



Thursdays & Grey's

by Lavina Bond

We make a pact. No matter where we all go to college, where we live when we get married, no matter where life takes us, we stop on Thursdays nights, we make a conference call, we pour wine, we all watch “Grey’s” together. It’s how we’ll never lose each other.

... Or ourselves.

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Steps.

Awkward.

Daunting steps.

I'd recently learned it.

Daunting, I mean, the word.

I found it to be the perfect word.

Because plenty of moments ...

Were. Daunting. Fearful.

But not really fear.

So daunting fits.

Impossible.

As I stared in their eyes, I decided impossible was the right word. Then prisms of thoughts shattered into my brain trying to plan every way to make them disappear. Why? I didn't really have an answer. If I had met them at school, we would have been friends. We would have gushed over NSYNC and Britney. Made plans for skate parties and slumber parties. But the great thing about a slumber party is everyone goes back to their own home afterward, and now here were the steps that were being forced into this like we were.

As if we hadn't been through enough transitions in the past two years. Dad's new baby and wife, and life that we less and less fit into. Mom's new craziness then apparently that found respite in their dad. *Maybe they've been through as many transitions as we have.* Can't allow that thought now. Then they become human. Then they win.

They'll be the cool daughters. And we'll be ... twice forgotten.

Somehow it happened one day, two years later, we went for a weekend at our dad's because the baby was turning two, and dad wanted to put on a show for everyone that he still had three daughters. The two years between that, he had two daughters on Wednesday nights. Definitely not on his weekend time with the new wife and that precious baby. And when we finally got home, Raena ran to me, like she couldn't even stop herself, and said, "We missed you," as she flung her arms around me. I stood frozen. Undecided if I should hug her back or not, until, the oddest thing happened, the scent of her hair hit me, the feel of someone's arms around me, someone happy to see me, tinged all the way through me. Without a hesitation, I let my arm drift around her. "I missed you too." As I was holding Raena, I looked to Sloan expecting some snarky comment that she usually made, but she only smiled at me, reached playfully toward my sister, Cori, and said, "Hey, Bitch." Cori laughed at her and said, "Back at ya, Bitch."

Then that was the moment we became sisters.

Sloan and Cori were soon to turn 13, as me and Raena were soon to turn 12, yes, wasn't our ages just meant to be for our mom and their dad? Oh, it'll be so perfect. With the four of us fighting nonstop for the past two years, I wondered how "perfect" reality had been for them. Sometimes they fought because of our fights. Sometimes the four of us had sat together listening to them fight because it was entertaining and felt for a brief moment in all the monumental changes and transitions they had forced upon us that one moment belonged to us, was our victory. We were so powerful we could make adults fight. We smiled in those moments, not allowing any wavering

of if our victory was selfish. It was ours. Sloan even shared her cigarettes with us. Cori stole us a bottle of beer we shared.

Their mother bore on them in those moments. She was striking, but emotionless. She usually bore on Sloan more than Raena, which I gathered was because Sloan was the oldest and had spent a lot of time trying to be emotionally responsible for Raena. Cori had done that for me.

Our parents were shitty. Our lives were shitty. And the four of us were the only people we could take it all out on, especially as we watched our friends' perfect two parent home lives. So in the moments we got to make their lives shitty too, the four of us reveled, stopped fighting. During one of the listening to their fights moments, I had laid my head in Sloan's lap. She had let me. Cori put her hand on Raena's for a moment. A subtle moment of acceptance.

Two years later we discovered IT!!, the greatest thing ever, don't even think I mean sex, we'd been experimenting (game of solitaire) with that plenty, something better than sex, something ...

Infinite! Our new obsession. Meredith Grey. She was so jaded like us. Cristina. Oh we loved her. Such a fucking pain in the ass and that's what we loved about Cristina Yang. Yang. Yang. We said it constantly, desperately hoping for those dramatic moments we got to tell someone off the way she did. Parents, all four of them, had kind of forgotten us in the past two years, decided we were "old enough",

whatever that meant, and all we needed from them was money, food, and clothes. They supplied all in abundance, but don't expect talks. Take your money and get away from us. Somehow in the past two years, the four of us had become inseparable. Learning to pool our money so we had quadruple the wardrobe and accessories. Taking turns whose night it was to klepto beer. Then we got bold enough to take bottles of wine and dared the shitty parents to say a damn thing about it. We had found women ten years older than us, but knew their circumstances had made them as surly as we were. We couldn't believe it, we had found our TV soul mates, and McDreamy and that hair weren't too bad to look at either. We were all tangled together on the couch with stolen wine and not enough closeness as we watched, and fell in love, not an NSYNC kind of love. Even that first episode we looked at each other, and knew, this is our connector.

A season later HE entered in a towel, steam all around him to exude the foreshadowing that the interns would call him McSteamy. Mark Sloan. Mmmmmmmmmmm. And we all fell much much deeper.

And that there was a character named Sloan, we just knew, this show was written for us!!

Yes, this was the show that made us ... Infinite.

Sloan moved to get more popcorn out of Cori's lap as we all looked at Addison. "I can't wait to have my first abortion," Sloan cried. "You are a bat-shit crazy bitch," Raena declared.

We all laughed. What she said had been funny, but I studied her. Sloan had spent the afternoon with her mother which always seemed to spark her need to be daring and dramatic, basically to be the fuck noticed. She had been more affected by the forgotten than the other three of us. I hoped I was wrong. I hoped she wouldn't do something that stupid as to get pregnant just to have their attention again. I made a mental note to go the next day and buy her some art supplies. Make her feel noticed. Let her paint me. Nude.

She'd asked a few times, and I had been so inhibited, another person limiting her art. Now I'd give her me.

The odd thing about being 16 and 17 is that you can only have four in a group. Maybe that never changes, as I thought about another TV show, "Sex And The City".

Maybe four is the perfect number for friendships, and it was, but for us it meant, we had kind of without meaning to, branded ourselves an exclusive club. And we were completely okay with that until, there was this meeting at school. "Everything You Need To Know About Your Senior Year." Oh Dear God, in a little over a year, Sloan and Cori will leave us.

Thus initiated the summer of mourning and pouring over “Grey’s” reruns. We bought all three seasons available on DVD and held on the couch and watched and clung to each other.

Raena grabbed the remote and hit pause then stood up and looked at all of us, all of us not at the pool or the mall, just mourning in silence on a couch on our summer break.

“We make a pact. No matter where we all go to college, where we live when we get married, no matter where life takes us, we stop on Thursday nights, we make a conference call, we pour wine, and we all watch “Grey’s” together. It’s how we’ll never lose each other.”

“Or ourselves,” Sloan added.

“Or ourselves,” the three of us echoed.

“You think after three years of watching “Grey’s” we know how to stitch a wound? I think we should seal this pact with blood,” Sloan dared, always looking how to be daring.

“What if we only cut deep enough that Band-Aids and Neosporin will heal it in a few days,” I said, as Sloan smiled at me always there to balance her daring side.

We made the cuts. We watched the blood. We gave our blood to each other. Then I took my blood dripping finger and smeared it on Sloan’s latest masterpiece. She smiled. “Wow, that just enhanced it even more.” Then three more streaks of blood smeared the canvas.

Cori went for healing supplies, and we all dramatically called out “Suture” like we were doing surgery on each other by wrapping our blood dripping fingers, so silly, but it unified us.

Sloan plopped into my bed, burrowed herself into me making sure I woke. Annoyance fluffed but filtered immediately as I felt it wafting off of Sloan. The undefinable it that trapped Sloan inside herself and the odd way I had become the only clandestine confidant. I was the fortunate and treasured one because of my ability to see pain. I understood one day it would make me a world famous writer, but it usually felt like a curse the way I could see people.

Especially someone I loved as much as Sloan. Her pain I could see brighter than others.

“What if I go to state school so I don’t have to move out? I don’t want to lose you.”

“You were accepted into RISD, one of the best art schools in the world. You can’t give that up. You’ll lose you if you give up this opportunity. So few artists have your talents.”

“All I can see for myself is the cliché of the lonely artist. You know no one understands me except you, and what if I’m only talented because I have you as my muse?”

“Sloan, I know it is scary to leave us, but we have our pact. We’ll find ways. I promise. Besides at RISD you’ll have plenty of other tortured artists there. You may never come home to see me.”

Sloan laughed. Then it fell on her, the reason for the plopping and burrowing. “She didn’t recognize me today. I tried to make a joke about *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* about her naming me after the girl in that movie, but even that she didn’t seem to connect to. My own mother doesn’t recognize me. This is how I start to not exist, slowly fade away because the origin is fading, and fading faster than ever. I

envy Raena, she never possesses one thought about her. Never goes to see her. When I go to college, will you, Dani, will you go see her? Take her art supplies so she doesn't fade away completely? Please, Dani. I don't know why after what she did to me that I can't stop loving her, but I can't. Maybe the forgotten pain feeds my art."

That was a very accurate description of how necessary pain is for an artist of any kind, but go see her mother? I'd never denied Sloan anything, I just couldn't, she was my weak spot. But pain as magnanimous as her mother's so haunted by it she walled it all inside herself and shut herself off from the world? I didn't know if I was capable. The word rose up. Daunting.

I didn't answer her. Maybe in the fact that she had requested, in her mind I had agreed because I never denied her anything. She released an adorably serene exhale and fell asleep.

At the end of the school day I got into the car with Sloan instead of my usual with Cori and Raena. Cori had pulled me out of math so it was just us, no steps around. "You don't have to do this. You can tell her no. It's not your torch to carry. We have our own problems."

"Not like hers. Ours are still functional assholes."

Cori laughed. "Did you see the picture of his new boat on Facebook?"

“Yeah. You and I will go klepto that one night. We’ll pee on his captain seat.”

Cori laughed again, that deliciously wicked laugh she loved to exude, especially with me.

She reached for a lock of my hair and twirled it around her finger like we were young again instead teenagers standing in a hallway at school. “So you’re going with her?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll concede. I’ll let you go. But you have to write me a poem about it.”

I smiled. She’d been demanding poems our whole lives. Demanding ways I was my best.

“An epic poem,” I said with a smile and a wink.

“Don’t let it turn you, you know. We all expect it from Sloan, it is her torch, but I can’t handle if it takes my little sister too.”

“I don’t think it works that way. I think it is a DNA imprint or something.”

Cori laughed. “Okay.” But still she pulled me into a long hug burrowing our DNA into me.

As soon as Sloan pulled the car into the driveway, I wondered if I had made a mistake.

It wasn’t just the thought of seeing her mother, it was that somehow in the inseparable we’d managed to keep this separate. Our former lives before we were thrown into the melting pot.

Before me was an old house. The kind erected out of character and charm. But the weathering of time passing had left its mark, especially on this house that didn't seem as well kept as its surrounding sisters. There was a garden that had grown wild and lush, but still you could see remnants of when it had been diligently maintained and manicured. Like someone at some point had thrown their entire selves into this garden. I recognized it. We had one now at our current home that every time she pissed him off he retreated to. For one moment he wasn't a step-father, he was a man who'd painfully watched his wife slip away and tried to funnel all the beauty she had previously given him into a romantic garden.

Into a way he could keep her alive. She had chosen the dark arts over his beautiful garden.

The door creaked and wheezed loudly, and Sloan smiled at the music it filled her with. Immediately I wanted to run back to the car. Sloan grabbed my hand like she saw the thought flash before me. "I'm here with you," she sang like a lullaby, like please don't leave me. "It was a beautiful life once."

"That's what is so painful. To see how you come here and wallow in it."

"I don't wallow. I surround myself with knowing once they were in love. We were made out of love, not the hollowness or the darkness they've now become. We were made out of love."

The reason she was such a talented artist was because she allowed her darkness to encapsulate her and flourish out onto the canvas. The darkness was all she seemed to know.

Here marked a time she knew love.

“I know it again sometimes with you, and you’re the one I chose to share myself with.”

She let go of my hand. She knew after that statement I wouldn’t have to be held there.

I let her show me. Pictures of her and Raena so young and seriously seeming to be dazzled by gumdrops. Paintings her mother had made of the two of them. Love letters from when her parents were in college and wildly in love. Paintings of the four of them. Tons of paintings of gardens. Her mother seemed obsessed with beautiful gardens. She was talented. Immensely.

I remembered overhearing Sloan and her dad late at night one night while everyone slept. *Can you go over and tend the garden some, Daddy? I can’t, Sloan. I just can’t. He started crying. I’ll want to go in that house and shake her and bring her back to me. I may actually kill her for what she did to you. I don’t know how you still go there every day. I don’t know why I let you. You do know why, Daddy, because you’ll always love her, and I’m all she has left. And her damn art.*

My mom had given him a respite too, but she couldn’t possibly shine brighter than gardens.

We walked up the stairs. Another set of stairs to the 3rd floor. An entire floor turned studio.

Sloan drifted to her immediately. “Hi, Mama.” Her mother didn’t stop painting, but she let her head drift to Sloan’s. We stayed for an hour. Sloan painted beside her mother.

I knew why she brought me here and asked me to look after her mother after she went to college. She needed me to hear her. The begging. *Please don't let this happen to me.*

The house felt so vacant without Sloan and Cori. I'd often find Raena in one of their rooms. I didn't say anything. I just laid on the bed with her, ached for them too. We'd been fractured in half. There's not surgery for that. There's hold and mourn. And accept. We were alone.

The season premiere of "Grey's Anatomy" finally arrived. We poured our wine. Raena did the conference call, and you could feel our souls unite when the four of us were on together.

During commercials we filled the gaps. Cori loved getting to play soccer at the collegiate level and even more loved juggling two men. *I found me a McSteamy and a McDreamy. Do they know about each other? Have you gone bat-shit crazy? You know I know how to keep secrets.*

Silence as we watched Meredith struggle so painfully with her mother's loss of self.

It seemed like such a symbolic way that Sloan had watched her mother lose herself.

Commercial. *It's fucking cold as hell here in Rhode Island.* Sloan couldn't talk about how affected she was with what was happening on "Grey's". *So how's senior life? Decided on colleges yet? Raena's probably going to Berkeley. She's been California Dreaming. It ain't as spectacular as The Mamas and the Papas made it out to be. Wear plenty of sunscreen.*

No one had to say shut up as the show came back on, the hush lulled over us. You could hear a few sobs as we watched Meredith cry and scream out her torment with her mother.

I realized Sloan also couldn't talk about Raena going to Berkley. As far away as possible.

And you, Miz Writer? All she can talk about is Sarah Lawrence or Brown. Brown! Please Brown. We can be together again! A monumental pause from all of us that Sloan had shown so much emotion. *I mean, you know, it would be cool to bump into you every now and then.* We laughed.

The show was over. We stayed on watching some dumb show we knew would only make it about six episodes, they loved to launch these after "Grey's" hoping to piggyback on the "Grey's Anatomy" audience, but real fans saw through these dumb shows. Still it gave us an hour to stay on the phone, to listen to us breathing, to be together again. *Goodnight, Bitches.*

The Thursday Conference Call had closed some wounds, but expanded some other wounds.

I missed our foursome and in ways I couldn't grasp I felt our unity was fleeting, like distance wouldn't just be a physical gap at some point in our lives. Some point it'd be emotional too.

Certainly there would have to come a time where Cori felt more united with her teammates. Where they were the ones she did conference calls with watching soccer games. Sloan would do the same with her artist friends because she was probably right, as she aged and dabbled in darkness, fewer and fewer people would understand her, maybe not even me. Daunting.

I decided to skip last period. I sent Raena a text confident she would find a ride home. The boy next door was hopelessly in love with Raena, had been since we were ten and moved to this neighborhood so that neither family was living in someone's former house – that might have been one good decision I think they made. From the moment he laid eyes on Raena, he was like a dog after a bone, and I'm sure she gave him plenty of bone – ners haha. She never indulged him even a smile unless she needed something. Still anytime she smiled, he wagged his tail and filtered into submission just to be around her for a minute. Yeah, she had a ride.

I drove to my spot. My mountains. I hiked and let all of Life's tapestry weave beautifully. At the top, I took it out of my backpack. The pen and notebook always with me. Never knew when the muse to write might hit. She deserved her due.

Her beautiful worship of language she spoke through me.

I was her slave, her very willing slave to words.

Ink dripped, flowed as her words did.

Her tale she flowed in me.

Poetry was her all.

Her vessel.

Me.

Alive was the only true feeling when I allowed myself to be a slave.

The one thing in my life that seemed to belong to me, even if it didn't because I was merely the vessel. Poetry. Alive.

I found her in Sloan's room, watching *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, funny scene, but her tears. She wouldn't watch "Grey's" alone. There's no way any of us would cheat on us like THAT.

I climbed a different mountain, into the bed,
pulled her into my arms, let her speak the unsaid.

"This was her favorite movie. She named Sloan after her. She always laughed when we watched this movie. She loved the scenes of Chicago. How Chicago was alive in this movie."

We'd lived together for seven years now, and I'd never heard Raena once mention her.

Maybe with Sloan around she had a mom replacement. Last night expanded her wounds too.

“She went to art school there. She met my dad in Chicago. He held my hand today on the way home. I let him for a moment, but then I saw her wither. I yanked away. Love hurts.”

Oh Dear God, she loved him too. The boy next door she was protecting him ... from her.

I knew at night he indulged himself. Chocolate. Memories of their mom. I took advantage.

“Cori has a soccer tournament in Chicago soon. I wondered if you’d get plane tickets for me and Raena and Sloan. Four days we could all be together again. They could have her again.”

A tear stung his eye. “Promise me you’ll take them to the art museum. Let them know she was great once. She was so great.”

“I promise.”

“I’ll get the plane tickets. I’ll give you money. I’ll tell you all the best pizza places.”

I laughed. “Yeah, we gotta have that pizza.”

“You’re teasing, but once you have it, you will know that you really gotta have that pizza.”

I took his hand. I was grateful he gave my mother the veneer of love again, even if I could always see his pain. See there was one moment he'd sacrifice everything to change.

As I was leaving the kitchen, "Dani?" I turned around. "Thank you for all you give to my Sloan. She'll really love this trip. She really loves you. I have no right to say this, but I hope you'll choose Brown. Sloan needs you." I saw it. I was capable with her in ways he wasn't.

Sloan looked tormented running toward us in the airport. Who should I hug first? My actual sister or my muse? I made it easy on her. I slowed down so Raena got to her first. Sacrifice.

When she finally did have me in her arms, I was sure she'd never let go. She burrowed into my neck, taking in the aroma of my hair and my skin and my essence. Comfort. Safety.

Both rang all the way through her. "You make me feel so whole."

I kissed her cheek, "I missed you too. So much, Sloan."

Brown. It spoke itself into being then.

I preferred Sarah Lawrence.

But. Well. Sloan.

Sisters.

A Thursday night. Cori busted into our hotel room with the key we left for her holding two bottles of wine. “Drunk Bitches watching “Grey’s” together again!” She screamed.

We released exalted screams and laughs and then were upon her for a sisters hug.

“I heard George is leaving after this season,” Sloan said as she reached for the room service we had ordered. The World’s Greatest Pizza could wait until tomorrow.

“What?!” Raena screamed. Then I saw it, the little things she’d said through the years that showed how much she loved George. While we were pining for McSteamy, she was pining for Dorky Honorable George. Then everything about boy next door clicked.

He was her George.

We had done the entire montage. Cubs game. Bean shaped art thingy. Bike tour. Navy Pier. But here we were. Standing in front of something I never expected. A plaque underneath ...

Gardens of My Soul, and underneath that, McKenzie Wells.

Captivating. Someone who looked just like Sloan, but pregnant, smiling, looking at her rounded belly, and flowers all around her. Raptured by happiness.

Raena allowed a tear then a smile, turning to Sloan, “That’s you in there. In her rounded belly. Look how happy she was. She was downright breathtaking. Gorgeous. Happy.”

Sloan tearfully nodded at Raena. Too choked up to speak. She turned back to the painting.

I took her hand and her pain. This had to be the most bittersweet moment of her life.

Then I knew why he wanted her to see this. He wanted her to know how happy she had made McKenzie. That McKenzie was talented, but more than talent, happy to have Sloan.

After an hour of looking and hand holding, and well, a lot of tears, Cori artfully crushed the moment, “So, Bitches, I kind of have this huge soccer tournament. It’s my chance to get on Team USA you know. I don’t think I should miss it.” We all busted out laughing. Grateful for laughter to come to us and revive and relinquish us from this staring prison. Then we busted out of the museum. Cori’s shot. There was no way we were going to miss that.

My arm reached and came up missing. Had my arm found its target, I would have curled her to me, molded us to each other falling back into a tranquil sleep, but the missing, I jerked.

I jerked when I heard a noise. She was standing there, beside my bed. What are you doing? She looked so vulnerable. I had only known her for three months, and all we'd done was fight, but tonight she looked so vulnerable. I ... um ... I ... I had a nightmare. Can I sleep with you?

I looked at the other bed. Raena was sleeping peacefully. I glanced at my phone to see a text from Cori: *made it to the hotel safely, the team doesn't have the swanky accommodations Sugar Daddy got paying for you three to stay in Chicago, haha, are you hitting that? I don't think Mom's hitting it anymore. Maybe we need to prepare for Divorce #2.* Two more texts, both with: *Dani?* Then the last one: *I guess you fell asleep. I loved getting to see you tonight. Goodnight, Sis.*

Damn, that was four hours ago. I'll wait until the morning, like real morning, to text back.

I grabbed the comforter off the bed and slid onto the balcony. I slid onto her lap, She was like a block of ice, sitting in the cold in nothing but a tank top and shorts. I moved the comforter around us. She laid her head on me. "I've missed you," she said.

"Do you do this in Rhode Island?"

"Sit in the cold?"

"Freeze yourself?"

“It helps me feel, Dani.” She nuzzled into my neck. Kissed my neck. “One day I won’t feel anything, maybe not even Dani that I love with absolutely all of me.” Her kisses trailed.

I moved before those could make it to my lips. Before I sealed myself forever in her hell.

Maybe one day I would. I would give her access. But for now I was only seventeen.

“Why Berkeley?” I asked when it was just me and Raena on the plane ride back home. She stared not answering. “If you love him, why move so far away?”

“That’s why. If I move far away, maybe he’ll forget me. Maybe he’ll move on.”

“What if you two are destined to be Meredith and Derek? Give yourself that chance.”

“Why don’t you take your own advice?”

“What do you mean?”

She stared at me for a long time before she said, “You don’t know, or you don’t want to accept?”

“I don’t know how to accept. I don’t know how to sign myself over like that.”

“You mean to her darkness?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever know the whole story. All I remember is I spent a week with my grandparents. My mother dropped me off there and took off with Sloan. A week later my dad picked me up. He took me a few times to visit Sloan in the hospital. I remember once Sloan told me the word hypothermia, but Sloan worked hard to protect me. Then my mother was in jail for a year. We lived in an apartment during that time until he met your mom.”

“You’ve never asked Sloan for more details?”

“I did once. She shut me down and told me not to ever ask again. You’re the only sense of light that she has.”

“Doesn’t that seem like an overwhelming responsibility to you?”

“To me, yes, I’m running from the boy next door who would love me unconditionally, but I’m not you. You’re made out of much tougher stock than me, and you want to be a writer. Unless you want to write beach lit shit that doesn’t seem like you, you’ll have to learn to really allow your characters’ pain and true selves. She might be dark, but she’s the truest person I’ve ever met. Cristina Yang is your favorite character. You like dark and twisty.” A laugh escaped from me. I found dark and twisty fascinating, but take it on full-time?

Mom ran to me as David ran to Raena, encompassing us with hugs and oaths of how much they missed us. Then we switched. Mom gave Raena a quick hug as David gave me a playful punch in the arm saying, “Did you bring me some Gino’s Pizza?” “I did, but NSA confiscated it probably because they were hungry.” “Damn 9/11,” as we all laughed.

This is a fantasy, of course, I saw it on Raena’s face like mine as we were preparing to land. Then we both steeled ourselves up for the reality. We got off the plane and reality won with accuracy. No one there to pick us up. We helped each other get luggage. We got a taxi.

David’s car wasn’t there. Mom was passed out on the couch with an empty bottle of wine on the coffee table. No glass, guess she decided that was a formality she could forego tonight.

We took our luggage up to our rooms then readied ourselves to haul her up the stairs. She didn’t fight us, nor help us, and somehow we managed to pour her into their bed.

Raena poured us both a glass of wine. Turned on the fireplace as we sat watching the flames.

“Did he cheat on your mom?”

“I think so. I think it was always there lurking in her, but while she had his love and promises and our happy life, she was able to stave it off. Then when he betrayed her like that, she went off the deep end.” A tear fell down Raena’s face. “It was hard to watch her.”

I thought of my own mother. When my father cheated. Now with David cheating.

I took Raena's hand. "I'm sorry it was hard on you and Sloan."

"I think harder on Sloan. She learned to cook and clean and help me with homework. Sometimes we went weeks that we didn't see Dad, and Mom never left her bed. I prayed so hard every night for God to make her my mom again, but it seemed she only got worse."

"It's why you never go see her?"

"I just can't, Dani. I can't. I can't see that house. I can't see how hard I worked to cheer her up. I can't see Sloan cooking and cleaning. It's one thing I'll say about your mom, she never puts that responsibility on us, and we always eat well here. I think they forgot we were coming home tonight. I mean I've thought for a while they were distant, but I didn't think they would put us through this, having to drag her to bed like that."

"The first time I was too little to drag her to bed so I laid there and slept on the couch praying she'd wake up, listening to her breathe so I knew she wasn't dead. I think she really loved my dad, but he never loved her. She got pregnant and he was trapped. With your dad, I think she felt in competition with my dad, him getting married and a baby he was happy about. I think your dad was running from everything he'd done to your mom, and I think they both thought the other would save them. Now here we are. Two broken homes."

"It's why you need her too, Dani. Your dad was never committed to you; your mom wasn't really either. Sloan wrote her a letter every day while she was in jail and drew her pictures. A court order said she couldn't live with her; still she went every day to see her. That's commitment. She's so committed, and to you, it would be an even deeper commitment."

“Until you go out with boy next door, you’re banned from giving me love advice.”

Raena laughed. “You don’t think one day?”

“Raena!”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll leave you alone about Sloan and hope things naturally progress.”

“You know you could go on one date with him. It doesn’t have to mean a lifetime commitment; it could really just mean one date.”

“With someone who’s been in love with me for seven years? It could just be one date?”

“Yes. It really could be. It might even be, dare I say ... fun.”

Raena laughed again then said, “Are the twisted sisters allowed to have fun?”

I put my hand on hers and leaned in to kiss her cheek then said, “Yeah. I think we are.”

I could see Hope shine her bubbly self on both of our faces for a moment, and I hoped it wasn’t fleeting like a million other times we had allowed Hope to fluff up our expectations.

Cori and Sloan came home for their month long Winter Breaks. Why can't we have that in high school? I'm suffering from Senioritis way too badly lately, but probably a lot of that has to do with being away from Sloan and Cori and our foursome, and well, things here at home.

The first night I felt her climb in my bed and us mold to each other. Our bodies seemed to release all the tension we'd been holding in without each other. As much as I had missed her, I still turned my head before her kisses could take my lips hostage. Tonight was the first time she'd ever said anything about the way I turned away from her, "You don't ..."

I tried to make a joke, "If I ever get a chance with Mark Sloan, is he allowed to be a freebie?"

"If you get a chance with Mark Sloan, I want to watch!" She said busting out laughing.

As did I then said, "Well, you just increased your chances."

We both giggled then she pulled me tighter. "Is that what you need? Time to be with guys before you surrender to me?"

"No. It's only about me and you. Until I know for sure I don't think I should toy with you."

"That's real decent of you, Heartbreaker." We both laughed. She pulled me tighter. Sleep.

I woke at some point and noticed Cori's face in front of me. Us holding hands. Sloan's hand around me and Cori, holding Raena's hand. When I woke for real, there was only Cori there.

She was already awake, looking at me. I smiled at her, “Good morning, Corrine.”

She smiled, “Why, good morning, Danielle.” We could see ourselves when we were three and four and these elaborate tea parties we had. They were so real to us, and so fancy that Cori and Dani just wouldn’t do while we were at those tea parties. Was that really our life once?

“You used to be so little, and so cute, and oh those big eyes got me every time. I’d do anything you asked when you turned those on me, even stupid tea parties after I had long outgrown those. And ugh that raggedy teddy bear you always drug around everywhere.”

“You gave me that bear. That made it so special to me.” Cori smiled the biggest smile.

“I’ve missed you, My Sweet Little Shadow.” I smiled the biggest smile then.

“I’ve missed you too. I don’t even know who I am without you here.”

“The school called about your absences. I pretended I was Mom and handled it.”

“Thank you.”

“It can’t continue, Dani, or Brown and Sarah Lawrence may rescind their acceptance.”

“I’ve kept my grades up. Still Perfect Dani with the Straight A’s, just not perfect attendance anymore. What’s it even mean? Perfect attendance? Who can do that for thirteen years?”

“I understand our Chicago trip. You should have taken those days, but the constant skipping last period when you do go. You could get suspended for cutting alone.”

A tear escaped. “She’s drinking a lot again, Cori. Before I was too little to understand. Now I feel like I’m reliving all of it again plus this one too. And picturing all the things that could have happened to Sloan. I just wish I knew the whole story. I’m so lost lately.”

“You could ask Sloan.”

“It feels wrong until she’s ready.”

“Okay, well, that one you know better than I would, but about Mom, let’s go.”

She jumped out of bed, as I said, “Go where?” She didn’t answer so I followed.

She busted into Mom’s room, jumped on the bed, and screamed in her ear, “Get the fuck up!”

Mom jumped, so startled. “Goddammit, Corrine. Leave me the fuck alone!”

“No. The fuck I will. You’ve still got my little sister to raise, so you will get your ass out of this bed.” Mom was awake now. They were staring at each other. I was so terrified. “NOW!”

Mom jumped up, and her uncovered titties bounced. She jerked clothes on. “Fine. I’m the fuck out of bed. What do you want now?”

“For you to fucking notice it is 10:00am, and your daughter is still here. She should be at school, but you don’t care, as long as you

get to drink all day, right? Dani is falling in a fucking pit because of you, and you can't even bother to notice her. Get downstairs and make her some breakfast." Mom turned to look at me. It was the first moment of my life I felt incapable of reading someone's emotions. Ashamed? Pissed? Worried about me? Washed-up?

She couldn't look at me long. She started to head down the stairs. We followed. She made coffee. Stood at the counter waiting on it to be ready. "I said for you to make breakfast!"

"I will, Cori. Just please let me have some coffee. I will make Dani breakfast, I promise."

When it beeped, I made myself a cup and sat at the table. They both made a cup. Joined me.

Awkward silence until Mom whispered, "It feels too familiar."

"I imagine it does for Dani too. Jesus Christ, Mom, do you know what all we watched you do then? How young we were. So what your husband is cheating? Get yourself together."

"I'm scared I don't know how, Cori. I'm not like you, Soccer Goddess. I need a man."

"So do I. I run several men at once because I can't be alone, but I also can't give myself to one and watch him destroy me like Dad destroyed you. So do that. Go fuck some men. When you're not plastered, you're still really hot, Mom. Go fuck someone too. Come home. Make him dinner. Enjoy his money. Do whatever you have to do so you can be a fucking mother."

She turned to me. Took my hand. "Do you do this a lot?"

I nodded. A tear ran down. I wouldn't look at her. "I'm scared you won't wake up."

Mom lost it then. She busted into tears and launched herself at me, gathering me to her.

"I'm so sorry, Dani," she cried as she held me. Was I still asleep? Still dreaming?

She felt so heavy on me. Holding me to her. Sobbing. Like she had really lost all of herself.

Sloan came in, holding some bags from McDonald's, then just staring at all of us crying.

"Um, I'm sorry. I got everyone breakfast after I dropped off Raena at school."

"Thank you, Sloan. Why don't you join us, Honey?" My mom said to her so sweetly as she released me and started wiping her face. She went to the sink to rinse her face. Then sat.

I got up and made Sloan coffee. Then we all ate the most silent awkward breakfast in history.

Cori pulled up at the school. She'd already made Mom call in about my tardy. I got out.

"I'll be here at 3:00. Make sure you stay for last period."

I laughed. "I will. I'll see you at 3:00."

I clearly drove myself to school every day, well, when I went, but this was something Cori needed to do for me today. In the 3 hours in between, I feared for Mom, and a little for Cori.

As promised she was there at 3:00. As promised I was still there. “Hey, last period survivor!”

I laughed as I sank into the seat. She pulled off as I said, “So what happened?”

“She took a shower. Had more coffee. We made a menu for tonight. Nothing really.”

“You didn’t yell at her anymore?”

“Why didn’t you reach out to me, Dani?”

“You’re at school and juggling soccer and all those guys.”

“Dani!”

“I didn’t know what to do.”

“That’s why you slept on the couch with her when we were little? You were scared she wouldn’t wake up? That’s a hell of a lot for a little kid to carry around. You never told me.”

“You were just as little as me. What could you have done?”

“I didn’t feel that way. I didn’t feel as little as you. I felt like I was the oldest, so I ...”

“Had to protect me, and be cheerful for me all the time. Now we’re both fucked up.”

“I don’t think she could die from wine just so you know.”

“You think aspiration discriminates based on the type of alcohol?”

“No. But it happened to a girl in our dorm this semester, and I’ve never seen Mom like her.”

“I’m sorry, Cori. That had to be hard for you, but you’re pretending everything is fixed.”

“With Mom? I don’t think it’s fixed, Dani, but I know she loves you. It’ll fix some things.”

I laid my head on her shoulder. She reached one hand to my face for a second. Kissed me.

“Please listen to me, Dani, in eight months, you won’t be there, so who’s going to make sure she wakes up then? However, if you keep doing that in the next few months, you will be there, taking classes at the community college, getting knocked up like she did. You deserve so much more. You deserve the best. You were accepted into an Ivy. Walk in it, Babe.”

When we pulled into the driveway, Mom was sitting on the porch. “Can I talk to you?” It was mid-December, but she was making an effort it looked like. She was really pretty. Cori went into the house. I sat on the bench beside Mom. She took several deep breaths. “I’ve been quite a shitty mom for the past ten years.”

“Maybe not the entire ten years.”

She laughed.

“I lose myself entirely when I don’t have a man, and I’m making my girls lose themselves too. Cori is scared to let a man destroy her, and I’ve never even seen you date a guy.”

My gift/curse rose up. Her pain. It was too visible. The writer/creator in me rose up too. “When you were a little girl, what career did you dream about having?”

She smiled. Then. “It’ll sound so silly.”

“So what if it does?”

She smiled at me again. “I wanted to give women manicures. I wanted to make them feel good about themselves, and I’ve always loved the way women talk when they’re treating themselves to something extra, something special like a manicure.”

“That doesn’t sound silly at all, Mom. You should go to school. Give that to yourself.”

“37 might be too old for school.” I started to rebut, but she put her hand on my mouth. “This conversation, I’m going to be the Mom, not you for a few minutes, okay?”

I smiled. Nodded. “I can’t imagine how scared you were when you were little seeing me like that, thinking I might die. And I can’t imagine, even now it’s any less scary. I’ve been here before; it should be something I can deal with better this time. Maybe I didn’t really deal with it with your father. I drank then met David and swung on different highs with him.”

“Is that what love is? Swinging on highs?”

“I’m definitely no expert, but I don’t think it should be. I think it should be more balanced.”

She took a really long breath, exhaled like she was exhaling the weight of the world. Then. “I also can’t imagine how hard it has been to watch your father in his other life.”

“Logically, I think he’s older, it’s a marriage and kid he wanted, but every picture of them hurts so badly. Like what’s wrong with me that I wasn’t worth enough for him to love me?”

“That’s how I always felt too, like something must’ve been wrong with me because he was so happy with the new wife. I wish I could tell you a lie, but all I can say is he’s really shitty.”

I laughed. “Yeah, he is.”

“But he’ll be paying for Brown or Sarah Lawrence. I made sure of that for you.”

“I don’t want his money, but I also don’t think I’ll have a good life coming out of college with all of that debt, especially either of those schools.”

“Take his money. A fabulous education is the least he owes you.” I nodded at her. “I’d like to promise you that everything, including me, will change and be super super wonderful, but I’d rather not lie to you. All I can promise is tonight. I got you girls a shit load of snacks for you all to watch “Grey’s” together again. Cori said it is the winter finale. I can promise tonight.”

“Tonight is a good promise, and for the past twenty minutes, you definitely were not a shitty mom.” Mom laughed. “When we

came back from Chicago, Raena said that you always did a good job with food. She appreciated how well they've always eaten here. I need a promise."

She looked at me, hesitantly, but waiting for what I needed. "This is their home. They need a mom probably more than me and Cori, and they need a home. If you and David divorce, please always let this be their home too. Let us always have the four of us. Please."

"That's not even a question, Dani. I know it is different, but in a way, they're my daughters too. I'd always want all four of you to have a place for Christmas and summer breaks."

"Thank you."

"Those first two years, I never could have imagined the way you all would bond. I was sure you were all going to kill each other." I laughed. "But your closeness is so beautiful now."

"I think it feels like the greatest part of all of us. I hope we'll always have it."

"Am I allowed to say anything about that?"

"Of course."

"You and Sloan. I know she's not your sister, but there would be no way to maintain the four of you if you two ever broke up. I just want you to have everything I never had."

I let it sink in what she said. For one moment of my life I decided I was exhausted thinking of possible endings, and I was so proud of what came out of my mouth, "She truly loves me. I don't think you've ever had that. So someone who truly loved me would be

something you never had. What do you think I should give to have that chance once in my life?”

“Everything. You should give everything if you can truly have love even once in your life. Even Sarah Lawrence so you two really would have a chance if you think it could be love.”

“I don’t have to think. I feel it every time we hold each other. I know it is love.”

“Then what’s stopping you, Baby?”

I stared at her. I did know, but I couldn’t say it to my mom. “I’ll know when it is right.”

She twirled a lock of my hair in her hand like Cori did sometimes, like I guess Cori had learned from her. “Trust your instincts. I agree. You’ll know when it is right.”

“Thank you for your honesty today, Mom, but it’s getting cold out here.” She laughed and took my hand leading me inside.

Raena and I worked on homework, we wanted that out of the way to enjoy “Grey’s” with our foursome. Cori and Sloan helped Mom make dinner. He didn’t show up. We invited Mom to join us for “Grey’s”, but she said she wouldn’t dare intrude on our time together like that.

Before the show started, I walked upstairs and gave her my favorite bottle of nail polish. She smiled at me. “I’ve never seen myself as the eggplant purple kind of woman.”

“Go a little crazy tonight, in a healthy way,” I said with a wink. She smiled and nodded.

I crashed onto Cori. She laughed. Moved a little so she could hold me and reach for snacks.

It felt so infinite to have them home. To watch “Grey’s”. To eat junk food together.

To all sleep together on the couch. Until Mom woke us up, in time to make breakfast and drive me and Raena to school. Obviously we could drive ourselves, but never underestimate a woman who has something to prove, especially something to prove to herself.

Cori and Sloan picked us up from school. I saw Sloan get out and get in the backseat. I did too. I molded into her. She kissed my forehead as Cori launched into her teasing, “Made it through a full day of school on the day before Winter Break. Way to go, Dani.”

Cori drove us into the quaint part of town. To our favorite coffee shop that made hot chocolate that tasted like it had magic woven in somehow. Our favorite table was waiting for us. Raena and I hadn’t been here without them. There were ways we couldn’t cheat.

“Are you guys going to see any friends while you’re home?” I asked as I drank the magic.

They looked at each other, shared a moment and a thought, then turned back to us.

“It’s different, Dani,” Sloan started. “High school, you think it will last forever, but the moment you leave it, you realize how trivial it was. They’re all still here, all going to community college like it was Grade 13. Cori and I, we’re different now. You’ll see soon.”

Then Cori took over, “But we are taking you guys to dinner then the football game tonight.”

“Feeling that Wildcat Fever?” I teased.

“Seems like they’re doing well. It was all there was in the paper,” Cori said rolling her eyes, she’d always resented that none of the female sports received such support from the whole town.

“Yeah, looks like they have a real shot at State Championship. But we don’t have ...”

“We have scarves, gloves, sweaters, and Wildcat jackets in the car for you. We take care of our sisters,” Sloan said with a smile and a wink. That was definitely true. They’d always taken care of us. “Dad’s coming home tonight, and I think they need to talk.”

“You saw Dad?” Raena asked.

“No, I didn’t. We heard Paige on the phone with him. She sounded really strong.”

I looked to Cori. To Sloan it may seem strong, but we knew her. “She did, Dani. She did. As she was talking to him, she kept looking at her purple fingernails like a Superwoman cape you must have given her.” I smiled so big at my sister. Although on the phone was one thing, in his presence with all the daughters out of the house, was something different entirely.

The game was a little weird having Cori and Sloan there. The whole town was there so why shouldn't they be? But it was different. I saw it immediately the way people interacted with them. They said all the right things, how happy they were for them to pursue soccer and art, but there was an underbelly to what they were saying, words conflicted with emotion, and the underbelly was we hate you, you got out, and you come here and show us all how we sold ourselves out by not wanting more for ourselves. Sloan had been right. They still did everything here like they had gone to Grade 13, and here were the trespassers. The unwelcomed.

I hadn't really thought about all the people in their class in the past few months, but they were still hanging around all the school events, living with their parents, coming to parties like they haven't graduated, like they have no clue how to move on. No more skipping. I made a vow to myself. I could handle ending up like Mom, but them, no way in hell.

When we got home, we had no idea what to expect, but they were sitting at the kitchen table. Opposite sides, but not seeming like they were fighting, just kind of giving each other space. Mom moved immediately to get us all some cider she had made that day, put some Christmas cookies on the table for us. Briefly touched and kissed my head. I saw it. I saw it all my life how happily she'd always fed us, cooked for us, made our favorite treats, and always delivered those with a touch and kiss on my head. I remembered her doing that to Cori when she was maybe seven, before the world broke, and Cori grabbed her hand. *Stop. I'm too old for that. Cori couldn't see the saddened look on her face. The way she pretended it didn't stab her in the heart, but I saw it, and I never ever told her I was too old for her kisses.*

I turned harshly on David, “You know you’re really not good enough for her.”

The whole table waited for his reaction. He looked ashamed. “Yeah, I know. I have a problem. I think I’ve had it since I was a kid, this way I need tons of women to validate me. I’m here tonight because I spent the past two days in a sex addict clinic. I’ve asked your mom to let me get help, and for us to go to counseling. I do really love your mom, and I think both of us have a lot from our childhoods, previous marriages, and our marriage that we both could use some help with. It broke my heart for her to tell me the things we’ve passed on to you girls. The bad habits and reluctance for love. Nothing is going to change overnight, Girls, but Paige and I would like to give all of you a really nice Christmas. We know how excited you all are to be together again. We want it to be nice.”

Cori shocked me. She went over and stood with Mom who was standing by the counter. She pulled Mom into her arms. Since the world broke, Cori hasn’t been affectionate with Mom.

Invisible war had been the only words I could assemble anytime they were together. Weak. It had been all Cori saw in her. Not enough. It had been all Mom felt around Cori.

But Cori had gone to her. Pulled her into such a loving hug. Like she would give her strength. “You don’t have to, Mom.”

Mom smiled at Cori, put her hand on her face. “I’m not doing anything right now except giving my girls and myself a nice Christmas. And giving David a ‘we’ll see’. We don’t know if the marriage is salvageable, but we both want to save ourselves for the first time. There’s no responsibility for either of us to save the other.

If there can be a marriage after that, then that will be a bonus. If it can't, we'll both be better people and parents because of this time."

Sloan looked like she was going to explode, but her voice was scary calm, "Sex addict."

David didn't respond. He looked like he was waiting on the lava to vomit from the volcano.

"I suffered a horrifying arctic prison and almost died because you're a sex addict!" She jumped up. Her chair fell back and hit the floor she had jumped so forcefully. "That's nothing but a goddamn copout. You're just selfish! You hurt her! You broke her completely! And you just get to go on and marry someone else and be okay while she's so not okay." The visceral anger escalated to peak too rapidly, then poured down her face like broken slivers of glass, like icicles, then the chill crept into her voice, "And neither am I."

She bolted out of the room. I stood. Looked directly at him. "Nice Christmas so far."

Then I went after my love, I thought I could see my heart take those stairs before my body.

The minutes I allowed. The depths from which her tears poured. The moment I feared she'd go blank, nothingness, void, trampled by her former self and her trauma. I jerked. Her up.

I grabbed one of her blank canvases. I splattered silver paint all over it. Then black. The splatter looked really cool, especially as I couldn't draw stick people. Then I grabbed the red and made a heart. Then wrote, *I love you, Sloan. Frozen depths aren't even as far as I would go to warm you with my love.* I turned to her to see her tears that

seemed to have shifted to lovingly affected, creeping back to me. “I can’t paint, but I can make art with words.”

She smiled. She walked to me. Put her hand on my face. “I love your splatter paint as much as I love your words. The perfect combination of us.” Then I was the one smiling.

We stayed frozen in the stare for treasured moments, allowing a beautiful life together to thaw between us. Until she said, “His selfish ass brought me you, the greatest gift ever.” We fell into a loving hug, wanting more, crisping the edges of those thoughts. Until. Time.

Top. My place I was sharing with her. Plopping. Down. Smiling. Her before me. I saw. Us. “You can’t move anything, even your lips,” I demanded. She nodded. “Close your eyes.” She smiled. Obeyed. My breath quickened, caught my throat on fire. Closed my eyes. Decided to seize the moment, even if I was shaking, burning, dying for her.

Open. Enough to make sure I landed at the destination. Her lips.

So soft. Close eyes. Feel. Sparks. She couldn’t obey me.

Her hand reached to my leg. Rested. Slight.

Moving. Surrender to her touch.

On my leg. Those lips.

That kiss. Love.

MUAH.

me

I was always finding myself at the top of this mountain, and now finding. Time. Right. All. I pulled away. She opened her eyes with a big smile to greet me. “I thought if the first one was in a bedroom, there’d be way too much pressure.”

She smiled bigger, so affectionate. “That’s probably true.”

I wasn’t even sure if it qualified as “a real kiss”, but it had been ours. I had given it to her.

I turned around. Laid into her. She wrapped her arms around me. We looked at the view.

There’d be more. We both knew it. But why rush anything? Especially when the moment was frozen in perfection. Me in a RISD sweat shirt. Her in a Brown sweat shirt. Irony? Or acceptance?

We held hands. We looked at a breathtaking view. We had this one moment. Together. Frozen sparks. Waiting patiently. Questionable, but waiting. And loving. Love.

Descent. Mid-way down Sloan grabbed my hand and spun me to her, her hands were on my face so fast, she was there, lips intersecting and no longer holding to the simple pleasures. Lips parted, tongues found passion, that surmounted rapidly until I felt past present future. Breathing so hard as there was a pause, but her forehead rested on mine. Her hand on my face. “Dani,” through the quickened excited breaths. “Sloan,” through my own breaths.

I knew this mountain. I knew we were close to one. I turned to look. Found. A big rock.

She followed me and sat with me. “I think this will be really hard, but I can’t have this time to make love to you then you go back to college and I’m left here. And after that kiss, a part of me doesn’t know if I can wait much longer. What do we do, Sloan?”

“Well, those are different statements. Me going back to college. And me leaving you. I’ll never leave you, Dani. I’ve been in love with you since the moment I laid eyes on you. I know all you wanted in that moment was to make me disappear, and that haughtiness of yours made me love you even more. Full of fire that could melt my ice.” I smiled so big. “And you have. You’ve made me feel again. You’ve made me reach depths of myself as an artist, as a woman, as a human being. You made me go to RISD. I offered to stay with you.”

“You had to, Sloan. You had to go to RISD.”

She smiled, “I know, Baby, and thank you for making me. I love it there. Being back here has really cemented for me how much I love it there, and in a few short months I’ll have you there with me. I hope. As much as RISD is such a part of me, I wouldn’t want you giving up Sarah Lawrence if you feel it is a part of you. It’s a train ride away. We’d make it work.”

“I’ve never gotten to walk on either campus. I just love Sarah Lawrence because of Kat from *10 Things I Hate About You*.”

Sloan laughed, “We sure are addicted to our movies, aren’t we?”

I laughed, “Do you remember when we watched that?”

“Yes. Vividly. Because as she said, ‘I don’t hate you at all’ you took my hand and smiled at me. It was one of my favorite moments of my life, even if I was only thirteen.”

“I want a chance at us, Sloan. I want to know love. The more I research, the more I want Brown, not just because of you, but for me. An Ivy League, and the English department.”

“It is quite an impressive English Department. I’ve been doing research. Hoping. Hoping.”

We stared, smiling, for a long time. “What if you could? Walk both campuses? Between Christmas and New Year’s, we could go. Our foursome. Maybe get Rae to fall in love with something on the East Coast.” Then her face lit up. “We could watch the ball drop in Times Square! Ice skate at Rockefeller Center. Let you write in Central Park. Let’s do it, Dani.”

“What about ...”

“David and Paige? Let them have several days to have to deal with themselves. If this time really is about them saving themselves instead of their marriage, then let them deal with themselves. You’ve been babysitting her too much, and I think you could use a break.”

I smiled at her. “Road trip! And I can show you guys RISD. I’d love getting to show you.”

“I love it, Sloan. I think Cori and Raena will too. But we started this conversation about ...”

She put her hand on my mouth. “We’re artists. We don’t plan. We love the muse when she inspires; making art so beautifully as making love, we’ll know when to welcome inspiration.”

I put my hand to hers and pulled it from my mouth so she could see me smile at her. She leaned in to my smile with her own as our eyes locked then so did our lips. Our tongues.

I loved kissing her. How had I ever lived without this before?

How could I ever live without it now?

When the kiss broke, probably out of us both needing to breathe, otherwise it would have continued infinitely - I hope kissing her does continue infinitely, Sloan rested her forehead on mine. I loved the way she did that, like a way she was fortifying our kisses.

Then she pulled back but still looking at me said, “Can I talk to you about something?”

“Anything.”

“She was already somewhat known, considered a little talented, but after she had a breakdown so badly she almost killed her own kid and spent a year in jail, she was legendary. She has all these, I don’t know the word, cult acolytes maybe. They worship her. They feed her, they sell her art, pay her bills, fluff up her ego of how glamorous her torture is. All of them stand around waiting on the minute she deems they’re the one she’ll fuck for a minute. It’s sick. It’s fucking crazy, honestly. I’ve always asked them not to be there in the afternoons, and they did always respect that. My time with my mother. I used to ride my bike after school, miles there and miles home. I haven’t, Dani, since I left for college, I haven’t written her

one letter, made one phone call, I haven't gone to see her since I've been home for Winter Break. I think I've realized I'm about as sick as they are, except worshipping her torture, I worship someone who doesn't exist anymore, who hasn't since the moment she dropped off Raena with our grandparents. I've met at least three personalities. When she had me those days, I met them all then, and since I went to visit her at various times, they were who was in charge of her. One of the personalities doesn't know me at all, like this part of her that wished she never had me. I'm so glad Raena has never met any of those personalities, but I'm sure Dad did, and blaming him forever for her choices, it's another part of me that is in denial. I think he really loved her, but she wasn't like Paige, she loved art more than him, more than anything, and this life she has now, I have to know she loves it, maybe she always wanted it, the fame for the tortured artist and the worship. She seems to really love the worship, of course so does he in his way, so no way for that to work out if two people need to be worshiped. They talked about her in one of my art classes. Her art before and after, a look at how devastation enhances art. They all talked about what she did to me was like this rite of passage for her to be great, for her to have followers, for them to want to be as tortured and as sick as she is. I'm so fucking glad she always kept her maiden name, but one person in my class did say to me, 'You know you kind of look like her.' I just said, 'Yeah, I've been told that before.' Sometimes I think I've completely blocked it out, but I remember how many times during those days that she told me that this was going to make me an amazing artist, the pain will come through on the canvas, people will find me mysterious and worship me. I was nine years old, and up to that point my art had been quaint and colorful and fun, my art had been fun once, even painting with

her had been so fun, like something we did together, and I even remember Raena hanging out with us with her books, never painting with us but she loved hanging out with the artists. But during those few days I painted out of fear, and I painted darkness and craziness to please her because I was sure she was going to kill me. I didn't even know where we were. I was so scared, Dani, and so cold, and then it was so cold, I went nowhere, numb, I felt my life leaving me, until I finally begged her to please let me go. I think somewhere in my begging I finally reached my mother not the other tortured artist personalities, and she released me. My mother snapped into being and saw me. I'll never forget the look on her face as she said, 'You're so purple, Baby, we got to get you warm.' She took me out of there, carried me out because I was seriously almost dead, and I don't know how she wasn't but she was pumping adrenaline through her with her frenzy is all I can gather. As soon as we got to the hospital, they arrested her. Once I was stable, I still wouldn't say much to the investigators, but my hypothermia was extreme enough for everything they needed. She always told me that she did it because she loved me, because she wanted to make me a great artist, and I guess she succeeded, I am a fucking great artist, but I'm haunted by her, by those days, by her personalities, by being forced to paint like that, by all she said during those days. And oddly I am also comforted by an angel. Something saved me, Dani, something made her snap back right before I died, and I'm so grateful, but so conflicted by the light and the dark in me."

She stopped for a moment as tears ran down her face. "I know you're scared to love me. I know you're a little scared of my darkness, maybe even scared I'll end up as sick as her. I've broken the addiction, Dani. I swear these last few months away from her, I

haven't once tried to write her, or call, or in any way need her. I've even allowed a lot of light in my art. I've been studying angels, and I've even signed up for a class on angels next semester. I don't want to lie to you. It will always be a part of me, but I want you to be the greater and the best part of me, Dani. I don't think you even know how much I love you. With all of me."

I took her hands, "Look at me." She turned that tear stained face to me. "I love you too." There was a hint of a smile through her tears. "Thank you for trusting me enough to share all of that with me. That was so brave, Sloan."

"I've always known I couldn't have you completely until I gave you me completely."

I smiled and said, "I've always been a little afraid of the details I don't know. I went once like you asked me to, but I guess with you at college the leave in the afternoon rule didn't need to stand. The one who answered the door looked at me like she wanted to devour me."

"I would have fucking killed her."

"Don't worry. I ran back to my car and got the fuck out of there. It's a really scary place."

"It should be. It's ran by a really fucking scary monster." She stopped a second. "That's the first time I've been honest about what my mom is." The look of pure relief and release on her face was divine, almost angelic, and so beautiful. I smiled so big at her. She smiled back. "You look so much like the first time we met Paige. One weekend you guys were at your dad's. She had us over to your old house. She was so sweet. She was such a good cook. I went to the

bathroom and snuck in your room. Maybe I fell in love with you then. There was a poem on your desk about how you were going to find true love so you were never washed in the wine like her. I remember that line so vividly. I almost wonder if a part of me made a vow to love you as I read your poem. I read it like five times. I laid on your bed for a minute. I allowed this dream of us in an apartment, the warehouse kind, so there's no walls, just lots of room for my canvases and your pages. And our big imaginations and all of our love. I was so young, so I didn't see anything sexual, except I remember one moment you looked up from your writing and smiled at me, and it was the warmest moment of my life. And I hadn't even met you yet. I probably willed Dad and Paige to marry in that moment so I could meet you. I know you have your struggles with her, but I'm so grateful for Paige. She's always been so kind to me and Raena. Always treated us so well. And she made you, so I love her."

I smiled so big. "God, I can't even be mad at you for snooping in my room. You made that sound so beautiful." I drew her to me. "You really have always loved me. The real me."

I sealed her love for me in a beautiful kiss, and prayed to her angel that I could do her love justice, that I could love the real her back to full capacity. I'm getting addicted to her kisses.

We both smiled as we pulled away. I pulled her to me. I loved the way we fit. I had always felt that way. Since I was ten and that first night she came in my room asking to sleep with me, I felt our bodies fit together. And through the years, I always felt we grew together. Fit.

We stayed holding a while, honoring all she'd been able to share. A part of me wondered if my kiss had made her strong enough, or given her enough, she knew she wanted all of me, and to have all of me, I had to have all of her. I still didn't, not the scariest moments of those days, she'd been quite general talking about that part, but she'd talked about it, and I had to recognize that maybe she didn't have all of those pieces either. She was only nine years old. She was mostly fighting to stay alive, and I knew the mind was so powerful, it was a very powerful protection cloaking device, but it allowed her the art. She gave those moments to the art, and she wanted to give her beauty to me. Something in that made me so beautiful.

As we stood to finish our descent down the mountain, Sloan looked back at the rock where we had been sitting and said, "Our truth rock." I laughed. "Marriage, it can get really complicated as we both already know. Anytime we feel ours is too complicated, we'll just bring the other to sit here on our truth rock, and maybe everything will innately fix itself."

I smiled. Then said, "A few kisses and you're already proposing? Slow down a little."

She laughed. "Fuck you. You know you're gonna marry me."

"Maybe, but maybe I like playing hard to get."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, Heartbreaker, you're the queen of that game." I laughed. I hiked down. I felt different. Everything felt different. This was my favorite hike ever, that I had shared this part of myself with her. That I could feel her behind me hiking, like hiking usually gave to me, I knew she was letting Life's tapestry weave.

Christmas did turn out to be really nice. David had gotten a beautiful tree, one that really made my mom smile and smile even more as we all decorated it with her, drinking her cider, dancing to music. She had bought us all these Christmas pajamas that had, “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” (the only Christmas song she liked, which I respected about Mom) and these cute snowflakes. They were cute enough and not too cute to make us vomit so we wore those on Christmas Day. All still a little sleepy, so we basically shifted from cuddling in my bed to cuddling on the couch. Mom smiled at her four girls. Brought us all coffee. Cori requested some Kahlua in the coffee. Mom looked a little hesitant, but she could rarely deny Cori. Delicious. Kahlua was my new favorite obsession. Which Mom hated when I said that. But she laughed then said, “Well, I really don’t have any babies anymore,” so I let her touch my head and kiss my head, and I had to admit, not just for her, I had always loved when she did that. I also had to admit I had always believed in the magic of Christmas, not the religious stuff, but in the sparkly decorations and the cold making people snuggle and have hot chocolate and cider and have closeness. My mom truly seemed so happy to have us all home, to cook a big breakfast for all of us, a few moments she smiled at David, a few moments he put his hand on her back, and she let him, but I noticed once he tried to wrap his arms around her, that she shifted, like I used to shift before Sloan’s lips could reach mine. But not anymore. So I looked over at her, and we both smiled and envisioned all the kisses we shared.

Tormented conflict was all I saw on Mom’s face as she opened a stunningly gorgeous diamond necklace, earrings, and bracelet. It looked like at least \$10,000 in that box!

Tears misted her eyes. She looked up at him. “They’re really beautiful, David, thank you.”

“Not nearly as beautiful as you, Paige.” She merely nodded. But even in her pajamas, she put those on, like she couldn’t not.

The moment felt so awkward, but Sloan did what Sloan did. “If I do end up a broke struggling artist, I know where to come to klepto some loot.” We all busted out laughing. Even Mom who touched her face. She’d always had quite the weak spot for Sloan too.

We saw boy next door standing awkwardly outside. Raena excused herself to the restroom, and we all practically ran to the dining room so we could watch. She had gone to her room, scaled down the trellis, we watched him go help her down. We watched them so awkwardly give each other gifts. Then he finally did it! He took control, threw the box she was holding on the ground, and swept her up into his arms, and gave her such a romantic kiss I could hardly believe from such an adorably dorky guy. Maybe he’s been watching “Grey’s”. Raena went weak in the knees, like during the kiss she had to grab onto him for dear life or she’d fall. And she was falling alright. Falling so madly in love, and all we could do was smile.

Until David said, “Jesus, do I need to go show the boy my gun.”

We all laughed, and Sloan said, “Leave her alone, Dad.” He put his hand on her shoulder. She let him. We scattered like cockroaches when he finally did release her from the kiss.

She came in the door, none of the scale back up the trellis shenanigans. Her face was red. She was smiling with the dreamiest expression on her face. Holding her gift. Holding herself against the

door. Her sisters joined her. She smiled at us. “I’m in trouble. Big trouble.”

We all smiled. Sloan went to her and gave her a big hug. “Enjoy it. You like trouble.”

Raena laughed. “I definitely liked that he finally took charge. Stood up to me, and took me.”

“Yep, that’s what makes a man a worthy competitor.”

Then Raena screamed, did a little dance, “Merry Fucking Christmas!”

In the afternoon, I watched Mom sneak upstairs. I followed. She went to her room, and pulled something out of a drawer. When I saw her go to the drawer, I was scared she was getting alcohol, not that I minded her having Kahlua or wine with us, but I didn’t want her sneaking it by herself. She didn’t pull out alcohol. She pulled out a picture frame. She sat in her chair; like I was drawn to her in that moment, I went to sit in her lap. It was a picture of her and me and Cori. I was four. Cori was five. Our Christmas pajamas. Hot chocolate on my face. Tangles all in my hair. Cori had lost her first tooth and that goofy smile. Mom kissed me, sitting in her lap, looking at the picture with her. “My girls. I just always return to this picture because I remember how excited you were that Christmas. Your excitement was infectious and you made all of us so excited too, even your dad. Dani, I love you so much.”

I smiled at her. I kissed her. “I love you too, Mom. God, you look so gorgeous and radiant in that picture.” I touched her new necklace. “Are you keeping this?”

“I don’t know, Dani. I don’t have to decide that today. Today I just get to be a woman in my pajamas draped in diamonds.”

I laughed at her. “Well, they are really pretty diamonds.” She smiled at me. I got up. I went to her drawer. I knew if she kept the picture, she had it. I was right. I took it back to the chair, sank into her lap, and listened as she read *Goodnight, Moon* to me like when I was four.

“Merry Christmas, My Precious Dani.”

“Merry Christmas, Mommy.” She cried and smiled.

The trunk was so full we could barely close it. The backseat was full of tons of food Mom made for us to take with us. David handed Cori \$2000 to make sure we had plenty of gas and food money as he’d already paid for our hotel in NYC. He gave her directions he had printed out for her. From here to Providence. From Providence to Bronxville. Bronxville to NYC.

Then NYC back home. That was the most important to make sure we all got back home.

I could hardly believe they were letting four teenage girls go off like this, but they had been very supportive of the trip when Sloan mentioned it. Of course they could rarely say no to Sloan. Either of

them, but with David, I always felt like he felt guilty so he couldn't deny her anything she ever requested, especially sisters time.

Mom hugged us all. Told Cori she better bring her babies back to her. All four of them. That made Raena and Sloan smile so big. Cori winked at her and made a promise. Then we were off. Music blaring so loudly, us dancing. Raena up front as co-pilot.

One bridge, and the city all lit up, and I fell completely in love with Providence.

Raena had fallen asleep. Sloan had fallen asleep. There was me and Cori. Her smiling at me from the rearview mirror saying, "I could totally see you here." I smiled back at her and nodded. "Wake her up. I need her to get us to her apartment." Sloan was not a dorm person.

It was soooo cold with her being away, and planning to be away for a month. She turned the heat on, and we shivered taking in her apartment. Open, artsy, canvases everywhere. But all I could see were the ones above her bed, the beautiful nude ones of me. How she captured me. How much she had to have treasured those to put those above her bed. How I had changed and grown, and you could see my history evolve from inhibited to sexy and alive.

Some poses I remembered how daring I had felt, how I had moved, how I had never imagined feeling that sexy and gorgeous. Sloan had made me feel so mesmerizingly gorgeous.

I took her hand as she said, "I love having My Dani here with me." I smiled at her.

"Come on, Lovebirds. We gotta get our luggage," Cori demanded pulling us from the trance.

“I gotta pee!” Raena yelled running to the bathroom, the only room not exposed in openness.

We rolled our eyes. We went to get luggage. She always did this. Time to wash dishes, she had to pee. Time to get luggage, had to pee. We should have left her bag in the car, but she was our Raena, so we brought it up for her. *The dishes are already done? I would have helped.*

Sloan woke me. Gave me jeans putting her finger to her mouth for me to be quiet. She didn’t want to wake Cori or Raena. She quietly grabbed the keys to Cori’s car from the counter.

She drove to RISD. Artistic, as simple as it sounded, was truly the only word for the campus. I loved taking it in, especially at night, especially during Winter Break when it was deserted.

She pulled up to a building. We got out. She put her ID Card to the door and it beeped. A green light flashed, then she pulled on the handle, letting me go in ahead of her. So sweet.

We were in an elaborate art studio. Large and inviting. Some of the largest canvases I’d ever seen. Some pieces were unfinished. Some were downright stunning and some so awful, like how’d they get into art school? but art is a very subjective persuasion. I was surprised it wasn’t freezing in here, but Sloan said, “Many students stay during break. Nowhere to go.”

She moved about so easily getting her canvas set up. Her pencils together. Her paint ready.

“Take off your clothes.”

“What if ...”

“I’ll hear it beep if someone comes, and I have us far enough away from the door, I can cover you before anyone gets to revel in the parts of you that belong to only me.”

I smiled. I obeyed. I laid down on the couch. She had given me a book, *Angelology*, a fiction book, but it must be one she was reading now in her new fascination with angels.

I loved that she wanted to paint me reading. I got so swept up that I was so natural. I honestly forgot I was naked. Forget I was in the world as I read. Until.

She came to me. She removed the book and it hit the floor. Her hand went inside of me. My legs wrapped around her as I moved with her rhythm. As I got wetter with each stroke. As she had at some point removed her clothes too. As I was raptured in her kisses. Touch.

Oh God. As we moved together. The feel of her fingers exploring me. Her hips on me. The seductive sound of her voice, like sweet black licorice, “Cum for me, Baby.”

The surrender. All over her fingers, and taking over my entire being. My head fell back. She kissed my arched neck, then my breasts, oh the feel of her sucking on my nipple.

Her kissed trailed. And I sure as hell didn’t move away from her trailing then. Destination.

Was there anything as great as the feel of her lips and tongue? There. Like a button that controlled my entire womanhood, my

entire essence of sensuality. “God! Yes! Sloan!” My loud approval made her devouring more ravenous until I was sure I’d come apart.

Tranquility. And surrender. Several more times we surrendered to the muse. Inspiration. And perspiration. Haha. God, the sex was so good, then the holding each other.

“Well, how the hell is Sarah Lawrence ever going to compete with that?”

She laughed, then got a wickedly sly smile as she said, “If you can play hard to get, I can play hard to live without.”

I smiled. “You win. You’re the champion of the game.”

She smiled. Kissed me. “Any regrets?”

“No. It was so perfect, Sloan. So beautiful. So ours. So amazing.”

“Yes, it was.” She lifted up. Grabbed my hand. Pulled me up. Pulled me to the painting. Me, the nakedness was stunning. The look on my face. But it was so amazing. She had drawn flowers on my body like these elaborate tattoos all over me. I loved it. I looked closer. Right on my pussy is where she had put her signature. *Sloan Mercado*. – Wow, did I smile then.

“I’m a Sloan Mercado original.”

“You’re all there is of Sloan Mercado, Baby.” We kissed in front the painting. My hand reached down and took her with my fingers. When she exploded, I took my fingers and smeared it on my stomach blending her sweet cum with a birds of paradise she’d drawn there. It

streaked it a little as it was still drying, but it actually heightened the effect.

I sent Cori a text so she wouldn't worry. Sloan got us blankets. We slept on the couch of our love making. An art studio. I banished the thought from my mind wondering how many students and teachers had enjoyed sex on this couch. Then I loved the thought. I loved that she had brought me here. That we were a part of the infinity that art united and made everyone bigger than themselves. And as I slept in her arms, a poem ran through my mind.

It started with a poem, I heard in me as I thought of her in my room before we met. When we woke, I got my own canvas, a quill, I was writing with a quill!! Ink. And poured.

FROZEN EMBERS

Winter's Tale fastened onto her all the way to the bone

But not fastened enough as she often felt shattered and alone

For seven years I wanted to get inside to help her thaw

Despite my desires every time she nipped, I retreated

Cold top of mountain one kiss I gave made her raw

Exposed her truths so beautifully we both heated

*Heated so much we saw a future and a life
And joked about the day she'd make me her wife
But it isn't a joke as now I've been kissed
EVERYWHERE by her frozen embers
So the little nips will never again be dissed
As we replace Winter's Tale with ours one awaited December
I know it comes with slips of frostbite you can't control
In those moments you're still mine
Because through you is the only way I'm whole
Please always wash me in your sweet wine*

To Sloan Mercado With Love From Danielle Winters

“You can come look now,” I called as I forged my last stroke. As I stood back and read it, not sure why, it was in ink, no going back now, still it released so feverishly I needed time to catch my breath and enjoy, like I now knew the surrender after the feverish fulfilment.

Sloan slid in behind me nipping at my neck as she read and I could feel her smile and relish.

“What an amazing play on words of our beginning with, ‘wash me in your sweet wine’. I love it, Dani. I love all the frozen nuances and the way you captured us so completely, and the EVERYWHERE, hmmm, I really love the EVERYWHERE,” as she bit instead of nipped.

“It was rushed,” I tried as my neck gave me over.

“It’s brilliant. Now get on that damn couch and show me your EVERYWHERE!” I obeyed. Sank onto the couch spreading my legs for her as she snapped her mouth at me. Then bathed me again in her frozen embers until my sweet wine poured into her mouth.

Was it just a few brief hours ago we discovered ourselves in this way? We took and gave so naturally with each other that it seemed we’d been making love forever. Maybe we had, and luckily now our bodies were getting to catch up to our minds, souls, and desires.

We entered Sloan’s apartment with both canvases, the relics of our love making, our shared night of making love and art; I’m really not sure which I loved more only to know the art was heightened by the love making and the love making was engulfed by art.

Raena was on the couch reading, a coffee cup in her hand. Cori was in the bed, hard sleep. “Good morning,” Raena said with a big cheesy loving sweet smile as she took us in.

“Good morning,” we chorused with our own loving Cheshire smiles. Sloan moved over to her and leaned down and kissed her then they stood looking and sharing without ever speaking.

When Sloan moved away, Raena said, “I think she’s really exhausted from driving. And thankfully I found some peanut butter and cheese crackers since you two left me stranded.”

We laughed. “Sorry, but not really sorry,” Sloan said. “I keep those on hand for when I can’t stop painting long enough to cook so I just pop in some crackers and keep on going.”

In such a sleepy crackly voice we heard, “Come here, Shadow.” I smiled, moved to the bed where I was brought into Cori snuggles then, “Is my little shadow a woman now?”

I laughed then conceded, “Yes.”

She lovingly kissed my cheek, then Sleepy moved away as Protective Sister rose up, looked squarely at Sloan. “I’m really happy for you two, but I swear if you ever hurt her, I’ll ...”

“No need to finish that threat. I’ll never hurt her, Cori. I swear on “Grey’s Anatomy”.”

We all busted out laughing. “I guess that’s quite a sacred swear,” Cori said with a smile.

Sloan and Raena left to get us breakfast as Cori got ready for us to go to Brown. It was like the needed Real Sisters Time to talk about me and Sloan separately.

“Tell me about it,” Cori called from the shower as I sat on the toilet with the lid shut.

“It was so magical, Cori, just what everyone’s first time should be. Artistic, and oh my god, her tongue feels like heaven on my clit, and the way I came. I knew I would love our first time, but I kind of always wondered if I’d be able to climax, but wow it was like a volcano erupting down there, every single time, Cori, oh my god, it was so ... Exhilarating.”

“Hmmm, stop you’re making me want to fuck her.”

“Shut the fuck up, and back the fuck off. She’s mine,” I said as we both laughed.

“I’m really so happy for you, Dani. I think this has been a long time coming.”

“How long have you known?”

“That she was in love with you? The first time we met. But you reciprocating that love, I think you were fourteen this one night I watched you watch her. I wanted to be mad, but you looked so in love and so beyond tranquil that I knew she was the one for you. I thought about all the times just being around you had calmed her, or you being around her had inspired a poem, and I almost couldn’t wait until you two were old enough to really understand a love like that. I like knowing that at least two people that I know would get that forever kind of love. The kind where you know all the bad parts and love those more.”

“I do believe that about me and Sloan, that we love all of each other. She was so honest with me on the mountain the other day, but it was more like she was being honest with herself. I loved that so

much. I loved that maybe I made her feel strong enough to give herself that.”

“Like Jack Nicholson tells Helen Hunt, ‘You make me want to be a better man.’”

I laughed. “God are the only things we know about love things we learned from movies?”

“There are worse places to learn about love, because movies are creative inspiration too.”

“You know how to speak my language. Has anyone made you want to be a better woman?”

“Only you, Dani, but in a romantic way, I’ve sure as hell never given anyone access enough.”

“There’s a man out there who’s talented at excavation who will tear down those walls.”

She shut off the water. “That would be one glutton for punishment.”

“To him it wouldn’t be. To him it would be the greatest honor of his life to break you free.”

She jerked the shower curtain back, locked eyes with me, “Your talent with words is no match for reality, Dani. You can’t will me to fall in love, to even be vulnerable enough.”

I went to her. I didn’t care that she got me wet; I pulled her into my arms and said, “If you ever love a man half as much as you’ve always loved me, that will be the luckiest man ever.”

Her stubbornness loosened, untangled slightly, as she hugged me back and took a deep breath, kissed me sweetly on the head as she held. “Maybe there is a Derek even for me.”

I smiled. “Somewhere out there, he’s wandering around looking for his Meredith.”

She laughed. Gently pushed me away. “Hand me a towel.”

I handed her the towel and left the bathroom. It was a small bathroom, and Cori had never been the type who allowed anyone in the bathroom with her while she did hair and makeup.

Sloan and Raena returned, and I went after the croissants like I hadn’t eaten in years. I rose up from my scarfing for a moment to look at Raena, “Any sister threats from you?”

Raena laughed, “If she ever gives you a ring, you better say yes then call me immediately.”

I laughed at her cute threat, “Deal.”

“Fucking savages,” Cori yelled when she finally left the bathroom looking gorgeous and discovered we hadn’t waited on her to eat our breakfast. Then she scarfed down the scraps.

On the drive to Brown, Sloan kissed me in the backseat, and Cori reached back and slapped both of our legs screaming, “We’re real happy for you two, but when the four of us are together, we’re sisters, and not the West Virginia kind.” We all laughed so hard. She won.

You ever had that one moment where you were sure every star in the universe had aligned for you? That destiny had woven and sacrificed to bring you to that spot and that moment?

That was how I felt as we walked Brown. As a spirit animal rose in me as we walked campus.

I'm a Bear. My spiritual nature was meeting a physical soil. A divine Providence at Brown.

I pulled Sloan into the hallway when we returned to her apartment since unless I wanted to take her in the tiny bathroom, there'd be no such thing as privacy, then I said, "I don't need to go to Sarah Lawrence. I want to go to Brown."

"That makes me so happy, but, Dani, you need to see both. You can't give this up for me. You'll resent me at some point."

"It's not for you. It's for me. Brown was the only Ivy that I applied to. Not Harvard or Yale or any of the other snooty ones, and I applied to Brown because of the focus on liberal arts."

"Yes, the emphasis on liberal arts is quite impressive there, but it is at Sarah Lawrence too."

"I'm not discounting that, but I had a spiritual experience at Brown. I know, Sloan. I know it is the place for me."

"Dani, your senses are all awake and in awe and looking to latch onto anything after having sex. The first place you went could have had that effect on you. I just ..."

I put my hand on her mouth saying, "Sounds like you don't want me here."

Even under my hand, I saw her cheeks rise and the playfulness reach her eyes. She pulled my hand away, “Oh, God, Baby, I want you here, so badly I can taste it. I want you.” Our lips found each other. Our bodies molded together. Our arms couldn’t gather enough.

Like another Sloan Mercado original she rested her forehead on mine, “I want you here.”

“Then it is settled, here is where I am and where I’ll be.”

“Do you need me to get another apartment?”

“Why?”

“It’s small, and there’s no customary things like walls or a closet.”

“I love this apartment. It’s so you, Sloan, and so perfect for us starting out. I like the openness. I can see myself writing here, reading here, taking you over and over in the bed.”

She smiled then, “Hmmm. How do I kick them out so we can have that?”

I laughed, “Maybe something we can look forward to when I come visit for Spring Break.”

“I love that plan. You know I’ll totally be taking you in your bed on my Spring Break. I know you didn’t want to make love and then us be separated, but I still have a few more weeks at home before Spring semester, and we’ll have my Spring Break and yours and I’m out in May. I’ll come down until you graduate. I’ll miss you, but we’ll make it work, Dani.”

“I know, Sloan, and there’s no way I could have waited any longer. You’re irresistible.”

“Well, my life is complete now,” She said turning her sexy smile on me; we stared in a trance.

Until I finally said, “I think this is sisters time.”

“Right. Right after I take one more kiss,” as she leaned in and caught me on fire.

As soon as we entered, my focus fell, was drawn to Raena, I could always feel people’s pain, and she was in a lot of it. My body glided to her like I was sliding instead of walking.

“What’s wrong, Rae?”

She looked at me, and knew there was rarely any point in lying to me. “I’m scared to go to NYC. That big crowd, especially for New Year’s. Could we stay here? I know you just told her that Brown is your school. Can we stay here, please? I don’t want to go. I’m so scared.”

Sloan sat on the couch on the opposite side of her, Cori left the table where she’d been painting her nails and sat on the floor in front of us. “Raena, I’ve never seen you like this.”

“It’s too much. We’re too young for that now. Maybe in a few years, but I want to go home. I want a normal New Year’s with Dad and Paige and maybe ...”

“Boy next door,” Cori bated.

“You know he has a name.”

“We’ve always called him that, but now you’re getting defensive, it must be love.”

Raena laughed, and in her genuine terror, it had felt good to feel her laugh. It wasn’t a ploy to go home and see him, Raena was really scared to go to NYC. “I know you guys think I’m being a brat, but I’m not. It’s been so hard on me with you two gone these past few months, and in a crowd that big, anything could happen, I can’t lose you guys, not ever. Please.”

“We’ll go home, Raena,” Cori said, which shocked us all, she was usually balls to the wall. “You’re probably right that it is too much for how young we are. We need to save some adventures for when we’re in our thirties.” We all laughed at her. “We’ll go home.”

“You won’t be resentful? I made you miss a once in a lifetime experience?”

“Once in a lifetime? It happens every year.” Then she looked at me so sweetly. “I think this trip met its purpose, My Shadow finding love and finding her place.” I smiled at her. “And New Year’s should be about us all being together. It doesn’t matter where, except maybe it will matter to Mom and David. Maybe they really need us now. And you need another kiss.”

Raena laughed. “A New Year’s kiss. You know the person you kiss at midnight is who you’re supposed to be spending the rest of the year kissing.”

“Great, I’ll be kissing no one on New Year’s,” Cori said rolling her eyes.

“Let’s invite Rowland Tucker; he’s always had a thing for you, and he’s got that movie theater job so locked up by now, I bet they promote him to popcorn soon,” Sloan teased.

“I’ll fucking kill you.”

“Any of the several men you’re running, you’d like to invite?” I asked.

“I’m pretty sure that’d be inhumane to ask someone to do that unless I was planning to be exclusive with him. Maybe after you give Sloan an R-Rated kiss, you’ll smooch my cheek.”

“Most definitely,” I said leaning in to kiss her cheek. Then so did Sloan, then so did Raena.

“We leave no woman unkissed,” Sloan said playfully. We all laughed, and Cori was touched.

“So I guess it’s settled. Dani is going to be an Ivy Snob, and we’re all going home tomorrow.”

I smiled. Then turned to Sloan, “Anywhere special you want to take us to dinner?”

“Parkside so we can walk, because right now, my woman said she’s coming to live with me, so I want us all to drink and celebrate, and none of us are of age to drink in public.”

Cori jumped up and sprinted to the kitchen, I got up to help her. She couldn’t carry four glasses and a wine bottle and corkscrew. She opened it on the little counter, poured, and she carried two back and I carried two back. “To my sisters, may they always know happiness,

commitment, strength in each other, unimaginable creativity, and boundless love.”

I almost cried. “I love you, Cori.”

She winked at me. “I love you, Dani, now let’s drink.”

Another bottle and sister time, and we somehow decided to have a pizza delivered and just spend the night in our tiny apartment talking and laughing and being enraptured with us.

My arm reached for Sloan and came up wanting. An ache for her ran all the way through me, and I knew this one was subtle, she was bound to be in the house somewhere, but soon there wouldn’t be subtle aching. She’d be back in Providence, and I’d be here in a vacant bed.

I stretched and glanced at the clock. 3:36. I went in search of her, wondering if she’d gone to the bathroom or her own room to paint, but as soon as I opened my door, light announced.

The living room light was pronouncing up the stairs enough, I knew that’s where she was. I crept down, and as I got closer to the bottom of the stairs I heard her and my mom. I sat. Eavesdropped if I need to be technical about it, but I couldn’t resist listening to them.

“I don’t think it is a copout, Sloan. I think he really has a problem. I truly believe when we are young, there’s this one ideal that we completely fasten onto as right and just and all of us. Then the first time that ideal gets shattered, it is so devastating that maybe

we never fully recover. He was fourteen when his parents divorced, and up to that point he'd been completely in love with the idea of marriage. The ideal shattered for him then he met this girl and he put all his shattering into her, she made him feel again, and then that shattered too, as young love often does, and he found another girl. I think he really loved your mother, he said her parents tried to tell him about the personalities, but he fastened so hard onto his ideal of marriage that he believed his love for her was stronger than the personalities. When that ideal shattered for him too, he went to find the fix, another woman. I don't see why I would be any different than his other patterns, but for some reason now, he's trying to break that pattern. While you guys were gone, we got really close, I mean he was so turned on, and I was too, but then I couldn't, I remembered how much he hurt me, and I couldn't."

"How did he react to that?"

"He was so loving, Sloan. I never expected that. I expected him to be mad and go jerk himself off, but he stayed, he held me, and apologized for hurting me so badly."

"Wow, Paige, that was pretty awesome of him."

"Yes, it was. I needed that."

"So you're ..."

"I'm not making any decisions, Honey. That was one moment. I need a lot more consistency, but I swear I feel like you want me to divorce him."

“I just really hate him sometimes. You’ve been a great mom to me and Raena and for him to do that to you, I want to kick him in the fucking balls then sucker punch him in the gut.”

“Wow, remind me to never piss you off,” Mom said, Sloan laughed. “You’re allowed to hate him, Sloan. I think you’re a lot like him. I think you have some really big ideals of marriage and love, and you feel he trampled on our entire family. You can hate him for that. But the crazy thing about parents is they’re people too with faults and patterns and weaknesses.”

“That’s so unfair. They’re supposed to be perfect.”

Mom laughed. “We all wish we could be, but we all fall short.”

They were quiet for a long time as I imaged Mom was holding her and letting her sort out.

“Paige, one of her personalities doesn’t know me at all. Like she wished she never had me.”

“Baby, every parent has these moments they are too overwhelmed and they take a five minute break from reality and imagine being on a beach with no one asking one damn thing of them, then about 4 minutes and 45 seconds in, this crazy ball of energy in mismatched clothes runs in, grabs onto your leg, looks up, smiling saying, ‘Hi, Mommy,’ and then just as energetically runs off, and you’re back to loving reality, loving being a mom.” I heard Sloan giggle. “But for someone with Multiple Personality Disorder that sliver of imaginary life, it can’t stay a sliver for them, when that personality takes over, that sliver is the reality. They created that personality so that they could have that sliver longer than a fleeting

moment, and there has to be something she really gets out of that personality, maybe that's the personality that never hurt her daughter the way she hurt you, maybe that one shows up when she can't handle that guilt anymore." Sloan broke into sobs, loud sobs, and for a long time all I could hear was Mom's soothing, "I got you, Baby, cry it out, I got you."

I cried too, trying to keep my tears silent not to intrude on their privacy in a way they knew I was intruding. It was killing me to hear Sloan cry like that. My heart swelled to full capacity for my mom to give to Sloan like that. I'd never thought about the way moms think, and I think it had to come from another mom for her to say that McKenzie created that personality as a way to deal with her guilt of hurting Sloan so badly. That really made sense.

After what felt like an eternity, the tears stopped, and they held in silence so long I wondered if Sloan had fallen asleep on Mom until I heard Mom say, "Am I allowed to give you any love and marriage advice, despite my two failed marriages?"

Sloan giggled, "Of course, and that probably makes you pretty wise about marriage."

"You two grew up together, and now it sounds like you're shifting to living together, and don't get me wrong, I'm so happy for both of you, but you'll have to make an effort, Sloan, to build in that dating time. You both need it. For a happy marriage, you'll always need it."

"I'll make the effort, Paige. Thank you for telling me that. You don't know how much I love her. I want her to feel special enough that I give her amazing dates."

“Just know a peanut butter sandwich in the park can be sometimes even more amazing than a big night on the town. Dates are about taking time out and listening.”

“I needed to hear that too. I worry sometimes about how much I want to impress her.”

“Well, obviously you’ve already impressed her, so don’t worry about that one, just take her on some dates. You both need that, Sloan, you’ve neither really had that before. Some really awful beer, a bowling alley, embarrassing yourself at put-put golf, those are essential in life.”

Sloan laughed. Then. “Do you want Dad to take you on a date?”

Mom took a deep breath. “Yes, I want that, Sloan, but right now it would feel like too much pressure, and I’m not sure I’m quite ready for the talking and listening. I’m really not sure it would be fair to him while I’m so hurt because I wouldn’t really be able to listen to him.”

“Do dates always have to be so heavy?”

Mom laughed. “No, God, no, but me and David kind of are heavy right now. That’s a fact.”

“Maybe it is a fact, Paige, but couldn’t there be some fun breaks? Dates that are just fun and no deep talking? You could have those rules. If anyone deserves a fun night, it is you.”

I heard the sound of a kiss like on a cheek then Mom said, “Thank you, Sloan. I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you for talking to me, Paige. You’re going through so much right now, but you were still there for me. I kind of really needed to hear that about my mom.”

“I know you needed to hear it. I know it won’t ever stop hurting, but there has to be some real truth and understanding for you. It can become manageable. Eventually even peaceful.”

“I know it may take a long time, and a lot of age and maybe a lot of distance from her, but I truly believe you’re right, I believe one day I’ll have complete peace about her and myself.”

“When you learn how to have that, will you teach me?”

Sloan giggled, “I think you’re on your way, Paige. I think you’re on an incredible journey.”

“It feels like a very scary and unpredictable journey, and not even what I’ll discover about my marriage, more what I’ll discover about myself, but maybe that’s the point of it.”

I was so proud of my mom then I almost ran to her, but I decided to creep back to my room.

New Year’s Eve finally arrived. It seemed we’d lived a lifetime since Christmas, driving to RI on the 26th, sneaking out that night to RISD discovering love and art, touring Brown on the 27th, driving back on the 28th, and listening the next morning to Sloan and Mom.

However, here it was, finally, and I decided Sloan didn't always have to be the one to make the effort. I asked her on a date. We'd be back in plenty of time for family festivities.

I wouldn't let her in my room while I got ready. Then I made her stay in her room as I went down the stairs then left for a little while. I rang the doorbell, kind of corny, but it was a date. And she smiled so big when she opened the door and I was holding a bouquet of birds of paradise. Mom sweetly took those, "I'll put those in a vase. You two have fun." We left. I even opened the car door for her. She looked so beautiful. *That's my date. That's my forever.*

I drove us to a 50's style restaurant where the waitresses served while wearing roller skates. They have the best burgers, fries, and shakes, and we had fun drawing on the butcher block paper that they put on the table along with the pail of crayons that they leave there.

Her drawings were unfair, but she couldn't help it, even here where it was just fun and goofy.

Then I took her to an arcade. We had so much fun playing Skee Ball and Air Hockey and driving go-carts and sharing a funnel cake and compiling our tickets for something worthy of the \$.99 Store.

Then I took her to the lake, basically where teenagers snuck off to go parking. We pulled in, and Sloan said, "Seriously?"

"Yeah, Girl, I bought you dinner, put out or get out."

Sloan busted out laughing, and in her laughing, she looked so radiant, I slammed on brakes, grabbed the face, seized the moment with a kiss she'd never forget, then stared mesmerized.

“I didn’t bring you here for that, Baby. I wanted to sit on the hood and look at the moon and stars for a moment and hear your wish for 2011. I want to hear all of you, Sloan.”

She smiled at me. I drove to the lake and parked. Got out, grabbed a blanket from the trunk then we got on the hood and held and gazed. “I wish for a lot more dates like this.”

“Me too, Sloan. What else?”

“I wish to sell a painting.”

“That’s an awesome wish.”

“I wish to one day be able to buy you a really pretty house.”

“Awe, Sloan, that’s so sweet.”

“I want to give you everything, Dani.”

“You will, and I will. But tonight doesn’t have to be about lifetime promises. It can just be about tonight and our wishes for only the year to come.”

She reached to my jeans, and undid, “Well, in that case, I wish to feel you up right now.” I didn’t stop her, and I got so wet when her fingers slid in. Well, we were at parking point. I moved to undo her jeans, slid my fingers in, we were on the hood of a car, but we were covered, and we could still arrive at ecstasy at the same time. I didn’t know which felt better, her fingers in me, or feeling that wetness of hers as I slid my fingers in. To feel her desire. We came. Arranged jeans back properly. Licked our fingers with smiles on our faces. Held.

“I have a confession to make,” came out of my mouth, like the damn moon illuminated on the water was some kind of truth serum for me. “I heard you and Mom talking the other morning. I’m sorry I was eavesdropping. I went looking for you then, well, I ...”

Sloan smiled, pulled me to her, “It’s okay. I would have listened too if I were you.” I giggled. “I really needed her, Dani, and she was so amazing to me.”

“I know. I was so touched by everything she said.”

“I was too, and I’m glad you heard, your eavesdropping got me a really nice date.”

I laughed. “She was right. We’ve never really dated. Are you worried about that?”

“I’m not really worried about anything with us, Dani. She was right; we need to be cognizant to build in dates, but we aren’t like any other couple on earth, so mostly I think we need to listen to ourselves, our art, and each other, and our life together will always be true.”

“I love you, Sloan.”

“I love you, Dani.” We held in our truth until we knew we had to get home or Cori and Raena would kill us for ruining the New Year’s Eve Party they had been planning.

“Hi, Baby,” I said into my phone as soon as me and Raena were released from the prison that is high school and were headed to our car.

“Hello, fucking bitch!” was what I was met with. I’d never heard her speak to me like that before. I was trying to decide if this was some new role she was taking on with us having to make do with phone sex in our time apart, but some bitterness in her voice sent chills down my spine. So much so that I felt my insides collapse on themselves. I tossed keys to Raena.

“Um, hello.”

“Why am I having to hear it from Cori that you won a poetry contest?”

“Because she heard it from Mom. It’s not a big deal, Sloan.”

“I better not ever hear you say that again. Any recognition you get for writing is a very big deal. A huge deal. I’m so proud of you. And so mad at you that you didn’t tell me, Dani.”

“Okay, well, thank you, and I’m sorry. It’s just a stupid high school thing.”

“Dani! It’s a state recognition, you went all the way to states in poetry. Are you serious?”

Raena grabbed my phone from me, “Quit yelling at my sister,” she yelled into the phone. I had to laugh. “I can hear you.” Pause. “Just be proud of her, or I’m going to yell at you.”

I have no idea what Sloan said back, but Raena laughed, a quick, “Miss ya, Sis,” and I was finally granted my phone back. “Hi,” I said so hesitantly.

“Hi, Baby. How are you? How was school today? I miss you.”

I busted out laughing, “Well, finally, I miss you too. And school was shit because of this graduating from high school thing is keeping me from being with you full-time.”

“Yet Brown requires the diploma anyway.”

I laughed then, “I love you.”

“I love you too. So proud of you, Baby.”

“Thank you.”

“I gotta get to class. Send me the poem. Talk to you tonight.”

“Bye, Baby.”

“Hi, Baby,” I said as soon as me and Raena were finally released from the prison that is HS.

“Put her on the damn phone.”

“Um, it’s for you,” I said as I handed Raena my phone and she handed me the keys.

I could only hear Raena’s side of the conversation. “I know, Sloan. I am aware what month it is. I know I have to decide soon.” Long pause. “I don’t know. I think I want to be a wife. Is there a college that has that as a major?” Long pause. “You’re a fucking psycho!” Long pause. “I’m considering a gap year.” And then I could feel her try to melt into the passenger’s seat as I heard Sloan’s yelling, not precise words, but the yelling was there.

I hadn’t cranked the car yet. I looked at her so sympathetically. She reached for my hand.

“The three of you, you were born knowing what you wanted to do in life, but I wasn’t, Sloan. I just, I don’t know, I feel like college is a waste of Dad’s money until I know what ...”

And then more trying to melt into the seat and the yelling I could hear. I grabbed the phone, “Sloan, you have to ...”

“What the hell kind of sister are you? Do you want me dealing with you about this?!”

I threw the phone back at Raena. “Thanks a lot.” Back into the phone, “Okay, Berkeley.” Raena literally had to pull the phone from her ear, as Sloan yelled so loudly. I cranked the car. Raena left the

phone resting on her leg, “So some frozen yogurt?” as Sloan kept yelling.

I laughed. “Yeah. My treat. And get all the toppings you want.” Then I grabbed the phone again. “We gotta go. I love you, Baby,” then I hung up before Sloan could say anything else.

“Thank you,” Raena said. I said *you’re welcome* with my hand on her leg.

She literally got ALL of the toppings. We sat down. Then. “She’s not entirely wrong for the yelling today. You do have to make a decision soon. Let’s just say you are the best wife ever, and I’m sure you will be, but, let’s say he ...” She gave me a death stare “... gets abducted by aliens. Wouldn’t you need some way to support yourself while he’s gone?”

She took a bite then rested her spoon, “This is the grossest frozen yogurt ever.”

I laughed. I got up, made her usual, paid for that too, then returned to the table.

I knew the pause gave her reign over her emotions. “I know I’ve known him as long as you’ve known Sloan, but it’s different. We’re not as sure as you and Sloan, but I love him, yet, I don’t know if I should make college decisions because of his college decisions.”

“I didn’t choose Brown because of Sloan!” I yelled.

“That’s what you got out of what I said, and, hello, defensive.”

I laughed, “I’m sorry, Rae. If he weren’t in the picture, which college would you choose?”

“Berkeley.”

“Because?”

“Because I’ve always wanted to learn how to surf.” I busted out laughing, somehow insulting her. “I would have expected that from Cori, but not from you. You believe in creativity.”

“Oh, God, Raena, you were serious. I’m so sorry. I’m sorry, I really thought you were teasing.”

“No. I wasn’t. I think I’d really like California. Laid back people. Sun.”

Then I saw it. “We’re all too intense for you, right?”

“I know I wasn’t as tortured as Sloan, but people still know who I am here. Who my mother is. My father. My legendary sister who survived it all. I want a place where I get to be me.”

“Then you should take it. Before they give away your spot.”

“Prom is coming up. I think I want to give him ... my virginity.”

“He’s the perfect one for that, and the perfect one to enjoy when you’re home for Christmas and summer breaks, but not the perfect one to keep you from all you want for yourself.”

“Thank you, Dani. Sloan or Cori would have never understood or said that to me.”

“Well, Cori and Sloan aren’t here.” I rolled my eyes. “It’s like they don’t even remember themselves a year ago.”

“I know. I thought Cori would never decide where she was going to play soccer and if Sloan was going to decide if she was going to go to RISD and leave you.”

“I learned a long time ago to accept that they’re the big sisters. They want better for us.”

“Fucking hypocrites.”

I busted out laughing. “Yeah, but fucking great sisters.”

Raena rolled her eyes. “Well, yeah.” Then we both laughed.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?” Raena said as I zipped up her dress.

“Despite what John Hughes seems to believe, you can’t buy prom tickets at the prom.”

“I just hate for you to miss ...”

“I had last year with Sloan and you and Cori. Tonight is about you and boy next door.”

“You know he has a ...”

“Whatever. You look so fucking hot. You’re like a 12, and that boy will be a 5 at best.”

She smiled. “Not to me. To me, he’ll be a 12 too.”

I smiled at her. “I’m so happy for you, Raena. Do you have ...”

“Yes. Several condoms, and I did spermicide.”

“Okay, but just so you know, if at any moment you change your mind, you ...”

“Dani, I know Sloan is my real sister, but I never could have gotten a better sister than you.”

I smiled. “Back at you, Rae, and I’ll shut up, and well, keep my phone by me if you ...”

“Thank you.” Then she kissed my cheek, squeezed my hands one final time. Descended steps. Mom took a bazillion pictures. Poor Raena. Then Mom finally let them leave.

Then it was, me and Mom, and the plethora of food she’d made for me and her for ... *Can’t Buy Me Love*, ‘my favorite movie when I was your age, you’ll love it, Dani.’

I hated to admit she was right: I did in fact love it, and there was McDreamy looking like such a fucking dork, the years have been kind to him, and there was my mom smiling.

And a night I got to spend just the two of us.

Cindy Mancini and Donald the Dork rode off into the sunset on a lawnmower, oh please. She clicked it off, then turned on the couch with her legs up to her, looking to me like we were old friends instead of mother and daughter. “So what did you think?”

“That’s the most 80’s movie I’ve ever seen.” She laughed. “Are you and David ...”

“Better, I guess.”

“He’s not dancing on lawnmowers for you?”

She busted out laughing. Then. A bit somber saying, “He would if I asked him to. He would find a way to suck his own dick if I asked, and there’s something about that much obedience that I can’t handle, that I can’t ... want him like I used to. Am I crazy, Dani?”

“No, Mom. You want him to take charge.”

“I want him to have any fucking identity outside of me. Sometimes, I almost want to tell him to go fuck McKenzie so she’s enduring this lapdog instead of me. I know you don’t ...”

“I understand more than you realize, Mom. It’s okay. You can be candid with me.”

“I feel like I’m supposed to be the mom here and forcing you to go to prom or something.”

“Okay, and in all of the realism of that scenario, and when you finally succumb to the real Dani, do you really think it would be enjoyable for me?”

“No. I don’t. That’s why I didn’t force the issue. And I must admit maybe it was selfish too. I wanted a night it was just me and you. My baby is going to leave me soon.”

“I am, but I would love it if Martha Washington Balls showed up at our apartment.”

“I can definitely do that. I can do anything for you, Baby.”

I smiled. Too big. I was aware, but I couldn't keep the creases from hitting my face.

She cupped my hand, “Dani, are you sure you don't want a dorm? I mean, are you sure you don't want an opportunity to know other freshmen girls at the same college as you?”

“Who says I can't have that and also have Sloan?”

“College life. It kind of really says that.”

I laughed. Then. “You said you'd give everything to have it. You can't contrast that now.”

“I get that, but, Dani, we don't see Cindy and Ronald after high school. We don't see any couple in these types of movies after high school, and I can't see you, there, I can't see you.”

I took on my best “Unsolved Mysteries” voice, “Danielle Winters left for Brown University where she met educated professors of the writing persuasion. She occasionally found herself at odd events like football games, but she never had to find herself standing in three inch high shower flip flops because she was terrified of the freshmen funk in the scary dorm showers. She, along with her girlfriend, Sloan Mercado, discovered new depths of creativity.”

“Okay, okay. That voice has to go,” Mom pleaded.

I laughed. Then. “Is there really only one path for college?”

“I don't know. I didn't get all of that. I wanted you to have ...”

“Cori is getting all of that for both of us. Funky soccer girls and athletic girls, fucking a bunch of different guys, and traveling for soccer tournaments.”

“I want all of that for her except the fucking a bunch of different guys part.”

“Mom?”

“I know. I know it is normal. I accept that part, but she’s so cynical about love, Dani, and all of that is my fault, and that part I can’t fully accept.”

“I can’t either. I have this part of me that wants her to fall in love. But then if she does get hurt, I’ll never be able to forgive myself.”

“Neither will I. She was more of a Daddy’s Girl than you were. She followed Vree around everywhere, and I have to admit all of that soccer talent had to come from somewhere.”

“I’ve seen the pictures of him. He was talented, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. God, I was a lackey at every game, like I was Posh and he was Beckham.”

“Then he made an ultimate goal in you and created Cori?”

She laughed. “Something like that.”

“I remember them playing soccer together. Him coaching at her little league games.”

“Cori adored him. In some of the things she’s said about him destroying me, I’ve always wondered if she was more talking about

herself, the way he destroyed her when he choose a different family. Before that, the two of them were inseparable. He doted on her then practically vanished after our divorce.”

“That’s probably true, Mom, but never discount how real it is to Cori that she’s already had her heart broken by Dad, in a really big bad way.”

Tears rushed down Mom’s face. “I know, Dani. I knew even when she was nine years old.”

“Do you remember the first game he didn’t attend?”

“Of course I do, Dani. I was the one having to hold her and literally carry her off the field.”

“I’m sorry, Mom, I didn’t mean to ...”

“It’s different for you. I know. You were the little sister, but I was the mom picking up my broken pieces and hers, and I was the one she took out all of her frustrations about him on.”

A tear fell down my face, “I’m sorry, Mom, I guess we come from different perspectives.”

“We’d have to, Dani, you’re a writer, you know that. I was the one who showed up for every game, and I was still the one she hated, I was still the one who was not enough.”

“I know that was so hard for you, Mom.”

“No, you don’t know, Dani, and I hope you never know. That was my first baby. She decided my kisses on her head were wrong, me showing up at her games was wrong, me holding her when she cried

was somehow wrong. I didn't do anything. I was the one parent there for her, and in ways that I'll never know, that was wrong too."

Her tears killed me. "Mom, you didn't do anything wrong, except be the one person she knew would never leave her so she could be a monster to you. You didn't do anything."

Through her tears she said, "A part of me knows that, Dani, but a part of me feels I'm the mother, I should always be able to magically heal my girls, even if I didn't break them."

"That's bullshit, Mom. I mean I somewhat understand, but that's societal bullshit."

"Doesn't make it any less real for me, Baby."

"I get that, but Cori is ... I don't know the word ..."

"Mean as hell and jaded because of my divorce?"

"Was it your divorce? Would you have done anything to keep the marriage?"

"Of course I would have, but I still lost my daughters in that unwanted divorce anyway."

"You didn't lose me."

"Yes, I did, Dani. Maybe you still let me kiss you and snuggle with you, but you, My Sweet Untainted Angel, yes, I did lose you, you faded into the poetry, only trusting creativity."

I stared at her. It was true. It was ... all writers have to accept that they trust creativity, that all pain happens to them to make them trust creativity, but most writers aren't staring down the barrel

of eyes of loving mothers who wanted to give much more than was allowed.

She needed an answer, and despite searching every crevice of me I couldn't find one of solace. Mom got up. Went into the kitchen, and I didn't go after her. I breathed on the couch and remembered nights of Cori crying so much I was sure a dam had broken. I remembered Mom trying so hard to calm the flood, and Cori yelling, and crying, and a tripod of brokenness.

I can't try anymore, Cori. I'm sorry he didn't come to your game. I'm so sorry, Baby, but I tried. I was there, and you don't care about that at all. I HATE YOU! Cori screamed. And Mom's tears. Then Mom's taking on more than she should, Okay, Cori, you hate me. I'm the worst mom ever.

Mom? Yes, Cori? Hours and hours later. You're a great mom. I just don't understand everything I feel right now. I somehow understand he doesn't live with me anymore, but I don't understand why he can't come to my games still? Mom pulled her into her lap. I don't understand either, Baby.

Mommy? Yes, Dani? The next day. Did I do something that made Daddy go away? Mom fell apart. No, Baby. Daddy doesn't seem to know how to be here anymore. What? I'm here. You're here. Cori's here. How can he not be here anymore? I don't know the right words, Dani.

She shouldn't have had to know the words. She wasn't the one who left, but she had to clean up his mess anyway. I finally pulled myself from the couch. Went to join her in the kitchen.

She was standing at the counter, just staring out the window, looking at the pool. I molded to the back of her. She put her hand on mine to acknowledge my presence. “Dani, life it ...”

“It’s a fucking bitch and then you die.”

Mom busted out laughing. “Something along those lines, yes.”

“I know how hard you tried, Mom, for me and Cori, but I think he hurt her in ways we’ll never completely grasp onto.”

“I know that, but that’s still my baby girl so lost and cynical about love, and so hurt.”

I pulled her up the stairs. We put swimsuits on. We dove in the pool. I didn’t really have a magical fix for Mom except after a few laps, I went to mold onto her and let her hold me.

I woke on my mommy’s shoulder. Raena was in the pool with us, and she must have turned the heat on in the pool. Dawn was making her announcement on the day. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“Are you kidding? You were so stinking cute, I couldn’t dare. Plus, I liked my baby sleeping on me again. That’s a rare treat for a mother.”

I rose up slightly, kissed her cheek, lowered my head back to her shoulder. Looked at Raena and said, “Magical night?”

“The decorations and music were nice.”

“And?”

“I wasn’t ready.”

Mom’s head, and body, which meant me, swung around so quickly. “That was ...? You were ...? God, I can’t make sentences. Somebody give me answers.”

“I had planned to lose my virginity, but I couldn’t follow through with it. That’s why I was home so early. I came home right after prom, and then just hung out with you in the pool.”

“Was he ...?” I started to ask.

“What kind of question is that? Was he understanding? So what if he was or if he wasn’t? It’s my virginity; he doesn’t get to be understanding. He gets a yes or no, I’m not ready.”

Mom and I both smiled then I said, “Well, right on, Sister. But can I get more?”

“You three have so much going for you. I wanted something going for me, but when it came down to it, not enough to give up me, to give away my virginity because I’m in competition with my sisters. It’s mine, and I kind of like that it’s mine.”

“I like that too, Raena. I am so completely in love with Sloan, not high school crush infatuated, seriously in love with her, or I can tell you, it never would have happened, I wouldn’t have given anyone that sacred part of me. It’s a sacred part of you. Only give it to yourself and you’ll know when you are completely ready to share it with someone else.”

“Thank you for saying that, Dani. And thank you, Paige, for how much you welcomed me when I came out here, and how we were talking about nothing and everything.”

Mom smiled, like some recognition of a life milestone clicked in her. She kissed Raena’s head, like she was a little Winters girl, then pulled me out of the pool and made a delicious motherly breakfast.

I thought I should be nervous, but I wasn’t at all sitting on the stage waiting for my speech.

I looked over at Valedictorian. She definitely looked nervous. I actually felt a bit sorry for her despite the way we’d always competed for Valedictorian, and up to the last moment when it really counted, I had always been a tenth of a point ahead, but my days of skipping finally gave her the advantage, and then we came back from Winter Break and it was final, she was Valedictorian and I was Salutatorian. “Suck my dick, Bitch,” she whispered in my ear as she was leaving the principal’s office after he had told us. And the worst part of all of it was this semester I had gotten my act together again, and I was now ahead of her, but they have to determine that the semester before to make arrangements. So here we sat. 1 & 2.

Did it matter? A part of myself asked. Not really. Another part of me answered back. Good because it really matters to her, and you

know how hard her parents have always been on her about grades. Stop, stop making me see other people's pain, especially someone who has always been such a bitch to me. Still, the part of me that could see people's pain reached out to her bouncing leg, "Congratulations. Stop being so nervous. You're great at speeches."

To which she responded, "Get your hand off of me, you fucking dike." No good deed goes unpunished. I pulled my hand away. We sat in awkward, awkward silence until our speeches.

Finally the whole pomp and circumstance was over, we got to join our class, which luckily she was early in the alphabet so we weren't sitting anywhere near each other. Raena smiled at me as I passed the LMNOPs as people had always said like one word.

Then we tossed 'em in the air, and it was final, high school was over, exciting and scary.

Raena and I found each other in the swarm of blue gowns, hugged then went to our family. As our family of six were hugging and congratulating, and just as Mom handed me roses ...

"Dani?" I buckled in on myself. Christmas cards with \$500, birthday cards with \$100, texts with Mom about child support and college tuition had been all we'd had of him in years.

I turned. Cori turned. Mom went so stiff. And there we collectively looked at the traitor.

"I saw it in the paper that you were Salutatorian. I'm so proud of you, Dani. Look at you. You're so grown up. Such a beautiful woman. And Brown, that's such a great honor."

I could feel Cori's breathing ramping. Mom's betrayal stiffening her more. My fears.

All of those kept us all silent, maybe stunned, were we actually seeing and hearing this?

"I want to apologize to you. I wanted something else, and I didn't think about how much I hurt my daughters, and you too, Paige. God, you look downright stunning, Paige."

Then David was on Mom like The Flash. "It's time for you to go now, Vree," he demanded.

The two men stared each other down, like a battle for my mother, and I waited for guns. No guns, we were at a graduation ceremony, they'd have to rely on who was the better man.

David literally moved Mom behind him, and I was sure I could see wetness come to her. In an even more threatening tone David gritted, "I said it was time for you to go now!"

Dad reached out an envelope to my hand that I didn't grasp so it fell to the ground as he finally turned and walked away from us. We watched his back until we couldn't see him.

"David, I need to get to Cori," Mom said as he hadn't let go of her. He released her then.

"No, Mom," Cori said before Mom could get to her. "This is Dani's day. And Raena's day. We need to go have some celebratory burgers." She started to walk to the parking lot. "Sloan!" She sort of commanded, and then Sloan walked to the beckoning.

That left me and Raena riding with Mom and David, and me never knowing what Cori said to Sloan, or knowing why she chose Sloan in that moment, except to feel she was mad at me.

Dad didn't really talk to her, address her, and he certainly didn't come to her graduation.

I couldn't help being glad when from the backseat I watched Mom's hand go to the back of David's neck. It was a moment of reconciliation, the look on his face when he turned to smile at her, it was beautiful, rewarding like he loved how he'd waited for her to love him again.

We had been at the restaurant for over 45 minutes before Cori and Sloan finally showed up. "Where have you been? You left before us," Mom asked.

They looked at each other, sealing a secret. "I had something I had to do," Cori said.

Then sat down in a huff daring anyone to question her.

In bed that night Sloan told me, "She followed him to his house. She told him off. I've never seen her so filled with rage, screaming at what a horrible piece of shit he was, I was scared for her, scared she'd go someplace she could never come back from with all that rage. He really stood there and took it, never saying one thing which made him seem even more like a coward. Then she finally stopped and looked around the living room at all the boxes and asked if he was moving and he said he wasn't, that the wife and daughter had left him. Cori laughed, a seriously wicked laugh then said, 'What comes around, goes around.' Then we left."

I got out of the bed. I had to go to my sister. I heard noises from Mom and David's room when I was in the hallway, and that made me smile. Then I opened the door. She wasn't in bed. She was on her floor with a metal pencil box she'd always kept from when we were little. Pictures of her and Dad. Tickets of some college and professional soccer games he took her to. But now those relics were in tiny shards all around her like even though I hadn't seen it, I saw the rage in which she had ripped and shredded and now she sat surrounded.

I sat beside her. She turned to look at me. She looked so vacant. I almost preferred when she was mean because at least then there was a little fight and fire about her, but this was so vacant, so haunting, so much pain in my sister's eyes. Looking at me brought on her tears.

She fell into my arms. My reflexes caught her. My inabilities rose up so insecure that they almost succeeded in killing me. How do I do this? She's always been the big sister? How do I know what to say? How do I help her right now? Then I didn't have to DO anything. My doing was being there. Holding her. Loving her. Letting her have a safe place to cry.

She cried so hard. Torrents flowed from her. Hurricanes swirled from her. Tornados clung to me tighter and tighter. Until. She literally passed out from the shear exhaustion of herself.

I laid back on the floor, letting her sleep on me, as we were surrounded by Dad's fragments.

I woke to a blanket on us, Mom lying on the floor beside her babies. I looked around, she must have cleaned the tiny shards and the metal box and thrown those away for Cori.

When Cori woke, she pulled Mom closer to her still laying on me. She's not really the Hallmark quaint gushy type of girl if you haven't already noticed, so after holding Mom a minute she said, "Will you make me some banana pancakes?"

Mom smiled, "Okay. You want some, Dani?"

We went downstairs. We had coffee with Kahlua. Mom made pancakes. We ate in silence. But, when Mom put Cori's pancakes on the table, she kissed her head, and Cori let her.

I looked up from my Biology homework as out of the corner of my eye this stunning god caught my attention. His muscles were shredded, he was in jeans and a tank top with no sleeves and armpit holes large enough you could see his toned obliques, his shirt was dirty, he was dirty like he was a construction worker or something, and that chiseled jaw and those ice blue eyes, each increment of roving glazing kneaded my attraction up more and more.

"See something you like?"

I snapped into reality, and literally snapped my head at Sloan sitting at the table with me outside of the little bistro by our apartment where we loved to meet after classes and do homework

together for a couple of hours. My girlfriend had caught me desiring someone else.

“Um, well, I um, I ...”

She busted out laughing. “It’s not a crime, Baby, and damn if he ain’t one fine specimen.”

I smiled. “You’re not mad?”

“I don’t own you, Dani. You’re allowed your own thoughts and ability to enjoy the view anytime you want, as long as it stays to enjoying the view; if you ever needed more, I couldn’t handle it. I can’t make your decisions for you, but my decision would be to leave.”

“I really like the way you worded that. I like the way you made us both responsible for own decisions. In my psychology class we’ve been studying this thing called The Kinsey Scale.”

“We studied it in my psychology class last year too. I thought it was really interesting. Like all my life I felt like there’s two boxes, gay or straight, but I always thought something as complicated as sexual attraction couldn’t fit into such simple boxes. I liked the way Kinsey made it a scale, linear and fluid.”

“That’s what I’ve liked about it too. Where do you think you fall on the scale?”

“If I remember correctly, Zero was completely straight and Six was completely gay?” I nodded at her that she was correct. “Then, I think I’m a Four. What about you?”

“I think I’m a Three. When it comes to you, I think I’m a Six.”

She smiled, “Oh, you have a way with words, Miz Writer” as she gave me a wink. I smiled at her. She got up, leaned in to kiss me. “I gotta get to work. If you talk to him, see if he’d be interested in posing nude for me.” I laughed at her. One more kiss, watched her walk away. I watched her walk down the street, took a quick glance back at him, then immediately back to watch her, my love, like I could see myself falling even harder in love because of that talk.

Sloan had been drawing in the park when a guy had seen her drawing and asked her to join him on a company he was starting. An internet company where people wrote in descriptions then they got original art to match their descriptions that was made into bookmarks, coffee mugs, t-shirts, keyrings, practically any type of paraphernalia. With Sloan as the artist, the company had taken off really well. Each week she was bringing home more and more money. She liked the job a lot, and he was a very laidback young bohemian dude, kind of like us in a male form but more internet business driven where we were artistically driven. Good match.

He had said that Sloan could work from home, but each time she tried it, she couldn’t get any work done as we were so flushed up by our new getting to live together that she ended up making love to me, so we had our couple of hours of homework after classes in public or that would have never gotten done either, and then she left me for a couple of hours to go do any new orders he had received that day. And some days she returned with a bookmark for me.

Sloan had also sold something, but not really in a way she had thought. One of her professors was asked by Kirkland’s to get him a young talented artist, and he chose Sloan to do a series of what Sloan called half-art decorum type of shit they sold at Kirkland’s. She was

delighted by the recognition, but she worried she was selling out. Then he told her the pay was \$15,000.

I saw the look on her face as she signed the contract. \$15,000 made for a helluva down payment on a house when we graduated from college, and buying me a house was this big motivation for her. I could also see the wheels turning in her head how it could gain interest in the next four years and give us more money. “You think McKenzie ever sold out?”

Sloan laughed, “When she lived in Chicago, she worked for American Girl painting the faces on those doughy-eyed little dolls.”

I laughed. “Are you serious? That seems so ...”

“Yes, I’m serious, and I know that seems like such a contrast to the Queen of the Damned she is now, but I guess everyone starts out somewhere, and this will be really good for me and you, Dani, so I’ll be really proud of that, that my talent will give us a nest egg.”

“God, I love you so much, Sloan.” And I did, and every day I came to love her more, and discover more about her, like our conversation outside of the bistro where I fell even more.

I left the bistro. Went to the market deciding she’d come home to her favorite meal, which from the Bistro I texted Mom to tell me all the ingredients to buy, then as I was leaving, I grabbed a cheap bouquet of flowers to have on our tiny table for her when she got home. Mom talked to me and guided me the whole time as I was cooking which was a new adventure for me. Mine didn’t taste like a Paige meal, but Sloan fell harder for me that I tried.

After a summer of the four of us and Mom lazing days away at our pool and enjoying Mom's treats that seriously seemed to taste better and better as she and David made love more often and I swear, he was more in love with her than he'd ever been with McKenzie, and she was more in love with him than she'd ever been with Dad – something shifted at graduation, and the two of them fell in love, but not even who they'd been seven years before they broke, it was like they had discovered new selves independently and discovered a different marriage – but anyway, after a summer like that, it had been a lot of tears the day we did all leave.

The same day we all left for our colleges, David and Mom left for a second honeymoon.

I let Raena take our car because I was going to share with Sloan. Raena was so happy.

It was two weeks before any classes were to start that we all left, but Cori had to get to soccer camp, Raena had to drive across the country, so me and Sloan came to Providence too.

To be honest we were glad to have two weeks before classes started where we weren't sisters, we were lovers in our own apartment, and it was like we needed the two weeks to be adults.

Our only breaks from making love and writing and painting during those two weeks were to check on Raena's Cross Country Trek. She posted so many pictures, and I absolutely loved getting to see the pictures of her climbing The Grand Canyon, hanging out in Vegas, and then when she finally made it to California. Her dorm wasn't ready yet, but she got a hotel and scoped out the place to take surfing lessons. She did it, she freaking did it for herself.

She was still Major: Undecided, but every day I loved getting to see the pictures of her learning to surf, of her hair getting lighter, her body getting leaner and more tanned.

Raena was really happy. Cori was Cori, more aggressive every game on the field, and me and Sloan were falling in love and painting and writing and loving college classes and our life.

Of course all of our lives still stopped and united on Thursday nights, even if this season was really getting on our nerves with some dumb plotlines, we were committed to this show.

And each other, which was probably more of the reason we couldn't stop watching. We had made a pact, and we were sisters spread out all over the country. Thursdays was a tradition.

I ran from the bathroom to our bed and jumped in molding myself to Sloan and grabbing as much covers as I could. "We need to turn the heat up."

"No way. I love the way you want to get close when you're cold," Sloan said.

I laughed. And a bit did have to revel in it was her body warming me. I fell into her more.

"What would you like to do today, Baby?" Sloan offered wrapping me tighter to her.

“Put on fourteen pairs of sweats and watch movies all day. I don’t think I’m faring well in this cold weather here.”

“It’s a season, Dani. Embrace it. Enjoy it. It’s a new exciting time in our lives where we get to enjoy winters in the Northeast. We haven’t even gotten much snow yet.”

“Okay, there’s a football game at Brown, and some people in one of my English classes invited us to come tailgate with them. I haven’t really been a Bear other than go to class.”

“Then today we’re Bears! Can I paint our faces?”

“Man, every Saturday you probably could make money painting people’s faces.”

Sloan laughed, “No. Saturdays are my day with my woman.”

We got out of bed, and yes, I did turn up the heat if we weren’t going to be in bed. Sloan was so sweet to cook me breakfast as I looked at the intricate details of a shape poem that my professor had done that formed the shape of a woman and had a poem about her woman. In high school people had been so ashamed to say anything about being gay and so many books we read my teachers skirted around the sexual content. Not here. Here they put it in your face and challenged all of your timidity to vacate premises immediately. Thrilling.

I think I have quite a big crush on my Poetry Professor. That thought made me float to Sloan. She welcomed me behind her as she moved about making us breakfast. “What am I going to do when I graduate, Sloan? It’s not like poets make sustainable money.”

“Kirkland’s asked me to do another series, so you can be my pretty kept woman.”

“Hey!” as I spanked her ass.

“You can tell me to ‘put out or get out’, but I can’t call you a pretty kept woman?!”

I busted out laughing. “Um, yeah, guess that kind of is a double standard.”

She laughed. I loved the way we teased. “You can become a professor like that Poetry Professor you have such a crush on. How do you sit in class without your wetness showing?”

“Sloan, I don’t ...”

“Don’t lie to me about it. I see the way you talk about her, read her poems. Besides, it’s not a big deal to me. I think it’s normal to have professor crushes.”

I got serious with her, dropped my head into her shoulder as my mood was dropping. “Once I watched my mom look at a man, it was even after Dad had been cheating on her, and he yelled at her and called her a fucking whore in front of me and Cori. She looked ... so hurt and degraded.”

Sloan turned off burners, moved our pancakes onto plates, then turned around to hold me. “I’ve known you since you were ten years old. I’ve always seen all the men and women who turn your head, the way you’ve spoken about some of your teachers or parents of some of our friends. I understand all of your fascinations, even how that husky Stevie Nicks’ voice turns you on. I’ve always found your

fascinations so endearing, especially in the way you don't seem attracted to what most people find attractive, you have this subtle but when you take the time to look at it, it is eccentrically gorgeous beauty that you're attracted to, and I love that so much about you, Dani. Do you think I've spent all those years studying you to change you when I finally got to have you? Can't see I'll be having you long with that plan."

I laughed, burrowed into her more. Crying, "He hurt her so badly, Sloan. I don't know if I've ever talked about it. Maybe I never could until now. I was scared she was going to shatter into a million pieces if I talked about it, but now she and David are so amazing."

"I love seeing Dad so happy, and honestly, more love seeing Paige so happy." She picked my head up. "I don't think your shape poem should be about me. It should be about Paige. All you've seen her go through to love herself and now to love Dad, has shaped who you are."

"I love her so much, Sloan."

"I know, Baby, and I'm so grateful we have one functional mom to rely on. I love her too."

"Do you still miss McKenzie?"

"I'll always miss her, Dani, the echo of her will always be in my art and sometimes the moments of pure longing for her that I allow myself, but being away from her has made me healthier, and I even think it's made me a better artist outside of her shadow and abuse."

"You've never said that before. You are getting healthier."

“What she did to me was abuse. Those horrifying days, but also keeping me on a string.”

“I’ve been so proud of you for cutting that string.”

“Cold pancakes aren’t that great,” Sloan said with a deep breath turning away from me.

McKenzie still haunted her, sometimes I still worried she was going to run to her, because Sloan is drawn to darkness, needs it sometimes to feed her art, and McKenzie is Persephone.

We ate, shared a shower, decked out in Brown attire, went to do something called tailgating. There was so much food and craziness. Why aren’t we tailgating every Saturday?

And coming up to several students from her class was Poetry Professor. We were all happy to see her as she introduced her wife to us. I introduced Sloan to her.

“It’s so nice to meet you. Dani loves your class. It’s her favorite this semester.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. I love Dani also, she’s a very talented writer. I look forward to more poetry from you, Dani.” I smiled at her. “What do you do, Sloan?”

“I’m an art student at RISD.”

“That’s quite an honor, Sloan. Congratulations. You two complement each other well.”

“I think we do,” Sloan said with a smile.

“We need to go meet your colleagues,” her wife, demanded, like she was bored with us.

“I’ll see you in class, Dani. It was a pleasure to meet you, Sloan,” Poetry Professor said so graciously making sure her demeanor didn’t change to reflect that of her wife’s rudeness.

We watched them walk away. When we were sure they were out of earshot range, Sloan said, “Lesbian Death Bed much.”

I laughed, “That poem about her was written fifteen years ago. It’s sad to see them now.”

Sloan saw it reflecting in my eyes, the worry for us in fifteen years. “Don’t. And don’t make me make lifetime promises when I’m nineteen. All we can either one promise is today we’ll give our best to each other. I don’t ever want to see us like them, so if there’s a time I’m not what is best for you, then I’ll do the admirable thing. I won’t keep you in a dead bed.”

I pulled her to me, whispered in her ear, “Your love for reality and me are making me so horny. I fucking want to take you right here, right now.”

She whispered in my ear, “I promised you today we’d be Bears, but after this game, I’m going to take you like the beautiful beast your sexiness brings out in me.” Satisfaction.

This girl was walking toward me, smiling at me, then of all things grabbed me tightly. “Oh, Dani, I’ve missed you so much,” said the girl, a faint hint of sounding like Raena.

“Raena, ohmygod, you look so different,” I said pulling back and keeping my hands on her arms so I could size her up. “You look like a Golden Sunrise Surprise!” Raena laughed. Then I really pulled her to me. Hugged her so tightly. Felt the two of us alone in the gap year. All my softest spots enlarged, all my gooey spots reveled, all my aching spots found respite. My Raena. I had missed her, immensely. She looked different, even smelled different, smelled like rays of sunshine and shoots of flowers all blossomed from her, but in my arms she was Raena.

My arm got jerked, “What are you doing?” I guess Sloan had returned from the bathroom.

I couldn’t even turn before Raena was in her face, “That’s not how you talk to my sister.”

“Your sis ... Rae? Are you fucking kidding me?” Right before she grabbed her, and the two of them tried to mold together in an embrace that made them one person. “My baby sister sure is all grown up. You look great. Love the blonde hair by the way.”

Raena laughed, “It’s not blonde by choice, it’s just so much sun, but I can’t get enough.”

Sloan finally pulled away, put her hands on Raena’s face, “As much as I’ve missed you, I want to tell you to come home, but seeing you like this and how it agrees with you, I know you’re in the right place for you. I’m so happy for you, Raena. And happy you’re here.”

“Me too. I can’t wait to have some of Paige’s Christmas Cookies with my sisters.”

I smiled at her. “Well, we have a good seven hour drive before we can get the cookies.”

They both smiled at me. We went to get Raena’s luggage, added it to ours in the trunk, and took quite a bit navigating out of The Boroughs before we could get on the highway to home. David had asked us to pick her up and bring her with us because the flight to JFK saved him \$1000. We were happy to pick up our sister and have sister time before we all got home.

Me and Raena were sitting in the back, catching up, making Sloan be our chauffer. “Still a fair maiden?” I asked with a sly smile.

“No, my dear, I bath in this god named Caleb every day, sometimes four times a day.”

I laughed at her. “Hmmm. Do tell.”

“He owns a healthy food truck. He’s there like at 3am for all the early morning surfers making smoothies and kale pancakes and shit like that, that I have to admit I’ve grown to love. I met him one morning. He asked his partner to take over so he could take me out. We surfed, and sat on boards facing each other and talking, and surfing some more, and talking. It was like the best day of my life. Until I had to go to class, but he asked me to come back that night. He and his friends, his partner with the food truck and his girlfriend, were having a bonfire on the beach. It was a really fun night for the four of us, then he took me to his tiny little place and took my virginity, and I’ve barely been back to my dorm since.” I laughed.

“We make love all night, get up early for him to work and me to surf. I go to class, take long afternoon naps, get in an evening surf, sleep an hour or two, and then we repeat.”

“Raena and Caleb with the five letter names.” We laughed.
“Sounds so amazing, Raena.”

“It is, Dani. I don’t want anything else in life. I love our simple life. Except maybe in a few years I would like a couple of baby surfers running around the beach with us.”

“I will pull this car over and beat some sense into you if you say you are dropping out!”

“I’m not, Sloan. Jesus, those protective big sisters.”

“Tell me about it,” I said as Raena and I mimicked each other’s eye rolls and smiles.

“I love college. I love the variety of classes. I love meeting new people. I’m not dropping out, Sloan, I promise. I’m in it for the four years and hope at some point a major grabs me.” I laughed at her accurate personification of how majors/passions do sort of choose you.

“So sounds like you really can see yourself with Caleb?”

“I can, Dani. I’m so glad I waited until it was someone I knew, even that first time our eyes locked, I saw the whole day splayed out in front of me, and I knew then tonight is the night.”

I smiled so big, kissed her cheek, gushed, “It sounds so romantic!” Raena smiled, matched my gushiness, and I could tell she’d been waiting to share with me. “Was it good?”

She leaned into me, “HMMMM, so good, I mean it was like I was his favorite wave he’d ever ride, and I loved him inside of me, and all over me. It was a 12 for sure, and you were right, boy next door would have only been a 5 in that department at best. He would have been so nervous, but Caleb wasn’t nervous, he never asked permission like he knew he belonged.”

“Fucking yes! I love him already!”

Raena beamed and pulled me so close to her. “Me too.”

Sloan eventually got tired and asked me to drive. I waited about twenty minutes and looked, the Mercado Sisters were both asleep, Sloan with her head in my lap, Raena laid across the backseat. Crank music, entertain myself. This was always them in a car. Sound asleep.

They even stayed that way when I pulled in. Mom ran out and pulled me to her so tightly. “You’re dropping out. I can’t be without you,” she breathed into my ear.

I laughed, kissed her cheek, then, “No can do, but I’m so glad to be home, Mom.”

We stayed holding in the driveway until David came out, gave me a sweet hug, looked at his girls, “Since they were babies, I’d drive them around the block and they were out.” He was smiling so big, so endearingly looking at them. “More cookies for you, I guess.”

I laughed. “We have to wake them up, David.”

He went to Raena first, she was the easier of the two to wake up, and she’d keep Sloan in check when Sloan started yelling. He just

sat in the backseat and raised Raena up to him. “Hi, Daddy,” she said like a little girl. “Hi, Precious Angel,” David cooed holding her.

Mom and I smiled at each other watching them together. She had always been Daddy’s Girl.

He gave her a gentle kiss then, “Wake your sister for me?”

Raena laughed. “You’re so mean to me.”

“It’s the cost for the flight I paid for so that you could have Paige’s Christmas Cookies.”

“Okay. Okay.” Raena got out of the backseat, took a deep breath, opened the door, and grabbed Sloan’s hand pulling her up, almost hitting her head on the door, thankfully putting her other hand on Sloan’s head before that happened or Sloan would have murdered her. Sloan grunted like she was going to murder someone. “Wakey wakey. We’re home, Sloan.”

Sloan collapsed onto Raena’s waist. “Let me stay here,” she released so sleepily.

David looked at me, “You have any influence in this area now?”

“Not any I can do in a driveway,” I shot back, and they all laughed hysterically.

“I’m going to have Paige’s cookies, you can stay here,” Raena said as she moved Sloan’s head back into the car then Sloan magically followed her while Raena smiled victoriously. Then. They looked like they had a competition running to Mom of who got to hug her first.

Mom pulled them both into her arms. I smiled so happy they had a mother. As we moved into the house, Sloan did side hug and walk the rest of the way with David. “Hi, Daddy.” We were home. There was a gorgeous tree. Mom’s cookies. Our stockings. Cider. Together. No Cori for several days and only for three days when she got here, so there was a hole in all of us, but we were home for Christmas, and Mom and David were whole so we were whole.

“These have to be the best cookies on earth,” Raena enthused inhaling her 5th cookie.

“Seriously,” Sloan confirmed, “And this cider. I think I’m in love with you, Paige.”

David pulled Mom’s belt loop dragging her to him, “She’s taken.” That smile on Mom’s face, and I somehow fell in love with David that she was that happy.

“So, Mom, give me some cooking lessons while I’m home before my woman leaves me for my mother and we all end up on Jerry Springer?”

They all busted out laughing then Mom said, “You mean you marrying your step-sister won’t be enough to get you on there?”

“Burn!” Raena and Sloan chorused then I covered my face with my hands.

Mom sweetly removed herself from David then removed my hands from my face where she put sweet kisses, “I’ll teach you how to cook, Baby.”

To which I stuck my tongue out at Raena and Sloan. Sloan said, “You think you one upped me? She teaches you how to cook, I still benefit, and I’ll put that tongue to some real use.”

“Hey!” Mom yelled, “Don’t we have some kind of when the four of you are together rule?”

“I don’t see four of us, Paige,” Sloan said slyly.

Mom jerked the cookie plate, “No cookies for you if I have to hear about the use of my daughter’s tongue.”

“Forget her, Paige, she ain’t nothing but a sister to me,” Sloan said as Mom slid the plate back to her, and we all laughed. Then Mom slid herself back into David’s lap and embrace.

And all joking dissipated as me, Raena, and Sloan shared cheesy smiles so happy for them.

Then Mom looked to Raena, “So one particular young man has appeared in several surfing photos on Facebook. Anything to report from Cali?”

Raena turned beet red then, “Maybe.”

“He’s a hottie. I approve,” Mom said. Raena smiled so big.

And David responded with, “A surfing hottie, huh? I’m escorting you back to California.”

Yeah, we were all home, and Sloan and I didn’t mind relinquishing a night to have sex in my bed because we had Raena in my bed, we had a night with our sister, nothing can top that.

Except ... “If you fucking bitches ate all the cookies, be prepared to meet your death!”

We all sleepily alerted, I caught a glance at the clock, 3:13am, then I smiled at my sister. I was barely awake as I saw her launch toward me. Felt myself pulled into her embrace.

Cori. The stretch between days of December 23rd and 24th, but she was finally here. Home.

She was as active as ever, and I felt all of me wake and move to feel that activity closer. A secret trap door inside me opened. A door only my big sister knew the combination to. “Hey, Shadow,” and the door flew off the hinges. I was hers. Cori’s Baby Sister.

“Hey, Corrine. You smell like soccer cleats met wine.”

She laughed. “Had a bit of Mom’s wine before I came up the stairs.” For a moment she removed half of herself from me to quickly kiss Sloan and Raena, and then all back to me.

“You couldn’t take a shower before you came in here?”

“I missed you too much for all that nonsense,” she said and I couldn’t help smiling so big.

“You’re really only staying for three days?” Raena asked in her sweet stay with us way.

“Olympics are only a few months away. They have us training every free minute. They barely wanted to give us a Christmas break at all, but one of the girls said something like Human Resources and Religious Holiday, and they rolled over for three days off.”

We laughed then I said, “We’re so happy for you, Cori. This is a dream come true.”

“Only if you’ll be in London with me.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. You know that, right, Cori?” She smiled and nodded.

“Dad bought us all tickets and got us a hotel, Cori,” Sloan assured. Then. “London, Baby!”

We all had Joey from “Friends” flashbacks and a big case of the giggles, and a case of sisters.

The next morning, Mom saddled up behind her drinking coffee and planted a million kisses. “Mom, stop,” Cori protested.

“Nineteen hours of labor. I’ll kiss as long as I want,” to which Cori had no choice but sit there, he kissed and roll her eyes as I smiled a big ole cheesy smile to see my mom get to kiss her first baby. Then she made us banana pancakes, and she was restored. Mom again.

Christmas Day was beyond familiar. Four grown girls moving sleepily from my bed to the couch as Mom kissed us and brought us coffee and smiled like we were little girls again. Is there something about being home that always makes you feel that way?

Mid-afternoon I dragged Cori away, tossed her a Wildcat sweatshirt, grabbed a soccer ball. The old high school soccer field. Four feet between us. Kicking the ball back and forth.

“Tell me a poem.”

“Two roads diverged in the woods. I took the one least traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”

“Thanks, Robert Frost, but I want a Danielle Winters original.”

She beckoned it, and it was like the poem I’d been wanting had finally emerged.

“I always wanted to be an oak, so strong nothing could break me
but I spent my life watching her be a pine, swaying with the sea
Of pain he dealt her, rising above the rapids if I called for her
At times swept away, damaged, soaked, ravished, and a blur

The second time was almost harder because I had believed
In you, in happiness, in life, but it hit again and we grieved
Until I gave you purple nail polish, and watched you sway
This time back upright, stronger than ever so you'd stay

Since then I've realized oaks aren't able to sway
They're too arrogant to bend in any way
I want to be my mom, I want to be a pine
Whose pain is only a path to the finest wine"

Cori had been bouncing the ball between her knee and head, not needing me to play as I flowed my way and she her way. And when I finished, she smiled so big, "She is pretty fucking remarkable, isn't she? And pretty fucking remarkable poem, Danielle Winters."

I smiled, "I had a shape poem assignment this semester, and I couldn't ever get it right. I turned in something, of course, and did fine on it, but that was what I couldn't grasp onto."

She released the ball, pulled me to her, "Glad to know you'll always need me, Dani."

"Always, Cori, Always." Then we lay on the field, holding hands, exchanging silent oaths.

Beside us - 3 and 4 year old us. *Please, Cori, come play with me. I saw all of her soft spots enlarge.*

Pain escalated and tightened as I fought, but soon my face couldn't hold and the torrential downpour started, streams all down my face, and subtly creeping to my throat with sound.

Sloan was too engrossed herself to notice the crying until I screamed, "Why? Why would they kill him?! Why not kill him last season in the plane crash?! Just to give us a few episodes of hope, even have him wake up and be lucid, just to kill him off!! I am done with this show!" Silence from Sloan sitting by me and the phone on conference call between us.

"I loved him. I loved Mark Sloan so much. Yes, he was a male whore, but he had a good heart, and he brought out the good in people and understood people. He loved Callie." She had definitely been one of my most fortified crushes, and well, so had Mark Sloan.

My sobs continued, ramped up in momentum until my poor girlfriend looked petrified. Then the only voice that really could have pierced into me then, "Shadow?" a part of me started to untangle and wrap my frayed edges around Cori. "I'm okay, Dani. I'm okay."

Cori never made it to The Olympics. In May she was invited to an All-American Invitational. All of the best collegiate soccer players were invited, and this was a huge honor. We all flew out to Chicago to see her, and with it being only three days we were going instead of the month she was away for Winter Break, Raena's boyfriend, Caleb, had felt capable of leaving his food truck in the hands of his partner and their employees, so we finally got to meet him.

He was absolutely perfect for Raena, and you could tell he was completely in love with her. Still David offered him a fair amount of

contention until Mom finally laid down the law. Then David was almost pleasant to Caleb, and we enjoyed a fun vacation of all of us.

Until. A defender swept her leg as she had possession of the ball, she fell, and her head crashed so hard onto the knee of the defender, her neck snapped back so quickly then her head bounced like a basketball on the turf and she lay motionless, almost looking lifeless.

My soul literally yanked itself out of my body and dragged the fragments of the things people call life – bones, skin, organs – to the field. I had never been much of an athlete, but I pelted down the bleachers and ran so fast to Cori that Usain Bolt couldn't have beat me there. "Cori! CORI!!" I yelled louder at her hoping to pierce into her, get her to look at me. Please!

A force so broad and muscular yanked me up as I started fighting to get back to her. "Let the medical team help her!"

A complete stranger, but I turned into his broad strength and wept, and he held me.

Mom made it to us then took me from the stranger as we watched them forcefully open Cori's eyes and shine a light in there. She had a pulse and breath had started again, but she was still unresponsive. "We're going to air lift her," we heard one of the medics say. The moment felt like it was happening in slow motion and too rapidly all at once. *My sister. Cori, come back.*

David drove me and Mom to the hospital as we clung to each other in the back of the SUV rental. Sloan, Raena, and Caleb rode with us, of course, but it felt there was me and Mom.

She was in surgery when we got to the hospital. Some people gave us updates, but it was seriously four hours before we saw her surgeon. “She’s stable. We had to drill because of the pressure on her brain was too much, but she pulled through that. Once we relieved the pressure, our biggest worry was behind us. Her neck isn’t broken, but most of the tendons and ligaments in her neck are damaged so she’ll be in a lot of pain and we need to restrict movement until those can heal. She’s in recovery now, but her brain is still healing itself. She may not regain consciousness for a while, and when we think it is safe, we’ll have to do another surgery to bind the gap in her skull, although now we have to closely monitor the pressure and bleeding. I know this is a lot of information, but she’s stable and healing.”

Mom took a deep breath, put her hand on the crook of his arm that had been so graciously on her arm as he gave the news about Cori, and said, “Thank you, Doctor, for saving my girl.”

He smiled, “She seems like a fighter.”

That made Mom smile. “Yeah, a real stubborn fighter.”

He smiled, “Then let that fighting nature serve her here. It’ll be a journey, but she’ll heal.”

We sat in the waiting room for a long time unsure of what to do. Unsure of if we were even human anymore with the hole left by Cori and not getting to see her yet. He could tell me she was stable all day, but until I saw her, it wouldn’t be real to me. She wasn’t Cori until then.

“You guys should go back to the hotel,” emerged from Mom, like she was too unsorted to say the words, but reason forced those

out of her anyway. “I can’t. If something ... if she needs me ... if there’s any news ... I need to be here, David.” He nodded.

“I can’t leave either,” forced out of me. “I’m staying with Mom, but you guys should ...”

“Baby, I can stay with you,” Sloan said so sweetly.

“It’s okay. We’ll call if anything changes. You guys get some rest.” We told them goodbye.

Mom anchored back into the chair as soon as they were gone. Her breaths were so deep. Her will power to make Cori wake up seemed even deeper. I took her hand. Praying silently.

At some point we must have fallen asleep together, holding hands, and our heads together. We were jerked out of sleep by him. “Paige, God, I’m glad I finally found you. Is she okay?”

Mom looked like she was caught between sleep and awake and was now living a nightmare. She removed his hands from her shoulders. She sat up stiff as a board. “What are you doing here?”

“I was watching the game on TV. I didn’t know what to do but to get a flight and come.”

Mom put her hand on her face. Put her elbows on her knees and sank her face into her hands. “Can you just get a flight and go back? I promise to update you through text messages.”

“Paige, tell me what is going on. Is my little girl okay?”

“Your little girl?” She sat up then. “I will murder you if you ever say that again. She is my little girl, and mine alone. She used to

wait for you to come to her games. I was the one holding her when she was wracked with tears that you didn't come. Cori crying like that. And it takes something this drastic for you to come to see her? You're a worthless shit."

He moved back away from her. Sat in the chairs that were perpendicular to us. Silence.

"I know, Paige. Believe me, I know I'm a worthless shit. I berate myself plenty. All I do lately is wallow in my guilt. I'd give anything to change what I did. Take out what an amazing wife you were and what a fucking asshole I was to you, there's no excuse for the way I walked out on my daughters. I couldn't see you anymore, Paige. Every time I saw you at one of her games, I felt like an ass the way I hurt you when I knew you were the best thing that had ever come into my miserable life. Every time you dropped them at my house, I was scared I was going to take you in front of the new wife. I never told you how much I loved you, and even if I said it at times, actions speak louder than words so you never knew that you were the love of my life. I wasn't trapped. I loved our life. I loved everything with the girls when they were young. I loved coming home to you and dancing in the kitchen while you made dinner, and this one moment every day it was me and you and our love."

"That's the end of memory lane, Vree."

He looked at her sitting there so strong and not dented at all by any of his sentiment. "Paige, I just wanted ..."

"I don't care, Vree. I no longer care about anything you want. The only wants that are valid to me anymore are from my four daughters and my husband. Do you fucking hear me?"

He nodded.

“She’s stable. They had to drill into her brain to relieve the pressure of the bleeding, but she is stable now. She’ll be unconscious for a while as her brain heals. When she wakes, I will tell her you deemed to appear, and if she wants you to come back, then you can then, but unless she wants you here, I want you to leave, now, Vree. We’ve been just fine without you for years and years that I was raising these girls and then me and David were raising them. You are not a part of our family anymore, and all I want is for me and Dani to be able to cope.”

He just sat there.

“Dad, please. This is hard enough on Mom. Don’t make it harder on her. Leave, please.”

“Yeah. Okay. I’m going to get a hotel here. I’ll get a flight back tomorrow. Will you please text me updates, Paige? I just want to know she’s okay.”

“Fine, Vree. I will text you updates.”

“Thank you. I’ll go take care of the medical bills. You’ll never see those.”

“So glad you can be a father in some respects for my daughters.”

He looked so ashamed as he turned away then said, “Bye, Dani.” I didn’t have it in me to respond to him as Mom and I watched his back get further and further away from us.

“Mom?” when we couldn’t see him anymore.

“That never happened, Dani. He wasn’t here, and we aren’t to speak about it.”

“Are you telling Cori that he came to see her?”

“Let me get my daughter conscious and then I’ll decide. We have no idea what we will be dealing with when she wakes up. Brain injuries are not predictable, Dani.”

“I know, Mom. How did you feel with him saying all those things to you?”

She took my hand. A tear slipped slowly down her face. “I used to dream and pray so hard to hear all of that from him. I just needed to know I didn’t make it up, who we were in the beginning and how much I loved him, I needed to know it was reciprocated, he loved me too. But now I am so removed from that woman who loved him, who made a family with him. There wasn’t a part of me happy to hear all of that now. Especially in that I’m only hearing it after his life has completely fallen apart. The whole time as he was saying all of that, this woman in me was growing more and more aggravated, more wanting him to shut the fuck up and go away, and more wanted to be in David’s arms. I wanted to be in my real marriage.”

“David hasn’t always ...”

“No, he hasn’t, and I haven’t always either. I had my flaws as David’s wife, but for the marriage we have now, I’d go through every bit of it again. I never could have felt that with Vree, except for coming out with you and Cori, I never could have felt it was worth it.”

I smiled at her. “That’s quite poetic, Mom, and speaks volumes about you and David.”

“He offered to pay your tuition so Vree wasn’t a part of our lives anymore.”

“Mom, you didn’t tell me that. I can’t even, he already has two tuitions he’s carrying.”

“It’s why I wouldn’t let him, but it was a moment I felt he was the father of my girls.”

“I know Sloan and Raena feel that way about you too, that you’re a mother to them.”

“I’m honored to hear that, but there’s a part of me that understands McKenzie better than I understand your dad. I mean I’ll never understand what she did to Sloan, but she’s sick. She’s really really mentally ill. What the fuck is Vree’s excuse for the pain and rejection I had to see in Cori’s eyes? How she was after your graduation. He didn’t even speak to her, but he showed up when she’s hurt. Physical hurt can heal, but he damaged my baby’s soul. She’s never going to trust a man, Dani. She’s never going to trust herself. My baby will never know love, never know being in love. She’s twenty years old and still that pain in her eyes.”

In the two weeks we waited for her to open her eyes, I imagine Mom would have given the world to see that pain in her eyes, to see anything in her eyes. Her face had been completely a cornucopia of colors: black, red, blue, and purple when we did finally get to see her. She had to stay in a neck brace, even though she didn’t look like she could move. There was a bandage on her head and I knew they had

shaved some of her hair, but there was something about the rest of her hair there, around her face, that there was a hint of Cori with us.

When her accident happened, we were only a week out from exams. My professors had been very understanding and allowed me to do all the work online and even emailed my exams to me. I purchased eBooks of textbooks I'd already paid a fortune for, but I was grateful to get to stay with Mom and finish out my freshmen year. Mom had been in contact with all of Cori's professors and they were giving her incompletes and letting her make up the last couple of weeks and exams whenever she was able. We were glad of that, especially as we were sure Cori's scholarship wouldn't hold up anymore. If she'd ever play again. Everything was unsure.

Unsure of everything was all we felt those two weeks. Mom pacing and trying to read a few books while I did all of my assignments, but she couldn't really focus. She read several lines over and over again until she just gave up and held Cori's hand and read a soccer magazine to Cori, doing something/anything for Cori seemed all that was holding Mom together then.

Of course we were on the phone with David, Sloan, and Raena daily, but mostly there wasn't much news to report. Then it happened one day, "Shadow," and I jerked my head up to see her smiling at me. "I guess I went to heaven because there's my angel."

My book fell as I rose to get to her. Took her hand so scared to hug her and hurt her. "Cori." I couldn't help myself. I leaned in and kissed her cheek which made her smile.

"Did I get hit by a Mack truck?"

“Sort of. A soccer player, her knee, then your head bounced on the turf.”

“Ouch,” she joked as we both laughed.

“Um yeah, ouch, that was a couple of weeks ago.”

“And you’ve just been here watching Sleeping Beauty?”

I smiled. Touched her cheek, “Definitely the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I second that,” was said behind me. I turned. There was Mom smiling, watching her babies. Then I moved back as she swooped as close as she could to Cori. “I’ve missed you, Baby.”

Cori smiled, beamed actually, looked at the coffee cup in Mom’s hand. “Is that for me?”

Mom laughed. “If your doctor says you can have it, it definitely can be yours, Baby.” Then Mom leaned in and kissed her lips and dared her to object. “Don’t scare me like that again.”

Cori smiled, “I’ll try my best.” Then she belonged to the doctors instead of us for a while.

Three weeks later she got to go home with us. David drove up to get us because Cori couldn’t fly yet. We spent the summer helping Cori with her physical therapy. Each day was progress.

Cori didn’t want Dad coming back to the hospital. I’d been a bit surprised when Mom even told her that he came, but she kind of did have a right to know and make her own decisions.

Toward the end of the summer, she did ask us all to leave and texted him that he could come over. When we returned, she didn't tell us much except that he was still alive.

When fall semester started, I hated leaving, but Cori was much stronger, so I went back with Sloan and slowly we got our life back while Cori's seemed suspended in time living with Mom.

With her living with Mom, Mom had been watching "Grey's" with her and joined in on our conference calls, and honestly she'd effortlessly joined our pact like she'd always belonged.

"She really is okay, Dani. She was mean as fucking hell to me today so there's hope we'll get our surly full of angst and fight Cori back soon. Don't be crying over her, but them killing off someone as hot as Mark Sloan, well, you can cry about that," Mom said and we all laughed.

Soon after our conference call ended, my phone rang. It was Cori, and I smiled seeing her face pop up. I walked into the hallway so we could talk privately. "Hey, Shadow. Need to talk?"

"I was so scared, Cori, scared you'd die, then scared you'd never wake up. Then you know I do really love Mark Sloan, but it was like transference, when I allowed a few tears for him then the flood I'd been holding back about you released and wouldn't/couldn't stop."

"Transference, someone paid attention in psychology class." I couldn't help but laugh at her. "Oh, there are those giggles from My Dani." Then. "I can only imagine how scary it was for you and Mom, but, Dani, I'm getting stronger every day. I may never play soccer

again, but I'll figure out a different path because I seriously cannot live with my mother forever."

"Why were you so mean to her today?"

"I don't have a reason. I miss soccer. I miss fucking a bunch of guys. I miss partying and college. I just was cranky as hell today about all of these transitions, and when I get frustrated with transitions, Mom has always been my very easy target to take it all out on. But she wasn't so easy today. She fought back and yelled at me and refused to let me enjoy my pity party. You've sure turned her into a not budging for one second oak tree now."

I laughed then said, "Well, good for Mom."

"Yeah, it pissed me off, but I was proud of her. She even made me look at some options for online classes that I can start in January, and I had to admit she knew what I needed."

"That sounds like Mom. The online classes sound good for you. Empowering. A way you're still working toward your degree."

"I'll have to change my major, but I think Sports Analyst would be a lot of fun for me. And I still think in a few years I can finish my coaching and sports medicine degree, but those require a lot of in the field training that I can't do right now. Still I need to feel I'm working toward something now or I'll become kind of hopeless which is probably the worst fate."

"Hopeless seems to be the one thing most people can never overcome. I'm so proud of you, Cori."

“It’s a bit disheartening, Dani. I always thought I would be in The Olympics, The World Cup, playing for a professional team, then in my late thirties, maybe forties when my body couldn’t handle how physical soccer is, then I’d switch to putting my coaching degree to use. Feels surreal to have to make all these changes at twenty years old. Feels like I’m cheating the world and lots of little girls who could have had Cori Winters as their beast mode idol.”

“Cori Winters will always be my idol.”

“You’re such a great sister, Dani. Thank you. I needed that.”

“Thank you for calling me. I’m sorry for how I fell apart on the conference call. Sloan just looked so terrified she’d never be able to put me back together.”

Cori laughed. “She’s the best girlfriend I could have imagined for you, but she’s not your big sister. I knew you needed me.”

“Feels so selfish to need you now.”

“Don’t ever say that. Being there for you makes me feel somewhat human again.”

“I love you so much, Cori. Kick ass at physical therapy tomorrow.”

“In the bag, Shadow. I love you so much too. Goodnight, Dani.”

“Goodnight, Cori.” I hung up and walked back into my apartment. Sloan was just sitting on the couch like when I walked out, waiting for me to come back in and see which Dani she’d be dealing with. She’d been so patient with me through all of this, but I knew there had to be moments she had considered leaving me. I sat

beside her. Brought her face to mine and kissed her with everything in me. She sparked to me. Returned the passion. Timidly allowed her hands to start roaming, waiting for when I stopped her, but after a minute and I hadn't stopped her, she let the roaming take on passion too. Until. She dragged me to our bed.

Once in the summer, I had gotten her off, but only because I could see how frustrated she was, and we were home and I didn't want more trouble in our house than was already there with everything Cori was going through. She was glad to get off, but she felt it wasn't that I had risen above the stress bearing down on me and actually saw her there alone and missing me. Still I guess it was a bandage, and enough for her in the moment. But we hadn't made love since before Cori's accident, and tonight I felt relieved, finally. Finally I rose above the stress and saw her, sitting on a couch waiting for me. *I will NOT lose her* rose up in me.

And when she dragged me to OUR bed, I poured all my love for her out on her, out for us.

After we reinvigorated the height of Sloan and Dani, I fell apart on her again. Yes, again.

"Sloan, oh god, Sloan, I've missed you so much. I'm so sorry, Baby. I'm so sorry."

She put her hands on my face, rested her forehead on mine so I knew we were real again. "Don't be sorry, Baby. I've missed you too, but I knew you'd find your way back to me."

"I can't believe you're still here."

“It’s my apartment. Where else would I be?” That produced a slight Dani giggle. “I know you, Dani. I know how worried you’ve been about Cori, and even your mom taking on Cori’s healing plan full-time. Then even when we were here, you felt guilty you weren’t there.”

“I didn’t mean to leave you so neglected though, and leave myself so neglected without you. I could have drowned in you then, I’ve missed you in that way so much. Her whole life has stopped and been interrupted, and mine just went on, school, my girlfriend. Mine just ...”

“Yours should. Cori would want that for you. She had a hard time letting you do anything for her this summer. She’s probably been a little more at ease since we left because it is hard to see everyone looking at her that way and trying to help her, and honestly I don’t think Paige will help her much. She’ll force her to help herself.”

“Yeah, she said Mom wouldn’t let her enjoy her pity party today.” Sloan laughed. “She also said Mom made her look at some online classes she can start in January. It’s real progress.”

She moved her hand between my legs then swirled her finger on my clit waking me up to her. “So, um, now that Cori is progressing, you think we could make love again, maybe without the meltdown and tears this time?” I said yes by moving her finger into me and wrapping my legs around her, and best of all, banishing all thoughts out of my head except Sloan. Love.

The next day Cori called as I was cooking dinner before Sloan got home. “Guess what I did.”

“What?” I asked so excited to hear some excitement, some life in her voice.

“I kicked a soccer ball into a net. There was no goalie to block it, but it still felt a part of me come alive by kicking that into the net, by being on a field again.”

“Cori, that’s so awesome. Guess what I did.”

“What?”

“I made love to Sloan last night.”

“It’s about time, Dani. I saw the struggle between you two this summer, but I didn’t know how to fix it. I overheard Sloan crying to Raena about it one night, and my heart broke for her, for both of you. I’m so glad to know she was patient with you. That’s real love, Dani.”

“If I could wish for anything for you, it would be for you to know that real love too, Cori.”

She was silent a moment that I was sure she was going to blast me and make me wish I never uttered the word love around her or to her, but when she finally did respond, she said, “One day.”

“Who am I talking to? Put my sister back on the phone.”

Cori laughed. “Do you remember Colby Stills?”

“The guy you lost your virginity to?”

“Yes. Mom and I ran into him in the grocery store one day. He was really broken up about what happened to me. He’s been coming by the house every day, bringing flowers to me and Mom, and

sometimes bringing coffee and asking if we could hang out. Sometimes he stays for dinner and plays cards with me, Mom, and David. He's the one who took me to the soccer field today. He's coaching at the high school now; I helped out with the girls' team."

"Colby Stills is my new hero," I said as a joyful tear snuck down my face.

"Maybe mine too. It felt so good to coach today. It was like I really could see something else for myself besides playing. I mean all players think eventually they'll coach, but it isn't real, it's a backup plan when you're old and washed-up. Today didn't feel like a backup plan. Today felt like I had a purpose and it was something I was doing with Colby. It was Colby bringing out another side of me. I hurt him so badly with my compulsive need to run several men when we were teenagers, and I think he always held a little torch for me. It's only been a month, Dani, but this part of me is weakening, the part that needed to hurt men. It's happening naturally with every nice thing he does for me and Mom, even when I see him talk to David and the two of them grill steaks together for us, it's like a future is unfolding that I can see, that I want. I'm scared, Dani. I haven't even kissed him yet because I'm scared when I do, I'll be signing myself over to him forever, but I think soon I might."

"Cori Stills has a nice ring to it." Cori laughed, an actual easy accepting wanting laugh.

When I hung up with Cori, I immediately sent a text to Mom: *Soooooooo Colby Stills!!!*

Mom responded with: *It must be serious if she finally told you about it. I'm a big fan of Colby.* I sent her like a bazillion smiley faces.

Thanksgiving. I told Sloan we had to go because I really wanted to check on Cori, but really I was dying to see Cori soft, gooey, and in love. Mom had slipped me a few pictures she'd taken of them when they didn't know she was sneakily building proof of their love story.

“Fine, Dani, but you're driving the whole way there and the whole way back.” And true to my love, she stayed in the passenger's seat, head leaned over in my lap, sleeping.

Cori even looked different, like a whole new person. I was beaming to see her like that. For a minute I saddled up to Mom who put her arms around me from behind and whispered in my ear, “I think it's finally happening.” I smiled so big as she kissed my cheek.

Colby joined us for Thanksgiving lunch bringing a gorgeous fall bouquet for Mom. David handed Mom a little black box, gorgeous earrings, “Think you can outdo me, Son?”

It was clear the four of them had established a relationship, like Cori had a new foursome.

At lunch Colby told me and Sloan, “I've been in love with her since she was eleven and y'all moved in this neighborhood, but that girl is so freaking hard headed, God had to drill a hole in her head to bring her back here so she realized she was in love with me too.”

We all smiled so big, the biggest cheesiest smiles ever, until Mom said, “Tell me you weren't THAT young.”

Cori smiled, “No, fourteen.” I expected a comment from Mom, but she merely gave Cori a touch on her arm then a sweet kiss. “I thought I was big stuff landing an older man.”

“Two years isn’t that much older,” Colby defended.

“It is when you’re fourteen!” Sloan and I chorused, laughed, looked at each other, remembered Cori coming home that night. *How was it? He said he loves me. Why would he have to say a stupid thing like that? Most girls dream of that their first time. I’m not most girls.*

Life seemed like a perpetual cycle of people not getting what they wanted. Like he probably never could have fallen for one of those gushy girls who would have wanted him to say that.

After lunch David took us all out to the backyard for a soccer game. I could hardly believe all he had brought to the yard for Cori, but seeing David had given her that made me love him more, and I’m sure it had an equivalent effect on Mom who looked radiant running, kicking the ball, one time she was about to score, and David who was on the opposing team scooped her up in his arms, and the two of them kissed and we all stood mesmerized.

Driving back practically alone was worth it to see my mom and Cori so happy like that.

A couple of days after we had gotten back to Providence, I climbed in bed after taking off my makeup and brushing my teeth. Sloan pulled me to her so tightly, kissed my head, took a few minutes, but I’d felt something brewing in her since we went home, so I waited patiently. “Cori she really is a fighter. She had a severe brain trauma so much worse than what happened to me, and she’s fought so hard to get back that athlete in her even though she knows she’ll never play competitively again. I was so scared to live after what happened to me. Poor Raena before that I would ride bikes with her for hours, run in the woods and see what we could discover. I was so

adventurous and not afraid of anything, but after that I was scared all the time. I never did anything with Raena anymore, no wonder she couldn't wait to get away from me and find people who would be adventurous with her again."

It was one of those awkward moments you didn't want to inhibit someone's ability to share and where you weren't sure if you should comment or if commenting might awaken a dragon.

"It wasn't until we met you guys that Raena even got a spark of a sister again. I know you guys hated me, but I loved you and Cori. I really loved fighting with you because you didn't know for a long time, you didn't walk on eggshells around me like Raena and Dad did. You two had your own problems you were real happy to take out on me. Cori's fighting attitude, I don't know if she even knows that it pretty much gave me my life back, and I'm so grateful to see it has given her hers back in a way too. I loved seeing her play soccer on Thanksgiving. It was bittersweet because it wasn't near the player she used to be, but she didn't even care to keep score or really be overly competitive like she used to be. She just wanted her family."

"Cori has changed a lot, and I really think most of that is because of Mom. When Dad cheated on her, Cori would barely have anything to do with Mom, unless she was crying her eyes out about Dad not coming to her games. But she saw Mom as weak, and that always hurt Mom. I think she never knew how to make that up to Cori, the woman she wasn't capable of being then. Mom is so strong now, and she hasn't allowed Cori to be weak during this time. She hasn't allowed her not to do her physical therapy, she even pushed Cori harder. She never allowed Cori to have a pity party; I think Cori really needed that. She truly needed Mom's strength, and it has been

beautiful to watch them come full circle. I think even her letting Colby in has been from seeing and being completely absorbed by how strong Mom is now, like she finally knows that someone can just barely survive a broken heart, but still emerge so strong, loving, resilient. I think Mom is her best friend. And the amazing part is that I don't even feel left out. I think they were destined to meet again."

Sloan laughed, "Like Paige and Dad were. Their love story is so amazing. I was so mesmerized watching them kiss when we played soccer. I thought I would never say this after how mad I was at him when he cheated on her, but I'm so grateful for the man she's made him into. I know it was hard as hell on her, but he's truly an incredible man now."

"Yes, he is, Sloan. I'm so glad you can see that. I thought you would hate him forever."

"If I had been Cori, the first thing I would have done when I woke up was hunt down that defender and kill her and all of her family, but Cori never had a thought like that. It made me think about what a vengeful person I am. I keep myself in an arctic prison away from Dad when he would have always loved me if I had let him. I kind of had a crazy thought while we were home for Thanksgiving. I thought we should move there when you graduate."

"Why is that a crazy thought?"

"Because we hate that town."

"But we love our family who is there, and we deserve a chance for our parents to be our best friends. There also has my favorite hiking spot and lots of beautiful bike trails you could explore again."

Sloan smiled at me. “Who cares where you paint and I write, if we get to once in our lives enjoy stable parents and a very happy family.”

“Thank you for saying that, Dani. I was scared to tell you. Scared you’d be so mad at me.”

“I can’t ever remember being mad at you. I’m sorry you can’t say the same about me.”

“I wasn’t mad at you, Baby. I missed you and us, that’s a fact, but I knew how worried you were about Cori. If Raena ever wipes out on that dumb surfboard, I’m dragging her back here by her hair and she’s never allowed out of my sight again,” I laughed, “so believe me, I understood, and technically Cori is my sister too. I was just as worried as you were.”

“I love you so much, Sloan.” She turned quite a loving smile to me, rewarded me with a kiss.

“So I’ve kind of been dying to ask you something, it’s just me being nosy honestly, but I’m kind of dying to know what Cori said to Vree that day she invited him over.”

“I don’t technically know, so you never heard this. Promise me on “Grey’s Anatomy”.”

“I promise, Baby.”

“Cori would never tell me either so I kind of snooped in Mom’s phone. She sent Dad a text that Cori wouldn’t tell her what they talked about and she asked if he would tell her. He responded with: *Cori told me if I ever come anywhere near you or Dani again, she’ll cut off my balls and shove those down my throat. I get the picture, Paige, and*

I'm out of it. Mom seriously took like 12 minutes to respond with: Do I need to take care of Dani's tuition? Dad responded with: No, I promise, Paige, I'll always pay it. Her tuition and Cori's medical bills are the only decent things I've ever given to them, but I'm so grateful they always had such a good mom to guide them to be amazing women. You've done a great job with them, Paige. Mom took another 12 minutes to respond with: I'll always be grateful you gave me them. Goodbye, Vree. He didn't respond back."

"Whoa, those were some seriously intense text messages!" Then. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I mean I'd really love to talk to Mom about how she feels about those, but I can't. I'm not surprised that Cori told him that though. She didn't seem excited at all when Mom told her that he came to see her. She seemed really angry that he put Mom in that position."

"That's what I don't understand about manipulative people. Like he thought that one tiny little effort was going to make Paige swoon, I bet he didn't even do it for Cori."

"I witnessed it, believe me, I've had those same thoughts about his motivation. I really wondered if he thought he'd be some heroic knight swooping in to save Mom when she'd surely be in shambles about her little girl. I mean if I was a narcissistic asshole, I'd probably think that was the perfect moment to prey on a damsel, when her daughter was hurting."

"Narcissistic asshole, sometimes I think you enjoy your psychology classes more than your English classes."

I laughed. “Sometimes I do. It’s really fascinating to me, and probably will give me a lot more to be able to put into my characters at some point. I’ve thought about a minor in it.”

“Wow, Dani, that would be so cool, and so perfect for you, the way you see people’s pain.”

“These psychology classes are actually helping me balance that. I mean how tormented I’ve always been seeing people’s pain and thinking I should help them. You can’t really help anyone, and these classes are helping me balance that. It is good for me to see people’s pain, and maybe pour all of that into characters that I really can help, but not feel guilty about anyone else I didn’t save. I’ve learned everyone is on his/her own journey, and their pain is really valid, but also theirs, not mine; except for my sisters, now that’s a horse of a different color altogether.” Sloan laughed. I pulled her so close to me. “God, I’ve missed this. How we always talked out everything. How we share. How it enhances the woman I am.”

“I’ve missed it too, Baby, more than even the making love, I missed having the intimate crevices of you and us figuring out the world together.”

“So you’re saying you don’t want the making love anymore?”

“In your psychology classes have you learned a word for antagonistic girlfriends?”

“Vixen.” I said so seriously, not missing a beat, and she busted out laughing. My Sloan.

For Spring Break, it was Raena's time. Time for us to go be a part of her life. David flew us all out for the ten days, and we enjoyed quite an awesome California Vacation. Raena tried to teach us how to surf, and Mom did the best out of all of us, but none of us really took to it. However, I absolutely loved watching Raena in her element and fell more in love with Caleb. Of course we were more in love with him with how genuine he was telling Raena to have a good time as we all took off touring California. We never wanted to leave Big Sur, loved San Francisco, and Mom was not going to California without touring vineyards in Napa Valley.

It was hard to tell Raena goodbye, but she promised to come visit a week in the summer.

Gone were the days that she completely belonged to us anymore, so we sounded excited about the week she was offering, despite how badly we wanted her there the whole summer.

David almost never let her go. "Baby, we have a flight to catch and traffic to navigate," Mom reminded him. He finally let go of her. Then a similar experience with Sloan at the airport. Of course Mom seemed to have a similar malfunction with me at the airport.

"Mom, it's not that long until the summer where you'll have me for three months. You'll totally get sick of me."

She kissed my cheek, "Never, My Love." But she let go, hugged Sloan while I hugged Cori and Colby. We watched them walk away as our flight wasn't for another hour.

I went to get us some sodas and when I returned Sloan was deep in thought. As soon as I sat beside her she said, “Was Colby that cute in high school?”

“Why? Wondering if you missed your shot?”

She giggled, took her soda, rested her forehead on mine, “No. You’re the only shot I ever wanted.” I smiled, too big revealing how transparent she made me. “Just nice realizing what Cori has brought out in him, as much as I love everything he’s brought out in her.”

“Yeah.” I took a swig of my soda and summoned my courage. “Speaking of bringing things out in people, I’ve kind of been wanting to talk to you about something.”

“Anything, Baby.”

“I’m not sure if it is an airport conversation.”

“Well, we have an hour to kill, and you opened the can of worms, so shoot.”

“Can you use any more metaphors?” Sloan laughed. Then I finally got it out. “I want us to try out a dildo.”

“Oh,” and then she just sat there, making my nerves twitch with her nonresponse. “Um, yeah, like for you, sure. I’ve never wanted more penetration than your fingers.”

I noticed a woman who looked in her forties doing her best job of inconspicuous eavesdropping, but well, what the hell did it matter if she heard? We’d never see her again after today. “Well, how would you feel wearing one?”

“I don’t guess I will know until we try, Baby, but it’s something my woman desires, so I’m more than happy to try.” I smiled at her. “We kind of fell in love as kids. We’re each other’s first, and believe me that is something I treasure wholeheartedly, but maybe the best way for us to avoid Lesbian Death Bed is if we can be with several people while still only being with one.” I gave her an odd look. “Fantasies and role play. I want all of your fantasies.”

I smiled so big and noticed our eavesdropper smile too. So I turned to her. “Any advice?”

“Um,” she looked so caught out, but she gained her composure quickly. “I wish my first girlfriend had said something like that to me. I think it is a great plan to avoid Lesbian Death Bed because that is one lonely occupied bed to sleep in. You two seem to really love each other, and I’m glad with how young you are that you’re still able to talk so openly together.”

“Do you currently have a girlfriend or wife?”

“No. I’m so burnt out, I quite honestly can tell you that I fucking hate lesbians.”

Sloan and I both laughed. Then Sloan asked, “How do we keep from getting to that point?”

“You don’t get too involved with other lesbians. Most of them want to hang out constantly, define themselves solely by being gay, and most like trying to steal girlfriend trophies.”

“Oh, well, no wonder you fucking hate lesbians.” She laughed. I extended my hand to her, “I’m Dani, and this is Sloan.”

She shook both of our hands saying, “I’m Lavina. It’s a pleasure to meet two lesbians who seem so normal. And your plan to be with several people but only with one is amazing.”

We both smiled, and I asked, “What do you do, Lavina?”

“I’m a writer.”

“Oh, me too, I mean I want to be. I’m in school at Brown.”

“That was my first choice too, Dani. I’m so thrilled for you to have such an opportunity.”

“Any advice for a budding authoress?”

Lavina smiled at the use of my word authoress, and I loved watching the smile meet her exotic green eyes with these wild yellow flecks I’d never seen on anyone before. “Trust yourself and trust your characters. Allow all of them, even what terrifies you about them, but allowing all of them is the gateway to them trusting you. When your characters trust you, full novels will pour through you like water in a matter of months, sometimes weeks.” A flight was called interrupting her. I wanted to pick her brain more about being a writer and being a lesbian, but she said, “Well, that’s my flight. It was ... quite refreshing to meet both of you. Best of luck, Dani, at Brown and with writing.” She turned, grabbed her purse and laptop bag. Then she turned back. “I’ve never been fortunate to have anyone, male or female, who put me first or understood me the way you two seem to understand each other. I know you two are young, but I promise you it’s very rare. Hold onto each other always.”

After she walked away, Sloan said, “Everyday Angels.”

I smiled at her. “That was kind of surreal.”

“Very, and beyond awesome. I really liked how authentic she was with us.”

“Yeah. I’m totally going to see if I can find her books.”

“Probably won’t be too hard. How many La-Vine-As could there be?” Sloan said as she exaggerated every syllable of her name. “Her name is as exotic as she is.”

“Who’s getting the older woman crush now?”

“What can I say,” she said leaning into me, “Hot writers do it for me.” My transparency again. Man, do I love that woman.

“How was it?” After our first attempt with the dildo.

“I didn’t expect it to hurt.”

“Well, of course it hurt a little. My fingers are all you’ve had, this was like you lost your virginity in all reality.”

“Hmm, I lost it to you twice.”

She pulled me a little, slapped my ass, “Turn it over and you can lose it to me three times.”

I busted out laughing then, “Hell no. Exit door only.”

Sloan busted out laughing. Then. “So you don’t want to try it again?”

“I never said that.” She smiled. “And on your part, how was it?”

“I was so nervous about hurting you and pleasuring you, I didn’t really think about how I liked it.”

“Then I guess we have enough reason to try again. You think this is normal?”

She laughed. “Do you remember the girls we went to high school with? They all lost it by fifteen, so no, this isn’t normal, but trusting one person and trying out new things together, it shouldn’t be normal. It should be special, even if every try isn’t stellar, we tried together.”

And 2nd try was better, no pain, and more fun.

And 3rd time our timidity vacated premises, and yes, it fucking was downright stellar.

Then I thought about what she said about sharing my fantasies with her. One day while she was at work, I wrote one out then left it on the toilet with the lid down for when she got home. She was in the bathroom for quite a while that night, but she couldn't show recognition that night. That wouldn't be tantalizing. By the time she actually actualized my fantasy, I was so caught off guard, and that only enhanced the triggers it did set off in me.

After we were expelled, she said, "Damn, you can contribute to our finances by writing erotica, that was so smokin' hot, Baby. You could make a fortune writing that." My mood dropped instantly. "No. Sorry. You never have to contribute to our finances."

"No, I want to contribute to our finances, but not like that. It was so good because it was a part of me I was sharing with you, and you're the only one I want to share that with."

Sloan smiled so big. "If it is even possible, I just fell even more in love with you."

I dropped her off at RISD one day on my way to Brown, and somehow as she kissed me goodbye she left a book on the passenger's seat that I didn't see immediately in my watching her walk into the building, watching every second I got an opportunity, but then, there it was. A very graphic graphic novel revealing one of her fantasies to me. The artwork was so stunning. The fantasy was making me so horny just seeing her art and her words for the characters. I seriously drove back to the apartment, took care of my horny self, then drove to Brown and ran the fuck into class, a little late, everyone looking at me, but it was worth it.

I waited a week, read it several times to make sure I got it right, had to pleasure myself every single time I read it. Then. She came in. I was behind the door, and I grabbed her by the hair as I slammed the door shut then slammed her against it, pressing my all leathered up self against her and released my sexiest Kathleen Turner voice. “I don’t take kindly to being kept waiting.” I slapped the riding crop against the door right by her ear. “Time for you to pay.”

I’m almost certain she came right then, but I wasn’t finished. I drug her to the bed and threw her on it like she was a ragdoll, slapped the riding crop down beside her. “Undress for me.” She laid there. I slapped the riding crop again, harder, screaming, “Now, Bitch!”

And again I was sure a miniature orgasm escaped from her before she did as she was told.

I could get addicted to power like this. And addicted to the way she couldn’t stop cuming.

Grabbed me so hard, as I easily shifted back to Dani holding my baby. “I’ve got you, Baby.”

She kept pouring out, almost to the point of weeping, and clinging to me. “I love you,” she somehow managed to release through her screams and clinging, even felt a fingernail puncture my skin a little, but it was worth it to watch her orgasm and orgasm and roll back in aftershock after aftershock and know all of it was my victory, was all of her she gave to me.

After almost forever of her expelling then her recovering, I finally ventured, “Please tell me he did not see you printing out that graphic novel.”

She pulled up, made sure we were eye level, put her hand on my face. “Of course not, My Love, that part of me I only want to share with you.”

I smiled. “If it is even possible, I just fell even more in love with you.”

Then right when we reached the height of our exploration, wouldn't you know it was time to go home for summer and have to figure out how to be quiet at night. David had asked Sloan to paint murals in his office so she was usually gone with him before I woke up. It was summer time, and I had no classes making me get out of bed, I was going to fucking sleep.

I stumbled down the stairs to find Cori ready to head to the soccer field. She and Colby were getting paid a really good summer wage to do soccer camps for little kids because soccer was like a law now for little kids, but Cori loved it, and I loved seeing her have a purpose again.

“Hey, Sleepy Little Shadow,” as she kissed me. I fell into her for a minute, and she allowed a minute, but then pulled me off of her, “Gotta get to work. Mom has coffee for you.” Kiss.

She left me and I stumbled into the kitchen where I was greeted with, “Damn, we heard you all night, no wonder you're so tired.”

“Um,” I was so embarrassed. “We were trying to be quiet. I'm sorry, Mom.”

She came over and kissed me, pulled me into a hug, “So you guys are in the trying out new things phase?”

“Yeah.”

“Never apologize then. Enjoy and revel, but maybe learn to be a little quieter.”

I laughed. She pulled away. Made me some coffee. Made her some coffee too, sat beside me. “Is it only a phase?” I asked, not sure I wanted an answer.

“It is, but it is one that will come around several times in a relationship.” That made me smile. I guess that’s all any relationship can hope for, that the spark comes back around again and again.

The doorbell rang. There was only me and Mom in the house as everyone was at work. I was reading on the couch, and Mom was in the kitchen preparing for dinner. “I got it, Mom,” I called then went to the door to find a young girl about eleven or so. “Can I help you?”

“Um, hi, Dani.”

I kept looking at her. “Do I know you?”

“I’m Alex.” I still kept looking at her quizzically. “Winters. Alex Winters.”

“Um, whoa, I haven’t seen you since you were like ...”

“Five. I have a picture of me and my big sisters that’s on my desk. I look at it when I’m doing homework. I’ve just always been curious about you and Cori, and today I finally got up the courage to come over here.” I looked past her and saw a bike in the driveway.

I heard Mom walking up behind me. “Who is it, Dani?” Then she was at the door.

“Oh, hello, Mrs. Mercado. It’s nice to see you again. Dani looks just like you.”

Mom smiled at her, “Hello, Alex. Nice to see you as well.”

I looked at Mom awkwardly. “You two know each other?”

“I recently ran into Alex and Lindsay; Lindsay introduced us.”

“That had to be an awkward run-in.”

“Immensely,” Mom assured. *Life in a small town*, I thought.

“Mom never intended for it to be awkward for you, Mrs. Mercado,” Alex said.

“None of it is your mother’s fault, and certainly not yours either, Honey.” Mom moved back saying, “I just pulled some cookies out of the oven, won’t you come in and share those with Dani?” Alex smiled so big to be welcomed in our home. I was glad Mom was being a gracious host, but it was awkward, so freakin’ awkward, watching her be so kind to my ... little sister? I’ve never even really thought of her that way. In my jealousy of how much Dad doted on her and not us, I probably haven’t thought of her at all, like I willfully banished her out of existence in my mind. But here she was, sitting in my kitchen, eating my mother’s cookies.

“These are so delicious, Mrs. Mercado; Mom barely lets me eat sweets, so I appreciate this.”

Mom smiled at her. Handed her a glass of milk, and I knew what she was seeing. How didn't I recognize her immediately? There was a miniature Cori sitting there, although Cori had never been so refined and well-mannered, but she looked like a female Dad and so did Alex.

“How are you and your mother doing, Honey?” Mom asked.

“I miss my house. I miss my bedroom, and yeah, I have it every other weekend, but it's not the same. However, Mom seems to really enjoy this New Self-Empowerment Lindsay that she's become. I'm sort of happy for her, but I'm a little scared too. It's like I don't know what mom I'll get from one day to the next, and I really wish she'd stop bashing Dad so much. I mean he cheated on her, and I know it hurts her, but he's still my dad, you know?”

Mom sat beside her. “Yes, I do know. It must be quite confusing all the changes you've been through recently. It was hard to watch Cori and Dani when we went through these changes.”

Alex leaned into Mom. “He says you guys won't have anything to do with him, so it's nice how you're listening to me, Mrs. Mercado. He swore he wouldn't make the same mistakes with me and lose three daughters. He makes it a point to come to all my soccer games.”

I thought Mom would tell her to get out then, but she said, “Learning from one's mistakes is what the journey of life is all about, and I hope for Vree that he can have a good relationship with you.”

“Honestly, lately, I've had a better relationship with him than with Mom because he actually listens to me, and makes our time

together real quality time, you know? Um, anyway, is Cori doing okay? I was watching the game with him. It scared me so much.”

“She’s doing much better. She’ll never play competitively again, but she’s coaching little league soccer here and coaching the girls’ team for the high school during the school year.”

Alex smiled saying, “She’ll be coaching me in two years then. I can’t wait for high school.”

I remembered those middle school days when you couldn’t wait for high school - you’d be so mature and understand everything, then you get there, and it’s completely different chaos.

“Yeah, middle school kind of sucks ass, doesn’t it?” I said finally entering the conversation.

Alex laughed at my profanity then said, “Seriously sucks ass.” Then looked at Mom like she was scared she would scold her, but Mom just smiled at her.

“So, besides soccer what are your interests?” I asked, I mean she was here, I might as well take a bit of interest in Dad’s daughter, oh what the hell, in my little sister.

“Mom keeps me really occupied with cello lessons, I’m not really that great because I’m more athletically inclined, but she has this firm belief in music lessons will help me get some perfect score on some test for college. Everything is about college. My grades. My classes. College seems a million years away, but to her, it’s so immediate for me to prepare.”

I had been naturally gifted with my intelligence, but there'd never been any pressure from my mom about my grades, only pressure from myself. I looked at my mother so appreciatively then.

"I'm sorry. You asked about my interests, not what my mother forces me to do. My interests are soccer, soccer, Abby Wambach and Alex Morgan, and soccer, and soccer, in that order."

I had to laugh. She was a really funny kid. "Not Hope Solo?" I asked tossing in my soccer knowledge.

"She's a great goalie, but she's a hot head. She's been arrested for domestic violence. I don't really think she's a good role model."

"That's kind of really awesome that you can see that at your age, Alex," I commended.

She smiled at me, she liked having my approval, of course I would have always walked on burnt coals to have Cori's approval. I felt a bit saddened for her, always knowing us, but not knowing us.

"What are your interests, Ms. Brown University, my mom would totally approve of you."

I laughed. "I like to write. I read a lot. I like to hike, and I like spending time with my girlfriend."

She smiled that middle school smile, the trying to understand sex and sexuality then how uniquely awkward it was at that time then said, "Oh, you have a girlfriend. That's cool."

I smiled at her. "I think so." And she gave me a smile like we had shared a moment.

“Thank you for the cookies and hospitality, Mrs. Mercado. I need to get back. I only told my mom I was going for a bike ride, I could never tell her I was trying to meet my sisters.”

“We’re glad you came by, Alex. Dani is here all summer, and we have a nice pool maybe you would like to enjoy one day if you can sneak away again,” Mom said to her so sweetly.

She looked so vulnerable asking, “Would that be okay with you, Dani?”

Some weird be a human to her switch in me controlled a smile on my face and my mouth to make me say, “Yeah, Alex, it would be an honor to have some more time with you.”

That girl seriously smiled like she had won the lottery. And smiled even bigger when I hugged her goodbye in our driveway. Then we watched her pedal away. We went back inside. “I can’t believe how welcoming you were to her.”

“Why? What kind of monster do you think I am? She’s really going through a rough time with her parents and she just wants to know her sisters.”

“I’ve never really thought of her that way.”

“I know you haven’t, but she is, Dani. She is your sister, and she needs you now. She’s older now. She’s putting pieces together of everything that happened, and I’m sure she thought if anyone would understand having divorced parents, that maybe it would be her sisters.”

An hour later Sloan returned from working on the murals at David's office. "Seriously? She just showed up here?" She asked as we were lying by the pool with drinks Mom made us. "Ohmygod, like Meredith and Lexi, that little half-sister even forced herself onto your turf just like Lexi did to Meredith." We busted out laughing.

Mom asked, "Is there anything that you can't related back to "Grey's Anatomy"?"

"Nope. Nothing," Sloan and I chorused then Sloan, ""Grey's" is life, Paige." Mom chuckled, took a sip of her drink. Then Sloan turned to me, "So, um, are you okay? What did you think?"

"It was really awkward at first, but I feel so sorry for her. I mean when I went through it, I had Cori, I was never alone. She kind of really has no one, and she did seem lonely."

"So, Dani has a little sister now. You gonna like braid her hair and have tea parties?"

I laughed, "She's not little little. She's in middle school."

"Are you going to tell Cori she came by?"

"No. She's into soccer. I'm going to wait and let Cori be shocked as fuck when she sees Alex's name on her team roster one day."

Sloan and Mom laughed. "And people say Cori is the mean sister." Sloan said with a smirk.

I laughed then, "Mom, thoughts on telling Cori?"

"I'm enjoying seeing My Cori happy, carefree, and in love. I'm not sure it would be the best news for Cori, or even sure she wouldn't

break that little girl's heart more than she's already had it broken. I think it's best not to tell Cori right now. Alex may not return."

"She was so excited when you invited her back, Mom. I'm sure she will return. I don't want to feel like I'm keeping something from Cori, but well, for now, it can stay just between us."

"Hmm, keeping secrets for my woman. I like it," Sloan said as me and Mom laughed at her.

Then Mom changed the subject, "David is so excited to have you and your talents at his office every day. Every night when we go to bed, he talks endlessly about it, Sloan."

Sloan smiled. "I'm really enjoying it. Murals are new for me, but I like the expansive canvas and it feels like my creativity and imagination can run wild with so much space. And, well, I like being a part of Dad's life. I mean he's working all day, it's not like we're spending much time together, but he stops every day and makes me stop, and he takes me to lunch."

I smiled at her. She was getting a date with her daddy every day, and getting to paint too.

Cori busted out onto the deck, quickly made it to Mom, giving her a kiss, then, "Hmmm, that kitchen smells so good, Mom. I can't wait for dinner. I'm going to get in the shower."

And then poof, she disappeared back in the house as quickly as she had bolted out of it.

Mom was smiling, having Cori love on her like that. "Mom and Cori sitting in a tree."

Mom laughed. Then. “Shut the fuck up, Little Girl. Can’t I enjoy a new relationship with my daughter without my other daughter harassing the hell out of me?”

“No. It’s too fun to harass you, and payback for how you harassed me about Alex today.”

“Whatever. I know you, Dani. I know you couldn’t have really been mean to her, but I knew you needed a little help to see outside of yourself and see the whole picture. You two will probably be best friends by end of summer, and you’ll miss her when you go back to school.”

I couldn’t respond to that, except to get up, and say, “I’m going to work up an appetite before dinner.” Then I jumped in the pool avoiding the sentimentally wanting stares from my mother and my girlfriend. I hated to admit I had found her to be an interesting kid.

And wouldn’t you know about the same time the very next day our doorbell rang. She pulled a swimsuit out of her backpack saying, “Is now a good time?” I couldn’t help smile at her.

“Where does your mother think you are?”

“At my friend’s house.”

“Must be so easy for kids now to lie to their parents since they can call your cell phone instead of having to call some parent’s house phone.”

“Oh, definitely, and kids my age like taking advantage of parents with our technology.”

I laughed at her, moved back, “Come on in.” When she came in, I said, “You can change in there,” pointing toward the downstairs bathroom. “I’ll go get my suit.”

She watched me in such an odd way as I moved about the kitchen getting us some snacks together. “What are you looking at?”

“Your boobs. I really hope I get some soon.”

I busted out laughing. Then indulged how mature she seemed and said, “Well, godspeed to you with those boobs coming in.”

She laughed and said, “Thank you. I don’t even need a training bra yet. It’s embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry, before you know it, they’ll pop out, and your butt will get bigger, and you’ll start having hair everywhere, and it will scare the shit out of you.”

She laughed. “Does it ever balance out?”

“Yes. You learn how to shave, how to move in your new body, even how to flaunt your curves.”

“Now we’re talking.”

“You naturally learn how beautiful it is to be a woman.”

She smiled, “Thank you, Dani, for telling me that.”

“You’re welcome. You ready to go outside?” She nodded. “Can you grab that cooler?”

She grabbed our drinks and even got the door for me as I was carrying our snack tray. She was very meticulous with her sunscreen, not something I had ever seen anyone do so meticulously before. I kind of haphazardly applied and hoped my future self didn't wrinkle too much. I put on my sunglasses, and she said, "I forgot my sunglasses. I don't think about it when I'm wearing my bike helmet." I went over to the covered tables and got her a pair. "Are these Cori's?" she asked. I nodded. She smiled. "Where's your mom?"

"Thursdays are her hair and nail day then she does some grocery shopping."

"So on Thursdays about this time I could have alone time with my sister?"

I smiled. Then. "Sounds like a nice date to me, Alex."

"Thank you, Dani. I like being here with you. You guys have a nice home. It feels like a home, like a place where people want to be."

"It is a home and a place where we all want to be now, but when my mom and David first married, we kind of wanted to be anywhere else. It's taken a lot of painful transitions to get to the family and home that we have now. Maybe one day your mom will remarry and you'll have some step-sisters to hang out with."

"Doubtful. She hates men now." I laughed. "I wish she would date. Give her something to focus on besides me getting into college. She didn't really focus on me like this when she and Dad were happy. I mean she focused on me plenty, but not like this. I hate this."

"Does your mother have a degree?"

“No.”

“She’s scared now, Alex. With the divorce, she doesn’t have anything for herself. She wants better for you. She wants you to be able to support yourself because it is scary for her how she has to still rely on Dad financially. She’s going about it in the wrong way where you’re concerned, but her motivations are right and coming from a real place inside of her.”

She was quiet for a really long time before she said, “Thank you for telling me that, Dani.”

I reached over for her hand and brought it to my lips then rested our hands together on my stomach. We laid in silence watching the sun glisten on the water. We ate snacks. We swam a little, but she was scared to get her hair wet because the friend’s house where she was supposed to be doesn’t have a pool. I kind of liked how good she was at lying and covering her tracks. We laid out again for her to get dry. “What was your favorite book when you were my age? I’m going to stop at the library on my way home and check it out.”

“*Twilight*,” I said smiling then somehow something else slipped out, “I used to really love that book, and loved reading just for reading instead of it being for school or some big list of classics everyone has to read to be accepted at my university.”

“Maybe you would like to read it with me.”

I had to smile at her. “Maybe I would.” She smiled so big, and well, so did I.

Mom came out. “Well, hello, Alex. I thought I recognized that bike in my driveway.”

Alex smiled but immediately said, “I’m sorry, Mrs. Mercado, I hope I didn’t keep you from being able to park in your garage.”

“It’s okay, Alex. Dani can move my car into the garage after you leave. You having fun?”

“Yes ma’am. These snacks are so delicious, and Dani has been really nice to me. We’re going to read *Twilight* together.”

Mom smiled. “Oh, all I heard about when she was your age was Bella Swan. I think she really dreamed about how romantic it would be to be a vampire.”

Alex laughed. “I’d like the never aging part, but drinking blood, I don’t know about that.”

Mom and I laughed at her. Then. “Would you mind if I put on a suit and joined you two?”

“No ma’am. I would enjoy your company, Mrs. Mercado.”

“My name is Paige.” Alex smiled and nodded. “And we’re not very formal in this house.”

Alex smiled and said, “Yes ma’am.”

I grabbed Mom and made us both fall in the pool, her fully clothed, then when I came up, I looked at Alex and said, “See, not formal at all around here.” Alex laughed so hard.

“I’m going to kill you. I just had my hair done. I’m poisoning your dinner tonight,” Mom said with a big smile.

“At least I’ll have some good Paige Cooking as my last meal.” I said smiling as I waited, I knew she couldn’t resist, she kissed my lips. “I love you, Mom.”

“God help me, but I love you too.” She waded out in her clothes. Took those off except her panties and bra then jumped right back in. “I guess no need to bother with a suit anymore.”

Alex didn’t get back in as she had to be dry and go home soon, but she seemed to really enjoy watching me and Mom swim and splash each other and tease. She did come over and put her feet in the water and joined in with the teasing some. I walked her out and hugged her in the driveway then watched her pedal away again before I moved Mom’s car into the garage.

I joined Mom back out at our lounges. She had grabbed a bottle of wine now that it was just us. She handed me a glass. “I remember one weekend we were there, we were playing with Alex, Cori put her on her feet and lifted her legs doing airplane, and Alex laughed so hard. Lindsay came in and saw what we were doing and yelled at Cori to put her down, she could get hurt. I know we weren’t there a lot, but I can see now what that did to Alex. She’s so ... cautious about everything. I don’t remember me and Cori ever having to be cautious.”

“Because I always let you be kids.”

“Thank you for that, Mom.”

Mom smiled at me. Took a deep breath. “Vree and I, we um, hooked up a few times after he married her. He always complained about how frigid she was.”

“I think my head just exploded. You just casually hooked up with Dad after he had married someone else?”

“I considered it recycling.”

I laughed. “I just never would have imagined that.”

“Wasn’t something I was going to share with my young daughters at the time.”

“Did it stop when you married David?”

“When I married him, yes, but when we first started dating, I was still somewhat hooking up with your father. I ended it when I started getting serious about David. Your father and I were going to get back together but then she told him that she was pregnant, and he felt like he couldn’t leave her after that. Then I felt like I went through the divorce all over again.”

“If anyone on earth felt validated in being an ass to a little kid, it should be you, but you’ve been so nice to her.”

“I’m grateful for her now. Her existence might have been hard for me at the time, but it brought me David and this family we have and a real understanding of myself and marriage. I never would have had that with Vree.”

“So everything happens for a reason? You know he’s still in love with you.”

“I’m not an idiot, Dani, and do you think your graduation was his first attempt at getting me back? With how rocky David and I were, I had moments I almost considered it, I mean not a real get back together, but hooking up with him, but it would have only been

to get revenge on David for cheating, and I knew if I felt that way, then a part of me had to really love David. I'm glad I didn't do that. I think David would have really left me if I had slept with Vree, any other guy he would have accepted, but not Vree."

"I'm glad you didn't, Mom, because you deserve the marriage you have now."

She smiled a little then said, "To be honest with you, I think David and I married too soon after we started dating, but after your father did that to me a second time, I kind of ricocheted into really needing someone, and I think for David, he felt so lost with Sloan and Raena and he wanted to get them a mother. It's a blooming miracle we are still together."

I laughed. Then watched Mom shift. "Dani, I think I share too easily with you. No one, and I mean no one, has ever known that about me and Vree except me and Vree. I don't ..."

"I won't share it with anyone, Mom. It's your business."

"Not even Sloan?"

"No, not even Sloan. I promise, Mom, and I'm glad you felt so comfortable sharing with me. Seems kind of weird thinking of you and Dad like that, but it only seems weird as your kid. Now as an adult, and if I remove myself from the equation, it actually makes sense. I don't think you're someone who likes sleeping around a lot, so I'm kind of glad Dad maybe filled some lustful gaps for you then."

Mom laughed. "It was odd how it did fulfill me then, especially knowing he preferred me sexually, but the woman I am now, I'm glad

to know I wouldn't put myself in competition with any other woman. It's kind of interesting to realize how much I've come into myself."

"It's been an amazing journey to get to witness, and I haven't told you, but I'm really proud of how you didn't let Cori push you around when she first got hurt and came to live here."

"Once in her life I was too weak in her eyes, and I'm glad to know when it really counted for getting my daughter to get herself back that I was strong enough for both of us."

I moved over to her lounge, she welcomed me, wrapped me to her. "I love you so much, Mom. I love the woman you are and all you give to this family. Thank you for being you."

"Oh, Dani, I was just teasing about poisoning your food, no need for such lavish mushiness."

"What a fucking bitch you are!"

Mom laughed, "Now that's how I like my daughters to talk to me." And we both laughed.

Cori came busting into the house as Mom and I were on the couch drinking coffee and reading our books. It was way too early for Cori to be home, but a storm had popped up out of nowhere and drove me and Mom away from the pool back into the house.

“You will not believe who came to the soccer field today! Alex, our half-sister. She just showed up and asked if she could help me with the soccer camp. She’s like super talented. I can tell Dad has been coaching her because she has a lot of his moves, and she was so great with the little kids. They loved having her there. When the storm popped up, I felt so bad for her that I put her bike in the back of my SUV and drove her home. Even with how much that rain was pouring down, she made me drop her off five houses away so her mom didn’t see me. Oh, did I have some Lindsay flashbacks then. I remember what a frigid bitch she was when we went to Dad’s. I see why he cheated on her; he was probably scared his dick was going to freeze off inside of her.” Mom and I busted out laughing. Then when Cori had stopped spewing for a second, she studied us. “You don’t seem too surprised.”

Time for truth. “She’s been coming here some and hanging out with me and Mom.”

“Mom?”

“I can’t help it. She reminds me of a little Cori, except without that potty mouth you always had, and she has manners. I’m thinking of adopting her.”

Cori laughed then teased, “Thanks a lot, Mom.” Then she sat on the coffee table in front of us. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.”

“I wasn’t sure if you would be mean to her, and she’s going through a rough enough time.”

Cori looked a little offended for a second, then, “I guess with how mean I was to Dad there was no way to predict how I’d react to Alex. I would have always thought I would have been mean to her too until she was there today. She has a weird effect on me, like she’s kind of cool and quirky, and definitely a bit odd, but that’s Lindsay’s fault. I liked her actually.”

“Yeah, I like her too,” I said. “I’ve enjoyed having time with her the past couple of weeks.”

Cori took my coffee from me, drank, never asking and not needing to, what was mine was hers, that’s just how it is with sisters. Then. “Kind of bizarre, isn’t it? We get Dad out of our lives and here comes the Mini-Vree melting our hearts and busting into our lives.”

“Did they do a full lobotomy on you when they drilled that hole in your head?” Then I looked to Mom, “Cori just said someone melted her heart.” Mom laughed.

“Oh, you’re one to talk, you should know better than anyone what a soft spot I have for little sisters.”

Mom laughed, “Well, I think she got you there, Dani. She has always had a soft spot bigger than her about you. ‘Cori, please’, and my tough little girl turned to complete mush.”

Cori and I both laughed. Then Cori admitted, “She looks a lot like me, doesn’t she?”

Mom smiled, “Yes, she does. Sounds like you really liked her.”

“I did, and she knows a lot about soccer. She’s easy too, like she really was excited to hang out with me again but she didn’t expect anything from me, like if I had told her to go away, she would have understood. There was something in that not assuming that I liked about her. And there was some weird DNA that we share that made me feel like she needed me.”

“I think she does really need the two of you now. I’m glad to see I’ve raised daughters who have been nice and welcoming to her because nothing your dad did is any reflection on her.”

“I guess I have two years to make peace with Dad because if I continue at the high school, she’ll be on my team, and he’ll be coming to her games.”

Mom gave her a sympathetic look, took her hand, “I know that will be so hard for you.”

“Maybe not. Maybe it will be good to know he’s become a good guy again. I really believed in him when I was a kid, and through this divorce, he hasn’t made the same mistakes with Alex that he made with us. A part of me is glad to know that. Especially as she’s an only child. She doesn’t have a sister or step-sisters. I used to think there was something wrong with me that he wouldn’t come to my games, and some of that really fostered the aggressive soccer player I became because I had to put all that hatred for myself somewhere, and as I got a little older I gave as much of that hatred for myself to men and to hurting men. But during the hardest time in my life, when I literally had nowhere to run from myself, no soccer, no men, and I was fighting for every part of me, my mom loved me, completely, and Colby loved me, and somewhere I started to love me.” Tears ran

down her face. “You know I really hurt Colby, but somehow he believed in me again so I believed in me too. Maybe Alex can do something we couldn’t do. She can keep Dad believing in something good about himself so he doesn’t wash-up completely because there’s no coming back from that for anyone.”

Mom and I stared at her, I think we stopped breathing, blinking. After we didn’t say anything, she kissed us both, “I’m going to take a shower,” then she ran up the stairs.

I turned to Mom, “Did that just happen?”

“I think so. I need to go buy Colby a Porsche.” My eyes got big as I nodded in agreement.

Sloan’s cell phone went off. She had her hands drenched in paint. “Who is it?”

I moved my laptop and grabbed her phone. “I don’t know, but it’s the same area code as home.”

“Answer it, and put it on speaker for me.” I did then she said, “Hello.”

“Sloan, hi, this is Mark Crandall. I took my kids into your father’s office this week for their check-ups and I completely fell in love with the murals. I want to hire you to paint some for my advertising office. Of course, I want more edgy than David’s pediatrician office, but David assured me that you would love to do edgy. He said you charged him \$10,000, but I’m assuming you gave

him a family discount. Is \$15,000 enough, and can I lock you in for Thanksgiving break, maybe? I know you're back in Providence, but I really want you."

Our eyes locked and grew so big. She had not charged David anything. He was paying for our apartment and her tuition, and he is her dad, she couldn't charge him.

"David said a lot of people have wanted to hire you since they've seen his murals. I bet you'll be all kinds of booked up for your Winter and Summer breaks, but I'm hoping to get ahead of everyone else. Look how's \$20,000 for asking you to do mine first?"

She finally spoke, "Mr. Crandall, I would love to. \$20,000 is more than generous. I hadn't planned on coming down for Thanksgiving, but you can count on me. Anything in particular that you want? I can start drafting between now and then so we're ready when I get there."

"Draft up whatever you want. We're an edgy advertising firm, so let your talent and creativity run wild. Then you can email me the drafts if you like. You have that whole week of Thanksgiving off, or when should I expect you? I'll get some keys made for you because I'll have the office closed then with it being a holiday, but I'll probably work a whole lot from home. Running your own business is nice, but I can't ever seem to break away."

Sloan laughed accordingly, "I'll be down that Tuesday. I can start working on Wednesday. I'll want to eat some of Paige's good cooking on Thursday, but other than that, I'll bust this out for you. Thank you for the opportunity."

“Oh, no, thank you, Sloan, and your dad probably thanks you too, his business has doubled since you painted those murals, everyone loves coming to his office. You’re like magic, Girl.”

“I’ll put that on my business card.”

He laughed, “Well, it won’t be false advertising. I’ll be looking forward to your drafts and us working together when you get down.” He rattled off his email that I wrote down for her.

I hung up her phone as Sloan screamed, “Holy shit!! I’m selling walls of paintings!”

I laughed, kissed her cheek, screamed, “This is so exciting, Baby! I’m so proud of you!”

“Let me go wash my hands. I’ll finish this assignment later. We need to celebrate.”

She came back and joined me on our couch. I had poured us some wine. “To you, Baby.”

She clinked my glass and said, “To us and our future.” I smiled. That really meant everything to her. “Dani, I’m sorry, I didn’t even ask if we could go for Thanksgiving.”

“Are you crazy? You don’t have to ask me that. This is such a great opportunity besides you know I’m always happy to go home and see Mom, David, and Cori.”

“And let’s not forget your favorite person Alex.”

I laughed. “She’s moved on from the entire *Twilight* series to *The Hunger Games* and she’s texting me about it constantly. It’s like we have our own book club. I kind of really like it.”

She smiled at me just as her phone rang again. She put it on speaker, “Hello.”

“Sloan, this is Mary Collins, love the murals in your dad’s office. Are you home for Winter Break? And David told me the price. I’ve got 20 Gs with your name on it. I’m adding a little extra because you’ll have to do some risqué stuff for me. Sex toy store. I’m thinking silhouettes. Kind of mysterious but sexy. What do you think? Soon every business in town is going to have Sloan Mercado originals on their walls, and I just cannot be left out.”

And just like that, our lives kind of flipped. She was booked solid for Winter Break, Spring Break, and all the way through Summer Break. And so many opportunities came her way that after she graduated and I still had one more year at Brown, I was the one in Providence often alone while she was going home a week, do a job, come spend a week with me. Repeat.

Mom had sort of become her personal assistant, lining up her jobs for her, and she had hired Colby too to get her supplies for her and get those set up at the locations. Cori really appreciated her hiring Colby as he didn’t make much coaching soccer, and they wanted to get their own house soon. “Won’t be near the mansion Mama Warbucks is going to be able to buy for you with all this business she has, but I’m so happy he wants to buy us a house.”

Life for all of us had changed, in ways we’d never imagined, but one thing that hadn’t changed was Sloan’s devotion to me. She told

Mom to blank out her calendar for two weeks. As soon as I graduated, she took me on a Tour of Italy, the place highest on my bucket list.

And when we returned, there was news: Raena would be having a little surfer baby.

We had spent much of the morning looking at houses, and I thought Sloan would go back to work in the afternoon, but she asked for us to go hiking and enjoy the beautiful fall day.

At the top of the mountain with us both sweaty, she kissed me, flashback to our first kiss here, then she knelt on one knee, tears came to me immediately, even before she pulled out a stunningly gorgeous ring, and then my tears were quite ridiculous, I'm sure. "There isn't anything, and I do mean anything, that I love as much as I love you, Dani. You make me feel so warm," oh yeah the tears flowed more then. "You make my life have purpose, and I want to share every moment of my life with you. The past year while we were separated some, it almost killed me, but knowing I was going to be able to buy a nice house and ring made it almost bearable. Giving you the world and more than monetary things, giving you all the best of me is all there is of Sloan Mercado. Will you marry me, Danielle Winters?"

I sank down with her. Kissed her so fervently. Then through my tears, I uttered, “It will be the greatest honor of my life,” and her tears started as she placed the ring on my finger.

We stayed at the top awhile holding each other and allowing the moment to become real.

As we got to Our Truth Rock, Sloan pulled me over to it. “I want to give you a wedding gift. Please hear me out. I don’t want you to work, and not because I want to make you a kept woman. I know how important writing is to you, and I want to give you that, Dani. We’ve been so fortunate with all that has come to me with painting, with the internet business, and Kirkland’s, and now my mural business, every day I get to pursue my passion, and I want to be able to give that to you. I want you to really have the time to work on novels and work toward publication. If you’re working another job, you’ll be too worn out or stretched too thin between work and marriage and our family that you won’t get to write much. We’re at Our Truth Rock so I’ve given you my truth, you have to be honest how you feel about it.”

I laughed, “I think I would have been honest about this no matter where we had the conversation.” She smiled. “There’s this part of me that was raised after the Women’s Rights Movement that feels pressure to work and have my own money, but the true part of me believes in us. Believes we’ll be together forever so I don’t need to be worried about making it all on my own.”

“We will be together forever, but even if we’re not, I waited until you graduated and had a degree to ask you to marry me, although I’ve wanted to ask you since I was eleven.”

I smiled at her. I searched all the crevices of myself then gave her an answer, “Thank you for a wedding gift that shows you really know me, love me, and want to give to my favorite part of myself. That makes my belief in our future together as solid as concrete.”

The Sloan Smile.

I smiled looking at her asleep in my bed. She just had to be the most beautiful woman on earth, I was sure. I looked down at my ring and was sure I had too much excitement flowing through my veins to sleep, and Mom had made these delicious sausage balls earlier today.

I crept downstairs to find the sausage balls were being invaded. I gave him a look as he had one going into his mouth and he just slid the container toward me, welcoming me.

For a few minutes we sat silently devouring sausage balls until I asked, “What made you move here, David?”

He got this comforted smile across his face, “When I was in medical school, I saw this man speak, Dr. Charles Thompson. I loved him. There were plenty of talented doctors, but he was so different than who we normally saw in Chicago. He was a small town man, charisma and southern charm for miles and miles, and I became quite enamored with him. I asked him to dinner so I could hopefully get some of that southern charm to wear off on me through osmosis. I

think he took a shine to me, in medical school and newly married. We stayed in contact, and every time he came to speak in Chicago we had dinner. Then I was telling him I had no idea where I was going to do my internship and we had Sloan and Raena was on the way, and I remember saying I wasn't sure I wanted to raise girls in Chicago. Then my life flipped. He offered me an internship and residency with him and said he was retiring in six years and that it would be nice to be able to leave the business to someone he had groomed. So we moved here, and I swear I learned more in that six years from him than I ever did in medical school, and I really fell in love with it here. It's so pretty, lots of hiking and biking, and wow, I couldn't really believe the cost of living here, how I could afford a house, like an actual nice house here for not too much money, and getting away from those harsh Chicago winters and even outside of winter those wind storms, they drove me crazy." He stopped for a moment and this smile about him. Then shared, "I, um, I fell in love with something else here, although I wouldn't allow myself to admit it then because I was married and so was she, but that first time your mom brought you two in that office, I about lost my mind. I had never seen anything so beautiful in my life. She was such a young mother, but you never would have really known it, she was so easy with you girls. Most kids came in and were so rambunctious and sibling rivalry oozing out of every pore of them, but not you and Cori, and I think I kind of fell in love with the way the three of you seemed like a team. I looked forward to every time she brought you girls in, and I couldn't even really understand how I felt around her, it was like I was ten years old all over again, and I loved that feeling and felt guilty for it, but I managed it, let it just find this never going to happen spot to exist inside of me. Until one night after I had me

and the girls living in an apartment, and they were asleep, and I walked out to the balcony and she surfaced in my mind and the first smile I had had in quite a while spread across my face. It's a small town so I knew she was going through a divorce too, and I did something unethical, I logged into the office accounts from my laptop and pulled up Cori's records so I could get her phone number. Oh man did I really feel like a ten year old boy then, dial a few numbers and hang up, and then try again and hang up, but then I finally did it, and she answered so quickly as she explained you two were asleep in her bed and she didn't want the phone to wake you, but then she went out to her backyard and I was on my balcony, and we talked all night long, just talking and talking and there were no awkward moments and I could have talked to her forever and we kind of watched the sunrise together then I heard, 'Mom, can you make me some banana pancakes,' and Paige was so sweet saying, 'Yeah, Baby, I'll be there in a second.' Then she spoke to me on the phone, 'I need to go, David, but I really enjoyed talking to you.' I did something else unethical, used Cori's records to send her flowers. We kind of talked like that several nights until you two went to your dad's for a night, and I got a sitter, and finally had a date with Paige Winters, the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen." Wow that look on his face, it was ... there's not even a word for that much consumption with another person. Then he kind of snapped back, looked at me, touched the ring on my finger and said, "You wondering if you two can make it here in this small town, is that why you asked?"

I smiled then said, "No. I just wanted to get to know you." He smiled at me. "Thank you for sharing all of that with me. I never knew that about how you felt about Mom, it's like the most romantic story I've ever heard."

David laughed, “I had a lot of conflict about it, but I’ll always be so grateful I finally was able to dial all those digits.” I laughed. Then he shifted. “Um, do you need money, Dani?”

“What?”

“I, um, well, I don’t know a lot about it, you know how it is with two women, but, um, well, I kind of really thought that my daughter should have a ring too.”

I smiled so big. “I’ve been thinking that myself.”

“I know Sloan has done real well for herself and for you two, but, um, I’m heading to California soon, I’ve been working with a realtor because that grandbaby is not going to be raised in that mud hut they call a home,” I laughed. “I’d be real honored to give this to Sloan. I’m so proud of her, Dani, and I know she’s a bit too proud to take money for the house you two are looking at, but I was hoping you’d let me do this, rings are so important.”

“Rings are very important, David, thank you so much. It’ll mean even more if you go shopping with me.”

“A date with a Paige lookalike, count me in.” I smiled. Kissed his cheek, was heading out of the kitchen when I heard, “Dani?” I turned. Went back in. He looked so solemn. I sat back down beside him. Several moments later he finally said, “I don’t know the politically correct way to say this, so I’m just going to say it. I know you have some curiosities about men. I don’t think Sloan has ever had those. I don’t think she’s ever been curious about anyone except you.” I smiled. “Your curiosities, those are normal, Dani, but if you’ll take advice from a man with a lot of regrets, just know there is not a

feeling worse than having the woman you love look at you like she is purely disgusted with you and that she has completely lost faith in you. During the times that Paige looked at me like that, it was the worst moments of my life. I hated myself, I hated everything about myself that I had caused her that pain, that betrayal, that disgust, and that lack of faith in me.” Tears ran down his face, “I’m so grateful I was man enough to turn it around and for how she looks at me now, but, Dani, curiosities, let ‘em remain as fantasies, because it’s not worth it.”

I started crying. He rose and pulled me into his arms. He cried some too. “I know I didn’t just hurt Paige. I know how much it hurt you to see your mom like that. I won’t ever hurt her again, I promise, Dani. She’s made me into an honorable man, and all I want is to love her and our four girls and that little baby coming. I promise you she’s with a good man.”

“I know you are, David, but it hurt so badly.”

“I know. I know. I damaged my wife and our whole family. It’s all on me.” He pulled away and put his hands on my face. “You girls have seen enough divorce and hurt, right?” I nodded. “So learn from my mistakes.” I nodded. “I have a nurse who is gay and has this girlfriend that she seems to love, but she says occasionally she goes and fucks a man and her girlfriend is totally fine with it. And on the surface, I think a lot of people think that sounds so cool, what everyone would want, permission to sleep around, but I’m going to tell you, what everyone really wants is to love someone the way I love Paige so much you could never see even wanting anyone else. Believe me even when I did do it out of bad habits, I didn’t enjoy it, and I just wanted to be home with Paige talking all night.” I smiled at him.

“Thank you, David, for being man enough to get her back and to save our family, and being man enough to share all of that with me. Most people are never honest about their mistakes so it means so much to me that you would share all of that with me.” He nodded. I moved in to hug him again, then a slight tap on his chest, and I left him to go back to my fiancé.

I pulled up at the high school, grabbed my old Wildcats jacket as it was a bit cold, and walked toward the field for Alex’s first high school game. They were stretching on the field, but she waved at me. Cori smiled and waved at me. I waved back and found my way to a spot on the bleachers. I saw him arrive, wave at Alex as all of me waged war inside myself.

“Um, is this seat taken?” he asked so awkwardly.

“No,” came out of me so weakly, barely audible. He sat beside me, and the memories flooded:

“Daddy!” I screamed as soon as the door opened and ran to him. He scooped me up in his arms, “Hey, Munchkin!” kissed my head as I wrapped my arms so tightly around his neck then he saddled me on his hip. He had a mission to get to the kitchen, but as he passed Cori, he touched her head and said, “Hey, Slightly Bigger Munchkin.” Cori

laughed, “Hey, Daddy.” Then. We made it to the kitchen and she didn’t see us, and he just caught his breath for a second then said, “Dani, lookathere, an actual sighting of the most gorgeous woman on earth.” She smiled and blushed the whole time watching him walk toward her, kissed him so sweetly, then laid her head on his shoulder, and he wrapped his free arm around her. She looked so pretty I reached my hand out to her cheek so that me and Daddy were both holding her. After a few sweet moments he said, “How long before dinner, Mama? I was going to run some drills with Cori.” She raised up and smiled at him, and took me from him. “30 minutes.” Together me and Mommy watched them out the window as she finished with dinner. I laid my head on her shoulder and said, “Will you marry me, Mommy?” She laughed a little then said, “Yes, Baby.” I smiled so big.

“Daddy!” Mommy shot up out of the bed, and grabbed the little clock. Squinted at it, put it back on her nightstand. “What’s wrong, Dani?” as Daddy was trying his best to wake up. “Cori can ride without training wheels, and I need to do it. Will you take me out there, Daddy?” “Right now?!” “I been lying in bed getting my courage up, and I gotta do it before it leaves me!” Mommy smiled, touched Daddy’s chest as he said, “Um, yep, I guess right now is the best time.” He wiped his eyes and stretched and said, “Paige, get the bike in the drive, I’ll get my tools.” Mommy and I watched him take off my training wheels then she put my helmet on me then he took me to the street. Several, several, several times he had to grab my bike before me and the bike crashed to the road until he finally got in front of the bike, put his hands on the handlebars and leaned down so we were eye level. “It’s about trust, Dani. Not trusting me. Not trusting this bike.” He tapped my chest. “It’s right here, it’s about trusting all that courage you built up.” I nodded at him. He moved back. I lowered my head to my chest, “We gotta do this, Courage.” Then.

“Trust. Trust. Trust,” like a million times with each pedal and then he was having to run down the street after me as I rode.

He was definitely a little grayer and older, but I looked at him, and he was still my daddy, still smelled like him, was still broad and had hard work wafting off of him. “You’ve done a good job with Alex. Cori and I have really been blessed to get to know her these past couple of years.”

“She asked to come live with me. She’s of age now according to the terms of the divorce, but I don’t know what to do, don’t girls need to be with their mother?”

He was asking me for advice. He was a man sitting there wondering how to raise a young girl into a woman. “Her mother isn’t like my mother. She probably really needs you, and the woman stuff, she’s now got me and Cori and even our mom for all of that. You should let her, Dad. She really misses her house, and Lindsay puts too much college pressure on her.”

“Everything with this one seems so different. There’s no way on earth I could have imagined you and Cori away from Paige, but with Alex, well, I think you’re right, and I want her there. I want her to come live with me.” He touched my ring. “Congratulations. I’d be real honored to meet your fiancé one day.”

“You’ve met her.” I saw the word “her” register a little shock on his face that he combed out real fast not to run me off that I was actually speaking to him. “She was with Cori after my graduation when Cori apparently ripped you a new one.”

He laughed, “Man, Cori actually ripped me about five new ones. I had to check my body for leaks when she left.” I couldn’t even keep myself from laughing. “I’m sorry, Dani, I wish I could tell you that I remember her, but all I remember is Cori blasting like bombs going off all around me.”

I chuckled, “That’s understandable. She can be quite the force.”

He laughed. “Alex says she’s the greatest coach on earth.”

“I remember Cori had a good coach too when we were little.”

He smiled at me. “Thank you, Dani.”

And then. I just sat there. Watching a soccer game with my dad sitting beside me. This time I didn’t need to climb a mountain to let Life’s tapestry weave. I merely sat by him, the origin, as Sloan said about McKenzie. Maybe age was granting me a transparency of him. Maybe now knowing love myself offers up indulgences to Life that you’re ready. I could see him so clearly. She had been the love of his life, and it was he who trapped her with a baby so he could hold onto her - maybe trapped is too harsh of a word - in reality they’d wanted to share Cori, but he’d made a mistake, thought he could dabble and still have her. She was going to let him back in, that part was true, but only so her girls knew a father; the essence of Paige, she’d sealed off to him, and he recognized it in their few times of sex, he recognized it was sex, not Paige. It hurt him too much to have part of her so he got another woman pregnant so not following through seemed admirable instead of another way he was a coward. David suffered it too, not being in the essence of Paige, of a time she sealed herself off to him, but the difference she realized, he wasn’t a coward. He fought to get himself worthy of her, he held her when she

presented him with what betrayal had done to her – he didn't run away. He held. Then my graduation was his ultimate reward as he literally shielded her from the half-self she was with my father, and then she gave her whole self to David, to their marriage, to herself, to their daughters – all four of us, and she's never looked back, never once questioned the giving. Then Life's tapestry wove in me with more force and fortitude than ever before, than ever how I had allowed Poetry to weave in and out of me. I had been the only one that Mom had ever shared that with, that tiny glimpse into the her and dad residing in the in-between. She couldn't force all the pieces onto me because every woman has to find it on her own, her true self, and the one worthy of sharing so much power with. I looked at my sister. Life had cursed her with a blow to the head, but maybe it had graced her in that moment. She was so meant for this. So meant to be a coach. She was dynamic, and even more so, meant to be Alex's coach and sister as it rung so loudly the past two years what an incredible soft spot Cori had for little sisters. That rung so loudly on the field as my view was yanked from Cori by Alex at mid-field, seriously, sweeping that ball to her possession and everyone mystified as moments stretched endlessly watching it careen from mid-field through the air until only the back of the net flapping like a flag by its force stopped its momentum and our awe. Cori and Alex ran to each other and Alex jumped on her wrapping even her legs around Cori. She was happier for Alex than any goal she'd ever made herself. Cori was made to give herself to coaching, and the man who'd shown her such a gift hidden deep inside of her. She'd been made for Colby. I'd been made for someone too. Someone who never got excited for her art for anything she could give herself. Her everywhere was US.

I smiled watching Sloan put on her ring. She didn't wear it often as she was scared to get paint on it or bang it on something as she was working. When she was working, she wore a simple black plastic band, and often didn't really think about a big gaudy ring when she got home as all she did was shower then we ate dinner or went to join the family at Mom's for dinner, maybe watch TV or a movie, then she was so tired she passed out. She woke up, braided her hair to keep it out of the paint, I tossed mine in a ponytail then we went over to Mom's for breakfast. Colby and Cori came over too, and Cori and I were usually silently stuffing ourselves silly on Mom's cooking as the three of them talked out all the details of Sloan Mercado – the business, not my woman. Then Colby and Sloan left, and me and Cori got in Mom's car to go to a workout class – we switched up which type every day, you know add a little variety into our otherwise routine lives. Mom took us to the grocery store for anything needed at all three houses then dropped Cori at her house and me at mine before she went home to run the business end of Sloan Mercado. I showered and wrote the rest of the day. I was sure Sloan wondered if I'd ever dress up for her, but all she ever said when she came home to me in my yoga pants and tank top and no makeup self was, “Hey, Gorgeous, you sure are a great incentive to come home.” And I'd literally melt and kiss her like crazy.

But tonight was a special night. Tonight was the grand opening of Touch of Tuscany, An Authentic Italian Experience. Two girls, Kayla McGee and Rhonda Parsons, that we had gone to high school with had always had big romantic Italian dreams, and had finally decided to open a restaurant. They had asked Sloan to do all the murals, and our trip to Italy had provided her a lot of authentic inspiration. This had actually been a really cool experience as I

stopped by the restaurant a few times in the getting it together process and got to be a part of tastings and pairing wine with food, oh I was happy to help with that. And somewhere along the way, without anyone ever needing to say anything, we understood that Kayla and Rhonda had probably been a couple since high school and I'm sure they sort of thought that about me and Sloan too, and the four of us had done a few couples things.

I was blown away looking at her, the sparkly navy dress that hit at mid-thigh and showed just the right amount of cleavage so I didn't have to kill anyone looking at my woman, the curls she'd put in her hair, the smoky sexy effect of the way she'd done up her eyes. I wanted to say the hell with grand opening, let's stay home, but tonight was a big night for my woman, so I smiled as she put on her ring then brought that sexy thing to me for a kiss.

"Wow, Mom," I said as David let us in the door. "Trying to put us all to shame."

Mom smiled, "Stop," waved a hand then leaned in to kiss me, air kiss, sort of as none of us wanted to ruin our lipstick. Then she gave one to Sloan too. Cori and Colby arrived shortly after, then we all loaded into David's SUV to go celebrate the restaurant and Sloan.

Kayla looked ecstatic as she showed us to the table they had reserved for Sloan. Besides our reserved table, every other table was full, and there was a lot of people waiting to be seated. "People can't even stop talking about these murals, Sloan, they are fabulous. I've had to give Paige's number to three people already, so be prepared to be busy Monday, Paige." Mom smiled. "You really made it feel like an authentic experience, and we are so grateful, Sloan."

“Well, it’s not like I did it for free, and I’m glad you’re happy with the outcome, and thank you for sending me more business. And most of all, congratulations! This is a great turnout.”

“Thank you. I’ll send your waiter right over. You guys enjoy your Touch of Tuscany.”

We all smiled at her, and watched her walk away as David asked, “Where’s Rhonda?”

“She’s the chef,” Sloan informed.

“Oh, what a dream come true for a young couple,” David said with a smile.

“Yes, I was happy to be a part of it with them,” Sloan said then smiled at me and our dreams that had been coming true.

After we had placed our order, I FaceTimed Raena as she was way too about to pop to fly. I used my phone to walk around and show her all of the murals and neat little touches about.

We were having fun until I heard Raena say, “Oh shit.”

I pulled the phone back to me so I could see her face. “What?”

Sure she’d had a baby pain or something, I wasn’t too concerned, until I heard the alarm in her voice, “Get to Sloan, Dani, now before she does!” I looked and started toward our table immediately. It couldn’t be happening, but my body was trying to get to her all the same.

I made it to the table the same time she did. “Sloan,” and I watched Sloan’s head jerk, her body stiffen, her eyes widen. “This is

so incredible, Baby. I just had to see. You're the talk of the entire town, and I can see why. You're really talented, Sloan." I was sure I saw a red splotch breakout on Sloan's chest and I thought there was a hint of blue to her skin.

"Mom, leave her alone, please!" was cried from my phone.

McKenzie jerked it from me, "Raena? You're pregnant?"

David was on his feet so fast jerking my phone from McKenzie like a way he was protecting Raena from her. "Leave, McKenzie," he gritted at her more determined than he'd spoken to my dad several years ago.

"I just want to congratulate Sloan."

He leaned into her so close trying really hard not to make a scene, but I was standing by her so I could hear him, "I don't care what you wanted to do, you or any of those crazy bitches that live inside of you will never hurt my daughters again. Get the fuck out of here now." McKenzie stiffened and moved back from him then walked away. We all stayed stunned.

Mom moved over two seats and pulled Sloan into her arms, "She's not your mother. I am. You're my daughter, Sloan. Don't let her do this to you, Baby. This is your night. Don't."

Sloan started to breathe again. I was so glad to see her breathe, lean into Mom a little.

Kayla charged to the table, "Sloan, I'm so sorry. I didn't recognize her or we would have ..."

“Kayla, it’s okay. I barely recognized her myself. It wasn’t your responsibility. People have been coming over congratulating me, you couldn’t have realized. But thank you.”

She nodded at Sloan, “Can I get you guys anything? More vino or bread?”

Mom reached her hand out to Kayla, “We’re okay, Honey, thank you though.”

Kayla squeezed her hand then walked away. David sat down, finally, and me too, finally. We had all kind of switched seats as Mom was taking possession of Sloan. Then Sloan reached for my phone in David’s hand that I think he had forgotten he had, “You okay, Raena?”

“I haven’t seen her since I was eight. That was just so bizarre. And me? Sloan, are you okay?”

She breathed, smiled looking at Raena, “I’m okay.” She looked at Mom, smiled. “I’m okay.”

We were interrupted by a man coming to the table, “Hi, I’m opening a brewery soon, and this kind of art would just be perfect. How do I make that happen?”

“She’s booked out for the next three months,” Mom informed.

“Perfect, we just started on construction, so how do I get in the queue of Sloan Mercado?”

Mom smiled, we all smiled, “Give me your number, and I’ll call you Monday morning.” Mom pulled out her phone and started taking his information just as our food arrived.

After we were all somewhat settled, Raena said, “Better not be booked in six days.”

Sloan smiled and looked into the phone, “No way, Little Sister, got a big hole on my calendar and so does Dad so we can come out and welcome that baby into our lives.”

I slightly woke because I was freezing, reached for the covers to hear, “No!” from across the room. I woke more and sat up and looked. “I’m grateful for all the recognition lately, but tonight I need a real Sloan Mercado original.” I noticed the outline of my body on the wall.

After what McKenzie had put her through at dinner, I smiled at my love and said, “How do you want me, Baby?”

“How you were was perfect,” a tear slid down her face. I was so unsure what to do, but I thought the best medicine for her then had to be to paint it out, to give it all to creativity.

I leaned back, exactly as I was, except with my eyes open, watching myself get erected on a wall, watched the way she personified every detail of me, the way she did truly need me.

Some tears escaped as she painted, but she continued. When she was finished, she stayed looking at the wall, at her creation. I got up and molded myself behind her. “I’m here.”

“I don’t even know what to say. I don’t even know how I feel.”

“You don’t have to know how you feel.”

“When I went outside the restaurant to talk to Raena privately, she said, ‘I hope Mom didn’t just curse my baby.’ I know she was somewhat joking, but I think we’ve both always been so scared of her illness popping up in us or our kids. It makes me so upset because Raena is so happy about this baby. I want to fly out early to be with her, but I’ve got at least three more days on finishing my current job. It was like 2 maybe 3 minutes of my life, but it seemed, well, I mean, it wasn’t those three minutes, it was all the other moments of my life with her.”

“I know, any moment is rarely just that moment.”

“She looked ... together, she looked kind of good, actually, and I had a moment I thought she could be my mom again, but then I realized this is just a sliver for her like what Paige said. Tomorrow or even before she got home, one of those other personalities could take over and hate me and want to hurt me.” She turned around, and I didn’t care about the paint she got on my back or hair as she wrapped her arms around me and wept. “I was doing so well.”

“And you still are. This is a moment, take it, cry, paint me all over this room if you need to, but know, she is not a part of our lives. You are still Sloan Mercado that I am insanely in love with and cannot wait for Raena to have that baby so your maid of honor can fly out here and we can get married,” I felt her smile a little. “You’re still Sloan Mercado who bought me this absolutely gorgeous house and whose business grows and grows and grows.”

She brought her mouth to mine and put every weakness and uncertainty and need into the fervor she released onto my tongue with hers until she took me back to our bed. Paint got all over our sheets as we thrashed about, but I'd much rather her drown in me than in herself.

Thursday. 2AM. BRAYNK. BRAYNK. BRAYNK. "Shit!" just as she rose up slightly, quickly grabbed her phone off the nightstand to end that hideous racket. I molded into her as she lay back down. Released my probably not as cute as I think it is whiny whimper. She pulled me a little closer, kissed my head. I whimpered again. "One more. I know you're not done." So I giggled then let out like five whiny whimpers in a row. "Done now?"

"Who decided on this dumbass 5AM flight?"

"I think all of us."

"Time for a quicky? Who knows when we'll have sex again around everyone for days."

She leaned in to kissed me, pulled away and said, "We might have time, but I can't even."

I laughed, "Oh, I've lost my charms."

“Never, you know that, Baby,” pulling me closer. Another kiss then, “We gotta get up.”

I somehow made it down the stairs without dying, made us some coffee, fell asleep leaning against the counter, the beep of the coffee pot woke me again. Sloan laughed at me jerking up when I heard the noise. Then she sweetly made my coffee for me and hers. “We can sleep on the plane, Baby.” But I still leaned against her drinking my coffee for a minute. “And how were you this tired ever going to manage a quicky? You’d probably pass out on me.”

I giggled then conceded, “Probably.” She dragged me up the stairs to dress and pack. We made it out the door in time. David loaded our suitcases in the SUV with theirs. I went in to try to klepto some Paige goodies as we waited on Colby and Cori to arrive. Then. Stand in line. Wait. Pass check-in. Pass security. Sit at gate. Wait. Finally boarding for our flight.

As soon as we were seated, I asked David to switch seats with me, and I seriously climbed right up on my mommy and passed out like I was a small child. I didn’t care who judged me.

Flight change. What is wrong with these people? Can’t they see I’m sleeping on my mommy!

Another gate. David brought everyone some coffee. I inhaled two ventis and still couldn’t wake up. David put me on his back for us to board again. “So glad our kids are all grown.”

Mom laughed at him as she playfully popped my butt, “Yeah, get off my man.”

“As soon as I get seated and get on my mommy.”

“Sloan and Raena with cars, and Dani with flights. Some things never change, huh, Mom?”

“It’s nice to have a few things to depend on, Cori.” Dependably seated and back to sleep. Ah.

Finally Oakland Airport. I feel like we flew across the country, oh yeah, we freaking did.

Got our big SUV rental, put on shades immediately, traffic, drive to Berkeley. Finally get to the hotel to drop off our luggage. Plop down on bed. I’m never getting up. “Let’s go, Baby.” Ugghhhh.

We pulled up at such a tiny house, but it so looked like Raena. And I didn’t care how tiny that house was, I ran in to see my sister. I almost never let her go, when I finally did, I put my hands on her belly, leaned in to kiss it, “We’re here, Baby, you can come after we watch “Grey’s Anatomy” later tonight.”

Everyone laughed, then Sloan said, “Can I please hug my sister?” I moved back, reluctantly, but they were so beautiful to watch. “Oh, My Raena, I’ve missed you so much.” Awe.

Raena released the most serene exhale to be in Sloan’s arms again. “I’ve missed you too.”

She hugged everyone else, then gave us the minute tour: two tiny bedrooms, one bathroom, kitchen and living room we saw when we came in, a back porch slab thing with some chairs and a grill, then a shed for all of their surf stuff. “Mine has been collecting dust lately,” as she touched her rounded belly and looked so beautiful. She really was so happy about this baby.

We went back inside and packed her living room like sardines some of us sitting on the floor, but no one minded as long as we got time with Raena and finally had our family together.

“Caleb is meeting us for dinner. He’s looking forward to seeing you all again.”

“We are too, Honey,” Mom said so sweetly. “The baby room looked full, but is there anything you need?”

Raena smiled, “No, Paige. I seem to get an Amazon package every day from you.”

“I can’t help it. Our first grandbaby. Plus, when I was a new mom I felt like there was constantly stuff I never even knew I needed. I wanted to make sure you had everything.”

“Thank you, Paige. It has made me feel so loved.” Mom smiled at her.

“Are you planning to work after the baby is born?” Cori asked.

“No. I want to be a mom. I don’t want to miss any of this, and we have enough. Although I’ll be really happy when she’s old enough to get on a board, but we’ll swim until then.”

We all smiled as Mom took her hand, “I didn’t want to miss any of it with my girls either. You’ll be glad for this decision, Raena.”

“You’ll be glad right after you pay me back for all that wasted tuition,” David said.

“Dad!” Raena and Sloan echoed.

“Just teasing, I promise, my dramatic daughters.”

“Well, at least Sloan’s tuition wasn’t wasted. I’ve been so proud of you, Sloan. I have absolutely loved every virtual tour Dani has given me over FaceTime, and I can’t wait to see your new house when I fly out for your wedding. My sisters are finally getting married!”

“We can’t wait to have you and the baby there, and maybe while I’m here I could do a mural in her room.”

Raena misted up a bit, “That would be the best gift ever. I could go in there and feel you with me and my baby. Thank you, Sloan!”

“So are we just going to keep calling her baby? Does she have a name?” Cori asked.

“You’re not allowed to laugh.” We all nodded. “Ariel.” We laughed anyway. “Hey!”

“She is naming that water baby after a mermaid!” Cori yelled.

“No, I’m not. It’s a surf move.”

“Oh, please, Raena. You watched *The Little Mermaid* nonstop when we were little!”

“Look at this stuff. Isn’t it neat? Wouldn’t you think my collection’s complete?” Cori and I belted out.

“Stop it! Stop teasing me. Plus, you two sing like cats caught in a trap!”

That just prompted us to sing, “Legs are required for jumping, dancing, strolling along down the, what’s that word again, streeeeeeet!” As we swung our arms out.

“Shut up!”

“When’s it my turn? Wouldn’t I love, love to explore that shore up above!”

“Okay, leave her alone, and quit assailing my ears!”

“Your mother has spoken,” David said in an authoritative tone. “You really missed them?”

“I plead pregnancy insanity.” We all laughed.

I moved into Sloan’s lap and said, “Go on and kiss ‘da girl.” She smiled, MUAH.

Then Sloan came up and batted her eyes saying, “Shalalalala, my oh my.” Shrugged the cutest little shrug.

“God, I love you,” fell out of me as a smile a coat hanger long took over my face.

“Okay, maybe seeing my sisters so happy I did miss,” Raena said with her sweet smile.

FINALLY! We ditched the testosterone. After dinner they went back to Raena’s house for a guy’s night which I guess meant watch sports, as we went back to the hotel for “Grey’s”!!!

Raena between me and Sloan with our hands on her belly on one bed, and Mom and Cori on another bed of the room Sloan and I were sharing with Cori and Colby. Tons and tons of junk food and sparkling grape juice out of respect for our very preggars sister. And togetherness.

“I can’t believe they got Geena Davis on here, but she’s been totally great.”

“Oh no, they’re going to kill April’s baby.”

“Callie and Owen, you think they’re trying to set them up as a couple?”

“I hope not! And what is with Maggie? They kill off Lexi and need to recycle the storyline of bringing in another half-sister for Meredith? Are we sure we need to keep watching this?”

“It’s tradition. Besides there’s no way we can stop now. We’re in too deep.”

Then it was over, and we pulled our legs up as Mom and Cori came to our bed for talk time. “Paige, were you nervous?”

“A little. Every mother is with every baby.”

“I don’t want it to change me and Caleb.”

“There’s no way for it not to change you, but hopefully in good ways.”

“How long were you with Vree before you got pregnant?”

“I think I got pregnant the night of the first day we met.”

“Mom!” Cori screamed.

“I went with some friends to a soccer game at the state college. He ran off the field and said, ‘I’m gonna marry you,’ as soon as he saw me walk up. He played probably the best game of his life trying to impress me. And it did. I was still there after the game, celebration,

and him getting a shower. He asked to take me to dinner. We went to dinner then parking point, and we got it on for hours.”

“Holy shit, Mom.”

She rolled her eyes in a nostalgic way. “Young and crazy, but we had a lot of fun.”

“What did you do when you found out you were pregnant?”

“What people did. He dropped out of college. Got a job with a construction company. We got married and got a nice starter home. He kept moving up in the company, and we didn’t upgrade the house when he was making more money. We decided to put money back so he could buy a partnership in the company which was a very smart decision as now I guess he’s had a hand in building every subdivision in our county.”

“Do you resent that?” Raena asked.

“Resent what? How successful he is now? Of course not. He was always exceptionally over generous with child support, anything I ever wanted for the girls, and Dani’s tuition.”

“I don’t think our generation does that,” Cori said. And we all waited for a clarification on what that was. “Start out small, work their way up in a company. Seems like everyone wants a big mansion at our age, and it seems weird to me. I like our small house.”

“I like your house too, Cori,” I said. “It’s so you, and you decorated it so nicely.”

“Thank you. I worry sometimes that Colby feels in competition with you guys, and I don’t know how to make him really understand

that I'm happy. I wouldn't have really made much playing women's soccer regardless, so I never planned on a fortune or anything."

"You have a nice home, Cori, but I do need to give Colby more money," Sloan said. "I can't believe all he's had to do as the business has grown. It was just part-time when he started, and I still pay him for all his hours, but, well, quite honestly, I never imagined I'd have so much work that I'd be booked out solid for three months, and even have a few things on the books for six months from now and a year from now. And poor Paige has been free labor."

"Sloan, I would never take your money. Besides my part is really only a few hours a day."

"No, it is not. You were working while we were at dinner the other night."

"That was a could not be helped situation as people were seeing your murals and you were there as an easy target to drum up more business. I like doing things for my daughters."

"Well, um, speaking of doing things for your daughters, I need something," Raena said.

"Anything, Baby," Mom said putting her hand on her leg.

"Will you be in delivery with me? I feel like I really want a mom there with me, and I like Caleb's mom, but not enough for that. I need someone who really knows me, Paige."

I shifted as I knew Mom wanted to get in to pull Raena to her. "I'd be so honored, Baby."

Then in Mom's arms, there was Raena, waiting so patiently on all of us to have our chitchat about absolutely nothing when she needed to talk about everything, but Raena had been the type who never could talk about her deep self until she was surrounded by her sisters, her home, it had been why she hadn't told me about Caleb over the phone, she waited until we were together to share something that intimate about how in love she was. As we met Caleb's parents at dinner earlier, it was clear she had a good relationship with them, but that no one would ever replace her sisters and by extension Mom, sometimes more so Mom than anyone.

"Paige, it was so hard to see Mom. I was so shocked when I saw her looking around the restaurant. Shocked she looked so together almost like when I was little, and even more it hurt how she looked at me into the phone. Like she still expected me to be eight years old and I definitely had no right to be pregnant. Why now, why, Paige? Why?" Sobbing.

Mom's strong fortress that I knew all too well in Mom's arms wrapped Raena tighter. "I don't have an answer of why now, Baby. It was a few minutes of our lives, and we didn't nor should we have spent time asking McKenzie for her motivations or reasons. All we can do is deal with what it brought up for you and Sloan, those insecurities and hurts that you both thought had found some stone deep inside you where you had lanced those emotions until now she made those resurface. So talk it all out, Baby, we're here. What's resurfacing?"

"I'm terrified I might do that to my baby. That it's been lying dormant in me."

“Oh, Baby, no, Honey. McKenzie had these personalities since she was young, a kid. Your grandparents told your dad about them before they married, and then after he picked you up there that time, they told him a lot more so he could keep you girls safe. I think there’s so much we don’t know about mental illness, Raena, but we would have seen it in you by now.”

“What if it skipped a generation and I just passed it on to this innocent little baby?”

“When I was pregnant with Dani, I was so scared. Cori had thrashed about in me so much, but Dani never moved really. I guess she was in there just writing some poetry on my womb,” we all laughed and shared sweet smiles that you only have with people who know each other, all of each other. “I had every fear on earth, that she was dead, that she had Downs Syndrome, that she hated me and didn’t want to come out,” we laughed again. “I understand it is a real fear, Raena, there’s a family history, but right now, she’s just a baby getting ready to come meet her mommy. So just love this baby, love her with all of you. You’ve wanted this for so long. Even after the girls had long gotten too old for dolls, I used to come play those with you so you weren’t alone; it was like you always wanted a baby.”

“Mom, that’s so sweet that you played dolls with her,” just shot out of me.

Raena smiled, “She was really good at playing dolls, and I always really loved how she’d teach me to hold a baby, to feed a baby. You never treated it as stupid, Paige.”

“Wanting to be a mother is the least stupid thing on earth, Raena. Don’t lose how much you’ve wanted this and what an

amazing mother you're going to be because your egg donor showed up for a minute. Like I told Sloan, that's all she is, I'm your mother."

A few tears ran down Raena's face, well, all of our faces, "I can't even imagine my life without you and my sisters and all you've given to us and to my Dad. I've never seen him so happy, and that's all you, Paige."

"No. It was all him, Raena. He did the hard work to get himself together. It was hard, but he did it, and I am honored that is the man who is my husband. You just remember that someone who pushed himself that hard to be an amazing man is also your family history."

Raena smiled so big, "Oh, I needed that, Paige. Thank you."

Sloan already had her hand on Raena's stomach, but she moved it about so lovingly and moved her face down to Raena's stomach, "Hi, My Little Niece, I'm blessing you now. I'm sending my angel to always be with you." That made Raena smile. "When you finally get out here for us to kiss those cheeks and love on you, there will be so many awesome women for you to meet and be accepted into our fold, but always remember Aunt Sloan is the best."

We all laughed and loved Sloan's specialty of helping a moment effortlessly transition with her subtle humor, and well, just with her. My heart swelled. I love her so much, so so much.

Friday we spent lazing about Raena's as Colby and David had helped Sloan get everything together for her to paint a mural for the baby. Caleb had gone to work, and we basically stayed in Raena's living room watching romantic comedies and Mom cooking for us. Moments me, Cori, and Raena smiled at each other watching David go up behind Mom while she was cooking and watch him kiss her neck, whisper in her ear, and watch her smile that smile. It was gorgeous, and I could see it on Raena's face that she saw all of that for her and Caleb, it was like watching her fantasize about years and a lifetime she'd share with him.

"Rae!" Rob, Caleb's business partner, yelled as he busted into the house with his wife in toe. Everything about Raena shifted and you saw the dread seep into her veins, into all of her.

She beat on his chest, "No! No! Don't you dare!"

He stood solid, taking her beating. Then, what she already knew, "He was too far out, Rae. We couldn't get to him in time."

"No! NOOOOOOOOO!!" She screamed. David moved so quickly, took her from Rob, she collapsed into him, "Daddy."

He was like a boulder holding her, "Daddy's got you, Baby. Daddy's got you." I turned. Sloan had left the bedroom, paint on her hands, tears silently streaming down.

Needing some semblance of balance after her whole world had crumpled around her an hour before, she asked Sloan to show her the mural. She grabbed my hand like come with me, and of course I did. It was stunning. Raena glowing, pregnant, looking at her rounded

belly with pure love written all over her, similar to the painting we had seen of McKenzie pregnant with Sloan, no flowers, behind Raena and taking up much of the wall was a gorgeous wave, water splatters, and the sun shining brightly. “I can paint over it now, if you don’t want the wave there reminding you of Caleb. I don’t even know what to say now, Raena.”

“It’s beautiful, Sloan, such a beautiful gift. I’ll take a picture of it so it’s always with me.”

“Always with you?”

“I’m going back with you all as soon as she is born.”

“Raena, you’re in shock, you need time to make decisions.”

“The only decision I need to make is that me and my baby need my family more than ever.”

We sat with his parents at a funeral parlor making all of the arrangements, and everything was mournful but peaceful between them and Raena, them asking for her input on everything even though Raena and Caleb weren’t married. Until, “Sandy and Carl, I’ve decided to go back with my family.”

“You can’t be serious. I just lost my son and you’re going to take his baby away from me too! Raena, no, I forbid it,” his mother yelled.

“My daughter is making the best decision for her and that baby right now, don’t you dare speak to her like that!” David yelled. “She just lost Caleb too, and she needs her family. I will pay for her and the baby to fly anytime she wants for you to see your grandbaby, we will send pictures, we will FaceTime, but she has said what she wants, you don’t get a say.”

Sandy stood. “We have all the arrangements finalized. I hope you’ll let us know when she arrives.” Then they just stormed out of the funeral parlor.

We kind of all sat for a moment, letting everything try to make sense. “Daddy, am I doing the right thing?”

“Yes, Baby. You can’t raise her alone, and you know she’ll be so loved with us, and so will you.”

“I know. I’ve missed you all so much. I don’t know what to do about the house.”

“I’ll take care of it, Raena,” David assured. “I’ll contact that realtor who helped me buy it. I’ll get a moving company. You just focus on you and the baby now. I’ve got it, Baby.”

And like a rush of relief flooded her, a flood poured out of Raena onto the floor.

“Oh fuck,” was all we heard from the manager of the funeral parlor looking at her ruined carpet with disgust. David tossed her \$500 as we all worked to get Raena in the SUV and to the hospital.

Mom finally came into the waiting room, a yellow gown on her and a big smile. “She’s beautiful,” she said as she fell into David’s arms. “Healthy. They’re both healthy.”

She was beautiful. We were all excited to see her when we finally went to the room. Raena was holding her, just looking mesmerized at her, holding her tiny little fingers around one of hers, how could anything be that little and that cute? “Hi, Precious Ariel,” Sloan cooed at our niece.

“Caleb,” Raena corrected. “Caleb Raena Mercado.” And we all nodded tearfully at her.

“Good morning, Cali,” I said with a big smile as I took her from Mom. She screamed her little delighted squeal and waved her arms excitedly like every time she saw me. Three months old, and still absolutely the cutest thing I’d ever seen. Three months old, but she was a stunning witch, easily wrapping this entire family around her every cry and giggle.

“Give her to me,” Sloan demanded taking her away from me. “I have to go to work. You have all day you get to spoil her rotten. Now’s my only time for that.” Then laid Cali on her legs and swung her face down pelting Cali with kisses as Cali giggled and giggled. Then she picked her up, put her on her so Cali’s head rested sweetly on her shoulder then looked at me, “So do you ever?” I stared at her. “Um. Never mind. It’s just we’ve never talked about it.”

Mom’s eyes were the size of saucers. Mine were too. Cori’s were too, and Colby just walked out of the room, like he was scared estrogen was contagious. “I ... um ... we can talk about it, but, um, maybe when it is just us.”

“I didn’t mean ... I, um, I was just so swept up in that feeling holding her. Dani, I didn’t ...”

Raena came in, her hair wet from getting to enjoy a shower while Mom had Cali. “Hey, good morning, Everyone.” No one said anything. “What’s going on?” after the awkwardness reached a peak and spilled on the table and onto the entire kitchen.

Sloan stood up, handed Raena her daughter, kissing Raena’s cheek, “Nothing.” Then came over to me, with a kiss, “See you tonight, Baby,” as she walked out. Colby didn’t dare walk back into

the lion's den even to kiss Cori goodbye, he yelled at her from the door.

It only took me a moment before I was running out, and getting to her before she could close the door of her work truck, "I love you, and god, I love that you would want that with me. We'll talk about it tonight, I promise. I love you so much."

She smiled, leaned in, "I love you too, Baby," kissed me.

"Crap, even the lesbos are going to have a baby. It's going to be some epidemic," Colby said as we smiled. "I'm gonna need a raise, Sloan." And me and Sloan busted out laughing.

“Dani, it’s about to start,” Mom called from the living room.

I looked down at my two week old daughter and said in that voice that babies love and have no idea what you’re saying, but the voice sounds loving, “You couldn’t have done this stink bomb 10 minutes ago?” She sort of spit and giggled like she knew exactly what she was doing.

“You need some help, Baby,” Sloan said coming in.

“I’ve got it, Baby,” I said to her. Still she stayed and wrapped the diaper and wipes and handed me baby powder and a clean diaper then threw away her stink bomb. Then she picked up our little Angel, after how hard we’d worked to get pregnant, it was the only name Sloan wanted to give her. “Grey’s” was starting, but I still needed a minute to fall in Sloan’s arms as she held our daughter and feel our little family before we joined our big family.

Mom had one of Cori’s twin daughters in her arms, Cori had the other in her arms. They were sleeping like good little babies who respected “Grey’s” time. “Did we miss anything?”

“Not really,” Raena informed as she reached over Cali happily perched in her lap for one of Mom’s delicious raspberry cake pops. She handed one to Cali without Cali even having to ask. Cali had become a part of our Thursday Tradition. She certainly didn’t understand anything about the show, but she loved all of her women having *Gey’s time* as she called it.

“Jo and Alex finally getting married!”

“Ugh, I can’t believe they didn’t kill off April last week. That episode was ridiculous even for this show, no one is going to survive that, and they’re writing her off the show anyway.”

“You know, what’s odd? Maggie has really grown on me. I think she’s one of my favorite characters now.”

“Why can’t they just bring Cristina Yang back already?”

All four babies were asleep when the show was over. Sloan took one of Cori’s from Mom since I had our Angel, and the four of us took them to the playpen. Then just stood mesmerized watching our four daughters wrap together, Cali instinctively protective of Angel. So sweet. After several minutes of mesmerized Cori said, “I love that they don’t have to wait until they’re ten and eleven to find each other. Our girls will always have each other.”

We all smiled, and Raena said, “And the best part is my daughter gets to be the big sister.”

“True, but you’re always my baby sister,” Sloan said smiling at her, hugging her.

“And you’re always my shadow,” Cori said hugging me.

Nothing had ever felt so complete.



Author's Note

For the first time, I don't really have an author's note. This was a new writing style for me and flowed out of me so quickly, and I totally loved that. I loved Dani. I loved only one POV.

When I finished, I kept trying to convince myself there had to be more. It's so short, such a quick read, and such a happy ending – which is not me at all.

Then on the phone with a friend, she said, "Tell me about this novel."

I explained the plot, and then somewhere, in our hours long conversation I said, "Like *The Alchemist*. I mean not nearly to that level of writing, but they all come back together, like everything they ever needed before they left for college all over the country was in their backyard all along." Then I smiled a smile she couldn't see. I nodded toward Dani, and loved that this novel was complete.

Thank you, "Grey's Anatomy", for being a constant in my life for the past fourteen seasons. I've learned so much about the human spirit from you, and found so much peace about the relationship with my own mother through Meredith's struggles with her mother, that despite sometimes having frustrations about plotlines (and still being pissed off that you killed off someone as fine as Mark Sloan and let my Callie Torres go) that I still tune in, religiously every Thursday.

It is unquestionably the only time in my week that I stop, that I pour a glass of wine, and that I connect to friends (maybe you call them characters) that I've known and seen myself reflected in for 14 years.