

## Pitcher Perfect- Devina Douglas

### I.

JANUARY 25, TWO YEARS AGO

"Alyssa?" a voice called hesitantly from somewhere behind her. Hardly a heartbeat passed before the voice boomed anew, the previous uncertainty replaced by an enthusiastic zeal. "Allie!"

Her attention diverted from knotting a thick, grey, knit scarf around her neck, Alyssa Reid looked across the hospital waiting room and froze. The icy wind steadily blustering through the door she'd started to push open nearly brought tears to her eyes. Standing there, she entertained the notion of shaking her head in disbelief and continuing on like nothing had happened. While she weighed her options, she instinctively squinted, hoping to alleviate some of the sting. Although it would have been far simpler to let the door sway shut, blocking out the harsh winter weather, she couldn't bring herself to do it, needing the open door to serve as a way out, not only from New York Presbyterian Hospital, but also from the situation she now found herself mired in. By no fault of his own, the man walking towards her was one of the last people she wanted to see. Numbly, she gestured towards the door, flashing a weak grin, implying she didn't have time to stop, yet stopped nonetheless.

Looking into his deep brown eyes, the last year and a half of her life seemed to flash before her eyes as a series of snapshots. ...Sitting in the stands of a baseball game in Los Angeles. ...Having a drink in a trendy bar

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downtown afterwards. ...Meeting Scott Miller, one of baseball's biggest names, and spending one glorious hour harmlessly flirting with the married man. ...Standing in the grocery store a year later, trying to fully comprehend that the recently-divorced Scott had just asked her out on a date. ...Attending that year's World Series as his guest. ...Being offered a job at the Centers for Disease Control's New York office, and realizing her high-profile relationship would no longer be of the long-distance variety. ...Moving a surprisingly small number of boxes across the country and then into her Manhattan apartment. ...Decorating the Christmas tree with her amazingly wonderful boyfriend and his two kids. ...The yelling, the tears, the accusations, the panic. ...Scott pointing furiously at his front door, screaming that he never wanted to see her again.

Each of those memories fluttered like the first snowfall of the season around her, individual flakes immediately lost in the bigger picture, yet, each contributing to the sense of awe and excitement, both marking the beginning and the end of something special. One of the images, however, had the tenacity and sublime perfection to last, refusing to melt into the flurry, the only one she allowed herself to indulge for any length of time. ...Standing on the infield grass at Highlander Stadium with her arm around her boyfriend, that year's World Series MVP, moments after the New York Highlanders had clinched their most recent Championship, confetti littering the grass, the stands just starting to empty.

That moment, also captured on film, turned out to be the best picture of she and Scott ever taken, despite the fact that Scott's cap, which he'd just playfully tossed over her head, was falling down over her eyes and his

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hair was ruffled. The two of them had looked so completely, wholly in love. Those days had unquestionably been the best of her life.

A woman entering the hospital lobby through the door Alyssa was still propping open, brushed past, muttering under her breath something about the cold, jolting Alyssa back to reality. Scott was the last thing she needed to be thinking about at that moment; she had a demanding new job and was still trying to settle into a new city, far, far away from the sunny California coast she'd left behind. It was time to move on. To move on, however, she had to ignore the fact that she *had* this new job and had *moved* to this new city just so she could be closer to him, the man she mistakenly thought she would spend the rest of her life with. ...That, and the fact that Alex Whitfield, Scott's teammate and best friend, was about to throw his arms around her waist, sweeping her literally off her feet.

"Hi," she clumsily smiled. "H-how are you?"

Catching her reflection in the windows behind them, she hardly recognized herself. Several years ago, a friend had described her as having the the eyes of Jennifer Aniston, the expressive face of Drew Barrymore, the shy smile of Emily Deschanel, and the hair of a brunette Kate Hudson. The combination had ensured that she had never been short of male attention. Of course, that been before the whirlwind weekend trips to New York and the late night phone calls left her deliriously, delightfully exhausted. ...Before Scott swept the the 5'6" bundle of energy off her feet and to the other side of the country where she'd fallen in love with everything that was New York: the theater, the culture, the city life, the hostile attitude towards others. But most importantly, however, it had

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been before the bitter break-up. Now her eyes had dark circles underneath. The only expression she could muster was that of disappointment and she couldn't remember the last time she genuinely smiled. A year ago, the 29-year old had been asked to mentor a junior member of her team because her passion for her work was "inspirational;" however, now she only inspired pity. During staff meetings and disease investigations in New York, her dour countenance betrayed the fact that she was, in all reality, a very sweet, sympathetic soul, whereas in California, her youthful exuberance had often led people to falsely assume she was a complete pushover, as easily manipulated as their manual wheatgrass juicers.

"Oh my God," Alex practically screamed, swirling her around as if she weighed near nothing. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"I..." She could hardly speak, wanting both to savor the thrill of friendly human interaction and to leave, to get incommunicably far away from anything that had any connection to Scott. "Work," she managed to explain after some stuttering. "The CDC is helping the Public Health Department deal with the media relations efforts for that tuberculosis outbreak that was reported last night. I just met with the Dean of Medicine." Still grappling with the improbability of running into Alex Whitfield in such a public location, she shook her head and her brow furrowed. "How about you?"

Alex lowered her to the ground. "My elbow--" having second thoughts about answering her question, he waved off the question with a dismissive flick of his wrist.

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"Is everything going to be alright?" she persisted.

"Don't ask."

Allie's eyes swelled with concern, but she quickly quashed her gut reaction to demand all the details, acutely aware that as long as she could keep him talking about his own life, they wouldn't be talking about Scott.

"Say no more. So, how's Lara?"

"Good."

Allie lowered herself into the rigid plastic waiting room chair, now extricating herself from the woolen scarf an instant ago she'd been bundling up underneath. "Good?" That's all you have to say?" She playfully rolled her eyes and shook her head slowly. With one deep breath, the tension she felt upon seeing him melted away like the snowflakes that had been tenaciously clinging to her eyelashes. "You always were one for brevity."

"Aren't I? Nah, we're all fine," Alex snickered, towering way above her at an impressive 6'5". "I'm fine. The wife's fine. The girls are fine. Nothing to report really. Sorry."

Cracking a smile, Allie looked up at the same guy she and Scott had frittered away numerous night with in dozens of bars and clubs, trying not to get tangled up in his sumptuous looks.

Lowering himself into the chair beside her, he tried to re-ignite the conversation he had inadvertently extinguished. "And how are you?"

"Fine," she teased.

"Fair enough." Perhaps finally processing the fact that Allie had clearly tried to avoid him moments before, and mistakenly thinking that

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she wasn't interested in prolonging the conversation, Alex found himself a little unsure of how to proceed. He and Allie had never been friends per se, their relationship best described as pleasant, but forced, interaction at benefit dinners, barbecues and post-game celebrations. The realization that perhaps she wasn't as fond of him as he had always been of her caused him to backpedal. "Hey, I'm not holding you up, am I? I didn't mean to stop you. I'm sure you've got--"

"No. It's okay," she lied. In truth, she desperately needed to get back to the office and prepare for a press conference later that night.

Cutting through the crap, Alex sank back in his chair and smiled. "Because it almost seemed like you were trying to dodge me a few seconds ago."

Allie crookedly smiled again. "I was. But please don't take it personally; it was just a gut reaction to seeing someone I associate solely with Scott. And I'm not really with it today anyway. It's been a bad couple of days."

"How so?"

Figuring it was easier than talking about a certain Mr. Miller, she indulged the question "Um. My alarm clock appears to be malfunctioning and keeps going off at all hours of the night. I haven't gotten a decent night's sleep in a week. My keycard at work stopped working. I got off at the wrong subway stop this morning. And the coup de grâce, I thought it was Tuesday all day today."

"It's Thursday," Alex smiled. "You're not even close."

"I know."

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"Damn," Alex choked hesitantly. "Glad I'm not you today."

"You're telling me." She looked down at his arm meaningfully. "So really, is everything okay?"

Alex gazed up at the heavens, begrudgingly acquiescing. "Don't know yet. At the end of the season I was feeling a little weakness and a dull pain in my arm and it hasn't quite gone away."

"And you're here today because...?"

He sighed. "I might need surgery. I had the MRI done yesterday, but had to run so we're meeting today to discuss the results and my options. Just waiting now for the doctor, a specialist, to get out of surgery. All I can do now though is wait."

"I'm sorry to hear..." Allie started before it became apparent that Alex really didn't want to hear it. How could she forget? Sympathy, in his opinion, was a sign of weakness.

Changing the subject, they talked and talked for almost an hour catching up on anything and everything there was to talk about. Hayden Chase, the Highlanders' shortstop, and his wife, the stunningly gorgeous Katherine, were pregnant. Hayden had used every penny of his World Series bonus money to buy a yacht. Roberto Carreras, New York's starting catcher, and his girlfriend, Sandy, had taken off to the Bahamas for a couple weeks. And, in a shocking turn of events, Scott and his agent had just gotten back from a few days on the West Coast examining the possibility of him being traded to the Seattle Seafarers.

"What?" Alyssa screeched. "He's--"

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“Don’t worry, Allie,” Alex sighed, “although Seattle wanted him, the feeling wasn't mutual.”

“Good,” she sighed, settling back into the stiff plastic chair, preparing for the discussion neither one of them really wanted to have, Allie, because the pain was still too fresh, and Alex, because he generally feigned disinterest in the emotional well-being of anyone but his family. “So... How is he?”

Alex, bless his heart, cut right to the chase and was brutally honest. “Fine. Other than being really shaken without you. What happened between you guys?”

“*What happened?*” she hissed. “Like you don’t know?”

“No. I don't. He wouldn't tell any of us. You know him, he doesn't like to talk about the bad stuff. The last we heard was that it was over and he didn't want to talk about it and we shouldn't even bother asking.”

Allie raised one eyebrow incredulously. “But he had to have told you something?”

“Nothing. He flat out refuses to talk about you, which I can't say is all that bad for me. So what happened?”

Having spent the last month dissecting the issue, Alyssa knew exactly the root cause and she didn't waste a moment in sharing the cold, hard truth. “I messed up.”

“Alyssa, spill it, what did you do to Moneytalks?”

“*Moneytalks?*” she asked, scrunching up her nose. She knew, of course, who Alex was referring to, and took a moment to relive the recent past, another snowflake piling atop the heap of memories once warm, now

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icy, frozen by one unforgettable fight. Scott, although always seeming to be receiving shockingly larger and larger paychecks year after year, swore that he wasn't playing the game for the money; he was in it for the sport. He was so adamant about this fact that he actually took offense to anyone even implying anything of the sort, no matter how lightheartedly the subject was broached. ...Not that that stopped any of his friends from teasing him about having signed a six-year contract worth more than the combined roster of the 2009 Florida Stingrays. The previous fall, in an attempt to get even with him for a prank he'd pulled a week earlier, Allie set him up for the ultimate revenge. She'd pulled a few strings and managed to convince the sound-guy at Highlander Stadium to play the refrain of AC/DC's *Moneytalks* when he stepped up to the plate for the last time in the deciding game of the World Series. If the whole stunt hadn't been so funny, and if Scott hadn't been well aware he deserved every second of the public humiliation, there's no doubt he would have been furious.

"C'mon," Alex urged, "just tell me what you did. I'm dying to know what drove such a wedge between my best friend and the only girl he's dated since the divorce I can stand."

Allie smiled appreciatively. "Okay, okay. I took Amy and some of her friends to a concert he explicitly forbade her to go to and lied to him about it."

"I don't get it, did you leave them alone or something?"

As he readjusted in his seat, Alex's leg brushed against hers and a shiver of electricity shot through straight to her gut. Her eyes darted to

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his, desperate to see if this accidental contact had even registered to him. It had. *Sorry*, he mouthed, not wanting to interrupt her train of thought. She rolled her eyes and waved it off, downplaying the thrill of the first real human contact she had experienced in over a month. "I-- Wait," she winced, the self-aware flush on her cheeks deepening, "what did you ask me?"

Fully aware of why she was floundering, he arched one eyebrow and leaned back against the rigid plastic seat, savoring the moment. "I asked if you left Amy and her friends alone?"

"No."

"So, then what's his deal?"

Allie shrugged helplessly, as Alex readjusted once more, this time crossing his legs towards her so that his foot hovered in midair only an inch or two away from hers.

"So he's mad you took his daughter to a concert?"

"...His thirteen year-old daughter."

"That's it?"

"Pretty much. That, as it turns out, was evidence of my -- and I quote -- willfully disregarding and disrespecting the decisions he's made raising his children."

Stone-faced, Alex thought for a minute and then said authoritatively "you should call him."

Allie was prepared for such a suggestion and immediately retorted with an over-aggressive "no."

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"You should," he insisted. "You made him incredibly happy and he hasn't been the same without you. I'm sure he'd love to hear from you."

"Ha!"

"I'm serious."

"No."

"Why not? You're clearly not over him."

"I'm not claiming I am. Truth be told, I'm an idiot for screwing things up and miss him tremendously. ...Which is, no doubt, part of the reason I am so miserable these days and can't sleep."

"Well, if you miss him so much, call him," Alex said plainly.

"Can't. He explicitly told me not to. Ever."

"So? He knows you 'willfully disregard' his opinions. He can't honestly expect you to start respecting his wishes now that you have no real obligation to, right? Call him."

For the first time, Alex and Allie exchanged an easy chuckle. "No."

"And you know what's funny? I'm pretty sure he told me *he* was an idiot for letting *you* go. Really, call him."

"No. No, no, no, no. No. If, like you say, he misses me so much, why can't he call me?"

"Because he was really drunk at the time he said that and now that he's sobered up, I'm pretty sure he's talked himself out of anything that resembles vulnerability. Call. Him."

"No. Here's an idea: next time you see him, tell him to call me."

Unrelenting, Alex continued. "We both know that bastard is too damn stubborn to call you himself."

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“Whitfield, I can’t,” she insisted. “He kicked me out of his house and told me he never wanted to see me again. On top of that, he said some *really* nasty things. I can’t.” In what was becoming a fairly predictable pattern, every time Scott’s name was mentioned, Alyssa found herself on the verge of tears.

Thankfully, Alex could see the pain being reflected back at him and he eased off. “Fine then, screw him. Moneytalks can go it alone, but I miss you. Look, Lara’s at her parent’s. Come and have dinner with me tomorrow night and save me from having to eat alone.” Seeing she was at least interested, Alex continued. “Pescatore’s? Eight o’clock? I’ll call and make the reservations!”

Allie looked up into Alex’s eyes and saw, for the first time in a long time, genuine concern. True, this was Alex Whitfield, the same man who constantly reminded Scott that Allie was six years younger than he was and was a consummate prankster, but this was also the same Alex that went out of his way to make her feel at home at every Highlander function. “You don’t think Scott will mind?”

“Al. He broke up with you. He has no right to care. Is that a yes?”

“You know,” Allie smiled, “I would love to.”

“Good.”

“Well,” Allie exhaled, “I hate to do this to you but I should probably get going; I need to get back to work and get ready for a press conference tonight. ...Unless you want me to stay until you find out what’s going on with your elbow?” Alex shook his head indifferently. “Okay. Tomorrow at eight.”

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At ten-to-eight the next day, Alyssa zipped out the door, caught a cab and, hardly fifteen minutes later, arrived at her favorite Manhattan restaurant fashionably late. A man on his way out of the building held the door open for her, nodding at the woman in a short black dress and knee-high, stiletto boots, and whose hair was cascading around her angelic face.

“Good evening, ma’am,” the maitre-d’ glowed. “May I help you?”

“Yes, I was supposed to be meeting someone here at eight...” Nervously, she surveyed the room, looking for the man who was supposed to be saving her from yet another lonely evening of chinese take-out. “The name is Whitfield.”

“Whitfield? Hmm...” The maitre-d’ looked over the reservation list at least three times before breaking the bad news to her. “I’m sorry ma’am, we don’t have a ‘Whitfield’ on tonight’s list.

"You sure?"

"Yes, ma'am. However, if you're willing to wait--"

“You know,” Allie suddenly gushed, “my mistake. *Rogers*, party of two.” How could Allie have forgotten that she was having dinner with one of New York's most public superstars, one recognizable by almost every baseball fan in the tri-state area? None of the guys ever made reservations under their real names.

“Oh, yes. Mr. Rogers hasn't arrived yet, would you like to wait at the table?”

“Yes,” Allie cooed, relieved that she was in the right place at the right time. “That would be wonderful.”

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The maitre-d' nimbly made his way through the restaurant, weaving between tables as Allie anxiously and clumsily followed behind. It was a beautiful place: bright white walls, high ceilings with sparkling chandeliers adorning them, marble floors, lush green plants in beautiful terra cotta planters and starched white tablecloths. "Will this be alright?" her guide graciously offered, leading her to a small and cozy table in a secluded corner, far away from the hustle and bustle around them.

"Perfect."

Left alone, Alyssa sat down, glanced over the menu and then ordered a drink, knowing her dinner date had a propensity for running late.

At a half-past eight, Alex hurriedly made his way across the room mouthing the words "I'm so sorry" over and over.

"Alexander," Allie beamed, standing up greet him, "how nice to see you again. I was starting to get worried."

"Fancy meeting you here on a Friday night?" he joked, hugging her and then chivalrously pulling her chair out so she could sit down again. "Really, I am so sorry I'm late, but I couldn't catch a cab."

The two enthusiastically picked up where they had left off the day before, Alex still insisting Scott was still in love with her for a good twenty minutes before the maitre-d' asked to see Alex, who still hadn't managed to crack his menu. Immediately, Alyssa felt her stomach sink.

Either oblivious to her concern or ignoring it, Alex blithely sighed "back in a sec."

True to his word, he came right back. The problem was, when he reappeared, he brought trouble trailing along behind him. Trouble, in this

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case, embodied as Scott Miller. Clean shaven. Fresh haircut. Button-down shirt tucked into neatly pressed slacks. A carefree grin lighting up the room. Alyssa's heart fluttered, a subdued excitement mingling with an intense panic, and she sunk into her chair knowing she had only precious seconds to get it together. Without Scott in her life, she had come completely undone and it pained her to no end that he looked completely untouched by the ordeal.

As they got closer, Scott finally looked up to figure out just where they were going and stopped dead in his tracks, mid-sentence. A storm of emotions, none of which indicated he was even vaguely amused, flashed across his face as he found the resolve to approach the table.

Terrified, Alyssa rose from her seat and forced a smile. "Scott, how... nice to see you," she ventured, certain that no one within earshot believed her.

"Right," he spat, turning to glare at Alex, his expression communicating an anger that bordered on murderous rage.

"Well, I hate to interrupt this unhappy reunion," Alex inanely bubbled, quite clearly ignoring the tension, "but I forgot I have other plans tonight, so I need to get going. But I'll call you tomorrow, Reid," Alex reassured Allie, leaning over to give her an encouraging hug.

"Holy shit, you're dead, Whitfield," she wheezed, holding onto him for as long as possible.

"Yeah, I know." Alex quickly pulled away to address the both of them. "You two behave tonight, okay?" he sang, dropping his hand to his side once it became clear Scott had no intention of returning the handshake.

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"I expect you to say through dessert. Trust me, you both need to talk to one another. Do it for me." With that he was gone, picking his way through the tables towards Second Avenue.

Alyssa and Scott both begrudgingly sat down at the table, and Scott anxiously fiddled with his butter knife. "With friends like that..." Allie began, knowing humor would be her best chance at breaking the ice. It failed miserably; Scott's hostile and distant look jolted her into the realization that she had lost her ability to instantly set him at ease. Choosing her words carefully, she took another stab at polite conversation. "So, how have you been?"

"Great." Hardly paying any attention to the beautiful young woman sitting across the table from him, Scott flagged down the waiter and ordered the first of what would be quite a few drinks.

"Wow," Allie grimaced taking a sip of her martini, "hitting the hard stuff early, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Okay..." Alyssa let her voice trail off and she stared blankly over Scott's shoulder, praying that it wouldn't take long for him to warm up to her. It soon became painfully obvious that her hopes were unrealistic. The silence became more and more oppressive with every passing second, buying Allie plenty of time to figure out how many different ways, all spectacularly painful and graphic, she could kill Alex for what he'd just done. Just as she was about to say something else that probably would have fallen equally as flat as her last few attempts at conversation, the neatly dressed waiter showed up with Scott's drink. The glass had hardly

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touched the table before Scott swiped it away, pounded the entire thing and ordered a second.

Following his lead, Alyssa took another gulp of her drink, her eyes now locked on Scott's, her hands trembling. The hush that had befallen them was punctuated by the clanging of silverware echoing throughout the cozy room, the stillness only disturbed as the wait-staff rushed past.

"So," the waiter pleasantly sang once he had returned, "have you both already decided what you'd like for dinner tonight or can try to tempt you with tonight's specials. We have--"

"Save it," Scott viciously erupted, thankfully at a volume low enough as to not draw attention. "I'll have the filet mignon, well-done, with a salad. Italian dressing on the side."

Obviously shell-shocked, the young man stood silent for a second before he could find the words. "Yes, sir ...and for you, ma'am?"

Doing her best to diffuse the situation Allie cooed, "I'd like the salmon and I think I'll go with a salad as well, but I'll have bleu cheese dressing."

"Great."

As soon as the waiter was out of earshot, Allie redirected her attention to the man across the table and hissed "what the hell was that about? You can't possibly think that he's out to ruin your evening, too."

Refusing to enter into anything that could possibly be construed as intelligent conversation, Scott did nothing more than shrug his shoulders and then polish off his second drink in ten minutes, a pace he showed every intention of maintaining.

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"Scott," Allie urged, "maybe you should just slow down with the alcohol. I'd hate for you to-"

"Whoa," Scott interrupted with acid in his voice, "the irony -- *you* giving me advice on how to be a responsible adult. I don't think so."

Taking a moment to fully internalize just how irate he was, Allie tried once more to broach the subject of why they were really there. "Look. Alex got us together for a reason. He must have thought that if he could get us to sit down and act like adults, we might be able to put this all behind us."

Peeling his eyes from the silverware, Scott's eyes eventually meet hers. "I'm not sure what Alex may or may not have told you, but this is a bad idea all around. In fact, I'm not even sure I should be sitting here."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but since we are here, and until you decide to leave, would it be too much to ask that you just be civil?"

"Am I not being civil?" Scott snarled patronizingly. "Well then, I'm very sorry. I'll do my best to shape up. Just for you. Because we know how well you honor my requests. Anyway, I thought I was showing *great* restraint not grabbing Whitfield and-" Scott's tirade was cut short when he caught sight of the waiter out of the corner of his eye, apparently in a holding pattern about ten feet away, obviously waiting for an "all clear." Allie waved him over with an artificial smile on her face and Scott managed to quiet himself long enough for the plates to be distributed. Even though the waiter's question was for the table he could only establish eye contact with Allie. "Would either of you care for some ground pepper?"

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"No," Allie whispered politely.

Scott, showing concern for another human being for the first time since arriving, also declined graciously and then added, "Hey, I'm really sorry for being rude earlier. It was uncalled for."

"Not at all, sir." Most likely too scared to hang around their table much longer, their server happily excused himself and proceeded to check on his other tables.

With some semblance of dignity returned to their meal, the two turned their attention to the food in front of them. In a way, Alyssa was glad they weren't talking. She could scarcely figure out how she felt about the situation. Having to express an opinion either way could only lead to disaster. One breath, she wanted nothing more than to walk out, leaving him alone, putting an end to this unmanageable evening. The next, she would die to be able to reach out and hold his hand again. To kiss him. To...

"Alyssa." Now halfway through his salad, Scott put his fork down and turned his attention, instead, to his ex-girlfriend, still panic-stricken a mere three feet away.

Her heart sped up at the mere mention of her name. Gone were the surly undertones. There was a chance Scott was finally softening. "Yes?"

"There's no salt on the table. Can you grab the salt-shaker off the table behind you?"

She gaped blankly at him for a fraction of a second, trying to comprehend what was going on. "Sure." With her back turned to him, she let out a long, silent growl.

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After sprinkling a staggering amount of salt on a tomato, he continued along acting as if the past twenty minutes had never happened. "So, how have you been?"

Her response, motivated by both fear and indignation at how she'd been treated thus far, was to look at him and, in a tone neutral enough to surprise even herself, reply, "Scott, I really can't imagine you want a response. I think we both know you don't really care."

After a long period of reflection Scott tried again. "Okay, I get it. I do. I'm just frustrated because I have no idea what to say to you; I'm sure you understand."

"Sure," she conceded, "but how hard is it really to say whatever it is you *are* thinking *without* creating a scene?"

Scott seemed to agree this was a reasonable request and took another moment to collect his thoughts. "You're right. It's obviously not your fault we're here tonight. Alex surely thought that if we... There's so much I want to say... But the problem is..." His mind still racing, he forced himself to take another deep breath. "I don't know where to start. Maybe I should start with... sorry." Convinced Alex was right, they were now well on their way toward reconciliation, Allie's pulse raced and she was instantly willing to forgive him for everything he said, both that day and in the not-too-distant past, but wisely she took a second to examine this last statement for land-mines. Finding none, a smile crept across her face and she immediately started daydreaming about her future with Scott. She parted her lips to say something just as Scott, oblivious to how touched Allie was with his half-hearted apology, or how much she loathed

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herself for surrendering so quickly, continued. "I mean its probably my fault Alex set us up."

"Huh?" she grunted, quietly trying to make sense of what he'd just said.

"I didn't argue when he put words in my mouth the other night. I guess this is what I get for not telling him, or anyone else for that matter, how bad things were."

Almost gagging on a piece of lettuce, Allie stared at Scott in disbelief. *His fault Alex set them up? How bad things were?* "So wait... What are you apologizing for?"

"Huh?"

Allie rolled her eyes and took a deep breath, exaggerating her annunciation of every word. "You said you were sorry. What exactly are you apologizing for?"

"I'm sorry you're having to waste an evening here."

"Waste an evening?"

"Yeah. I'm sure you have better things to do than..." Scott trailed off when he realized that Allie thought that there was a chance at reconciliation. "Oh Allie, you didn't think that a simple dinner would solve all our problems. Don't you understand that you-"

"Just stop, Scott," Allie snapped, blinking back a tear before he could get any further. "Please." Sickened, Allie pushed her plate away and stared dumbly at him. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't bring herself to leave. As awkward as this was, in some twisted way, this was exactly what she wanted: for Scott to see how deeply she cared. And it

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was a hell of an opportunity for him to realize that if they both committed to do so, they could make it work.

They ate the entirety of their meal thereafter in silence. Allie picked at the beautiful fillet in front of her, but couldn't find the appetite to eat anything other than the spears of asparagus that adorned the plate and a few pieces of bread, reflecting on each painful second she'd experienced since their breakup.

"You know," Scott boldly asserted, signing the credit card receipt and then dumping what remained of his fourth bourbon down his throat, "Alex may have been right, maybe by talking this over we can get some closure." Allie unfortunately knew by this point that when he said "we" he really meant "I." "Can I talk you into a cup of coffee?"

"You mean now?" Allie gasped, almost horrified that she was contemplating allowing Scott to prolong this evening.

"Well, yeah." Scott paused and looked at Allie, his suspicion correct that her resolve was crumbling. Continuing his persuasive assault, he gave her a wry half-smile she had trouble resisting and said, "I promise to be civil. For real this time." Figuring she really had nothing to lose, Allie aloofly nodded and allowed Scott to help her on with her coat. "Rudolph's okay?"

"Sure."

"Good."

Perhaps softening a bit, this time he took Allie's arm and they walked through an unusually tranquil downtown Manhattan, the sound of the

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snow crunching underneath their feet one of the only sounds. "Scott," Allie ventured when she could stand the silence no more, "do you remember the last time we were down here this late in the evening?"

After thinking, a second a faint grin appeared on his face. "Our first date..."

Allie classified the grin as the result of someone recalling a single fond memory from a time best forgotten. Her stomach sank and she wondered both why she'd allowed herself to get talked into this, and if the day would ever come when she would be able to tell him no.

Scott led the way to Rudolph's, her favorite New York coffee shop, managing to keep up a fairly steady stream of polite small talk and, although it was obvious that Scott really had to work at it, she greatly appreciated his efforts. Even a little of the old Scott managed to show through, which let both of them relax enough that they could both chuckle occasionally.

Rudolph's was moderately busy so Scott wisely suggested that Allie find them a table and he'd order the drinks. Agreeing, Allie started to relay her drink order, but caught herself halfway through. Of course he knew what she wanted by now. Allie dismissed the look he was giving her with a wave of her hand and started the hunt for an empty table, trying desperately to not let show the feelings of loss and loneliness washing over her.

By the time Scott had ordered, paid and was heading towards their table with two paper cups in hand, Allie had managed to get a grip on herself, flashing him an almost-genuine smile. Scott handed her a tall,

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caramel mocha and then settled into his seat. The two sat there for a short while, enjoying the first sips of their drinks, not looking at one other, but quite not looking away either. Alyssa found she appreciated the silence, knowing on some level this was just the calm before the storm.

As could be expected, the serenity didn't last. "Allie," Scott began, "I didn't realize that you and Alex thought if you could get us together I might apologize for what I said the night we broke up. I'm not and I won't. Ever." Allie suddenly found it much more difficult to swallow the sip of coffee in her mouth. Scott continued, "You need to realize that I don't regret anything I said that night. Not one single thing."

"Scott," Alyssa muttered weakly, simultaneously trying to ward off another inevitable attack and surrendering to it.

"Hold on," he interrupted, "just let me finish. You were my girlfriend. That's it. Maybe it's my fault, but somewhere along the line you got confused. You seemed to think that also automatically made you Amy's mom. I really don't know how that happened, and to tell you the truth I don't care. When you went from politely following the guidelines for the raising of my child to picking and choosing which rules suited you, you crossed the line."

Shaking, Allie lowered her cup to the table and sat there, petrified. The night she and Scott had broken up she had apologized a thousand different ways for taking his only daughter to a rap concert and said everything she knew how to say. She now found herself speechless, feeling, if it were indeed possible, worse than the night Scott had first told her that he never wanted to see her again.

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Either not noticing or not caring that Allie had already gotten the point, Scott kept spewing fire. "I won't date someone who, with malice of forethought, tried to sabotage the way I'd decided to raise my children."

"Scott, you're getting carried away," Allie moaned softly.

"Am I? I feel I've been betrayed. Nothing you can say or do will ever change that. When it's my daughter's well-being at stake, I can't afford to give people second chances. You had your chance and you blew it. Big time."

With tears welling up, Allie fought harder and harder to stay in control of her emotions. "Are... are you done?" she stuttered.

"Yes."

"Do you feel better now?"

"Actually, I do," Scott replied flatly.

"I'm oh-so happy for you," she replied curtly. "As it's getting late I think I'm going to get going. Thanks for the coffee though."

"Huh?"

"Look, I've got better things to do than suffer through your metamorphosis into Mr. Hyde." Although the change was almost imperceptible, every word grew louder than the last. "I'm not going to sit here and be berated by you. What, were you disappointed you stopped so early into it the night we broke up? Here's the news: I'm done with letting you make me feel bad. In fact, I'm done with you all together. Have a great life."

At this point in her tirade she was almost yelling and had stopped all other conversations in the coffee shop. She only became aware of the

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incredible silence as she stormed out past Scott, but she was surprised to find she was so angry she didn't care she'd caused a scene.

"Allie," Scott called after her on the street. "Allie, come back, please?"

Alyssa didn't slow her determined pace as she stormed away, nor did she even pause when she rocketed her coffee cup towards a trash can on the corner, missing the slot, the whole thing rebounding onto the snowy sidewalk in a brown, sticky mess. Scott honestly didn't want things to end like this and searched desperately for words that could make things better, but, as much as he hated to admit defeat, he reluctantly realized that any words at this point would only make things worse. After watching her round the corner a block away, he turned heavy-heartedly and headed towards his car. Halfway down the block, he caught himself about to commit to memory the last place he would ever see her and forced himself to keep walking without glancing back over his shoulder.