

**DRUNK SINCERITY:  
A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

In many young adult novels, teens are portrayed as whiny eye-rollers who seem incapable of taking control of the situations in which they find themselves. In *Drunk Sincerity*, this is not the case for 15-year-old protagonist Alyssa. Set in Los Angeles, the novel chronicles Alyssa's journey into sobriety, where her sometimes painful, sometimes funny coming of age tale begins. This work is influenced by young adult texts like *Rule of the Bone* by Russell Banks and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, as well as Freilich's own journals from childhood.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Chapter One.....	1
Chapter Two.....	9
Chapter Three.....	16
Chapter Four.....	19
Chapter Five.....	24
Chapter Six.....	31
Chapter Seven.....	38
Chapter Eight.....	44
Chapter Nine.....	48
Chapter Ten.....	52
Chapter Eleven.....	57
Chapter Twelve.....	62
Chapter Thirteen.....	65
Chapter Fourteen.....	72
Chapter Fifteen.....	76
Chapter Sixteen.....	79
Chapter Seventeen.....	86
Chapter Eighteen.....	90
Chapter Nineteen.....	94
Chapter Twenty.....	98

Chapter Twenty-One.....	111
Chapter Twenty-Two.....	117
Chapter Twenty-Three.....	122
Chapter Twenty-Four.....	131
Chapter Twenty-Five.....	134
Chapter Twenty-Six.....	142
Chapter Twenty-Seven.....	147
Chapter Twenty-Eight.....	154
Chapter Twenty-Nine.....	159
Chapter Thirty.....	167
Chapter Thirty-One.....	176
Chapter Thirty-Two.....	183
Chapter Thirty-Three.....	193
Chapter Thirty-Four.....	196
Chapter Thirty-Five.....	202
Chapter Thirty-Six.....	208
Chapter Thirty-Seven.....	214
Chapter Thirty-Eight.....	219
Chapter Thirty-Nine.....	224
Chapter Forty.....	229
Chapter Forty-One.....	236
Chapter Forty-Two.....	241
Chapter Forty-Three.....	246

Chapter Forty-Four.....	252
Chapter Forty-Five.....	256
Chapter Forty-Six.....	260
Chapter Forty-Seven.....	263
Chapter Forty-Eight.....	267

## Chapter One

I'm sweating bullets. The room is closing in on me. The smoke is filling my lungs and my pores. I can't breathe. But I have to stay here. I have to stay seated, mind my manners, and listen. But why the hell do I have to listen? Why can't I escape? The man next to me is hacking up a lung and talking about metaphorical snakes in the crowd. Jodie looks calm, and for that I despise her.

I'm startled by a sound—a voice.

“Alcoholics Anonymous is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, or organization...”

I need to leave. Right now. People are still filing in. The room is getting smaller and smaller. Time is passing.

I feel an elbow hit my ribs.

“Go,” the man next to me says. “Go up to the front.”

I'm caught off guard. I toss him a confused look and get off the folding chair, shuffling my feet behind Jodie's. We're in a line with a dozen other people who look substantially more fucked up than we do.

And it hits me. We're getting key chains—chips, they're calling them. Newcomer chips, to be precise.

“Jodie, addict/alcoholic.” Jodie smiles, like a pageant winner. Miss Trailer Park 2009.

“Hi, Jodie!”

I'm next. I freeze.

“Just state your name and disease,” the impatient chick holding the Tupperware of key chains tells me in a hissy whisper.

“Oh, um, Alyssa. Addict/alcoholic?”

I’m not an idiot. I’m just not sure what I’m doing here. I just want to clarify.

“Hi, Alyssa! Welcome!”

I walk back to my seat, down the narrow aisle, trying to avoid the gazes of the faces in the crowd. I feel like I’m looking at a funhouse mirror or something. Like I’m in an alternate universe where everyone is really excited for life. People are muttering things like “welcome” and “congratulations” to me as I shuffle past them.

Congratulations for what?

I settle in my seat, fingering the chip in my hand. I’ve seen these before. The chip-woman goes through the various lengths of time—thirty days, sixty days, etc. Then the people with multiple years get up. Years sober. Crazy.

“And now, our main speaker and a good friend of mine...”

That’s it. I’m past the point of no return.

I’m lighting cigarette after cigarette. The cinder block walls do nothing to absorb the stench. It’s like being engulfed by an ashtray full of screwed up people. The windows aren’t helping—my lungs are capsizing. It looks nothing like the scenes I’ve seen in movies of anonymous meetings. I mean, where’s Bob Saget to accuse someone of never having sucked dick for coke? Kidding.

But this isn’t, technically, my first time. I zone out.

My friend Bobby went missing last year. We had no idea where he had gone until the rumor surfaced that he was in rehab. It’s Los Angeles. These things happen. So, by

the time I got wind of his whereabouts, he was out of rehab and living in a halfway house in the Valley. Despite the fact that the Valley is 9000 degrees year round, Tracy and I decided to visit him. Somehow, Tracy and I acquired boyfriends there. Seriously. We go to school with 2000 kids and we found boyfriends at a halfway house. Go figure.

Fuck. I miss Tracy.

Her boyfriend Jon was (still is) completely nuts (and nearing thirty), so we don't talk anymore. My boyfriend Devin was the cutest idiot I'd ever met. Long after Bobby had been released from Progress House, Devin was still living there, so I would take the three buses out to the middle of the Valley and visit him. There was one time we were sitting in the garage (where smoking was more than allowed—it was encouraged) and somehow got on the subject of what we wanted our successors to do with our bodies once we died.

“I want to be cremated. And then have my ashes shot into space.” Devin told me, his words wandering.

“I can understand the whole cremation thing. But why have them shot into space?” I asked, shooting out of my usual daze with a twinge of concern for my boyfriend's wellbeing.

“Well, you know... so when Aliens find my body they can reconstruct me and fix me and teach me their ways.” He returned.

“Devin, honey... fire creates a chemical change. Chemical changes are irreversible. Besides, your ashes would spread... And seriously? That's impossible.” *Chemical changes are irreversible—what am I doing?* I looked into his doe-eyes that looked so young even though he was eighteen. He had a spark about him, this youth that



seeped out of his pores. He had cut his hair oddly the week before and looked like Beaker from the Muppets.

“No, you’re missing a major part of the equation.” Oh God, I didn’t even want to hear it.

“And what’s that?”

“The Aliens have different technology.”

Up until that exact moment I was under the impression that girls dated older guys for their mental maturity. It was rough. I was ready to break up with him. But, he was sweet and funny and he really liked me. And he made incredible French toast. He was always trying to drag me to things for AA or NA or CA or some other A. He seemed to go to all of the anonymous programs that existed. I’m not even sure if he did all the drugs that headlined the meetings.

Somehow, he eventually dragged me to a CA meeting with him and a few of the other disaffected youth living in the house. Beyond being thrust into a world I had never entered, their house manager slash babysitter bribed me to read the preamble at the start of the meeting. He said he’d buy me a pack of cigarettes if I read it and stood up as a newcomer. I agreed, wondering if taking a screwed up kid to a meeting nullified the act of contributing to the delinquency of a minor. But, I can’t buy my own cigarettes, so, really... think I was going to say no? Devin was having his sobriety birthday that day. I had to do the girlfriend thing. I had to go.

I was frightened. These people were telling stories about things I couldn’t imagine. I didn’t want to listen to any of them. I shut them off, observed their faces, and

sat in the corner fidgeting. It was a level of discomfort I had never experienced before. These people were not like me. Or maybe they were. And there I was.

Devin cheated on me a little bit later when I went to summer camp. You would think that would have made it a messy break up, but I got drunk and cheated on him a few times. It balanced out. We haven't spoken since. That was at the end of the summer.

Flash forward to the room closing in on me 6 months later.

Jodie is responsible for me being in this room. Her shrink wanted her to go to a meeting, she needed a companion, and she knew I'd say yes. I don't even really like Jodie, I just feel kind of bad for her. I can't even break down exactly what it is about her, but there's just something that irks me. And she was a bitch to me in seventh grade. Hell hath no fury like mine. I also hold some excellent grudges.

But, when Jodie asked me to come with her, I didn't expect the smoke and the cinder blocks. I didn't expect to see no less than fifty people between the ages of fifteen and seventy sipping nervously at coffee and either looking like they had just been hit by a bus or just been invited to live in paradise. I'm shocked. This is nothing like the creepy coke addicts in the Valley upstairs from the bowling alley.

A single tear travels down my cheek, like out of some über-cheesy movie. I'm panicking. My palms are sweating off the homework assignments I wrote on them in third period. I can't even read typed Spanish, let alone sweaty palm Spanish. And, somehow, this chain of reactions and emotional overload are forcing me to focus.

“You know how you do the stupidest shit when you’re using as a kid?” Insert uncomfortable Alcoholics-with-repressed-memories-laughter here. “When I was kid, I used to take all the bottles out of my parents’ liquor cabinet and just mix up a bunch of it into a mason jar and drink it. It was foul, but it did the job.”

Time out. I do that all the time, but with a water bottle. Who even *has* mason jars?

“For some reason, everyone kind of bought that I was a good kid. So, I could get away with *murder*. My buddy Rick and I used to dare each other to drink in class. It’s rough to do, but given the right circumstances, you can pull it off.”

Seriously. My friend Kitaro and I were just enjoying rum and Coke in Kusserow’s honors English class last week. It was a little tricky, like the speaker was saying, but only because the girl with the loud mouth who sits in front of me kept screaming about how the room smelled like alcohol.

“My other love in life, next to alcohol, was pot. I couldn’t smoke enough pot. I used to fake sports injuries and justify what I was smoking. It was unreal.”

And my heart flies out of my chest. This guy isn’t telling *his* story, he’s telling *my* story. Well, he was. Now he’s going on about losing his apartment and sleeping under the 10 freeway. That hasn’t happened to me.

I keep my face as calm as humanly possible. I’m trying to drown out the room by listening to the ceiling fans, but it isn’t helping. Jodie’s text messaging someone on her phone. The guy with the walrus moustache is talking to me, but he sounds like the adults in Charlie Brown. Wahh wahh wah. This is when I suddenly remember all the times my

family warned me that my grandfather was an Alcoholic and it was genetic. I'm fifteen. What the hell is going on?

I want to call Devin or Bobby (even though Bobby's now a meth head) and find out what sobriety is like. I want to know if it even makes a difference; if the benefits outweigh the costs. I don't have their numbers.

Jodie gets up to make a call outside ten minutes before the meeting is over, leaving me uncomfortably close to the mustached-man on my right. After a collection basket makes its rounds (I don't put anything in), people get up to the front of the room and make announcements. Something about books being for sale and phone lists and some blog specifically for AA related news. I'm wondering if they're going to give instructions on the secret handshake after the meeting.

I release my hand from his (gratefully) after making up the words to a prayer I had never heard before, and make my way through the crowd of people, either hastily getting to the front of the room to shake the main speaker's hand or to the back to get even *more* nicotine flowing through their bloodstreams outside.

I get out to the parking lot and stop dead in my tracks. Jodie's blonde hair and holey jeans are nowhere to be found. Through the swarms of people and clouds of smoke, I make my rounds and still can't find her.

"Typical," I mutter under my breath.

The meeting is about ten blocks away from where I take driving lessons, so at least I know what bus will get me home. I pull the millionth Camel Light out of my pack and light it. As I look up, I'm blindsided by a toothy grin.

"Martinia." She holds out her hand to me.

I'm in such shock I almost drop the cigarette from my lips. I stand there—probably long enough for her to think I might be deaf—and contemplate the repercussions of accepting this handshake. If I take her hand, I'm in. Clearly, I was not quite as under-the-radar as I might have thought. She takes my silence to mean I need to hear her speak again.

“I saw you take a newcomer chip.”

She's got me.

“Oh, yeah... um... Alyssa. Hi.” I shake her hand. Fuck. Now I'm definitely on the radar.

She starts pulling flyers out of her bag for various events and whatnot. Apparently, Alcoholics Anonymous hosts dances. *Dances*, of all things. At some point, when I tune her back in, I can hear her reassuring me of something.

“Don't worry, no one really dances... they just play spades, shoot the shit, you know. It's a good time to meet people.”

More alkies? Sign me up.

“Just energy drinks and good times.”

I'm over this, and worried that the buses will stop running. I force a smile.

“I'll definitely consider it. Sounds cool. Nice meeting you, Martinia,” I say through my teeth.

“See you next Thursday, Alyssa.”

*I wouldn't bet on it.* “Yeah, cool. See you next Thursday.”

I rush through the rest of the parking lot to get to the sidewalk, pretending to thumb through the stack of papers in my hand. What am I getting myself into?

## Chapter Two

The streets are dark and relatively unfamiliar. I walk along Sepulveda, trying to remember where the stops for the 2 and 3 bus lines are. For those of us who can't drive, we refer to Santa Monica's public transportation system as the Big Blue Limo Service. Cheap, safe, and will get you anywhere you need to go, as long as you don't mind waiting for your bus for awhile.

I put on my iPod and shuffle around until I hit a song I haven't heard in ages. It's an old Bad Religion song: *Drunk Sincerity*. Even my iPod thinks I've got some things to work out.

I want to take a detour to a gas station and buy more cigarettes, but I'm too close to UCLA and I know the attendant will actually want to see I.D. I should've convinced one of the albies to buy me a pack. Some of the guys there might have been hot. I didn't really get a good look.

What am I going to tell my parents?

They stopped asking me where I was going and what I was doing a while ago. I'm pretty sure they've given up on me entirely. I mean, I'd be sure of that if my dad didn't ride my ass to study all the time. Clearly he hasn't given up completely. And my mom is awesome, when she isn't being a complete bitch. But what if I try this sobriety thing?

Here's the thing: If I go to my house and announce this whole "getting sober" idea to my parents, they will actually start watching me. They will be aware of whether or not I'm drunk because I will be actively trying *not* to get drunk. This poses a problem.

It's also known as Jewish guilt. I'm not that Jewish, but the guilt doesn't waver based on one's religious involvement. That's just not the way of the chosen folk.

If I don't tell my parents, I'm going to have to figure out a reason why I'm coming home late on a school night. Or maybe they won't care. Maybe I want them to ask. Maybe I want to be sober.

I reach the bus stop and check the schedule. The next bus is supposed to arrive in twenty minutes. I sit on the bench, close my eyes, and listen to the music, trying to drown my thoughts, but apparently, they can swim.

I'm still trying to figure out an excuse to tell my parents. I wonder if anyone's ever tried saying their dog ate their list of excuses. I like to believe I'm a "terrific liar" (I think Holden Caulfield coined that phrase), but I'm pretty sure I'm a shitty liar. The corners of my mouth turn up when I try to lie. I can look someone in the eyes and lie to them, but if they avert their gaze and take a look at my mouth, they'd at least be clued in to what's going on.

I missed dinner. The meeting went from eight until nine-thirty. It'll be after ten by the time I get home. Maybe even ten-thirty. The bus arrives.

There are three other people on the bus, all of whom are self-consciously self-involved. They look like they work harder than I'll ever have to work. I manage to scrape the fare from the pockets of my backpack and take a seat towards the back. I pull my hoodie up over my head and stare out the window, watching the VA hospital and the federal building pass as we swoop down Wilshire.

The bus lets me off three blocks away from my house, across the street from my old elementary school. I loved elementary school. I loved making posters and playing

handball and the smell of popcorn on Fridays when the PTA would sell it on the steps for fifty cents. But those thoughts are overtaken by the tainted images of the playground at night, in more recent times. Forty ounces in one hand, a guy I wasn't actually attracted to in the other.

I sigh, and walk towards my house.

I arrive at the doorstep and rifle through my bag for my keys. I eye the swing tied precariously to the tree in our front yard. It stares back at me, dejected. I'm startled by the sound of the door.

My father opens it.

"Where have you been?" His tone isn't necessarily angry, but it could get there quickly with the wrong answer. I'm fucked.

"Well," I start, as I walk through the door. "My friend Jodie's therapist wanted her to go to an AA meeting so I went with her and she left before it was over so I had to take the bus." Easy peasy.

"Oh," my dad says, a blank expression across his face. "So?"

"So, I think I'm going to stop drinking. Look at this," I say, quickly, as I find the newcomer chip in my pocket.

My dad is beaming at me, which surprises me completely. The look in his eyes is screaming "FINALLY!" but he remains cool as ever.

"Sounds like a good plan. Mom made tomato-basil pasta. There's some in the fridge." There's something about the way he's talking to me. It's almost like he's never met me before, or he doubts the possibility of me not drinking.

"I'm just gonna have a smoke and go to bed."



There may be something wrong with a parent letting their under aged child smoke, especially on their property, but if that's the least of your "bad" behaviors, they let it slide. My father doesn't know about the pipe in my pocket.

"Go have your smoke. Don't forget to feed the cat. I'll see you before you go to bed." He kisses me on the forehead and retreats back into his office. I want to say his office is like the bat cave, but his cool gadgets are from Sharper Image, not a host of government workers. And I'm fairly certain he doesn't fight crime, but people can surprise you.

I go to the far part of the backyard, away from the windows, and sit on the old moldy hammock. Through the smoggy sky, I can make out a few stars. I take out my pack of cigarettes and my pipe, and put them in my lap.

"It's AA, not MA. I can still smoke pot." I say aloud, justifying my actions to myself. I talk to myself a lot. It works for me.

I light the cigarette first. The smoke smells different from pot smoke, so it's of the utmost importance to mask the weed with the tobacco. My parents both smoke pot, they know what it smells like. They would not be happy to see me smoking on a school night. I take a deep inhale from my Camel and place it delicately in the oversized clam shell my mom uses as an ashtray. I take the pipe, place it against my lips, and light the bowl. I hold it for what feels like years, and exhale in a choking cough. This is my life.

After a few more hits, I realize I'm going to have to get past the bat cave in order to get upstairs to my room. Fuck, again. I pack up my shit and walk stealthily down the hall.

"Cat food?" my dad asks.

I'm stumped. What cat food?

"Alyssa, she's *your* cat. Did you get the food?" He asks again. Am I paranoid or is he starting to sound suspicious?

"Left it in the kitchen," I mumble. I knew I forgot something.

After getting Nunu's food together, I mutter "goodnight dad" and get up the stairs as quickly as possible without making too much noise. My mom's asleep and gets extra pissy when she's woken up at odd hours of the night. I learned that lesson several times when sneaking back into the house has triggered the alarm. And, really, you can't argue with a woman in a twenty-year-old nightgown.

I get into my room, greeted by my cat who says hello by digging claws deeply into my leg.

"I love you, too, Nunu."

I put her food down in the bathroom and get ready for bed. I'm trying to push the night's events out of my mind, but they're just bringing up more and more thoughts. It's like when you're forced to write something in class and they make you brainstorm, except in my mind, it's more like a shitstorm. And, there aren't any of those circle-line diagrams in my head.

I'm in bed, staring at the ceiling, mesmerized by the glow-in-the-dark stars Tracy and I managed to stick up there when we were high one time. I still have pictures of her on my wall. She got me into this mess.

Well, she didn't really, I guess. But she was fun to get high with. I think about the times we'd play capture the flag with figurines. I can't even explain how that works, but it does. I remember we'd put our cell phones on vibrate on her dresser and call them

from two different lines in her house and make bets on which one would make it to the end first.

I want to end on those thoughts. I want to end on happy thoughts, like the kids in Peter Pan. I want to fly.

But that's not how it works.

Every night, like clockwork, my mind hits the deepest darkest pit of my memory it can before I can get to sleep. I would assume tonight it would go to Chelsea's death, but I'm wrong.

It's insecurity night, apparently, and I'm the fat kid.

Again, I try to flush out my thoughts with sounds, but *Muppet Treasure Island* is no match for my fat-kid-complex. I'm thinking about the guys I've hooked up with—the fucked up things I've done—all in the name of my insecurities.

I've always thought I'd be like a word-of-mouth campaign. Like, if enough guys hooked up with me, maybe they'd spread the word about my awesomeness and I'd become a seductress of sorts. I've hooked up with enough guys, but I sure as shit don't feel like a seductress.

I'm that girl you get drunk when you know you have no other options.

I think about that night last summer with Eli, where he begged me to hook up with him. He literally begged me. We were wasted (he might've even dropped acid—maybe), and he was comparing me to my on-and-off best friend Bernadette. She went down on him in a port-a-potty while they were working on a math presentation freshman year. He told me it didn't affect their friendship. He told me it wouldn't affect ours. He told me it was a good idea. Then he told everyone else about how I raped him. Cute.

These are the thoughts floating through my head as I drift off to sleep. I'm wondering why the Muppets and marijuana are no match for my crazy. I sleep a dreamless sleep.

### Chapter Three

The Muppets DVD is still playing when I wake up. My mother is screaming at me. Apparently, I've overslept. This doesn't surprise me, as I oversleep every single day.

"Get the fuck up!" She's pulling the comforter off the bed. Nunu goes flying. This means we've entered phase three of operation: wake Alyssa up for school. Translation: she's been trying to get me out of bed for an hour. She looks at the T.V.

"You smoked before bed." At least there wasn't an empty pizza box on top of me.

"Hmm?" I'm barely able to form words. My mouth is glued together.

"Just... get up," she says, walking out the door.

I need to fix the lock. My parents took the lock off my door when I was little. Apparently, I used to lock myself in my bedroom all the time and I'd panic because I couldn't figure out how to unlock it. They were worried I'd lock myself in and then we'd have an earthquake and they wouldn't be able to save me. The lack of a lock isn't going to save me.

I go through my daily routine. It's 6:30am. I have to be at school by 7:15. This isn't going to happen. I fall asleep in the shower. I've asked my parents to be tested for narcolepsy several times, but they don't take this issue seriously. Something about how I should smoke less pot and get to bed earlier. Whatever.

It's Friday. I'm staying at Bernadette's house this weekend. Her mom's going away with her boyfriend, so we've got the house to ourselves. I'm fairly convinced in

situations like this that parents should be legally obligated to watch *Risky Business*. I mean, who the fuck leaves a teenager alone in the house anymore?

I'm not telling Bernadette about going to the meeting last night. Her parents are sober, and I don't want it to turn into a thing.

It's 7:00am. I won't be on time today. Surprise, surprise.

"Alyssa, I wrote you a note." My mom has disguised herself as a saint today.

"Thanks, Ma. Love you." I give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Love you. Go straight to school. That note's not going to save you from your second class."

I leave the house, reading the note. *Alyssa ran late this morning due to severe menstrual cramps. Please excuse her from the beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> Period.* Menstrual cramps? Thanks Ma.

I pull a joint out of my pocket as I walk towards the bus stop. I take a few hits and stub it out on a neighbor's fence. I'll need it to get through the second half of classes. I light a cigarette instead. I debate whether I'll receive a ticket for truancy or under aged smoking as a cop car passes.

I get on the bus, and start thinking about what to say to Jodie when I see her at lunch. She left me stranded in Westwood last night. She just disappeared. If I could throw a decent punch, I'd knock her in the face. But, instead, I'll just have a verbal throw down with her. It's a complete myth that stoners are mellow. We're just too lazy to act on our anger. There's a difference.

An empty soda can is rolling around the floor of the bus. I watch it creep back and forth, under the seats, playing hide-and-seek. It reminds me of the beginning of sixth

grade. I collected pop-tops from people's soda cans and made a necklace. Tracy, who was in seventh grade at the time, came up to me.

“Alyssa, right?”

“Yeah, that's right.” I was excited she was even talking to me, but tried to keep it cool.

“How many of those are there?” She pointed at my necklace.

“Eighty-one.” I braced myself for the oncoming compliment.

“You've sucked *eighty-one* dicks?!” She screamed, in front of what seemed like the entire school. Cue massive bouts of laughter.

“No! EW!!” I yelled back, making sure everyone who had been in earshot of the initial accusation heard my response.

“Well, you know that's what those mean, right?”

And, I cried. I bawled. I never wore the necklace again. Tracy apologized, and later that year we became friends. I don't even think she goes to school anymore.

I practically pour Visine into my eyes as the bus rolls up to the school. I hang in the alley next to the football field, listening to the band I should be playing in play, and have another cigarette. I lean against the wall, pull my hoodie up over my head, close my eyes, and exhale.

## Chapter Four

The day rushes by. I'm like a robot, going from class to class. Marching band becomes calculus becomes AP chemistry becomes Spanish. I look around and realize I'm sitting in another band class. There's a bass clarinet in front of me. I'm playing music and watching the clock simultaneously. It's almost lunchtime, and I am going to have a throw down with Jodie.

The kid I sit next to nudges me with his sax.

“What?”

“Alyssa, if you keep falling asleep, Hammer's going to start yelling at us. I've got student council at lunch. I don't want to stay late.” He tells me.

“Fuck off,” I say. It's all I can come up with. Student council? Come on, no one cares about that shit. But I do start paying attention, partly because I didn't even know I was sleeping. Mr. Hammer's glaring at me, thrusting the baton angrily in the air as he conducts us in a cacophony of what should be Dvorak. No one cares about this class. Don't get me wrong, I like playing music, but it's band right before lunch. That's the worst idea I've ever heard.

Apparently, Mr. Hammer decides not to get in my face today. We just sound too awful to blame one student. The bell rings, and everyone just stops playing. We're not supposed to do that, but no one in this room has respect for Mr. Hammer. He's a douche bag.

I throw my bass clarinet into my music locker and beeline for the door, averting my eyes from Mr. Hammer, who's charging towards me, probably more for being late to marching band than for zoning out in sit-down band. I narrowly escape, as some



übernerd tuba player cuts him off to ask about a solo in the third measure. I make a mental note that I owe him one.

I got caught smoking two blocks away from the school by Mr. Cooper during lunch last week. He took away my lighter, my cigarettes, and, more importantly, my off-campus lunch-pass. I've only been caught doing something "wrong" twice since kindergarten, and Mr. Cooper caught me both times. In seventh grade, Eli and this other kid made fun of me, so I reported them to our teacher. Ten minutes later, I'm called into the security office. I guess I forgot how much I made fun of the two of them before they retaliated.

Anyway, now that I'm off-campus-pass-less, I've had to find kids who will stow me in their trunks and drive me out of the student parking lot. Today, though, I'm going to miss my opportunity because I have to find Jodie. I hike up the hill from the music room to the quad, where most of my friends eat lunch. Strike that. Where most of the people I *know* eat lunch. I'm a little lacking on the friend front these days.

I see Bernadette en route to my destination.

"What's crackin', Berns?" I say, secretly wishing we had some cool secret handshake.

"What's goin' on, lady?" At least there's a hug, instead.

"I have to find Jodie. Seen her?" I ask, hoping desperately she won't ask me why I need to find her. If she does, I'm going to have to come up with some brilliant lie as to why I'm looking for her.

"Yeah, man. She jumped the east fence. I think she's going to Taco Bell."

"Fucking delinquent."

Bernadette laughs. “Like her fat ass needs anymore Taco Bell.”

“What are you up to?” Now I’m getting antsy, but I can’t just peace in mid-conversation. Jodie probably knew I’d be looking for her. Fuck. I’m going to have to find someone fast now, so I can escape prison for just an hour and track Jodie down.

“I have to do a photo project. Lame. You still coming over later?”

“Yeah.” I realize I forgot to pack my stuff to stay at her place. And we’re nowhere near the same size, so I can’t borrow anything. “Can we make a quick stop at my house before we go to yours?”

“Dude, seriously? You forgot your stuff *again*? Your house is in the complete opposite fucking direction from mine. Damn.”

“It’ll take like, five minutes.” She rolls her eyes. “Anyway, I gotta get off campus. I’ll meet you at the bus stop after sixth period.”

She nods, and I book it to the parking lot. I hide in the shadows on the west side of the lot, far away from the security guard at the gate until I see someone I know. I flag him down and convince him to take me a few blocks from the school. It’s hard to sneak off campus if you’re not tight with the people you ask because they can lose their parking space *and* their off-campus pass if they’re caught. But, if they’re dumb enough to take the risk, I guess that clears you from being at fault. Or so says my logic.

We get away from school, unscathed. I’m dumped out on Lincoln, right by the Taco Bell. I duck into another alley, listening for the bells on Mr. Cooper’s bicycle, and light part of the joint from this morning.

“Dry liquid courage?” I say aloud, giggling. I take a few deep pulls, and stub it out again. I’m going to need something to get through the bus ride home. I light a

cigarette, and walk towards the Bell. I see one of Jodie's meth-head friends sitting on the curb, smoking a cigarette. Jackpot. She catches my eye, and shrugs, like I've asked her a question.

Jodie busts out of the door, throwing soda all over the place with her flailing arms. "OH MY GOD!!! ALYSSA!!" She's running towards me.

"What the fuck, man?" I say this calmly, which surprises me. The image of her flying out of Taco Bell is just too funny to stay angry.

"Dude! My mom called and I totally forgot to tell her where I was and she freaked out and drove to the meeting and picked me up."

I feel my eyebrow arch up. "Um, really? You couldn't have come inside and got me?"

"That would've been disrespectful and shit. There were *prayers* happening, Alyssa!"

"Right, of course." Now I'm angry again. She didn't have to hold that sketchy moustache guy's hand. "Jodie, bottom line? That was fucked up. It was a dick move."

"Sorry," she says, hurriedly. "I'll buy you a burrito. Then we're cool?"

The pot's kicked in at this point, and I could totally go for a burrito. So, despite the fact that this is a bullshit agreement, I accept the offer. The burrito is delicious, and makes me want to text a friend of mine (I call him the Burrito Bandito—It goes back to fifth grade). I check my cell phone and realize I have to run—literally *run*—to get back to school on time. For the millionth time in twenty-four hours: Fuck.

The last time I actually ran, I was on speed. I snorted Adderall, stolen from a girl in marching band's little brother. It was right before the homecoming football game,

freshman year. Bobby was still in school. It was right before he was sent to rehab. News moved quickly through the stands that I was high, and people were fucking with me, left and right. One kid threatened to gauge my eyes out with his trombone. Bobby told me I was going to get permanently tweaked out and possibly die. Funny how he's the one homeless and tweaking and I'm just trying to get back to school.

How did time go by so quickly? I'm thinking about the lunch period in particular, but, in general, time is rushing past me. I can't run fast enough to turn back all the clocks I would want to. I think about Chelsea again. I think about how she could've worn a seatbelt.

I make it to the gates with three minutes to spare, so I hop the fence instead of trying to figure out which entrance Mr. Cooper is working today. My bag snags on the fence, and I'm pretty sure something's fallen out on the other side, but unless it's my cigarettes or my cell phone, I really don't care. I check the bag once my feet have landed on school ground and I have both (and what's left of my joint), so I move on.

My last two classes, like the first five, are a complete blur. The last bell rings, and I'm ready to start the weekend.

## Chapter Five

Bernadette is waiting for me at the bus stop. I see the red hair from a distance. As I get closer, I see the grey-green eyes glaring at me. I know I messed up forgetting my stuff this morning, but I also know she'll forgive me. She always does, always will.

“We missed the first one.”

I assume she means the first bus back to my neighborhood. I nod to the line of kids waiting on the curb.

“Well, we wouldn't get seats anyway.”

“My mom's going to be pissed. She has some list of instructions about what to do with our house while she's gone and she leaves in like, an hour. We kind of needed to be on that first bus.”

I know what she's getting at. This is her being angry. This is the extent of it.

“How about this? How about I go back to my place and pick up my shit, and you go back to your place and deal with your mom?” It's not perfect, but it'll keep the weekend from being awkward.

“Fine. But try to get to my house before my mom leaves. Otherwise, you know, she'll cancel her trip because she'll think I'm pretending you're staying over as a cover to have some dude stay over.”

In all other situations, I would find that a completely illogical argument. However, Bernadette's mother is not a logical being. In order to make this weekend work for both of us, I'm going to need to speed it up.

“Alright, I have a plan. I'll get to your place as soon as possible.”

She nods, and starts walking south down 4<sup>th</sup>. I can see her shuffling through her bag as she walks away. She's debating whether or not she should have a cigarette en route to her mom's house. I try to will her with my mind to refrain from my position down the block. It works. We both know that if she rolls up on her mom smelling like smoke, her mother will cancel her trip. And neither of us have enough minutes on our phones to explain to our friends that this weekend isn't happening.

I take the shortcut through the alley to the parking lot. It's early enough that I can still find someone I know who will give me a ride to the north side of Santa Monica. I'm looking around at the cars, trying to figure out which ones I recognize. I'm walking down the middle of the lot, searching. I laugh to myself about the irony of the crazy amount of SUVs lining the lot, despite Santa Monica's oh-so-green political climate.

A boxy white Jeep comes speeding towards me, seemingly hell-bent on hitting me. But I don't panic. I stand completely still. I raise my hand and extend my middle finger. The Jeep stops.

"HEY! FUCK YOU!" comes forcefully (and, so you know, jokingly) out of the mouths of a chorus of boys whose heads are now sticking out of the windows of the car. Zack and his friends. I have a ride.

I'm hanging onto the door, about to get in, and Zack puts his foot on the gas. I know this game, and there's no way to really win. His friends Marc and Aaron are laughing their asses off. If I whine, even a little bit, about the complete unfairness of the situation, I will be flung from the door and back onto the pavement. If I grit my teeth for about a block, I will be allowed into the vehicle and escorted home. Zack picked this

tactic up from his older brother. It's neither fun nor fair, but it gets me home faster than the bus. And I need speed more than dignity right now.

As predicted, I get home in record time. The Jeep's tires burn against the pavement and another "HEY! FUCK YOU!" is yelled out the windows. They run the stop sign at the end of my street.

I stare at the black slate walkway as I walk up to my doorstep. There's an earthworm dried to the tiles, being devoured by ants. The sprinklers must have been on earlier. They might have been on when I was leaving the house the morning, but I can't remember. I can never remember.

I look up and see my dad through the window of the bat cave. He's hunched over the computer, typing furiously. An email to a network. A pilot script. A message to a fourteen-year-old playing World of Warcraft. It could be anything. I know he heard Zack and his friends yell from the car, but he isn't looking up. He has to know I'm here.

For the second time today, I'm thinking about the time I snorted Adderall before the homecoming football game last year. In my tweaked fury, I was unaware I was being watched. Which is hilarious if you think about the intense paranoia that accompanied that experience. When I got to my parents car, my dad looked at me and said, "Wow, I've never seen you run that fast in your life." My dad has seen almost every softball game or soccer game I've ever played in. He's seen me run. He was right. I didn't tell him why. For some reason, it's on the tip of my tongue—I want to tell him. I won't, though. I can't.

I snap out of it, and he's standing at the open door.

“I thought you were going to Bernadette’s this weekend. A history project, was it?” His eyes are piercing me through titanium bifocals.

“I forgot my stuff this morning.”

“Surprise, surprise. I have to run out in a few minutes to Rite Aid. Do you want a ride to Bernadette’s house?”

“That would be awesome. Thank you.” If you’re keeping track, this would be the second time today one of my parents has surprised me with unwarranted kindness. I’ll take it.

I get upstairs and nearly trip over Nunu, who screeches, runs up onto the bed, and shoots daggers out of her eyes at me.

“C’mon, Nunu... really?” I go to the bed and scratch her behind the ears. All is forgiven.

I search my room for the necessities: clothes, weed, camera, toothbrush, crayons, unlined notebook, squishy pillow, iPod and cell phone chargers, and an Abba Zabba. I shove everything into an old backpack. The backpack is still littered with punk band patches and writing in whiteout—vintage chic. I’m pretty sure I have everything I’d need for a weekend spent less than three miles away.

When I was younger, I used to have problems sleeping over at peoples’ houses. Not my friends’ houses. That was always fine. But kids on my softball or soccer team would invite me over and I never really liked them, and there are only so many excuses you can come up with before telling someone you just don’t like them. And if you’re the catcher and the pitcher asks you to sleepover, you can’t say no—it’ll screw up the rest of



the season. At eleven or midnight, I'd end up calling my parents to pick me up, claiming I had a stomachache or headache or some kind of ache. I'm still not good at saying no, but people aren't really into slumber parties post-eighth-grade.

I grab a pair of five-dollar-Venice-boardwalk-faux-hipster sunglasses off my dresser, give Nunu another scratch on the head, and get out of my room.

"Dad! Ready?" I yell at the top of the stairs, momentarily forgetting that yelling in the house is probably number three on my dad's list of pet peeves.

He steps out of his office and gives me the "you've got to be kidding" look.

"Alyssa. Do you want a ride to Bernadette's?" He asks calmly.

"Yes, please." I'm halfway down the stairs when I answer. My dad can't hear well out of his right ear, and I have to speak quietly to prove that he's getting his point across, but loud enough so he can actually hear me. Plus, I'm sure it was a trick question so I'm set up for the response.

"Then why are you yelling?"

"Sorry, Pop." Insert mildly awkward pause here. "But are you ready?"

"Five minutes. Just wait down here."

I sit down at the piano in the living room and fiddle with the keys. I used to take piano lessons when I was a kid. My teacher was incredibly nice and I really liked playing, but I didn't practice, so my parents decided they didn't want to pay for lessons anymore. I play the opening notes to *The Entertainer* a few times—I can't remember more than the first few measures, so I stop. Bernadette texts me with an urgent-seeming "where are you" message. I ignore it.

Finally, my dad is ready to go, and we get into his car. He gave my brother his hybrid when my brother went off to college, so my dad is now rocking a sports car reminiscent of the Mach 5. The speedometer doesn't work, which is part of the reason why he won't let me drive it with my learner's permit. He probably won't let me drive it once I get my license, either. It's one of those cars where you throw a feather on the gas pedal and you're suddenly going 120 mph. It would be sick to drive, but I kind of understand where he's coming from.

One thing about my dad's driving makes me, my brother, and my mom go completely crazy. The man has lived in Los Angeles for a long time. He's lived specifically in Santa Monica for over thirteen years. We're convinced that he must know the most direct routes to get from point A to B—he just refuses to use them. If there's a small street that intersects a major street, my dad will take it. It kind of makes my dad a rebel in the loosest sense of the word. But it's also really fucking annoying.

We eventually get to Bernadette's house. I'm pretty sure it would've taken less time to hop the bus, but then I wouldn't have been able to have the twenty-minute-long awkward conversation with my dad. All the parental bases were covered, from homework to what I should do if I get arrested. I hug my dad and get out of the car.

“See you Sunday. Love you. Don't get into trouble. Stay sober.”

I cringe at the word “sober.” Coming out of his mouth it sounds like a death sentence. Part of me wants to be sober this weekend—the other part of me knows that won't happen. I probably will get into trouble. I'll probably look for it, even. I just won't get caught.

“I’ll try, on both counts. Love you, too, Pop.” I sigh as I walk towards Bernadette’s house. There always seems to be a deep amount of sadness in my dad’s eyes. I shake them out of my mind as I get up to the doorstep.

## Chapter Six

They left the door open for me, so I walk into the house.

“Hello?” I call out, listing family member names in order á la the Von Trapp family.

“We’re in the living room!” Bernadette calls back to me.

Bernadette’s mother is running around grabbing last minute items and trying to get Bernadette’s brothers’ stuff together so she can drop them off at their friends’ houses on her way up north. She may be silly enough to trust Bernadette with the house, but she’s not an idiot—she’s not leaving a thirteen-year-old and a ten-year-old in the care of a fifteen-year-old. Bernadette is sitting on the couch watching TV. Her middle brother is gathering his schoolbooks and drumming practice pad. Bernadette’s youngest brother climbs on the counter to get a glass from the shelf and knocks an entire carton of milk into the open cutlery drawer. Chaos ensues. Slaps are heard round the block.

After the storm calms, Bernadette’s mother reiterates what I’m guessing she told Bernadette earlier—don’t start fires, water the plants, only call 911 if there’s an actual emergency, etc. We agree to the terms of the “leaving-us-alone-in-the-house” contract and assure her that she will (probably) not regret this weekend. She hugs us both, and drags the boys out of the house.

Sweet, sweet freedom.

We give Bernadette’s mom about an hour of turn-back-around time, just to be sure. When we’re as positive as we’re going to get that she isn’t coming back, we start texting our boys. You would think this is the point where a teen movie style out-of-

control house party ensues, but that's not our style. That's not Santa Monica's style. I have never once seen that happen and I have no idea where writers get that idea.

In Santa Monica, we have what we like to call “kickbacks.” It doesn't matter how many people show up, it's still a kickback. And people don't roll up looking like they'd fuck anything with a heartbeat, either. And the worst thing that's going to happen to your parents' stuff is maybe a kid steals a permanent marker and tags up the back of a bookshelf—no one ever notices. Shit doesn't get broken. Again, I don't get where these ideas come from.

So we've invited a dozen of our buddies over—all dudes—who used to be called “skaters” in middle school but were apparently promoted to being called “stoners” in high school, even though some of them don't even smoke. They have individual personalities and quirks and whatnot, but when you get them together in a group, it's like an army of clones. You don't want to be on the shit end of them making fun of someone—the laughs never stop echoing. But they provide good entertainment, so it's usually fun.

They come over. We all get fucked up. Let the good times roll.

We decide, as we usually do, to wander the streets. There may be a legal curfew in Santa Monica, but it is far from being enforced. I have wandered this city in the wee hours of the night so many times it's not even funny.

Drunk Dunc is babbling about the latest liquor heist. Apparently, this particular batch we're indulging in was taken off the shelves at Pavilions while Andrew was faking

a seizure with some Alka Seltzer. Amos is making fun of Eli because Eli apparently declared earlier in the evening that he wanted to live under the pier. Andrew has decided to take our adventure to the next level with a good round of bush jumping.

It's like the drunk Olympics. Andrew gets a running start down the street and jumps maybe three or four feet off the ground before landing straight into a bush in one of Bernadette's neighbor's yards. We damn near pass out laughing. He gets up, dusts himself off, and realizes he's now put a hole in his hoodie. Except it's not his hoodie—it's Amos's. Amos has a little reputation for fits of rage. We all get quiet quickly.

“Fucking douche bag! My mom is going to fucking kill me!”

“Dude, I'll fix it. Seriously. Calm the fuck down.”

We're all braced for a shit show. Instead, Amos just pushes Andrew back in the bush. He lands on his ass. Laughter ensues.

“Shit, I was ready to put money on that fight.” I whisper to Bernadette.

“Well, Amos could probably fuck someone up, but Andrew wrestles, so it's debatable.” She says, laughing.

Eli, who can't be ignored for more than five minutes, decides he's going to be the next to take a leap into the bush. We realize this is the dumbest shit ever, but that doesn't stop it from being hilarious. I am drunk and high as shit and just want to have a good time. There's a pang of guilt setting in from the drinking, but I don't think it counts if AA people and my parents can't see me.

Eli starts running up the block. Just as he's nearing the bush, Andrew and Amos clothesline him. He flies onto the pavement and scrapes both arms sticking the landing. We're dying now—all of us are convulsing with laughter. Eli is, of course, crying. It's

the embarrassment more than the physical pain, but we've all come to expect tears from Eli. None of us are doing anything to make him feel any better. It's not that we're soulless. He just cries about *everything*.

In eighth grade, he went to some party at this girl's house and got alcohol poisoning and had to go to the hospital. That Monday, Amos was telling everyone about it, making AA jokes (hah.) and everyone was laughing. Eli cried.

Eli's made me cry before. I wonder if that makes me more emotionally unstable than he is. It's like, if a crybaby makes you cry, does that make you a crybaby squared or something? Or does that just make him an asshole?

As expected, Eli stops crying. We're rolling up on Thriftys (with the delicious thirty-five cent ice cream cones—no joke, thirty five fucking cents) and realize we're out of liquor and need to restock. We've still got some pot, but it's at the point where people are getting shady with it and having secret smoking sessions because it's not really enough to go around and make a difference. We're trying to figure out who's going to go in. Drunk Dunc is down. Andrew volunteers. Bernadette is talking to Andrew, so she volunteers by default. Eli has dried blood on his arms and dried tears on his face, so he's out. I'll probably have to steal tomorrow, so I can't use up my luck today. The rest of the boys just start looking around.

"There are at least two counter people and one security guy in there. We're going to need someone else." Drunk Dunc is in charge of drugstore logistics.

"I did it last week." Amos is complaining, and has recently decided that a curb and a light post make an excellent bench.

“Fuck that, man. We did it earlier today. You fucking go.” Andrew has become momentarily distracted from trying to get into Bernadette’s pants and is now rescinding his earlier offer.

I can’t tell up from down so I’ve decided not to respond to anything.

Max, who couldn’t possibly be any more quiet, raises his hand, “Yo.”

Drunk Dunc nods, and the original plan is back on.

I’ve found my mouth. “Yo Berns, Chocolate Malted Crunch?” I hand her a dollar. She raises an eyebrow, but agrees.

I’m left on the street corner up the block with the boys while Berns and the other three go on our booze slash my ice cream run. If this doesn’t work, we have to walk to 7-11 and pay the homeless guy with one eye and the single matted dreadlock situation to buy us beer. If that doesn’t work, we’ll have to collectively come up with a plan C, and I am not down for thinking right now. Apparently, neither is the rest of the crew as they’ve all followed Amos’s lead and taken seats on various parts of the sidewalk. Except Eli.

“How goes it?” Oh fuck. Words are coming out of my mouth and I can’t stop them. I’m talking to Eli, and I realize this is the first time I’m trying to have a conversation with him since the bullshit rape accusation. I still secretly want him to be my future ex-husband.

“Chillin’. You?” He’s looking at me sideways. He can’t look me in the eye.

“Yeah. Chillin’. How’re classes and everything?” I stepped into this sans ammunition. I’ve got nothing to talk about whatsoever.



“Yeah, I’m not failing anything yet, so it’s cool.”

“Yeah, that’s good.” There are a lot of “yeahs” and “mmhmms” going on. I can’t tell if it’s because we’re fucked up and can’t figure out other words (I can’t think of any others for the life of me) or because we’re not really interested in having this conversation. My mouth is, but my brain isn’t.

“So, dude... I’ve been meaning to tell you. What you did was fucked up. I never raped you. You asked me.” This is me completely blowing it.

“I woke up in your bathroom with no pants on.”

“You know that’s not really what happened.” The words are coming out thick. I need water. Or that ice cream.

He looks at me like the cat that ate the canary. “I have no idea what happened.”

And Eli, for the win. Game, set, match. The look said it all. He knows exactly what happened and he will never admit to it.

We used to be close. And I want so badly to make jokes over Spanish projects again. I want to share a handle of Bacardi Limon in Rustic Canyon. I want to throw Wheat Thins and smoke cigarettes on the side of his house and send him random text messages and actually get responses—I want to be friends with him. I want to erase what happened. I want to cry. I step away from the guys and light a joint. After a few deep inhales, I no longer want to cry. I just want to chill.

The Thriftys crew is walking back towards us, and everyone gets up to see if there’s a long walk in the near future or if our night can continue. I can’t read the

situation. Drunk Dunc is smiling, but that's not unusual. Bernadette is still talking to Andrew. Max is... Max. I'm feeling awkward and paranoid and just want to be out of this nomadic situation. Bernadette has my ice cream.

"Success. Let's go." Drunk Dunc rallies the troops and we head back down to Berns' house.

I'm blazed and drunk and shit is spinning and I'm trying to freestyle rap and mush is coming out of my mouth. I wish I had more ice cream or water or something, but all I have is an old mint in my bag. Peoples' words sound like the adults in Charlie Brown cartoons. Waah-wah-wahhh. I'm not sure what time it is or how far away we are, but it feels like we've been walking for hours. My feet are rubbery. I want to lie down.

My mouth tastes like acid and I'm lying in Bernadette's bed. The room is dark and I'm fairly certain I'm in here alone. My contact lenses are still in. I have no idea what happened or how I got here.

## Chapter Seven

“Alyssa? Wake up, time for Denny’s!” Bernadette is a morning person. Even if she’s hung over, she’s still a morning person. Her voice is echoing in my ears.

I groan and look for where her voice is coming from.

“What happened? How was the rest of the night?” I’m half awake and starting to panic inside. My mouth still burns. I taste metal. I have no idea what “the rest of the night” includes. I’m mostly clothed. I’m pretty sure a failed attempt was made to get me in pajamas. NoFx is playing in the living room. The boys are still here.

“Actually, never mind. Tell me after breakfast. I’m just going to have a smoke and brush my teeth before we go.” She shrugs, and goes back into the living room.

Bernadette’s side yard has a few old futons out there and it’s incredibly comfortable. I fix my clothes and throw on my hoodie. I dodge the pseudo walk of shame by literally hopping out of Bernadette’s bedroom window. Max is sitting out there by himself. I’m okay with that.

“Morning.” I mumble, fumbling between my pack of cigarettes, lighter, and my joint, debating which vice to partake in first.

“Morning.” He nods back. I like Max. He’s quiet for the most part. When he does speak, it’s not for the sake of getting attention. There’s something genuine about his responses.

We share silence outside. The music is muffled through the walls. We smoke our cigarettes. We pass the joint back and forth. And, in a wordless gesture, we both return to the house.

I beeline—with my head down and my tail between my legs—to Bernadette’s bathroom to brush my teeth. I look like shit. Makeup is smeared across my eyes. There’s a cut on my mouth with dried blood caked on it and my right cheek is scratched. I can’t remember acquiring either injury. Fuck.

I clean up the best I can and walk back into the living room, eyebrows raised.

“At least we didn’t draw a cock on your face,” Andrew laughs. “Berns wouldn’t let us.”

“Hey Andrew. Go fuck yourself.” I smile. “Breakfast?” I can get through the day. I just have to get past a stack of pancakes and then I can make sense of some things.

Breakfast goes smoothly. We’re surrounded by families and retirees and somehow don’t make too much of a scene. We don’t get kicked out. This is a plus, as I have definitely been escorted out of Denny’s before. The only thing more embarrassing than being kicked out of Denny’s is being kicked out of Norm’s, which is across the street.

We talk about music and movies and how many bones Max has broken skateboarding and underground graffiti artists and middle school and summer camp. Apparently, being hung over has led us to be chatty. Weird.

We barely get enough money together to pay the bill and leave our separate ways, with the idea of meeting up later. Bernadette and I walk back towards her house. We’re passing the 10 freeway—Santa Monica’s great divide.

“So... what the fuck?” She’s glaring at me. I feel like that question should’ve come out of my mouth.

“What do you mean, what the fuck? I want to know what the fuck happened to my face!” I’m not yelling too loudly, but I’m completely frustrated and confused and want answers.

“Dude, you puked *all over* my brothers’ room! I don’t even know how I’m going to clean that up. But that was after you decided to fight Andrew and Amos.”

My jaw is on the floor. I did *what* now?

“And that was after you saw me talking to Andrew and called me Flappy McGynastein, the slut-wonder!”

I have to laugh at that one. That’s just ridiculous.

“Fuck you!” She’s walking fast now, and I have to jog a bit to catch up. She’s pissed. Like, I’m-going-to-have-to-find-a-way-to-make-it-up-to-her pissed.

“Berns! I’m really sorry. And I didn’t mean to laugh... but that’s the worst insult I’ve ever heard.” She’s still stone-faced. “And I’ll clean up your brothers’ room. They won’t even know what happened. I’ll do it as soon as we get back to your house.”

“You also tried to give Max a hand job and made out with Drunk Dunc. But in your defense, he was literally trying to eat your face. And you also called Eli a, and I quote, ‘homogay,’ after you shared with the entire group that he didn’t try to kiss either of us when we blew him.” This information comes out half-smug, half-pissed.

I’ve got nothing. I can’t remember a single thing she’s telling me. The pancakes in my stomach are becoming unsettled. I’ve got a lot of damage control to take care of tonight.

“Fuck. Really?” My mind is reeling. I light a cigarette.

“Really. Maybe you should’ve gotten more fucked up.” Sarcasm. How original.

“Dude, I’m sorry. Really. Tonight I’ll be way more chill.” I’m crossing my fingers that there’re still plans for tonight. I want to numb everything that’s in my head right now.

“Yeah, I guess. Can I get one of those?”

I hand her a cigarette. “So, I got the cuts from fighting Andrew and Amos?”

“No, they laughed at you when you tried. Then you ate it on the sidewalk and passed out for a few minutes. You literally just face planted.”

Fuck. My chest feels heavy. No part of me wants to move, but we keep walking. I’m terrified to say anything else. There are two reactions I’m having that make me feel sick: intrigue and excitement. I want to know as many details about my absolute absurdity from the prior evening. I want to bathe in the details, to soak up the words and actions that I don’t know about. And I’m excited that something actually happened. There was drama. I’m not so pumped about dealing with the consequences, but at least it wasn’t boring.

We get back to Berns’ house and I step into her brothers’ room. The room looks like a horror movie. It smells a little bit like ass, a little like weed, and a lot like Lysol. I’m not sure which of those I contributed to. I raid the cabinets for cleaning supplies and start taking the bedding off the beds. Though my breakfast is coming halfway up in waves, I know that in order to save some kind of face, I have to clean it up. It’s fucking

disgusting. But I do get a laugh out of the hidden Playboy I find under Berns' middle brother's mattress. Hilarious.

I get Bernadette to give her seal of approval and move on to greater things: smoking a joint and watching some DVR'ed episodes of something mindless. As a peace offering, I roll a joint for Bernadette. We blaze and zone for a while—maybe hours—before deciding it's time to figure out a food situation.

“In-N-Out. Best burgers, period.”

“True, but we'd have to take a bus all the way to the marina or to UCLA. Is the trek worth shitty fries?” I actually don't really care either way about their fries. They're pretty terrible, but the burgers are dynamite. The bus is the main issue. Before my brother left for college, we used to go to the In-N-Out in Hollywood after going to concerts at the Palladium. We'd also yell, “your fries suck,” at the top of our lungs whenever we passed one.

“Taco bell. They have the ultimate product: the Mexican hexagon. Or Mexigon, if you will.”

“I ate there yesterday. How about Jack in the crack?”

“Mm... twenty-four hour breakfasts and 99-cent tacos.”

“Best of both worlds.” I feel like we're in Harold and Kumar with our decision process, except we know that there's an open Jack in the Box three blocks away.

Within minutes, we are fully attacking way too much food. Every bite tastes like it is an intricate part of my last meal on earth. I cannot imagine how food tastes like

sober anymore because it tastes so incredible high. You can make the worst food in the world taste good high. There's only one thing that no longer tastes good when I blaze: chocolate. For some reason, the salt overpowers the sugar and it doesn't taste sweet enough.

My dad tried to explain to me something about how your body freaks out and goes into starvation mode when you smoke pot. Hence, the munchies. I'd like him to explain the drunchies, though. When you get drunk and suddenly appear in front of a 7-11 or McDonalds and require savory delicacies. I'm going to ask him, and if he gives me the same explanation, I'll know he's just making it up.

Berns and I get back to her house and set up in the living room for a solid round of napping in front of the TV. As I'm dozing off, I can't help thinking about how tonight will pan out. I'm going to need to figure out a system to prevent my crazy from resurfacing.



## Chapter Eight

I am blazed out of my fucking mind.

I cannot discern between shapes and colors and directions. I've lost my shoes and am feeling the grass squish between my toes, covering chipped nail polish with dew and dirt. I really want to do a crossword puzzle for some reason, but I don't even know where I'd find one. I'm pretty sure I keep hearing my name, but I've decided to sew my mouth shut this evening. At some point earlier today, I stole a forty of O.E. and one of those giant novelty lollipops. I'm not sure how that went down, but I can assure you that both are delicious.

“She's been like this since before you guys came over.”

My paranoia is officially blowing up my spot. I'm like the negative image of yesterday's Alyssa. In a way, it's as equally shitty a situation as being overly rambunctious. The intensity of my quiet is putting me on the fucking radar. I'm debating whether or not to speak. My head is throbbing with an indescribable pulsing weight. I am fucked up.

“Where are we going?” I manage to whisper to no one in particular. There is a pause that feels like six years before I receive a response. Dozens of eyes are on me.

“Beach. Some fools are down there fighting the waves.” I'm pretty sure that's what Berns tells me, though I can only really hear a painfully sympathetic tone.

“Where are my shoes?” I don't really care about my shoes, but I'm pretty sure it's less weird if I talk. I'm not entirely certain about my logic, but I roll with it.

“I don’t know, honey. I’m not sure if you even put shoes on before we left. How much did you smoke?”

Something in Bernadette’s voice is making my mind melt. She sounds like a concerned babysitter. I totally fucked up her evening. My cheeks are wet.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!! What are you crying about?” She redirects her voice to the crew. “Guys, just keep walking. We’ll catch up.” She pulls me to the side of the sidewalk.

“What’s going on?” I hear someone yell.

“Don’t worry about it, okay? Alyssa’s just freaking out.” She turns back to me. “Why are you fucking crying?”

My eyes are emptying out completely. I will probably drown the whole of Santa Monica. I’m crying because Bernadette has to baby-sit me. I’m crying because I’m paranoid. I’m crying because Eli didn’t kiss me, and because I can’t feel my feet, and because I’m failing at being a member of my family, and because I can’t bring Chelsea back from the dead, and because I don’t fit into my skin.

I can’t tell her any of this. I manage to choke out a few words. “I don’t know.”

She hangs her head in frustration. This, for some reason, calms me down. I’m still gasping for air, but there are fewer tears. I probably ran out of them at some point.

“Come on, let’s go.” She grabs my arm and leads me down the street towards the water. The lights from the pier are dancing on the surface of the waves. It’s soothing.

When we get to the beach, the boys are wrestling in the sand. There’s a drum circle playing down by Venice—the beats are echoing through my head. Bernadette gets

dragged into the wrestling match. I feel like a leper, but I'm kind of at peace with the loneliness. The sand feels cool on my feet. I put my bag on the sand and walk to the water.

The waves crash over my head, filling my hoodie with salt and seaweed. My jeans are alternating between being plastered to my body and becoming one with the water. The cuts on my face from last night are burning. I can hear my name over the ocean, but I'm ignoring it. I've been able to swim since infancy; I'm not trying to drown myself. I'm just trying to drown everything else.

In fifth grade, I swam far into the water with my two best friends at the time, Chelsea and Katherine. We felt like we were in the middle of the ocean, daring each other to go just a bit further. We were invincible. Our mothers were on the shore waving frantically to us. As we reluctantly rejoined them on the sand, they hugged us worriedly. Apparently, we were about two feet away from a pair of sharks. Those sharks, however, turned out to be dolphins. I've always regretted not noticing them behind us.

I pull myself out of the water and start creeping back to shore probably resembling swamp thing's sister. Andrew is half-naked running towards the water. He stops short as he sees me.

"She's fine, Berns!" He turns around and hollers. To me he says, "You're having some night." I silently follow him back towards the group. I'm trying to not exist.

Everyone's sitting in a circle, smoking cigarettes and joints, drinking, and laughing. I grab my bag and sit down next to Berns. I light a joint and chase it with a swig of my forty. She furrows her brow.

"Are you sure you want more?" She gestures to the malt liquor and marijuana combo in my hands.

"Positive. The waves didn't work."

She raises her eyebrows and shrugs. "Eh, live your life. Just don't do any more of that stupid pseudo suicidal shit tonight, okay?"

I fight the guilt tears. "Gotcha."

I inhale deeply and focus on the sound of the waves slapping the sand. I think about almost swimming with dolphins and other things that could have been.

## Chapter Nine

I wake up in the morning feeling weird. It's early, maybe six or seven. The boys didn't crash here last night. I'm not really sure where they went or how we got back here. I open Bernadette's bedroom door and see that she's still sleeping. While she's asleep, I wash my clothing from the weekend in order to destroy the evidence of the weekend. I'm actually in my pajamas and my mouth tastes like I brushed my teeth last night. I have no memory of either event occurring, so I'm slightly confused.

I throw my clothing in the dryer, put on a fresh set, take the spare key to her house off the kitchen counter, and head out. In the morning sun, I walk down to the Coffee Bean on Main Street. The light is somehow both dull and blinding, even with my sunglasses on.

I sit outside on the curb—the regulation distance from the door according to “smoke-free Santa Monica” law—smoking a cigarette and drinking my coffee. I feel better about last night than I do about the night before, but I'm still bracing myself for consequences. I'm trying to stop myself from having the anxiety attack I feel bubbling in my chest, but the nicotine and caffeine combination are not helping. I try to distract myself with the surroundings.

A bunch of aged surfers and bottle blondes come tumbling out of a building up the street, laughing and shaking hands. I feel like I vaguely recognize them. They fit the Santa Monica-Venice late-twenties/early-thirties profile, but there's something else I can't pinpoint. My eyes narrow on the big blue books a few of them are holding in their hands and my heart begins pounding again. An AA meeting just let out. Fuck.

I grab my coffee and cigarettes and start speed walking back towards Bernadette's house. There's a feeling in the pit of my stomach like when I steal something, as if sharing the morning with those people was prohibited. As if I took their sunshine and the last of the good coffee and the sea smell of the air.

I think I'm losing my mind.

When I get back to Bernadette's house, she's in the shower. I consider making a quiet getaway while she's in there, but can't stand to be that sketchy at this hour of the morning. I grab my clothing out of the dryer and pack my bag. I leave my stuff by the door and head to the futons outside. I opt out of having my morning joint (mostly because I'm out of weed) and stick to chain-smoking Camel Lights until Berns comes out of the house.

"You heading out?" This is less of a question and more of a statement. I think she's temporarily over my existence.

"Yeah, in a second. Just have to throw on a little makeup first." I gesture to the scrapes still on my face from Friday.

"Oh yeah, your dad would *love* it if you came home with a fucked up face. You wouldn't be able to leave your house for a year."

"Bet I could get a good 'story of the seventies' out of my mom if I tell her about them, though." We laugh. I'm considering it, as my mom does have some pretty killer stories. But on the off chance my dad comes in the room while I'm pointing out the cuts to my mom, I'll literally be imprisoned in my house until I'm thirty.

"Taking the bus?"

“Nah, I think I’ll walk. It’s not too far. And I have to get cigarettes anyway.”

Bernadette shrugs, and we get back inside her house. She helps me make my face look presentable. I’ve never really been good at putting make up on. It’s not really my thing. I used to wear an awkward amount of eyeliner in middle school to the point where I’m pretty much tainted from wearing anything on my face. Berns has tried to show me how to put it on, but I’m fairly inept when it comes to things like that.

“Listen, maybe you should take a mini vacation from getting fucked up for a bit.” She’s not looking at me when she says this, but the weight of her words is palpable.

“We all have weird weekends. It’s no big deal.” I can feel myself getting defensive.

“Whatever. See you tomorrow at school.”

We hug. There’s an indefinable tension in our embrace—it feels like a warning. I have to leave before I’m overcome with awkwardness.

“Peace.”

I turn on my iPod and crank it to deafening levels. I light a cigarette and walk towards the Promenade. There are three places I can buy cigarettes in Santa Monica: the gas station across the street from my high school where I’ve managed to convince the clerk that I’m a student teacher, the hole in the wall liquor store on the Santa Monica-Venice border where their rent is so high that they’ll take anyone’s money, and the head shop in the back of a used CD store on the Promenade. Otherwise, I have to wait outside of 7-11 until someone who doesn’t care about buying a kid some smokes comes along.

I'm in a daze. I'm trying to figure out what to tell my parents about this weekend. There was no history project—Berns and I aren't even in the same class. Even if we were, she refuses to do a project with me anymore. In ninth grade, we were supposed to read some book and present it to our English class, and I totally flaked on her. She did the whole project. We got an A.

In the back of the used CD store, I'm almost knocked to the floor by the overwhelming stench of incense. It smells like a Phish reunion concert. Some kid my age is behind the register and asks no questions when I buy my cigarettes. I consider asking for a job application. It's probably an under-the-table pay situation, which means I wouldn't need a work permit. The desire is fleeting. Fuck working. Except for, you know, the money part.

I light at least three more cigarettes on the way home. It's easier now that my parents know I smoke. I no longer have to shower myself in cheap perfume before entering the house. I consider this a win.

My parents are busy with their own shit when I get home, which makes them shockingly non-confrontational. I get to my room unscathed. Nunu decides to try to eat my toes as I work on some homework. For some reason, I feel incredibly relieved that the weekend is finally over.



## Chapter Ten

It's Thursday. I'm sitting on a folding chair in the back of the same smoky room I was in last week. I've decided to try to O.D. on cookies and coffee in order to make the best of this situation.

I wasn't going to come back to the meeting this week, but my dad asked me every day how the sobriety was going. Literally *every* fucking day. I'm trying to get into this whole thing. After what Bernadette said on Sunday and the look on my dad's face last Thursday and everything, part of me wants to make this work. But I'm looking around the room and I can't relate to these people.

Most of them are adults. There are one or two kids my age hanging by the front of the room, closely guarded by a gang of men and women in their twenties and thirties. Almost everyone in here has some assortment of visible tattoos and piercings. I'm sure most of the tattoos were mistakes.

Last week I was open to this idea—this “sobriety” thing. Today, I'm fucking over it.

I see Martinia and the old man with the moustache and pretty much all of the same faces from last week, give or take a few. There's a boisterous redhead who has now stood up to make five or six separate announcements. She calls herself some fruit name (Cherry or Pomegranate or something—I'm not really paying attention) and people either roll their eyes deep into their heads or smile in a bizarrely friendly way when she speaks. Seems the jury's still out on this one.

The meeting stops abruptly. People have their noses up, sniffing furiously at the air. As to not look out of place, I take a whiff of the room. It smells like someone's burning plastic somewhere. I look around. The looks on the faces around me are a combination of hunger and disgust.

“What the fuck is *wrong* with you?! You can't fucking do that here!” I turn around to see one dude dragging another out of the bathroom by the throat. The guy getting dragged is writhing around, trying to escape the firm grasp on his gullet.

“What's going on?” I whisper to the chick next to me (who has way too much makeup on and kind of looks like a cross between a clown and vampire).

“Guy smoking meth in the bathroom. Happens once in a while.” She turns back to the drama.

More people are yelling at meth man. A chair is thrown. Some people have their heads down in prayer. Some people are actually crying. Fuck this. This is completely out of my experience jurisdiction.

I manage to dodge the ruckus and slither out the back door. There are almost as many people in the parking lot as there were inside the meeting. They're all smoking and laughing and seem kind of cool. But I'm not down for this—I'm getting to the bus. It's still early but I figure I'll find a coffee shop in Westwood to kill some time.

An older guy catches me as I'm trying to slink to the street. He's a pretty big dude and with the soul-patch/fedora/button-up black shirt thing he has going on, he looks like he's living in the wrong decade. There's something bear-like about him—probably the absurd amount of chest hair coming out of his shirt.

“John.” He sticks out a massive paw. “But they call me Golay.”

I’m completely disarmed. “Alyssa.” I take what I can of his hand and give him an awkward shake. My seventh grade math teacher tried to teach us how to shake hands for a grade-wide monster project. He told me my handshake was like a wet hot dog. I don’t even know what that means, but the image comes up every time I shake a hand.

“So, how much time do you have, Alyssa?”

My mouth turns up. “Seven days. You?” He knows I’m lying. I can tell.

“Ten years.” He’s not lying. Holy shit.

“Wow... that’s just... congratulations.”

“Thanks. It’s one day at a time, just like everyone else. Where are you off to?”

He has piercing black eyes. They complement the Johnny-Cash-goes-swing-dancing look.

“I have a ton of homework, so I can’t really sit through the martyrdom of a crackhead. Might as well go home.”

“You’d be surprised how many excuses you can come up with to leave a meeting early, kid.” He says, raising his eyebrows. He’s challenging me. I’ve got nothing, so he continues, “How about you stick around and come join me and some other people for some food and coffee afterwards?”

“No, but thank you. I have to wake up early for school and I don’t have any money, so it’s cool. Maybe some other time.” I want to tell him to get the fuck out of my face and leave me alone, but he’s killing me with this kindness routine.

I’m gearing up for formulating another alibi, but Golay just shakes his head at me. “Hey, it’s *your* sobriety. See ya ‘round, kid.” He lights a cigarette and rejoins a group on

the other side of the lot. I'm not entirely certain what just happened. I kind of wanted him to plead with me to come out.

There's a Coffee Bean on Westwood Boulevard. It's a straight shot up Ohio Avenue, but the walk is entirely uphill. When I get there, the place is swarming with pigeons, even though it's relatively late. I'm fairly convinced one is going to commit suicide in the fire pit on the patio. I'm equally convinced the homeless guy in the corner is praying for that to happen.

When I get inside, I take out my wallet and realize I don't have enough money to purchase a drink. The barista looks at me impatiently. She rolls her eyes and goes into the backroom. I look around the store. There's only one other person in here—presumably a UCLA student—and he's staring so intently at his computer screen that I'm positive he's unaware of my existence. I eye the tip cup on the counter. There's a five mixed in with some other bills. Finders keepers.

When the barista comes back out, my words come out confidently. "I know what I'd like now."

"Sure. What'll it be?"

"I'll take a regular-sized white chocolate latte, please."

"For here or to go?" I know this trick. At Coffee Bean, if you order something 'for here,' they charge you tax. Completely ridiculous.

"To go."

"Three eighty-five." I hand her the five, and collect the change back into my pocket. I just made a dollar buying coffee. Sweet.

I sit by the fire pit sipping the coffee for a bit. I light a cigarette and am thankful for the less stringent smoking laws in Westwood. I try to do the crossword puzzle in a forgotten L.A. Times, but it's frustrating and makes me feel like an idiot. I rip it out and toss it into the fire.

"Hey!" It's the barista on the warpath. "You can't do that! Get out!" She's probably having a shitty day and has decided to take out her aggression on the sketchy looking teenager (me), but that doesn't stop me from matching her hostility.

"Fuck you! I was leaving anyway!" I scream back. It's more belligerent than I intended and I'm not sure where the anger is coming from, but it might be because the dude on the water polo team who sells me pot was absent today.

Once I've collected my things and I'm halfway off the patio, I turn to the barista. "P.S., thanks for the five bucks."

She's seething, but can't come after me. She's the only worker at the store, and can't abandon it. There's something about the scenario that alleviates any guilt I'd normally feel. I win.

## Chapter Eleven

“Wake up.”

The outline of a shadowy figure is standing over me. I don't know what time it is, but I know it's a weekend and I have no obligations. I can't manage to use words or fully open my eyes. The sheet I was clinging to for dear life is stripped from me. Nunu flies through the air hissing and runs into the bathroom. Must be dad. With my dad, there's no patience for the amount of time it takes me to wake up in the morning. When he wants you up, you're up.

“It's Saturday. Come on.” I plead with him as I rub my eyes.

“It's noon. You should be awake.”

I can't argue with that. I've managed to sit upright and get my glasses on.

“Am I supposed to do something today?”

“Homework? Laundry? Probably other things? Listen, Alyssa, we have to talk about your interview tomorrow.” My dad relinquishes my comforter and sits on the edge of the bed.

“Interview?” I can't remember what the interview is or what it's for. My dad raises an eyebrow.

“Yes, Alyssa. Your interview for Marymount. Are you still interested in transferring to another school in the fall or are you wasting my time completely?”

Oh fuck. I completely forgot. When school started back up in September, I was pretty much on off terms with everyone I knew. I was completely and utterly alone. Tracy had dropped out to be with her douche bag abusive boyfriend and Bernadette

wasn't speaking to me for one reason or another and it was just painful to be at school. So I decided the solution was to transfer to private school.

I took the exam, scored in the 99<sup>th</sup>-percentile, and filled out an application for an all-girls Catholic school. I'm neither Catholic nor am I particularly fond of other girls, but it seemed like the easiest school to get into. The other private schools in Los Angeles are the kinds where you have to apply as a fetus—literally. Parents put their kids on lists when they're born and kids are interviewed when they're two or three-years-old.

Apparently, Marymount was impressed by my test scores and extracurricular activities and wanted to see if I was as brilliant in person. My dad arranged everything—the test, the application, the interview. I have to go. This conversation with him is merely a formality.

“Yeah. I'm interested. I probably won't get in, but it's worth a shot.”

“It's their loss if they don't accept you. And Alyssa, your interview is at ten. Sharp.” Don't these people have church to go to or something?

“Got it.”

“So you're not going out tonight.”

“Got it.” Even if the interview were at 10 p.m. he'd tell me I couldn't go out tonight.

“And you have the visit at the school on Monday. Now, go get some homework done. Take the dog for a walk. Please do *something* with your day.” There's something sad in his tone—like he's worried. I try not to let it affect me.

“Will do.”

He leaves the room. Nunu paces around. When she realizes the coast is clear, she rejoins me on the bed. I scratch her ears and find myself suddenly nostalgic. I wish I could spend weekends with my dad like I did when I was younger. When I was *really* young, we'd go to the pier on Sunday afternoons. I played a game where you have to throw a wiffle ball into a plastic cup and, depending on the color, you could win a prize. I never left without winning. Then we'd ride the Ferris wheel at sunset, watching reds and violets burst over the Pacific.

Saturdays, I'd have golf lessons. Afterwards, my dad and I would go to the practice green and play for a dollar a hole. He always let me win. We'd drink lemon-lime Gatorade with crushed ice and play a few holes on the back nine, trying not to get outed for lacking a tee time. Other weekends, we'd take the motorcycle out and ride along the coast to Manhattan Beach. We'd stop and get lunch by the beach and we'd pretend there were no greater responsibilities in the world than spending time together.

The only interactions we have anymore have to do with how I'm struggling in school and just generally fucking up. There's no fun to be had. There are no destination-free motorcycle trips. There are no sunsets on the Ferris wheel. He just stopped asking.

I figure if I'm going to be imprisoned in my house this evening, I might as well get stoned. I throw on some shoes, put in my contacts, and grab a joint and my iPod.

"Daisy! Want to go for a walk?" I call through the house to our skittish Australian sheepdog. Daisy has literally been on three different forms of dog Prozac. Apparently, when we rescued her, she had been living on the streets for months. It took



her six months to bark for the first time. It was at my brother when he came back home for Thanksgiving. Good dog.

She careens down the stairs. I attach the harness, put on some Sublime on my iPod, and we go on our way.

Daisy's incredibly well behaved. She waits at every corner before crossing the street and doesn't really chase after other creatures. My parents probably like her more than they like me, but I'm kind of cool with that. It gives them a fallback plan, like having a third kid without having to go through the motions.

Every two blocks or so, I pull Daisy into an alley to take a hit. The laws in Santa Monica are funny. Since weed is decriminalized, it's actually a worse crime to smoke a cigarette than a J, even if you're underage.

I continue taking pot breaks until I feel a pretty decent buzz. I need it to be long lasting, because chances are, I won't get another opportunity tonight. They're watching me—smoking in the backyard is nearly impossible. If they end up leaving the house, I have a shot at getting high again. Problem is, they never leave the damn house anymore without me. I thought I was too old to have a babysitter.

I start guiding Daisy back towards the house and think about Marymount. I'd really have to "wow" them to get in. Private schools rarely take in eleventh grade transfer students. Plus, my dad said if I go to private school, I'm not getting a car when I'm sixteen. However, as it stands, there's no way they're getting me a car anyway. I'm torn. Going to Marymount might be my only chance at going to college, and I'd get a fresh start. But again, Catholic plus uniforms plus all girls does not equal my cup of tea.

I take one more hit and stub out the roach up the block from my house.

The rest of the day whirls by. I try—unsuccessfully—to read *Frankenstein* for class. It's boring as shit and I can't stay awake. I work on my pen-and-ink self-portrait for art class, but keep giving myself crazy eyes. I now have six pictures of myself looking completely nuts. Calculus, Spanish, and AP Chemistry homework are obviously out of the question, so I try to read about World War II. It bugs me out, so I forfeit history. I consider practicing the bass clarinet, but realize I've left it at school. Well, I tried.

I heat up leftovers for dinner and watch T.V. for far too long. I am fucking pathetic.

## Chapter Twelve

I really want to call her grandma. She looks like a grandma. She looks like the kind of grandma who bakes something every time you came over and dotes on you and knits you sweaters for your birthday. But apparently, that would be inappropriate.

I'm sitting with impeccable posture. I look like for an ad for the Gap, as I'm dressed head to toe in an outfit picked out by my parents that I—no joke—purchased at the Gap. Khakis, white button up—the works. I actually brushed my hair and put on make up. I'm itching to get the fuck out of here.

“So, Alyssa, you play softball? Is that something you would be interested in doing at Marymount?” Her voice is relaxing.

“I would love to play on the softball team here. I've played for nearly ten years and absolutely intend on trying out if I am accepted.” I sound saccharine. The sound of my own voice is making me queasy. My dad is next to me, nodding approvingly at every word I say.

“And you're in Marching Band and Concert Orchestra at Santa Monica High School. Your records also show that you were in jazz band last year. Would you be interested in playing music here at Marymount?”

“Yes, ma'am. I play clarinet, bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, piano, and I'm trying my hand at guitar.”

“Splendid! We need a new tenor saxophone player in our jazz band. Laura, our current musician, is graduating in June.” She's fervently making notes on my application.

I sit there, smiling vacantly. I would literally kill to be anywhere else.

“Now Alyssa, there are two problems I would like to address. One, your grades seem to be all over the place. We need to know that you will consistently perform well as a student at Marymount.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I try to recall the bit I rehearsed with my dad in response to this question. We knew it was coming. “Certain social circles at my public high school have tried to influence me. I am not one for peer pressure, per se, but they have affected my studying. In entering a new environment, I believe I will be reborn as a student. I will continue to take AP courses and receive high marks in these classes.” And the Oscar for most robotic response in an admissions interview goes to...

“Well, then. The only issue that remains is that we very rarely accept eleventh grade transfer students. I will talk to the Board of Trustees and see where they stand on the matter. Alyssa, I will fight for you to become part of the Marymount community.”

I have to catch my jaw from hitting the floor. My dad is beaming. Grandma Admissions is tingling with excitement. What the fuck just happened?

“Thank you, Mrs. O’Brien. We appreciate your time and efforts.” My father shakes her hand. “And Alyssa will be here at 8 a.m. tomorrow morning for her classroom visit.”

“Thank you, Mrs. O’Brien.” I follow suit and shake her hand. Her hand is soft and papery, confirming my grandma theory.

“No, no! Thank *you!* Alyssa, you’re the best applicant we’ve had in years.”

With that, we’re back in the car. I’m pretty sure my dad is wavering between congratulating me on my excellent performance and chastising my schmaltzy responses.

I'm not actually paying attention, though. I'm watching Sunset Boulevard fly past the window, inhaling the polished leather smell of my dad's car rather than the sweetness of eucalyptus trees outside.

I want everything to stop.

## Chapter Thirteen

I've been stopped by two nuns this morning. They both wanted to send me to the office for not having my appropriate uniform on. This confuses me, as I was pretty convinced that everyone knows everyone at private school. This will go into the "cons" column.

I'm being led around campus by a girl I went to summer camp with. I don't like her at all. She talks too much. I kind of want to punch her in the face. I was asked yesterday if I knew anyone at the school. I should've remembered this girl was in eleventh grade before mentioning her name. Maybe if I hadn't said her name, I'd be with someone else right now.

So far, the classes are boring. I would take the worst SAMO teacher over these douche bags any day. I don't think I want to go here. I don't think this is the answer.

We're walking down the hall to her next class.

"Normally, I have psychology this period. But the first and last Mondays of the month we have college prep. It's great! We get to talk about our fears and expectations for college and they help us fill out applications and..."

She's still talking. Great. I get it. College prep. Awesome. I didn't smoke enough this morning. Shoot me in the face.

"...Wouldn't that be great, Alyssa?" She pauses.

"What?"

"Wouldn't it be great if we went to the same college?" Are you kidding? We're not even friends.

"Yeah, that would be super." I manage to respond through my teeth.

The classroom we're in is freezing. Like, bone-chilling it-shouldn't-be-this-cold-anywhere-in-Los-Angeles freezing. That's another "con." This tightly wound yet overly excited woman is standing at the head of the class.

"Ladies, the important thing for you all to consider when applying for colleges is your safety. Safety should be a priority." I was going to tune this woman out, but I'm intrigued in the shit-starting way by what she's saying.

"Big cities are dangerous. You could get hurt, possibly even murdered." There's a collective gasp from the entire room. I'm bracing myself for an argument.

"You should apply to rural schools, with small populations." She smiles, and the resounding nods from the class prove she's made her point.

I raise my hand.

"Yes," she reads my nametag, "Alyssa? Our visitor to the school?"

"You're saying that a school in a city is more dangerous than a school in a rural environment, correct?" I size her up. She looks frail and a bit worried.

"Absolutely!"

"So, when the captain of the football team dates rapes you right before the big game, you think the sheriff, who has *clearly* bet on the home team, is going to buy your story? Or would yelling 'fire' in a big city be more effective?"

"Well, those circumstances..."

"Those circumstances what? Seriously, you are less likely to receive help in a small town. People don't want to get involved in that nonsense. They have other priorities. Like winning." I realize everyone is staring at me. I realize this might fuck

my chances of going to this school. But if this is their grand philosophy of education, count me out.

“Well, what you’re saying has some validity... but we don’t like to think about things like that! On to covering tuition costs, ladies!”

The “teacher” zones on for a few more minutes until she’s interrupted by the bell ringing. My escort looks pissed, like I embarrassed her. Again, I don’t like this girl, so I really don’t care *at all*. I don’t feel the twinge of guilt I’d expect from the scenario—mainly because she’s not my friend.

“Where’s the office again?” I’m peacing. This is nonsense.

“In the main building. Are you leaving?” She asks me curtly, pointing to one of many ostentatious stone structures.

“Yep. See ya.” I walk quickly away from her—no hug, no handshake, no recognition of her humanity.

I cruise into the office. I clear my throat about thirty times before the gum-chewing overly made-up hag looks up at me from behind her computer.

“Hey, I’m Alyssa. I’m visiting eleventh grade classes as a potential student. I’m feeling a bit under the weather and can’t stay for the remainder of the day.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah, um... is Mrs. O’Brien here?”

“Yes.” This is getting uncomfortably awkward.

“Um... May I see her?”



She rolls her eyes at me and picks up the phone, sharply punching the numbers with dagger-like fingernails. The look on her face says ‘I will cut a bitch.’ I’m not trying to start a fight with an administrative assistant today.

“Mrs. O’Brien, there’s an Alison to see you.”

“That’s Alyssa.” I’m getting mildly impatient. According to NPR, it apparently takes eight minutes and twenty three seconds of waiting to get someone to reach their breaking point. I’m not quite there yet.

“You can go ahead in. Third door on your right.”

Rather than saying “fuck you” outright, I just don’t thank her. I cross through the office labyrinth, eyeing the surrounding pictures of cheery well-rounded girls, until I arrive at Mrs. O’Brien’s door. I knock timidly.

“Come in!” I duck my head in. I don’t want to fully face her. I know she wants me at this school. I know I don’t want to be here.

“Hi, Mrs. O’Brien. I just wanted to tell you that I’m not feeling well and will have to head home. But I believe I saw what I needed to and really appreciate you letting me take a tour of the school and sit in on classes.”

“Alyssa! Of course! Please, take care of yourself! We’ll be in touch soon, dear.” I close the door, and find my way to Sunset Boulevard. I feel like I can breathe again.

It’s early. I’m supposed to take the bus home when I’m done “for practice,” but I don’t want to arrive home earlier than I’m expected. I walk onto the UCLA campus and duck under a tree. I look around and grab a special cigarette from my pack. (Hint: it’s half-tobacco, half-weed. That’s what makes it special.)

I'm feeling weird and nostalgic, which has been happening far too often lately. I'm trying to snap out of it—to exist in the moment—but memories and images are in full attack mode. Every step pumps out a different face.

I'm wandering across the campus, trying to figure out how to get to the other side. On the other side, there's Westwood Village. There's food and shit to do in Westwood Village. And UCLA is giving me the heebie-jeebies. My mission: get the hell out of here.

My feet are like cement dragging across the campus. I'm trying to will them to move faster. I'm trying to get my feet excited about the In-N-Out burger waiting for us at the end of the journey, but have a feeling this only insults them (with the whole “lack of taste buds” thing).

I feel lost. I go through my cell phone trying to figure out who I could call who might help me. Part of me wants to call my parents and have one of them pick me up, but that's more trouble than it's worth. So I call my brother instead.

“Hello?”

“Hi Nee Nee.” My brother's name is Nick, but apparently it was too hard for me to pronounce as a child, so I changed it to Nee Nee.

“Hi Alyssa.” He sounds busy. He always sounds busy when I call. This is a huge fucking mistake.

“Are you in the middle of something?”

“Um. Yeah, no, I guess not.” Insert one of many guaranteed awkward pauses.

“Shouldn't you be in school right now? Isn't it around noon in L.A.?”

My brother's at an Ivy League school in Rhode Island. For some reason, I thought the time difference would psyche him out rather than make him suspicious.

"Yeah, well... I had my school visit at Marymount today and they only had a half-day so I'm done." It's the best I can come up with. The cottonmouth is kicking in and forming words is becoming a near impossible feat.

"So are you at home?" I can't help feeling like these questions he's asking are completely lifeless—like he has to ask them but couldn't care less what my responses are.

"Um... I'm lost. I'm—"

"Lost? How are you lost?"

"—at UCLA. I want to go to In-N-Out." I want my brother to be a brother.

"Oh. Just go south." He seems impatient. I'm trying to hurry through this situation. I knew this was a mistake.

"I don't know where south is. Listen, it's okay. I'll figure it out." I'm extraordinarily uncomfortable right now.

"Okay, Alyssa. Um... good luck. Don't get the fries." He hangs up.

"I love you. Bye." He can't hear me say it. He's already gone.

I feel small. I feel like I'm five instead of fifteen. I do love my brother, but he's made my life harder by simply existing. I don't buy into the philosophy that siblings one day become friends. I've tried to befriend my brother. I tried confiding in him once. It backfired.

Long story short: Freshman year, I hooked up with a teaching assistant (who, coincidentally, was a UCLA student—I couldn't possibly feel any more awkward than I

do right now). I told my brother, and my brother told my parents, probably because the TA was ten years older than me. My brother didn't only tell my parents, though. He decided it was a good idea to tell a few of his friends who were still in high school. I found out when I was at Tracy's house from a mutual friend of ours. It was embarrassing and awkward. My parents still haven't confronted me about it, but the guy was mysteriously fired shortly after I told Nick. So much for trusting family.

I smell Westwood Village before I even notice it in front of me. Its hookah smoke and fresh baked Diddy Riese cookies and Lamonica's New York pizza deliciousness stun me. I now realize two things: fuck In-N-Out (I'm getting pizza) and a Diddy Riese ice cream sandwich is of the utmost importance. These are my priorities.

## Chapter Fourteen

I'm flipping a thirty-day chip over and over in my hand. I know I don't deserve it. I know it doesn't belong to me. I'm dreading the look of pride on my dad's face and the look of sincere doubt on my mom's face waiting for me up the street.

Martinia gave me a high five when I walked down the aisle tonight at Ohio Street. Golay raised his eyebrows. People tried to give me phone numbers. People invited me out after the meeting for some "fellowship."

I need to figure this shit out.

It's at the point where I'm not sure how much longer I can lie. Sure, I've been going to this meeting for a full month. And I haven't been drunk around my parents in a month. I'm stoned almost every day, and I'm almost positive that means I'm not technically sober.

I took advantage of being around adults tonight by having one of them buy me a pack of "victory" cigarettes. This is the only redeeming quality of going to the meeting that I can think of right now. That aside, all I feel is guilt in my stomach.

I'm sitting on the steps of my elementary school smoking a joint. There's no part of me that wants to go home right now. I just don't want to face my parents.

When I was in ninth grade, I wrote my parents a letter apologizing for being the daughter they never wanted. I realize that it was a melodramatic move on my part, but at the same time, I attribute a lot of my anxiety to how they look at me. How they're disappointed that I'm not Nick.

I've had Saturday school like, four times this year. Saturday school, for the record, is detention on steroids. It's four hours of sitting in silence on a Saturday morning. And I'm not talking ten a.m. kind of early. I'm talking eight a.m. Nick *never* got in trouble. I haven't seen an A on my report card since seventh grade. Nick had straight A's since Kindergarten, but only because preschool didn't give grades. That doesn't cover the shit I've done that they don't know about.

They have one of those giant soda bottle banks I've acquired at least a hundred dollars from. The bottle of expensive Puerto Rican rum my dad has been looking for is empty in my closet. There's a ton of other shit I've stolen from them. They haven't confronted me, so I assume they don't know. But in reality, I am a terrible fucking daughter.

So coming home and raising their hopes up only to know I will only disappoint them once again is killing me. I'm not really down for being sober. But I'm kind of ready to stop fucking up so much.

I'm late getting to my house. I get to the door but my dad opens it before I can turn the key and unlock it.

"Alyssa, it's past eleven."

"I missed the bus. Sorry." I step inside the house. Daisy runs up to the door but once she realizes it's only me, she wanders elsewhere.

"We tried calling you." I check my cell phone. Four missed calls. Fuck.

"I had it on silent at the meeting and forgot to turn the ringer back on."

“Well, okay. Next time you’re going to be late, can you please let us know? Mom was getting ready to jump in the car and find you.”

“I’m only like, what... forty-five minutes late?”

“Alyssa.” I should stop arguing with him. This is like his version of a three-count but without numbers.

“Sorry, Pop.”

“So how was the meeting?”

“It was fine. Look, I got a thirty-day chip.” I pull out the red plastic poker chip and hand it to my dad. His face lights up and I feel mine start to burn.

“Wow! Thirty-days! Congratulations, sweetheart.” He gives me a huge hug. I feel like collapsing. “Maggie! Come here!” He yells to my mom.

My mom comes halfway down the stairs. “What?” She clearly came out of bed for this, negating my dad’s earlier claim that she was going to look for me.

“Look!” He hands her the chip. As predicted, she looks skeptical.

“Congratulations, Alyssa. Thirty-days, really?”

“Really really.” I manage to whisper.

Her face turns to relief and she comes down and hugs me, too. I not only feel like collapsing—I feel like throwing up.

“That’s awesome, Alyssa. Wow.”

“Yep. I should probably get to bed. I think I have a Spanish quiz tomorrow and I need time to study before class.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart.” My dad kisses me on the forehead.

“Goodnight, Peachula.” My mom kisses me on the cheek and gives me another hug.

I head into the kitchen and get Nunu’s food together. I have to focus on each breath I take in order to stop myself from bursting into tears. Rather than taking the food up right away, I go in the back and have a smoke.

I feel like my parents are talking about me right now. They’re probably analyzing whether or not I’m actually sober. My mom knows me better than my dad does and is probably arguing that I’m full of shit. My dad is probably trying to convince her that everyone deserves a second chance. My mom would respond to that by saying I’m manipulating him into believing a lie.

My face feels hot. I’m lying in bed, petting Nunu.

“I just don’t know what to do anymore.” I have no one else to talk to, which doesn’t really matter, as I can’t find any more words.



## Chapter Fifteen

I've been spending a lot of the last month alone when I'm at school. It's almost like I've been in hiding. After that weekend at Bernadette's house, it's borderline embarrassing to be around any of those people. They look at me in a weird way, even Berns. I've run out of Plan B friends, so every lunch has been spent sitting on stoops off of Michigan Avenue chain smoking by myself. At least I got my off-campus pass back a week ago, so I don't have to go through the whole deal of jumping fences and hiding in car trunks anymore. And I've read a lot, so I guess that's cool. I've read *Rule of the Bone* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* like, five times each now. Still can't turn in my homework on time. Probably should do that instead, but what can you do.

Today, though, I have to be social. Today is Bernadette's birthday. It's also a Friday. There will be mayhem this evening, and I'm not looking forward to it.

I find her in the Science Quad at lunch.

"Happy birthday, Berns!" I give her a big hug, but I feel completely numb.

"Thanks love."

"I made you a card," I lie. "But I left it at home... I'll get it to you Monday or something." I totally forgot about her birthday until this morning. I used to be really good at remembering birthday parties and phone numbers, but I'm not really good at remembering anything anymore.

"Or tonight, right? You are coming out tonight?" She raises an eyebrow.

"Psh, wouldn't miss it for the world. It's my bestie's birthday! So what's the plan?" I haven't actually hung out with her outside of school since that weekend, which

is weird for us. There's a tension I can't quite place. This whole situation is more of an obligation than anything else.

"I guess just hanging out, getting fucked up. It's my fucking birthday—I shouldn't have to figure this shit out."

"Fair enough. I'll wrangle something together."

"Good. All I have to do is go home after school. My mom's going on a fucking date tonight and my brothers are at my dad's house. My dad has work at four a.m., so we're celebrating together tomorrow night instead."

"Damn. That sucks. Well, we'll make sure you actually get to do something fun. Why don't you grab some stuff and stay at my house tonight?" This is my version of an olive branch of some sort. I still haven't really apologized for going crazy at her house. I mean, I apologized on Saturday, but the way she looked at me when I left on Sunday was almost mean. She's got some shit to say to me—I can feel it.

Another thing is nearly every time I've tried to call her recently, she's zapped the call. I can tell because the phone doesn't ring very many times, but mysteriously goes to voicemail. When she does pick up, she seems annoyed. I need to use this celebration to make up for last time.

"Better than nothing, I guess. I have to go talk to Mr. Sohn about my science test. I'll call you later."

I hug her again. There's still some time left, so I get off campus and smoke a cigarette. I send Andrew a text message to get the usual suspects together for tonight.

On the way back to school, I look inside the 99-cent store to see if there's some tchotchke I can give to Berns as a mildly lame birthday present. I sift through aisles of

stale cereal and cheap flashlights until I find a coloring book. It looks like it's been in the store since the mid-1980s. I grab the book and a box of no name crayons reminiscent of the kind you'd get in a generic Easter basket (the ones that are so waxy they're incapable of writing on any surface). I pay the cashier, and run back to school, trying to smoke half a cigarette en route.

In history class, I borrow some markers and a piece of printer paper from my teacher. I actually had to change history teachers at the beginning of the semester because the one I had last semester called me a criminal after I argued that my Russian routes enable me to drink substantially more vodka than a non-Ruski. I was clearly just fucking with her when I said it (and it related to a newspaper article someone brought in), but she was completely serious when she started name-calling. Fuck that noise.

Now I have the hot, new teacher who plays music and puts up Christmas lights when he does his lectures. His tests are really easy because he makes the information interesting enough to recall—plus he's cute, so my attention span is a bit better. And he likes me well enough, so when I told him I fucked up on the best friend front, he said it was cool if I made a card in class.

I would totally marry this guy if he was down.

## Chapter Sixteen

I'm waiting outside a liquor store on the north side with Andrew and Kitaro, the kid I used to drink with in English class. We pooled together enough money to bribe some dude in a pickup truck to buy us booze for Bernadette's birthday.

"How long has he been in there?" I ask them. I'm a little faded and the time is dragging.

"It's only been like, two minutes." Kitaro says, checking his watch. "Chill the fuck out."

"He's buying us bitch liquor." Andrew reports after looking through the window. "Looks like flavored vodka, flavored rum... light beer, maybe?"

"I thought you told him liquor only." I'm kind of confused. Beer doesn't go far with a fair sized group. They both look at me and then at each other when I say this.

"Alyssa, *you* were the one who told him what to get." Andrew tells me. Oops.

"And you told him he should buy himself something nice." Kitaro adds.

"Fuck. My bad, guys."

"Oh, he got one of those gallon plastic jugs of what could be either rubbing alcohol or vodka. The beer's probably for him." Andrew reveals, before signaling for us to hide back in the parking lot on the side of the building.

The guy turns the corner to where we are, clearly struggling with our liquor purchase. I hope he's taking a moment to rethink his physical fitness regime. Actually, I don't care.

"Don't drink it all at once! Y'all might not live through it." *I didn't realize I asked for a warning with my purchase, dick.*

I bat my eyelashes. “Thanks a million, sir! Have a wonderful evening!”

He gives me a creepy smile and a wink in return. I gag a little but force a smile. And I’m pretty sure he shorted us on the change.

We survey the goods. Andrew was right. We have a normal sized bottle of raspberry vodka, a fifth of lemon rum, and a gallon jug of really shitty cheap vodka.

“Ok, so you and I take the rum,” Kitaro nods to me. “Andrew, you hold on to the raspberry shit until we run out of everything else. We’ll use the big one first.”

“Sounds like a plan. Where are we going?” Andrew’s shoving the giant jug and the raspberry vodka into his backpack.

“Guys, we have to call Berns and get her to this side of town.” I’m trying to be responsible before the shitstorm begins.

“That’s all well and good, but where are we *going*?”

“How about Eli’s house?” Kitaro suggests.

“We can’t. His parents are having a dinner party. Dunc’s?” I’ve checked out of this conversation. They can figure out this shit.

“Can’t. His sister’s in town, so they have family over. Max’s?”

“Max’s mom is psychotic. That’s a no-go.” Andrew shudders, probably at the thought of the last time Max’s mom yelled at him for no reason. “Amos’s?”

“Amos’s parents have date night tonight. That’d be a good place to start until it gets dark enough to go outside.”

“And he lives close to my house.” I pipe in. “Berns is staying with me, so that’d work.”

Andrew calls Amos to make arrangements. Kitaro and I are sharing a cigarette, pacing around the parking lot.

“Did you do the English?” Kitaro asks me.

“We have homework?”

“Yeah, we’re supposed to read the first third of *The Odyssey* for Monday.”

“Seriously? Balls. Did you do it already?”

“Are you kidding? That shit is thick. I read a bit of it in orchestra, though. It’s fucking weird.”

“Fuck, man. Are we having a test on it?”

“Probably. Something about iambic pentameter or some shit.”

“I am so over this year.” I’m bordering on a panic attack. There’s no way I’ll be able to get through any reading this weekend. I can feel it. The worst part is, I’m really good at English. I just hate the reading. They pick the most boring books possible. It’s like all the English teachers get together at the beginning of the year and say to each other “hey guys, what shitty classics do we have in the library this year?”

“Whatever, man. Just sit next to Melike or one of the Bessons. You’ll be fine.”

“It’s a go.” Kitaro and I look at Andrew, who is now off the phone.

“I’ll call Bernadette.” I get out my phone. Maybe she’ll actually pick up this time. Andrew and Kitaro start play wrestling in the parking lot.

“Hello?” Two rings. Record breaking, at least for this month.

“Hey Berns, it’s Alyssa.”

“Hey.”

“So Amos said it’s cool if we meet up at his house. His parents are heading out tonight and it’s close to my house, so it makes the most sense.”

“Okay.”

“So you want to head over that way?”

“Okay.” The one-word answers are killing me. I’m starting to get a little pissed off.

“Oooh-kay. Well. We’ll see you there soon, then?”

“Yeah. Bye.” Click. I stare at my phone, slightly dumbfounded. What the hell was that?

“She’s heading over there soon. We might as well go now.” I’m trying to game-face this situation. I’m trying to pretend that there’s not some awkward rift between me and my best friend. I’m trying to think about how once everyone’s drinking, things will be better.

We walk down Wilshire towards the water. We have some time to kill until it’s copasetic to head over to Amos’s. We pass the promenade, filled with tourists and gutter punks, and hit Palisades Park. As we pass the statue of Saint Monica, heading south, “giant marble cock” jokes are made. Seriously, though, I’m pretty sure the artist who made the statue of our city’s saint legitimately made her look like an uncut penis. It’s hilarious.

Kitaro and Andrew are hungry, so I decide to hang back on a bench at the park while they hit up the McDonald’s by the promenade. I’m looking over the bluffs at the ocean. I can see this girl’s house on the PCH and I get the chills. It’s her fault I lost my virginity last year.

Technically, it's my fault. I'm the one who had sex. But really, it's her fault. There was a party at her house around this time last year. I smoked out with a couple of my friends and was hanging out there. Me and this girl have never gotten along, but we've never tried speaking, either, so it's weird. In middle school, I'd have pool parties at my house for my birthday and for the last day of school. She somehow scheduled her parties to be on the same day. Halfway through my parties, a huge chunk of my friends would leave to go to her house. It was unreal.

Anyway, she had this party thing last year. I made out with this kid on the beach for something like two hours. By the time we got back to her house, she was kicking everyone out. When she saw me come back with him, she freaked out at both of us. The Monday afterwards, I came to school and people were rolling up on me telling me that they heard some rumor that I banged this guy. So, rather than dealing with fighting a lie, I just did it. It was lame. The guy was lame. It fucking hurt and it was mildly embarrassing. He kept giving me instructions and all I wanted to do was punch him in the face. The worst part was that my mom and I went away the next weekend, and she called it immediately. She just straight up said: "you lost your virginity." She literally *just knew*. I was kind of amazed. That's how I can tell she knows I'm not entirely sober. She just knows these things.

I want Andrew and Kitaro to come back so I can get out of my head. I turn away from the water and watch in awe as a homeless guy becomes covered in pigeons. He's feeding them, which is cool, but I'm somewhere between intrigue and disgust. I look around, checking for cops, and pull the handle of lemon-flavored rum part way out of my bag. I might as well get the party started while I'm waiting. I take a couple of sips and



they come like a shock to my system. I haven't had a drink in a few weeks, and there's something warm and inviting about it. I put it away, knowing that it'll be weird if I just get wasted before shit begins, but I feel a very mild buzz and it gets me through a few more moments of awkward solitude.

"Sorry, Al. There was a line at McDonald's." Kitaro tosses a bag at me. "We got you an apple pie."

"Thanks, man. I'll save it." I sling my bag over my shoulder and shove the pie in.

"Check out pigeon guy!" Andrew points to the homeless guy under the palm tree.

"Yeah, I know, right? It's fucking insane, but kind of cool at the same time."

Andrew shudders. "Gross, too. Let's go."

We split a joint on the way to Amos's house. Amos lives three or four blocks away from my house. I want to drop my school stuff off at home, but I'm kind of stoned and I feel like my parents will smell the rum on my breath. They're going out to some dinner thing later tonight, so I might be able to swoop by the house then, but not while they're potentially at home.

When we get to Amos's house, his parents are already gone. Max and Eli are sitting on the couch in the living room, playing video games. Amos is collapsed in a beanbag chair, watching them intently. Drunk Dunc is making a phone call in the backyard. Bernadette isn't here yet. I feel this combination of self-conscious weirdness and extraordinary power being the only girl in the picture. It's not helpful that I've made out with or blown four of them.

Andrew and Kitaro join the zonked out living room crew. I go to the kitchen and call Bernadette.

“I’m almost there.” Not even a hello. But at least she’s saying more than one word.

“Yeah, it’s weird. I don’t like being alone here.” I’m feeling a tinge of paranoia. This isn’t a good start.

“You’ll deal. I’ll be there soon. I’m just on the bus.”

“Where?”

“Passing the school.” *Almost there my ass.*

“That’s like, twenty-five minutes.”

“It’s my fucking birthday. I’ll come whenever I want to.” I cringe like a kid who’s about to get beaten.

“We got vodka.”

“Sounds awesome.” Everything’s coming out so flatly. I kind of want to cry, but my awareness of how awkward that would make this whole scenario knocks out my ability to express emotion.

“Okay. See you soon.” She hangs up. No hello *and* no goodbye. What the hell?

I take a seat between Max and Eli on the couch.

“Berns is on her way. She’s just passing SAMO. She’ll be here soon.” I announce to the room. They all respond by nodding.

I stare off into space.

## Chapter Seventeen

I'm fidgeting. I'm biting my nails, playing with my hair, and literally doing anything I can to distract myself from how slowly the time is passing. I'm replaying songs I've heard a hundred times over and over in my head.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" It's Andrew. Apparently, in my efforts to pass the time, I unknowingly started pacing in the foyer. He doesn't sound harsh—he kind of sounds sincere.

It's funny—Andrew and I met in fifth grade when he came to live with his mom. The first words he said to me were in reference to a band t-shirt I was wearing. I don't remember what group it was, but I remember he told me they sucked. My eloquent response was, "so do you." This mutual hatred escalated when I mistook food getting caught in his braces and misfiring as him spitting at me. I retaliated with a mouthful of carrots right on his cheek. We both had cafeteria clean up duty for a week. And somehow, we became friends.

"I dunno, man. I think Berns is pissed at me."

"You'll get through it. The two of you always do."

"I'm not so sure this time."

He shrugs at me. "Just don't let your worrying ruin a good time."

There's a knock at the door.

"Yeah, I guess." I try to put on a poker face. It feels more like an awkward half-smile. Andrew pats me on the shoulder and retreats to the living room.

"Hey, man!" I yell to Amos. "Should I answer the door?"

"Go ahead!" he calls back.

I take a deep breath knowing full well it's probably Bernadette. I open the door. She rushes past me before I can get a word out.

"Party's here!" She yells into the living room.

There's a collection of grunts and half-hearted hollers of recognition. I unlock the front door and step into the yard, closing it behind me. I'm panicking.

I rifle through my pockets until I find a joint (well, more like borderline roach). This will calm me down. It has to calm me down.

I light it and let the smoke fill my lungs.

It's not working.

It's *really* not working.

My heart is preparing to burst through my chest. I can't catch my breath. I am probably dying.

I choke on air. Holy shit. I'm having a panic attack. And the pot is making it *worse*.

My eyes flutter. I don't know how long I've been out here and it takes me a second to get my bearings. My head is between my knees, and there's a hand on my shoulder.

"Alyssa?"

I cringe. I crane my neck to the side and am close to having another attack when I realize who is talking to me.

“Eli?”

“Why are you out here?”

“Why are you talking to me?”

He pulls his hand away.

“Whatever. Are you okay?”

I’m taken aback by the tone of his response. I can’t figure out why *he’s* the one who came out here. Anyone else in that house would’ve made more sense. Not him. He doesn’t make sense. This doesn’t compute.

“I’m fine.” I’m a stuttering idiot, but I’m fine. “Just had a bad reaction to the weed.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“We’re getting ready to head out.”

I can’t find words to respond with, so I nod. I get myself up, almost falling back over. Like vertigo. I’m staring at his face, trying to decipher his presence. He looks away and silently opens the door. I follow.

My face feels hot. It’s bad enough when it’s Berns or my brother or my parents are looking at me like I’m crazy or treating me like I’m going to break, but the boys are doing it now, and that’s *real* bad. They’re kind of the “bust in case of emergency” types. I trace the back of my teeth with my tongue in order to stop myself from screaming.

Pot should not induce panic. My mind should not be this scattered. I should not feel this powerless. I should have my shit under control. I can't need help.

I need help.

## Chapter Eighteen

My mind is legitimately blown right now, but it is neither the time nor the place. It is still Bernadette's birthday and I still have to be some semblance of a best friend and maybe look less like a head case.

I need a drink. I need a drink to counteract the pot that was supposed to counteract the crazy.

I get into the living room and they're all throwing on their hoodies. Apparently, they took the initiative to divvy up the big jug of vodka into a few smaller water bottles while I was outside. Classy. And here I thought someone would have to be responsible for it.

Everyone's laughing and talking a mile a minute around me as we crowd through the hallway and out the door. It's just dusk outside. The sun is like a dull flame towards the water and the sky is exploding with purple. I gotta say, I love sunsets. I know it's corny or whatever, but I love sunsets. Especially Santa Monica sunsets.

"Where are we going?" Someone asks. I'm not paying complete attention and can't distinguish the voice.

Bernadette answers. "Let's go to 7-11. I'm not drinking this shit straight."

We start heading south on Seventh Street towards the closest 7-11. There is literally nothing that goes better with really cheap vodka than a Slurpee. The over-saturated sugary flavored iced beverage can make *anything* taste good. I'm glad she made the call. I want to walk next to her and talk to her, but my feet are dragging and she's flanked by Eli and Max. I'm half-sulking as I shuffle at the back of the crew, conscious of eyes flashing back at me in ten-second intervals.

Don't get me wrong—some part of me is trying desperately to enjoy this night. I'm out with friends. It's a nice spring night. It's my best friend's birthday. There is some effort being made on the part of my subconscious to put me in a better mood. My subconscious just isn't trying hard enough.

We get to 7-11 and I'm kind of pissed off that they're out of Coke flavored Slurpees. I try reasoning with the guy behind the counter—or, rather, try informing him that Coke is the *only* flavor that should be working. All non-Coke flavors are purely for decoration.

Everyone else has their shit together. Except Kitaro, who is debating between two equally cheesy flavors of chips. In an expert mixologist move, I decidedly pour a concoction of Extreme Cherry and Blue Raspberry (which may or may not *also* be “extreme”), halfway filling a giant cup. I find a neon spoon-straw and give it a try. It tastes brutal—like if someone mixed Hi-C and Kool Aid with a half-pound bag of sugar and some ice—but it'll do the trick.

I bring it up to the register to pay. 7-11 is not the kind of place you want to skip out on. The clerks here are the ones you hear about with shotguns waiting under the counter. Definitely not the type to be fucked with.

“You and your *friends*,” the attendant muses. “You don't want to fill your cups?”

I realize this dude's eyeing a police cruiser outside. What he's really saying is: don't do anything stupid. That's my cue to push buttons. I look him dead in the eyes.

“We're a calorie conscious bunch. We like the illusion of having more,” I reply flatly.

He purses his lips. I had him ash.



“Don’t come back here tonight,” he hisses. “I don’t feel like filling out police reports.”

“Sure. Thanks.” I take my change and walk out the door. What a dick. It’s more of a crime to be under-21 in Santa Monica than anything else. We’re just going to get fucked up and have a good time. We’re not going to break anything tonight—at least we don’t intend to.

I get a text from Andrew telling me they’re around the corner. The cop car must’ve freaked them out a bit.

There are so many nooks and crannies in Santa Monica that finding somewhere to hide in a pinch isn’t all that hard to do. My friends are huddled in the courtyard of some office building that shut early for the weekend.

“We thought that guy was going to search you and bust us, so we peaced,” Drunk Dunc volunteers.

“Close. He did warn me that we shouldn’t go back there tonight.” I start pouring my share of vodka into the cup.

“Fuck that. I should go back in there now and cause a ruckus.” The words are playful and surly simultaneously—a funny but not uncommon combination from Dunc.

“Nah, Dunc. Let’s bounce.” My suggestion is met with nods from the crew.

We walk along Seventh Street until we hit the area close to the Promenade.

“Berns, you want to see some street performers? That’s a pretty sick birthday present,” Kitaro suggests.

There are only three reasons to go to the Promenade as a Santa Monica resident. Four if you’re underage. One: Christmas shopping. Two: to see a movie. Three: to buy

cigarettes at the head shop. Four: because there is absolutely positively nothing better to do. But if there is *anything* at all you *could* be doing, you don't go to the Promenade.

Tourists and street performers. Essentially, Kitaro's just being an asshole.

Bernadette responds accordingly.

"Fuck you, Kitaro."

"How about the pier?" Max suggests.

"That actually sounds cool. I haven't been there in *ages*. But we can only go if Alyssa promises not to try to drown herself again," she snaps, glaring at me. And with that, I'm over it. I'm done fighting for her affection tonight. I take a long sip of my purple vodka slush.

"Sure." I turn to Andrew, trying to change the mood. "I challenge you to a rousing game of air hockey."

Bernadette looks thrown by my lack of a response. Good.

"You're on," Andrew says. He jabs me lightly in the side with his elbow and smiles. I smile back. I can feel Bernadette's eyes piercing me.

## Chapter Nineteen

We get to the pier in what feels like record time. It's still early enough that the crowd is basically all families and tourists. There was actually a fight at city council about whether or not the pier should stay open late. This woman argued that it was like the closest thing residents had to a theme park, so they decided in favor of keeping it open until 2 a.m. However, all of the clientele past 10 or 11 p.m. are gang members, so it's kind of silly. They come out during the earlier evening, too, but not like they do later at night.

We've all pretty much finished our Slurpees, so Drunk Dunc suggests we go under the pier to share a J before doing anything else.

Underneath the pier, it's seedy. Like Coney Island in *Requiem for a Dream* seedy. Clearly, I'm in no position to want the cops to patrol down here, but it's like a cold, wet, drug-riddled tent city down here at night.

"I wanna live under the pier," Eli says sleepily. Andrew, Amos, Kitaro and I share a look. Last time we made fun of him, he cried. We've decided to be speechless for the moment, instead.

Drunk Dunc sparks a blunt and we huddle around it like it's our life force. I'm pretty fucked up already but I take a deep pull. Everything is spinning. I look at the sand to try to stabilize myself but the overwhelming stench of rotting seaweed and squatters pierces my nose. I take a few steps towards one of the wooden pillars, staggering.

"Here it comes," Bernadette hisses. I can visualize the shit-eating grin on her face and that alone is enough to make me nauseous.

A flood of purple flies out of my mouth in a thick stream. I rifle through my bag with the hand that isn't gripping a column for dear life in search of a ponytail holder. Jackpot. I find one and sloppily put my hair up.

The worst part about throwing up when you're wasted is that you feel so much better once it's done. Hear me out. It's like those Ancient Greek parties where they would stuff their faces and puke on purpose, only to stuff their faces some more. Rinse. Repeat. It's the worst part because you're tricking yourself into thinking you can handle more. Like right now, I know it's a bad idea, but I will probably smoke and drink more once this is over.

I wretch again. It burns my throat, but I'm fairly certain the worst is over with. I can hear the crew murmuring, but from what I can tell, it's not about me. I dig through my bag and find a half-full Nalgene bottle. I take a couple swigs of water and rinse the bile from my mouth.

The taste is diluted enough that I'm pretty sure I'm going to be okay. I find an old mint in my bag and pop it in my mouth, only to discover it's covered in tobacco leaves from months of bag-life. I gag and spit it out.

Fuck this. I light a cigarette instead. The rotating underbelly of the pier has slowed to an acceptable pace, so I head back to the group.

"You cool, Al?" Kitaro asks me.

"Yeah... I'm chill." I'm probably at about 70%. Maybe a little lower, but I'm cool to keep going for the rest of the night. Like the Greeks or Romans or whatever.

"Hey, let's head up." Max suggests. Like I said, he doesn't talk much, but it's always words of wisdom from that kid.

“Yeah,” I agree. “I still have to kick Andrew’s ass at air hockey.”

“In your dreams,” Andrew tells me. Truth is, he’ll probably destroy me. But seriously, it’s fucking air hockey. Who gives a shit?

“Are you sure you won’t just get us all busted?” Bernadette snarls.

Mechanically, the boys all shoot her a look that combines “what the fuck” with “just shut up.” She turns away, pouting. I want to consider it another win, but Eli’s the one who consoles her. He whispers something in her ear and she laughs—a little too loudly. I’m trying not to let it bother me, but the whole situation feels so forced, that I can’t help but feel rattled. Andrew and Kitaro apparently decide together that I need distracting and link their arms in mine on either side.

“I saved you some, Al.” Kitaro whispers, handing me part of the blunt. “Let’s hang back.”

Andrew gets the hint.

“Hey guys,” he calls out. “We’ll be right up.”

Drunk Dunc starts guffawing in his maniacal, high-pitched laugh.

“Eiffel Tower! Wooo!” He screams.

I roll my eyes and call back, “Hell yeah! And *your* fat ass isn’t invited!”

“Oooh! Burn!” Amos says to Dunc, pushing him into a column. We wait for them to escape from the shadows and ascend the stairs.

“She’s fucking *angry*, huh?” Kitaro asks me.

“Yeah, right?” I shake my head. “I’m not even sure *why* she’s so mad at me.”

Andrew shrugs. “You could’ve been breathing wrong. It’s Berns.”

“She’s never been mad at me like *this*.” I spark the joint. I need to erase this, to mellow out a bit. Being with Andrew and Kitaro is helping, but I feel like I need to talk to Berns. I need to figure out what I did to upset her. I pass the joint to Kitaro.

“It’s nothing a little air hockey and maybe some food won’t fix.”

I know Andrew’s only saying that to make me feel better, because he’s visibly furrowing his brow, so I humor him.

“Well, you might get angry with me after that.”

He pauses with what appears to be genuine concern.

“Why’s that?”

Kitaro passes Andrew the joint.

“Cause you’re about to get your ass handed to you. And then you might cry.”

He nods, mouth full of smoke.

“Psh... he’s not *Eli*,” Kitaro jabs. Smoke rushes out of Andrew’s mouth as we all erupt in laughter. We pass the joint around the small circle again and stub the roach out into the damp sand.

“We’d better go upstairs before Dunc decides to tell everyone we’re high-fiving over your head,” Andrew says.

“Trust me, I’ve heard worse rumors about myself,” I return. I roll my eyes and we start walking towards the stairs.

## Chapter Twenty

The arcade is far too bright. The same games have been around since the 80s or early 90s. Half of the machines don't even work. Some of them haven't worked since before I was born. But they have the staples of any good beachside arcade—skee ball, air hockey, those claw machines where you try to get a stuffed animal but the physics aren't in your favor, games that are totally just for winning tickets (and maybe if you get enough, you can get a pencil topper).

It's an odd time of night, so the crowd in here is a strange mix of straggling tourists fresh from their fix of fried clams and gang members with white socks pulled to the knees under jean shorts. Amos and Max are already battling aliens on a shooting game that was probably ground-breaking when it came out in the mid-1990s. Drunk Dunc is leaning in a corner, talking on the phone. Eli is playing some variation of skee ball with Bernadette cheering him on in an overtly flirtatious way. Kitaro, Andrew, and I walk over to the south end of the arcade where the air hockey is.

"I'm playing the winner," Kitaro announces.

We change out a couple of bills for quarters with the guy at the prize counter. He looks like he may be our age, but he has one of those creepy molestaches that has the same effect as gluing a caterpillar to your upper lip. Gross. He winks at me as we're turning away and I shudder.

"He totally wants you," Andrew nudges me. "You should get his number. He's *so* sexy."

"Fuck off." I punch Andrew in the shoulder. He rubs his arm, throwing me a look of mock-pain, and we head back to the tables.

Due to my level of intoxication, my hand-eye coordination is completely shot. Andrew is slaughtering me. I'm trying to block shots, but end up knocking half of them into my own goal. Maybe I should've picked a game that required less of a skill set. Or, you know, something I'm actually good at.

There are some things you get better at doing when intoxicated. Like pool, for example. Everyone's better at pool when they're drunk. And it's one of those games you don't get excited about *unless* you're drunk, so it's a win-win. Air hockey is a little too fast paced to have the same effect.

"Goooooal!" Andrew's excitement is reminiscent of a Spanish soccer announcer. Seven-to-two. And those two goals of mine were accidents.

"Damn. Well, you're up, Kitaro," I say, flatly. I'm smiling and kind of having a good time, but this is a golden opportunity to find Bernadette and talk to her alone. "I'll be back in a minute, guys. If I'm not back when you're done with this round, feel free to play again."

"You're going to try to talk to her?" Andrew asks. The question is so heavy with doubt that I blush automatically. I didn't realize how transparent that was.

"Yeah, I'm gonna at least make an attempt."

"Good luck. Hopefully you'll be better at convincing Bernadette you're not an asshole than you are at air hockey."

"Thanks, dick."

He and Kitaro start laughing and feeding quarters into the table to start their game. I'm wandering through the machines. The sounds and flashing lights are extremely distracting. I'm bee lining for the skee ball area, but Bernadette and Eli aren't



there anymore. Fuck. I look around and see Dunc sitting on a bench outside, so I walk over to him.

“What up, Dunc?” I sit next to him and light a cigarette, offering him my pack as I inhale.

“Chillin’. You?” He takes a smoke and nods. “Thanks.”

“Just looking for Bernadette.”

“Girl fight!” He screams, cackling.

“Shut up. No, I just need to talk to her.” I’m fidgeting again. I keep flicking my cigarette, even though the cherry is orange and ashless.

“I saw her going over to the bathroom right before you got her.” He tells me a bit more seriously. Thank god. I really didn’t want to deal with Duncan’s silliness.

“Was Eli with her?”

“Nah, he’s with Amos and Max.”

“Why are you out here?” I ask him. I legitimately want to know. It seems like he’s been alone for the better part of the night.

“I’m just chillin’. It’s fucking bright and loud as shit in there. I’m feeling mellow.”

“I hear ya.” Only now do I notice a dull throbbing pain in my head. I’m sure it’ll be worse in the morning.

“We should probably head back north side soon. You know, before Amos starts a fight with someone. Or Eli throws a tantrum.”

I see Bernadette out of the corner of my eye.

“Yeah, soon,” I mumble, as I get up and walk towards her. I don’t have a game plan and I’m still feeling buzzed. It’s a bad combination. I stop her thirty-or-so feet away from the arcade entrance.

“What the hell is going on?” I feel sick and emotional and am doing everything in my power to stop those feelings from surfacing.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she challenges, smugly.

“Dude, I know it’s your birthday and you’re entitled to some leeway with how you act and all, but I you’re being a fucking bitch to me for no damn reason!” I feel lighter letting out my frustration but I’m bracing myself for her response.

“*I’m* being a bitch? Fuck you. You insult me, puke all over my house, try to commit suicide—“

“—I wasn’t trying to kill myself, okay?” I needed to correct her.

“Whatever. And then you try to act like shit is cool. You’re all over the fucking place. You’re a complete fucking mess.” Her words sting more than I think they should.

“I’m working on that,” I tell her. The words come out soft and timid, like I’m defending myself against some monstrous bully.

“Work fucking harder,” she says dryly.

“Berns, you’re my best friend—“

“—Some fucking friend you are! You can’t apologize without victimizing yourself. Everything comes with a ‘but’! It’s never ‘I’m sorry for whatever fucked up thing I did to you this time’ it’s ‘I’m sorry for whatever I did *but* you did something first!’ I’m over it. We’re done.”

If she had punched me square in the face it would've hurt less. I can't even process the words she spat at me. They were venomous and purposely mean. They were shoot-to-kill words. I'm trying to convince myself that they were *just* words, but my mind can't process that, either.

I reach into my bag and pull out the coloring book, crayons, and card I got her earlier. I hand them to her slowly.

"Happy birthday." I can't look her in the eyes. I'm staring at the cracked wood beneath our feet.

"Thanks." She takes the items out of my hands softer than I expected, and I watch as she walks towards the arcade. She stops, and for a fleeting instant I feel like she might apologize and hug me and everything will be normal. Only in dreams. "I feel sorry for you, Alyssa. I hope you get your shit together."

I watch her walk away from me. I feel incredibly alone.

I shift my weight on my feet awkwardly and retreat towards the bathrooms. My face feels hot. I'm leaning against the tiled wall that lines the outdoor stalls. It's like I was just sucker punched. I take a quick glance around.

I'm sure no one is paying attention to me, so I slickly take the handle of rum out of my bag and take a swig. It's warming and calming. I take another. I feel it pumping through my veins. I don't know if my face is still red—I can't tell anymore. I take another long swig and throw the bottle back into my bag. It's time to man up. I can still have some fun tonight.

Sure, I'm pretty much friendless, but I'm not crying or anything, so it kind of feels like a win.

I walk back to where Duncan was sitting. He's not there, so I take a deep breath and wander back through the chaos to Andrew and Kitaro. They inform me that they've just finished their fifth game.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," I say, half-pleading.

"Sure, let's rally the troops," Kitaro agrees. "Plus, I'm starting to feel sober and that's a problem."

We start searching the arcade for everyone else. I literally have my fingers crossed that I won't be the one to find Bernadette. Rather than try my luck, I let Andrew and Kitaro be the search party and I head outside.

Rather than waiting directly outside the arcade, I walk to a bench facing the bay. It's dark and there's something peaceful about how the black waves are crashing onto the shore. I can see steady traffic moving along the PCH and dim lights lining the cliffs. My breathing feels fairly even for the first time all night. I want this feeling to last forever, but my chest tightens when I realize it won't.

"Aly, can I get a cigarette?"

"Not if you're going to creep up on me like that." I'm kind of spooked, but it's just Max. I'm craving words of wisdom or at least a non-threatening topical conversation (I'm not really in a position to be picky right now) so he is basically the best case scenario for company.

"Sorry about that."

He takes a seat next to me and I hand him my pack.

"Where is everyone else?"

“Thanks. They’re figuring something out. Tickets, or something? And Amos went to the bathroom.” He hands the pack back to me and I light a smoke for myself.

“Ah. Eli’s probably trading those tickets for a spider ring or something for Bernadette.” I’m gagging on the inside at the realization of how that interaction is going down.

“Yeah, something like that.” He looks uncomfortable, so I try to switch the subject. I’m fairly certain he has a thing for Bernadette and her thing for Eli secretly kills him.

“Um. So... did you have fun?” It’s the best I can come up with. But he takes my cue, which I appreciate.

“Yeah. I played this shooting game that I haven’t played in *years*. My cousin had it at his house growing up so I only ever played it at Christmas, but I always thought it was awesome as a kid.”

I’m searching for a response. Part of me wants to play up the childhood memory portion of that answer, but the other part of me wants to keep it light.

“Did you get far into the game?” That’ll do.

“Amos and I *almost* beat it, but we ran out of quarters.”

“Oh. That sucks.”

“It’s cool. Losing my buzz sucks more. Someone needs to make a decision. I’m either drinking more or going home. Well, going to Eli’s house. If my mom even *thinks* she smells alcohol on me...” I cringe. His mom is a menace.

“What about Amos’s house?”

“Nah, Andrew, Kitaro, and Dunc are all crashing there. Plus, Eli’s house is around the corner from mine.”

I always block out the fact that Max and Eli have been best friends for *years*. Like, since birth. Max is so much calmer than Eli is. He epitomizes the mellow stoner mentality.

It’s funny. Max and I used to make out in movie theaters in middle school, back when his hair was long. I remember Dunc said something about it to Max once and Max’s response was super simple and honest. Max used to go to concerts with me and my mom in middle school, too. That was always fun. I genuinely like the kid. Part of me wishes I could kidnap him as my own best friend.

“Make out already!” Dunc says, laughing. Max and I spin around startled. It’s middle school all over again.

“You all need to stop creeping up behind me. It’s just plain mean.” I shoot Dunc a glare that he returns with a smile and a shrug.

“Sorry, Al. So what’s the plan?”

“We should definitely head north side. Maybe make a stop around Lincoln Park. Then maybe head to my place?” The words are already out of my mouth, but I want to shove them back in. We can’t go back to my house. I’m pretty sure my folks decided to go out to a movie—my dad sent me a text earlier—and they won’t be back “til late” (as he phrased it) but it’s the very definition of suicide. They can’t see me drunk.

And, to make it worse, pretty much anything that goes into Duncan’s ears comes directly back out of his mouth. There’s no taking back the suggestion. Fuck.

“It’s a plan!” Dunc says like it’s the most exciting idea ever.

I look at Max. He returns my expression sympathetically. I wish he'd speak up more. I can tell he knows the jist of what I'm thinking.

“Look what Eli got me!” Bernadette's voice cuts me. I can actually feel my shoulders tensing and lifting. I need another swig or six before dealing with this insanity.

I turn around and see her holding up some toy car that probably cost Eli ten dollars in quarters. He should've bought her a card or something. It would've saved him money. He looks resigned. I haven't exchanged so much as a look with him since my panic attack a few hours ago. I could definitely use a drink about now.

“Cool, Berns. Let's go!” Dunc replies impatiently. She pouts at him. He doesn't react and her mouth immediately morphs into a scowl.

We gather our things and walk up the death hill that is the Santa Monica Pier incline. It is physically impossible to walk up this hill while smoking. Well, not entirely. I've managed it once—on rollerblades, no less. But I pretty much died afterwards.

We get to Palisades Park at the top in non-record time. No one bothered talking along the trek. We all smoke in some form or another, so it was just a whole lot of huffing and puffing.

Palisades Park is creepy at night. It's like all the lost souls of Santa Monica are gathered in one place. Rather than walking along it, we seem to subconsciously channel each other and opt to head east instead.

I'm over this walking around nonsense. I can't wait until the fall when I'll get my license. My parents will definitely not get me a car, but at least the possibility of driving will become more possible.

We're moving along 7<sup>th</sup> street like a pack of zombies. Shit is flying through my mind. I want to have that conversation with Bernadette all over again. But this time, I'll be the spiteful one and I'll open up *her* file. I'll put all of *her* flaws on the table and see how *she* reacts.

We cross up Wilshire over to Lincoln, and pass the tennis courts and the old playhouse on the east side of the park. The eucalyptus smells incredible. We dodge the breathing sleeping bags scattered throughout the park and dip into the shadows by the basketball courts. I grab a seat on one of the benches. Andrew sits with me. The rest of our group settles, some standing, some sitting on the ground.

Having spent the whole of sixth grade in boy scouts, Andrew proves to be more resourceful than the rest of us. He retrieves two more small water bottles filled with vodka from his backpack. My hero.

Duncan is rolling another joint in the meantime.

"It's like Christmas!" Kitaro says in mock childlike wonder.

"Or like herpes," Eli says.

"...what?" Amos asks, dumbfounded.

"You know... the gift that keeps on giving." Laughter ensues.

We pass around the bottles and J until we're adequately fucked up. It's like a second wind—the general spirit seems to be renewed.

Kitaro gives me a look and calls me over.

"You still have the rum?" he whispers.



“Yeah, why?” I think the accusatory tone my voice took correlates directly to how much pot I’ve smoked. I’d be happy to share with Kitaro, I guess.

“Can I have some?” He asked in a confused way, which throws me. I guess I came across more aggressive than I thought.

“Yeah, but not here.” I eye the rest of the pack and he nods back. We cross the park to the curb in front of Saint Monica’s, hidden behind a tree from the group’s eye line.

“Spot the church?” I rifle through my bag to find the half-full handle of rum. I didn’t realize I’d drank half of it already. Oops.

“Fuck, Alyssa! You dominated that handle!” His eyebrows shoot up so high, I swear they’re going to come off his face.

“Spot the church it is!” I respond uncomfortably, with an equally uncomfortable half-giggle. His eyes are so wide—they’re freaking me the fuck out. I’m trying to keep cool, at least for the rest of the night, so I opt for averting his gaze altogether. I get where he’s coming from—or at least where his surprise is coming from. No one actually *saw* me drink the rum tonight, so I get it. It’s weird for half of it to be gone. I wonder if Andrew still has that flavored vodka in his bag.

“You first,” I insist, shoving the bottle at Kitaro.

He closes his eyes in an exaggerated motion, squishing his face together.

“Oh!” He points frantically at Saint Monica’s. “There’s a church!” He takes a huge gulp and passes the bottle back to me.

I close my eyes for a few seconds. When I open them, I display the same faux-enthusiasm as he did.

“Yes! Another church!” I take a drink and pass the bottle back to him.

“We are *so* good at this game!” He high fives me and we both start laughing. We go back and forth with another few rounds until we kill the bottle.

“Awesome. What’s next?” Kitaro asks, breathing on me a little more than usual. The rum is an improvement over the general stank of his mouth. He has halitosis like *whoa*. And a tendency to be a close talker.

“Dude. Your breath!” Oh fuck. Words before thought. I’m no longer thinking.

“I know, right? I’m so drunk!” Thankfully, he isn’t thinking either.

My mind clicks off.

“HAND GRENADE!” I scream, throwing the empty bottle into the street. It shatters into a thousand pieces. Kitaro stares at me like I’m out of my mind, then starts busting up. I turn around slowly and face the group in the park. It looks about fifty-fifty—half of them are about to kill me and the other half are about to high five me.

Eli comes charging out from under the trees.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Alyssa?” I’m seeing red. That motherfucker cannot tell me there’s something wrong with me. There’s something wrong with *him* if he thinks that’s going to fly.

“This whole fucking night is what’s wrong. Bernadette throwing herself all over you. *You* consoling *me* earlier. There’s a whole fucking world of shit that’s wrong with me! Fuck you!” I’m trying to use my anger to stop the tears that are pushing against my eyes, dying to pour out.

“You are batshit crazy. You need some *serious* help.”

I notice there's a definite gap between the two of us and the rest of the group. This is apparently a showdown. This is not how I wanted to do this. I wanted to sit down with him one-on-one, stone-cold sober and work out our shit. But my words are coming out way faster than my thoughts.

“You're one to talk, you douche bag! You're going to lie about hooking up with me, be a complete dick to me, and expect to get away with it? Hell no! You're a fucking crybaby, you're not as hot as you think you are, and guess what? All your friends make fun of you!” The part of me that's totally in love with him is stopping the angry part of me from opening up a decent file on him. Lame.

His voice lowers. It's cold and mean. “At least I'm not some delusional, psychotic insecure slut. Enjoy milling over that one, Al. And never fucking speak to me again.” It's not the words so much as the tone. I'm shaking.

My right elbow cocks back. Everything slows down. Everything's silent.

I knock that fucker out.

## Chapter Twenty-One

I'm sitting on the bench surrounded by Kitaro and Andrew. Duncan's pacing. Max, Amos, and Bernadette are tending to Eli. He's awake now, but still on the ground. I know I should be worried, thinking about whether or not he's okay, that kind of shit. But I'm not.

I'm thinking about how I should've said something cool when I punched him—something he'd remember. Like when Patrick Bateman kills Paul Allen. "Try getting a reservation at Dorsia now, you fucking stupid bastard!" *That* has the umph last words need. But my words wouldn't have come out like that. I probably would've panicked and said something lame like "Thanks for hurting my feelings!" That doesn't really get the point across in the same way.

I light a cigarette. I can't quite piece together what just happened. The whole situation is bizarre and, as far as I'm concerned, totally out of character.

I watch Eli get to his feet. I'm focusing on my smoking, watching the thick cloud billow in front of me with every exhale. He is glaring at me. I don't care.

I catch Andrew and Kitaro waving out of the corner of my eye. They're allowed to be friends with him—nothing I can do. My head feels heavy, like it's taking extra effort to hold it up. What he said to me wasn't really that bad—sticks and stones, you know. But it was the cutting tone behind the words. He could've said "I wish you were dead" or "I baked you these cookies" and it wouldn't have mattered. The words didn't matter.

I don't want to care. I don't want to take back the hit, but I don't want to be in this pool of awkward anymore, either. I'm watching them all talk to one another. Bernadette and Eli are intermittently glowering at me. I guess a decision's been made. Eli, Bernadette, and Max start walking away together.

I guess Bernadette's not staying at my house tonight. Oh well.

"So, Al's house?" Dunc asks, strolling up to the bench with Amos.

I'm kind of into the fact that he's pretending nothing just happened. I'm not sure *why* he's doing it, but I can ignore my curiosity for the sake of appreciation. Plus, the other three follow suit. Bonus.

It would be a better idea to go to Amos's house than mine, but I can't get the balls together to change our plans. We walk down 7<sup>th</sup> street for what feels like the hundredth time tonight. Everything seems hazy, but I think it's just the combination of night fog and poorly placed street lights than anything else.

It would be a good night to lie in the grass and listen to Ben Harper.

They're laughing and joking as we're walking, but I'm too checked out to participate. When we get to my house, I'll be social, but for now, I'm just trying to calculate how many days are left in the school year. It's April, we're out in mid-June. I think Spring Break is soon, so that knocks out a week. And Memorial Day. And those stupid state testing days that I can't get excused from even though they won't let me take the tests because half of my classes are above my grade level. I'm not down for taking standardized tests, but it actually pisses me off because they give \$100 to the top

percentile and I know I could score high enough to get the money. Whatever, it's really lame.

We pass Amos's house and turn up my street. Totally past the point of no return. I don't see my mom's car, so I guess it's clear to go in. The problem is I have no clue when they're going to be home. I need to be asleep before they get here, or at least be pretending to be asleep, so they don't know how fucked up I am. I feel myself getting anxious and paranoid. I wish my head had an "off" switch.

Apparently the off switch is directly linked to Dunc peeing in the hedge next to my house.

"Dude! Really?!" I ask incredulously.

"Do you want me to stop mid-stream?" I gag a bit. The thought of Dunc's junk just doesn't do it for me.

"Hurry up," I groan. He's clearly breaking the seal—it's taking for-fucking-ever. It's the kind of piss where just when you think it's done, it gets its second wind.

I can't believe he couldn't wait until I opened the door. Rambunctious bastard.

"Guys, beeline for the back door, okay?" I figure if I hear my parents coming up in front, I can send the guys out to the alley and get upstairs before my folks even get the key in the door. Also, Dunc has a history of tagging my furniture and I really don't want to deal with that today.

The alarm takes me four tries to turn off and I'm mildly terrified that the security company is going to call my house. Daisy is waiting at the back door. She barks as we approach, but runs away to the side of the house as soon as I unlock the back door. Some guard dog. The five of us go outside.

We have a slew of half-broken patio furniture in my backyard. The chairs themselves work, but the cushions have been patched up and glued in the most ghetto way possible. They're threadbare and the fog somehow soaks them to the core. Basically, when you sit on them, you're afraid they'll dissolve. I want to test that theory one day—just sit on a damp busted cushion for hours until it disappears beneath me.

Rather than dealing with the guys complaining about getting their clothes wet on the cushions, I start pushing five non-cushioned seats together. Andrew removes the raspberry vodka bottle from his backpack and puts it on a table. Dunc is already seated in a chair working on the formation of a blunt.

“You should throw parties here again, like in middle school,” Andrew says, picking up the bottle and taking a swig. The parties I used to have in middle school were pretty awesome. Ice cream and swimming. That's a win-win in my book.

“My parents are pretty much done with me having parties after the one where Eli dropped acid and almost stabbed that one kid and that girl lost her virginity in the house.”

“I heard about that,” Amos says. “Weren't there a bunch of freshmen here crying?”

“Only a couple.” Only two of them cried. It was for band initiation—everybody has to go through it at some point.

Things are going smoothly now. We're passing around a joint and a bottle of bitch-liquor, and everyone's throwing out random things and laughing. Even Daisy decided we weren't a threat and is curled up by my feet. This is totally the night I wanted.

“I'm fucking hungry,” Andrew says. “Al, you have anything to eat?”

Red flags are popping up all over my mind. It's like if you give a mouse a cookie. I don't really want my parents to look in the fridge and figure out that I've fed four boys. Seeing my brother go from being a kid to a teen years ago was mildly terrifying. My parents' grocery bill skyrocketed—he ate *everything*.

“Let me check what we have in the kitchen.”

“I'll come with you,” Andrew insists. Now I can't even lie about not having anything in there.

We go inside. I find half a bag of reduced fat chips in the pantry. They're probably stale to the point of being chewy, but I figure I can throw those to the boys outside and it'll prevent them from further food related inquiries. I was the kid in elementary school who couldn't trade anything due to the lack of junk food in my lunch bag. The fact that we even have chips of any form in the cupboard is bizarre.

Andrew starts going through the refrigerator constructing some sort of sandwich. I toss the chips outside.

“Here guys. It's the best we have in there,” I say apologetically. They shrug and go to town on the stale chips. I go back inside so I can keep an eye on Andrew. There are certain things in the fridge that shouldn't be eaten and I need to make sure they stay undigested.

“What are you making?” I ask him.

“Oh, you know. Basic sandwich.” It looks kind of gross. Mustard, processed cheese, and ham. I know I won't miss any of the ingredients, and he isn't taking the last of anything, so I'm pretty sure I'll be in the clear.



Andrew's rambling on about something, but I'm not listening to him. I hear something in the background, something outside. I concentrate, shutting Andrew off completely.

It's the distinct sound of my mother's car locking and two pairs of feet walking up the pathway.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

My heart is racing. I can't believe I didn't kick the guys out sooner. I look at the clock on the microwave. It's past midnight—we've been outside for much longer than I thought.

"Andrew," I whisper. "You guys need to get the hell out of here."

He doesn't hear me or he's ignoring me. I don't have time for this. I nudge him, and point outside. He isn't moving fast enough. We both head towards the back.

The key is in the front door. And here come my parents.

"Alyssa! We know you're up! We heard your *friends* walking up to the house," my mom calls out.

"Oh yeah, we're just in the back!" I yell. I have nothing else I can say. I can't lie—the guys are still in the backyard. My parents heard them. I realize now that I'm slurring. I am completely and totally fucked.

I can hear them talking to each other in the foyer. They're speaking too low for me to really discern the words they're saying but I know they're talking about me. Or, rather, what they should do with me.

I go into the backyard. There's nothing else I can do. I light a cigarette.

"You guys are going to have to leave."

"Oh come on, Alyssa. Your parents are going to give you a slap on the wrist like they always do. It'll be fine," Kitaro assures me.

"Not this time."

“What makes this any different from any other time you’ve had people over? Your parents *always* get over it,” Amos says.

“So, here’s the deal. They think I’m sober.”

The four of them erupt in laughter. I’m still stoned and a little drunk so I can’t help but laugh with them. It *is* ridiculous that my parents think I’m sober, but in light of recent events, I’m strongly considering trying it out for real. Because whatever *this* is, isn’t working out for me.

“Alyssa.” It’s my dad. The blood rushes out of my face. I’m literally terrified.

“Hey, pop.”

“Guys, you need to go home. I’m not going to call your parents, but you need to get out of here. Now.” My dad shoots a glance at the vodka bottle that’s still on the table. Andrew snatches it quickly and shoves it into his bag.

“Yes, sir,” they say as a collective. They look almost as frightened as I feel, but they’re getting out of this. They don’t have to stay for the consequences part of this equation.

“Bye Al, see you at school,” Andrew says, shooting me a sympathetic look. I nod, and stare at the ground.

I glance up and see my mom is talking to the boys at the end of the hall. Chances are, it’s completely friendly banter. She’s disarming them so she can maintain her reputation as a cool mom. She’s probably regaling them with tales of rock stars and what Hollywood used to be like. And I’m out here, staring at the cement.

“Alyssa.” My dad says my name like it’s painful for him to get the word out. I’m starting to brim with guilt. “I don’t know what to say.”

My dad not having something to say is borderline impossible. He *always* has something. I know I’ll regret it, but I look at him.

“I’m really sorry, dad.” I am sorry. He looks like I betrayed him, and in a way, I did. He was so proud of me, and I fucked it up.

“I don’t think ‘sorry’ is a solution. You lied to both of us. You’ve wasted right now, I can smell it from here.” He mutters something under his breath.

“What?”

“I said I knew it was too much to hope for.”

“Oh.” I am frozen. I feel disgusting right now.

“Don’t you want a future? Don’t you want to go to college? You’ve got so many talents, you could actually be anything you want to be. Why are you throwing everything away? What can we do to convince you that your life is worth living and that you should be coherent enough to experience it?”

“Can I have a do-over?”

“Haven’t you had enough ‘do-overs?’ I can’t put this any other way: you *have* to get your shit together. Maybe going to Marymount would be good for you.”

“Dad, I’m really going to try this time. I promise I’ll try.” My eyes are leaking out at this point. The fact that my voice is trembling *and* slurring isn’t helping my case, but I feel like the words coming out of my mouth are dripping with sincerity. I can’t see my dad like this anymore. I can’t keep hurting the people around me.

“That’s not a good enough promise, Alyssa. Get some sleep. We’ll talk about this in the morning.”

I get up and stub out my cigarette. I try to give my dad a hug, but he turns away. He won’t even look at me.

“Goodnight, dad.”

I grab Nunu’s food from the kitchen and head upstairs. My friends are gone. I can smell smoke wafting out of my mom’s upstairs office. I want to talk to her, but I can’t bare any more looks of disappointment this evening.

I go into my room and put down the food. Nunu apparently senses that I’m in no mood to be attacked, so she leaves me alone.

Getting ready for bed has never felt so impossible. It’s like my toothbrush weighs fifty pounds and my face wash won’t come off. Trying to peel my contacts off my eyes takes an exorbitant amount of effort.

When I turn out of my bathroom to go into my bedroom, I notice an envelope on my desk. It’s from Marymount and it looks like someone already opened it. I remember when my brother was waiting for his college responses to come in. He explained that small envelopes are rejection letters and big envelopes are acceptances. I sigh a bit of relief when I realize the envelope waiting for me is small.

I read the letter.

*Dear Alyssa, Thank you for your application to Marymount. Rarely do we find a student so well suited for our educational environment. We did not have a space in our junior class for you, but after discussing the matter with the Board of Trustees, we thought you were worth creating a space for. Congratulations! We will be sending*

*additional information to you in the upcoming weeks. We look forward to having you matriculate in the fall. Sincerely, Meredith G. O'Brien.*

Really? I know I should be excited and I should give the school a chance and I should take advantage of the opportunity that's been given to me, but I can't. I hated being there, even for just one day. What makes it even more awkward is that they *made* a space for me. Mrs. O'Brien actually fought for me. Now I get what my dad was hinting at. He knew I'd been accepted.

If for no other reason than to dodge the bullet of an all-girls Catholic school, I need to clean up. I'll deal with the fact that I actually punched someone in the face today later.

I sit at my computer for a moment, and a brilliant idea comes to me. I type "AA meeting Saturday Los Angeles" into the search engine. A meeting directory pops up. Turns out there's another meeting at Ohio Street on Saturday nights. It's not specified as a "young people's meeting" like the Thursday night one, but I'm guessing some of the same people will be there anyway. I write down the time it starts on a piece of paper.

Maybe I can get a fresh start at that meeting. Maybe I can stop talking about trying to be sober and actually do it.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

I wake up in a cold sweat. My heartbeat tells me I was having a nightmare, but I can't remember what it was. Nunu is curled up by my head and looks pissed at me when I pull my body upright.

Today, I start over.

I make my bed. I *never* make my bed. It's not a priority to my parents that I keep my room clean, so I never thought to do it before. When I was little, I remember my favorite days were the ones where my mom cleaned my bedding. She'd actually tuck me in by making the bed with me already in it. It was awesome.

I put the dirty clothing littering the floor into my hamper. I figure this is a good second step in becoming a better person. I remember the first guy I heard at Ohio Street talking about how it's the little things that improve your life in sobriety, like taking a shower or cleaning your apartment. As I am apartment-less, I figure cleaning my room is the next best thing.

I replace Nunu's water and clean her litter box in the bathroom. I put my makeup and random shit on the counter in their proper places. Being productive is bizarrely easier than I expected.

And then it hits me. In the midst of my whirlwind of productivity, my night of debauchery comes back up through my stomach. I feel it rise and rush to the toilet. What little food I had and what feels like gallons of liquid exit my body from whence they came. I'm a dizzy mess on the floor.

I swear I hear my mom crank up the radio in her office next door. I think she's trying to drown out the sound of me retching. I wish I could drown it out, too.

After twenty minutes or so of being sick, I finally feel a little bit of strength coursing through me. The backs of my eyes hurt and my stomach and throat are burning, but I feel like I've taken care of whatever was left in my system. I drink a ton of water and brush my teeth twice. I jump in the shower and clean off whatever's left of last night. The water wakes me up.

I feel weird. There's part of me that wants to smoke a joint so I can stop thinking about my dad's face last night. I want to erase his pained expression from my memory, but it's flashing in my mind every time I blink.

I need some kind of distraction, so I forage through my bag for my copy of *The Odyssey*. I might as well do some homework. I imagine what the look on my mom or dad's face would be if they came into my room and saw me doing what I was supposed to be doing. There's something calming about that image. I make a mental note to store that under "nice things to think about" in my mind.

Reading *The Odyssey* is like reading gibberish. I have to read every line five or six times to understand what's going on. And I can't get the names straight. The names of the gods and goddesses, I get. It's all the Telemachus-this and Eurymachus-that nonsense I'm tripping over. Part of the problem might be my complete lack of attention, but I am giving it a good enough shot. I'm halfway through my reading assignment, so I figure I can take a break.

I think I need to get outside. I grab my iPod, cigarettes, sunglasses and a hoodie and go downstairs.



I still haven't seen either of my parents this morning. I think they're avoiding me. I'm wandering through the house. I can still hear my mom's radio blasting, but my dad is nowhere to be found. He's probably golfing or something. He probably had to get out of the house—to get away from me.

“Daisy! Want to go for a walk?” I call out into the emptiness. I hear the scratching of claws against wood as she ambles down the hallway to meet me. I hook up her harness, grab the spare key, and go outside. Even with the sunglasses on, the light is blinding. So this is what a weekend morning looks like when you're sober.

I take Daisy on a shadier route than usual. We go up San Vicente instead of Georgina or Carlyle and the combination of the breeze and thick trees cools my face. Daisy keeps trying to eat the coral tree pods on the sidewalk. Trying to stop her junkyard dog behavior is saving me from having to think. Points for Daisy.

We get all the way to the Country Mart before I realize how long we've been walking. I consider getting a coffee, but realize I have zero dollars on me and stealing is probably frowned upon in sobriety. I don't think I'll be able to do this alone. It seems like there are too many rules in the real world that I'm not used to. Instead, I slow our pace and cruise up 26<sup>th</sup> street, lighting a cigarette as we turn onto Carlyle.

Daisy is not excited about slowing down, but she seems to understand the mood I'm in. It may be the illusion of her face that's making her appear sympathetic to my cause. It looks like she's wearing dark eyeliner, so her face has a sad understanding look to it. Either way, she's stopped trying to rush us home, which I appreciate.

It takes us twice as long to get back as it did to get to 26<sup>th</sup> street, probably because I'm actually cognizant of the distance we traveled. Daisy decided to get back at me for walking too slowly by practically pulling my arm out of the socket in pursuit of a squirrel. When we get to the house, I see that my dad's not sitting in his usual spot in his office. He's probably still out. I can hear my mom gardening in the backyard, so she's apparently moved on. I guess I'm kind of avoiding them, too. I don't want to have a conversation about private school and drugs and whatever. I just want a chance—just one more chance—to prove I can be a legitimate human being.

I let out a long breath as I unlock the door and lead Daisy to the back. When I get to the back door, I freeze. My skin is tingly. I don't want to talk to my mom *at all*, but I can't ignore her completely. I open the door. Daisy flies by me, almost knocking me on my ass.

“Hey, Ma.”

She doesn't hear me. She has these crazy huge radio head phones from the 1990s covering her ears, possibly on full blast.

“Ma!”

She's actually on a ladder across the pool cutting the hedges protruding from our neighbor's house. This should be a weird image, but I'm pretty used to it at this point. It's not everyday that you see someone balancing on a ladder across a body of water. I'd really like to see her in a lumberjack competition. I feel like these skills have to have some greater use than mere bush trimming.

She stares at me for a moment, like she's contemplating whether or not she feels like talking to me. Again, I get it. She's angry. They're all fucking angry.

“Hold on, Al,” she snaps, as she descends her ladder bridge.

I’m standing in the shady part of the backyard. In normal circumstances, the amount of shade we have back here is detrimental to all things fun. Our neighbors decided at some point that privacy is defined by how tall your trees are, so hanging out in the back when you want to swim or try to get a little color consists of moving around a lot.

My mom is standing in front of me, arms crossed, foot tapping.

“Well?” She says impatiently.

“Um, I think I’m going to go to a meeting tonight.” I can’t look at her face. Even with her sunglasses on, I can feel her judging me, rolling her eyes.

“You shouldn’t be allowed to leave the house for a *month* as far as I’m concerned,” she returns coldly. Daisy is pressed against my mom’s leg—a show of solidarity. See if I ever walk *you* again, you mutt.

“But Ma, this is for a meeting. I get that I screwed up last night, but I’m serious about changing things.” Her face softens. I think she’s shifted from anger to sympathy. Great. Another person who feels sorry for me.

“Alyssa,” she starts. She takes her sunglasses off. Her blue eyes are heavy and empty. I can sense she’s about to get emotional. I tense at the thought. Rather than fight it, I throw myself into her arms. She’s not crying. Neither of my parents cries unless it’s important—I wish I had inherited that gene.

“Mom, I swear I’ll fix all this. I’m going to stop getting fucked up and roaming the streets and punching people in the face—“

She pulls away.

“—who’d you punch in the face?” She asks incredulously.

“Eli.”

My mom bursts out laughing. It may not be the most appropriate action for her to do, but she’s never thought super highly of Eli. I’m glad she can find the humor in the situation.

“Alyssa, you know I don’t condone violence, but…” She raises her hand. I give her a high-five. “If anyone deserves a punch in the face, it’s that boy.” I laugh uncomfortably.

“So is it cool for me to go to the meeting tonight?”

“Yeah, I guess.” She pauses. “But we’re going to drop you off and pick you up. You’re not wandering around L.A. tonight.”

“Deal.” I give her another hug, and walk back into the house.

I’m usually good with technology, but the fact that my dad had to write and illustrate a fairly thick manual to work the TV in the living room makes the machine intimidating. Rather than turning the beast on, I just lie down on the sagging couch. My mom had the sectional re-stuffed a few years ago, but it fought back with a vengeance and the same spine-dislocating dip reappeared in no time. As I sink into the couch, I realize how stifling the house is.

The meeting doesn’t start until 8pm. It’s only 2ish, maybe. I can’t see a clock from here. That means I have about six hours to kill. If I was high right now, six hours would pass like nothing. I would risk destroying my dad’s handiwork and watch a movie down here (complete with surround sound). Then, I would fall asleep on the couch and

wake up around 8:15. It would be too late to go to the meeting, but those hours would disappear.

I could try to do more homework, but I just can't imagine doing it here. We don't have the best ventilation in my house, so it feels stuffy even when it's practically empty. The thought of spending hours in here is making me anxious.

I get off the couch and go back outside.

"Ma!" I call out. She hasn't climbed back up the ladder yet, so I figure I'm causing less of a disturbance this time.

"Yeah, Al?"

"Can I borrow five bucks? I think I'm going to head to Westwood early and do some homework at a coffee shop." Normally I'd just take the money from her purse and call it a day, but I genuinely want to prove myself to her at least a little bit.

She's sizing me up and looks mildly discouraged, if only because she can't tell whether or not I'm telling the truth. I think the words "borrow" and "homework" are throwing her off.

"We had an agreement, Al."

"I just can't be in the house anymore."

"You can sit out here," she suggests.

"Please mom?"

She stands there, obviously weighing the pros and cons of the situation.

"What are you going to eat if you go out?" What a question.

"I'll just bring a sandwich or something. Please?"

She sighs. I take the opportunity to light a cigarette and take a seat on the steps.

“Whatever, Alyssa. Sure. But I have some conditions.”

“Shoot.”

“One, have your phone on. If your dad or I call you, you answer. You can have the phone off during the meeting. What time is the meeting, anyway?”

“I looked it up online. I think it’s from 8 until 9:30? I’m not positive though. What’s number two?”

“Two: if we call and think you’re intoxicated...” her voice trails off.

They had been so passive about my drinking and pot smoking and everything else until I started going to meetings. In my mind, her unfinished thought turns into a hundred conversations they must have had about me. I don’t make her finish the sentence.

“Anything else?”

“I want to see what homework you’ve done so far. When you come back home, I want to see what you completed in the time before the meeting.”

“Deal. What else?”

“We’re picking you up afterwards. As soon as you know what time the meeting actually ends, you let us know. Either call the house or send your dad a text message.”

“Okay.” I stub out my cigarette in the clamshell ashtray. She takes a bill out of her pocket and hands it to me. It’s a twenty.

“I want you to get something more substantial than a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to eat. The meeting is over by UCLA, right? There are plenty of places around there.”

“Okay. Thanks, mom,” I respond, sheepishly.

We walk back into the house together. I run upstairs and grab a sweater and the bag that has all my homework accoutrements and day planner in it. I rush back down the stairs and lay my weekend's worth of assignments out on the kitchen table to show her. I have more of *The Odyssey* to read, a few calc problems, a sketching project, a dialogue to write out for Spanish, and a chapter review for history. I don't understand why you have to take so many classes at a time in high school, or why every teacher you have pretends that they're the *only* one you have. All I know is that I always have a shit-ton of homework.

"I've only done some of my reading for English. I haven't started anything else."

"Okay, you've got a ton of time, so you should make a pretty decent sized dent in your homework."

"No worries, mom. I'll take care of it." I put all of my stuff back in my bag and sling it over my shoulder.

"I love you, Alyssa. But I think this is the last chance we have in us," she says, solemnly. "Please don't fuck it up."

"I love you, too, mom. I'll see you later." I give her another hug. I take in her smell of Nag Champa and self-tanner. I feel momentarily soothed, like it would be a good idea to reenter the womb. It takes me a moment to release her. When I finally get up the courage to let go, I give her a timid wave as I walk out the front door.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Taking the bus on the weekend is terrible because most buses only come by once an hour. Usually they come two or three or sometimes four times per hour. I check the schedule mounted at the bus stop on 7<sup>th</sup> and San Vicente. I check my phone. Fuck. Missed it by fifteen minutes. The next one doesn't come by for another forty-five.

I decide to walk up San Vicente to kill time. If I walk far enough, I might even catch the number 3 bus where San Vicente crosses Montana. But let's be real, here. It's pretty fucking far. Like, at least an hour by foot.

I zone out passing the same scenes from my walk this morning. I'm thinking about the familiar faces I've seen the past few weeks at the meeting. I don't know if tonight's meeting will consist of the same group, but I'm kind of hoping it will. I want to confess to Martinia or Golay or that chick with the fruit name. I want to tell them I haven't really been sober, that I didn't deserve that thirty-day chip. I don't even know how I'd say that.

Maybe I should just take another newcomer's chip. Whenever people take newcomer's chips for the umpteenth time, the whole room cheers for them. They're welcomed back. But those are people who do mounds of coke when they start using again, so it's a bigger deal for them to make it back alive.

I guess I'm embarrassed by the idea of having to tell these grown-ass people I was lying. I'm pretty sure they have more important things to think about than some kid fucking up, but they've just been so damn *nice*. It's like, if they had just been assholes to me from the get-go, I wouldn't care what they thought or whether or not they knew I wasn't sober. This whole situation just sucks. Period.



Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the bus whirling past me. I clutch my bag tightly to my chest and run after the blue monster like my life depends on it. I must have been daydreaming in slow motion. I chase the bus for three or four blocks until it finally pulls over.

I toss my change into the ticket machine with a huff and shoot the driver, who probably moonlights as a bounty hunter, a look.

“Sorry, kid. I only stop in designated areas.”

“That’s cool, man. No worries.”

I’m still kind of pissed, but at least I’m on the bus now. I guess I’ll figure out whether and how to declare my non-sobriety when I get to the meeting later. I could always just *not* tell them. I mean, in reality, they don’t know me from Adam. Why would they really care if I lied?

Then again, this would give me a chance to erase the past—a clean slate. I could do everything right from the start.

The bus ride takes longer than I think it should. There’s an unusual amount of traffic and I swear at some point on my journey, I see my dad drive by. I get off the bus a couple of stops early. For some reason, I just feel like walking today. I can’t find any music on my iPod that really fits my mood, so I just zone out listening to cars passing as I wander to Westwood village.

After crossing paths with a few Starbucks, I finally find a Coffee Bean, complete with outdoor patio. I light a smoke and lean against its wall. Looking around the street, I realize L.A. gets less attractive the further you get from the water. Things just suddenly

turn into strip malls or Disneylandesque marketplaces east of the 405. And yes, that's including Hollywood. It's not that we don't have those things on the Westside, but the beach and the palm trees and the sunsets make up for the commercialism.

After long debate, I end up with a half-mocha half-vanilla ice blended because for once I can actually afford to drink a fancy coffee without the bitter lingering guilt taste. It compliments the warm day perfectly. And finally, I'm able to get out of my head long enough to get to my schoolwork.

Spanish soars by, *The Odyssey* makes a little bit of sense—the world feels slightly more in sync. My mom calls me something like ten times, and I am completely coherent for every conversation. There's even a fleeting moment where some cute douche bag from UCLA tries to talk to me (until he realizes I'm in high school—oops). All is right with the world—until I realize what time it is.

Apparently, homework effectively kills time. It's 7:30 and I'm about a 20-30 minute walk from where I need to be. Time to get to the meeting.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

I'm half-running to what I feel in my stomach will be the very death of me. I'm kind of like the weak antelope in the back of the herd who knows the lion's chomping at its ankles, but instead of faking the lion out and having a chance at survival, I'm accepting the shitty odds—accepting fate.

I slow as I come upon a park on Veteran. There's something haunting about parks, particularly when the sun's coming down and you're alone and the swings are creaking in the breeze. Maybe I've just seen too many horror movies and between those creepy memories and the antelope metaphor, I'm pretty sure I'm going to get stabbed.

Against the odds (or, at least, the odds in my head), I make it past the park alive. I turn onto Ohio Avenue and a sinking feeling overtakes me. I feel nauseous. I don't want to be here right now. I had the cajones to do this earlier, but any courage I may have had before has vanished. I am not prepared to do this for real.

As I'm psyching myself up with every self-help mantra I've ever heard watching paid programming in the middle of the night, I notice something. The parking lot of the meeting house, normally full of self-conscious addicts chain-smoking, is empty. We're talking barren wasteland kind of empty. Did I misread the website?

I check the time on my cell phone. 7:45: Record time. I take a tour around the building. Every door and window is locked up and impossible to break into. They all have those ghetto iron-bar covers over them like you see in shadier places. The perimeter of the parking lot is made up of short wide brick walls, so I find one to perch on and

decide to wait it out for a bit. Maybe the meeting starts at 8:30 or 9:00. If that's the case, I might as well hang around for a bit. I'm here already, right?

I rifle through my bag and pull out my art homework and my cigarettes. I throw on some Radiohead and blast the hypnotic electronic beats in my head. Apparently, we're supposed to draw an illustration of something from a favorite poem or story. I stare at the broken down prison in front of me, trying to think of something. For some reason I have Robert Frost repeating in my head: "two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

It's not my favorite poem. And not to out-nerd myself, but it's not even my favorite Frost poem. It's just that I'm staring at this building—this opportunity for a new beginning—and for some reason this building and those words make sense together.

I try to draw it in some kind of meaningful stylized way—like making the iron bars look like teeth, and the handicap ramp look like a tongue—and it looks kind of cool, but I don't think I'm really panicking that much. At least, it shouldn't seem that scary to me. I know what to expect, I've been there before. I've just never seen it empty like this.

I feel something looming over me and let out a yelp. I didn't even know I was capable of making whatever sound just passed through my lips. I look up, and see a tall, lanky guy hovering over my personal space—and suddenly there's a metallic taste in my mouth. He's muttering something, but I can't hear whatever he's saying. I'm freaked out, but I take off my earphones anyway.

"Oh, you had music on," he says casually. I'm still gawking at him like he's a ghost. "I was just wondering if you've seen Andy. He's supposed to unlock the building tonight."

“I don’t know who Andy is,” I respond, flatly.

“Are you new?”

“What?”

“Is this your first time at the meeting?” Oh, I get it now. Damn, these guys are friendly.

“Well, kind of. I mean, I’ve been to the Thursday night one, but never here.” I take a closer look at him and realize he’s been at every Thursday night meeting I’ve been to. It makes a bit more sense.

“How much time do you have?” Why do they always ask that? Part of me just wants to say ‘nunya business’ like I’m five-years-old, but I guess it’s kind of an alkie ice-breaker. I fidget nervously.

“Um, well... I was coming here for over two months, but I guess today is day one,” I tell him, and feel blood rushing to my face.

He gives me this look of complete disapproval. I react accordingly, dropping my head in shame, though I can logically justify that a stranger giving me a look is not worth any reaction.

“Man, what are you embarrassed about? Psh... so what? So you have a day today. It’s one day at a time, anyway. A dude with ten years is no better than another dude with one day. They just have a better set of tools, you know?”

I’m kind of reeling over this moment. He shot me a disapproving look because I was *embarrassed*? Who are these people? Plus, I’m trying to process what he’s said. I guess it makes sense. Like, if you take a drink after a year of being sober or you take a

drink after a day of being sober, it's still breaking that sobriety, I guess. That's kind of cool.

"I'm D.C. What's your name?"

It takes me a few extra moments to realize he's just given me his name.

"Wait, what?"

"Girl, are you high?" I feel high right now. This conversation is way weirder than necessary.

"No, no... what was your name?"

"D.C. Dark and crazy." I laugh, but kind of shudder about what kind of crazy lurks in that wiry frame.

"Alyssa." I throw my stuff back in my bag, pull myself up and shake his hand. I'm 5'9" and this guy is *still* towering over me.

"Six-six, almost six-seven," he says, rolling his eyes.

"Oh, sorry," I must have been staring. "How much time do you have?"

"Two years, four months, one week, and three days."

I kind of want to laugh at how ridiculously detailed his response was, but I'm not that rude. I guess he takes that one day at a time shit seriously. He lights a cigarette. I follow suit.

"So what time does this meeting start? I kind of have to tell my parents." There are maybe two cars in the parking lot and this Andy guy hasn't shown up yet.

"8:30."

"Oh, okay. And it's an hour and a half?"

“Yeah, we’re out at ten. Wait, tell your parents? How old are you?” He looks me up and down, in a half-searching, half-sketchy way.

“I’m fifteen.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Ah, fuck... I feel like a pedophile.” His response legitimately grosses me out as, up until the sketchy once-over, I was not picking up any signs. I laugh awkwardly to try to quell the weirdness.

“Would you excuse me just a minute?” I say smiling.

“Yeah, sure.”

“I just have to call my folks.” I walk to a dark corner of the parking lot, out of earshot. I find my cell phone and dial my house number. The phone rings for about half-a-second before I hear the muffled sound of my dad trying to put his headset on to answer the call.

“Yeah?” My dad is primarily a television producer. When he doesn’t look at the caller ID, he answers the phone like someone is about to present yet another dilemma to him. I find it hilarious. It’s always ‘yeah’ and it always sounds like he’s in the middle of something. It’s not personal, it’s just business.

“Hey pop, it’s me.”

“Hi Al. I’m on the other line right now, what’s up?” He sounds extra impatient. I’m pretty sure he *isn’t* on the other line, but the man spends several hours a day on the phone, so you never know.

“Hey, yeah, mom wanted me to call when I know what time the meeting was and when it was going til.”

“So what time is the meeting and when does it end?”

“8:30 til 10. An hour and a half.”

“Did you get some homework done?”

“I actually got most of it done.” I really want to change the tone of this conversation, make him a little happier to hear my voice. I don’t think that’s in the cards right now.

“Ok, we’ll come pick you up at ten.”

“Can you make it 10:15? The guy who’s supposed to unlock the doors isn’t here yet so I think they might be running late.”

“We’ll wait,” my dad says somberly.

“Ok.”

“Anything else?”

“Nope, that’s it,” I sigh.

“Alright, we’ll see you at ten, then.” Click.

“See ya,” I whisper dejected to my phone.

In the briefness of the conversation with my dad, the parking lot has come alive. A mushroom cloud of smoke thickens the air over the lot. Cars that didn’t exist before are now occupying every possible spot.



People are everywhere—frantically gesticulating with Venti-sized coffee cups and cigarettes. I recognize most of the faces, which fills me with equal parts comfort and fear.

D.C. is off in another area now, chatting up some other chick. I think about the warning from the bearded guy at my first meeting here about most men being snakes. Point made.

Martinia is here, wearing her token bandana and wife beater combination. I want to avoid her, but she sees me before I can make a move. She waves to me, and I walk over to her like I'm caught in a tractor beam.

“Hi Alyssa!” I find her enthusiasm forced, but try to match it anyway.

“Hey Martinia!” Unlike the other alkie women I've observed, Martinia is *not* a hugger. I'm totally fine with—and fairly thankful for—that fact.

“How's everything?” She looks distracted—like she's going through greet-a-newcomer motions without really caring about the responses.

“Oh, you know...” I trail off. I'm even more terrified of telling her the truth face to face than I was in my head earlier.

She looks at me seriously. “No, I don't *know*.”

I hate that about these conversations. Where is this alleged presumed catharsis in wearing your heart on your sleeve? Why does she feel the need to know my business? I cave anyway, and start bawling. I mean, I am literally sobbing all over myself.

She is staring at me like I am absolutely psychotic. Her unsympathetic eyes are burning a hole through me. I feel like a fucking loser.

“What is it?” She asks coldly. I should’ve realize she would be like this. She’s probably just under direction from her sponsor to “befriend” new people as a part of her “service.”

“I... I... haven’t really been sah-sah-sooooober!” I cry out.

She stares at me. She looks impatient and perplexed.

“Is that all?” The callousness of her response grounds me. I stop crying.

“Yeah, I guess. I was smoking pot. And I drank yesterday.”

“Well, just take a newcomer chip and start over,” she says, matter-of-factly.

“Um... okay.” I’m pretty put off by her response, but the meeting hasn’t started, so I have nowhere to go.

“Do you have a sponsor?” I know this isn’t the first time she’s asked me this question. It’s like walking into a trap.

“No.”

“Well, that’s why you went on marijuana maintenance.”

Of course. Super simple. Now how do I go about getting a sponsor?

“Will *you* sponsor me?” I don’t really want her as a sponsor—I just want an easy way out of this situation.

“No,” she says, holding back laughter. “But I know the perfect woman for you.”

“MEETING TIME!” a few hearty voices call out.

Martinia turns back to me. “I’ll introduce you to her at the break.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

I walk into the building and scour the area for a seat. I got here before all of these people and seem to be the only person without a destination. I look at the chairs and realize every seat has a set of keys or piece of paper on it. Note to self: mark your seat.

I'm still a bit shaken and my face is probably still red from bursting into tears moments earlier, so I'm positive I look psychotic right now. I wander from row to row trying to find a seat. I find one in the front row on the right side of the room and sit down.

A gruff voice startles me. "That seat's for the speaker."

"Oh, sorry." I get up and start searching again. He glares at me as I turn a way. Asshole.

I finally find an unmarked chair in the middle of a row.

"Welcome to the Saturday Night Ohio Street meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous," the chick at the podium says. Fuck. I'm panicking.

"Is that seat taken?" I point and whisper to the angry faces on the aisle. They respond by shaking their heads and I try not to kill myself as I stumble over their legs to get to my four-legged folding sanctuary. I'm pretty sure everyone in the room is staring at me. When I finally get to my seat, I feel like I've never wanted a cigarette so badly in my entire life. But unlike on Thursday nights, where the room is a cloud of heavy chemical goodness, not a single person in the room is lighting up. It must be against the rules. Lame.

"The format of this meeting is a reading of Chapter Five entitled 'How It Works,' followed by a reading of 'The Twelve Steps.' We will continue with our main speaker,

the observation of the 7<sup>th</sup> tradition, and then take a fifteen-minute break. After the break, we will continue with chips and birthdays and then finish with our second speaker and a prayer.”

This is weak. Not only is there no smoking in this meeting, but there’s no sharing time, either. On Thursdays, the second half of the meeting is dedicated to the incessant ramblings of alcoholics of all time lengths. I was thinking of sharing tonight—maybe publicly reaching out so I wouldn’t have to be awkward and approach people individually. Martinia’s right—according to everything I’ve learned so far, a sponsor is a necessary part of sobriety.

I’m getting irritated at the person asked to read Chapter Five. I get that some people aren’t great at reading aloud, but this is just ridiculous. There should be a reading level requirement at this meeting.

I catch myself staring at one chick across the room. She has tattoos covering her arms and it looks like they go over onto her back. She’s sitting next to Martinia and they clearly see me gawking. Martinia whispers something to her and they both shoot me a look. I don’t need any enemies here, so I try to smile in return. They both laugh to each other, and I look down at my shoes instead. Maybe I shouldn’t have come here tonight.

The first speaker up is that sketchy guy D.C. from the parking lot. I’m not sure if it’s the way he talks or his story itself that’s interesting, but I’m completely captivated by what he’s saying. His story includes living under the freeway and robbing his own mother to get money for crack. It’s kind of fascinating, as I’ve never smoked crack nor been homeless. I still want a cigarette, but at least I can pay attention now.

He finishes up, and a bunch of guys with old coffee cans painted blue start walking around the room.

“The seventh tradition states that every A.A. group must be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions. Give what you can,” says a guy from the podium.

When they pass the can to me, I decide to put in a dollar. I try to do it in such a way that people see me contributing, but no one seems to care. I feel like I could’ve grabbed a wad of bills out of the can and no one would’ve noticed. But I really wish someone could validate my efforts.

“We will now have a fifteen minute—“ the guy doesn’t even finish his statement. He’s cut off by the sound of folding chairs scraping the floor. It’s almost as hard to get out of my seat as it was to sit down initially and I scramble towards the back door, grabbing a cigarette from my pack as I go.

I’m cowering in a dark part of the parking lot, trying to avoid the attention of others. Martinia is talking to the chick with tattoos. I think I’m safe, until the woman who goes by a fruit name comes up to Martinia. Martinia turns towards me and points, rolling her eyes.

In no time, the fruit lady is standing in front of me waving the smoke away from her face.

“Hi! Alyssa, right? I’m Strawberry!” I’m gagging. How many Red Bulls did this woman consume today?

“Hey, yeah,” her hand is out, so I shake it. “How’s it going?”

“Martinia told me you need a sponsor.” No bullshit with this one, apparently.

“Yeah, I do.” I’m a little nervous, but I’ve seen her around before. She’s always the one talking about dances and events. She must be super involved. I guess that would be a good idea.

“Well, my sponsor told me I can have one more sponsee, but that’s it. No more after that.” I take it she’s offering her services, but somehow making me ask her.

“So, can you sponsor me?”

“Do you want what I have and are you willing to go to any lengths to get it?”

I don’t know what she has and I have no idea what she means by “any lengths” but I figure this will be one step towards legitimate sobriety and I’m in no position to turn down the help.

“Yeah. Cool.” I feel a bit overwhelmed by this whole situation, but I’m trying to roll with it.

“Awesome!” She takes out her phone. “Get out your phone. What’s your number?”

We exchange numbers and she gives me a bear hug that nearly chokes the life out of me.

“So what do I do?” I don’t even know what a sponsor does or a sponsee does or any of that. I know you work the twelve steps with your sponsor but I don’t even know what “working the steps” means.

“Ok, first off: you need to call me to check in *every* day. And you need to get a Big Book.”

“Every day?” I ask, mildly shocked. I have two parents already; I’m really not feeling another one.

“Every day,” she confirms with an obnoxious nod. “And how many meetings are you going to?”

“I go to Thursday nights.” She gasps. I almost laugh.

“*Only one?*”

“Yeah, I guess only one.” I can’t imagine with homework and whatever else that I can do more than one a week.

“You really should go to a meeting every single day, especially this early in your sobriety. You should do a ninety-in-ninety.”

I look at her blankly, which apparently gives her the go ahead to explain what the hell she’s talking about to me.

“Ninety meetings in ninety days. No wonder you were drinking.”

“Oh. Yeah, Strawberry, I’m in high school. I have homework and can’t really go to a meeting every night.” Is this bitch on crack?

“Alyssa, how badly do you want this?”

“I want to be sober. I understand where you’re coming from, but I can’t do that.”

“MEETING TIME!” The break is over.

“We’ll talk about this more after the meeting,” she tells me sternly, grabbing my arm.

“No problem.” I say through my teeth. I’m not sure how down I am for this whole sponsor thing. It seems like more trouble than it’s worth.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

I get back to my seat (expertly marked by my math book) before the second half of the meeting begins. I'm pumped that I didn't have to shuffle past the other people in the row this time, but the feeling only lasts for a second as I hear part of the familiar meeting script ring out through the room.

“We give chips at this meeting for various lengths of sobriety and tonight our chip person is—“

Fuck. I'm going to have to take another newcomer chip. I consider not taking one for a moment. I could avoid the embarrassment of trying to pass these people and just stay in my seat. But I can already tell from my first impression of her that Strawberry will give me a load of shit for not taking the chip.

When the time comes for the newcomers to collect their key chains, I awkwardly join up with the rest of the motley crew of people trying their hand at sobriety. By the crowd reaction, I can tell this isn't the first time around the block for most of these folk. There's some relief in knowing that, but not much.

When I take my chip and announce my presence as both an addict and alcoholic, I hear Strawberry cheering for me at the top of her lungs. The enthusiastic support actually makes me feel like choosing her as a sponsor wasn't the worst idea I've ever had. And there's something nice about feeling equally embarrassed and validated. I walk down the aisle and hear a few “welcome back” offerings from faces I don't recognize.

When I get back to my row, I'm greeted by smiling faces, politely allowing me through as if being a newcomer is like a “get out of jail free” card. I take my seat and try



to focus on what's happening. I try to memorize the faces of the people taking six month and nine month chips and the people taking cakes for years of sobriety.

The second speaker comes up to the podium and my focus disappears. Something about her voice is just annoying me, so I take out my notebook and start doodling in the margins. I feel like I've put enough attention out there for one day. I take out my phone and send my dad a quick text telling him I'll be a little late meeting them in the car because I have to talk to Strawberry. He responds with the word "okay" and nothing else. Awesome.

When the meeting ends, we all stand up to hold hands and say a prayer. I still don't know the words to the prayers they use—we use—here so I mumble random words and try to listen to what's actually being said. It sounds like something out of the bible.

"Our Father, Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen."

As someone of the not-so-religious persuasion, the prayer part kind of freaks me out. I like the other prayer about serenity better. But of course, before we unlock hands, the AA twist is put on the whole thing. As we all swing hands in a kind of awkward handshake motion, the room sings out, "keep coming back it works if you work it!" (with some people adding: "so work it, you're worth it!" as an extra affirmation of the program).

I throw my notebook in my bag and stealthily dash outside. I want to find my parents' car and rush back home, but I have unfinished business with Strawberry to attend to.

I'm taking ultra deep drags of my cigarette as I scour the parking lot for my new sponsor. When I find her, she's surrounded by a crowd of people. I decide to forfeit the situation and take a seat on the wall of the lot until the flock disperses a bit.

I feel myself starting to worry about what's going to happen at school on Monday. I want to make things right with Bernadette. Shit, I even want to make things right with Eli, but I know it's just too soon. They said some harsh things to me, and I just don't want to be the one to apologize right now. Maybe Strawberry can help with that.

I stub out my cigarette and decide to approach Strawberry despite the fact that there is still a ton of people around her. She must be big in AA. I wonder what that's like. It's kind of like being the class president of a school for losers. I mean, some of the people look overly excited for life, but most of them just look like they've given up already. There has to be some kind of middle ground. Strawberry seems like she's on the super excited team, and I don't really roll that way, but I can make this work.

"Strawberry?" I tap her on the shoulder.

"Hey Alyssa!" She gives me a big hug again. I'm usually a hugger, but I'd like to get to know a person a little bit first. I'm not a huge fan of forced affection.

"So, yeah, about the meetings." She's talking to someone else and I'm trying to fight the urge to walk away from the situation out of impatience.

"Oh yeah, listen, you're going to have to figure that out. You need to go to at least five." Five? Seriously? I choose to placate her but I'm slightly seething inside.

“I don’t know even know of five meetings. I just found out about this one.”

“Get a meeting directory when you buy your Big Book inside,” she says matter-of-factly.

“I don’t have any money.” I have some money, but not enough for books and stuff.

She hands me a twenty. “Pay me back when you can. Go inside before our lovely literature lady goes home.”

I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck. I now know the real definition of dumbfounded. I walk up the wheelchair ramp at the front of the building and find a woman hastily stuffing books into a duffle bag.

“Excuse me,” I say. “Can I buy two things from you before you go?”

“Yeah, sure, sweetheart. What do you need?” I take a moment to bask in her polite warmth before moving on.

“I need a meeting directory and... I’m blanking on the other one.”

“A Big Book?” She asks sweetly.

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Are you new to sobriety?”

“Kind of.” She lifts an eyebrow at me but doesn’t ask any more questions, which I appreciate.

“The Big Book is on me. The meeting directory is four dollars.”

“Wow, really?” I reach into my pocket for my own money, so I won’t have to owe Strawberry. I’m not a huge fan of keeping track of debts.

“Really. It’s our way of giving back. We usually give out a Big Book to a newcomer at every meeting. I just forgot tonight.” She smiles.

“These things happen.” I hand her the money, smiling back.

“Do you need a Twelve and Twelve, too?”

“What is that?” I feel my face twisting and want to explain that I don’t want any more homework than I already have, but I keep my thoughts to myself.

“It’s a book of the twelve steps and twelve traditions. I’ll give you a deal: ten bucks for the lot.”

I dig through my pockets and my bag to find the remaining six dollars. The last two dollars is in mixed change, and I have a momentary freak-out until I realize I won’t have to take the bus home tonight.

“Thanks for all of your help!” I don’t want to get her name or know how much time she has or anything. I’m in no place to be chatty. I know my parents are waiting and I have to finish with Strawberry before I meet up with them, so I rush back out the door, books in hand.

Strawberry is still babbling away to a half dozen people. I don’t even try to pull her aside.

“I got the books.” I show her my meeting directory, Big Book, and Twelve and Twelve.

“Oh, right! A Twelve and Twelve! I totally forgot that for a moment. Super pumped you got one of those!” The people around us laugh. Their laughter worries me.

Are they having a moment about Strawberry's forgetfulness? Do I want to put my life in the hands of someone who doesn't know how to work the program?

I hand her the twenty. "The girl inside gave me a deal. I had enough money to cover it."

"Oh, awesome! Okay, so are you coming out to Café 50s with us?" I didn't realize I had been invited to Café 50s.

"No, my parents are waiting for me. So what should I do? Like, what is step one?"

She pulls me aside, giving a 'be right back' look to her group.

"Okay, I need to you to go to as many meetings as you can. Then on Thursday, when you come here, I want you to bring your step work. We can go over it before the meeting. Can you get here at seven?"

"I'll have to talk to my parents, but I'm pretty sure I can."

"Do you have a piece of paper?"

"Yeah." I grab a notebook out of my bag and flip to a page filled with doodles.

"Define the words 'admitted,' 'powerless,' and 'unmanageable.' Then I want you to answer this question: 'how were you powerless over drugs and alcohol and how was life unmanageable.'" This is one of the few times she's seemed serious, so I feel like I'm actually making progress right now. But with the end of the school year coming up, I'm not sure how I feel about more homework.

"Got it. Anything else?" I can feel my phone vibrating in my pocket. I know my dad's wondering where I am.

“Nope, that’s it. Just call me every day. I’ll see you on Thursday!” She gives me a big hug that chokes the life out of me and skips back to her friends. What a fucking strange bird.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

I take my phone out of my pocket as I start searching the area for my parents. Only one missed call, thank god. It's already 10:30 and I know my dad's been waiting since ten, maybe even earlier. I can't seem to find the car so I call him.

"Hey pop, where are you?"

"It's 10:30. What took so long?" That didn't answer my question.

"I'll tell you about it in the car. Where are you?" There's a long pause.

"Across the street, in the parking lot of the little park."

"I'll be there in a second."

"Hurry up." Click.

Fuck that. These curt conversations are getting more and more obnoxious each time. I light a cigarette and take my time walking across the street. The baseball field is lit up and there are men in their late thirties playing an overly aggressive game of slo-pitch.

I see my dad sitting in the car alone. I was hoping my mom would be with him as a buffer, but I guess we need to have a little one-on-one. I tap on the passenger side window and he unlocks the doors. The second I'm in the seat, the engine revs.

"Thanks for picking me up, Pop." I'm trying to get the conversation going in as neutral or calm of a direction as I can.

"Yep. No problem." Insert one of many estimated awkward pauses here.

"So how was golfing?" I figure I'll try to ask him about himself, rather than tackling the elephant in the room. Or the car, so to speak.

“It was fine. I shot an eighty. Beat out Frost by enough strokes that I walked away with fifty dollars.”

“That’s awesome! What’d you do after?”

“I came home, walked Daisy, did a little work in my room.”

“Oh, cool.”

“How was the meeting?” Okay, he seems to be breaking down a little bit. I can tell by his voice that he’s holding something back, but I’ll take what I can get.

“It was good. I got a sponsor, so I have some homework to do for Thursday. I’m supposed to go to five meetings a week—“

“—so?” I know what’s coming.

“So what?”

“So what’s your excuse for not going to five meetings?”

Bingo. I saw that coming a mile away.

“I was going to ask you and mom first. I can’t just go to five meetings over the weekend, they’d have to be on school nights.”

“Well, if they help, that’s fine.” Rough translation: if they keep you away from your friends and the trouble you get into, meetings sound like a good idea.

“Okay, well, I’ll look through my meeting directory when I get home then.”

“So who’s this sponsor?”

“Her name is Strawberry. She has two years sober and a couple other sponsees. She seems super involved in AA.”

“She has other sponsees? When will she have time for you?”

“I don’t know, Pop. We didn’t get to that point yet.”



We're winding around the VA Hospital, about to branch off onto San Vicente. I'm hoping we get home quickly—I can't take much more of this questioning.

“So what do you have to do?”

“Well, this week, I have to work on the first step. There's some writing I have to do. And I have to call her every day and start reading, I guess.”

“And you can manage your time to do both this and your school work?”

“I don't know. I'll have to try first, though, right?” He doesn't respond. “Listen, Dad, I know you're angry about last night, but I really need this chance. I need you to let me try this and see if it works. And I need you to stop being mad at me.”

“Alyssa,” he looks at me. “I'm trying.” He stares blankly back at the road. We drive the rest of the way in silence.

When we get inside the house, he beelines for his office and closes the door behind him. I show my mom my completed homework and she lets me be alone. I'm glad I actually got some shit done. I feel kind of deflated and just want to curl up for a bit, maybe watch something stupid on TV.

I go into the backyard and have a smoke. I'm repeating the events from last night in my head. I am completely fucked. When I go to school on Monday, I'll be completely alone. The boys are great to get fucked up with, but they're not my friends. I haven't spoken to the kids I was friends with in middle school in ages; they're not going to take me back. Bernadette and Eli, both of whom I used to be so close with, will probably never speak to me again.

I'll probably be okay for the rest of the school year. Sure, I'll be friendless, but there are only two months left. Next week is Spring Break, I think. Then I have my AP Tests, and Memorial Day in May. Then it's just finals and school's out. I think I can handle that. And maybe I'll start connecting with people in AA and hanging out with them. So maybe there's a light at the end of the tunnel. It's just really dim right now.

I'm just trying to look on the positive side of things right now. I'm pretty sure I've cried more than enough this weekend and, more than anything, I just want my parents to be okay with my existence again. I know they're sitting there comparing me to my brother, thinking about how he never got into trouble, and wondering how they ended up with such a fuck up for a child.

It could be worse, though. They could be Tracy's parents.

Tracy was my best friend last year. I mean, Bernadette was my best-best friend, but Tracy was my homie. Our friendship was based almost entirely on the boys we were dating and getting high and watching old Muppet movies, but there was purity to it. She was a bit heavier into drugs than I was, and took a lot of ecstasy and a shit ton of acid, but I always thought she was good people. We would play together, like we were five year olds. We colored and came up with weird pretend games and it was fun—legitimate fun.

Then, the summer before tenth grade, she started getting weird bruises. Another one of our friends and I talked to her about it. We thought her creeptown old-man boyfriend was beating her up. He probably was, but we never got to know for sure. He told her we were jealous of their relationship and that we were in love with him. That was right before she dropped out to live with him in the Valley. I don't know what

they're doing these days, but I wish I could get a hold of her. Her stepbrother still goes to my school, and last time I asked, even *he* hadn't heard from her. I hope she's alive.

But I feel like that would be a worse situation for my parents: if I just disappeared one day with some douche guy in his thirties.

Maybe living in their house and being a lame daughter is worse. I don't know, I've never been a parent and don't plan on it anytime soon. I'd probably end up with a kid like me.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

I'm waiting for Strawberry to pick me up for—no joke—an AA dance. I kind of want to punch myself in the face right now, but she said I have to go. Apparently, I have to start being more involved in AA.

We did my first step work yesterday. She wants me to re-write it. It was too “robotic” and “didn't seem like I was powerless or my life was unmanageable.” I'm kind of pissed because it took me a long time to write it. I think I'm just going to dramatize what I wrote the first time. Maybe if I throw some suicidal thoughts and insane emotions in there, she'll accept it and we can move on.

I really want to get to the fourth and ninth steps. Those sound like the steps that make a difference. For the fourth step, I have to write out all my resentments (of which there are many), which sounds uber-cathartic. The ninth step is the one where I apologize to people. Strawberry says I have to have four months of sobriety to do my fourth step. I think that's bullshit, but I haven't really connected with anyone who has time to see if that's the usual way of doing it.

Calling her every day is annoying. Usually all I say is that I didn't drink or use, and leave it at that. The times I've tried to talk about non-AA stuff, she's shut me down. Maybe it's just because it's so early in my sobriety. Maybe right now, nothing else is supposed to matter. I have seven days today. It's a Friday, but that doesn't really matter anymore. It's not like anyone asked me to hang out tonight or anything. People have been looking at me like I have the plague. I guess word got out about me clocking Eli, and Bernadette probably embellished on how crazy I was. Shit's a little weird, but I'm

pretty good at keeping to myself. And I have the week off next week, so it'll be fine. Or terrible. Either way, there's nothing I can really do.

Strawberry's picking me up with this chick she calls my "sobriety sister," one of her other sponsees. I'm a bit too standoffish to accept new "family" into my life, but I'm going to do my best to embrace the situation. Her name is Becky and she's eighteen. She has six months sober. Cool.

The doorbell rings. I'm upstairs, just grabbing the rest of my stuff. I try to rush downstairs so I don't have to deal with my parents being awkward with Strawberry, but they beat me to the punch. The three of them are having a cheery time with one another.

"Well, Michelle, it's lovely to meet you. Alyssa has told us so many good things about you," my dad says, shaking her hand. Who the fuck is Michelle?

"Whenever you bring her home is fine with us. We know she's in good hands with you." My mom adds.

"Hey All!" Strawberry yells to me. The three of them are staring at me, smiling. I feel weird, but try to put up a non-weird front.

"Okay, guys. I'll see you later," I say to my parents. They've been bizarrely supportive this week, taking me to meetings, helping me study. It's been strange, but I'm kind of into it. I like feeling like I'm part of my family instead of just an outsider looking in. I could get used to it.

"Bye, sweetheart. We'll probably be asleep before you get home, but you never know." My mom hugs me. I'm not sure how I feel about the open-ended curfew. It's like a test. If I fuck this up, it's off to military school with me. That, or something equally shitty.

“Call us if you need anything,” my dad says, as he gives me a hug.

“Cool. See you later.” I’m trying to let the shock settle. Strawberry grabs my hand and waves to my parents as she drags me to her car. It’s a Range Rover. Bitch has money.

Becky is sitting in the front seat playing with her phone. She waves as we approach. I get into the back of the car.

“Hey, you must be Alyssa,” she says with a sleepy voice.

“You must be Becky. Hi.” I get a good look at her through the rearview mirror and her sleepy voice is matched with even sleepier eyes. She looks like she was born stoned or something.

The car smells like perfume, and it drives me into a sneezing fit. Strawberry drives like a maniac and I’m clutching the oh-shit handle on the door for dear life.

We’re stuck in traffic driving into Orange County. I’m not entirely sure where we’re going but apparently this shindig is at a library of all places. I can’t imagine some epic event happening at a library, but I try to allow for the suspension of disbelief to kick in.

Strawberry has been on her cell phone since we got in the car talking to about fifty different AA people about whether or not they’re coming to the dance tonight. I’m not really in the mood to strike up a conversation with Becky over Strawberry’s babbling, so I stay quiet, staring out the window. My grandparents used to live in Orange County before they moved to Oregon, so I recognize bits and pieces of our journey.

I want to have a cigarette. Strawberry isn't a smoker and judging by the smell of her car (that I've finally gotten used to), she doesn't allow anything of the sort to go down in her vehicle. I feel like we've been in the car for hours, but it's probably only been something like forty-five minutes. I wonder if Becky's a smoker. Strawberry told me she's from Seattle. She probably smokes menthols. And probably has an illegitimate child somewhere.

I know I should stop being so judgmental. These are my people, now. But I'm hung up on the stereotypes. There's a homeless guy on the promenade who holds up a sign that says "Need \$\$\$ for beer and weed." He's an alcoholic and an addict. I just drink a lot.

But there's this quote I like that they always say at the beginning of meetings: "The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking." I have a desire to stop drinking, and I guess if I have to wear a label in order to get'er done, so be it. I guess whatever comes of this process will be my doing; I'm the master of my destiny, so to speak. Awesome. All I really wanted in life was more responsibility and more work.

I doze off in the back seat and wake up to Strawberry shrilly announcing our presence at the library. This is no run-of-the-mill library. This is by far one of the most insane structures I've ever seen. It's three or four stories, with huge windows. I can see a bunch of plants inside and a fountain. It's crazy. I'm feeling a bit more positive about this experience.

There are a ton of people milling around outside. Some are smoking, some are giving hugs, some are just drinking Red Bull like there's no tomorrow. We have to go to

a meeting before the actual “dance” portion of the evening, but I’m kind of okay with that. I’m beginning to feel comfortable with the whole idea of going to meetings. Sometimes I connect to what’s being said, sometimes I don’t. I guess it’s a crap shoot and it’s helpful if I accept that.

A girl with way too much makeup on and a really skanky tube top is ambling towards the car as we get out. She gives Becky and Strawberry hugs like she hasn’t seen them in a year. Then, without warning, she attacks me with an embrace. She releases quickly as I uncontrollably recoil from her clutches.

“Hi, I’m Jenna! We’re sponsor sisters!” Oh goody. Another person with too much fucking energy. I feel like I might get along better with Becky out of the whole lot. Even though I haven’t smoked pot in a week, I still feel like a stoner. I’m far too mellow for this shit.

“Hi, I’m Alyssa.” It’s all I’ve got. I say it flatly and she wrinkles her nose at my response.

“I know that! We’re all part of Strawmama’s family!” Strawmama? Ew.

“Cool, cool.” I force a smile.

Strawberry, Becky, and Jenna start talking a mile a minute to one another. I’m left on the sidelines. I overhear things about me being quiet, but take the opportunity to step a bit farther away and light a cigarette. A lot of people in AA quit smoking and drinking coffee along with the whole drugs and alcohol thing. Something about having a pure body to start over with. I’m too young to be completely without vices, so I can’t see myself quitting either anytime soon.



I look towards the door and do a double take. Leaning against a trashcan by the entrance, I recognize a guy from Devin's sober living house. I feel a sudden pang of nostalgia and want to call Devin to see how he's doing, but I can't remember the phone number of the house. I don't even know if he lives there anymore.

I debate going over to speak to him. Part of me wants to reconnect with some part of my past, maybe to ground myself in this new situation. The other part of me is mildly terrified of having a connection with something because it will make this all too real. I opt to avoid him for now, but I start the process of mentally prepping myself to run into him later.

Becky snaps me out of my nostalgic haze to have me follow the three of them to the building. Strawberry's whole crew seems to be at the front door. There are a couple of women who I swear are just duplicates of the same woman (really thin, pale, with jet black hair), Martinia, Golay, the chick with the tattoos who Martinia was laughing with last Saturday, D.C., and a couple of other familiar faces. They're all clutching Red Bulls or coffees and half of them are smoking like there's no tomorrow. I'm trying to feign cheerfulness, to meet the energy of Strawberry and Jenna, but I can't quite make it work. I muster everything I've got to enter into the dynamic.

"Hey, I'm Alyssa. I don't think we've met yet," I say to the chick with the tattoos. She's wearing a wife beater and Dickies men's shorts, with black braids halfway down her back. She sizes me up, and responds reluctantly.

"Athena. You're one of Strawberry's sponsees?"

"Yeah, I guess," I shoot Strawberry a sideways glance. Chattering away as always. Athena laughs at this, which makes me a bit more comfortable. I like her. She's

intense and kind of quiet. She seems like the kind of woman who would have the entire collection of Ayn Rand books and maybe judges people based on their use of the English language, despite being covered—and I mean *covered*—in tattoos.

“Don’t be too judgmental. You’re new.” I feel like that comment is judgmental in and of itself, but I can’t help but nod sheepishly in response. She’s barely five feet tall but there’s something so powerful about her. I want what she has, but I guess it’s too late to change sponsors now. I already set myself up.

“So, what are these things like?” I’m trying to strike up a conversation with Athena because I’ve become instantly obsessed with the idea that she has to like me. I need to prove myself to her—prove that I can exist in this “adult” world. She’s in her early twenties and seems to have her shit together. Seems may be the key word here.

“Tonight, the venue’s divided into four different areas: a room where people just drink energy drinks and play spades, a house and trance room, a hardcore and punk room, and your basic hip-hop and R&B lounge. There’s a meeting for an hour that starts in oooh,” she checks her watch, “fifteen minutes. Then the music starts. People mill around awkwardly, avoiding whoever they hooked up with last month, or dance like cracked-out marionettes. We shut down around midnight or one at which point we all take a pilgrimage to Top Fuel and chain smoke and drink XTZs until the owner decides it’s closing time. That’s what *these things* are like.”

My jaw drops a little. Her description of the bizarre social ritual I’m about to be introduced to is a little scary. For one, I don’t really do the dancing thing. Sure, I do the silly I’m-in-my-room-no-one-can-see-me dance, but I’m not actually sure that I was born with any rhythm. Secondly, what the fuck is spades? A card game? If I’m going to play

any card game it's going to be Apples to Apples. And thirdly, how do these people drink so many damn energy drinks? This is going to be a weird night.

## Chapter Thirty

I follow the group silently into the meeting. Apparently, Strawberry's so popular that she actually had seats reserved for her and her sponsees in advance. At least tonight I'm not going to have to play a rousing game of find the seat.

The room we're having the meeting in makes this place actually feel like a library. It's windowless, and everything is the same shade of tan, with the exception of the carpet. The carpet looks like it was yanked straight out of a casino in Reno. We're grouped towards the front, so I try to at least create the illusion of paying attention.

It's the same shit as usual. Someone talking at great lengths about that time they put tinfoil up on their windows because they were paranoid or whatever. Cakes are given, chips are taken. The only real difference is I don't recognize most of the people in the room. This is not a meeting I'm familiar with. I spend most of the time just watching people reacting. Some are hanging on the speaker's every word, some are chatting to one another, some are texting—one guy is passed the fuck out against the wall. It's weird, because even when I'm not really paying attention to what's being said, I still feel better after being in a meeting. This meeting is no exception. Maybe it's the prayer at the end, or maybe it's just being in the company of other fuck ups. I'm not sure, but whatever it is, it seems to work.

The moment it's done, Strawberry grabs my arm.

“Service time, my little ones!” She drags the three of us downstairs in a whirling dervish of excitement. We're thrown into another group of people and Strawberry starts rattling off orders to everyone. I'm supposed to stamp hands at the front door for the first hour.

The flyer for this dance thing asks for a five-dollar donation, but if you don't have the money, you can come in anyway, which sounds like a pretty sweet deal. Or it's just an attempt at being inclusive. I guess the money pays for renting out the place and whatever's left over goes back to the central office. I'm not really following, but I'm thankfully not responsible for the cash box. I just stamp.

I'm set up with someone I don't know at the door. We're behind a folding table. For my services, I'm given a Red Bull. It tastes like cough syrup, but I drink it anyway. The guy I'm next to acknowledges everyone with the same smile and welcoming greeting. I just say hi and ask for their left wrists.

I'm actually having fun. The smile I was half-faking before is now real. It's bizarre mingling with AA people from all over Southern California. As much as I'm annoyed by the "how much time do you have" ice-breaker, it's actually kind of cool being surrounded by people I already have something in common with.

I tried learning how to play spades, at first. I have no patience for the game at all, but I watched Athena, Golay, D.C., and some other dude play for a while, and got the jist of it. It's essentially like playing Hearts, but with more shit talking. The shit talking was probably my favorite part of the whole thing.

Then I checked out the different music rooms. The rock one was still being set up—apparently, a band from Venice is playing live later. They're all sober, and the lead singer looks like a cross between Bono and a tattooed circus midget. I talked to him for a minute, and he's extremely serious about spirituality, which is pretty admirable. It must be hard to meditate and be so punk rock at the same time.

The technoish room was a little too much for me. It was full of a bunch of people in their twenties and thirties who must have been candy ravers in the mid-nineties. I can't imagine listening to that music being fun without E. Maybe they just like the music now, but it's not my thing at all.

The hip-hop area was pretty sweet. I danced with Strawberry and Jenna and Becky and some other people for a bit. It's funny, though. When you're dancing sober, it's as if you're dancing in the shower by yourself or something. You know you look awkward as hell, but you can't help yourself. You just nerd the fuck out. No one gets to really lose their self-conscious issues, and there's some comfort in that. I'm finding there are a lot of comfortable aspects about being around sober people. I guess because we're almost equal here—no one gets to escape.

Now I'm just chilling, having a cigarette outside. I talked to Becky for a little bit when she was out here, but she's kind of—how do I put this—*stupid*. She's eighteen, and decided to move to LA to be with her aunt or something, but when she got here, her aunt had already moved, I guess, so she lived in an abandoned apartment building for a month before her parents agreed to send her money. She's relapsed about a zillion times, but has a tattoo of the AA symbol on her back fat. It's like a side tramp-stamp. It's kind of gross to look at, but her shirt doesn't quite cover up her situation, so you don't really get a choice in the matter. She has *huge* boobs so she told me she always wears tight shirts to, and I quote, "show off the goods." I almost gagged. Thank god some dude she was making out with inside dragged her away.

Seth, the guy from Devin's sober living house, is standing out here smoking. I'm kind of tucked in a shadow, but I want to approach him. I always thought that place was

a joke—Bobby never stopped doing drugs when he went away there, Tracy’s boyfriend was always on drugs, I bought pot there a few times—but maybe it wasn’t a joke for everyone.

Seth looks happy. He looks healthy. And even though it’s only been a year or so since last I saw him, he looks like he’s grown up a bit. Actually, he’s looking pretty hot right now. I don’t know if that’s because he’s actually hot or because I haven’t hooked up with anyone in awhile, but what can you do? I get a bit of chutzpah together and prep for the approach. My hands are shaky. I’m not sure if it’s because I’m about to talk to a seemingly cute boy or because I’m about to talk to him as another sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous, but I try to steady my breathing as I walk towards him.

“Hey, Seth, right?” I exhale smoke, trying to give myself a cool touch. It probably makes me look way more awkward than I actually am.

“Alyssa?! Holy shit!” I’m shocked that he recognizes me but even more shocked that I’m now enveloped in his arms. There’s meaning behind the hug, like I’m not the only one happy to see a familiar face.

Okay, so I may have left out a detail in the back story to this Seth character. Before beginning my relationship with Devin, I may or may not have made out with five or six of the guys who lived at the house. I’d get there to visit Bobby and he’d be out, so I’d hang out with the girl-starved fixer-upper guys who were stationed on that hill in the Valley. Seth and I may have made out a few times. And he may have been a good kisser. And I may want to kiss him again at this very moment.

They tell you not to have romantic or sexual relationships in your first year of sobriety. It’s one of those things that I hear over and over again in meetings. The

speakers always say that their sponsors told them that and they listened and everything was awesome because of that. For all the rules and regulations Strawberry has, the whole sex thing is not involved. Granted, most of the people I've met so far at meetings have been unlikely match-ups for me. The hooking-up-with-a-minor thing is strongly frowned upon. It doesn't *not* happen just because people are sober, but I have more guys shooing away sketchball old dudes for me than I can count. And this is only my first week. I may have a whole army of old men by the time I have a year.

“So, are you—“

“—five months. You?”

“Seven days. I half-assed it the first time, so I'm trying again for real.”

He looks at me with a pained expression. “Don't worry, it gets easier.”

“It feels easier already.” I feel like this is a mostly true statement. As I suspected, though, this reconnecting thing is starting to ground me into reality. This is my new life. These are my new people.

“So, how have you been? Well, obviously not so good if you're here now, but, you know, what have you been up to?”

“Oh, the usual. You know, alienating myself from my friends, making my parents angry, hiding in shady corners chain-smoking. That kind of stuff,” I tell him with a laugh.

“Ah, gotcha.” There's a brief pause before I realize I'm meant to respond.

“You?”

“I took my G.E.D. Now I'm working full time at my sponsor's furniture repair store. I'm probably going to start taking classes at Pierce or something in the fall. I've



almost saved up enough money to live without roommates, but I'm not quite there yet. And my sponsor doesn't think I'm ready yet. But things are good," he says, finishing with an accomplished smile. Night and day, my friends. This is not the kid I met last year. This is like his un-evil twin.

"Wow," I'm impressed. "So, do you still talk to anyone from the house?" (Read: Is Devin still around?)

Seth looks at me with a knowing smile. "Yeah, he still lives there. I thought you guys broke up anyway?"

"Well, yeah. But I might get to my 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> steps one day and have to track him down to apologize. Plus, I just want to make sure he's okay."

"Yeah, that's cool. I go by the house once in a while now, 'cause I live right by there, and try to help them actually help guys. That house is a fucking joke, but the guy who replaced Jon, your girl's boyfriend, is actually sober so it's kind of helping."

That's cool, I guess. I don't really care about the house so much now that I know Devin's still there. I mean, it's great that Seth's helping and doing so well in sobriety, but those boys as a collective are not my problem. I think about asking Seth for the number to the house, but it's probably in a drawer somewhere at my house and I think I've pushed the awkward envelope on this conversation far enough.

"Hey, it's really good to see you, Seth. You look like a different person."

"Just wait. It'll happen to you, too," he smiles. "I want to go back inside—"

"—Yeah, me too." I realize we've been out here for a bit, and I'm going to have to reconnect with Strawberry soon.

“But I wanted to exchange numbers with you. Maybe we can go to a meeting together or something.” He blushes when he says this and I’m pretty sure he’d be down if I kissed him right now.

We swap numbers and walk back inside together.

“Are you going to dance?” Seth asks me, as we’re about to part ways in the hall.

“Yeah, for a little longer. My sponsor is running around here somewhere and I’ll have to find her soon. Dancing’s not usually my thing, but it’s kind of fun to do it in a non-middle school setting.”

The last time I even went to a dance before tonight was at the end of eighth grade. I took my boyfriend who went to another school and he embarrassed the shit out of me. It was awful. The last time I actually *danced* at a dance was in sixth grade, but only because I’m not counting Bar Mitzvahs.

Seth leads me into the hip-hop room, and we start legitimately dancing with one another.

“My friend’s band goes on in a few minutes, but I figured it’d be nice to pass the time with you.”

“Heh. Thanks,” I blush.

After a few minutes of intertwined legs and awkward arm movements, he looks me in the eyes and kisses me. He actually goes for it and *kisses* me. Holy shit. Being sober and kissing have not been in the same room as one another in so fucking long, that it takes me a minute to even believe this is happening.

Awesome. This is awesome. It's like someone's trying to tell me about all the good things that can happen when I'm not using. It's working. I'm convinced.

Granted, after a few minutes, he gets pulled away by his friend to go watch their other friend's band play, but it was a good moment while it lasted—a good reminder of what came before alcohol.

I take a moment to stand and absorb what happened. I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn around and am completely startled to see Strawberry, Jenna, and Becky standing right there.

“Oooh, who was *that*?” Jenna asks.

“A guy I used to know,” I reply, readying myself for 20-questions, girl-style.

“Some lip-lock you had going on there!” Strawberry says, patting me on the back. I cringe at the use of the term “lip-lock.”

“Yeah, well. He's really put together now. It just happened.”

“Are you going to see him again?” Jenna is jumping out of her skin. I feel like she'd be asking a million questions a minute if the other two weren't here, but the restraint she's trying to have is making her burst at the seams with energy.

“Maybe. We talked about going to a meeting together sometime.” I know we'll probably never see each other again. Or maybe we'll meet up at another event like this one, but it doesn't bother me. He was more of a symbol of things to come than anything else.

Jenna is pawing at me with a face pleading to let her ask more questions. I just shake my head.

“Alright ladies, time to rock ‘n roll,” Strawberry says. I check my phone. It’s close to midnight. I look around and realize the room has emptied quite a bit. “Who wants to go to Top Fuel?”

“I’m down,” Becky says.

“I can’t go. Work tomorrow,” Jenna pouts.

“What’s Top Fuel?” I ask. I remember Athena mentioning it earlier, but I’m not sure what it really is.

“You’re coming, Alyssa,” Strawberry decides for me. “Jenna, my love, I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” She hugs Jenna. “Becky, Alyssa, let’s go.”

Jenna forces a hug on me, hugs Becky and walks away. Strawberry, Becky, and I start heading to Strawberry’s car.

“If you two want to have a smoke before we drive, now’s the time.”

Becky and I both light up immediately. I’m trying to prep my allergy-prone nose for the flowery fragrance of the ride home. Strawberry is running around the parking lot and the front entrance announcing her departure. I’ve never seen anyone hug so many people in such a short span of time in my life. It’s almost impressive.

Once she’s done, the three of us get into the car and start driving down the dark freeway.

## Chapter Thirty-One

It looks like a bar. It smells like a bar. Apparently, though, it's not a bar. It's a coffee, tea, dessert, and energy drinks place. There are Nascar-esque and classic tattoo images all over the walls. It's actually a pretty cool looking joint.

The room is filled with cigarette smoke. It's like an asthmatic's worst nightmare. There's loud rock music and shiny booths and people playing cards. I'm so into this. This is not a forced social environment. Everyone here made the choice to be here. Score.

Strawberry leads us to a booth where Athena, Golay, Martinia and D.C. are seated with a few other people. They're all talking a mile a minute, and I'm just taking it in. If tonight is any representation of sobriety, sign me up.

I start finding my comfort zone in the conversation and throw in a little bit here and there. I am the youngest person at the table, but that only comes into play once in a while. There are two more kids around my age who have been sober for a while who frequent Ohio Street, but they're not here now. It kind of makes me feel special—like I stopped before shit got as bad as it could've and that makes me different, but in a good way.

Strawberry bought Becky and me a round of these energy drinks that don't taste like Red Bull. I'm pretty hyped up on caffeine and taurine and all that as it is, but I actually like how this one tastes, so I drink it. I get that this is just replacing old vices with new vices, but the camaraderie of the caffeine-induced conversations is infectious.

There's one of those touch screen game machines that you see in sushi restaurants and dive bars in here and I want to play it for sentimentality's sake. I excuse myself from

the group and sit on a stool at the coffee counter to play it. It's not that I'm feeling anti-social, per se, I just want to play a little round of spot the differences in the pictures. I'm poking at various flowers and banisters that appear to be off on the screen—and rocking out at it—when I hear a voice behind me.

“You should try the nudie one. Way better.”

The voice belongs to a guy who looks familiar. Then again, everyone in here looks familiar. Unless there's just a look to AA people and I don't actually recognize anyone.

“I'm cool with this one, thanks,” I respond, shooting him a glance. He's kind of cute, so I decide to throw a band aid on my standoffishness. “It's easier with two people, though. Pull up a chair.”

“Right on.”

He pulls up a stool and we're like the ultimate touch screen game playing team. With seconds winding down, he finds that one pattern that's off in the nick of time. I try making small talk while we're playing.

“Did you go to the dance tonight?”

“No, I couldn't get down there. My ride bailed on me. How was it?”

“I've gotta admit, it was pretty cool. It was my first event, so maybe that's why it seemed cool, but it was fun, so that works.” I'm having troubles formulating sentences and my mind is trying to stop my mouth from talking but failing miserably. I *did* have fun, and I'm downplaying it. Why? To seem cool to this dude? Who is he anyway? Answer: a guy who's not only pretty cute, but also seemingly sober.

“Yeah, it was at that library in Orange County, right? They usually do it up down there.”

He’s resting his arm on me, and we’re chatting back and forth and laughing.

“You over eighteen, bro?” I hear behind us. Golay.

“Excuse me?” He turns around. I turn to, to try to shoot Golay a look. He ignores it.

“Answer the question. Are you or are you not over the age of eighteen?”

“Why?” Holy displays of masculinity, Batman.

“She is fifteen—that’s right Alyssa, fifteen?—years old. And I have my eye on you.”

The guy turns back to me. “This your dad, or something?”

“I’m her big brother,” Golay responds for me. I’m teetering on the edge of embarrassment. I wasn’t going to fuck this guy. I just wanted to play spot the damn differences.

“He’s not actually,” I say. “He’s just looking out for me.”

“Dude, chill. I’m nineteen. We’re just playing mega touch screen. Come on.”

“Let me put it this way. If you want to keep your dick, keep your hands off her.”

Wow. Now that’s a fucking threat right there. The guy moves any appendages in contact with me

“Alright, bro,” he tries to put out his hand for a fist-bump with Golay. Golay is not having it. The guy explodes his hand anyway, as if the brotherly love has gone down.

“Alyssa, watch out,” Golay warns me. I raise an eyebrow and watch him go back to the table.

There's an awkward silence. I try to save the situation.

"Fuck, man! We missed that curtain over there!" He, thankfully, takes my cue, and we resume having a good time.

I'm not naïve. I'm not an idiot. I understand that yeah, some guys are fucking creeps and predators and whathaveyou. But again, I'm not trying to fuck this dude. I don't need some six-foot-something, two-hundred-something pound guy being my bodyguard. Although, it's kind of nice knowing someone has your back. But now I know that whole table is keeping an eye on me. Strawberry probably told them all about how I made out with Seth at the dance and now they're on high-alert. Fuck that noise.

I get a hug from behind that smells like too much perfume. It's Strawberry.

"We have to get you home, Aly," she yawns. More like her ass needs to go to bed. I consider trying to get a ride from someone else—anyone else in here—but realize that in order to keep being allowed out late, my parents probably have to trust who I'm out with to some extent.

"Alright, no worries," I get up, gather my things and turn to the guy. "It's been real." I give him a hug, and follow Strawberry into the parking lot.

It's just me and Strawberry in the car, so I get to ride shotgun. We're driving down the Sunset Strip and everything looks so alive. Hollywood is teeming with people even though it's so late.

"Did you have a good time tonight?" She asks me, smiling. I'm surprised that she's paying attention to me. I thought she'd be on her cell phone or something.



“Tonight was awesome. I don’t know how I’m going to get to sleep, though. Those energy drinks are pretty strong.”

“You’ll get used to them. They’re just part of the fun.” If that doesn’t sound like an ex-drug dealer, I don’t know what does.

“Yeah, it was fun, though. It’s good to know.”

“Good to know what?”

“You know, that sobriety can be fun.”

She smiles. “Yeah, but there’s also a ton of work involved.” Way to put a damper on my excitement, lady.

“Yeah, I’m working on that work.” I know she’s referring to my rejected first step, but I’d rather bask in the goodness of the moment. “Taking cakes looks like a blast,” I say, changing the subject. “I can’t wait until I turn one.”

“One day at a time,” she says, sternly. “You’ve got a week, that’s worth being proud of. And I’ll get you a cupcake tomorrow or something to celebrate your week.

We’re flying through Beverly Hills now. There’s almost no traffic, which is strange for L.A., but I guess it’s because it’s past two.

“So what’s the next big event?”

“Well, there are a few Al-Anon dances coming up, but nothing huge. There’s a trip to Magic Mountain in early July.”

“I love Magic Mountain.”

“I know, right? Ooh, will you be my coaster buddy, little mama?” I really want to laugh at the words she uses when she speaks to me. It’s a cross between an Elvis

impersonator and a grandmother speaking to a child, but I do my best to sift through the words for the message.

“Sure, I love roller coasters. Have you been on the new one over there?”

“The last time I was there, I was on so much meth that I can’t remember riding any rides.” Well, that answers *that* question.

“Does that worry you?”

“Does what worry me?”

“Going to places where you used to use?” I mean this question honestly. I haven’t been to the promenade since last week. Thankfully, my mom’s been willing to buy me cigarettes, so I don’t have to go to the head shop over there. I’ve been dodging the park where I knocked Eli out, too. My neighborhood is feeling very constricted these days.

“It did, for awhile. But a lot of the places where I used to use got a whole lot better sober. Trust me, thing will only get better. You ever hear that phrase they say around meetings? My worst day sober is still better than my best day drunk? It’s true. Trust me.”

We sit in silence until we get to my house. I’m having trouble believing that saying. Besides the fact that when you’re sober, everything is so *real*, there were tons of really fun drunk and high days. Tracy and I perfected the Muppet vacuum dance when we were high. A buddy of mine in San Francisco and I make the ultimate batch of cookies while high. There are plenty of fun times I’ve had high. I guess there were some really fucking terrible days high, and I’ve yet to have a really fucking terrible day sober, but I guess this all just doesn’t matter right now.

I hug Strawberry and head towards my house, offering promises of a first step for the next time I see her. Hopefully this will get done soon so I can keep moving on. I hear working the steps makes all the difference in the world. I'm ready for that difference.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

I have thirty-four days today. Thirty-fucking-four. I'm super pumped to get my thirty-day chip tonight at Ohio Street because this time, it's completely legitimate and actually exciting.

The past few weeks have been weird. Spring break went by like nothing. I basically worked on a history project and hung out with A.A. people every day. Last year, I went snowboarding with my mom and a friend of mine for the whole week. We all smoked pot and drank beers and had a blast. This year was the exact opposite. I did get my first manicure, though. I brought my step work to Strawberry, but she decided there wasn't time for it and took me to get a manicure instead. It was weird having random people touching my hands. And I never *ever* wear nail polish. It's all chipped off now, but it was kind of cool in the moment.

I'm pissed, though, because Strawberry has been too busy to go over my first step with me. My *first* step, never mind the eleven others that come after this one, is still not completed. I'm on my way to meet her at the Starbucks by Ohio Street now, but I'm fuming and probably should calm down a little before I see her.

Every day at school, I'm reliving that scene in Mean Girls where Lindsay Lohan eats lunch in the bathroom. Minus the bathroom and usually the lunch. The point is, I'm beyond alone at school. The good news is my grades have started going back up. I'm not failing math and science anymore, which is a plus, and my teachers have been offering me praise and giving me extra credit assignments so I can catch up.

My dad has started talking to me again. We ended up discussing the whole private school thing. While I still don't have any friends here at school, I don't think

making a change like that would go well with my sobriety. He and I both decided to turn down the acceptance. I think he was relieved that he wouldn't have to pay for a small sports utility vehicle for two years just for me to finish high school. It's like twenty grand a year to go there and I'd either have to take the bus or get driven by my parents (when they're shelling out that much money, they're not getting you your own car, that's for sure). The time and the money alone were enough to deter my folks from wanting me to go there, but I guess the sobriety thing was just the icing on the cake.

Hanging out with A.A. people is fun. My parents have been giving me some money here and there (note to self: get a job when I turn 16 so I can stop asking them for money) so I've been able to go to Café 50's and Coffee Bean and places like that after meetings. The half-chocolate half-vanilla milkshake at Café 50's is amazing, but their tap water tastes disgusting. I don't like soda, so this is a problem.

A bigger problem is that Strawberry doesn't seem to have any time for me. I've been hanging out with Athena, mostly. She's cool, but she calls me out on complaining too much. It's like she's frustrated by my "bourgeois teen problems," or so she says. I almost feel guilty for not having a rent to pay or car payments or whatever. I'll have those kind of problems at some point and maybe she'll actually take my feelings seriously. Don't get me wrong, though, she's fun to hang out with. She's just a little harsh when it comes to calling bullshit.

I get off the bus and I'm early to meet Strawberry. I consider taking a walk around the neighborhood, seeing the sights of West Los Angeles, but it's a densely commercial area and really, if you've seen one strip mall, you've seen them all, so I walk towards the Starbucks instead.

I hate Starbucks coffee. I really do. The only way it's drinkable is in the form of something übersweet, so I go for just that. I get something smothered in caramel syrup and head back outside to have a smoke. My bag weighs a ton because, in addition to the school stuff I'm carrying, I have my Big Book in there. Truth be told, it's an interesting book. The stories in it are old as hell, but it's cool, anyway. I mean, granted, I don't really find stories about 1950s working men's alcoholism relatable, but they're kind of fascinating. But again, the book is *heavy*.

I make small talk with another alcoholic waiting for her sponsor. We share a moment when a sketchy old guy walks by, and the time passes fairly quickly. Strawberry rolls down the block shouting my name like it's going out of style.

When she reaches me, she gives me a big bear hug. I'm getting used to the absurd amount of hugging that goes on around these parts to the point where it's becoming mildly terrifying to be in the real world where hugging is not an acceptable form of expression.

We sit down in the café. She doesn't order anything, which makes me kind of irritated that we came here at all (hello, lost five dollars). We're in a corner of the store, so I feel a bit more comfortable reading my first step out loud. That's the most fucked up thing about step work I've found so far: you apparently have to read everything out loud. And I thought it was just Strawberry, but apparently it's a common practice. We're all about the embarrassment in A.A. It's not enough that you have to write out every problem you've ever had on a piece of paper, you also have to make sure at least one other person hears those words come out of your mouth. But I guess that's the point, right? To hear the person with the problem admitting those problems off paper.

I start by reading the first step itself aloud, then reading off the definitions of “admitted,” “powerless,” and “unmanageable.”

“Alyssa, when I asked you to define the words—“ She pauses, and looks exasperated.

“What did you want? I looked them up, found suitable definitions, and wrote them down.” I can feel myself acting defensive already. I have yet to hone the off switch on reacting outright.

“Nevermind. Continue.”

“No, what did you want? I want to do this right, preferably the first time, but since that didn’t go down, I’ll take the second time as a—well—close second.” The words are lame but they come out of my mouth anyway. We both laugh, even though our frustrations are real.

“Listen, Alyssa. I want you to write *two* definitions for each word. I want you to write the definition from the dictionary *and* your own interpretation of the meaning of the word.”

I get what she’s saying, but she should’ve fucking said it the first time. Or before I wrote the second version. There was time for her to be more specific with her expectations, that’s all I’m saying. Now I’m panicking that the actual writing part is wrong—again.

We discuss the various meanings of the three words for a fair chunk of time. It would be cool if this was a post-meeting thing, but we do have places to be at some point. Or rather, we have a place to be in less than an hour and I don’t know how long these things take.

“So,” she pauses. “Now it’s time to answer the question: how were you powerless over alcohol and how was life unmanageable?” She has piercing blue eyes and they are cutting me in half. Here’s that attention I’ve been wanting. Goody.

I take a deep breath. Like, an if-I-release-the-air-the-wrong-way-this-will-become-hyperventilation kind of deep breath.

“Ok, so all my life, I’ve been told not to drink or do drugs because there’s a long line of alcoholism in my family. I remember the first time I got really fucked up in public. Chelsea died in a car accident. She wasn’t wearing a seatbelt, and I found out about it when I was at summer camp. This girl I wasn’t even friends with left this voicemail on my phone and I just screamed in response. I had been a brownie with Chelsea, we did almost every school project together in third and fourth grade. She was like family to me.

“When Chelsea died, I talked to this guy I had a crush on at camp who was older and I knew was hiding alcohol in his room. He gave me a bottle of Gatorade mixed with vodka. I was eleven or twelve then. The guy was like sixteen or seventeen.” I’m kind of adlibbing bits and pieces because I know I forgot to write certain details. She can probably tell, but her gaze hasn’t left my face since I started talking. I’m also not being entirely honest, and I don’t know if that’s coming across in my expressions.

I was twelve. He was sixteen. I wanted him to love me. He wanted a blowjob. Cut and dry. I just don’t want to say it loud enough for me to hear. I didn’t blow him, and he broke my heart.

But I say eleven or twelve because I want to exaggerate my problem. I say crush and not love because I want to downplay my emotional investment in someone who



couldn't have possibly cared any less about me than he did. It's a lot of up playing and downplaying facts where I see fit—where they'll make my problem more problematic.

“I started failing tests at school. Every male friend I've been drunk or high around, I've hooked up with. I started to hate myself. Other people started to hate me. When I wasn't getting fucked up with people, I was considering suicide. I stole to get booze. I stole to buy drugs. Before I started drinking, I'd never so much as stolen a penny.

“I got drunk at school a few times. And then, when I tried to get sober the first time, I didn't really give it a good shot. I faked it. I bullshitted it like I was bullshitting life.” I've somehow tapped into the waterworks. There are hollow, crocodile tears falling down my cheek.

“It's okay to be emotional, Alyssa. Keep going. What else?” Strawberry is rubbing my shoulder. I feel them lifting and lowering as I sob out the rest of my story.

“I went to my dad's boss's Christmas party and got wasted and almost lost him his job when I projectile vomited right in front of his boss. Any close friends, I've lost in the last year. When I went to my first A.A. meeting, I listened to the speaker. He was talking about how he used to bring drinks to school and all the shit that paralleled my life, and I thought to myself: this isn't the life I want. I don't want to be like this. I'm going to end up worse off if I don't quit. My life is already completely fucked up since I end up getting drunk and hooking up with everyone. I lose all control when I'm drunk or high. I'm powerless over alcohol and drugs and my life has become totally unmanageable. I need to change it, one day and one step at a time.”

I drop my head onto my arm and cry quietly. These are real tears. These are tears of defeat. I know there were embellishments and whatnot in what I say, but the feeling is real.

“Let it out, honey. It’s okay.” Strawberry’s coddling makes me snap out of it a bit. I don’t really want her sympathy. I just want to get through the steps.

“Thanks, Strawberry,” I sniffle.

“Do you believe that you are powerless over alcohol and that your life has become unmanageable?” Duh. That’s what I just fucking said.

“Yes. I do,” I say, flatly. Maybe all that eye contact was just a way to zone out while I was talking.

“Congratulations on completing your first step,” she says, smiling warmly. I smile back.

“So, what’s next?”

“Okay, step two: came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” I swallow big. I’m not a religious person, and this sounds, well, religious. This is the “God stuff” I keep hearing about. “I want you to define the following words: believe, power, sanity, and insane. Then, I want you to answer the question: how did you come to believe that there is a power greater than yourself?”

I scribble down what she wants me to write in my school planner like it’s homework.

“When are we going to talk about it?”

“I want you to have another thirty days first.” *What?! Are you fucking kidding me?!*

“Excuse me?”

“I want you to sit on your first step for around thirty more days. Then I want to talk about your second step.”

“But, that’s thirty days. Thirty *more* days.”

“If you were going to a meeting every day, we could wait less time. But as it stands, your still not even going to the five a week consistently, so thirty days.” Inside, I’m seething. I have a pretty legit poker face on the outside. But, I can’t argue. She’s my sponsor, and she makes the rules.

“Fine, okay.”

“In the meantime, maybe even tonight, I want you to take a service position at a meeting.”

“Like what?”

“Like sign up to be a greeter, or a chip person, or do the phone list. We’ll see what positions are open tonight. If there aren’t any, you’re going to have to find another meeting to take a position at.”

“Okay.” I fold. Being of service is part of the program, so I get it. It’s a necessity. This isn’t a request. This is an order.

“Cool. Alyssa, you need to start being proactive. You need to be more into the program.” The only people I’ve seen aside from my teachers and parents have been A.A. people. How much more *into* the program can I be? Plus, if she’s demanding dedication from me, I’d like to request a bit more attention from her. You can’t go around telling someone what they should and shouldn’t be doing if you can barely make time for them. I can’t verbalize any of this, though. She’s been sober for a while for a reason, and as

frustrated as I am, I need to try listening to her first. As Golay told me the other day, clearly my way so far hasn't worked and it's time to try something new.

We're in the meeting and it's chip time. I step up to take my thirty-day chip and this time, recognizable faces are cheering for me. People I know and hang out with on a regular basis are running into the aisle and giving me hugs for only thirty days. It's a big deal to me, too, but they're making it a bigger deal. It's not like I've been shooting up for the past ten years and couldn't even put a day sober together before. But I guess I've already made that much of a change. I just haven't really picked up on it yet.

When the announcements transpire at the end of the meeting, and Andy who heads the meeting is reading off the service positions and thanking people for helping, the dude who's done the phone list for months stands up.

"Hey guys! It's been awesome to be your phone list dude for the past few months, but sorry to say it's time for me to leave Los Angeles. I'm moving to Texas in two weeks and I'm going to need to give up my position as communication guru. Who wants the job?"

Strawberry elbows me and whispers in my ear. "Take the position."

I stand up robotically. "I'll do it," I say, shrugging.

"Alyssa's going to take the phone list job!" Andy shouts over the meeting.

There's a roar of mock enthusiasm from the group.

"Way to be of service!" Someone calls out. It takes me a moment, but I'm pretty sure that was a serious comment. Weird. I'm still standing up and about to sit back down when I realize I have no idea what I'm supposed to do.

“What do I do as the phone list chick?”

“Meet me after the meeting and I’ll let you know,” he says, nodding to me. We both take our seats.

I now have a service position. Yay me.

### Chapter Thirty-Three

Nine letters. Reason for a ticket. There's an "I" and a "T" in the word.

Violation.

I'm sitting in my regular seat in English doing a crossword puzzle. I've started cutting them out of the morning paper and doing them in my classes and during lunch. School is fucking boring without people to talk to. I'm starting to nerd it up a bit and talk to people I was friends with in middle school, but even still, it's too late to really make friends this year. School is literally a month and a half away from being out. Therefore, I'm fucked for friends.

This is my routine: Get to school. Go to my first five classes. Lunch. Go to my last two classes. Get on the bus. Go straight home. Rinse. Repeat.

I used to do shit during and after school. I used to spend two or three periods at a time in the nurse's office *sleeping*. I drew a picture in science class the other day made of tiny dots that covered an entire piece of notebook paper. I am so fucking *bored*. I wish I could just take my G.E.D. and peace out of here altogether.

I had a conversation with an advisor (not my advisor, which is probably why this conversation took place) about the prospect of graduation a year early. I'd have to take summer school for the next two years but I could do it. I just don't have it in me to sit in school during the summertime.

Class gets out without me even noticing. I'm half-awake. It's lunchtime. Rather than going the direction I use to go for lunch, I opt to creep down by the hotel, right next to the freeway. It's an unfrequented spot by the security guards. I sit in the alley there,

chain smoke and do crosswords. Every. Single. Day. I don't eat. I don't socialize. I smoke and fill in little squares with vocabulary words I'm unsure of. That's it.

The weird thing is, nobody knows that I'm sober—well, that I know of. Jodie's been to Ohio Street since I've been seriously sober and I ignored her completely. She probably spread something. I wouldn't know. I'm so out of the loop that I don't even hear rumors about myself anymore. Nobody's called me or texted me to hang out since Bernadette's birthday debacle. Maybe my mom told the boys I was trying to get sober when they were leaving and now I'm labeled with the non-drinking plague.

I mean, it's at the point where I'm so bored with listening to the music I have on my iPod that I've started downloading NPR podcasts like my parents. I listen to prerecorded talk radio, essentially. I am a fucking nerd and a half. I'm pretty sure Carl Kassel is not punk rock.

I've been reading a lot, too. It's like that weekend even before Bernadette's birthday all over again. I've actually been using my library card and stopping over there on the way home every few days. I've now read every J.D. Salinger book and a whole lot of e.e. cummings and T.C. Boyle and pretty much any writer who subs out his name for initials in existence. Short stories and poetry are where it's at, though. I can bang out a few of those during lunch with no problem.

Sometimes, I use my lunch period to make my daily call to Strawberry. I figure I might as well call her when I have fuck all to do, since I have to call her anyway. She's usually either with another sponsee, at some rehab in the valley, or getting her nails done. It makes the situation easier because then I don't have to talk for so long. I can speculate about whether or not I'll be making a meeting in the evening.

I hate our conversations. Usually after talking to Strawberry, I have to call Golay or Athena or someone like that in order to feel like a person again. For one, Strawberry treats me like a fucking child, even more so than Athena. I don't need to be molly coddled. On the other end of the spectrum, she doesn't even really *ask* about me. She just tells me about herself. About her work with sober living houses and WACYPAA and LACYPAA and all that shit. I just want to talk about me sometimes. Call it selfish, but I'm pretty sure that's what her job is. To make me get over myself, suck it up, and start out fresh. All I know is she painted her nails coral today, which will totally clash with her hair color and skin tone.



## Chapter Thirty-Four

“I don’t *want* to do it, Aly. I don’t *want* to fire you. But I might have to if you can’t meet the requirement we arranged in April.” I’m glad I can’t feel her eyes on me. We’re on the phone, I’m having a smoke on the stairs in the backyard. I opted to make my daily call an after school event today, rather than killing precious reading time. My mom is watering the plants and rolling her eyes at me. I’ve told her more than enough about Strawberry for her to know she’s on the phone.

I inhale my cigarette deeply, thinking about what’s really at stake. Yeah, I need a sponsor, but does it have to be Strawberry? Can’t I get another sponsor? I guess I’m just worried that my step work will be postponed even more than it is now if I switch up.

“Strawberry, it’s finals time. I have to catch up with all the work I fucked up earlier in the year so I don’t have to go to summer school. I have to bring my grades up so, you know, I can go to college.”

My mom mouths something to me that looks like “is that woman out of her mind?” I roll my eyes in response. Yes, mom. Yes, she is.

“But we *talked* about that Alyssa! School was already a factor when we decided *five* meetings a week. This wouldn’t be an issue if you went to more than *two*!”

It’s true. I go to two a week, and they’re both at Ohio Street. Thursdays and Sundays. I understand the problem, kind of. I just don’t *care* about it. I’m sober, I’m feeling better, I’m starting to deal with feelings a bit better. I don’t get how more meetings are going to suddenly make me a candidate for sainthood.

“How about alternating weeks?”

My mom mouths “is she trying to get you to more meetings again?” before face-palming. I cover the mouthpiece and laugh. My mom’s exaggerated movements are *hilarious*.

“Do you *want* me to hang up on you? I’m going to have to call Stephanie.” Oh no. She’s pulled the “I’m going to have to call *my* sponsor” card.

“Strawberry, let me try to change it around this week. Let me show you that I can go to more meetings.” I’m defeated, but sometimes defeat is easier than fighting, especially when you don’t care about the outcome.

“That sounds better. Five, four at the very least. If you don’t make it to at least four meetings, it’s over.”

“What about my second step?”

“What about it?”

“When are we doing my second step?”

“Do you have sixty days yet?”

“Almost.” Fuck. I forgot about that stipulation.

“*Alyssa!*” And I’ve officially screwed up the first rule of Fight Club.

“Sorry! One day at a time! There’s no almost! I forgot!” If you don’t look at this program as a one day at a time thing, a baby kitten dies somewhere. And then an angel loses its wings.

“That’s better. Now, how many days do you have?”

“Fifty-one.”

“So, when you have sixty days, we’ll schedule a time to do your second step.”

“Fine,” I’m getting petulant. I don’t want to play in Strawberry’s sandbox anymore.

“Ok, sweetie. Call me tomorrow.”

“Ok.”

“Love you, Aly!” She says, making kissy noises on the phone.

“Love you, too,” I return, swallowing a little to prevent myself from gagging.

My mom looks like she’s about to laugh.

“What was *that*?” She giggles.

“That’s what a verbal slaughter looks like.” I stub out my cigarette and shrug.

“So it sounds like you’re going to have to figure out a better schedule for yourself, Al.”

“Yeah, Ma. I got enough from Strawberry, I don’t need it from you, too.”

“Well, I could help you.” My mom is great in an emergency. If the house is burning down, you want her with you because she’ll manage to put out the fire and save the important things before you can even blink. If you have a last minute art project, she will do half of it for you to make sure your idea is realized. However, time management is not her strong point. If the house was burning and I had a poster due tomorrow, I’d totally take her help. Making an organized schedule? Not so much.

“Nah, that’s okay, Ma,” I smile. “I’ll figure out a way to make it work.”

“Well, if you need me, I’m around,” she says. She puts her headphones on and starts working on the vines in the way back.

I'm kind of pissed, so I grab Daisy's harness. Nothing works out frustration like walking an energetic puppy. I dial Athena's number as I step out the front door, dog in hand.

"Yo," she answers, flatly. She sounds annoyed or bored or something already.

"Hey," I say.

"What's up?"

"Walking Daisy." This is awkward.

"That's cool. What's going on, Al?" I think I'm going to have to just vent to Athena. She's not going to dig for it, necessarily, so I'm just going to have to come out with everything.

"Fucking Strawberry threatened to fire me! Can you believe that shit?"

"Well, what happened?" Athena always stays calm when she's responding to me. It's like a pained, angry calm, but the volume of her voice doesn't waver in the slightest.

"She told me I have to go to five meetings a week but I've only been going to two but I don't have time to go to five because I have so much school work and I don't want to go to five meetings," I explode.

"Do you hear yourself?" I repeat myself in my head quickly and realize I sound like a five-year-old throwing finger-paints.

"Yeah, but do you see what I'm saying?"

"Well, to be honest Al, I can't tell what point you're trying to argue. Is it that you're lacking time or desire to go to more than two meetings a week?"

Fuck. I know where this is going.

"Both, kinda." Ew. I'm being sincere.

“You have to figure out whether or not you want to be sober.”

“I *do* want to be sober! I *am* fucking sober!”

“Not really. Not if sobriety isn’t your top priority.”

“Athena, I’m in *high school*. School has to be my priority.”

“So grades are more important than staying alive?” Exhibit A in my case against making sobriety my “top priority”: The life or death exaggerations. Clearly grades are *not* more important than life, but if I answer in favor of being alive, I’m arguing against myself. This is so lame.

“Athena, I get it—“

“—*Clearly* you don’t. Do you know how many people have died in this program because they just have a drink? Because they stopped calling their sponsor? Because they didn’t work the steps? Because they stopped going to meetings? You either take this seriously, or you find some new fucking people to talk to. We’re not interested in people who want to bullshit their way through this. This is fucking life and death, Alyssa. Maybe not for you. I get that. But if you want to want to be in this program, you need to legitimately work it.”

I feel like I’ve been slapped in the face by a brick. I see what she’s saying, though. Maybe it’s not the most dire situation for me if I drink, maybe I’m lucky enough to have a bottom far above other peoples’ bottoms (maybe it’s just because I’m young), but if I’m treating it like it’s nothing, people are going to resent me and I might affect their program. I repeat that in my head. My actions can affect other people. I get how obvious that sounds, but I’m going to be honest—I’m kind of having an epiphany here.

“Fuck.”

“I’m going to Second and Hill tonight,” Athena tells me. “And yes, you do need to call her and apologize.”

“What time?”

“I’ll be at your house at 6:30. It’s an early meeting and we can get coffee beforehand instead of after. I know you have homework and all that.” I smile a solitary grin. Sometimes tough love takes a few minutes longer to soak in.

“Thanks, Athena.”

“Yep.” She hangs up the phone.

I have a meeting to go to, I have some support, and I can call Strawberry and calm her down a bit. I have to start thinking of this program as a team effort. Sponsoring others isn’t just a selfless act; It’s a way of helping someone else get sober while helping yourself stay active in the program. Ah-ha.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

There's about a week of school left. Finals are done. I have sixty-one days today and I'm meeting with Strawberry to go over my second step. But let me tell you, I'm having a little bit of trouble finding my faith in a greater power today.

Yearbooks cost fifty dollars. I have one for every year I've been in school, preschool included. My mom was übernostalgic as kid and begged her parents for a yearbook every year. That was the one request they were okay with, despite having four other kids and not much money. However, the storage unit my mother's family had burned when she was in high school, so only two of the books remain. Therefore, it was of the *utmost* importance that Nick and I get our yearly yearbooks.

My yearbook from last year is tight. Tracy and I got high in her room with a pack of a hundred markers and a couple magazines and went crazy on the pages. She essentially turned my yearbook into a choose-your-own-adventure book. It's absolutely incredible.

And *everyone* wrote in it. Eli even wrote something funny. Bernadette glued photo booth pictures into it. My senior friends who all went off to college and those kids from JAMS who I met at the beginning of the year but never really spoke to again and that girl who played the standup bass in jazz band and every fucking person I ever talked to my freshman year signed it.

I'm staring at a page of my yearbook from this year. In sharpie, across a candid photo of me playing saxophone at a football game: "You're a fucking crazy cunt." All I can think is: why did I waste fifty fucking dollars on this? I knew this would happen.

Maybe the unsigned message is a joke, maybe it's a legitimate statement. Either way, the coward didn't leave a return address. There's no "HAGS and KIT!" note beside it.

And it's not the only one.

Somehow, my yearbook made its rounds today and, though a couple of the Jehovah's Witness kids wrote neutral, meaningless statements as per usual, most of the pages are either completely bare or covered in nasty shit. I recognize Eli's handwriting in a few spots.

I want to genuinely care about this. I want to internalize it and get pissed off and report it to the school as bullying and get some kids expelled for fun, and I want to find those kids and apologize to them, beg for their forgiveness on my knees in the middle of the quad. But I really just feel like God kicked me in the box. I get that a power greater than yourself doesn't have to be nice to you all the time, but I've put so much time and effort into this whole sobriety thing lately that this yearbook thing just feels a bit like defeat.

That's part of it, though, right? God doesn't work like that. God doesn't reward you for good behavior and punish you for bad, not really. That's the work of religious mythology. In reality, God keeps the earth spinning and tries to push you in the right direction and if you get there, good on you.

I found a killer definition for "believe" for my second step. It was defined as "to accept as the truth." I get that that's the textbook definition of "believe," but I've never thought of belief as something that could be broken down so simply. It's your truth and as much as it exists, you have a hand in creating it.



As much as I resent Strawberry for making me sit on this step for a month, I kind of get it. I realized that the whole “God fear” was unfounded. In reality, I’ve always believed a power greater than myself existed. Talking to the stars or meditating on the beach or trying to stop the waves—all things point to something a bit more powerful than myself.

We’re thankfully not at a Starbucks this time, but a Coffee Bean. It’s nice to actually enjoy a cup of coffee, and to be able to acquire one for less than two bucks. I should just get a job here or something. I finish reading Strawberry my step work and she nods.

“It’s a bit robotic.”

“That’s what you said with my first version of the first step!”

“Well—“

“—Maybe I’m a robot. How about that?” She’s fidgeting with her Blackberry. I can’t hold back. “Pay attention to me!!” She stares at me blankly. Other café patrons are gawking at me. And, of course, I’m crying.

“Alyssa,” she says to me, calmly. “If you can’t interact with me calmly, how can you expect to rush through your steps?”

“Strawberry,” I’m forcing the words through my teeth. “Putting off my step work is driving me up a fucking wall. I want to apologize to people already! Someone called me a cunt in my goddamn *yearbook*! Who does that? I just want to get to the point where things from my old life get better. I want to have people to *talk* to at school. I’m there, what, forty or so hours a week? I should feel at least a *little* comfortable when I’m there.

I'm safe for the summer, but when September rolls around, I'm going to be completely and utterly fucked."

"You. Can't. Rush. This." She spaces out her words in a completely patronizing manner and I really want to punch her in the face. "So what if someone called you a cunt in your yearbook? They're a coward for writing that in your yearbook. We're working on making you a better Alyssa, and part of that is using time to work through the steps. Did you feel—answer honestly—did you *really* feel prepared to write your second step thirty days ago?"

"No, I guess not," I respond sheepishly, unable to make eye contact.

"I get that you want to feel better at school, but it's not something you have to worry about right now. You only have a week or two left, right?"

"About a week and a half."

"Right. A week or two. So what are you worried about? Get through that for now. You can work on making friends at school in the fall." She's totally right that it isn't a necessary concern right now.

"My writing wasn't robotic," I say, getting back to the point at hand. "Maybe I'm just not a hyperemotional writer." I kind of am a hyperemotional writer, though. Just not about A.A. stuff.

"What I was going to say, *Alyssa*, is that it's a bit robotic *but* you make good points and clearly believe that a power greater than yourself exists and that is the purpose of this exercise and you've started outlining who that greater power is and that's important, too."

Well, fuck. My bad.

“Sorry for jumping the gun on that one. I just got defensive, you know? It’s my writing—it’s my *God* I’m putting out there—so I’m sorry I was so quick to get into it.”

Okay, now I’m just being melodramatic to save face.

“Aly, I have to make a phone call. Don’t worry about it. Why don’t you go have a smoke?”

“Yeah, okay.”

I go outside and light my cigarette. I feel like I was just kicked in the teeth. Listening. I have to work on listening. I’m so used to being on guard that I can feel myself just assuming the worst when peoples’ mouths open. Granted, Strawberry does have a history of drinking haterade before reading my step work, but that’s not an excuse to jump on her.

I’m kind of embarrassed for my reaction in the Coffee Bean. It’s funny because I’m starting to think about everything in A.A. terms. My mind literally just said to me “why don’t you write about it?” (aka the stock response to anything and everything A.A.) I should just write about it—give it to God, as they say. Let someone else deal with my reactions and my feelings. Get rid of them for good. Or, at least, for now.

I return to our table and Strawberry is just getting off the phone.

“Hey, Strawberry. I’m really sorry for reacting. I think I’m just stressed out about school and the summer and everything.”

“Never apologize with an excuse.”

“What?”

“You apologized and gave me an excuse for your behavior, as if to say you didn’t make the decision to act the way you did.”

“I see.” I give it some thought, and can definitely see what she’s seeing, but want desperately to move past this conversation. How many times does one need to be right in one day?

“This is a valuable lesson, Alyssa. It’s one that took me a long time to learn. Either apologize or don’t. If you apologize, make sure you mean it. And if you mean it, don’t come up with an excuse for why it happened. It cheapens the apology.”

“Point taken.” I get it. It makes sense. Cool.

“So, step three.”

“Yeah, step three. What’s in store for me?”

“Define decision, care, and understood.”

“Oooh-kay,” I stretch out, as I scribble down the instructions.

“Write about turning your will over to God. Then give me the characteristics of your God.”

“Characteristics of my God. Got it.”

“Alright, that’s about it. Take about two weeks to do this one, okay, Alyssa?”

“Okay, no problem. I won’t bring it up to you for at least two weeks.”

“Alright, we’re going to be late. Let’s go.”

We get up from the table and walk towards her car. It’s meeting time. It’s a day that ends in “Y”—it *must* be meeting time.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

“You’re not leaving the house.”

“It’s the *summer*, Dad! I don’t have school. I can’t fix this!”

“You *failed*, Alyssa! We spent eighty dollars on a test plus however much on a chemistry tutor and you *failed*. You are *grounded*! You are *not* going to that event tomorrow, you’re not going out tonight!”

“I’ve never been fucking grounded in my life and I’m not starting now!”

My dad and I are having a battle royale right now. I will win this fight. I’m not going to win because I’m a brat, but because I’m right. I fucked up throughout the school year and took the AP test for chemistry despite my comfort level with the subject. I got a “1” on it, which roughly translates to “congratulations, you spelled your name right.” My dad is livid, but there’s nothing I can do now. The test was two months ago. I can’t time travel.

“You didn’t even *try* Alyssa! A one? *Really?*”

I see red. I get quiet.

“Peace,” I say, staring angrily into his eyes, as I grab my bag and leave through the front door. I guess this isn’t technically a win. I guess I’m technically running away from the situation altogether, but I think he needs some time to think about how ridiculous this is.

I’m supposed to go to an A.A. event at Magic Mountain tomorrow. I’m super pumped for it and have had the ticket in my wallet for a month now, but I’m pretty sure my dad wants to put the kibosh on that situation. I’m also pretty sure I’m going to go

anyway. Athena would let me crash at her house, maybe. Or not. Someone would, though.

I call Golay. We meet at the promenade and see a movie. It's a comedy, I think. I'm not entirely sure, as it doesn't make me laugh all that much. Golay treats me to some food and leaves me to go to work.

I have ten missed calls and no voicemails. I'm not calling back until there's a message to respond to. I start walking away from the promenade down to Main Street.

I call Athena. She meets me for some coffee and a meeting. I carry my directory with me all the time now, so I always know where I can find a meeting. I bet there's some alkie app out there for people to find meetings and events and shit, but my phone isn't quite up to speed that way, so even if they did, I couldn't download it. How funny would that be, though?

Athena meets me at the Coffee Bean on Main Street. I get some serious déjà vu from the time I sat here alone after staying at Bernadette's house, but the light's all wrong so the feeling doesn't last long; It just weirds me out long enough to give me the heebie jeebies.

"So your dad's mad at you again, huh?" She says, as she hops out of her pickup truck.

"Um, yeah. But I don't remember—"

"—Golay called me. Said you could use the company."

Now I'm a charity case. Thank you.

"Yeah, I guess so. I could use a vanilla ice blended, that's for sure."

“Do you know how much sugar is in one of those?”

Okay, I get it. I have some body image issues. However, as much as I want to grow up and have my own life and all that, I’ll take the “I’m a kid” defense for food. I can eat whatever the fuck I want to because one day I’m really going to have to care. That’ll come in like, a year or two. At fifteen you can still drink übersweet blended coffee drinks and you should be able to do so without judgment. This is L.A., though: land of lipo and implants. Plus I’m pretty sure Athena had an eating disorder at my age, like most of the adults I know.

“I don’t really care.”

“I’m not talking you through the pain when your foot gets amputated, then.” I’m pretty sure she’s referring to diabetes. I choose to ignore her completely.

“So, yeah. My dad’s pretty pissed off.”

“What is it this time? Scratch the car when you were practicing driving? One of your A’s was an A-minus?”

Athena thinks my dad is really hard on me. He is pretty hard on me. He confines me to studying at home more often than not, but it’s probably for the best. It’s just one of those things where when you talk about someone, you’re more prone to sharing the bad things than the good. I guess I share a lot of the “my dad is riding my ass for no fucking reason about this, that and the other thing” stories more often than not.

“I failed my AP test.”

“Didn’t you take that at the end of May?”

“Yeah.”

“I see.”

“He’s tried calling me a bunch of times, but hasn’t left a message yet. I’m waiting for the message. I figure the first ten calls are completely out of anger.”

“Ah-ha,” she nods her head like she’s Sigmund fucking Freud. I guess I can’t complain *too* much—I’m the one over-sharing.

“What?”

“You think he’s going to come down?”

I think about it for a moment. Am I just hoping he’ll realize he’s wrong? Am I actually wrong but too stubborn to realize it? Fuck that noise. This is a “what’s in the past is in the past” kind of situation—there is fuck all I can do.

“I don’t know what I’ll do if he doesn’t.”

For an hour or so, we sit outside and smoke and talk about less serious things and have a pretty awesome time all around. We kill some time, hit up a meeting, get some sobriety, and call it a day. We’re idling outside my house. My dad hasn’t tried to call me since before I met up with Athena.

“You have to handle your situation. Love you,” she says, kicking me out of the car.

“Love you, too,” I return, confused.

“Clean up your side of the street, Alyssa. Always clean up your side. That’s all you can do.”

I take a breath as I contemplate the cliché echoing through my head. She’s right though. I need to apologize for walking out on the conversation. Whatever he does and



however he reacts is out of my hands. I'm walking up the pathway to my house and the door cracks open.

My dad is standing in the doorway with a pensive half-smile.

"Hey Poppy."

"Hey Stootchkie." He steps to the side to let me in. Daisy looks up at me, then skulks back into my dad's office.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you and was so disrespectful and essentially told you to fuck off without actually saying that. Oh, and leaving without contacting you or Mom or anything. And just generally for reacting the way I did."

"Come on in." He directs me into his office. I sit on one of his gaudy old couches. "Listen, Alyssa. I'm sorry. It was unreasonable to get upset with you for failing an exam you took a month or two ago. I was disappointed that you tried so hard to turn the year around and it didn't end up as well as we'd hoped. You worked so hard in that final stretch and Mom and I are so proud of you—my reaction was really about that work being for nil rather than actually being angry with you."

Come again? I mean, it doesn't make a ton of sense to me, but I'll take it. And I really should be able to predict my dad's reactions to things. There's always the super anger, then the cool down and then the logic. Well, most of the time that's how it works.

"Thanks, Dad." We hug for a moment. I can't really say much else. I appreciate his apology, and his logic. I'm just glad things have been easier the past couple months.

"So what time am I driving you to your friend's house in the morning?" He says

"Oh man, seven, I think?"

“Make sure you have all your stuff together and ready. I’d like it if you woke yourself up—save Mom and me the effort,” he says, smiling.

“Okay, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Alyssa.”

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

It's not often that people are in underwear when I meet them.

Strawberry is chauffeuring a carload of people to Magic Mountain and this dude's house was the middle ground for everyone. His name is Ben, I think. Something kind of biblical like that. He's in his late twenties or early thirties and was wearing boxers when I rang his doorbell. Awkward.

Apparently I'm early, which has more to do with my father driving me than my planning. I run on my own time—fifteen minutes late to everything. However, if I tell my dad I need to be somewhere by a certain time, I get there five to ten minutes early. Go figure.

I'm situated in Ben's living room playing with the contents of my bag since he has decided to jump back into the shower he was in the midst of taking when I arrived. My mom didn't believe I'd put sun block on at all today, so she made me put some on before I left the house. I feel greasy and sun blocky. Non-greasy formula, my ass.

The last time I went to Magic Mountain, I was severely hung over and or still drunk. Let's just say riding roller coasters while partially intoxicated is not the best idea one can have. It was for Tracy's birthday. We kidnapped her the morning after having a luau themed surprise party. I have a picture on my wall at home. There were ten or twelve of us altogether and there will never be another moment in time when we're all in the same place together again.

The drive to Magic Mountain is typical—we catch up quickly to the thousands of weekend warriors en route to Tahoe cabins and power boats and inch along behind them

for an ungodly amount of time. And, in my own typical fashion, I take a nap in the car for the duration of the trip. I'm going to be in lines all day having to make small talk with people I barely know. Why spend that energy now?

I wake up when we're close to the park. There's no other reason to come to Valencia than to go to Magic Mountain, so as the sky tower and super tall rides come into sight, my mind floods with childhood memories of school trips and birthday parties. Sure, to the south there's Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm, but if you're seeking legit thrill rides (and not some pussy slo-motion indoor shenanigans), no place tops Magic Mountain. Plus, you know a place is badass when almost all of their rides are named after superheroes.

When we enter the park, we go through some super secret side entrance. Apparently, there's a barbeque slash meeting taking place in the middle of the day that's included in our tickets but in order to get the stub for the barbeque, we have to go through the other entrance. The only reason I know this is because Strawberry explained it. I hope the other people who don't have an event organizer with them know where to go.

My stomach flies through my chest and up through my ears on every loop, corkscrew, and drop I encounter. This place is awesome. I actually have my camera out. Weird faces made in long lines: captured. Mid-air high fives: captured. That funnel cake the size of Ben's head that we covered in chocolate: captured. I wonder if this is the final step in accepting my new life. I actually want to document it. I actually feel like this is photo worthy—like printing these images up and taping them on my bedroom walls will be representative of my friends.

It's hot as balls here, and I'm probably getting a sunburn anyway, but I don't care. I've chugged like, seven frozen lemonades and have that weird urine-sewage smell on me from trying to cool down on the water rides. It's barbeque time and we're all lined up by this hidden side area of the park waiting to be allowed into some secret area. It smells like generic barbeque—smoke and seasonings.

Once we're through the little white gates, it doesn't even feel like we're at Magic Mountain anymore. It looks like something out of Rustic Canyon or one of those parks with the janky coal grills that look like mailboxes. There's a sand pit with a volleyball net and one of those concrete half-court basketball areas.

I scope out the food situation and find myself mildly disappointed. It's one of those awkward buffet-style set-ups where all of the food is lukewarm and congealed. The only main course option is chicken, which sucks for me. Chicken and I have a strange relationship. I have to be *pumped* to eat chicken—like, super pumped. I have to *want* to eat it. Otherwise, I cannot stand the flavor for the life of me. I'll have to buy myself an overpriced theme park meal later. Lunch fail.

A guy I don't recognize is testing a microphone at a podium on the grass. I guess the meeting will be held outdoors. A pretty fair chunk of the day is reserved for lunch and meeting time, according to my ticket stub. As per Strawberry's attitude towards the program, we were super on time, so there's at least another hour until the meeting. Since there's not much food I'm interested in, I'm kind of pissed that I didn't go on another ride.

I grab some corn on the cob and salad and a mix of random side dishes and sit in the grass in the shade. I've been talking all day and have never been more excited to

have down time in my life. It's interesting people watching at A.A. events because you know everyone has some sort of back-story. I'm playing a little game in my head called "guess-who-was-homeless-under-a-freeway-before-they-got-sober" while simultaneously trying to figure out why so many people in sobriety complain about being poor or in debt and yet have intricate full-sleeved tattoos. There are a lot of paradoxes like that with the people in A.A., but I'm starting to get used to them. I'm really getting used to the whole shebang.

A shout wakes me from my musing.

"Alyssa! We need another player!" I'm getting beckoned to the volleyball court by a group of people. I suck at volleyball, but it looks like fun, so I jump over.

This is fun. This existence is fun. Knowing that all of this is actually happening right now is fun. Yeah, real life happens and shit gets weird and I get resentful and whatever, but there's something to be said about the fun parts being fun-ER in sobriety.

Post-volleyball, the guy who was testing the mike earlier calls everyone to the grassy area and to have what's called a "red ball" meeting. Apparently, at red ball meetings, there's literally a ball tossed around and whoever catches it has to speak on the theme subject of the meeting. I'm in the back with the other smokers, so I'm just crossing my fingers that no one has a decent enough arm to get it over here.

As we go through the ball catchers, I find out that there are people from all over Southern California. It's funny—at my regular meetings, they always ask the out-of-towners to stand up and it seems like maybe a handful of people outside of L.A. are sober, and then there are moments like this at events that make it seem like there are actually more sober people than normies or addicts in the world. It's like, if there are so

many people from just Southern California, how many people are there in Northern California? And the West Coast? And the U.S.? And the world? It's not that thinking about it makes me feel small—actually, quite the opposite. I feel like I'm part of something—like I'm in a club with a secret handshake where I'm automatically accepted into the world.

It's dark and feels really cold and we're searching the parking lot for Strawberry's car. I'm pretty exhausted and lazily smoking a cigarette, but I'm listening to the chatter going on within the group and the anecdotes from the day are making me smile. Apparently, Martinia passed out—*literally* passed the fuck out—during the drop on the Goliath, some dude who looks a little like the devil got kicked out of the park right after the meeting for flipping off the camera in the log ride, and Athena made a little girl cry by psychoanalyzing the Superman ride.

I fall asleep in the car on the way home and opt out of the obligatory post-event trip to Top Fuel. Even though I feel like the excitement of my eleventh birthday trumps today's trip to Magic Mountain, it does come in as a close second. I'm starting to feel like a person again—a *whole* person—no longer missing chunks of myself.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

It's July 22<sup>nd</sup>. I have ninety-six days sober, it's the third anniversary of Chelsea's death, and I can't bring myself to finish my third step.

I can't accept a God who would let a thirteen-year-old die.

I can't consciously turn my life over to that same God. I need to let go and let God. I need to be less controlling. I get it. But I can't do it.

At my end of the year pool party, I said to her, "This sucks, I'm never going to see you again." (She was changing schools.) She said, "Oh Alyssa, don't worry. I'll see you soon." And then a month later, she was gone. I never got to see her again. I was right.

So where's the lesson in that, God? What did I learn from Chelsea dying? That enough vodka can make you stop feeling? That it doesn't matter how good you are? That there's no such thing as karmic justice?

So Strawberry keeps asking for my third step and I can't do it. All I have written down are the definitions for the words "decision," "care," and "understood." The second and third steps are known as being the biggest hurdles for a lot of alcoholics to get over. Apparently, a lot of us have an issue with accepting God.

My grandpa's been sober for something like twenty years, maybe more. I know he got sober about a month before my parents got married. Anyway, he goes to A.A. for agnostics or atheists or humanists—some non-religious something or other—and that



works for him. I don't really know enough about spirituality or religion to label myself. I guess there's no time like the present to figure out where I stand.

I can accept that trees and the ocean and the stars are beyond my control and the result of a higher power. The existence of a higher power I'm okay with. It's putting them in charge of my life that I take issue with. It's faith that I can't incorporate into my routine.

"Meditate about it."

Seriously? I'm having problems putting my life in God's hands and I'm told to meditate? I hate this program sometimes.

"But isn't that part of the problem?"

"Alyssa, you have to *try*." It's Athena. I didn't really care to hear what Strawberry might have to say about this whole thing.

"Can't I just make it up for the step work and then accept God later?"

"What good does that do you? Alyssa, the reason you do the steps is to help *yourself* get sober. Go meditate. Call me later." She hangs up.

I'm walking along Palisades Park and getting more skeptical about having my life be in God's hands. I'm watching homeless people talk to pigeons and get harassed by bored cops. This is all part of His plan?

I walk across a bridge over the PCH and get down to the sand. I take off my shoes and let the sand burn my feet. When I get closer to the water, I walk through the wet sand to cool my feet down. I'm trying to make every step deliberate—to have full

control of everything I'm doing. I throw my hoodie down on a dry bit of sand and sit on it and watch the water.

I am repeating the serenity prayer in my head like there's a secret message in it, maybe something that only comes out when you play it backwards. God grant me the serenity. God allow me the peace. To accept the things I cannot change. To be okay with things being out of my control. The courage to change the things I can. The guts to step up when I need to alter things in my control. And the wisdom to know the difference. And a bit of common sense.

I repeat it and repeat it and redefine words until it makes sense to me. I have my moment of clarity.

It's not about God. It's about me. It's about accepting the world as it is. It's about being okay with things happening. It's about not sweating things I have no hand in. It's about taking care of things on my end and letting God take care of the rest.

Okay, third step. I gotcha now.

I scribble down some aspects of my finding on a piece of notebook paper I have in my bag and frantically search for my cell phone.

"Hey Strawberry. I'm ready."

"That's great, Alyssa! Meet you at Coffee Bean on Main Street in an hour."

We hang up, and I walk along the boardwalk for what feels like an eternity. It's funny because when most people mention the boardwalk or think of it, they think of the portion in Venice, lined with people handing out cards for Kush Doctors and head shops and t-shirt stores. Little do they know it goes much farther North. Even farther North than the pier.

Where I start walking is totally barren—there are a couple of houses fairly close by but no exciting signs of civilization. It’s just the easiest way to get to Main Street. I would rather walk in the middle of nowhere in the sun on a flat surface than try to traverse the bridge over the PCH again in order to wait for a bus to come by Palisades Park and get all caught up in traffic and have it take forever. I’m all about the forward motion right now.

Strawberry is sitting across from me slurping a tea latte while trying to decipher my handwriting. Even though the sound of each sip is driving me absolutely insane, I’m grateful that she isn’t making me read it aloud. There are too many people around us and apparently she needs to have a bathroom close by today so we can’t sit in the car somewhere or anything.

“Great job, Alyssa. It seems like you really did some soul searching,” she says, hugging me across the table.

“Well, I’d been putting it off and putting it off. I realized a lot out there today.”

“Some of the characteristics of your God seem a little questionable, but the main point is there,” she says, looking at the paper again. I want to argue with her, but I did write that my God speaks Spanish and is made of leaves, so I can understand where her judgment is coming from. Sometimes it’s just easier for me to practice Spanish if I’m talking to God rather than, you know, actually doing my Spanish homework.

“So when do I start my fourth step? What do I have to do?” Fucking *finally*. I’ve been itching for steps four through nine for the three months I’ve been sober. I can finally do step work that makes me feel like I’m moving forward.

“When you have six months,” she says, flatly.

“I’m sorry, I think I misheard you. Did you say six months?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I have no idea how to react right now. Six months. That’s twice the sobriety I have right now. It will be the middle of October when I have six months. I’ll be sixteen already. I want to fight this—I want to fight *her*—but I can’t. I’m too weak.

“Are you alright, Alyssa?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll be fine. I’m just going to start heading home.” I am the very definition of downtrodden right now. I thought it would be like waving a wand. I’d be finished with my third step and then—poof!—my resentments would be written down in a jiffy.

It’s just three more months. How hard can that be?

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Alyssa, don’t ask questions. You can’t talk to him anymore, okay? Have some solidarity with your sisters. He’s a threat to women everywhere,” she pauses. “Maybe you should go to ‘women only’ meetings for awhile.”

“Maybe Becky should be doing that!”

“Alyssa, he *tied her up* in front of that *seventeen*-year-old girl she hangs out with. Ugh, I’ve said too much.” I have no idea why this has become a super “hush-hush” incident.

“You can’t tell me who to fucking talk to!”

“Yes I can! I’m your sponsor, I know what’s best for you!”

Arguing with Strawberry is like arguing with a brick wall. I’ve been sober for one hundred thirty three days and still have trouble accepting that.

Apparently, Golay slept with Becky. It’s kind of fucked up because he’s in his thirties and she’s just eighteen, but that doesn’t seem to be the part that matters. Strawberry has told me four different stories during this conversation alone as to what he did in front of this seventeen-year-old ex-heroin addict slash massively bulimic chick Genevieve who has like, thirty days who Becky carries around like a doll everywhere she goes. I’m pretty sure Genevieve is a pathological liar and made up some stories to get attention, so I’m really confused as to why Strawberry is trying to “order” me to stay away from Golay.

“You’re not my mom, Strawberry! You cannot make these decisions for me!”

“Alyssa, do not talk to him and do not see him! That’s all.”

And like that, she hangs up on me. What the fuck does that even mean? I'm bawling now—totally sobbing all over myself. Golay is my go to. He's my adult male voice of reason. I don't think he raped Becky and made Genevieve watch (aka Probable Story Number Two). And it's extra fucked up because I know Golay has been friends with Strawberry's sponsor for a million years and some of this "direction" Strawberry's feeding me came straight from her sponsor.

I don't understand how someone can disallow another human being from seeing someone. I love Strawberry and all, but I love Golay, too (more, actually, most of the time). I'm not getting a real explanation and it's totally unfair. It's 1:40am. I should call Golay.

At times like these, A.A. is confusing. It's not just a matter of choosing one friend over another. It's this whole thing of loyalty. Do I owe it to my sponsor to stick with her? Is she replaceable? I'm a little less than two months shy of six months, meaning I'll be able to do my fourth step soon. It also means that school starts in a week or two and I should be surrounding myself with friends, not losing them as quickly as possible. And since I don't get another chip until I reach six months, I think I might need even *more* motivation than usual to stick with everything.

Fuck it, I'm calling.

"Hello?" A sleepy voice asks. I'm already crying in response.

"Golay? Wh-why am I n-n-not allowed to ta-ta-talk to you?!" Right now I'm thankful for thick walls and parents who either sleep heavily or don't even want to know what's going on—basically, parents who leave me alone when I need to be left alone.

I'm sitting in my mom's office, chain smoking, clutching an ashtray from Reno, Nevada like it's a life or death situation, and sobbing into my cell phone. Yikes.

"What are you talking about Alyssa? Wait, first, take a deep breath. Then try to tell me what's going on." He sounds serious, which really makes me freak out more, but I try to control my breathing. It takes a few shudders, but I have it down fairly evenly.

"Okay... Strawberry called me... and I can't talk to you anymore." I figure it's easier to get it out in a short, vague burst.

"Oh? Hm... okay."

"What happened?!"

"Well, I have a feeling my name is getting tarnished a bit," he says calmly with a hearty chortle. Seriously. A chortle. "Don't worry about this, Alyssa. It'll all be cleared up by the morning. I can guarantee it's going to be cleared up."

"Golay! Come on! Put me on the same page!"

"You sure you want to know what happened?"

Yes. I'm sure. I'm desperate to hear another side of the story. I need for him to stay good—stay gold.

"Yeah, please tell me?" I hear a heavy sigh on the other end of the phone. He clearly doesn't think it's a good idea to tell me what went on, but I won. He's going to do it anyway.

"I've been seeing Becky—physically—lately." *Awesome, he's talking to me like he's my health teacher.*

"So you've been fucking?"

"Yeah, Al. We've been fucking," he spits out.

“Dude, c’mon. At least talk to me like I’m a person and not a *child*.”

“You *are* a child.” Zing.

“Come on, Golay. So you’ve been banging. Who the fuck cares?”

“You know that girl Genevieve?”

“Yeah, I heard she’s involved in this whole thing.”

Golay mutters something inaudible under his breath in response, then there’s another sigh.

“Alyssa, this is difficult for me to talk to you about.”

“*Why?*” I can feel myself acting petulant, but my gut reaction is hard to ignore.

“*Because*, Alyssa, Genevieve got undressed in the back of my truck and tried to get me to fuck her, too. And yeah, there *was* temptation there and I *did* kiss her and I feel fucking disgusting for it, but it happened. And *now* she is telling Strawberry and the like that I raped her and pissed on her and all sorts of weird fucked up shit.”

I’m battling relief and nausea. This is the guy who has told countless eighteen and nineteen year olds to get the hell away from me, and he kissed a seventeen year old. Oooh-kay.

It takes a moment to process. There’s an aspect of him that no longer feels safe. He’s become human.

“Um, that’s good that you didn’t sleep with her.”

“Not for lack of trying on her part. Alyssa, I think you should listen to Strawberry until I have this under control. Obviously, I’m going to need to have a conversation with Genevieve in front of other people and I’m going to have to have a chat with Becky, but I want you to know that you’re not in any danger and everything is going to be *fine*.”



“Okay.” It’s all I can manage to say.

“Goodnight, Alyssa. Get some sleep. You sound like you need it,” he says, hanging up.

It’s not as bad as it could be. He could’ve fucked Genevieve. That would be a bad situation. That would be creepy. But he-said-she-said shit is awful to be involved in. I think about Max and what he said about me and Eli and how he just mixed and matched information from both of our stories to get an idea of what went on between us. It’s the first time I’ve thought about those boys since school got out. Against my better judgment, I light another cigarette with the end of the one I have burning and stub the burning one into the ashtray. I’ll feel it in my chest in the morning, but I need the vice right now. I need to have some time to process this evening.

My head hurts from crying and smoking. I want nothing more than to just leave the house and take a walk right now, but it’s been ages since I last snuck out of my house and I’m not really down to potentially getting caught and having to deal with forming some kind of trust with my folks all over again.

“God, grant me the serenity,” I start out loud, closing my eyes. I finish the prayer silently and exhale a huge cloud of smoke. “This is out of my hands,” I say, as I stub out my cigarette and get up to go to my room.

It’s true. The whole situation is out of my hands. I have to wait it out, let Strawberry and Golay try to work it out, and see what happens. I can make my own choices and it takes making those decisions to find out what the repercussions are.

## Chapter Forty

I didn't want to push my parents for my birthday this year. Since I've been such a pain in the ass, I asked for a hairbrush and a new cell phone. That was it. Considering our usual birthday bonanzas, I figured it would be a much smaller affair than usual, and we could really dedicate more of the morning to spending time together. Since Nick's been back at school for the past few weeks, tensions have eased in the household. College students are apparently huge jackasses. They eat all the food, take the car all the time, and leave their shit all over the place. I've never tripped over wayward pairs of shoes so many times in my life.

Besides, Nick barely said two words to me all summer except "stop smoking so close to my window" (which he said nearly every day when I was, for the record, smoking on the opposite side of the house from his bedroom). He mostly just glared at me and sidestepped me like I have some contagious disease. So it's nice that it's back to just being me and my parents.

The house is actually empty right now and I feel borderline Molly Ringwald in *Sixteen Candles* as no one woke me up to celebrate my existence, but a text message from my mom asking if I wanted a hot vanilla latte or an ice blended with my breakfast is reassuring. It's the first day of Fall and the morning fog is a bit heavier than its been lately, so I go with the latte option. Christmas, birthdays, and every once in a blue, we have bagels and coffee for breakfast. I have never been more pumped at the prospect of a freshly baked sesame seed circle with a good schmear in my life. I'm fucking *starving*.

And really, I can't be feeling *too* sorry for myself. My inbox is flooded with birthday messages from school people, softball people, AA people—I feel like people

consciously made the choice to click my name on the screen and type out thirteen letters and an exclamation point. I have a few text messages, too, which is nice. Athena called me, Strawberry didn't. I'm not sure if she will. It's early and it's a weekend—I didn't really expect much—but I thought my own sponsor would've called me by now.

“Al?” I hear my dad yell out from downstairs.

“Yeah, Pop?” I yell back, moving to the balcony of the staircase.

“When mom comes back, we'll do your birthday. I have some thing to take care of before then, okay?”

“Okay, Pop. Sounds good,” I say, as I turn back to go into my room. It's definitely time for a smoke.

“Hey Al, one more thing,” he calls out.

“Yeah, Pop?”

“Happy sixteenth birthday, Stotchkie!” He has the warmest smile on his face I think I've ever seen. In the light, it looks like he could have tears in his eyes, but that's just dramatic.

“Thanks, Dad.”

I decide rather than trekking into the foggy backyard, I'll just sit in my mom's office and smoke. As I take each drag, I imagine seeing my mom rolling up down the street in a brand new car with my name on it. I know it's not going to happen.

My dad took me to eight hundred different car lots in the greater Los Angeles area over the last two months to have me test drive different vehicles. New, used, whatever—we literally drove every available car in L.A. I decided my dream car would be a brand new Jetta, but I'd also be into a Subaru Outback or a Ford Focus. There was a pretty

sweet used Jeep Cherokee that looked kind of old school and badass, but my Dad said a ten-year-old S.U.V was probably not a great plan if I wanted to get more than a year or two out of a vehicle.

So every time I blink, I see a silver Jetta coming down the street, until I actually see my mom's car careening down the block at an ungodly speed. It's bagel time.

"A little help?" My mom yells out at the bottom of the steps. Thank God my dad responded with such speed. As a daughter, it's my moral obligation to assist my mom at the drop of the hat (otherwise I have to suffer the consequences and the guilt trips).

However, as birthday girl, I shouldn't have to do shit.

A few minutes pass and I hear my mom's voice echo through the house.

"Al! Come on down!"

My mom didn't stop at bagels. She had to go overboard. She got fruit salad and fresh squeezed juice and a bouquet of flowers and balloons and all sorts of other amazing stuff. The kitchen looks a million times brighter than usual.

"Aw, Ma! What's all this?"

"Happy sixteenth birthday, Alyssa!" She gives me a huge hug that nearly knocks the breath out of me. I kind of want to start crying. I'm not used to having this much niceness at once.

My dad comes into the kitchen from the back door and looks kind of surprised to see us there. He exchanges a glance with my mom that I don't understand, so I ignore completely.

"So, breakfast?" He says, trying to change the moment.

“Ah, yes, some bagels and schmear, and a little lox, maybe?” I say, mimicking the voice of my Great Aunt Sybil (an über-New York überJew with an accent to match).

There’s laughter; there’s warmth in the kitchen.

We sit down at the table. I’m going to town on my bagel and latte and fruit salad. It’s fucking delicious. My parents see that my mouth is full of food and take that golden moment to start talking about me.

“Alyssa, we want you to know that we’re so proud of you. You have done so many positive things in the last five months and change. We don’t have to ask you about your homework as much, you call us and let us know where you are and when you’ll be home—you’re *actually* sober. It’s incredible, Peachula,” my mom says, beaming.

“We don’t have to worry about you all the time anymore,” my dad adds. “We get fewer calls home from your teachers. For lack of a better phrase, you’re getting your shit together. I second what mom said. We’re incredibly proud of you and we love you so so much.”

I’m speechless.

To put it into perspective, my ninth grade English teacher actually called my dad and told him he didn’t tell me he was proud of me often enough. This is not business as usual in my house. My parents don’t abuse me, they’re actually nothing if not extremely loving, but they, as my dad has explained to me before, think I’m well aware of my accomplishments and they don’t find it necessary to constantly compliment for doing things I should be doing. So to hear both of my parents not only tell me they love me but that they’re proud of me is like—fuck, there are no words. Happy birthday to me, indeed. I don’t even need presents.

I say the only things that come to mind. “Thanks guys, I love you both, too.”

They both get up and hug me. I’m borderline tears, but am somehow keeping it together. One more tender moment, though, and it’s waterworks time.

We move the party into the living room, as per usual for birthdays. I blow out seventeen candles (one for good luck) and we make jokes about how cake is not part of a balanced breakfast. My dad is filming all my awkward with a handheld HD camera he got himself for his last birthday. He asks me the silly questions home movies are made of and I can’t help but laugh at all the corniness.

I get the cell phone, a hairbrush, a gift card to Sephora, and a fake gift card to get me “clothing that don’t have holes all through them.” It doesn’t end there. The family-tradition-birthday-present-that-just-won’t-die is apparently hiding behind my ear.

Allegedly, my mom’s dad started it when she and her siblings were kids. Because they were poor, they made birthdays more fun by having a scavenger hunt for the last present. There are four or five rhyming clues that you have to decipher that drag you all over the house. It’s meant to be fun, at least. Nick and I used to do them together on each others’ birthdays when we were kids.

The first clue brings me into the laundry room and I actually have to pull a piece of paper out of the lint trap. It’s kind of gross. The second takes me all the way upstairs and into the mask of one of my mom’s Kachina dolls. I feel my heart collapse a little as I remove the clue. I almost sold one last year—I would’ve made about two grand—but couldn’t quite bring myself to do that to my mom. I’m pretty sure she never found out, but the pangs of guilt coursing through me as I walk away from the carvings feels like enough punishment.

“Al!!” I hear coming from downstairs.

“Yeah?”

“Remember, you have to read them in front of us!” My mom yells back.

I race down the steps. If the next clue brings me back upstairs, I may punch myself in the face.

“Okay, so, what does it say?” My dad asks eagerly.

*“You’re growing so fast, our little Alyssa. Soon you’ll be in college, and then we will miss-ya. Today you’re sixteen, and that’s super, too and to celebrate this day, we’ll give you one last clue: Though not used much these days (yeah, it’s a little “old school-a”) here’s where you’d play one-on-one: someone else V. Peachula.”*

I try to get past the cheesy rhyming to figure out what my mom was talking about. It’s always my mom who writes the clues. Even on her birthday, I’m pretty sure my dad just recycles the clues she’s written.

“Do you have it?” My dad asks. He is beyond giddy. It’s too funny.

“Um...”

“You know, one-on-one,” my mom adds, like it’s an extra hint.

“The basketball hoop in the alley?”

“We’ll have to see, won’t we?” My mom says.

My parents shoot each other an excited glance. I half-run out the back door to the alley.

Holy shit.

Covered in a giant banner that says “Happy Birthday, Alyssa” with about fifty exclamation points is a brand-fucking-new Volkswagen Jetta. Silver. The exact car I

wanted. The car I imagine taking road trips to San Francisco and San Diego senior year in. It is *sick* and it is *mine*.

And that's it. That was the one more sweet moment I needed. I am *sobbing* with joy—and my dad is catching it all on camera. It will probably be sent to my brother and my grandparents and my aunts and uncles and I will be mocked incessantly for the rest of my life for being a crybaby but I don't even care. There is a *car* in the alley and it is *mine*.

There is no way I thought I'd have a car six months ago. There's no way I thought I'd have a car *this morning* but at least it makes a little more sense. There is a shit ton of pay off in sobriety. Karma is totally on my side.

Aside from this completely undeserved shower of generosity from my parents, shit at school has been going well so far, too. Granted, I've only been back for two weeks or whatever, but it's awesome. People have been nicer to me. I'm actually ahead in my classes. Junior year is going to be amazing. I can feel it.



## Chapter Forty-One

She asked where I wanted to do this—the world was my oyster, I could choose anywhere in the world (within reason)—and I chose the beach somewhere between the Venice boardwalk and the Santa Monica pier. I’ve been working on my fourth step for nearly a month. It’s funny because in the book, they give you an example of what a personal inventory should look like, but that inventory was made in like, the fifties, so the examples are written like lines from *Casablanca*. Things don’t affect you financially, they affect your “pocketbook.” Shit like that.

I knew the obvious resentments off the bat: my dad, my mom, my brother, Bernadette, Eli, that music teacher guy, Bobby, Tracy, Devin, etc. People who got under my skin when I was using (and still do now). I realize as I watch Strawberry read over my inventory that I forgot to include her and boy do I have some fucking resentments against that woman.

Besides that whole Golay friendship scare thing (turns out Genevieve’s a big liar—and now my sponsor-sister, apparently) a couple of months ago and not calling me on my birthday last month, she also has a generally disregard for everything that comes out of my mouth and a complete lack of attention directed towards me. I get that this is kind of a bullshit issue to have with someone and really all I need to say is “hey, I need you to pay more attention to me,” but I expect more from a sponsor. I expect some level of guidance and understanding and if you can’t offer that to each of your sponsees, maybe you shouldn’t have four of them, you know?

I don’t really want to fix that right now. One of the things they say about the fourth step is that it’s ongoing. This isn’t the last personal inventory I’ll take.

Apparently, a little later down the line, I have to do one *just* about people I've hooked up with. How does that sound like a good idea?

The other thing I heard was that some people get to just print up a worksheet off the Internet and use that to do their fourth step. That sounds so fucking easy. I made a grid on a piece of paper based on the überarchaic list in chapter five of the Big Book. And to be honest, I didn't understand half of the shit they were talking about. Based on the look on Strawberry's face, I *really* missed the mark on some of it.

"What about your *security* Alyssa?"

"Yeah, I saw that in the book. What does that mean?"

"You know, like your sense of security—your fears. Your essential Alyssa-ness."

"Oh, yeah, I guess they all kind of affect that." I scribble the word "security" into the "affects my..." column. I realize that I used the word "effects" instead of "affects" and Strawberry doesn't notice and I'm pretty sure I'm judging her even more than normal out of nervousness. Sharing these resentments is making me feel naked, and not in the good way.

We go through each row and column with a fine-toothed comb. The "My Part" and "Why" columns are still empty and I'm terrified for the moment when we start filling those out together. I don't understand what part I could have in some of these resentments. I didn't do anything—shit was done *to* me.

"You forgot someone."

I stare at her blankly. She knows I secretly hate her. The emergency alarm starts blaring in my head.

"Who? Who did I forget?" Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe she 's just baiting me.

“You. You forgot to write yourself.”

Come again? What does that even *mean*?

“That wasn’t in the book.” I should’ve learned in the last six months that arguing with this woman is a fruitless effort. Sometimes, I just need to keep my mouth shut.

“Alyssa, you need to read between the lines.”

I’m ninety-eight percent sure she’s throwing out a cliché for the hell of it right now.

“Sorry, ok, I’ll add me.”

“I’ll wait.”

My inner crazy comes out on the page in full force. Under what and why (aka “The Resentment” column), I write: let myself get into fucked up relationships, never good enough for myself, think I’m secure when I’m not, don’t let myself keep a safe distance from people, have unreasonable expectations for myself, lie to everyone, cry too much, don’t respect myself or others, get into paranoid delusions, spend too much money.

And just when I thought tears wouldn’t be making an appearance today, they start raining from my face and hit the page at full force. I’m not excited to hold such a judgmental mirror up, but at the same time even the simple act of writing down those issues I have with myself removes a heavy weight from my shoulders.

It takes hours to do my fourth and fifth steps. Literally hours. The sun is actually on the verge of setting as we’re on the beach. I have smoked almost half a pack of cigarettes, which is pretty intense, and have learned *way* too much about what I’m

actually afraid of. As it turns out, when you hold something against someone else, it generally means you have some kind of fear that they're tapping into. Who knew?

Apparently feeling like Bernadette is self-righteous and dramatizes everything actually means that I have a fear of loneliness and abandonment and rejection. I mean, it isn't so mathematical as that, but that's the jist. Everything means something else. According to what I've scribbled down in the last couple of hours, I have a huge problem being dishonest with my feelings. Maybe that's why I can't write Strawberry's name down in front of her.

Here's what I'm really resenting about looking at my resentments: they're all about me. Really, at the root of things, these are all things *I* have to change about *myself*. How lame is that? And I can't even argue it. Strawberry and I have sifted through every scenario I can dream up involving everyone listed on my fourth step, and there are no two ways about it: it all falls on me.

So now I'm faced with this huge responsibility. This is what I've been rushing to get to for the last six months? I can just imagine all the apologies I'll have to make in the future and all the self-restraint I'll have to use when reacting. Part of the prospect angers me, like my very essence will disappear. And then there's the memory of knocking Eli out cold.

Nowadays, it's harder to remember what it was like—what I was like—before sobriety, even with a list of names and resentments and issues in front of me. But I was the one who needed the change. I need to embrace these new ideas because the old ones weren't working.

The old way never worked.

Well, here's to conquering a fear of what looks like everything.

## Chapter Forty-Two

My car's in the shop so I'm on the bus to Strawberry's house. We're about to do my sixth and seventh steps. I like how the middle steps all go together. It feels like the months of waiting make more sense when you get two done at a time. Plus, step four and five kind of start step six so half of the step was done three months ago when I was working on the last two steps with Strawberry. When I say it out loud, this shit sounds way more complicated than it actually is.

I'm not really thinking about the step work so much, though. I'm thinking about the meeting I went to last night. I went to Ohio Street. It was super business as usual, except I realized I saw three kids I'd partied with in the room and it made me feel weird, almost like they had crossed over from one world to another. They weren't school people or people I regularly used with, but I had still *used* with them and they were at *my* meeting.

I'm on the fence with this one. There's some comfort in it, though. It's like hey, I wasn't the only freak show involved in my using. There were other people who were using for equally dumb reasons or using more excessively than other people. It almost makes me feel normal.

I don't know. Maybe it's because second semester just started up again and I'm starting to feel normal at school. Maybe too many things are going right and it's throwing me off. I mean, earlier today, I told this kid at school who I've known forever that I was sober and she was like "oh I *wondered* why you seemed so much more put together!" I must be doing something right when someone who doesn't spend time with me notices that I'm getting my shit together.

This is actually the second time I'm going over my character defects and definitions with Strawberry. The first time I included "alcoholic" as a character defect and Strawberry had a fucking heart attack over it. Luckily that was the second word so we didn't go through the whole list before she made me redo it. I don't think being an alcoholic is anything to be proud of but apparently Strawberry does. Whatever. I guess because it's something that's not really in my control, it doesn't count. Dishonest people can try their hand at honesty. Alcoholics can't start drinking again and not fuck up.

Most of the words on this list she made me write down on my fourth step. I don't know. Sometimes, I feel like she's just *judging* me. Like, I'm the black sheep of the sponsorship family, which is particularly fucked up when you consider that she started sponsoring Genevieve *after* the whole Golay debacle (she "needed guidance").

Right now, I'm kind of judging Strawberry, though. I'm in the elevator going up to her—I mean her parents' (even though she's in her mid-twenties)—gaudy condo. She makes tons of mistakes and makes some totally bad decisions. She's human, I get it, but it's hard to listen to her when she has so many issues. Then again, my character defects list is two and a half pages long.

I knock on the door. She answers, but she's on the phone and in barely-there pajamas. I'm mildly uncomfortable, but that's business as usual.

I wait in the living room for her to get off the phone.

And I wait.

And I wait.

An hour has passed. I have shit to do. I'm angry.

She comes out of her bedroom. I have waited for a grand total of one hour and seventeen minutes.

“Okay, ready to go?” She asks me like nothing has happened.

“No, I’m not fucking ready to go!”

“What’s wrong, Alyssa?” *Is she fucking serious?*

“I was waiting for you for over an hour. That is completely unacceptable.” Who’s being dishonest with feelings, now?

“Alyssa, I had things to take care of with Becky and Gen and Jenna and my own sponsor.” She says this *way* too calmly. I go through about four thousand different reactions in my head before coming to something logical.

“This is my time. We scheduled this time to do my step work. You could’ve texted them and told them you’d call them later. Plus, you never call *me* I always have to call *you* so that’s complete bullshit on a whole ‘nother level. You have too much shit on your plate, Strawberry! Listen, I really appreciate you helping me through the first nine months of my sobriety, but this,” I gesture, waving frantically in the air, “isn’t working for me.”

I just fired my sponsor.

“Do you want to finish doing your sixth and seventh steps since you’re here and you have them?”

“What are the chances my new sponsor will make me redo all the steps I’ve done so far?”

“Well, it’s about fifty-fifty. Step work is an ongoing process. This is just the first time you’re going through them. To put it in perspective, I’m in my fourth round. So



there's a pretty fair chance that any sponsor you move on to will simply have you finish the last five steps and then have you restart them their way."

This is the first time I'm informed that this isn't the only way to do the steps. Thank fucking God. If I had to wait another few months between each step again, I was going to have an aneurysm.

"Well," I soften. "Then yeah, let's do this."

We work through the list. She gives me advice on how to stop procrastinating, how to say "no" instead of being a people-pleaser, how to feel more comfortable with my feelings. For the first time since she's started sponsoring me, I feel like Strawberry is listening to me and actually being helpful. I stand by my decision but regret not being more direct earlier. I feel like I could've saved myself a lot of trouble by standing up for myself earlier in the relationship.

As I leave the apartment, we hug. No hard feelings, that kind of thing.

The second my feet are on the ground floor, I call Athena.

"Hey, wanna be my new sponsor?"

"Generally people say 'how are you' before launching into something like that," she says back, laughing.

"C'mon, please?"

"Yeah, yeah. Okay. I'll sponsor you. What step are you on?"

"I just finished my seventh."

"Okay, are you free tomorrow?"

"Yeah, why?"

“Meet me at Coffee Bean on Main and Ashland at one. We’ll start your eighth and ninth.”

“You mean I don’t have to wait three months to start it?” I am shocked.

“Are you fucking kidding? You should be nearly ready to have sponsees at this point. You have what, nine months? You should be finished with your steps by now.”

I love this woman.

“Okay, cool. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

She hangs up. En route to the bus, I feel a sense of pride. I stood up for myself and what I believed to be right and it worked in my favor. I get that the outcome won’t always be in my favor, but if it happens to be every once in a while, I can be okay with that.

## Chapter Forty-Three

Athena and I are smoking cigarettes outside the Coffee Bean. She shoves a piece of lined paper in front of me.

“I’m not going to make you redo your first seven steps.”

“Thanks. Appreciate it.” Thank God. That was pretty much my biggest fear in changing sponsors. And now I’m staring at the piece of paper. I like her directness as a sponsor, but I’m totally freaking out even though all I have to do right now is write down a list of names. I don’t have to apologize to them yet and I don’t have to write out what kind of amends I need to make to them or what happened. There are three columns and I think that’s what’s intimidating me. The “what happened” part—having to relive my mistakes.

“Just do it. You don’t have to think about it so much, Alyssa.”

Essentially, the eighth step involves copying the names off your fourth step and then adding the people you affected who you don’t resent and voila, you have a list of people to apologize to in some way, shape or form.

My list is long. I cover the front and back of the first page and she silently hands me another sheet of paper. I’m leaving a lot of space for the “what happened” part, but I feel like it’ll all be filled up soon enough.

It’s interesting looking at the completed list because I’m pretty sure I’ve tapped into parts of my memory that haven’t seen the light of day in quite some time. Like the time I went on the ski trip and stole a bunch of food from Big Bear Mountain because I was high and didn’t feel like paying eight fucking dollars for a baked potato. So

apparently I need to make some money and send them a check for an approximate amount. There's that chick who told everyone that I lost my virginity before I actually did who I owe an amends to. I stole some weed and cigarettes and money from her. I'm also fairly certain I called her by some rather unpleasant names before. That one's going to be fun.

Then there are the amends that I find *really* strange. Athena explained to me that there are some amends that you make either to yourself or just do in practice. Like, the cheating thing. In addition to apologizing to Devin and some other guys I dated and cheated on, I not only have to apologize to them, but also try to not cheat ever again. That's what she means by "in practice." And then with that music teacher, it's actually an amends to myself (which is awesome, because when I found out you essentially have to make amends to everyone on your fourth step, I just about shat myself) like I'm forgiving myself for my naïveté and allowing myself to move on. I'm not quite there yet, but that's how it was explained to me.

I choose to make amends Devin first. I want badly to get over him and to start my amend-making with someone who is familiar with sobriety, so I only get the judgment of what I did to him in the past rather than the combination of that *and* being freakishly sober at sixteen.

When I first got sober, I took all the pictures off my walls. I took numbers off my bulletin board. I basically removed my past life. It was too painful to wake up and see it around me every day. I didn't throw anything out—I'm pretty sure I'm completely incapable of throwing things out—but I vaguely remember tossing everything into a

manilla folder in the back of my closet. The only place I could think of finding the number to the sober living house would be in that folder.

The number is exactly where I thought it would be. I wrote it on a note card two Februaries ago. It's in crayon and there are hearts drawn around it. I take a moment and think about those shirts they sell—the ones that say “I don't date 818”—as I dial the number of Devin's former sober living house into my phone.

It's been over a year since I last saw him—about a year and a half. And part of me is secretly praying for him to be single and sober and that same part of me wants him to ask me back out and for us to live happily ever after. And then there's the part of me that's based in reality and knows that he probably won't even live there anymore.

“Hello...? *Hello...*?” I realize I'm zoning out and not responding to the young sounding voice on the other line.

“Hey, yeah, hi. Does Devin still live there?”

“Um, Kevin?”

“No, I'm looking for *Dev-in*. With a ‘D,’ as in ‘dog.’” I say, sharply. I forgot I'm calling one of the last payphones in the world and the receiver's seen better days. I remember that phone. Sometimes when “house groupies” (aka girls who were trying to bang the dudes in the house but were generally kind of ugly) would call repeatedly, the boys would send me to the phone and I'd have to explain to the ladies that the gents didn't want to be bothered anymore. Except I'm using the word “explain” loosely—I was an outright bitch to those poor girls. But I remember when they'd try to cuss me out in response and I could only hear half of what'd they said if they didn't enunciate.

I hear muffled yelling in the background.

“Hold up, yo.”

“Okay, cool. No worries.” *Ohfuckohfuckohfuckohfuck.*

“Hello?”

Pause. Deep breaths. Calm the fuck down, Alyssa.

“Hey,” I melt into the receiver.

“Who is this?” Annnnd... back to earth.

“Oh hey, yeah. Um Dev? Yeah, this is Alyssa.”

“Alyssa? Seriously?”

“Yeah, seriously.”

“Oh man, I thought you were my *girlfriend* calling!” Well, there goes *that* plan.

“What the fuck?! How the hell are you? What are you doing *calling* me?”

I need to do this. The ninth step asks me to do a simple task: to make direct amends to those I’ve harmed as long as it doesn’t injure them or others. I picked him first because he’d be the easiest amend. I’m supposed to return order to my life by making amends to people. I look at the piece of paper shaking in my hand.

“So um, yeah. I’ve been sober for about ten months. And I’m doing my ninth step. And, um, you’re on it, so I wanted to call and make amends for some things.” I have to say, I’m digging the fact that I don’t have to explain what the ninth step is to him. “I just want to apologize for how I treated you when we dated and even afterwards. I was condescending towards you and treated you like you were less important than I was. Um, also I wanted to apologize for cheating on you. That was wrong, too. I’m sorry if anything I did affected you and I just wanted to apologize.” End ramble. There’s a long

pause on the other end followed by that distinguishable and infectious laugh I want to wrap myself up in.

“You’re *sober*? Really?” This was not the response I was expecting, but I’ll go with it.

“Yeah, dude. No joke. Really really.”

“Man, Alyssa. I can’t imagine you getting to the point of needing to get *sober*, but if that’s where your at, I mean, good on ya. Um, fuck. Well, apology certainly accepted. I never really noticed that you were condescending to me or anything like that, but I mean, thanks? Oh fuck, someone needs to use the phone.” I ignore this last bit.

“So, yeah, do you want to hang out sometime?” The red flags and lights are blaring in my head screaming things like ‘too soon!’ and ‘what the fuck are you doing, Alyssa?!’ but it’s worth a shot.

“Um, Al, what we had a couple years ago was cool and everything, but I have a girlfriend now and I just don’t think we’re interested in the same things, you know? I’ll always think of you as a sweetheart. You’re a good girl, Alyssa. I’m glad you’re getting your shit together. You are far too smart to waste your life away.”

“Thanks, Dev. Hey listen, in a totally platonic and non-creepy way, I love you. Thanks for always being so fucking nice to me.”

“Love you, too, Al. Good luck with everything.”

“You too.”

We hang up. I take the deepest inhale followed by the deepest exhale of my life. This is what closure feels like, and my friends, it feels fucking brilliant. I feel five pounds lighter.

More importantly, my fear of making amends is gone. That conversation with Devin, though I was sad it was the last we'll ever have, broke the seal. And yeah, maybe the rest of my amends won't go as smoothly, but they will all point me into the direction of starting anew, and really, that's all I can ask right now.



## Chapter Forty-Four

“Can I talk to you?” I feel strong as the words leave my lips. This is not the shell of a person who made a similar attempt nearly a year ago—this is the new ten-and-a-half months sober Alyssa. This is the Alyssa who is ready to be wrong and admit it. She senses the change and her eyes soften.

“Yeah, sure. When?”

“Are you busy after school?”

“No, I have time.”

“Want to meet at the southwest corner after school then?”

“Sure, Alyssa. I’ll see you then.”

I actually fake a doctor’s appointment to leave my calculus class ten minutes early to make sure I’m not making her wait at the corner. However, when I get there, she’s approaching from the other side of campus. Apparently, she had the same idea. At least now I get the feeling she’s missed me, too.

“Wanna go down to the beach?”

I did my fifth step on the beach—I figure that makes it a cathartic environment. It’s neutral territory. She nods. We walk. It’s empty. It’s a bit foggy today—it’s the end of February, not really beach season. We perch on a short wall adjacent to the biking path and both move our cigarettes from our bags to our hoodie pockets, each lighting one.

I break the silence.

“I’m sorry, Berns. I’m sorry for everything. For things I remember and things I don’t. I’m sorry for being a terrible friend. I can’t change the past, and I can’t control

how you feel about me or what happened between us or anything. The thing is, when I looked at why *I* was mad at *you*, I discovered that I act on my fear and insecurities and that's something I'm working on changing. I've been sober now for ten and a half months—since the day after your birthday—and I've learned a lot in that time and I'm not trying to make things go back to what they were because obviously that wasn't working, but I thought our relationship in its purest form was worth salvaging. At the very least, I just wanted to apologize for hurting you and being a shitty person towards you.”

I've run out of words. After that bout of word vomit—some of it was just rambling—I stop abruptly and watch for Bernadette's reaction. Her eyes are narrowed and she's taking deep drags of her cigarette. I feel like time has stopped completely.

She sighs.

“Okay. Apology accepted. Actually, someone told me recently that they heard you were sober. My mom showed me your grades from last semester, so I figured you'd gotten your shit together. Congrats.”

“I'm going to let your mom slide on that one. And, thanks.”

“Can we *please* be best friends again? There is *so* much weird stuff happening and I have *no one* to talk about it with!” I almost die laughing. Her reaction is amazing. After what happened when I called Devin and the horror stories I've heard about ninth steps gone awry, I'm brimming with excitement at her response.

We hug like the end of the world is coming, and resume our conversation like it's nothing.

“So what’s going on, lady?” I ask. It seems like she may have some interesting shit up her sleeve.

“Dude. You know how word on the street is Eli went to art school at the start of the year?” Yes, I’ve heard that. That was the craziest thing *ever*. When I got back to school in September, I was shocked to hear that both Max *and* Eli had been sent away to Idyllwild, an arts boarding school a couple of hours away.

The part I laughed at when I heard about it was the “art” bit. Neither of them struck me as artistic, unless you count trying to pass off music lyrics as your own poetry (a much-mocked hobby of Eli’s).

“Yeah? What *really* happened?”

“Well, Max went straight to art school. That part is true. I guess for music? I’m not sure. But Eli didn’t go to art school first.”

Oh, I know this punch line. I ask the question anyway.

“Where’d he go?”

“Rehab. Apparently, Eli liked Oxycontin a bit more than any of us knew.” I light up at the prospect of Eli being sober and going back to being friends with him and having a bond over sobriety, but Bernadette catches my excitement and quickly erases it. “I don’t think he’s *sober* like you. I think he’s just stopped popping pills. But how funny is that?”

“Hilarious. I was wondering where he was. I had heard the whole art school thing, but like, seriously? Rehab?”

“Seriously.”

Bernadette and I shoot the shit for a bit more, until the sun starts coming down over the water.

“Fuck, it’s time to get home,” I say, checking my phone. No one’s tried calling me—one of the benefits of being sober: trust. But I know that rolling up to the house after dinner is probably going to require more than “I was apologizing to Bernadette” as an explanation.

“Yeah, my mom will probably kill me when I get back.”

“I parked on your street, so we can walk over to your place together.”

“You’re driving now?”

“Yeah, man! I got a car for my birthday.”

“No shit!”

“Dude. That was like, six months ago. You *had* to have seen me,” I say, calling her bluff. I mean, not knowing the intricate details of my life is one thing. Not seeing me drive right by you is another completely. In fact, I’m pretty sure I’ve made eye contact with her while behind the wheel of the car.

“Yeah, okay. I have. You got me.”

We laugh and act stupid for the rest of the way to her block. After another bear hug, I get into my car and watch as she gets back into her house. I can almost hear her mom screaming at her as I start my Jetta and ride home.

## Chapter Forty-Five

“Okay, our next cake is for Alyssa for one year and it’s being given to her by her mom, dad, grandmother and Athena!”

I cannot believe I have a year today. I can’t believe I have a year *and* my grandma’s in town and my parents came out and I’m taking a cake. I’m beaming as I hear “happy birthday” being sung by a hundred people at once.

The four of them hold the cake in front of me and I blow out the single candle, making a wish for three hundred sixty-five more days of sobriety. My entourage goes back to their seats and I come up to the podium.

“Hi, I’m Alyssa, grateful addict and alcoholic.”

“Hi, Alyssa!” The crowd echoes back.

“Thank you to my mom, dad, grandma Rita, and wonderful sponsor Athena for giving me my first cake of the week. My grandmother has been supporting my grandfather through his sobriety for over twenty years and I’m incredibly grateful for the advice they have both given me over the last year.” Birthday cards, Christmas cards, St. Patrick’s Day cards—every card my grandparents have sent me in the last year have had little sayings and prayers relating to sobriety. “My parents are one hundred percent behind my sobriety and without them, I would not be in front of you today.” The crowd laughs. “No, but seriously, their support means the world to me. And Athena kicks my ass when it needs to be kicked and gives me big hugs when I need those, too. Guys, I’m sixteen years old. If I can get a year, you can, too. Just work the steps, follow direction, and have an open mind. Getting sober was the best thing I could’ve done for myself, and there’s no way I could do it alone. Thank you.”

I step down from the podium to hear a round of applause from the meeting. I'm met with words of congratulations from everyone en route to my seat. I feel untouchable right now.

"Thank you, Alyssa. We will now observe the seventh tradition and have a ten minute break for coffee," the meeting leader says.

"I'm going to go outside for a smoke," I tell my parents and grandma, who are excitedly talking to Athena.

I'm leaning against the wall of the church, having quite possibly the greatest cigarette of my life. There's a guy walking towards me who looks incredibly familiar.

"Hey, Alyssa, right?"

"Yeah, hi. How's it going?" He gestures for a lighter. I pass him mine out of my pocket.

"I'm Robert." He shakes my hand.

"Hey Robert." I swear I know this guy but from where?

"I just wanted to congratulate you on your year. I've been trying to put a year together for a while. I keep getting close and then, well—"

"Don't worry about it, man. Just keep trying, you know?"

"Yeah, cool. Hey, it's really awesome that you're so young and have so much time. That's pretty amazing. Your parents must be proud."

"Yeah, they are."

"Well, keep it up. Nice meeting you, Alyssa."

“You, too, Robert. Good luck with everything.” He winks at me and walks away. In that wink, I realize I have like, ten of that guy’s movies on DVD. I kind of want to run back after him and ask for his autograph and maybe bang him, but I bask in the awesomeness of being complimented by someone who’s accomplished so much. I hope he gets his shit together—he was way nice.

After the meeting, my grandma and my parents take me to the Ben and Jerry’s on Main Street and I get some Chunky Monkey ice cream in a chocolate dipped sprinkle cone. My grandma gives me a card she apparently bought at the Twelve and Twelve store in Westwood. It’s a store specifically for sobriety gifts, so the card is perfectly suited for wishing someone well in their abstinence.

The rest of the week ends up being just as rewarding. Not only do I get to take a cake at my home group (and *everyone* gives me a cake—Martinia, Golay, Athena, Strawberry—*everyone*) but people bring me gifts. Strawberry gave me a crystal necklace with a “1” carved into it, Athena, who used to be a sous chef, baked me a German chocolate cake *and* gave me a metal one year chip on a key ring, Martinia gave me a bouquet of flowers, and Golay gave me a gift that blew the rest of them out of the water. He gave me a silver case with a compass inside. Engraved on the top of the case it says:

(ONE)

OPEN IN CASE OF EMERGENCY.

HOME IS NEVER FAR AWAY.

LOVE, JOHN.

I just feel so complete. I feel loved. I feel like I'm part of this program and I do have a home in A.A. A year. I cannot believe it. I can't even remember where I was a year ago. I mean, I have a vague recollection. I know that this is the part in the movie of my life where there would be a montage of awful images like me being friendless and puking my guys out and sobbing while smoking a shit ton of pot, but I guess I just never want to be back there again. I guess that's the part of my mind that's blocking out those images of the past.

I'm sitting in the backyard, having a smoke, spinning the charm on my necklace around and trying to find due North on my compass. It doesn't get better than this.



## Chapter Forty-Six

It's day 376, I think.

I have a fever. It's fucking spring break and I have a fever. I win at life. This is the first time I've been sick in sobriety. My cell phone has been ringing for an hour but I don't have the energy to answer it. I keep lifting my arm up with my mind—trying to will it to have the power to pick up the phone. I look at the phone. Ten missed calls. Six from Strawberry. Four from Athena. No voicemail. Weird.

My mom comes in to check on me. She's armed with a gallon of orange juice, a wet wash cloth, and a bottle of aspirin.

"Al, your phone has been ringing." Thank you, captain obvious.

"I know, Ma. I just don't want to talk. I feel like death."

"Can you shut it off? It's echoing through the whole house and it's annoying."

I can't come up with a witty response, so I give her a half-nod. She leaves me in my nonfunctional state and I strain to grasp the phone. In mid-movement, the phone rings again. I grab at it to turn it off and make the mistake of answering it, instead. It's Athena. She's sobbing.

I get that adults are allowed to cry. I have always understood that. But, there's still something about it that makes me incredibly uncomfortable.

"Athena?" I can barely form the words.

"What the fuck? Why didn't you answer the phone?" She's a strange kind of angry right now. I am far too ill to deal with this.

"I'm sick," I whisper.

"Genevieve is dead."

I'm so stuffed up that I'm not entirely sure I just heard her correctly.

"What?"

"You know how Genevieve moved into that apartment by herself not too long ago and everyone was worried because she stopped calling Strawberry or Becky or myself as much anymore? And her eating disorder was starting to come back and things were getting fucked up?" Athena is speaking so quickly I can barely understand her. Each word is being forced out by a hyperventilated breath. I've never experienced this side of her crazy before.

"Mm-hmm."

"She overdosed on heroin. She was dead for three days before anyone figured it out."

I'm barely functional and can't really process information so I say the first thing that comes to mind. Usually honesty is the best policy, unless it sounds like this:

"Saw that coming a mile away. You didn't think she'd stay sober, did you?"

It comes out sleepy and sick, but I can feel the meanness. I can feel how harsh it must sound to my sobbing mentor on the other end of the line.

And she stops crying completely.

"Whatever, Alyssa. Bye."

I'm weaving in and out of sleep and having weird nightmares filled with visions of this extraordinarily sick seventeen-year-old girl from Chicago. I see her frail ninety-pound body bloated and bruised and cold on the floor of her one bedroom apartment in the valley that I went to once a month or two ago. When I went there, we watched the movie *Kids* from the early 1990s and I couldn't sleep for a week.

I wanted to be her friend, but I couldn't. I just felt sorry for her. She was a pathological liar and her addiction was far stronger than she was and it ate her alive. I think she really was doomed for failure. That doesn't mean it was okay to say that to Athena, but I can't really handle that situation right now.

This shit is real.

That's what Genevieve's death tells me.

This. Shit. Is. Real.

She went to take one more hit and that was it. Her life went from happening to over like that. This shit is serious. She's probably not the last person I will lose while in sobriety. Her addiction was fucking strong. Who knows how strong mine could get if I fed it?

I let my fever take me back into nightmares. It feels like breaking into an ecstasy high and I try to will my eyes into snapping open and making everything feel good, but things keep feeling shitty and sad and painful instead.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

I can't believe what I said to Athena yesterday. I mean, there are dick moves and then there are *dick moves*. I think telling her a death was expected when she was sobbing was probably the latter. I think I'll give her a day or so to cool down before I try apologizing to her, but I know I was definitely in the wrong on that one.

I'm feeling better today, but still a bit feverish. This chick Stephanie—an old friend of mine that I've reconnected with since I've been sober—is having a little kickback at her house and I told her I'd be over come hell or high water. She's a couple of grades ahead of me so my older friends who graduated after my freshman year are going to come over to her house, so it's not really an every day occurrence situation. She also happened to go to another school during my sophomore year, so she dodged a relationship with super-crazytown-Alyssa. Translation: I didn't even owe her an amends when I got sober.

Things are good when I get to Stephanie's house. No one is drinking or smoking pot or anything, they're just there to see one another, so it's a really easy environment to be in. Plus, Stephanie's family has the most comfortable couch in their living room I have ever had the pleasure of collapsing in. So, I really just sit in the corner of the sunken in couch, drinking out of a Nalgene bottle and pretending to be the Godfather. I don't get up; people come to me instead.

Things aren't just good, they're great.

Until I hear a voice.

Every bone in my body, every red blood cell, every particle shudders at the all-too-familiar laugh that comes through the front door of the house.

“Hey guys! Eli’s here!”

I’m not ready for this. I know I have over a year, I’ve done most of the steps, I have the tools, but I am not ready to make amends to Eli. I’m not ready to be in the same room as him. I’m not ready to hear his voice. I’m not ready to see his face. I’m not ready for him.

I sink farther into the couch and try to become a chameleon. I’m fairly convinced I blend in with the brown leather. Eli enters the room with a “friend from art school” whose name is François or something ridiculous like that and acts like I’m not even here. I’m totally into that right now.

After a bit of time passes, he goes outside for a cigarette and my psychological fight or flight kicks in. I can either try to make amends to him now, or be a coward and bank on never having to see him again. Will making my amends to Eli injure him or me? Probably not. In reality, I have no excuse.

I pray quickly in my mind that I’m making the right decision.

I get up. I go outside. I light a cigarette. He’s just lighting his. We have a good five minutes together. On various websites and in the Big Book and Twelve and Twelve they suggest actually planning out times to make proper amends to people. I’m sixteen. I’m not making apology dates with people. They will laugh in my face at the suggestion. I will take the opportunities as they come.

“Hey.” I am cool as a fucking cucumber.

“Hey,” he responds. The fact that he even *responded* is a win. Anything else, well, in the words of my father, ‘it is what it is.’

“So, um, Eli, there’s this thing.” I feel wobbly and awkward, like merely being in the presence of this dude has fucked up my whole neurological system. Maybe it’s the fact that the last time I really looked at him, he was laid out on the ground by my doing.

“Yeah?” His patience level is not high enough for me to lose my grasp of the English language.

“So I’ve been sober for a little over a year and I’m doing my ninth step in A.A. and that’s the step where you apologize to people for hurting them. So, I wanted to apologize to you for anything I did that affected you. I’m sorry I punched you in the face and said all those fucked up things to you and embarrassed you in front of your friends. And what I’d like to know is if there is anything I can do to make the situation right.”

There’s a brief pause and then he laughs.

He seriously just laughs at me.

“Are you kidding me? I don’t know which part is funnier, the fact that you’re sober or that you thought I’d accept an apology from you. You’re fucking insane, Alyssa.” He stubs out his cigarette and tosses it into the alley, and spits in my direction as he walks back into the house. “Like I said, don’t fucking talk to me.”

My initial reaction mentally is to start bawling, but I don’t. I actually feel better than I did before I came outside. The point of a ninth step is not to force the other person into having a relationship with you again. Rather, it’s to try to fix your past wrongs. Sometimes there’s nothing you can do. Sometimes you just need to pay it forward. I will never have a relationship like the one I had with Eli with anyone else. Or, you know, I’ll

try not to treat anyone that way. I don't need his forgiveness, I just need to take my necessary step towards making things right. I finish my cigarette in peace outside but I feel myself getting woozy from the fever.

"Hey Steph," I say, as I walk back into the house.

"Yeah?"

"I gotta head home. It's been real, but that fever is coming back with a vengeance."

"No worries, dude. I'll see you next week, right?" She lifts her eyebrows up like she's asking me about Eli in E.S.P, but I shake my head. Her face relaxes, so I know she's dropped it.

"Only if we can go to Westwood and get those giant chocolate chip cookies with the ice cream on them."

"Done and done."

She walks me to the door.

"Bye, everyone!" I call out. "Bye, Steph."

"Later."

"Peace." For some reason, Stephanie and I always have three-part goodbyes. It's just how we roll.

I get into my car and turn on my iPod. I consider listening to Ben Harper's *Roses from my Friends* but instead switch on some old vintage U2 and rock out to *Mysterious Ways*. It gets me in the mood to move forward. It's been a complicated twenty-four hours and I'm more than willing to move on.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

The phone has rung out every time I've tried calling Athena and I've been trying for the last week. She's disconnected her voicemail, so I can't even leave her a message. I've tried texting, emailing—nothing.

So I'm trying again, because that's what I need to do.

"Hello?"

I'm caught off guard by the sound of her voice and almost forget to respond.

"Hey, Athena."

"Hi." She's curt, but I expect that from her.

"Can we meet up? Can I get you a coffee or something? I'd really like to talk to you." With the exception of my apology to Bernadette, my amends thus far have missed this vital step: giving the person the opportunity to choose whether or not they want to talk to me. I am crossing my fingers *and* my toes right now. I am running through every prayer I know in my head hoping that she decides talking to me is a good idea.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Does today work for you? Tomorrow? When is the best time? I'll even pick you up."

"I can drive myself, thanks." Translation: she wants an out in case I piss her off. I can't totally blame her, but the intention still stings a bit.

"Okay, when would you want to meet?"

"In an hour. Coffee Bean."

She hangs up.



I can only assume she means the one on Main Street, since that's where we always meet and she gets her drinks for free there because the barista is in love with her. I get my stuff together and hunt my room for quarters for the parking meter. I am determined to be sitting there waiting for her when she arrives, so I rush out of the house at super human speeds, my pockets heavy with change.

Once I've parked, I get a fresh pack of smokes from the liquor store. While I'm at it, I pick her up a pack, too. It's hilarious to me that if you look a cashier in the eye, they won't card you. I am sixteen-years-old. I shouldn't be able to buy myself cigarettes. I get that it is technically dishonest for me to purchase cigarettes, but I feel like in the grand scheme of things, I'm only hurting myself, so fuck it.

I get a drip coffee and sit outside. I really wanted something more extravagant, but I used most of my money to pay for parking and I promised Athena a drink. The coffee tastes kind of old, so I mask the flavor with a smoke. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her launching up the sidewalk like she's bursting out of a canon. I stub out my cigarette immediately.

"Hey Athena, what can I get you?" I ask as she approaches.

"The usual."

I feel like it's almost *extra* apologetic to buy someone a drink where they'd normally get it for free anyway. I order her drink and it cleans me out. I am now officially on a time crunch as I can't add any more money to the meter. I'm going to have to be direct.

Once we're situated on the patio, I start speaking.

"Athena, I cannot find the words to tell you how sorry I am about how I reacted to Genevieve's death on the phone with you."

"I can't fucking believe you said that. Who fucking says shit like that?"

"Listen, I had a pretty high fever and I wasn't in my right mind." I know I've started apologies like *that* before. Well, minus the fever part. "I'm really sorry. It's a fucking tragedy that she died at seventeen. She was hurting and needed a lot of help to pull through what was going on in her life." I'm kind of having an ah-ha moment. Maybe Strawberry paid more attention to Genevieve because she needed the attention. "I just want you to know that I'm sorry. I love you and never meant to hurt you."

Athena eyes me up and down, searching for 'buts' and other such insincerities.

"Okay, Alyssa," she pauses, inhaling her cigarette. "I accept your apology."

I'm surprised. I had actually fully prepared myself for her to tell me to fuck off. I was already going through my mental list of potential new sponsors (which pretty much came up empty) and trying to figure out how my life would go on without her in it.

"Thank you," I say.

"And Alyssa, I'm very proud of you. I know you tried to contact me the past week. I know I avoided you like a rabbi and a potential convert, but you kept trying. You cleaned up your side of the street."

I have zero response to this. She senses my shock and changes the subject.

We're back to shooting the shit like usual.

I can't help but continue to feel surprised by the effects of this program. Sometimes things don't work out as well as I'd want them to, but at least now I know how to cope with that. There isn't an end in sight, but a ton of new beginnings. Maybe I'll even get healthy enough to legitimately date someone. Who fucking knows. The point is, I have tools I never had before. I have the kind of friends I never had before. I am living a strange life, sure, but it's working. What I've got going on now, for the first time in years, is working. And I'm more than down to ride this wave out for a while.

THE END