

## Reckless Driving

Alex pulls up in his small blue sedan and texts me that he's outside. I already know; I was watching through the window. I pull my shoes on, open the garage door, and make my way toward the car. He's looking down at his phone, as if unaware of my approach. I try the handle of the passenger door. Locked. He pretends to startle at the sound before shifting slightly to press the unlock button. I open the door.

Where the outside of the car is spotless, the passenger seat is cluttered, the cupholders full of days old McDonald's or Chick-fil-A cups. I toss a crumpled napkin onto the floor and settle into the passenger seat. He turns to me, a smile creasing his warm brown cheeks.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi," I say.

"Where do you want to go?" he asks me, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes. When I was a kid and all my choices were made for me, I used to think I'd relish the day I was the one who got in the car and decided where we would go. After months of experiencing such power, I've learned that it's possible to get tired of pretty much anything.

"I don't care," I tell him, the opening line in a verbal dance we practice every time we meet.

"I don't either," he says, and we're finished with the opening steps and off to the races.

"Should we get something to eat? Go for a walk? Shopping?" I toss the words at him, a perfect triple combo.

He pivots with exceptional grace. "Whatever sounds best to you."

We go through the motions for a few more minutes, bobbing and weaving until finally I reach my breaking point. I'm always the one who calls the whole performance off.

"Let's shop first, then get something to eat," I tell him, a forced air of decisiveness permeating the words. He ignores this tinge of insincerity and obediently shifts the car into drive.

We are mostly silent as he drives. It's my third day home for Thanksgiving break, and we should have a lot to catch up on, but he's not talking, and I'm too busy holding back tears to break the silence. A forbidden corner of my mind is making itself known to me. I am trying with everything I have to push it back into the deep, the dark, where it belongs.

"How was the movie?" Alex asks me.

I saw a horror movie with my parents the night before. *Thanksgiving*, the one with Patrick Dempsey. I invited him along, but he said he was busy. I knew he'd say no; he hates horror movies, and I love them. My mom drove while I googled "How do you know if you're falling out of love?" in the backseat. *If you feel trapped*, the article read. I almost threw my phone out the window.

"It was alright," I tell him. I'm silent for another beat as I consider the bloodiest, most horrifying parts of the movie. I tell him all about them as he cringes in disgust beside me. It's a favorite game of mine.

We reach the mall and get out of the car. I open my door before he does and have to pause while he unhooks his seatbelt and locks the car. We're shopping for new glasses for him. Days before, I'd asked him why he didn't just get his glasses from his eye doctor's office. He told me he always gets them at Walmart. We settled for Eyeglass World.

He watches as I meander through the store, picking out different frames and setting them on the bridge of his nose. Every time he looks in the mirror, he shrugs, indifferent.

“Do you like these?” I ask him, picking up a wider pair with a streak of electric blue.

“I don’t care,” he says.

“They’re your glasses,” I say. “You’re the one who has to like them, not me.”

I tell him this, but it’s not true. I care very much whether or not I like them. I suspect he does too, and now we’ve reached an impasse, because with every pair I place on his face I find I like them, and the face behind the glasses, less and less. Eventually, I give up and lead him toward the exit.

“Do you still want to get frozen yogurt?” he asks.

I’d told him earlier that we could go to Pinkberry, because I love frozen yogurt and I love it even more when he pays for it. Now, I can’t stomach the idea of driving all the way across town with him.

“We can just go to your dad’s,” I tell him. It’s just up the street from the mall.

He pulls into the lot and parks in the back. He takes me into the restaurant through the kitchen. The hot air is oppressive against my already-flushed cheeks.

We reach the hostess stand and he taps his mother on the shoulder. Her face breaks into a wide smile at the sight of him.

“What are you guys doing here?” she asks us, but she’s looking at him. “Let me get you a table.”

She seats us. All we order is chips and dip. We sit across from each other as we wait for his father to make the food. He asks me if I'm feeling better about college. I wish I could lie to him, but there was a time when he knew me better than anyone, and the echoes of those people still exist in us. I tell him that I don't, and I'm not sure I ever will. I've pleaded with my RA to let me switch rooms, but she told me that switching in the middle of a school year is difficult, often impossible. I told her I'd do whatever it takes.

"Would it really be so awful to stay for the rest of the year?" Alex asks me, and I cringe inwardly. The tears rise closer to the surface. *Yes. I'm not sure how much longer I can do this.*

"I don't know," I say. "Maybe."

He gets up to use the bathroom. I sit alone at the table and stare unblinking at the fraying leather seats. I'm startled from my reverie when my phone buzzes. It's a text from my mother.

*What time do you think you'll be home?*

I pick up the phone and hold it close to my chest. *As soon as possible*, I write back. *I'm not feeling well.*

Three little dots pop up on screen. *What's wrong?*

I hesitate. My hands begin to move on their own. I feel like an outsider in my own skin, watching from above.

*I want to break up with him*, I write, and it feels so wrong but so *good* to voice a thought that's been needling its way closer and closer to the forefront of my mind for months.

The dots appear, disappear. Reappear. She calls me. I decline. I'm suddenly shaking, sweating like I've robbed a bank. He'll be back from the bathroom any moment now.

*Can't talk*, I write. I flip my phone over and place it on the seat beside me.

His mom comes over with the chips and dip. I thank her but don't reach for them. He returns a second later. The seats groan with displeasure as he sits back down in front of me.

He eats like a rabid animal; I barely eat at all. He tells me about his classes and his new friends and I smile when I think I'm supposed to, but now that I've voiced my fears to my mom I'm having a harder time keeping up the act than I normally do. He finishes the chips and I tell him to take me home.

"I don't feel good," I say in response to his questioning look, and he nods.

The drive to my house seems to take hours. He's not a particularly observant person, but even he can sense something's off. He asks me if something is wrong, and I tell him I'm fine.

Finally, he pulls into my driveway and lets me out of the car. I speedwalk toward the front door and wrench it open. When I turn to close it behind me, I see he's followed me. This, unfortunately, is an obstacle I should have expected. Most of our days are spent sitting in the same spot on the couch in my living room, together but not really, absorbed in books or movies or our phones.

"I think I just need to get some rest," I say.

He frowns. "So... you don't want me to stay?"

"I just feel really sick today," I tell him. It's an excuse I've used with him before.

"Okay," he says, but it's not and we both know it. I walk him back to his car. He leans against the car door but doesn't open it. This is the beginning of another routine we've practiced.

"Bye," I tell him.

“Bye,” he says. He leans in for a kiss and I open my mouth obediently. He tastes like chips and salsa. I fight the urge to cringe.

He holds me there for a long moment. I’m stiff, still. Finally, he pulls back.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. I love you,” he says.

I stare silently at him for a moment too long. My fingers dig into the soft fabric of his T-shirt. I try to memorize the way it feels. I rise on tiptoes to press my lips softly against his one more time. Closed-mouthed and sweet. When I pull away, he’s looking at me strangely, and I wonder if he knows.

“I love you, too,” I say before turning and walking away. I hear the engine start. I glance back, watching his car until it rounds the corner and he’s gone.

\*New Scene\*

When Alex and I first started seeing each other, before we were even really dating, things were different. *Good* different. We met at a high school football game, introduced by mutual friends. I’d seen him around before, but I’d never paid him much attention until that night. He sat a few seats away from me, the harsh glow of the stadium lights outlining the sharp angles of his cheekbones. Even with our friends between us, I began to notice him in a way I wasn’t sure I’d ever noticed anyone.

“Do you want to get concessions with me?” Gia asked from my right. She was the only person between me and Alex.

“Um...” I thought for a moment, unsure. Finally, “I’m okay. Thank you, though.”

“Sure,” she said. Glancing at Alex, she asked, “Do you want anything?”

He started, eyes shooting to Gia. “Oh, sure. I’ll take a hot dog, if there are any left. Thanks.” His gaze returned to the field.

Gia crossed her arms, irritation evident in the tense set of her jaw. “Is anyone going to come with me? I can’t carry everything myself.”

Gia’s older brother, James, sighed and pushed himself off the sun-warmed bleachers. “I’ll go with you. Stop being a baby about it.”

She scowled at him. “Fine. Let’s go.”

I watched them descend the metal staircase. Gia’s stomping echoed, drawing glares from a few nearby fans. Their ire barely registered – I was alone with Alex.

We sat in silence for a few moments, Alex’s stare locked on the game and mine locked on him. I’d felt like maybe he was noticing me too, but he seemed to barely register I was still here. Something inside me fractured a bit, thin cracks in a half-formed fantasy.

“Do you like football?”

The words sounded next to my ear, so loud I almost jumped. I glanced to my right. Alex was glancing between me and the field. “Not really,” I confessed. “I like the atmosphere of the games better than the actual playing, you know?” I paused. “Things like this make me feel... older. Cooler. Like a high schooler in a movie.”

He laughed, a small smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. “I get it. I like watching the game, but part of the fun is the energy.”

“Exactly!” I burst out, then blushed. Had I ever blushed before? I must’ve, but suddenly I

couldn't remember ever feeling quite like this. The heat in my cheeks felt foreign. "There's something about the togetherness of it that I really love. Is that stupid?"

He looked at me then. Really looked at me, warm brown eyes boring into mine. "No," he said finally. "I totally get it."

There wasn't really any choice for me after that; he was kind, and I was lonely, and falling for him was so simple. For a few weeks, we lingered on that precipice between friendship and something more, that terrifying and exhilarating and horrible and wonderful feeling of being half in love. When he finally asked me to be his girlfriend, we were standing next to his car, huddled together against the October chill. It was early, a few minutes before the start of school.

"So..." he started, then trailed off. "Are we, um, dating?"

I looked up at him. He was smiling, but I could see the tension in the tight lines of his face. He was nervous. Something in me softened at the sight of it. "I think so," I said. "I mean, I hope we are."

His face brightened, that stiff smile melting into a full-blown grin. "We are." He released a long, shuddering breath. It lingered in the cool air between us. "Thank God," he said. "I was worried you'd say no."

Laughter rolled through me. "Trust me, you don't need to worry about that," I said. "Ever."

The second I re-enter my house my mother appears beside me.

"Hey," she says. "Are you alright?"

I don't answer right away. I take a slow, deep breath. "I don't know what to do," I say plainly.

She studies me. "What do you want to do?"

This is a more complicated question than it seems. The older I get and the farther into myself I grow, the more I find that all I ever do is *want*. I want to know everything, to become a local in a place I've never been. I want everyone I meet to think I'm interesting and beautiful and worthwhile. I want to kiss someone and be so caught up I stop thinking entirely.

A wave of guilt rolls through me. I find it hard to reconcile, sometimes, how much I want with how much I already have. I already have someone who loves me. He loves me so much that sometimes it keeps me up at night. It makes me angry. It makes me sick.

I don't say any of that. "I want to be happy again," I tell her.

The thing is, I have been happy. When I'm away at college, aside from the hours I spend sitting silently across from my roommate, I am happier than ever. I call Alex every night. First him, then my mom. She teases me: "You call him first because you miss him more."

I blush and giggle and pretend it's the truth. The thing I won't let myself say or even think: I call him first because I want to get it out of the way. I wonder if this makes me a bad person or just a bad girlfriend.

Another thing I don't let myself think about: the worst thing I have ever done. I push it into the darkest reaches of my mind; it's the only way I can still face Alex. But the more you ignore your demons, the scarier they get, and I'm starting to crack. The moment returns to me in the darkest hours of the night, taunting, tantalizing.

I picture *his* breath on my neck and *his* lips on my skin and I am overcome with desire, with traitorous want. The dingy frat house basement, crowded with bodies and the stench of mildew and sweat, could've been Paris. I felt transported, truly alive, for the first time in months.

The morning after I realized the enormity of what I'd done. I am not religious, but I've always believed I had a particularly strong moral compass. I've lied to myself so much that I almost believe I still do. But when I take that night out of its lockbox, I wonder what it means that we've been dating for over a year and I've never felt that way with Alex. Electric, alive, *hungry*.

I can't look him in the eye anymore. I can't touch his skin without remembering the feel of another's arms wrapped around my waist, another man's fingers and lips and limbs touching me in ways only one other person ever has. I know I can't keep doing this, to myself or to Alex. But it is much harder to break someone's heart than most people ever imagine. They don't teach you that in the movies; in the movies, the "good guy" is always the dumped, never the dumper. The person who breaks it off is almost comically evil, an unfeeling monster who laughs in the face of their former lover's pain.

My mother is staring at me, expectant. Did she say something? I think she might've said something. I hesitate, finally landing on, "I just don't want to hurt him."

My mother doesn't know about that night. So when she tells me, "You always end up doing the right thing," she really means it. I don't have the strength to break another person's heart today, so I don't. I nod and make my way toward my bedroom. When I emerge, I will not be the same, and neither will he.

Hours later, I still haven't worked up the courage to call him. How do you say goodbye to someone you can hardly remember living without? We've only known each other for a year, but Alex feels like a part of me, a tumor attached to my body that I wish to excise but I can't, it won't stop growing. I wish I was a brave person, but I'm not. I've only done one spontaneous thing in my entire life, and it was the best and worst decision I've ever made. I don't do things on a whim. I think them through. Still, the guilt and shame and pain are coming close to overwhelming my need for thoughtfulness, for control. I have to do something.

Alex picks up on the sixth ring. For a moment, I thought he'd let it go to voicemail. He usually answers on the first or second ring. I wonder if I wasn't as subtle as I thought. Sometimes it's easy to forget that he knows me just as well as I know him. A spike of guilt pierces me at the thought.

"Hey," he says, voice steady, so steady he seems almost careless.

"Hi," I say. "Do you have time to talk?"

"I'm on my break, so I only have fifteen minutes. Will that be enough?"

*Shit.* I'd forgotten that he had to work tonight. I backpedal. "Oh, I'm sorry, I totally forgot you were at work." I'm trying to make myself sound as casual as he does, but I've never been a great actress. "We can talk tomorrow."

He's suspicious. "Why can't we talk now?"

His voice is louder, as if he's moved closer to the phone. Taken me off speaker, most likely. We have all the same friends, and I get the sense that he normally lets them listen to our conversations when I call him at work. I've never cared enough to say something.

“I just...” I hesitate. This was so much easier in my head. “I don’t want to bother you at work.”

I can almost hear his relief through the phone. “You never bother me, babe. I love you.”

I hesitate.

“...Ang?” he says, confusion laced through his voice. “Are you still there?”

My mouth is suddenly bone dry. I reach for the closest liquid in sight: a cup of water abandoned on my nightstand for the past few days. I wrinkle my nose but take a sip anyway.

“Sorry,” I croak. “My throat is dry. I’m sick, remember?”

Silence. I wait, heart rate skyrocketing. Finally, he speaks. “Right. You should get some rest.”

Air rushes out of my lungs. I feel like a popped balloon, lost and deflated and irreparably damaged. “I will. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I wake with a gasp, memories of a drunken liaison still projected like a beacon in my mind. I reach for the fresh glass of water on my bedside table and gulp it down. I kick the thrashed covers away from my body; I’m soaked in sweat. A sob leaves my mouth before I’m awake enough to hold it back.

A knock sounds at the door. “Angie?” my mom calls. “Are you okay?” She pauses. “You sounded... upset.”

I freeze. I've thought about confessing my sins to her since the moment I committed them. When I was in high school, I told her everything. A lot of things were different, back then.

I hesitate a moment too long. I'm opening my mouth to respond when I hear a soft sigh from beyond the door. I listen, silent, as she shuffles back to her room. Tears leak from the corners of my eyes.

I lay back. I toss and turn, pull the covers up and push them away, but it's useless. I open my eyes. When I was a kid, I was so scared of the dark that I refused to sleep with the light off. When I went to summer camp, the other girls made so much fun of me that I came home, stoic and resolved, and told my parents that it was time.

I spent the whole night frozen with fear. Every creak, every sigh of settling beams was a monster looming over my prone, helpless form, teeth dripping drool onto my cheeks. I fell asleep in the early hours of the morning, when the sun began to spill over the horizon in deep red streaks.

The next night, I did it all over again. I became especially wary of my closet door. Every night, I shut it tight, pulling it flush with the wall until every sliver of the darkness within was vanquished. But my bed was directly across from the door and I could see it drifting open as the hours passed. I told my parents I wanted to rearrange my room. After that, I forced myself to sleep in the dark until I could pretend I wasn't still scared.

I wake from my fitful slumber to a text from Alex. *Are you feeling better today?*

Guilt floods me like a tidal wave. It's unbearable, this feeling, and it's all my fault. I reach for my phone, hands shaking. *I'm still not feeling great. I think I'm just going to spend the day in bed.*

He's typing. He stops. Starts. Stops. Finally, *OK. I'll see you tomorrow.*

I slump, every muscle in my body loosening at once. *See you then.*

I move through the house as quietly as I can, but Mom is waiting for me at the kitchen table when I come downstairs.

She looks up. "Hey, Angie."

I flinch. "I told you not to call me that anymore."

Her face falls, just for a moment. "I know, I know, I'm sorry. Angelica." She hesitates for a moment before continuing. "I just wish you could stay the same little girl you always were."

I bristle. "I'm not a little girl anymore."

"I know you're not." She smiles, a strained, crumpled thing. "Have you... made any decisions? Since yesterday?"

She's just asking, but it feels like an accusation. *Decide faster, Angie. You're a horrible person, Angie.* "No," I say hotly. "This is a big deal. For once, can you just give me some space to think?" I start forward again, swiping my car keys from in front of her steepled fingers.

"Angie, wait," she says. She's upset, and she should be. It seems like all I do these days is hurt people. "You can't just run away from this. He's a person, too. If you'd just talk to me—"

“Stop!” I explode. She cringes backwards, hurt pooling in the corners of her eyes. I take a breath. More slowly, “Stop. Please. I just... I need some time to think.” My voice cracks. “Just a little more time.”

I wait. She waits. Finally, “Alright. I’m here if you need anything. You know that, right? I’m always on your side, no matter what.”

The guilt returns in a hot, cloying wave. “I know,” I say, voice weak and strained. “I’ll see you later.”

After driving aimlessly for an interminable amount of time, I realize I have nowhere to go. I thought it would be nice to get out of my house, that place with so many memories, but I’m slowly realizing that every place I would want to go is a place I’ve been with Alex. The thought sows a seed of doubt in my mind. My mom’s words come back to haunt me. *Would it really be so bad, to stay?* My mind turns in endless circles until I can’t stand it anymore. I jerk the wheel to the left, just barely turning onto the entrance ramp ahead of oncoming traffic. A horn blares from behind me. The sound reaches my ear distantly as if the whole world is underwater. I turn the radio up and press the gas pedal closer to the floor.

It’s only after I’ve reached Pittsburgh that I realize I have no way to contact him. I feel wild, stupid, free, trapped. My mom calls, again. I send it to voicemail, again. She’s been texting and calling nonstop since I left my hometown.

Without any other options – my residence hall is closed for the break – I decide to drive to the frat house. I’m not sure if he lives there or not. I’m hoping someone will be able to tell me where he is.

I park outside and walk to the door. I hesitate, embarrassment tightening like a vise around my throat. It's crazy, to show up at someone's door after one drunken night. He's probably forgotten my name. He's probably forgotten all about me. But I came all this way.

I pound my fist against the door, once, twice, three times. I wait. I lean forward, raising my hand a fourth time, but the solid weight of the door disappears before I can rap my hand against it again. I stumble forward, surprised. Someone's hands reach out to steady me, resting lightly against my upper arms. I glance up, the beginnings of a smile already pulling at my cheeks.

And it's not him.

Every blood vessel in my body seems to burst. My cheeks feel like they're on fire. The boy standing across from me looks confused, even suspicious, and I have never felt more ridiculous. Of course he wouldn't be here. I used to think that when people met and connected and fell in love, everything always worked out. I didn't think I was that girl anymore, but the girl who showed up to a random frat house door expecting to find Leo, a man she spent a single night with, clearly isn't the cynical person I thought I'd become. She still believes, somehow, that if you want something enough you can will it into existence.

When we first met, I was afraid that eventually I'd lose Alex. I thought that he'd get tired of me, or decide I wasn't pretty enough to be with forever, or that I'd be too boring or too clingy until he couldn't stand it anymore, until he realized what I'd always known: we weren't quite right for each other.

I kept waiting, for that movie moment, to feel the spark of passion and joy that I had been anticipating my entire life. Before we were officially together, when we hovered on that

precipice between mutual like and something more, I used to dream of the moment he'd finally kiss me. I pictured fireworks, an orchestra, pouring rain.

When it finally happened, we were sitting on my living room couch watching *Iron Man 3*. I was bored of the movie and already half-asleep when he leaned over and kissed me, right there. Suddenly I was awake, alert. *This is finally it*, I thought. All of my excitement, all of my fantasies burst into life as I sat there and waited for *something*. And it was... fine.

It was over in all of ten seconds, and I thought I'd be disappointed, but I was glad for it. His lips were chapped and overeager. The taste of his spit in my mouth threatened to send me to the nearest toilet bowl. When he pulled back, I gave him a shaky smile. It was my first kiss, but not his. So when he said, "What did you think?" I knew he was asking as someone *older*, someone experienced in a way that I wasn't.

"It was... great," I forced out. "Everything I've ever imagined."

I've been lying to him, but mostly to myself, ever since. I stopped listening to sad songs for fear of thinking too much about all the ways Alex and I could stop being "Alex and I." The ways we could drift apart until everything I felt for him turned icy and awful.

"Um, hello?"

The boy's voice startles me back to the present. "Hi," I say. "I was, um, looking for Leo, but I guess he doesn't actually live here? So. I'm just going to..." I trail off. My throat feels lined with cotton balls. "Go," I finish limply.

His face relaxes, as if finally realizing I'm not going to burst into the house with a poncho and an axe. "No, he does live here," he says. Hope surges in my chest for a millisecond, but he isn't finished. "He's just, uh," he pauses, scratches the back of his neck. "Occupied."

I don't understand. My face screws up as his words settle into my mind.

At my blank expression, the boy sighs, rolls his eyes. "He's with someone, okay? I'll tell him you stopped by... um..."

He's waiting for me to supply my name, but it's like every word I know has fled into the greater ninety percent of my brain where I can't find them. *Is that true, that we only use ten percent of our brain?*

He's still staring at me. The suspicion in his eyes is rapidly dissolving into pity, and I can't stand it. Why should he pity me, the girl stupid enough to drive all the way here on nothing more than murky memories? I was a single night's distraction, and that's it. I shouldn't have expected anything more. But what I want and what I know to be true haven't been the same in a very long time.

"I'm Ang—" I start, then stop. "You know what? It really doesn't matter," I say, forcing the words past the lump in my throat. "We barely know each other anyway."

I call Alex from the car.

He sounds frantic. "Babe, where have you been? Your parents are freaking out. They thought you were with me, and when I told them I haven't seen you all day, they lost it."

I'm silent for a moment too long, and he knows me a little too well.

“Ang? What’s wrong?”

I swallow. He deserves better than this, but I can’t hold it back any longer. I feel poisoned, like a piece of me has rotted and needs to be cut out. Still, I am both selfish and endlessly masochistic. I am hurting us, both of us, but I can’t bear to hear the hurt, the heartbreak, the anger in his voice one second before I have to. I hesitate, in this final moment. I savor the very last seconds of my life where he does not hate me.

“Alex, I’m sorry.”

He’s silent. A beat, two.

“Alex?”

He clears his throat. “No, um, I heard you. Sorry for... for what, exactly?”

My knuckles whiten. “You know what.” My voice stretches thin, breaks.

I’m met with silence, again. Just as I’m wondering if he’ll play dumb, I hear him take a shaky, heaving breath.

“Okay.” A pause. I can almost see him running his hand through his hair. “We can... we can work through this, Ang. It doesn’t have to be this way.” The longer he speaks, the more frantic he sounds. “I know things have been different, but I love you. We were...” he trails off. I can barely hear him when he says, “You were supposed to marry me.”

Tears are streaming down my face in earnest now. “I know,” I sob. “But I can’t do this anymore, Alex. I just can’t. I feel like... like I lost myself in you, in *us*, and I don’t feel like myself and I just feel so...” The article comes back to me. “...trapped. Is it normal, to feel trapped at eighteen? I don’t think it’s normal.”

“Angie, come on,” he says. The heartbreak in his voice is turning to anger. “That isn’t true and you know it. I love you and you love me too. So just come home and we can forget all about this. We can still be together. We can still be... us. Perfect.”

He’s offering me what I’ve wished for, what I’ve damn near *prayed* for, for months. Months of trying to convince myself that all of this was all in my head. That we’d never have to end. But it’s too late. I’ve made mistakes I can’t come back from.

“Alex, I cheated.”

He’s silent for so long I wonder if he’s hung up. When he speaks again, there’s a horrible, dead quality to his voice.

“Okay,” he says, robotic, empty.

“I’m so sorry, Alex,” I whisper.

Seconds drag into minutes, and he still won’t speak.

“Alex, please,” I beg. “Please, say something.”

“What? What do you want me to say?” he explodes. “Tell me, what could possibly make this better?”

All at once, telling him about Leo feels like the most selfish thing I could’ve possibly done. I thought I’d be making things... not better, but honest, at least. But all I did was assuage my own guilt. And I hurt him, again. Worse than I ever have before.

“Nothing,” I choke out. “Nothing will make this better, and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I hope we can be friends, someday.”

He scoffs. “Yeah. Friends. Sure.”

I wilt, sinking lower in the driver’s seat. Tears blur my vision. Surely this is considered reckless driving. I consider pulling over, but I am selfish, again, and all I want is to keep moving, keep running farther and farther away until all of this is a speck in the rearview mirror, a mirage fading suddenly out of existence.

“You’ll always be in my heart, Alex.”

“Goodbye, Angelica.”

I wait, foolishly, for the rest. I told him I loved him. That must count for something, right? But the seconds drag on, and when I hear the telltale beep of my cell phone, I know he won’t say it back. And it’s finally over. A year, poured down the drain in four minutes.

\*New Scene\*

When I get back to my hometown, the sky is darkening around me, bleeding from blue to red to black. I almost drive to Alex’s house. I wish I could explain, somehow. I want to, but I know that there’s nothing I can say to make things better. Instead, I text Gia. I’m not ready to go home yet, and she’s the only person who might understand. Who might *not* hate me.

*Are you home?*

She responds in seconds: *yea. wanna come over?*

A sigh rolls through me. I can feel my shoulders shuddering, a tidal wave of relief. *Yes please.*

I park on the street outside of Gia and James's house. I've been here dozens of times, but sometimes the size of the place still surprises me. When you're inside, it feels like a fortress. Like the outside world could never touch you in here. It's exactly what I need.

Gia greets me at the door. "Hey," she says. "What's up?"

I glance past her. "Um, is James here?" I don't want to do this with him around.

Gia narrows her eyes. "No, he's at Alex's. I guess it was urgent?" She eyes me. I realize she's waiting for me to tell her what's wrong with Alex. I guess if anyone should know, it's me. Or at least it was. I swallow. My tongue feels coarse. My chest is tight with dread.

"Let's talk upstairs."

\*New Scene\*

"Oh my God. Angelica. This is..."

"It's crazy. I know," I blurt. "I feel so horrible. I never meant to hurt him."

Gia stares at me. I'm surprised to see discomfort, even anger, in her eyes. I shouldn't be, but I am. She's my best friend. "Ang... what *did* you mean to do? How could you let this happen?"

I scowl, my own dormant anger igniting. "Obviously I wasn't planning to cheat! He just started to feel so... high school. We never really did anything together anymore, and I was away for school and he was still here, and it just snowballed, I guess. I didn't mean to," I repeat.

"You didn't *mean* to? So you... what? Stuck your tongue down some other guy's throat by accident? Your clothes magically melted off?"

“It wasn’t like that!”

On the drive here, I’d almost convinced myself that Gia would be on my side. She’d noticed the way our relationship was falling apart. She’d told me, weeks ago, that she thought I should break up with him.

“Angelica,” Gia says again. “How could you do that to him?”

I scoff. “*You’re* the one who told me to dump him. I thought you’d understand.”

“This isn’t what I meant, and you know it. I could tell you two weren’t happy anymore, but I never expected this.” She pauses, shaking her head incredulously. “Alex is my friend, too. I would never wish something like this on him.”

The tears pooling in my eyes finally spilled over, slicking my eyelashes and landing on my cheeks. “I was miserable. I—I didn’t know what else to do.”

“I’m sorry, Angie,” Gia says. “But I can’t support this. You knew what you were doing. You’re my best friend, and I’m here for you. But I need some time to... to think about this.” The anger in her eyes is quickly becoming pity. Somehow, that’s almost worse. “I think you should go,” she says finally.

“But—”

“I’ll text you in a couple days,” she says.

And that’s it. She kicks me out.

\*New Scene\*

I spend the next few days in a haze.

When I got home, my parents grounded me. I barely managed to avoid laughing in their faces. The irony was almost too much. Where would I even go?

I told them that Alex and I broke up, but I didn't give them the details. After that, they let me retreat to my room. I've barely set foot outside of it since. I can't eat, can't sleep. Can't move. I've never felt so miserable. My first breakup, and I can't even be properly upset about it – it was all my fault.

A knock sounds at my door. "Angie? We need to talk."

I stiffen. If I'm silent for long enough, she might go away. Unfortunately, the universe is not on my side; the door swings open. *Should've locked it.*

As soon as she sees me, curled in the fetal position on top of sheets stained with tears, my mom's face falls. "Oh, honey," she says. "This isn't healthy."

A choked laugh. "Oh, really?" I say, a thick layer of sarcasm coating the words.

"You need to eat something. You need to *do* something. I'll unground you, if that's what it takes. Go to Gia's. Eat ice cream and watch sad movies," she says. "Your first heartbreak is never easy, but this isn't normal."

*My situation isn't normal.* "Gia doesn't want to see me."

Her expression tightens, confusion evident in every line of her face. "What? Why not?"

I don't have the energy to lie to her. "I went over there the other day. I told her what happened with Alex. She asked me to leave."

"Why would she say that? What happened?" she asks. A note of apprehension disrupts the soothing quality of her voice.

“I cheated on him.”

She’s silent for a long time. Too long. Finally, “How?”

I cast a withering look in her direction. “How do you think?”

“Why,” she amends.

“Does it matter?” I force out a laugh utterly devoid of humor. “There’s no good reason.”

I can practically hear her mind working, wheels turning in her head. “No,” she says eventually. “There’s not. But it might help if I understood why you felt like that was your only option.”

It’s my turn to think. *Why did I think that was my only option?* Every time I think I might be able to explain it, the words turn to ashes on my tongue. It doesn’t feel worth it to try. But she’s still here, staring at me. Waiting. So:

“I just...” I hesitate. I kept this secret from everyone for so long. From myself, even. Now the words still feel forbidden, long after it’s stopped mattering. “I fell out of love with him,” I finally confess. “And I know that’s not an excuse. Believe me, I know. I just couldn’t admit it to myself – Alex has been so important to me for so long. I couldn’t imagine telling him something like that. So I tried to pretend it wasn’t real. I thought if I just didn’t think about it, it might go away. Things might... go back to how they were.”

Mom is still watching me. I can’t read the impassive expression on her face.

I decide to keep going. No point holding it all in now. And honestly, it feels good to say it all out loud, awful as it is. It’s a comfort I don’t deserve, but a comfort nonetheless. “The night it... happened... I wasn’t planning to do something like that. But my friends talked me into

coming to a party with them, and I was drunk and sad and stupid, so when... *he* kissed me, I didn't stop him." My voice breaks. "After that, it was too late," I whisper.

She's still eyeing me, but I think I see sympathy flash across her face, there and gone before I can be sure. Still, it encourages me. "I thought maybe I could just forget about it—" she opens her mouth, presumably to chastise me, so I hasten on, "—but as soon as I saw him on Monday, I knew I couldn't do that to him. So I ended it. It didn't... go very well." I choke on a wet laugh. "Obviously. And when I told Gia, she was pissed. Not that I really deserve to be upset about it."

Mom is silent for a long time. So long I wonder if she won't say anything at all, if she'll simply bear witness to my misery and then leave me here with it. Eventually, she says, "Well, I can't tell you that I'm on your side. Or that what you did was okay."

The words feel like a knife to the chest. "Mom—"

She holds up a hand, silencing me. "But I also don't think you need to beat yourself up about this forever."

I dab a rogue droplet from the tip of my nose. "Really?"

"I'm not saying that I'm okay with this," she says. She must see my face crumple, because she continues, "But I'm also not saying that I don't understand." She rests her hand against my cheek. "Angie," she says, "You're still so young. Of course you're going to make mistakes. I just wish you'd let me help you."

"This is more than a mistake," I say. "It's unforgiveable."

She nods. "It probably is, for Alex. And you'll have to learn to live with that. But I hope you can forgive yourself." A tear falls from my eyelashes onto her thumb, and she wipes it away.

“You don’t deserve to carry this weight for the rest of your life. It happened, and it was wrong, but you can’t change it now. All you can do now is try to live with it.”

By the time she’s finished speaking, I’ve lost all capacity for language. I exist in a torrential downpour, a storm of tears and regret and love and loss. I don’t even notice when she leaves the room, closing the door quietly behind her, until later, when I resurface. I feel like my emotions have flayed me within an inch of my life, but I also feel... cleaner. Like I’ve finally begun to shed some of this crushing, awful guilt. I don’t know if it’ll ever completely pass. But I feel like I’ve taken a small step forward.

The stupid thing about regret is that it’s pointless. Unless you can go back in time, it’s only purpose is making you feel like shit. I’ve relived that night with Leo in my head over and over again. It almost doesn’t feel real anymore, like I’m watching a car crash from the side of the road and I can’t do anything, anything at all, except wait for the cars to stop spinning and hope that someone, anyone, survives it. In the aftermath of it all, I’m not sure anyone has. Me, Alex, Gia. My mom. I’ve hurt them all. Myself included. I have to at least try to make things right.

I pull out my phone with shaking hands. I send two text messages.

Hours later, I get a response.

\*New Scene\*

“How are you doing?” Gia asks me. We’re at a local coffee shop, the only one in our small town. The moment feels surreal; I’m still surprised she answered my text.

“Not great,” I admit.

Gia nods. “I didn’t think you would be. Alex definitely isn’t.”

I flinch. “How... how is he?”

“He’s hurting, Angelica. Really hurting.”

“I figured,” I say softly.

We spend the next few minutes sitting in silence. Gia stares at me, but I avoid her eyes. I don’t know why I thought this was a good idea.

Eventually, Gia sighs. “Look, Ang,” she says. “I’m still pissed at you. I still need time. But I’m also still your best friend. So if you need anything, I’m here, okay?”

I wipe my hand across my flushed cheeks. “Really?”

“Really,” she says. “You made the biggest mistake of your life, and you hurt one of my friends. I’m not sure I can get past that. But...” she pauses, considering. “I think we can try,” she says finally. “I can tell this is killing you. I wouldn’t be here talking to you if I didn’t think you were sorry.”

“I really, really am.”

“Does Alex know that?”

“I don’t think he cares,” I reply. “He never answered when I texted him.”

Gia takes a sip of her drink. “He needs time, Ang. I think the best thing for both of you is to get some space from this. When do you go back to school?”

“Tomorrow.”

She nods. “Alright. Try to put it out of your head, then. He’ll reach out when he’s ready. And so will I.” With that, she stands. Her chair scrapes against the wood floor. “Thanks for the coffee,” she calls over her shoulder. Then she’s gone, and I’m alone again.

\*New Scene\*

The sun filters through the window and onto my face. The warmth eases me awake. A few minutes later, my mom pokes her head in.

“Good morning,” she says, smiling. “How does it feel to be a sophomore?”

I laugh. “The same. I’m not a real sophomore until next semester.”

She waves her hand as if shooing the words from the air. “You’re done with finals, aren’t you? You’re home for summer break. I’d say you’re a sophomore now.” Some of the humor slips from her expression. “You’re getting so old,” she says finally. “When did you grow up on me?”

The words sober me. “I don’t know,” I tell her.

When I first went back to Pittsburgh after the breakup, I was miserable. I could barely drag myself from my dorm to class and back. Winter break passed in a blur of excruciatingly-long, boring days.

A few weeks after the beginning of my second semester, Gia texted me. *Can we facetime?*

We talked for hours. I had been doing better on my own, a little, but Gia’s forgiveness was like the first ray of sun after a thunderstorm.

After that, the days went more quickly. I moved out of my old dorm room. I started going out more with my school friends. I worked harder in my classes. I ate three consistent meals a

day. In March, I realized I'd gone a whole day without thinking of Alex. Without the constant, haunting presence of the regret that had once consumed me.

By May, I was itching to talk to him. To tell him, without the mess of emotions that had consumed me in November, how truly sorry I was. On my walk back to my dorm after my last final, I sent him another text. *Can we talk?*

Days passed. The old misery crept in, ice around the edges of spring days. I'd already given up when my phone dinged with the notification. *My last exam is the 6<sup>th</sup>. Coffee on the 8<sup>th</sup>?*

An absurd mix of emotions bombarded me. Relief, terror, excitement. And guilt. Always guilt. *Of course*, I wrote back. *See you then.*

My mom's voice pulls me back to reality. "So when are you and Alex meeting?"

"Noon," I tell her. My voice only shakes a little bit.

"You've got this," she says. "Whatever happens, I'm here."

Her words soothe me, somewhat. "I know."

\*New Scene\*

He looks different. Good different. His too-long, messy hair has been trimmed back. It falls lightly over his warm brown eyes. The same, even after all this time.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi," he says.

"How have you been?" I ask him.

"Better."

He's short with me. I can't blame him. After thirty seconds that feel like years, I say, "I don't want to waste your time, Alex. I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am. I've never felt worse about anything in my life. What I did was unforgiveable, and the way I ended things wasn't fair."

He stares at me. His expression is unreadable.

I inhale, a deep shuddering breath. "What I'm trying to say is, I'm so, so sorry. I understand if you can't forgive me, but I wanted you to know that."

Alex glances down. His fingers move rhythmically up and down the wooden table. "I'm seeing someone," he says finally.

I hate that the words evoke a twinge of hurt, even now. Even if I hadn't cheated, I knew our relationship was over. I swallow. "I'm happy for you," I tell him. "Really."

"Thanks."

Another long, awkward pause. "Okay, well," I say when I can no longer stand it. "I'm glad you're doing better. And I'm sorry. Again."

When he doesn't respond, I hoist my tote bag over my shoulder and make my way toward the door. Unshed tears burn in my eyes. I shouldn't be upset, and I shouldn't have expected him to forgive me. I wouldn't, if I were him. Still, I'm proud of myself for at least trying to make things right. It's a strange feeling, to be upset and at peace all at once.

"Angie?"

I stop. Glance behind me. "Yeah?"

"I hope you're doing better, too."

I nod, a small, inexplicable smile tugging at my cheeks. “I am,” I tell him. Then I turn and walk away, out the door and to my car. And I don’t look back.