of where it was taken from so that it can be returned, risking his life on a daily basis to do so—*

“He’s innocent,” I said, smiling at my father.

“I know, so…” He took a deep breath and stared at my open door. “I guess…I was wrong. I was right to punish you for sneaking out during the night, but—since he came to me the way he did, and gave me his word that it would never happen again…” He took in another deep breath. “Maybe I should have allowed you to continue seeing Mason.”

“Does that mean I can see him again?” I asked.

“Well—he is the son of a national hero now. So I was hoping I would get the opportunity to thank his father for what he did. And it would be an honor to have a daughter dating his son.” Somehow I knew he was already looking forward to telling the men at work that his daughter was dating Sydney Algoth’s son.

“Thank you, Father.” I reached out to hug him. “But I need you to leave so I can change.” I climbed out of bed and grabbed my father’s arm before I began pulling him toward the door.

“Wouldn’t you rather go back to sleep?”

“No, I need to go show this to Mason.”

“But it’s five a.m.” I looked out the window and realized it was still dark outside. I also noticed for the first time that my father was still in his night clothes. “And I thought you didn’t know where he lived.” He raised an eyebrow and tried to give me a reprimanding look, but I could tell he wasn’t angry.

“I’ll find him. Please let me go, Father.” How could he deliver this news to me and not let me pass it on to Mason?

“Absolutely not. Although I’m lifting your house restriction, you can’t call on a boy at this hour. You will be allowed to go at eight o’clock. And bring him back here with you. I’d like to have a few words with him when I get home from work. I’m going to wake up your mother and tell her what’s happened.”

I washed up and changed quickly before I met my mother in the hallway on her way to the stairs. “Did Father talk to you?” I asked.

“Yes, this is wonderful news. We should celebrate. Maybe we could talk your father into taking us all out to dinner and invite Mason to come along, unless he’s getting ready to go to New York.”

That hadn’t even occurred to me, even though it seemed so obvious now. How could I not have thought about how badly he would want to be with his father? And what if his father wanted him to move back to Shilling? So many questions began to form and tangle themselves in the relief and anticipation I was feeling.

I sat down at the dining table, as my mother continued on to the kitchen, and spread the paper out in front of me, hoping that I might find some answers in it.

*The story of what happened is given directly by Mr. Algoth in the interview he granted us only yesterday:*

*“It was a Thursday night, I believe, early last December, when the night that changed everything took place. I was having trouble sleeping, so I decided to take a stroll down the city streets. It must have been two in the morning when I walked past the empty old building. Glancing through a window to my right, dim candlelight caught my eye in the back of a room, where two men sat across from each other at a table and four more stood around them. A gunshot was fired from the darkness consuming the rest of the room and a man was killed. Unfortunately, one of the men saw me watching them from the window, and even though I tried to run and fought them tooth and nail, the men overpowered me. After being shoved into a car and driven to a house in the middle of nowhere, I was tied to a kitchen chair in a small room. I was told I would be killed in the morning because they couldn’t leave witnesses alive, and then I was left alone in the dark, to sit and await a certain death.*

*“But sometime during the night there was a great commotion. Men were shouting about being swindled. Then there was gunfire and more shouting.*

*“A few minutes after things got quiet, seven men entered the room I was in and wanted to know who I was and what I was doing there, so I told them the truth. I told them what I’d seen and that I was a simple man from a little town called Shilling in Illinois. This struck a place in the heart of the man in charge—I’ll refrain from using any names for now—since he’d visited the town a few years before, when he was still living in Chicago. He remembered it being a beautiful place, full of kind folks, and couldn’t bring himself to kill one of them. So he began explaining several things to me about the mob. This man was one of their higher-ups and agreed to let me live if I would join his men and work for him. Thinking of my son all alone back home, I agreed.*

*“He kept a close eye on me so I wouldn’t try to run and sent me with two others to rob a bank within the week. It was torture walking into that bank with a gun in my hand. But it was over quickly, kind of a blur of fear and adrenaline. I remember being careful not to point my gun at anyone. All I really did was help carry the money away. The boss was pleased since he hadn’t really expected me to go through with it.*

“Alexandra,” my mother called out from the kitchen. “May I have a turn with that when you’re finished reading it?”

“Yes, Mother. I’m nearly done.”

*So he decided he could trust me. And the more I did for him, the stronger that trust became.*

*“I began to wonder how I would ever get away from the mob and what I was being forced to do. Even though I was alive, my son was still alone, and I needed to get home to him. But I realized, as I got deeper into it, that I was being trusted with valuable information that only those on the inside had. So I began to keep records and evidence of everything. I would stay in until I had enough to have every man that was a threat to my life put behind bars for a long time, if not for the rest of their lives. I’ll be honest, it was frightening, terrifying at times, something I never would have imagined myself capable of doing, but it was the only way out.*

*“The hardest part was not being able to contact my son and let him know what I was doing. I can only imagine what he must have thought of me over the last twelve months. But it would have only put him in danger.*

*“So when I realized a couple of weeks ago that I had everything I needed, I began putting everything together and tying up all the loose ends, quietly planning with the police to take everyone down at the same time. And now here I am, ready to go home and resume life as it once was, grateful that this nightmare is finally over.”*

*So now, jobs and businesses once torn down will be restored. Lives once broken will be repaired. Future crime and the damage it would have caused has been prevented. And it’s all thanks to Mr. Sydney Algoth. What a wonderful Christmas gift he has given to our nation. We can all sleep a little easier tonight. The following year will be better because of him, a true hero.*

I looked up and thought about Sydney’s last sentence. He was ready to go home and resume life as it once was. Mason would certainly be part of that. But maybe his father would change his mind when he found out how everyone in Shilling had treated his son. Of course, things weren’t much better here in Chicago.

Standing up, I carried the paper to my mother and took over cooking breakfast so she could read the article.

I wasn’t sure how I felt. There was so much to be happy about, but just as much to be potentially sad about, too. *No—no matter what, we’ll work it out.* I knew Mason well enough now to know that he would do anything to make sure we stayed together.

My father came into the dining room, so my mother and I carried the eggs and ham to the table, where we all sat down and ate. It was impossible to pay any attention my parents, though. All I could think about was getting to Mason to tell him about his father and that we could finally be together, no complications, no dangerous secrets.

My father hugged me before he left for work, and then I picked up the newspaper my mother had set on the table and went to sit in the living room, where I would stare at the grandfather clock and wait, watching the seconds tick by. Six fifteen.

It occurred to me that maybe someone should wake up Katy to tell her, but then I figured she would only be disappointed.

“Alexandra, snap out of it,” my mother said when she came in the living room at six thirty-six. But I couldn’t tear my eyes away from that clock. She turned the radio on before she left the room, probably thinking it would help.

At seven forty-five she walked back into the room and laughed. “It’s killing me to watch you like this. Why don’t you go ahead?” she said.

“Really?” The newspaper made a crinkling sound as I sat up straight and squeezed it.

“It is nearly eight o’clock. Go ahead, dear.”

“Thank you!” I ran past her, grabbed my coat, and took off down the street. I ran past Emmaline’s house and took a right, toward the damp alleyway. I slowed down to a quick walk when I was out of the neighborhood and into the busy city.

A few blocks later, I turned right into the alleyway. There were the stairs. I ran to them and began to climb, faster than I ever had before. At the top I raised a hand to knock, but stopped when I saw the note wedged between the door and the wall. *Dear Alexandra,* was written at the top, so I pulled it out to read.

*Dear Alexandra,*

*I called the police station in New York after you left yesterday, and they found my father. His name has been cleared and he’s being honored for what he spent the last year doing. Today, every newspaper in the country will be running the story New York City’s paper ran yesterday. This will explain everything. I’m taking a train to New York tonight.*

“That’s it?” I turned the paper over and found that it was blank on the back. “He left without even saying goodbye?” I sat down and reread the letter. The paper had been torn in half and Mason hadn’t signed the bottom, which was strange, but it was his handwriting. He had written the letter. *He couldn’t have come to my window or called or anything?*

All the energy and happiness I’d felt all morning seemed to drain away. He was gone, and who knew when he would be back? Certainly not before Christmas. The train ride just to get to New York would take at least two days. He would have to come back after only two days with his father if he wanted to make it in time.

But he would come back eventually, I was sure of that. And things would be better when he did, just like he’d always said they would.

I picked myself up and walked down the stairs, unsure of what to do. I wanted to do something with myself, with the freedom I had returned to me only hours before.

So I decided to go to the dancehall. Surely I would be allowed back inside. It was a long walk, but I didn’t mind. I needed to let off some of my pent-up energy anyway.

When I reached the hall it appeared that no one was there. There wasn’t a single car in the parking lot. But the doors were unlocked when I tried to open them, so I walked through the foyer and into the spacious room inside. People were dancing around on the stage with four people sitting in chairs in front of them.

I wasn’t sure what to do, but the older looking woman sitting on the left of the four turned her head and saw me. She smiled and stood up to walk toward me. Her lips were almost as red as her dress. “What can I help you with, young lady?” she asked in a feeble voice.

“I was just hoping I could look through the picture album from the Christmas dance.”

“I’m sure Charles would love that. He keeps up with all the albums and he loves to get them out to look through with people. So full of memories. I’ll take you to him.”

We walked across the room to a side door and then down a long hallway full of closed doors.

“I’m Martha, by the way. Our dancers are practicing for the Valentine’s Day dance. Do you think you’ll be attending it?” the woman asked me.

“I’m not sure yet. I hope so, though.”

“Charles is right up here.” She pointed to an open door on the left just ahead.

We found a handsome man who could’ve been my father’s age sitting behind a desk with papers spread out in front of him. He didn’t even seem to notice us until Martha knocked on the door. He looked up and smiled. “Hello, there. What can I—” He stopped when his eyes fell on me and studied my face as he continued. “—do for you?” I felt myself blush nervously, sure he recognized me, even though I didn’t remember seeing him at the dance.

“This young lady, I’m sorry, what was your name?” Martha asked.

“Alexandra,” Charles answered for me, leaning back in his chair and tilting his head as he continued to study my face.

“You two know each other?”

“Yes, we do.”

“She was hoping to look through one of the albums, so I’ll leave you two to it. It was nice to meet you, Alexandra.”

“You, too.”

She left me standing alone in the doorway, wondering if I was about to be thrown out again. Charles’s behavior was so strange. He obviously knew me, but he didn’t seem upset.

“Would you please shut the door and then come and have a seat, Alexandra?” he said.

“How is that you know me?” I asked as I took a seat in one of the two saggy green chairs in front of his desk.

He stood up and walked to the wall on the right side of the room, which was lined with rows of picture albums on bookshelves that had been built right into the wall from the floor to the ceiling, and picked up the one that had *Winter Ball, 1932* written on its spine. Then he sat back down behind his desk. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of Martha, but you’re the girl who was here with Sydney Algoth’s son, right?” he asked as he opened the book and began turning pages.

“Yes, but Sydney’s name was cleared. He’s not a mobster.”

“I heard. But it doesn’t really matter, anyway. I hated that they threw you both out. A father’s mistake isn’t cause for the punishment of his children. They wanted to destroy the photos with his son in it, but I talked them out of it. The bits and pieces of the dance caught in these photographs live on through them. We can look back at these to remember and feel what we felt then. Destroying any part of that would be a tragedy, I think. So they let me keep them.”

“So you have pictures of us?”

“There are a few, yes.” He stopped and peeled the plastic away from a page to take out a picture and hand it to me. “There’s one.”

I had to look through the faces sitting in chairs for a minute before I found Mason and me in our seats, waiting for the show to start. He had his arm around me and I was looking up at the ceiling.

“Here’s another one.” Charles set another picture beside the first, and I saw us still in our seats, clapping after the show had ended.

“There are two more I think, here’s one.” A picture of Benny, Emmaline, Mason, and I eating at our dinner table was laid in front of me. I did *not* want that one. Charles set a picture of everyone dancing in front of me. Mason and I were hardly visible behind another couple. While I was grateful for the pictures, and for Charles rescuing them, none of them were as good as I had hoped. But they were better than nothing.

“I think that’s it, but I’ll keep looking just in case,” Charles said as he continued to flip through the book. I watched the pages turn as different pictures triggered different memories of that night, and I understood what he meant before. “Wait, how could I forget this one?” I leaned closer to see a close up picture of Mason holding me close as we danced together. Even though Mason was turned so that part of his back was facing the picture, his face was positioned so the camera caught him smiling brightly at me. And I looked just as happy smiling back at him. It was perfect. Charles took it out of the album and handed it to me.

“Could I borrow this one so I can get it copied?” I asked, looking up at him as I took it.

“Yes, take them all if you like. People do that sort of thing all the time. Just remember to bring the originals back. Sometimes people don’t and something happens to it. So they come back asking if I can do anything for them, but I can’t, not without the original.”

“I’ll bring them back as soon as I can. Thank you.” I picked them all up, deciding to cut Benny out of the copies later.

I walked down Michigan Avenue toward MonaMay, a little gift shop with a photo developing center in the back. Here, I dropped the photos off, requesting two copies of each. That way I would have copies, too. *Maybe I should get a matching frame. It might be nice to be able to look at Mason as I fall asleep every night.* So I picked another one up on the way home.

As I neared my house, I saw a familiar curly blond sitting on my front porch. She looked just like she did the day before, leaning forward, looking away from me. This lifted my spirits as my pace quickened. “Hello, Emmaline,” I said as I approached her.

She sat up straight when she heard my voice. “Hi. Your mother said you went to give Mason the good news.”

Cautiously, I sat down beside her. “That’s right. But he wasn’t home. He took a train to New York last night.”

She nodded and stared across the street absently.

“Do you want to come in? Hayden’s supposed to be picking me up sometime this morning, but—Oh no—I should have called him before I left. Did my mother say if he’s come by?”

“No, but there’s something I want to talk to you about. It might be better if we did it outside.”

“Okay.” I had a feeling it was about one of two very important things, the repairing or conclusion of our friendship.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Mason?” she said, looking over at me.

“It was his secret, not mine. And I promised not to tell anyone.”

“You told Hayden.”

“No, I didn’t. He found out from his father, but that’s another story altogether—”

“Tell me, then.”

“Alright,” I said with a sigh. So I told her everything that had happened the night I was caught sneaking out and filled in the gaps I’d left when I told her about the day I met Mason.

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t tell me. I would have kept your secret,” she said when I was through.

“It’s not my secret to tell…What if I told him one of your secrets? Think about how you would feel if I told Mason how your father married your mother when she was six months pregnant with you by someone else, or how you were raped where you used to live by a man that was never caught. You would be furious—”

“Because they would have ruined me.”

“The same way Mason’s secret ruined him. But that’s only part of why I would never tell anyone what you confided in me. The most important part is that those are your secrets, not mine. I promised him, Emmaline. I only told my parents because I would have done anything to keep seeing him.”

She nodded and looked down. “You’re right…I’m sorry I was so mad at you. I felt bad that you didn’t tell me, but I felt worse about Benny. It was easier to blame you than myself for what happened.”

“It wasn’t your fault, either. It’s his own fault for judging Mason so harshly. He was a creep, anyway.”

She shook her head as tears sprung to her eyes. “That’s not what I meant.”

I put my arm around her and laid my head over hers as she rested it against my shoulder. “What did you mean then?”

She shook her head again. So I just held her as she cried.

A few minutes passed by before I heard the door open behind us. We both looked back and saw my mother standing in the doorway. Her smile faded when she saw Emmaline. “Are you alright?” she asked.

“I’m okay.” Emmaline turned away as she wiped her cheeks on her coat.

“I just wanted to let you know that Hayden called while you were out and wanted you to call him when you got home,” my mother said to me.

“I’ll call him when I come inside. Thank you, Mother.” The door closed behind her as I turned around.

“Do you want to go to Hayden’s with me?” I asked Emmaline. “I was supposed to go over there this morning. Or I could stay here with you, if you want.”

“No, you already have plans. But I wouldn’t mind going with you. Usually I would feel like a third wheel, but I really don’t want to be alone.” Her eyes began to tear up again, so I stood up and held a hand out to her.

I told my mother about Mason before I called Hayden, who said he wouldn’t mind at all if Emmaline came over with me. So Emmaline and I had lunch with my mother and Katy before we left for Hayden’s.

It was such a relief to have my best friend back.

“When will Mason get back?” Emmaline asked as we turned the corner.

“I don’t know. He left a letter that didn’t really answer that. So…we don’t have school tomorrow. Maybe you could spend the night over.” As much as I wanted to show her my ring, I figured it was best to avoid the subject of Mason. She would probably associate him with Benny, and I didn’t want her to have to think about him.

“I would love to spend the night over. I’ll call my mother from Hayden’s to check with her.”

As we walked and talked about what we could do together later that night, a wonderful idea came to me. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of it sooner. If I could get Emmaline and Hayden alone, maybe they would really hit it off.

When we got there, we followed Hayden to his living room and listened to the radio while we talked about our Christmas plans. Emmaline was leaving Christmas Eve to visit her grandparents in Kansas, but Hayden and I were doing mostly the same thing. Luckily, it seemed that Hayden wanted to talk about Mason just as much as I did, so the subject didn’t come up.

When he suggested we play cards after awhile, I told them to start without me so I could talk to his mother about something. I wondered what I would talk to her about as I walked down the hallway toward the patio. I found her sitting at the table in a sunshiny yellow dress, with a book in her hand. *Oh, now I’m interrupting her reading…But it’s for a good cause.* “Sorry to bother you, Mrs. West,” I said as I sat down across from her. “I was just wondering if you could tell me what happened on the Friday night mystery radio show since I missed it.”

She smiled and set down her book. “It’s no bother at all. I would love to retell the story. So, Christina’s trapped in the cellar and she still thinks there’s just a problem with the lock on the door. Her fiancé is trying to find the old place…” She told it so well, her face and voice so full of emotion, that I became completely lost in The Killing Plot. Right in the middle of an intense nightmare Christina was having, the door opened behind me and I nearly jumped out of my seat.

Hayden and Emmaline laughed as I took in a deep breath to try and calm myself down. “You nearly scared me to death,” I said.

“What are you doing? We’ve played through three full games already,” Hayden asked.

“Your mother was just telling me what I missed on The Killing Plot Friday night.”

“I missed that too, would you mind if I sat down to listen?” Emmaline asked.

“Not at all. I’ll just backtrack a little so it makes sense to you,” Hayden’s mother said. Both Emmaline and Hayden sat down and we spent the next twenty minutes or so listening to her tell the story. The show ended just as Christina began to understand what was happening, that someone was plotting to kill her.

I looked at her with wide eyes. “That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“That’s just cruel. Now we all have to wait until Friday night to find out if she escapes. Oh, she must be terrified.”

“Alexandra, it’s only a story,” Hayden reminded me.

“I know, but aren’t you afraid for her?” I always get way too wrapped up in mystery radio shows.

“I’m more worried about you. You’re taking this way too seriously.” We both laughed as we stood up.

“How about we all go have some oatmeal with brown sugar and almonds?” Hayden’s mother asked as she stood up, too.

“I am a little hungry,” I said.

“Me, too. I’d be happy to help you in the kitchen,” Emmaline added.

We all went to the kitchen and helped put lunch together before we sat down in the dining room to eat.

“Emmaline and I were talking about the Frankenstein film they’re playing in the theatre right now. Maybe we could all three go see it tomorrow,” Hayden said before taking a bite.

“A film?” I’d only seen two films before, and for some reason, I just didn’t enjoy them, which worked out well in this situation. “That’s alright. You two should go ahead, though.”

“Are you sure? We could go a different day if you’d like.”

“No, I don’t really care for the movies.”

Hayden looked at Emmaline. “Would you still like to go with me?”

“Yes,” she said, looking happier than she had all day.

“Alright, I’ll call later to see what time it plays.”

Hayden began eating, but Emmaline smiled over at me and stopped to hold her spoon just in front of her lips as she mouthed out *thank you*.

**Chapter Fifteen**

The rain tapped on my window, reminding me that I wasn’t completely alone.

I was lying on my bed late in the afternoon, trying to get some sleep since I hadn’t gotten much the night before with Emmaline sleeping over. We sneaked downstairs a little after midnight to do each other’s hair while we listened to the radio, keeping the volume so low we could barely hear it. Then we baked and ate cookies, quietly, before we went back upstairs to my room and stayed awake talking for at least another hour. But for some reason, sleep just couldn’t seem to find its way to me now.

So I got up and opened my window just enough to hold my hands out so the rain could wash over them. The sound of rain instantly became louder.

Hayden had driven his father’s car over to pick up Emmaline twenty something minutes before and I’d been lying in bed ever since, unable to do anything other than think about Mason. It was the first time since I found his letter that I had been able to stop and think about it, and it was beginning to get depressing. What if Mason did decide to move back to Shilling with his father? His home was there. His friends were there. Our relationship could continue, but it wouldn’t be the same. It would be more like it was now, a lot of waiting…wondering…worrying...

I looked at my hands and watched the clear streams of water snaking their way unevenly over my skin and dripping off of my fingernails. The freezing water was beginning to hurt, but I just didn’t feel like pulling them back in. I didn’t really feel like doing much of anything, not until Mason came back and cleared everything up.

The phone in the hallway rang. *Probably another one of Mother’s friends, calling to hear more about Sydney Algoth’s son.* The newspaper article had been fueling her gossiping nature for two days now. I pulled my hands in and closed my window as the ringing stopped.

A car just like the one I saw driving out of Swatches the first time I went there to see Mason drove by. I wondered if I talked Benny into giving Mason his job back if he would be more likely to stay in Chicago. But would that be selfish? And would he even take the job after what Benny had done? I really didn’t want to go see Benny, but I would do it if it might keep Mason there. If he didn’t want to stay, I wouldn’t try to make him, but it couldn’t hurt to try and get him his job back.

“Alexandra,” my mother called from downstairs. “The phone’s for you.” Hope began to creep in as I pictured Mason calling from a train station somewhere.

“Who is it?” I asked as I ran down the stairs to the little table at the bottom of them.

“Hayden.” That glimmer of hope died.

“Is he calling from the theater?”

My mother nodded and handed me the phone. “He said it’s nothing to worry about. He just forgot to tell you something when he was picking Emmaline up.”

“Hello?” I said, pressing the earpiece to my ear.

“Alexandra? I’m calling because we heard a couple standing in line in front of us talking about how Sydney Algoth would be on the radio with his son Friday evening and it reminded me that there was something I needed to tell you. It’s better said sooner than later.”

“Mason’s going to be on the radio Friday? But the train couldn’t have reached New York yet.”

“Yes, but it will probably get there before the radio show.”

“How could they know Mason was coming?”

Katy walked down the stairs muttering something about the stupid rain.

“I don’t know. I suppose he must have gotten a message to his father somehow. But that’s not why I called. I wanted to let you know that I went to the police station this morning and dropped the charges I had against him. I still don’t care much for Mason, but I can see now that he’s not a threat to you. I hope you know that was what it was always about, protecting you.”

I could see how he could have thought he was protecting me, in his own way. “Thank you for doing that, Hayden. Do you know what time he’ll be on the radio?”

“I think they said five o’clock. Do you want to come listen to it at my house?”

“No, my parents and Katy will want to listen to it, so I’ll probably stay here with them. You could come over here, though, and stay for dinner afterward.”

“Alright.”

“Listen, I know you need to get to your movie, but I was wondering if you would go somewhere with me tomorrow.”

“Sure, where do you want to go?”

“I need to go to Swatches, but I really don’t want to go alone.”

“Why do you need to go there?”

“I was hoping I could get Mason his job back, but don’t say anything to Emmaline about it, okay?” The less she had to hear or think about Benny, the better.

“I won’t say anything, but are you sure you want to go see that Benny character? The more I hear about him, the less I like him.”

“I don’t like him very much, either, but I want to do this for Mason. It’s alright if you don’t want to come.”

“No, I’m coming with you. I don’t want you going over there alone. I just don’t think it’s a very good idea.”

“Thank you, Hayden. Just come over tomorrow whenever you want.”

“I’ll come by in the morning sometime.”

“Bye.”

I set the telephone down and headed to the kitchen, where I knew I would find my mother and Katy. I couldn’t wait to give them the good news.

#

“Ready to go?” Hayden asked when I opened the front door and found him standing on the porch in the morning, wearing one of his nicer black suits.

“Yep, I’m leaving, Mother,” I called out.

“See you in a bit,” she called back.

The wind blowing the groaning tree branches to the east was barely even chilly, I noticed during the short walk to the car.

“Thank you for coming with me. I really didn’t want to have to be alone with Benny,” I said as we rode down Michigan Avenue.

“I’m glad you asked me to come, but are you sure Mason will want to work there again? Emmaline told me what happened at the dance.”

“I honestly don’t know.” And really, I couldn’t stand the idea of Mason working with him again, but this was something I felt I had to do.

“Look at that,” I said, pointing to a group of four bundled-up children being led down the sidewalk by an old woman. They were all smiling and waving at us as we rode by.

“Merry Christmas,” one shouted. I looked back and watched them do the same thing to the next car that went by.

“Could we stop by MonaMay on the way home? I dropped off some pictures for copying and I need to pick them up.”

“Alright.”

We pulled up behind the three other cars parked in front of Swatches. The garage door was closed, but the office door was unlocked when Hayden reached out to open it for me. The familiar ring of the bell announced our arrival and Benny yelled, “Come on back,” from the open side door that led to the garage.

Hayden and I glanced at each other before we followed his voice into the garage, which was a terrible mess of tools, car parts, and trash, and found Benny sitting in a convertible, wiping off the dashboard. He looked a little startled to see me, but he smiled as he climbed out of the car and wiped his hands on the cloth he’d just been wiping the car with. “Alexandra, I’m glad to see you here,” he said. “Mason here, too?”

“No, he’s in New York, or he will be soon. But I did come to talk to you about him.”

“I shoulda known he wouldn’t be here since you brought *him*.” He nodded at Hayden. “Just with him till Mason gets back?” He gave me the same sleazy smile he’d given me the night of the dance.

“I would never do that to Mason. I only asked Hayden to come with me because I didn’t want to have to be alone with you after what happened before. And I don’t think Mason would want that, either.” I was acting a lot braver than I felt.

“Sheesh, well I’m sorry, Alexandra. I’d had a lot to drink and drinking makes me pretty stupid sometimes.”

“Thank you. I wanted to talk to you about Mason getting his job back, though. You’ve heard about his father, haven’t you?”

“Course I have. That’s why I’m so happy to see you. Anyone who heard about Sydney’s kid working here’s been coming by to see him. And business is booming. I can’t keep up with all of it by myself. I’ve thought about it a lot and I’d even be happy to make him my partner and split everything with him if he’d come back. He’s the reason for all the sudden business and—he’s the best darn mechanic I’ve ever met. It was stupid of me to fire him. So yeah, you send him over here when he gets back, and he’s got a job.”

I felt a great deal of relief, knowing his job would be waiting for him here in Chicago with me. “I will. Thank you, Benny. Hopefully, I’ll see you later then.”

I turned away and got to the door before I heard Hayden speak up for the first time since we’d gotten there. “What about Emmaline?” he said. I stopped and turned around.

“What about her?” Benny answered.

“You’re sorry for what you did to Mason and Alexandra. What about Emmaline?”

“What about her?”

“You broke her heart. You made her cry. Don’t you even care?”

Benny shrugged his shoulders. “If she couldn’t see it for it was, then no. I don’t care. No man who’s serious about a woman moves to the bed with her that fast, and she should know it…She’ll get over it, anyway.”

“What do you mean?” I asked him.

His eyebrows bent down as he shook his head. “She really never told you? Well, I’ll let Emmaline help you figure that out.”

But I wasn’t going to ask. I refused to believe she would have done something like that. He had to be lying.

Benny picked up a black hose off of a counter and went back to the car he’d been working on.

“You’re a real piece of work, treating her that way,” Hayden said as the hood of the car Benny was leaning into popped opened.

Benny stood up straight. “Look at you, moving in on another man’s woman while he’s out of town. You’re just as bad as me, I’d say.”

They gave each other dirty looks as I went to grab Hayden’s arm and pull him toward the door. “Come on,” I said.

#

I stared at the full moon through my window as I lay in bed, rather than try to sleep, since I had already tried and failed at that for so long. It was just like the night before, lying in bed awake, unable to do anything but worry about Mason. The quiet was so heavy in the air at that hour that it almost hurt my ears. The same question just kept running through my head. *What’s going to happen?*

It felt like ages since I’d seen him, and the realization of the short time I had actually known him was beginning to set in. I hoped it was the not knowing that was causing it and that he wasn’t feeling the same way, making it easier for him to choose Shilling over me.

I slipped my hands in the pocket of Mason’s coat as I rolled over onto my side. Wearing it was comforting, somehow.

Just as my eyes began to get heavy, I heard a single tiny *tap* against my window. *Probably something being carried on the wind.* A minute later, another *tap* came. Again, I decided to ignore it. *Just a twig… or a rock…* My eyes were getting heavy again. *…a moth… or a bird…* As they began to close, something dark flew over my head. My window shattered, falling all over me in tiny pieces.

Fear tore me from my bed. *Someone’s out there!* My feet carried me instinctively over the floor and past the dark, fist-sized rock that was still rolling toward the door. I reached it first, flinging it open and running into the hallway—right into Katy. We both fell backwards, knocking the breath out of me. “Are you alright?” she asked as she stood up and held a hand out to me.

“Someone’s outside,” I said breathlessly, picturing an ax-wielding serial killer climbing up the side of our house toward my broken window.

“Really?” She got the same sort of eager look my mother sometimes gets. “I’ll go see who it is.”

“I’ll go get Father.” It was a wonder neither of my parents had been woken up.

“No, wait.”

“Why?” How was she not even a little bit afraid?

“Just wait.” Katy crept across my room, feeling the floor carefully with her foot before putting the weight of her body on it to prevent stepping on the razor sharp glass I had somehow managed to avoid. She stayed in the shadows as she approached my window, stretching her neck up to get a look at the front lawn a half second sooner. Her shoulders seemed to slump as she let out a breath and relaxed. “It’s just Hayden,” she said quietly, rolling her eyes and turning to make her way back to me.

“Hayden? Why would Hayden want to break my window?”

“Beats me. I shouldn’t be surprised, though, since I already knew that *rat* was no good.”

“Katy, he dropped the charges against Mason. He honestly thought he was protecting me from a mobster.”

She reached me just then and stared at me like she didn’t know what to say for a few seconds. Then she shook her head. “You’re so nice, Alexandra. I’m going back to bed. You can tell Father what happened after you talk to Hayden. He probably didn’t break your window on purpose and it would only get him in trouble if you wake Father up now.”

She went back to her room as I made my way down the stairs, still at a loss for why Hayden was there in the dead of night, throwing things at my window. “What are you doing here?” I asked him as I stepped outside, pulling Mason’s coat tighter around me.

“I’m really sorry about the window. I’ll pay to have it fixed.” He looked behind me at the door. “Where’s your father?”

“Asleep. Did you really come here to see him?”

“No, I came for you. I just thought I would have woken him up and he would be coming out here with you.”

“Then why didn’t you run away?”

He gave me an odd look. “He would have thought I was a burglar or something. I couldn’t leave him to think his house was under attack.”

“Well, what are you doing here? Is something wrong?”

“No. I just…You seemed to appreciate it when Mason came to see you in the middle of the night…so I thought I would come instead…while he’s away.” He took one of my hands in his. His hand didn’t feel right, too soft and smooth. I had grown so used to the rough hands Mason held me with.

I shook my head as I pulled my hand away. “I’m sorry, Hayden, but I can’t.” I was already beginning to feel guilty about being outside with him during the night. I could only imagine how Mason would have felt if he saw us like that.

My gaze was drawn to the windows lining the other side of the street, searching for any sign of light or life in them.

“Alexandra,” He took a step closer to me and took my hand again. “He would never know. No one would.” His voice became a whisper. “It’s just us.”

The full moon hung directly over his head as he leaned closer. I felt a strange sensation inside that confused and scared me—so I took a step back. “I, I should probably go inside. I’ll see you tomorrow.” I turned around and ran into my house, sitting down against the back of the door once I was inside. *That was awful.*

Even though I couldn’t see it in the darkness of the house, I held my ring up and smiled as I sighed. Mason was the only man I loved, the only one I wanted.

I waited awhile to get up, hoping Hayden would leave before I went to get my father.

#

After getting my parents up to let them know a rock had mysteriously broken my window and then cleaning the mess up, I spent the night downstairs on the couch. The cold air coming in through my window would have free reign in my room until my father came home from work the next day. He planned to get home early to make sure he was able to fix it before the radio interview we were all looking forward to came on. He was in an unusually good mood when he got home, since he wouldn’t have to go back to work until after Christmas Day.

Hayden came over early to help him with the repairs. I was worried that things would be uncomfortable between the two of us, but they weren’t. When the knock came at the door and I opened it up to find him on the other side, it felt like nothing had even happened. I guess it’s just that way with family. We went up to my room and talked about the movie he’d seen with Emmaline while he and my father worked.

They had the window in well before five o’clock and we were all gathered in the living room by four-forty. I sat down on the couch in the middle of Hayden and Katy while my father turned on the radio. “Almost time now,” he said as the static came on. He fiddled with the dials for a minute before he found the right station. Jazzy trumpet music was playing. My father bobbed his head to the music as he sat back down in his chair. My mother worked on her knitting in the chair beside him. All I could do was stare at the radio anxiously, willing the time to go faster.

My parents talked quietly about my grandparents staying in my room when they came, since it was so much neater than Katy’s (where they said I would be staying), until the announcer finally came on.

*Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It’s an honor to present a special guest to you tonight, Mr. Sydney Algoth. Thank you so much for being with us, Sydney.*

*I’m happy to be here.* This must have been Mason’s father.

*And your son is here with you, Mason, is it?*

*That’s right,* Mason’s deep voice said. I felt my heart speed up as I smiled. Oh, I missed him like crazy.

*So you came all the way from Shilling, Illinois? You must be happy to be with your father again, after having not seen or heard from him for the last year.*

*Yes sir, almost as happy as I was when I called up here on Monday and found out what was going on.*

Why hadn’t Mason corrected him about Shilling?

*So we’ve all read the newspaper article that’s gone out nationally, but it didn’t quite explain, how did you do it? How did you handle the ever-present danger that what you were doing posed, Sydney?*

*Well…I won’t lie and say it was easy or that I wasn’t afraid. The fear was debilitating at times. There are things worse than being killed, and I knew that if anyone figured out what I was doing, there was a good chance those things would happen to me. It would have been so much easier to just become a true mobster. But—I couldn’t do that…Do you have children, Frank?*

*Oh, um, yes I do. I have two sons myself, actually.*

*Imagine you’re all they have. Their mother’s passed away and they have no other family. You can’t bring them into the life you’ve been forced into. No matter how scary or difficult things were, I had to do what I did for my son’s sake. A child is the most powerful driving force there is. Logic and danger are irrelevant when your child’s wellbeing is on the line. So—I guess that’s how I handled it. That’s what got me through it.*

*So, now you’ve finally got your son here with you. I’ve been told New York’s finest will require your help in straightening everything out legally, and that this will take some time. So, Mason, will you be staying here with your father until everything is settled, or will you be returning home to Shilling sometime soon?*

*Well, I’m extremely grateful to be here with my father, and I hate to leave him when I only just got him back, but I’m actually getting on a train to go home tonight. There’s a girl waiting for me back home, and I think I’ve already been away from her long enough.*

*Back home? Shilling?* It felt like the wind had been knocked out of me as I processed what I’d just heard. I vaguely felt my hand against my mouth and then my body stand on its own before I ran upstairs to my room. My heart was breaking and my brain couldn’t seem to process anything else.

Someone shut the radio off as I reached the top of the stairs. A second later I fell onto my bed and pressed my face against my pillow as the crying began.

There was a girl waiting for him back home. It was always her. I was just a temporary thing for him, until he could go back to her. My hands dug into my pillow as the pain continued to worsen. It was the worst pain I had ever felt, and I knew that it would never end. I was just something convenient for him, something he clung to in the city to get him through the time he was stuck there. It made sense now. I knew how things would end when they began, but I lost sight of that somewhere along the way.

*So this is what’s going to happen. He goes home to her and leaves me behind.* It was probably the only thing I hadn’t imagined happening.

He seemed so sincere…the notes…the ring…How could he do this to me? How could I ever trust anyone after what he did? No one would ever be as convincing as he was… He said he loved me…Every time I heard that from a man, I wouldn’t be able to believe it. It would seem hollow, a death sentence to our relationship even. It didn’t really matter, though, because I could never love any other man.

The weight of someone’s body pressed against my bed a second before an arm slid around my shoulders. I didn’t even look to see who it was before I sat up and leaned against them, wrapping my arms around their neck, the sobs only becoming heavier. I felt Hayden’s arms wrap around my back. “I’m sorry, Alexandra,” he said.

“You were right. I should have never trusted him.” I picked my head up to look at him. “I should have listened to you.”

“It’s alright. He was good at what he did. I hate that you’re suffering, but…would you give me a chance now? You know I would never hurt you, and I would do anything to make you happy.”

I knew he would never hurt me and that he truly loved me. But I didn’t want to think about that. I wanted Mason to take it back. I wanted it not to be true. I leaned against him again, letting him hold me close as I nestled my head in his neck. It felt good, but not right. *Is this it, then? Will I really end up with Hayden?*

His hand rested against my cheek as he shifted his head to look down at me. I couldn’t look back at him. “Let me be him for you, Alexandra. Nothing like this will ever happen, I promise.”

“No. No more promises…please.”

Hayden leaned back, pulling my arms away from him so he could hold my left hand. He reached for my ring and tried to slide it off. “No!” I said, jerking my hand away.

“You still want to wear that after what he said?”

“I don’t want to take it off.” Not yet. His promises may have become broken lies, but I wasn’t ready to let the ring go. It was proof that he cared enough to buy it for me, a reminder that he had once claimed to love me.

“I’ll buy you a new one. We could pick it out together tomorrow.”

I shook my head as I held my hand against my neck, under my chin where he wouldn’t be able to see it.

He reached for my hand again, so I leaned back and turned away. “Alexandra,” He put his hand on my back and scooted closer to me, leaning over to put his face right in front of mine. “Love me instead of him.” And then—he kissed me. For a second I couldn’t move. I would have done anything to feel some relief, so I let him kiss me. But I only felt worse. I turned away and lay down so I could cry, alone. “What’s wrong?” Hayden asked me.

“It doesn’t feel right. I just…I want to be with Mason.”

“Come on.” He pulled me up slowly. “I know you want Mason, but he’s not coming back.”

I let out a painful cry as I leaned against Hayden.

“Choose me instead.”

No. I knew I could never be with him. It wasn’t just Mason. I tried to pull myself together long enough to make him understand. “Hayden, I can’t. You feel like my brother. It would be like agreeing to date Katy. I, I can’t.” I really just wanted him to leave, so I could be alone with my pain.

“You don’t mean that. It’s ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not. We grew up like brother and sister. This just won’t work…”

“It has to. I’ve never even considered anyone else. You may have always seen me as your brother, but I’ve always seen you as my future wife.”

“Well, maybe you *should* consider someone else. You should ask Emmaline out on a date.”

“Emmaline? But she was with Benny.”

“She’s not with him now.”

“I mean she was *with* him. I can’t take a girl out on a date who’s given her virtue away so easily.”

“No, she didn’t. She couldn’t have—Look, I know Emmaline. She wouldn’t do that, and she would make you happy.”

“But the way she was kissing him—How can you not even wonder?”

“Because I know her.”

Hayden looked down at my bedspread for a minute as he considered what I was saying. “What if she rejects me?” he said before he looked back up at me. “I can’t handle any more rejection.”

“She won’t reject you.” I wanted to tell him how much she liked him, but it seemed like a violation of her trust. But it also sounded like he was seriously considering asking her out. If I could convince him to, she would forgive me. “She really likes you. She always has.”

“Really?” He smiled.

“Really, just don’t tell her I told you. I don’t want her to be angry with me, but she would be over the moon if you asked her out on a date.”

“Huh. It’s going to be difficult to get over the idea of ending up with you. It’ll take some time.”

“Alexandra,” my mother said from my open doorway. “Can I come in, dear?”

“I really don’t feel like eating anything,” I said, letting her know I wasn’t going to come to dinner.

She came to sit at the foot of my bed. “I understand. But, will you be alright?”

“No.” The tears returned, spilling over uncontrollably.

“I’m sorry.” She put her arm around me. “This is all my fault.”

“How?”

“Your father and I drove him away. Of course he’ll want the girl with parents who love him. He probably left her to come here and only decided to go back because she had better parents than us. Oh, I wish we had been more understanding.”

“This isn’t your fault. He obviously never broke it off with her. I, I, I was just a fling, a girl on the side.” My voice broke and burst loudly and I really just wanted to be alone. I lay back down on my pillow and hid my face. My mother’s hand went back and forth over my back. “I want to be alone,” I said in a muffled voice which I wasn’t sure they could hear. But the hand pulled away. Feet moved across the floor. And then my door shut.

I was alone, so alone, more alone and wounded than I had ever been before.

#

Sunday. The day before Christmas Eve.

I hated the sun for shining so brightly and the people out in the city for being so happy. I was lying on my bed, the same thing I’d been doing for two days, since that terrible radio program.

Mason’s ring still hadn’t left my finger. It hurt to wear, but it would hurt worse to remove, I knew.

The phone in the hallway rang. No one bothered to answer it. We were all four staying inside the house, not answering the phone, not answering the door. No one wanted to talk about what had happened with Mason, and we all knew that this was the only thing the outside world would want to talk about. I could tell it was driving my mother crazy, but she dealt with it for my sake.

Katy was so angry with Mason, I was surprised she hadn’t gone to Shilling so she could sit and wait for him. She took every opportunity she had to say how much she wanted to sock him in the jaw.

The ringing stopped.

I rolled over and reached under the pillow that hid the rope I’d tied to my bed. My eyes began to tear up, something they did constantly. “I hate you,” I said to the rope. “I hate you!” I stood up and went to get the nail file from the top of my bureau, and began rubbing it against the rope I hated so much. I cried and slashed at it and, more than anything, I just wanted to stop hurting.

*How could he do this? How could he say he loved me? How could he be going home to someone else right now?*

My bedroom door opened and I pushed the tangled hair away from my face to find Emmaline standing in my doorway. “What are you doing?” she asked me.

“I’m trying to get this rope off of my bed.”

“Hold on.” She left and came back with a pair of sewing scissors. Then she cut through the rope and carried it away, returning empty-handed.

She sat on my bed beside me. “I know how you feel, Alexandra. I know it hurts so bad you think you’ll never be able to smile again, like all you can do is lay in your bed until you die.”

I nodded. “I just want Mason to be here…I want him to love me again.”

“I know.” She reached out to hug me. “But things will get better.”

“No,” I shook my head as my face tensed with pain. “No, it won’t. You don’t understand how much I love him. Did you hear what he said?”

“I was out having dinner with my parents, but Hayden told me about it. He took me out on a date yesterday. I wanted to tell you what happened, but maybe this isn’t a good time.”

I shrugged and turned my gaze toward the window. I knew I should be happy for her. I could only imagine how happy she was, since she’d had a crush on him for so long. But I just didn’t have the energy.

“Well,” Emmaline went to pick up the hairbrush on my dresser and began brushing my hair. “I’m going to tell you the story my mother told me when I was in your shoes a week ago…” I didn’t hear a word she said. I just continued to stare out of my window as she brushed my hair and told the story.

Someone knocked on my door. “Can I come in?” my mother asked, as it began to open.

I offered her the same shrug I’d given Emmaline.

“I hope you’ll come down to dinner tonight, Alexandra. You’ve hardly eaten anything lately. You’re welcome to stay, Emmaline.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Roomer, but Hayden invited me over to his house for dinner. I was going to invite Alexandra to go with me?” Emmaline said.

I shook my head, not even having the energy to answer.

“Hey, Emmaline.” Katy walked into my room and sat on my bed beside my mother.

“Hello, Katy.”

“I noticed you haven’t put your presents under the tree yet,” my mother said to me.

“They’re in my closet. I can’t wrap them.” My eyes began to water. “Mason’s present’s in there and…I can’t bear to look at it.” I hadn’t even put the picture in the frame yet, and I still needed to return the originals to the dancehall. Or maybe I wouldn’t return them. It wasn’t like I would ever need more copies.

“Don’t cry.” My mother put an arm around me. “I’ll take care of the presents for you.”

“Yeah, he’s not even worth it,” Katy said. “Ugh, I hate that guy. I wish he was here right now so I could hit him and throw him out the window. You can’t trust men. I’m never getting married.”

“You can’t judge all men by one man’s mistakes. Your father’s wonderful and there’s plenty more like him out there,” my mother said.

“I should probably go,” Emmaline said. “I’m leaving for Kansas tomorrow and I won’t see you until I get back, Alexandra. So…” She took a small wrapped box out of her pocket and set it on the bed beside me. “Merry Christmas.”

“Thanks, Emmaline. I got you something, too, but…”

“That’s alright. You can give it to me when things are better.”

I waited for her to leave to lie back down and pull the covers over my head, blocking the wretched sunlight out, and cry. *Things will never be better.*

**Chapter Sixteen**

Christmas Eve.

My father said I had to go to Hayden’s. So I dragged myself out of bed at noon, and followed my family dutifully out to the car.

Katy went on excitedly during most of the ride. “I can’t believe Christmas is tomorrow. Finally. It felt like it would never get here. I wonder if Grandma and Grandpa will get me the catcher’s mitt I told them I wanted—and the hangman’s game…”

I took to staring out the window, watching the Christmas trees in the houses pass by.

“Girls, you help carry in the presents,” my mother said, as my father parked the car in front of Hayden’s. “Your father and I will get the casserole and fruitcake.”

“Yes, Mother,” Katy and I said in unison. Katy looked over at me and laughed. I surprised myself with a shadow of a smile.

My father opened the trunk as I climbed out of the car and went to retrieve as many presents as I could carry. “Even you can’t be sad on Christmas,” Katy said to me as we walked up to Hayden’s house. “Think of all the presents you’re going to get.”

I nodded as my father pressed the doorbell, but I knew that no amount of presents would compensate for what I’d lost.

We were all surprised to see Emmaline when the door opened. “Hello, Roomers. Come on in.”

“Hello, Emmaline,” my mother said. “I thought you were leaving today.”

“I am. I’m just spending the morning with Hayden until my parents come pick me up. Then we’re going straight to Kansas.”

Hayden appeared in the foyer just then and came to take an armful of presents from Katy and me. “Let me help you with that. We’ll just set them under the tree. My parents are in the kitchen, Mr. and Mrs. Roomer.”

Emmaline, Katy, and I followed Hayden out of the foyer and away from the kitchen, where my parents were headed.

“You have five Christmas trees in this house. Which one are these going under?” Katy asked as we walked toward a possibility of three of these trees, the other two being in the dining room and just inside the front door.

“The one in the parlor. My mother said we’ll open these presents in there after dinner,” Hayden answered.

We slipped into the parlor, a smaller room in the house (still larger than most rooms in a regular sized house, though) and put the presents under the snow painted tree, beside the ones that were already there. Then we sat in the tall stately chairs with their round crimson backs against the hexagonal walls.

“This has always been one of my favorite rooms,” I said, looking around at the burgundy walls with little gold flowers painted here and there.

“Mine, too. We weren’t allowed in here very often when we were children, were we?” Hayden said, reaching out to hold Emmaline’s hand.

“Well I hate the color red, so it’s always been one of my least favorite rooms,” Katy said.

“To each their own, I guess. Emmaline’s parents will be here any second, but perhaps we could play a game of cards before she leaves.”

“Yeah, let’s play Hearts.”

“I haven’t played that one in awhile. I’ll be right back.” Hayden got up and pulled the long coffee table in the middle of the room across the floor so that it was right in front of Emmaline before he left the room. Katy and I pulled our chairs closer to the table once he was gone.

“Are you two a couple now?” Katy asked Emmaline.

“Yes. Hayden took me out to dinner and we had so much fun. He took me back to my house afterwards and listened to a radio show with me and my parents, but we didn’t hear much of it since we had so much to talk about. When I walked him to the door, he asked me formally to be his girlfriend.

“And Hayden’s perfect. He’s such a gentleman, and he can’t seem to spend enough time with me. He took me shopping yesterday morning and got me this dress for Christmas. Then he had to help his father with something, but he said he had to see me again before I left. So I agreed to come by for dinner. And then he drove me home afterwards… and kissed me…” Emmaline stopped to sigh. “It was wonderful. I hope you don’t mind me saying this, Alexandra, but I’m so glad it didn’t work out between you and him.”

“I don’t mind at all. I’m really happy for you, Emmaline.” It did feel good to see her so happy.

And I noticed the ankle and elbow length red dress she was wearing for the first time. It was lined with silver sequins, perfect for Christmas. I had walked into the house so overwhelmed by my own grief, that I hadn’t even noticed it before. “Is that a Vimage dress?” I asked her.

“Mm-hm. The first one I’ve ever owned. Isn’t it something?” She smiled proudly.

“It’s gorgeous. Vimage always has the best dresses.”

The door opened behind her and Hayden walked in, looking a little sad. “What’s wrong?” Emmaline asked as he set the cards down on the table.

“Your parents just arrived.”

“Darn. I guess I have to go, then. Sorry we didn’t get to play cards.”

“That’s okay. We’ll just play without you,” Katy said.

“Katy,” I said reproachfully.

“What?”

“It’s alright,” Emmaline laughed, giving me her ‘we all know how Katy can be’ sort of look before she stood up.  
 “I’m going to walk her to the door, so I’ll be back in a minute,” Hayden said, putting a hand on her back and following her out of the parlor.

“So you really don’t care that they’re dating?” Katy asked me once the door was shut.

“Why would I mind?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I’ve never really seen you ending up together. But it just seems like it’s always been you and Hayden.”

“It has. We’ve always been really close. But I’ve never thought of him that way.”

“Hm.” Katy picked up the cards and started dealing them out.

Hayden still looked kind of down when he reentered the room, taking the seat across from me. “Six days. She’ll be gone for six whole days,” he said, shaking his head.

“The time will pass by quickly,” I said.

“I know, but a lot can happen in six days. She could get caught in the rain with some dirty mechanic and fall in love with him in that time.”

My breath caught as I stifled a cry. I knew he hadn’t meant for them to, but his words poured burning salt on the deep cut from which my heart was still bleeding. “N, no.” I struggled to breathe, determined not to let the pain show. “You don’t understand how Emmaline feels about you. She’s been saying how much she wishes you would ask her out since she moved here.”

“Thanks,” he smiled. “So who’s going first?”

“I’ll go first,” Katy said, picking up the cards she’d dealt out in front of her.

The game was pleasant, drawing my thoughts away from Mason, as I watched Hayden and Katy finally getting along.

We played a few games before his mother came and asked us if we wanted to come decorate and eat Christmas cookies. We were all hungry, so we left the cards and the game we were in the middle of behind to go to the kitchen. Here we found our parents, already decorating cookies three times the size they should have been with the different colored frostings and candies filling the bowls all over the counter. Katy and Hayden both picked up star shaped cookies and set to work decorating their own. I picked up a tree and began painting green frosting over it. Then I picked up several of the brightly colored candies to make Christmas lights with. “This is really good,” I said to Hayden’s mother after taking the first bite. I hadn’t eaten anything all day, and my appetite seemed to come back all at once as I took another delicious bite.

“Thank you, Alexandra. You made a lovely tree,” Mrs. West said.

I finished the cookie before I decorated and began eating a gingerbread man. “It’s good to see you eating so well,” my mother said. For some reason this made me feel awful. I set down the only remaining limb, an arm, and tried to smile at her.

“Will you go out back with me?” Hayden asked me.

“Yes.”

We walked through a sitting room and then through a door that led to the side of his house. “It’s freezing out here,” he said, hugging himself, as we took our first steps over the red brick path that wound to the left and right, taking you to the front or backyard of his house.

“I guess.” The frigid air didn’t really bother me, though. Whatever discomfort it caused seemed so trivial compared to the pain of Mason leaving me.

“I just wanted to thank you for suggesting that I ask Emmaline out on a date. It was difficult, but I decided to give it a try and see how things transpired. If I had ever looked past you to her, I might have noticed the wonderful woman she is sooner. We’ve had a lot of fun, and she seems to share my feelings. So, thank you.”

We turned around the corner of his house and entered his backyard.

“You’re welcome. And she does feel the same way.”

“Alexandra, you’re shivering. Let’s go back inside,” Hayden said as he put a hand on my back and hurried me toward the back patio door. I hadn’t even noticed.

Something tiny and cold fell on my cheek, halfway to the door. Looking to my left at the circular bushes lining that side of the back of his house, I saw the first powdery snowflakes falling on its branches. “It’s snowing,” I said, feeling a fragment of the joy I always felt when it snowed on Christmas or the day before.

Hayden stopped and looked up. “You’re right. Perhaps we’ll be able to make a snowman if we get enough of it.” He held up his arm to look at his wristwatch as he picked up walking again. “It’s only a quarter ‘til two. There’s still plenty of time before you have to go.”

Once we reached the patio, we took seats at the empty garden table inside. “Guess who called Emmaline this morning?” Hayden said once we’d sat down.

I shrugged, not really caring who had called her.

“Marcy.”

“Really?” Now I was slightly interested. “What did she have to say?”

“Well, she did a terrible impersonation of a man’s voice, insisting that she was an officer of the law and that Emmaline was a suspect in a crime. Emmaline knew her voice right away, so she called her bluff before Marcy could even get to the crime she was supposedly involved in.”

“Was Emmaline angry?”

“No, they both shared a good laugh about it before they hung up. Emmaline and I agree that it must be killing Marcy not to have anyone to push around. I’m glad Emmaline’s not taking it. It always killed me to watch Marcy being so mean you.”

“It killed me, too.” I sighed as tears began to blur my vision. Everything made me cry, or maybe it just gave me an excuse to cry some more about Mason.

I heard Hayden’s chair scrape against the ground before I felt his arm go around me. “Things will get better.”

I took in a shaky breath and let out a broken cry. “Mason always said that.”

His hand went up and down over my back as I wiped at my eyes. “If I can find happiness with someone after you, you can, too.”

I shook my head. He just didn’t understand. No one did.

The door we came in through opened and Katy walked inside. “There you two are. Christm—um, Christmas carolers are at the door and our mothers want everyone to come hear them. Should I tell them you’re not coming?” she said, seeing how terrible I must have looked.

“No, I’m coming,” I said, forcing myself to stand and stop crying.

As we all moved toward the door leading into the house, I stopped to look through a side window and saw that the snowflakes were coming down more heavily.

After moving through the hall and back to the foyer, we found a small party of merry looking men and women, pink in the nose and cheeks, brimming with Christmas cheer. They wore the most beautiful caroling costumes I’d ever seen. The women were all wearing red felt dresses with enormous skirts and white fur trimmed shawls, while the men wore thick emerald green suits with matching silk top hats.

“It looks like we’re all here now,” Mr. West said.

A man in the back counted them off. “One, two, three, four,”

“*Angel’s we have heard on high, sweetly singing o’re the plains,*” the others joined in. The harmonious voices filled the air, creating that wonderful Christmassy feeling. My father took his handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to my mother as the carolers began singing ‘Joy to the World’ so she could dab at her eyes. For some reason, carolers always got to her. It was sad to see them go after only two more songs. The atmosphere they’d created seemed to leave with them, to me, at least.

We moved into the living room to listen to Hayden’s father as he stood by the fireplace and read the same Christmas story (written by his grandfather) that he read every year, and I began to appreciate these traditions. Knowing what was coming at the turn of every page and sharing it with the same people I’d shared it with my entire life was consoling, even though I still suffered.

“Katy!” my mother said when the story was over. We all turned our attention to my sister, who was sitting beside me on the sofa with her sleeping head lying on the armrest. “Katy, wake up. I’m so sorry about this,” she said to Hayden’s father.

But he and Mrs. West both began laughing. “That’s alright. It used to put them all to sleep when they were little, remember?”

“Katy,” I whispered as I patted her knee.

She picked up her head and stretched, but froze when she looked around and realized everyone was staring at her. “Did I fall asleep?”

Everyone laughed at the look on her face, the mixture of innocence and guilt.

Hayden stood up and looked out the window at the front yard. “There’s plenty of snow for a snowman now. Do you want to go build one?” he asked me.

“Why not? Would you like to come, too?” I asked Katy.

“Yeah, let’s make it a contest. You two against me and Father. Will you build a snowman with me, Father?” Katy asked.

“That’s not fair. We both know he can build one better than the rest of us all put together.”

“Hey, it was my idea. Will you help me?” she asked him again.

“Sure I will,” he said with a smile. “I haven’t built a good snowman since the winter before last. The rest of you could be the judges.”

Everyone agreed, so we went outside while our mothers went to the kitchen to get started on Christmas dinner. I knew there was a lot to do and that they would need my help, but it would have to wait.

Hayden and I worked quickly on the north side of the front yard while Katy and my father worked on the south side.

It wasn’t quite as cold outside as it had been before, even though the snow was now falling so heavily. I hoped we would be able to drive home okay.

Once we had the snowman’s body built, Hayden ran inside to get the hat and scarf while I searched for sticks and rocks for arms and a face. As we assembled everything, I looked over and saw Katy and my father huddled in front of their snowman so that we wouldn’t be able to see what they were doing. “What do you think they’re hiding over there?” I asked Hayden.

“I don’t know, but we finished first. That has to count for something.”

“No, we didn’t. He needs a nose. I’ll be right back with the carrot.”

Katy turned around and hurried to the house at the same time I did, reaching the front door at nearly the same moment as me. I looked back and saw that my father was still doing an excellent job of blocking my view of their snowman. “What’s he trying to hide?” I asked Katy as I went through the front door.

“Obviously we don’t want you to know, so why are you even bothering to ask?”

“Fine.”

We both walked into the kitchen, where I took a carrot from the fridge and Katy asked Mrs. West to help her find a few things, refusing to tell her what they were until she was sure I couldn’t hear them.

I headed back outside and stuck the carrot on our snowman. “He needs one more thing,” Hayden said, taking off his coat and draping it around him.

“You’re right. That’s much better.”

Katy walked outside just then with a bag full of something we couldn’t see, frustrating me even further. “At least *we* get to get out of the cold,” Hayden said, walking away from our snowman toward his house.

“That’s true. And maybe if we go back to the living room, we can see what they’re doing through the window.” They were working almost right in front of it.

But when we got there and went to open the drapes, Mr. West, who was sitting in a shiny black rocking chair right in front of it, said, “Sorry, kids. I’m not supposed to let you near this window or any other one.”

“Come on, Father. We’ve finished ours already. It’s not like we’ll replicate theirs,” Hayden said.

“I know, but it seemed really important to Katy that no one, not even me, sees it until it’s finished.”

So we sat down on the couch to wait. “Maybe I should go help out in the kitchen,” I said, standing up.

“They’ll be alright. You two just stay right here. I’ll even turn on the radio to keep you occupied,” Mr. West said, setting the newspaper he’d been reading down in his chair as he stood up and flipped the radio on. After he’d found a station playing Christmas music, he picked his paper back up and sat down.

I felt like a child in time out, sitting there, but what really bothered me was listening to the radio. It was something I hadn’t done since the Friday night interview. What if someone mentioned Mason or his father? Hearing about either one might have caused me to relive the whole thing. But I dealt with it, sitting tensely and trying to think about what Katy and my father might be creating instead of what I was hearing, until they were finished. The waiting felt endless.

And then finally, the front door opened and I heard Katy running to the kitchen. “It’s ready, come on!” Then she ran to the living room. “We’re done. Come on, it’s freezing out there and I want to get this over with.”

We all stood up and walked outside, where we had to wait another minute for my mother and Hayden’s. Katy’s snowman was covered with a sheet and my father was still standing beside it, rubbing his gloved hands together and stamping his feet to keep warm. “Oh, an unveiling, how exciting,” Mrs. West said when she walked outside.

“We want you to see ours last, so look at the other one first,” Katy said.

“Alright.” Mr. West led the way.

“That’s adorable. You even gave him your coat,” Mrs. West said, walking around our snowman.

My mother gave me a hug. “I love your snowman, Alexandra.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

“Wait till you see mine, come on.” Katy ran across the lawn back to hers and shouted, “Hurry up,” to us until we got there. She was really excited. “Okay, the moment you’ve all been waiting for,” she said dramatically. “The most fantastic, incredible, original, first ever…” She grabbed one side of the sheet and my father grabbed the other. “…snowwoman!” They both yanked it off at the same time and I stared at their creation. Dark purple cloth had been draped around it and a straw hat with a purple ribbon tied to it set off-center on the snowwoman’s head. Food coloring had given her bright red lips, pink cheeks, and wide blue eyes with twigs for eyelashes. Beads were placed around her neck and two were where her ears would have been.

Hayden just looked at me and shook his head. There was no way ours would win.

“It’s beautiful. How on earth did you come up with this?” my mother said.

“It was Father’s idea, but Mrs. West helped me come up with an outfit and the beads. So I guess I can’t take too much credit, but our snowman won, right?” Katy said.

My mother looked at Hayden’s parents. No one answered right away. “Give us just a second,” Mr. West said. They took a few steps away and huddled together to whisper.

“What? But ours is the obvious winner,” Katy said.

“Now, now, they get to make that decision,” my father said.

She waited impatiently with the rest of us for the other three to come back.

“Well, *I* liked ours better,” Hayden said with a smile.

The three judges turned back to us and Mr. West gave us our answer. “Considering how a man and a woman just aren’t complete without each other, we’ve decided that there cannot be a better one of Mr. and Mrs. Snowman. Therefore, we’re declaring a tie.”

“A tie? That’s not fair,” Katy said, looking thoroughly offended.

My father put his arm around her. “Come now, Katy. We had fun putting her together. What does it matter who wins?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Let’s go back inside. Lillian and I made hot cocoa for everyone,” Mrs. West said. So we all made our way to the kitchen to warm up.

Half an hour later, it really was time to make dinner, since we always had Christmas Eve dinner early. That way we would be sure to have plenty of time to exchange gifts before we left.

So Hayden, his father, and mine left the kitchen to give the rest of us space to cook in. The kitchen was blazing hot with the stove burners and oven going, but we had a stuffed turkey with all the trimmings on the table by five o’clock.

The dining room was filled with the sounds of laughter and forks and knives clanking against fine china. The Christmas spirit filled the air. The happy, familiar sounds, and the sight of the people I loved so much being so happy together made me smile, really smile. I still felt the deep open wound my heart was suffering, but I was grateful for the people surrounding me. Even if I never healed, and I was sure I never would, I would still have them.

Something *diiiiinged* in the kitchen. “That’ll be the pies. I’ll be right back,” my mother said. She returned holding two steaming apple pies in oven mitted hands and set one on each end of the table beside the serving knives that were already there waiting for them. “Anyone ready for a piece?”

“I am,” Katy said at once. She had been the first one to finish eating and only my mother and I had food remaining on our plates.

My father and Hayden held out their plates as Mr. West reached for another piece of turkey. Mrs. West stood up at one end of the table to serve the pie closer to her and my mother served slices on our end. More than half of each pie was gone before we were through. Then six people sat back in their chairs, stuffed nearly to overflowing. Six, because I’d found it difficult to eat and only had one helping of turkey and stuffing, along with a buttered roll.

“Should we move on to presents?” my father asked when he was sure everyone was finished.

“Yes! I’ve been waiting for that all day,” Katy said, jumping up and running out of the dining room.

“Katy,” my mother called after her, but she was already gone. “I’m really sorry about her. She always gets so keyed up for Christmas.”

“It’s alright. People like her were made for this holiday,” Mrs. West said.

As everyone got up and left the dining room, my mother came to walk behind them with me. She put her arm around me and gave me a little squeeze. “I love you, Alexandra. I’m so sorry you’re having such a rough time,” she said.

“Thanks. I love you, too.” I put my arm around her waist and we made our way to the parlor.

My mother stopped just before entering the room. “Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?” she asked me.

I just shook my head. No one could help me.

So she took my hand and led me into the room, where Mr. West was sitting on the floor beside the tree, handing the presents out. Katy and I got matching dresses that Mrs. West had made for us herself. They were pink and lacy with a thick pink ribbon running along the waist and tying in the back. Katy was polite about it, even though I knew she hated it. I, however, thought they were wonderful. Mrs. West opened a flowery, yellow spring hat from my mother as Hayden opened the Civil War book my father and I had picked out for him. Everyone was thanking someone else as the present opening continued.

After my father opened the last present, a royal blue Vimage tie from the entire West family, I helped my mother and Hayden’s pick up the torn pieces of wrapping paper scattered all over, before Mr. West read the story of Christ’s birth to us from The Holy Bible.

Then my parents, Katy, and I each put our presents in a bag and carried them to the front door, where we stopped to wish Hayden and his parents a Merry Christmas.

My father opened the trunk so we could put our presents in, and then we began the terrible ride home. I felt the walls of hopelessness pressing in on every side. Soon I would be back in my room…all alone…with only painful memories for company.

By the time we pulled up in front of our house, I was sniffling and failing to hold back the tears. Katy reached out to pat my hand. “I’ll carry your presents in for you,” she said.

“Thank you, Katy.”

No one else said a word as I climbed out of the car and made my way to the house and up the stairs. Once I was in my bed, I couldn’t seem to control my sobbing. All I wanted was Mason.

My head and heart pounded with the overwhelming pain. He would be getting home to her right then…The girl he truly loved…*He’s probably holding her right now.* My shoulders trembled with the heavy sobs. “When will this end?”

I rolled onto my back and looked up at the night sky. My chest rose and fell as I struggled to make myself calm down. I could force the crying nearly to stop, but the pain refused to. I would never stop hurting.

A star shone brighter in the sky than all the rest, the Christmas star I wished on every year. My wish was always granted because it was always something I wanted enough that my parents were aware of it and had already gotten for me. But this year was different.

I stood up in my bed and stared at the shining star. “You’ve never failed me yet.” My voice caught and I choked back a cry. “But this year I have to ask you for something my parents won’t be able to give me.” I looked down for a minute, crying silently into the night, knowing it couldn’t be done, and then lifted my head back to the star. “I just want Mason. Even if it costs me everything I have, I want him. That’s my wish this year.”

The star stared back at me unblinkingly. It couldn’t hear me. It didn’t care. So I knelt down, keeping my arms on the window sill, and laid my head against them to cry. *I’ll never see him again.*

Something lit up the dark space my arms were wrapped around, so I lifted my head to see the headlights of a car driving in the direction of my house. A streetlight revealed its navy blue paint as it drove right under it. I began to lay my head back down, but stopped when it parked under the streetlamp right in front of my house. The only people I could think of that might be coming over that late were my grandparents, but their car was tan.

The car stayed motionless for a minute, and then the door opened. A broken scream escaped me as I leaned forward way too quickly and slammed my head against the window—Mason was climbing out of the car.

**Chapter Seventeen**

I jumped out of bed and ran from my room, racing past Katy on the stairs. “What’s wrong? What are you doing?” she asked, seeing the look on my face. But I didn’t answer, because I didn’t know what I was doing. I only knew that I had to get to Mason.

Running as fast as I could across the floor, I dashed right into the front door before pulling it open and racing across the snow covered walkway, right into his arms. Mason dropped the bouquet of roses he was holding as he wrapped his arms around me. “Alexandra, I missed you,” he said, leaning into my hair and taking a deep breath.

“How could you do this to me?” I demanded, tearing myself away from him with difficulty and letting the tears and pain spill over. “How could you say you loved me—and you said your heart was mine alone.” I stopped to take a few short, painful breaths, wondering why he looked so confused. “I heard you on the radio. You said you couldn’t wait to get to your girl back home. You always had a girl waiting for you in Shilling!”

“No, I didn’t. I was talking about you.”

“Don’t lie to me! This isn’t your hometown. The man interviewing you kept talking about Shilling, and you did too, and—”

“Stop! Stop. Home is wherever you are. And this,” he took my hand and placed it over his heart. “This is yours. Only yours. You must not have heard the whole thing. I talked about you and Chicago. And I did correct him about how I wasn’t from Shilling anymore and never planned on going back.”

“Really?”

“Really. There is no other girl. There never has been. I meant it when I said I love you, Alexandra.”

I wanted to believe him, but I wasn’t sure. What if he was lying? What if he’d changed his mind about her and chosen me? How long would it be until he went back to her?

Mason leaned forward to kiss me, but I pulled my hand away from him and stepped back, feeling unsure. “Alexandra,” he said sadly, his gray eyes speaking his pain.

*How many times have I wished I could look into those beautiful eyes again?*

A door opened somewhere off to my left, and I looked over to see Mr. Smith walking out of his dark house, wrapped in a night robe. His old, graying features moved through his yard and into ours. I was sure that we’d woken him up and now he was coming to fuss about it. He was usually a kind man, but no one likes to be woken up during the night. “Hello, Alexandra,” he surprised me with a smile.

“Hello, Mr. Smith. I’m sorry if I woke you up,” I said.

“I *was* coming to ask if you would keep it down, but when I saw you through my window talking to this young man, I figured it was the Algoth kid and came to meet him instead. It’s perfectly understandable to make a little noise when your sweetheart’s just come home for Christmas.” His door opened again and his wife stepped out. She waved as she hobbled along. “This is my wife, Marjorie, and I’m Albert,” Mr. Smith said to Mason, as he put his arm around his wife when she had reached us.

“It’s nice to meet both of you,” Mason said, reaching out to shake their hands.

“Is your father here with you?” Mrs. Smith asked in her slow, weathered voice.

“Remember, he has to stay in New York to help the police,” Mr. Smith said loudly so she could hear him.

Realization shown on her face. “That’s right.” She reached out to hold Mason’s hand. “You left him in New York so you could keep your promise to Alexandra and be home on Christmas Eve.” I smiled at Mason as what she was saying set in. “That was such a nice thing to do, just the sort of thing my Albert would have done for me.”

“Ah, but I still would, my dear,” Mr. Smith said, smiling lovingly at his wife.

“So you heard us on the radio?” Mason asked. The Smiths both nodded. “Unfortunately, Alexandra missed most of that interview. Maybe you could tell her what she missed.”

“You missed it?” Mrs. Smith asked. “What a shame. Oh, Mason told everyone how much he couldn’t wait to come back home to Alexandra Roomer in Chicago, the most beautiful girl in the world, he said. Imagine our surprise when we heard that. Then he said how much he loved and missed you. We tried coming by to see you Saturday, but no one would answer the door…You’ve been crying. You must be so happy to have him home.”

“I am,” I said, smiling at Mason.

If only we’d picked up the phone or answered the door, I might have known the truth a lot sooner.

“Well, we best get back to bed. It was such a pleasure to meet you, Mason. You will bring your father by when he makes it here to Chicago, won’t you? I’d love to meet him.”

Mr. Smith held out his hand to shake Mason’s again. “Yes, we need more men like your father. It’s about time someone stood boldly against the criminals demanding power over this fine country.”

“I’ll bring him by. He should be here mid January.”

“Good, good. Merry Christmas to you both.”

“You, too.”

Mason moved closer to me as they turned away. This time, I reached out and clung to him. No words could adequately express the joy and relief I felt in knowing his heart was still mine. “Alexandra, how could you doubt me? Have I not done enough?” He pulled his head away suddenly and reached behind his back, looking worried, so he could pull my left hand around to look at it. His face relaxed as he ran a finger over my ring.

“Of course you have, Mason. If I had heard it from anyone else, I wouldn’t have believed it. But they were your words. You should have heard the way it sounded.”

“I did. *I* said them. And I was pretty clear about the way I feel about you.”

I felt awful, knowing this wasn’t the way he wanted things to go when he came home. “I’m sorry, Mason,” I said, feeling the tears returning. My emotions were already so close to the surface.

He smiled and bent down to pick up the roses at his feet. “It’s okay. And I’m sorry you thought I had another girl. I would never do that to you, you know?” He handed me the flowers.

“I know.” I smiled as a tear trickled over my cheek.

Mason took my left hand. “You still wore my ring, though.”

“I couldn’t let you go.”

He leaned over and stopped right before his lips met mine. His eyes seemed to flash when he blinked and then they stared deeply into mine. “I love you, so, so much, Alexandra.”

These words drew something between a laugh and a whimper from my lips, right before I pressed them against his. I slid my fingers through his as his other arm went around me, and reached my other hand out to grab onto his coat and pull it tight. “I love you, too,” I said, letting him lift his head, even though neither of us let go of the other. I laid my head against his chest and let go of his hand to wrap my arm around his waist. His arms closed in around me. “Don’t ever leave me again,” I said.

“I won’t leave without you. Every day got harder while I was gone. I couldn’t do that again.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

I smiled and snuggled closer to him, realizing that I was beginning to get cold.

“Benny said he would make you partner if you came back to work at Swatches,” I said, remembering he had a job waiting for him.

“What?” Mason arched his back so I would lift my head up to look at him. “You went back to Swatches?”

“I took Hayden with me so I wouldn’t have to be alone with him.” His face reverted further into disbelief. “He dropped the charges and he’s seeing Emmaline now—Hayden, I mean. And he really likes her. Benny said he was sorry.” I went on to tell Mason everything Benny had said. And then everything Emmaline and Hayden had said about each other, so he would know Hayden wasn’t the threat he once thought he was.

When I was finished, Mason stared thoughtfully down the road in the direction of Swatches. “I was going to try and open my own shop, but if he made me joint owner it would save me a lot of trouble and money. I’d have to talk to his dad.” He looked back at me. “But he’ll have to agree never to go near you. I still don’t trust him.”

“I don’t, either. I only went to talk to him because I thought you might stay here if you had a job.”

“I would have stayed no matter what.” He rested his forehead against mine. “But thank you.” He kissed me before he nodded to the right. “The For Sale sign’s still up at that house. Have you heard if anyone’s made any offers?”

“The Watkins’ house? I haven’t heard anything about it.”

“Well, maybe *I’ll* just buy it.”

I glanced at the house that was nearly right across the street. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. My dad told me he was planning to open a real estate business here in the city, since he refuses to return to Shilling after the way everyone there acted. So he told me to get a house.” He twisted his neck around to look at the house. “That one’s perfect. It’s plenty big enough, not far from downtown.” He looked back at me. “And it’s close to you. I could even drive you to school every morning.”

“That sounds perfect. So, is that your father’s car?” I looked around him at the brand new car, smiling when I noticed my lion sitting in the front passenger’s seat.

“No, it’s mine.”

I looked back at him skeptically. “Yours?”

“Yeah.” He leaned closer and spoke in a whisper. “Just between you and me, some of the money my dad recovered is in a secret bank account that only the three of us know about. So me and my dad each got a car. And the day after tomorrow, I’ll buy this house, paid in full. Since I’m not leaving town without you, maybe you’d go to Shilling with me when I go to get all our stuff out of the old house.”

“Of course I’ll go. I bet my father will come and give you a hand, too.”

“So he’s not mad at me anymore?”

“Neither of my parents are. They’ve both wanted to see you since the day that article was printed so they could apologize…They were really upset after the radio show because I wouldn’t be seeing you anymore.”

“So they think I’m a two-timer, too?”

Before I could answer, Mr. West’s car pulled up behind Mason’s and Hayden got out. “It must be eight o’clock. What’s he doing, coming over so late?” Mason asked, as he let go of me with one arm.

“I don’t know.”

“So you’re already here,” Hayden said to Mason as he walked over to us and handed me the newspaper he was holding. “I was looking at the paper my father had earlier and I saw this.” Hayden pointed to a paragraph he’d circled within a short article titled, *The City’s Wait for Sydney Algoth’s Son*.

I set the flowers down behind me and moved the newspaper around so I would be able to read it by the light of the streetlamp.

*On this Christmas Eve night, all of Chicago holds its breath as they await the arrival of Sydney Algoth’s son, who proclaimed his love nationally over the radio for our very own Alexandra Roomer, and announced his commitment to keeping the promise he made to her to be here on the night of Christmas Eve. So tonight, we welcome him, and his father when he also arrives, as the two newest members of our proud city.*

I caught the word *Swatches* in the next paragraph before I looked up. “My father said he heard the whole interview,” Hayden said. “He had no idea what happened over here. I didn’t say anything to him about it and he couldn’t believe your father didn’t, either.”

“We didn’t say anything to anybody,” I said.

“There’s something else…I want to get everything out in the open so we can put it all behind us…so I think I should also give this to you.” He reached into his coat pocket for a folded up piece of paper and handed it to me. “Try not to be angry with me.”

“Why would I be angry?”

“You’ll understand.” He glanced at Mason and took a step to the side, further away from him. I noticed the torn edge along the top as I opened it.

*I’ll be home before Christmas. I made a promise and I intend to keep it. I miss you already. I love you.*

*Love, Mason*

“You took half of the letter Mason left me? Do you realize how badly I needed this?” I asked in disbelief.

“Where did you get that?” Mason asked, glaring at Hayden.

“I went to apologize to you the morning the newspaper article was printed and I got there before Alexandra did. I—I followed her last Monday when school let out early. Knowing Katy and how much she likes you, I figured she let the snakes out and I wanted to make sure Alexandra was safe.”

Mason stared at Hayden in outrage. “You think I would hurt her? I’ll die ten times before I let anything happen to her.”

“No. I did, but now I don’t. Look, I wanted to apologize for everything and let you know I would drop the charges. That was the whole point.”

“But why did you take this?” I asked Hayden, holding the paper up.

“It was obvious when I read it that Mason would be gone for awhile.” Hayden took a deep breath and fixed his anxious eyes on Mason. “I thought if I took this part of the letter and you didn’t know when or if you would ever see him again, you might choose me instead.”

I felt the muscles in Mason’s arm tighten right before it left me. He took a step toward Hayden. “You conniving, little—”

“But she wouldn’t,” Hayden said, throwing his arms up to shield his face.

Mason stopped, but stood just as tensely, as if he were waiting for his moment to strike.

Hayden looked back at him through his arms when the blow never came. “I was here when you came on the radio. I was the one that shut it off when we thought you’d just announced you were going home to someone else. I was the one who followed her upstairs to try and comfort her. I was the one who tried to take advantage of her pain and work my way into her heart, to try and replace you there,” Mason’s fists tightened at his sides. “but she wouldn’t. Even though she had just heard you tell the world that you needed to get home to Shilling to your girlfriend, the girlfriend she thought you had the entire time you were with her, she couldn’t let your ring go. She couldn’t talk about anything except how much she wanted to be with you. And I would have given the rest of the note back to her that night when it became clear to me how deeply she loves you if it hadn’t been for what you’d just said. So maybe you can forgive me because it gave her a chance to prove her love to you, which she has done completely.”

I reached out for Mason’s hand. He was standing in front of me, a little to the left, with his back to me. He visibly relaxed when he felt my fingers slide into the center of his hand, before he turned to face me. His hand, so much bigger than mine, let go, and then both slid along my sides and over my back as he moved closer to me. “Thank you,” he said in a low voice. I smiled as I put one hand on his neck and let the other wander through his hair, shining black in the bits of clouded moonlight.

Feeling the intensity in his voice and in his hands pressing against my back, I leaned up to kiss him, inhaling everything deeply as I did—the way he tasted, the way his arms felt around me, and the tinge of that mechanic smell he still had, even though he hadn’t worked on a car in days. Everything felt perfect, because it was him.

Hayden cleared his throat. “I guess I’ll be going then,” he said as Mason let go of me. “I just wanted to give that to Alexandra and ask for her forgiveness. I guess I should ask for yours as well, Mason. It’s obvious you’ll be around for awhile, and I’d hate to have this wedged between us.”

“Just promise you’ll never do anything like this again,” I said. It was impossible to be mad when Mason was finally here with me.

“You have my word.”

“It’ll be harder for me to forgive, but,” Mason looked down at me. “You’re family to her, so I guess I have to.”

Hayden stepped closer to us and held out a hand to Mason. “I still think you’re a first-class troublemaker,” he said with a smile. “but I guess you’re alright.”

Mason laughed as he let go of me and reached out to shake Hayden’s hand. “And I still think you’re a pompous tightwad, but I guess you’re okay, too.”

“Hey!” Katy’s voice came from the front porch, where the door had been left cracked open behind her. “What’s he doing here?” She began storming toward us, and I could see the same rage in her eyes I’d seen every time his name had come up since Friday.

“Katy, it’s alright,” I said, standing in front of Mason protectively. Her eyes remained locked on Mason’s. She was almost there.

“Hey, Katy,” he said.

“I was the girl he said he needed to come home to,” I said. She was only two steps away now, still acting as if I wasn’t there. “Katy—” She put her hand on my shoulder and pushed me to the side effortlessly, right into Hayden. I turned around in time to see her punch Mason in the jaw. “Katy, no!” I screamed, trying to move in front of her as Mason held his cheek.

She stared angrily at me, only an inch or two from my face. “You’re so naïve and trusting. He’s a liar and a cheat, Alexandra.” She brought up her arms and shot them forward just above my shoulders, slamming them into Mason behind me. “Get out of here,” she said to him as she tried to move around me.

“Stop it.” I tried to restrain her, but it was like trying to hold back an angry bull. She was so much stronger than me.

“Do you know how badly you hurt my sister? We were afraid we would wake up and find her dead from grief every morning. It actually occurred to me when she ran outside just now that she might be going to throw herself in front of a moving car.”

I gave up on trying to stop her and went to hug Mason. “Hayden, do something,” I pleaded.

Hayden moved in front of Katy and grabbed her arms. “Stop it. You’ve got it all wrong.”

“Don’t touch me.” Katy grabbed Hayden’s arms back and pushed down, causing him to go to his knees.

“Look at this, and then you can continue with this needless violence if that’s what you really want,” Hayden said, holding up the newspaper I’d dropped when Katy pushed me.

She looked at the paper suspiciously as she took it. “Just what am I supposed to be reading?” Hayden pointed out the circled paragraph.

I looked up at Mason as she read. “Are you alright?” I asked him.

“Yeah.” He rubbed his face where she’d hit him as he opened and shut his mouth. “But, man, your sister can throw a punch.”

“I don’t understand,” Katy said, looking up from the paper at each of us.

“You must have turned the radio off right before I mentioned Alexandra, and Chicago,” Mason said.

“Mr. and Mrs. Smith were just here talking about it and Hayden’s father said he heard it, too. That’s why Hayden’s here,” I added.

“I love your sister, Katy,” Mason said. “I would never lie to her or do anything that would hurt her.”

“Well…I guess I’m sorry, then,” she said to Mason a bit grudgingly. “You just should have seen her. It was like having the Grim Reaper living in our house.”

I nearly laughed at the picture this brought to mind of myself in a black cloak with a scythe in hand, realizing I must have looked like death walking these last few days.

“It’s okay. It’s good to know you’re looking out for her so well.”

“I think I’ll go, since that’s straightened out,” Hayden said, walking toward his car.

“Bye, Hayden, thank you,” I called after him.

“Do you want to come in now?” I asked Mason, bending down to pick up my flowers.

“Yeah.”

“You better let me go talk to Mother and Father first. I’ll show them the paper,” Katy said. We all headed toward the house. Katy pushed open the still-cracked door and Mason and I waited just outside.

“I thought I would never see you again,” I said, the bitter and sweet of those words lingering on my tongue.

He put his arm behind my back and pulled me closer to him. “I’ll never let that happen,” he said. I laid my hands on his shoulders and my cheek against his chest.

A few peaceful minutes later, the door opened behind me and my mother shrieked. “You’re here! Oh, it’s so good to see you.” She threw her arms around him, forcing me to the side. “Come in, come in.” She ushered him toward the living room, leaving me to close the door behind them.

My father and Katy met us halfway there, coming from the living room. My father stopped in front of Mason and held him with a firm stare. “I was wrong about you…I’m sorry,” he said as he held out his hand.

“That’s alright, Mr. Roomer. Will you allow me to see your daughter, now?” Mason asked as he shook his hand.

My father smiled. “Of course I will. So where are you staying tonight?” He put his arm around Mason’s shoulder and led him to the living room, leaving me behind, just like my mother had.

But in the living room, Mason stayed standing until I reached him. Then we sat down on the couch together, where he held me close at his side. “I was planning to rent a hotel room after I saw Alexandra—” Mason began.

“But tomorrow’s Christmas,” my mother said. “You just better come over as soon as you wake up and spend the day here. Ted’s parents will be coming over and I know they’d love to meet you.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Roomer. I will.”

“You can call me Lillian, dear. You’re seeing my daughter now, so we’ll become great friends.”

“Alright, Lillian, I was telling Alexandra outside that my father asked me to find a house for us and to go ahead and buy it. I think that house across the street is just right. So I’ll get started on that Wednesday, since tomorrow’s Christmas. As soon as that’s settled, I’ll bring all our stuff here from Shilling. I’m hoping to have it done before my father gets here so he can move right in. I’ll be fine in a hotel until then.”

“Oh, I know.” My mother sat up straight and clapped her hands against her legs. “You could stay here. We could put that cot in your office, Ted, and he could sleep in there.” My father and I stared at her in surprise and I wondered if I’d heard her right.

“I don’t want to impose, Mrs. Room—Lillian.”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea, either,” my father said.

“I’m sure Mr. Roomer will need his office to work in.”

“During the day,” my mother said. “But not during the night when you would be asleep.”  
 “That’s true,” my father cut in. “But that’s not the problem. The problem is Alexandra. We can’t have her boyfriend staying here. The neighbors will talk.”

“No, they won’t,” I said. “He’s Sydney Algoth’s son, so a lot of them will be happy he’s here so they can meet him, and he’ll only be here until he can move into a house. The neighbors will understand.”

“I agree. I’ll go get the cot,” my mother said before she stood up.

“Lillian, wait, you shouldn’t have to carry that up the stairs,” my father called after her, his voice falling on deaf ears. “I better go help her.” He shook his head as he stood up to leave the room, but stopped in front of us to raise an eyebrow. “If anyone asks, he’s staying downstairs, far away from you, Alexandra. Got it, Katy?”

“Wh—” Katy stammered from the other end of the couch. “If anyone asks me, I’ll tell them to mind their own business.”

“*Katy,*”

“Fine, Mason sleeps downstairs. I’m going to bed.” She walked up the stairs and into the bathroom.

“You had better be off to bed, too, Alexandra. Mason, maybe you could give me a hand with that cot. I really don’t want Alexandra’s mother having to carry it up the stairs.”

“Of course. Um,” Mason looked over at me. “Good night, Alexandra.” His eyes softened, like liquid silver, as he leaned over to kiss my cheek.

“Good night.”

We both stood up. Mason’s voice trickled away with my father’s as I made my way up the stairs. “I really appreciate this, Mr. Roomer.”

“Lillian’s right. You’re a grown young man who’s dating our daughter. You can call me Ted…”

I couldn’t help but smile as I walked into my room. When I woke up, Mason would be there. When I went to bed, Mason would be there.

Picking up my hairbrush and moving to the window, I looked over at what used to be the Watkins’s house across the street. I’d been inside it a few times when I baby-sat for their little boy and girl. If Mason took the upstairs bedroom in the corner of the house closest to ours, we would be able to see right into each other’s windows. He could be the first thing I saw every morning when I woke up.

Lifting my gaze to the sky, I found my Christmas wishing star, and said, “Thank you,” as I ran the brush through my hair.

#

Later that night, I lay awake in my bed with the clock I’d taken off of my wall resting against my stomach. I’d held it up every ten or fifteen minutes since eleven o’clock to check the time by what little moonlight there was. I held it up again. “Finally.” Only seven minutes to midnight.

Silently, I climbed out of bed and took the curlers out of my hair. My dress was still on. It was easy enough to hide under my blanket when my mother came for what must have been the longest good night we’d ever had. She couldn’t stop talking and asking about Mason, of course.

I crept to the closed door and waited a few minutes before I heard the faint *creak* of a board out in the hallway. My heart fluttered as I opened the door very slowly. A tall, dark figure stood only three feet away from me. Mason smiled as he stepped barefooted into my room and shut the door behind him. He shook his dark hair, messier than usual, away from his face as he held up a glass ball. “Merry Christmas,” he leaned over to whisper.

“Merry Christmas.” I took it and held it up to see it better by the weak light filtering in through my window. It was an apple shaped snow globe with a miniature Statue of Liberty inside, surrounded by snow and silver glitter. “Thank you, Mason. Your present’s under the tree downstairs.” My mother told me when she came to say good night that she’d tucked it safely away under there while Mason and my father were setting up the cot.

He leaned over and kissed me. Then his hand slid up over the back of my neck and into my hair as he nuzzled it out of the way with his nose so he could get closer to my ear. “My angel.” His warm breath against my ear sent a shiver through me before he leaned up and kissed me again. “I better get back to bed, but I’ll be here when you wake up. I love you, Alexandra,” he whispered as he pulled away and reached for the door.

“I love you too, Mason.” He stopped and looked back, leaning over to kiss me once more before he left the room.

I set the snow globe on my night table and hung the clock back up.

“I knew he would come.”

As I climbed into bed, I couldn’t wait for morning to come, not because of what day it was, but because of who I knew I would find standing at my door when I opened it.

**Chapter Eighteen**

3 weeks later.

I zipped up my dress in the back and ran my hairbrush through my hair before I went to look out my window at Mason’s house. We had a routine now where I got ready for school and went over there to wait until he was ready to go to work. Then he took me to school on the way. But today I slept in late, so I was checking to see if he was waiting beside his car or coming over. When I leaned against my bed to look outside, I saw neither.

*At least the sun’s shining. That’s a good sign.* Today was a big day, and I needed everything to go exactly right.

I went downstairs and grabbed my books and the lunches I’d made for Mason and me before I headed for the door.

“Don’t you want breakfast?” my mother asked, leaning out of the kitchen.

“I’m too nervous to eat anything,” I said. Mason’s father would finally be getting to Chicago that evening, so Mason and I were putting on a housewarming party at his house across the street and having all his new neighbors over to meet him.

“You have to eat something. I’ll just grab a few pieces of bacon for you. Wait here.”

I waited for her to come back with a big handful of bacon. “I can’t eat all that,” I said.

“Just give Mason whatever you don’t eat.”

“Alright.”

I tried to go to the door, but my mother stopped me by giving me a big hug. “Sweet, sweet, Alexandra,” she said in a shaky voice.

“Mother, are you alright?” She had been overly emotional and sentimental the last few days.

“I’m fine. I just—can’t believe how fast you’ve grown up.”

“Well, you’re still my mother. That will never change.”

“I know.” She smiled at me through teary eyes.

“I’m sorry, but I really need to go.” I felt kind of bad as I hurried outside and across the street, eating a piece of bacon along the way, but I didn’t want to be late.

Mason’s door opened and he came outside dressed in his untidy work clothes, just as I started up his walkway. I would always prefer him this way, messy and masculine. “Hey,” he said when he saw me. “I was just coming to see if you were sick or something.”

“Sorry, I got up a little late.”

“That’s okay.” He turned around and locked his door before he came to put his arm around me and walk me to his car.

“My mother said to give you whatever I didn’t eat. Should I put this in your lunch?” I asked, holding the bacon out to him.

“I can always eat.” He took half of the pieces from me and said, “You can put the rest with my lunch. Thanks for making it for me again. I always appreciate it.” He shoved three pieces into his mouth at once as he opened the car door for me.

“You’re welcome.” With my hands free, after setting my books on the floorboard, I opened Mason’s lunch pail and wrapped the bacon in the napkin that was inside.

Mason climbed into the driver’s seat and pulled out onto the road. “Looks like you’re not the only one having a late start,” Mason said when we turned at the corner, seeing Emmaline climbing into the car Hayden had gotten from his father for Christmas. Hayden waved to us as he shut Emmaline’s door.

“You look upset. What’s wrong?” Mason asked, glancing over at me.

“I’m just nervous about the party and your father, I guess.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t want to say how afraid I was of his father not liking me out loud.

“You don’t have anything to worry about. My father’s going to love you,” Mason said, reaching out for my hand. It was amazing how he always read me so well. I took his hand, scratched and stained by hard work at Swatches, in both of mine, feeling its warmth and power.

“Will you still be able to get my ring back today?” I asked, remembering when I looked at my hand that he was supposed to be getting it back that day. Mason had insisted on taking it to the jewelers to get it cleaned on Monday, two days before, and I was really missing it.

“Yeah, I’ll pick it up on break and get it back to you tonight.”

“I keep reaching for it with my thumb without thinking and realizing it’s not where it’s supposed to be. I can’t wait to have it back.”

“Me neither.” He brought my hands to his mouth to kiss each one as he pulled up in front of my school and put the car in park.

I could already feel the spectators watching us through the classroom windows, and see out of the corner of my eye the bodies walking across the schoolyard stopping to stare at us. It was the same thing every morning. Everyone wanted to get a good look at Mason Algoth.

Mason leaned over to kiss me, so I gave him a quick peck before I leaned away. “What was that?” he asked, raising an eyebrow and giving me half a smile.

“I’m sorry. I just hate the way they’re always staring.”

Mason sat back in his seat as he looked out his window and laughed. “Look at all those jealous guys, wishing they were me.”

“I think they see you the same way everyone sees your father.”

Mason gave me an odd look as he shook his head. “No. I bet every single guy is wishing they were the one in this car with you, getting to kiss you every morning.” I smiled as Mason put his arm around me and leaned closer. “But I’m never going to let you go. So I say, let ‘em watch and keep on wishing.” He pressed those silken lips of his against mine, and this time I let him kiss me, resting one hand against his cheek as he did the same to me. “I love you, Alexandra.”

“I love you, too, Mason.” I savored his words as he got out of the car and came to open my door for me. He must have said them a hundred times by then and I still felt the same infinite happiness that I did the first time I heard him say it.

Looking outside, I could see students still looking back at Mason and me as they walked into school, and feel the prying eyes watching us through the windows. It was creepy, so I watched Mason, nearly to my door now, instead. Somehow, just seeing him took all that away.

The door opened and I got out with my books and lunch pail. “I’ll be here right after school to get you,” Mason said as he gave me a hug.

“I can’t wait.”

I heard my door shut as I walked around the car and up the walkway to the school building. When I reached the main doors, I stopped and turned around to see Mason sitting in his car, still watching me, just as he did every morning. We waved to each other as Jack walked up behind me and opened the door.

“Let me get that for you,” he said, holding it open for me. He had been unusually nice to me since the truth about Mason’s father came out.

“Thank you, Jack.”

“Hold it,” Katy’s voice came from outside as he let the door go. He pushed it back open for her. “I know I’m not Mason Algoth’s girlfriend, but I *am* his girlfriend’s sister.”

“Sorry, Katy. I didn’t see you coming,” Jack said.

“Well look closer next time.” She stalked off to her classroom as Jack and I went to ours.

“Don’t feel bad. It’s just how she is,” I said.

We wouldn’t have had that run-in if Katy would have just ridden to school with me each morning. Mason and I tried it on the first day back to school after Christmas break, but by the time we got there and Mason leaned over to kiss me, Katy said she would vomit if she had to spend another minute alone with us and she refused to let Mason drive her to school ever again. Mason and I didn’t mind her coming with us, but honestly, we preferred it this way.

“Hey, Emmaline,” I said, sitting down beside her. “We beat you and Hayden here, but I didn’t even see you come in.”

“That’s because you were so busy with Mason.”

“Yeah.” I smiled to myself as I looked down and realized I’d grabbed Mason’s black lunch pail instead of my silver one. “Oh no, I took Mason’s lunch.”

“So? They’re the same, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, except that I put bacon in his and I don’t want to eat that for lunch.”

“I’m sure someone will eat it if you tell them it’s Mason’s.” Emmaline put the back of her hand against her forehead dramatically. “Like the lunch of a movie star.” We both laughed. It was ridiculous the way the kids at school thought of Mason.

“Good morning, class,” Mr. Web said as he entered the room and made his way to the front of it. “So, I hear Mr. Sydney Algoth will finally be joining us in Chicago this evening. Is that right, Miss Alexandra?”

I wondered where he’d heard about it as I glanced uncomfortably around the room, since everyone was turning to stare at me. “Yes, sir.”

“Oh, good, good. If you get the chance, you should bring him to school with you one morning. I would be honored to meet him.”

I nodded, but knew I couldn’t ask him to do that.

“We’re having a welcoming party for him tonight, if you’d like to come,” Emmaline piped in. I stared at her in surprise, mentally willing her to take it back.

“Really?” Mr. Web’s face filled with expectancy.

Emmaline caught my look, but pressed on. “Sure. Mason said the more the merrier, so bring a friend if you want. He really wants his father to feel welcome here in Chicago.”

“Why not invite the whole class while you’re at it?” I whispered, trying to sound sarcastic…She didn’t catch on.

“Good idea. You’re all invited to come and bring your parents. I’m sure Mr. Algoth would love to meet them. It’s almost exactly across the street from Alexandra’s house, the yellow one. He should be getting there about five-thirty, so come a little before that.”

“Splendid. Thank you, Miss Alexandra and Miss Emmaline. I will certainly be there. And we can’t very well have any homework with something so important happening tonight,” Mr. Web said, giving us a heavily mustached grin. A few students cheered. I groaned inside. “So, let’s take out our American History books and turn to page three hundred and eleven.”

After finding the right page in my book, I began scribbling feverishly on my slate. *I was only joking about the class. I wasn’t planning to feed that many people, and what will we do with them all?* I pushed it over to Emmaline.

Her eyebrows wrinkled as she read. Then she wrote on her slate and pushed it over to me. *Mason said he wanted his father to make friends and feel at home here. Hayden and I can pick up more food right after school and bring it over.*

*Okay,* I mouthed, hoping Mason wouldn’t be too upset.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the little note I knew would be there. *Have a great day. Love, Mason.* He usually wrote something to that effect on the notes he left in my pocket every morning when he dropped me off, and they always made my day brighter. I definitely needed that one.

As Mr. Web droned on, I went over everything for the party in my head. Mason had arranged for a taxi to pick up his father at the train station and bring him home. We had snacks and drinks in his fridge and on the counters, ready to be served. Emmaline would have to bring enough to double what we already had to make sure we had enough. My mother was bringing over extra plates and glasses. Mason and I had everything unpacked that we’d brought over from his house in Shilling with the help of my father and Hayden. Every room in the house was clean and ready for his father.

“Miss Alexandra, it’s your turn to read,” Mr. Web’s voice broke into my thoughts. Emmaline’s eyes widened when she looked over at my book. I realized I wasn’t even on the right page. She put her finger on her book to indicate where to start reading, so I kept my head low and faced my book as I read the three paragraphs from hers. Then she picked up on the next three. I tried again and again to focus on school, but my mind refused to stop wandering to the party.

At lunch, Hayden said he and Emmaline would be happy to pick up more snacks and come over after school. At least half of the class came over to where we were sitting under a tree to let us know they would be at the party with their parents unless something came up, each one adding to the pressure I already felt. It seemed that every adult in Chicago was dying to meet Sydney Algoth, so it was unlikely any of their parents would pass up the opportunity. I hoped Hayden realized just how many refreshments they would need to bring.

Stress continued to build throughout the day. I usually spent every minute I was in school looking forward to Mason picking me up (even on days when he had to work late, he took a break long enough to come get me after school), but today I didn’t want afternoon to come.

It did come, though. The jolting ring of the bell sent a rush of fear through my body as it stiffened. Hayden came around to our desk and picked up Emmaline’s books before they left, talking about which deli to head to.

Outside, I was met by a heavy north wind that caused me to put my hand against my skirt to keep it from blowing up too high.

And the instant I saw Mason standing beside his car, I began to feel better. His face lit up as he strode quickly toward me, reaching me before I could get very far across the crowded schoolyard. He wrapped his arms around me, his coat protecting me from his grease-covered clothes, and held me there for a full minute, at least. It felt so good. “Ready to go?” he asked when he released me, taking my books and lunch in one arm and putting the other one around me.

“Yeah,” I laid my arm against his and held the hand he had on my waist. “But I have to tell you something, and I really don’t want you to be angry with me, because it’s not my fault,” I said, glancing nervously at him.

“Oookay.” The apprehension in his voice was evident.

“Emmaline invited our teacher, *and* everyone in our class, *and* their parents to the party for your father. I’m really sorry.”

He opened the door for me as he let out a loud breath. “Goodness, Alexandra. You really had me scared. Why would I be mad about that?”

“Because now all these people you don’t know will be coming over to your house. I can’t believe she invited them.” I sat down in the car, still feeling guilty in spite of what he said.

“It’s okay.” Mason shut my door and walked around the car before he got in on his side. “It’ll be good for my dad to meet all those people. I really want him to like it here in Chicago as much as I do, and they’re only going to be there for an hour or two.” He twisted his neck around to look behind him before he pulled out into the street. “Besides, it’ll give me a chance to size up that guy that was holding the door for you this morning.”

“Jack? Why would you want to size him up?”

“That’s the second time this week he’s held the door for you. He’s got a thing for you, Alexandra. I can tell.”

“No, he doesn’t. He’s just being nice because he feels bad for being so mean to me that Monday after the dance.”

Mason looked over at me solemnly. “You didn’t see the way he was looking at you when he was watching you go from my car to that door, or the way he ran halfway across the grass to hold it open for you.”

I thought it was sweet that he worried so much, even though I knew he was wrong. I scooted as far as I could to the left side of my seat and laid my head against his arm. “It doesn’t really matter, because I love you,” I said. He kissed the top of my head and reached up to put his hand on the cheek I didn’t have against him, running his fingers back and forth over it.

When the car pulled up in his driveway, I had to take a deep breath and try to calm down. People would begin arriving in a matter of hours.

“I should probably go wash up. You can wait downstairs if you want to. I’ll be fast,” Mason said before he got out.

“I think I’ll help my mother carry the dishes over here.”

“I can get them if you wait a few minutes.”

“We’ll be alright.”

“If you’re sure. Just be sure and leave the chairs for me to get, okay?”

“Okay.” I picked up both of our lunch boxes and my books as Mason came to open my door for me, giving me a kiss before we went our separate ways.

By the time he was finished, my mother and I had a fresh tablecloth on the serving table in his living room and were stacking all the plates and glasses beside a punch bowl we would fill with cold juice just before guests began to arrive. Mason carried the trays of food from his kitchen to the long table and several chairs over from our house to put around his living room. After that, he took a stack of puzzles and a small folding table from the hall closet and set them against the wall for kids to play with when they came over. “That’s all we can do for now,” my mother said when we were through. “Your father will be home soon, so I should probably go fix him something to eat. I’ll be back in a little while.”

“Thank you, Mother.” I was glad to see her go, since she kept stopping to smile and stare tearfully at me.

Mason and I sat on the cream colored loveseat with a folded purple quilt his mother had made hanging over the back of it, as we admired the finished room. My eyes rested on the ‘Welcome Home’ sign hanging just above the three framed pictures that were resting on top of the fireplace. My favorite of the three was the one of us together at the dance. The picture in the center was of Mason and his parents when he was about twelve years old, and his parents’ wedding picture sat on the other side of it.

“I got something for you today,” Mason said, drawing my attention to him.

“My ring?” I asked hopefully.

“I got that too, but I was talking about this.” He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out two tickets. Red hearts were stamped on either side of the words *Valentine’s Day Ball* on the end of each one.

“Tickets to the ball! Thank you, Mason.” I took one to look over.

“It’s only a month away, so maybe we could go get you a dress next week.”

“Okay.”

He put his arm around me and pressed it against my back, so I would have no choice in kissing him, as if I ever had one. But someone knocked on the door, interrupting our kiss.

“I hope that’s Emmaline,” I said, standing up. “She’s supposed to bring over more food since she doubled the number of guests today.”

“I’ll hold onto these until the ball,” Mason said, taking my ticket and putting both back in his pocket.

When we opened the door, we found Emmaline and Hayden standing on the porch, each holding a stack of five snack trays from the deli in their arms. “There’s ten more in the car. Will that be enough, Alexandra?” Emmaline asked me.

“That will be more than enough. Thank you for bringing them.”

“No trouble at all,” Hayden said. “Where should these go?”

“Just put them on the counter. They won’t all fit on the table, so I’ll figure that out later. Mason and I can get the rest of it.” We went out to Hayden’s car and got the other ten, then met Emmaline and Hayden in the kitchen.

“Do you want us to help with anything else?” Emmaline asked.

“There’s not much else to do,” Mason said. “But no one’ll be getting here for another hour and a half at least if you just want to stay till then.” Hayden and Mason had become good friends, strangely enough, over the last few weeks when we’d all four gone out or stayed in together.

“Okay. Do you want to, Hayden?” Emmaline asked.

“Why not?” So we sat in the living room and talked about school and the ball and this and that. But I had the same problem I had at school, my anxiety over the party calling my attention away from everything else, so I missed a lot of what was said.

It was just that so much could go wrong—spilt juice or snack trays, Marcy reverting to tormenting me in front of everyone, too many guests to fit inside the house…or worse, no guests at all—I just wanted it to be over with.

My parents and Katy came over at about five o’clock to be ready to greet the guests when they began to arrive. My father took my seat beside Mason when I got up to carry a few of the snack trays to the table and they began talking about a car he’d seen earlier that day. My mother and I barely got the juice poured before someone knocked on the front door, sending my nerves into overdrive as I pictured my classmate’s parents, whom I’d never even met, coming over and me having to meet them all at the door. Suddenly Mason’s father didn’t seem so scary.

But it was Mr. Web we found standing on the front porch when Mason and I opened the door. “I hope I’m not too early,” he said jovially, leaning back slightly so that his round belly poked out even farther.

“Not at all, come in. Mason, this is my teacher, Mr. Web. Mr. Web, this is Mason.”

“Yes, the fellow I see you leaving with every afternoon. It’s nice to meet you, Mason.”

“You, too,” Mason said, shaking his hand.

I looked outside as Mr. Web walked past me and saw Mr. and Mrs. Abbey coming over from next door with their little boy. A dark blue tint was already beginning to settle over the world outside. The Abbeys waved when they saw me, so I stood at the open door and waited. “Hello, Alexandra. I brought these for your get-together.” Mrs. Abbey held out a plate of brownie squares.

“How thoughtful, thank you.” I took the plate from her as we entered the living room. “The Abbeys are here,” I said.

“Hello, Caroline, Mitch,” my mother said, coming to say hello.

I moved some things around on the table to make room for the brownies as Mason picked up a puzzle with the Eiffel Tower on the front. “Hey, Mikey, you want to do a puzzle with me?” he asked the Abbeys’ son.

“Okay,” Mikey popped out of the chair he was sitting in with a burst of energy and sat on the floor in a corner of the room with Mason, just as another knock came at the door.

Elise was there with her parents and little brother. I did my best to be friendly and welcoming, even though Elise and I were anything but friends.

As more and more guests arrived, my nerves began to calm down. Elise’s brother decided to help Mikey with the puzzle, so Mason was able to stay with me beside the door. It felt natural to welcome each person and thank them for coming when he was standing beside me. It was so much easier than what my parents were doing in the living room, having to carry on conversations with each person as they entered the room. And the more guests that came, the more successful the party felt.

Luckily, Marcy and Jack never showed, even though nearly every other student in my class came, each one staring obsessively at Mason as they walked past us.

After the Smiths came over at about five twenty-five, the traffic finally stopped. Everyone stood or sat in the living room, dining room, or kitchen, talking happily to each other.

Mason and I went to stand in the living room and wait. “So, old Jacky decided not to come?” he said, giving me a smile. “I guess that means you’re all mine tonight.”

“I’m all yours forever.”

His smile slowly faded as he stared fixedly at me. “Really?”

“Yes.” For the first time I didn’t feel embarrassment or regret for something I’d said that I knew was way too forward.

He wrapped his arms around me and kissed my forehead. “Thank you, Alexandra. Knowing that will make tonight a whole lot easier.”

“What do you mean?”

The room was suddenly flooded with light coming in through the window, reminding me that I should be watching for the guest of honor. Mason and I looked through the window and I felt the familiar hot rush of fear when I saw a taxi. “That’s him,” Mason said loudly to the quiet now filling the room. “If you’ll all just wait here, we’ll go and get him.” Mason held my hand as he walked to the door. I wished he would have just left me behind. It would have been so much easier to meet his father while I was surrounded by others who were desperate to do the same.

Outside, the orange setting sun hung over the man pulling his suitcase out of the back of the taxi, which was stopped in the middle of the road, unable to park with all the cars along the sidewalk and in the driveway. It was strange to see this man as more than a picture. He turned around when he heard our footsteps coming. “Hey, Dad,” Mason said, letting go of me to hug his father. The taxi drove away behind them.

“Mason, it’s good to finally be here.” His father looked around at all the cars. “I wasn’t sure if I was in the right place with all these cars here. It looks like someone’s celebrating something.”

“We are. We’re celebrating you getting home by having the neighbors over to meet you. But first, I want you to meet Alexandra.”

His father fixed the same stony gray eyes on me that Mason had so many times before, only slightly darker than his son’s. They reflected the dying sunlight as tears began to form in them. He reached out and hugged me. “Thank you, Alexandra, for taking such good care of my son when I couldn’t. I know his mother is just as grateful, somewhere.” I couldn’t come up with a response, since it felt as if Mason had always taken such good care of me, instead of the other way around. Mr. Algoth took a step back to smile at me. “I’m so glad to finally meet you.”

“I’m glad to meet you, too.” Somehow the nervousness I’d dealt with all day wasn’t quite as overwhelming. He felt familiar because he reminded me so much of Mason.

“Well, let’s get you into your new house,” Mason said, taking his father’s suitcase and patting him on the back.

“It’s a fine house. You did an excellent job in choosing one,” his father said before he looked over at me. “I hope your parents are here. Mason told me what a help they’ve been in getting him into this house. I would really like to thank them.”

“They’re here. They’re just inside with everyone else.”

As soon as we opened the door, everyone inside began clapping. People moved forward to shake Sydney’s hand and thank him for what he did.

Leaving the suitcase just inside the door, Mason took my hand and led me to the now empty kitchen. That way the guests could do what they came there for, and Mason could escape the never ending stares from the kids in my class, which would probably be directed at his father now, anyway, I guess. “It looks like things are going really well,” Mason said as we looked back and watched my parents shake his father’s hand.

“I think so, too. I’m going to take these trays out there and bring back the empty ones,” I said, taking the tops off of two dishes and picking them up.

“I’ll get the old ones out of your way.” Mason went ahead of me and brought back a tall stack of empty plates and trays, leaning over to kiss my cheek when we passed each other. Everyone was so busy talking or listening to every word Mr. Algoth said that they didn’t even notice us. After Mason and I had put all the food on the table and carried the empty dishes to the kitchen, I turned on the water and began rinsing them off. *Less work to do later.*

“You don’t have to do that,” Mason said, coming to stand behind me and putting both arms around my waist.

“I know, but I don’t mind. My mother probably won’t leave until the mess from the party’s all cleaned up, so I’m just getting ahead.”

I dropped the plate I was rinsing off in the sink when I felt him spinning me around to face him. The sound the plate made was terrible, but I hardly even noticed, because he pressed one hand against my back and the other behind my head, pulling me close and kissing me until my legs felt weak and my breath was short. “You’re so good to me. What did I ever do to deserve you?” he asked, gazing at me with heavy eyes.

“No, what did *I* do to deserve you?”

“Excuse me for just a moment,” Mason’s father’s voice came from the living room. A few seconds later he walked into the kitchen with Katy. We watched them move to the wall opposite the living room and sit down at the little four person table. “So, you want to know about getting your foot in the door with the mob. Have I understood you correctly?”

“*Katy!*” I said. How could she embarrass me like that? I let go of Mason to walk over to his father. “I’m so sorry about this, Mr. Algoth.”

“It’s alright. Mason prepared me for this, so I’ve been expecting it, really.” He turned his attention back to my sister. “I could tell you of the horrors I’ve seen and vicious natures I’ve encountered, the terrible fates of the victims who weren’t as lucky as I was, but it would be more than a lady could bear to hear. So how do I make you understand?”

Katy threw her long hair over her shoulders and glowered at him. “*I* can handle it,” she said indignantly.

He stared thoughtfully at her for a few seconds before he nodded. “Alright, then. There are men—”

“I can’t,” I said desperately. They both looked over at me. “I’m sorry. I would really rather not hear this.” Knowing that they were about to discuss the terrible pain and suffering inflicted on one human by another, I rushed away from the room and into the next one, where everyone still seemed to be having a good time.

Once I located Hayden and Emmaline standing in a circle with a few of our classmates beside the snack table, I wound my way through the crowd and went to stand in between Emmaline and a boy named Jonathan. “Hey, where have you been?” she asked me, as Jonathan moved over to make more room for me in the circle.

“In the kitchen, washing dishes.” I leaned closer and whispered, “Katy’s talking to Mason’s father about the mob.”

“Sorry.” She gave me a sympathetic look.

“Hey, thanks for inviting everyone to the party,” Jonathan said to Emmaline and me, the small scar under his right eye becoming more defined when he smiled. “My dad’s been kind of mad at me for something stupid lately, but I think after me getting him into this party to meet Sydney Algoth, he’ll get over it.”

“So you’re having fun?” I asked him, wanting to know that they were having a good time.

“Yeah, I mean, how often do we all get together like this outside of school?”

“That’s right. We’ve never done anything like this,” Tony said from across the circle. He was one of those kids who was always at the top of our class, grade-wise, but never let on how smart he was. But since he sat right in front of me in class, I saw his grades once in a while. “And it has been a lot of fun. Maybe we could get together at my house on Friday. Actually, I’ll go talk to my parents right now.”

A hand slid over my back as he left the circle, so, thinking it was Jonathan, I jumped to my right, bumping into Emmaline. She managed not to fall over as I turned to ask him not to touch me, but I saw the arm extending from behind me and turned around to face Mason. “Oh, you scared me.” I smiled and moved closer to him, leaving the circle behind.

“Sorry. I guess I thought you would have known it was me.”

I leaned up to whisper in his ear, so he leaned over slightly. “How’s it going in the kitchen?”

“Good, I guess. I think some of what he’s saying might be getting through to her. I’m glad you left when you did, though. It was definitely more than you should have to hear.”

I noticed Mr. and Mrs. Smith making their way toward us, so I took Mason’s hand and turned to face them. “We just wanted to thank you for inviting us over to meet your father tonight,” Mr. Smith said to Mason. “Marjorie’s feeling tired, though, so I think we’ll head on home.”

“Could you wait just a few more minutes? As soon as my father comes back in here, there’s an announcement I want to make, and I’d really like for everyone to hear it,” Mason said. I stared curiously at him, wondering what it could be.

Mr. Smith looked to his wife. “Of course we can wait,” she said, reaching out to pat Mason’s arm softly.   
 “Thank you.”

They walked across the room so Mrs. Smith could sit down in an empty chair.

“What announcement?” I asked Mason.

“It’s a surprise.”

“But I don’t want to be surprised in front of everyone.”

“You’ll like this one.”

I wasn’t so sure, though. And I didn’t think I could handle all those people staring at me. Maybe he could just make the announcement alone. There was really no need for me to be there, especially since I didn’t even know what it was about. It was probably a surprise for his father, anyway.

“Hey, Alexandra,” someone behind me said. I turned around and saw Tony motioning for me to rejoin the circle. I kept hold of Mason’s hand as I did so. “So everyone’s going to come over on Friday. I live just a block over from school. You wanna come, too?”

I was a little surprised by the invitation, since no one aside from Emmaline or Hayden had ever offered me one. “I’ll be with Mason after school.”

“He can come, too. You wanna come to a get-together like this one at my house on Friday?” he asked Mason, who was standing halfway in the circle between Jonathan and me.

“I’ll be working.”

“See, Alexandra. You’re boyfriend’s busy, so you’ve got nothing else to do. You should come.”

Looking over at Mason, I could tell he didn’t appreciate the way Tony was talking to me. “I don’t know. He’ll still be there to pick me up after school.” I felt Mason’s arm go around me. Even if it was only for a few minutes, I would have rather been with Mason than anyone else. And it didn’t really sound like fun anyway, having to worry about what I would do and say at his house.

Tony gave me a strange look. “So come over instead. Emmaline’s coming.”

“We’ll see.”

“Here comes my dad,” Mason brushed my hair aside to whisper. I looked at the kitchen door and watched every nearby adult swarm around his father as he entered the room. Katy scooted against the wall to get around them, looking extremely sobered by whatever he said to her. “Come on.” Mason tried to pull me away from the circle.

“Mason, wait. Do you really need me with you to make this announcement?”

“Yes, I really do…Trust me.” I stared into his alluring eyes and saw how important this was to him. My own eyes pled not to have this burden put on me, I’m sure, but I would have done anything for him. So I took a deep breath, hoping it would slow my racing heart, and let him lead me to the fireplace.

“Excuse me, could I have everyone’s attention, please,” Mason raised his voice to say. The noise level dropped, but people in the back of the room continued to talk. “Could I have everyone’s attention, for just a minute?” he said, louder this time. People began shushing each other until everyone was silent…and then everyone was staring at us. I felt my cheeks burning. “Alexandra and I would like to thank everyone for coming to meet my dad tonight. I want to say how happy I am to finally have him home, safe and sound. I’m glad you could all share this important night with us. There is one more thing that could make this night even better, for me at least, and I wanted to share that with you, too.” Mason let go of my hand to reach into his pocket and pull a small white box out of it. He opened it, and inside—

“My ring,” I said happily, reaching out for it. But Mason knelt down on one knee, taking it further from my reach. My hand went slowly over my mouth. Breath seemed to leave my body as I realized what was happening.

“Alexandra, you came to me like an angel, full of light, in a dark and lonely city. You stood by me through impossible circumstances. It only took me a day to know that I belong with you…and you belong with me. I want to wake up beside you every morning. I want to spend lazy summer afternoons out on the porch with you and cold winter nights beside the fire with you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Alexandra. So, will you please marry me?”

I wiped the happiest tear I’d ever cried away from my cheek as I nodded. There was nothing, *nothing,* in this world I wanted more than to spend forever with him. “Yes,” I choked out, wanting to say more, but not trusting myself to.

Mason smiled as he reached out for my left hand so he could slide my ring back over my finger, where it sparkled this time with the promise of forever. Then he stood up and wrapped his arms around me as he kissed me. I rested my hands on the back of his neck as everyone broke out in applause. But I didn’t care about them, or the eyes fixed on us and our kiss. All I cared about was the man kissing me, the man I would marry, the man I would spend the rest of my life with.

A few people came over to congratulate us, including Emmaline and Hayden, but the attention remained mostly on Mr. Algoth. The first chance he got, Mason led me to the kitchen, which was still empty, and wrapped his strong arms around me. We smiled at each other for a long moment. “Thank you,” he said.

“For what? I should be thanking you, Mason.”

“Thank you for agreeing to become my wife. You’ve made me happier than I’ve ever been before.”

His wife…I loved the sound of that.

“Remember when you said you didn’t know how you could give me anything for my birthday that would be better than the kiss I gave you?” he asked me.

“Yes.”

“I know what you can give me.”

“Anything.”

“My twentieth birthday’s the day after your last day of school, May fourteenth. You could marry me for my birthday. Nothing could top that. Then we could travel to Europe or get a cabin in the woods, if you don’t want to travel very far.”

“Okay.” Going to Europe with Mason sounded perfect, actually.

“Did I hear you right? Did you just say you want to get married this summer?” my father asked as he entered the room, followed closely by my mother.

“She said yes. I knew she would, but…Oh, Ted, our little girl is getting married. I’m so happy for you both,” my mother said as she hugged both of us, then began dabbing at her eyes.

“Thank you, Lillian,” Mason said.

“I’m happy for you, too, as long as Alexandra finishes school next year. You didn’t mention how soon you would want to marry my daughter when you asked my permission,” my father said.

“You both knew?” I asked my parents. My mother nodded and I began to understand why she’d been acting so peculiar lately, but my father continued to stare at Mason, waiting for a response.

“I guess I should have,” Mason answered him. “I just don’t think I can wait another year and a half to marry Alexandra. But she can still finish school. I’ll just keep taking her every morning and picking her up in the afternoon like I’ve been doing.”

“So, we’re having a wedding,” Mason’s father said as he came into the kitchen.

“It looks that way.” My father reached out to shake his hand.

“Maybe you two would let me take you house shopping.” Mr. Algoth winked at his son. “It’ll be a good way to get my feet wet in the world of real estate.”

“Sounds good,” Mason said. “You don’t mind, do you, Alexandra?”

“Of course not.”

“And we’ve only got five months to plan the wedding,” my mother said excitedly. “We need to send out invitations so people can plan to be there. We can choose and order them this weekend so we can send them out as soon as possible. And a dress, I’ll have to help you select a dress, Alexandra. Oh, this will be so much fun…” She went on about the wedding as I smiled and leaned against Mason when he put his arm around me.

And I realized for the first time how all the challenges we’d faced and the way our love for each other had been tested and proved had brought us closer and made our love stronger than it might have otherwise been. I knew, beyond any doubt, that what we shared would be able to withstand anything our future might hold.

Mason planted his fingers in my hair, as our parents began talking about the grandchildren they would someday share, and leaned his head down against mine. “I love you, Alexandra…so much it hurts sometimes. And I will *never* stop loving you,” he whispered.

I pressed against him as I wrapped my arms around his back. I knew exactly how he felt. “I love you, too, Mason.”

So now, my only problem was how I would ever survive the next five months having to wait to be married to him.

*About the Author*

April Marcom works as a substitute teacher of all grades in her local public schools and absolutely adores all the wonderful children and teenagers she gets to work with. When she's not teaching or creating stories, she's enjoying the country life with her car-obsessed husband and three fabulous children. She also enjoys rainy days, traveling, and her five very rowdy dogs. April grew up a southern bell in Mississippi, but is now a proud Oklahoman.

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*Thank you so much for allowing me to share my story with you.*

*-April*