

# THE DOOR OF SHATTERED GLASS



A STORY OF FATHERS,  
SONS, AND THE GHOSTS  
WE INHERIT

**RICK NOVAK**



## **The Door of Shattered Glass: A Story of Fathers, Sons, and the Ghosts We Inherit**

*What if the most dangerous thing your son could inherit was you?*

Alex Mason swore he'd never become his father. He was raised behind locked doors and broken promises, where silence hurt more than shouting, and rage shattered more than just glass. When he was growing up, fear was law, and love came with conditions. Power passed for strength. Pain passed for love.

Now a father himself, Alex is determined to break the cycle. But cycles don't break cleanly; they crack, they resist, they haunt. When his young son Max begins to flinch at the sound of his voice, Alex is forced to face a terrifying truth: the past isn't finished with him yet.

*The Door of Shattered Glass* is a raw, deeply intimate story of generational trauma, fatherhood, and the long road toward healing. As Alex fights to become a man he never had the chance to know, he's faced with a daunting question: Can you escape the ghosts you've inherited without becoming one yourself?

Told with haunting honesty and emotional precision, this novel explores what it means to carry pain, and what it takes to put it down. For readers drawn to character-driven fiction about redemption, legacy, and the love that redefines us, *The Door of Shattered Glass* will stay with you long after the last page.

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A Story of Fathers, Sons And  
The Ghosts We Inherit

Rick Novak



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*To my mother, my light through every storm, my strength in darkness, my compass when I was lost. Your unwavering presence has been my anchor when the world felt unsteady, a testament to the power of unconditional love. The very love this story seeks to find.*

*To Wolfgang Sebastian, my beloved Wolf, who waits for me at the Rainbow Bridge. Your silent understanding and steadfast love carried me through my darkest days. You were more than a companion, you were my healer, my bridge from past to present. True love asks for nothing in return, and you gave it freely. Until we meet again, my boy, know that Daddy loves his Wolf.*

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*To the men I've walked beside on the road to redemption, this is for you. You have faced the weight of your past, and strive every day to break cycles, rebuild trust, and redefine yourselves. This book is a testament to the belief that even the most shattered lives can be mended with hope, hard work, and courage.*

*This story is about love's fragility, the human spirit's resilience, and the power of change. It is about finding the eye of the storm within, holding onto calm amidst chaos, and believing that even in the wreckage, something beautiful can rise.*

*This book is for all of you who dare to believe in second chances.*

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## Prologue: The Sound of Breaking Glass

Under the dim glow of a porch light, Alex once traced the outline of Max's tiny fingers against his palm, his son's sleepy giggle light as a breeze through tall grass. For a moment, before the weight of history pressed in, he had believed he could be something different.

He had held so much in that tiny palm. It was his own second chance, the fragile promise that he could rewrite what had been written into him. But second chances were like glass, and Alex had never learned how to hold anything without breaking it.

Now, his fingers curled around something else: not Max's tiny hand, not the warmth of something worth keeping, but the slick, empty weight of a bottle.

The whiskey seared its way down, hot and useless. The bottle teetered beside him, amber liquid sloshing with his unsteady grip. He let the bottle fall, the weight of it too much to hold. His pulse throbbed behind his eyes. The headlights carved long shadows across the street, stretching toward the house at the end of the cul-de-sac.

Sarah's house. The house that used to be his.

It looked the same—clean white siding, neatly trimmed flowerbeds, the porch light shining as a sentinel above the front door. But Alex knew better. The warmth was gone, leaving behind a hollow shell of everything he'd lost.

He blinked hard, trying to steady his vision. The whiskey washed over everything, leaving the porch wavering like heat

rising off pavement. His eyes locked onto the door, where the brass handle reflected the streetlight in a taunting glint.

The lock. The first thing she changed. The last thing keeping him out.

His fingers fumbled for the crumpled papers on the passenger seat, clumsily smoothing them over his thigh. The words blurred, but he didn't need to read them. He knew the line by heart now:

"I get scared when Daddy's mad."

Max's words. His boy. His shadow.

The same boy he had once tucked into bed with dinosaur stories. The child who had wrapped tiny arms around his neck and whispered, "you're the best dad ever."

Now that boy was hidden behind lawyers and locked doors. And Sarah. She'd done this. Taken Max. Filed for full custody. Supervised visitation. Like he was a monster.

The pain hit fresh, sharp and sudden. The paper crinkled under his grip, edges biting into his palm. His knuckles stood out, pale against the deep creases of the page.

He took another long, desperate swallow, fire creeping through his veins. He wasn't sure if he was trying to put himself out or set the whole night ablaze.

The word "Defendant" stared up from the paperwork, cold and impersonal, as if he were nothing more than a case file now, an entry on a judge's docket.



The bottle now on the floorboard caught his eye again, golden liquid shimmering in the low light. He twisted the cap off and took another pull. The fire spread, deliberate and slow, winding deep into his gut.

*You let them lock you out.* The words slithered in, finding every crack in his mind.

Alex stiffened. He shook his head, trying to shove the voice back into the grave where it belonged.

His father's voice. Even after all these years, Frank Mason's rough baritone still gnawed at the edges of his mind, chewing at him like rot beneath the floorboards.

Alex squeezed his eyes shut. His father's breath was right there, hot against his ear. *Men don't beg, boy.*

The porch light quivered, its faint glow straining against the dark. For a moment, jagged shadows twisted in a frantic dance, reaching, resisting, before the glow vanished with a distant click. Someone inside had shut it off.

The light of the streetlamp barely reached him, leaving the car in a dim, murky haze. The darkness pressed closer, not just around him, but inside him.

Alex's hand clenched against his thigh. Just go. Just drive away. Just take a step back.

Then Max's voice came again. *I get scared when Daddy's mad.*

His breath caught. His jaw locked. The custody papers shook in his grip, the edges damp where sweat softened crumpled creases. He exhaled hard, fingers tightening, then shoved the papers onto the passenger seat.

Enough. No more reading. No more thinking.

His boots hit the pavement before he'd made the conscious choice to move. The whiskey surged through his bloodstream, throwing his pulse into an uneven rhythm.

He pushed forward, past the sound of the car door slamming shut behind him, past the warning in his own head. Up the driveway.

The walkway blurred beneath him, shadows stretching long and thin under the streetlamp's glow. His breath hitched as the porch steps loomed. One stride. Then another.

His boot caught on the last step, rattling the wood beneath him as he reached the door.

"Sarah!"

His voice split the night. He slammed his fist against the wood, once, twice.

"Open the goddamn door!"

The door didn't budge. Only silence.

"Let me see my son!"

His voice cracked. The night shrank around him. Everything funneled down to one thing: that damn door. Unyielding.

Alex seized the handle and twisted hard. The brass chilled his palm, slick with sweat. He rattled it, as if force alone might break its resolve.

*She's locking you out. Like a child.*

Alex staggered back. Slammed his fist into the door again.

“Sarah! Max needs me! You can’t do this!”

His breathing turned ragged. His hand drifted toward the porch chair, fingertips skimming the rough wood before pulling back.

A breeze stirred the porch, rustling the leaves. The house stared back, empty and indifferent. The lock held firm beneath the porch light, a silent barrier between him and everything he’d lost.

His fingers gripped the chair’s edge, splinters biting into his palm. Then, he pivoted. Hefting the chair high, he smashed it forward with everything he had.

The chair struck with a crack like a gunshot. Wood buckled and splintered. The lock jolted but held.

The violent sound split the quiet street open. The door’s glass cracked but didn’t give. Fractures spidered across the pane in a frozen explosion, jagged lines outlining shards that hadn’t fallen.

A small hole gaped near the center, surrounded by cracks. But the door still stood.

Alex lowered the chair, now hanging limp at his side. His chest heaved. Sweat clung to his brow despite the chill.

The porch had gone still. Unnaturally quiet.

Movement. Max.

The boy stood just inside the house, in the hallway, dinosaur pajamas clinging too tight around his wrists, bare feet flat on the wood floor. His hands hung stiff at his sides. He didn't speak. Didn't cry. Didn't run. Just stared through the broken glass. Straight at his father.

Alex's breath caught. "Hey, buddy," he said softly. "It's okay. I'm not mad. I just want to see you, that's all."

Max didn't approach. His wide eyes flicked toward the hallway, quick, cautious. Looking for an exit. Looking for someone else.

Alex's throat closed. Something sharp twisted in his chest. Why does he look afraid of me?

Then he saw it. In the glass. The fractured pane reflected his face in shattered pieces. The face had blood on its lip, eyes wide and wild, jaw clenched so tight it pulsed. Alex didn't recognize the man staring back.

The reflection didn't flinch. Didn't soften. It stared back, steady and accusing.

He knew that look all too well. The fury barely buried beneath the skin. The grim, hard line of the mouth. The same mouth that once shouted down a different boy, in a smaller house with cheaper walls and darker memories.

Not just his father's face. His own.

New light filled the street behind him, blue, red, blinding. A siren burst once, sharp and electric, then cut out, leaving the cul-de-sac buzzing with its echo.

Alex stood still. Then he turned slowly as two officers stepped out of the cruiser, their shadows stretching long across the lawn.

“Sir,” one called, “step away from the house.”

Alex’s breath came ragged. Behind the broken glass, Max had vanished.

“You don’t understand,” Alex said, voice breaking. “She locked me out. I just wanted to see my son.”

“Hands where we can see them,” the other officer said, hand hovering near his belt as he inched closer.

Alex’s fists clenched. Splinters dug deeper into his palm.

“I didn’t break in,” he insisted. “I didn’t.”

“Sir. Now.”

His chest rose and fell in uneven bursts. He didn’t lift his hands. Not right away.

Another step. Boots creaking on wood.

“Don’t make this worse,” the officer next to him warned.

Alex shifted back. A hand closed on his shoulder, firm, controlled.

Alex twisted instinctively. “Get off me!”

The movement was clumsy, unbalanced. The second officer moved fast, arm across Alex’s chest, driving him to the boards. His knees hit hard. Pain burst through his ribs.

“Hands behind your back!”

His body resisted, not to fight, but to breathe. To slow it all down. A knee pressed between his shoulder blades. His cheek met the cold porch.

The handcuffs clicked. Tight. Final. The same sound his father's belt once made. Sharp. Measured. Unavoidable.

Somewhere inside, Sarah's voice rose. "I'm here." Maybe she was speaking to Max. Maybe to herself.

Alex turned his face toward the door. Toward the splintered pane of glass. There was no father there. Only the jagged reflection of a man he didn't recognize.

# Chapter 1: Echo Training

The front door slammed, rattling the kitchen window. Alex looked up from his math homework, pencil halted mid-equation. His mother, Anna, stiffened at the stove, the wooden spoon suspended above a pot of boiling rice, steam curling around her tense fingers.

Heavy footsteps filled the hall. The smell of sweat and whiskey rolled into the kitchen before the man himself appeared.

Alex's father stood in the doorway, his solid frame filling the narrow space, shoulders slumped with exhaustion. His face was ruddy from the cold February wind and the bottle he'd nursed on the way home.

Anna forced a smile. "You're home early."

His father grunted and dropped his lunchbox onto the table. It landed with a metallic thud beside Alex's notebook. He rubbed a hand across his face, the scrape of his calloused palm against his stubble the only sound in the kitchen for several long seconds. Then his bloodshot eyes shifted toward the stove.

"Where's dinner?"

Anna stirred the rice. "Almost ready. Just a few more minutes."

The muscles in his jaw twitched. Alex flinched inside but was careful not to let it show.

"Long day." He ran a hand through his dark hair, disheveling it further. "Bust my ass out there for ten hours, and you can't have a fuckin' meal on the goddamn table when I walk in?"

“It’s almost done, Frank,” Anna said softly. “Just give me a minute.”

Frank’s fists clenched at his sides.

Alex’s pulse kicked against his ribs. He glanced at the clock, 6:42. He didn’t know why he memorized those numbers, only that he needed something, anything, solid to hold on to.

The spoon clattered against the pot as Anna turned toward the counter to reach for the salt. The motion was ordinary, harmless.

But Frank exploded.

He stepped forward and slapped the back of her head, hard. Anna stumbled against the counter with a small, startled cry. The pot of rice was jostled, water hissing as it splashed onto the burner.

Frank’s voice rose, sharp and slurred. “Don’t turn your back on me when I’m talking to you!”

She turned back toward him, muttering, “I wasn’t.”

The second slap cracked across her face, open-palmed and brutal. Her head whipped sideways, hair lashing against her cheek. She reeled back, colliding with the refrigerator, her breath rushing out in a sharp, uneven exhale. Knees buckling, she caught herself with one hand on the tiled floor, fingers splayed, trembling.

The sound of it, the flat, unmistakable crack of flesh on flesh, froze Alex in place. His fingers dug into his jeans beneath the table. His breath turned shallow, the air around him thick and unsteady.



Frank towered over her.

“You think you can ignore me? Disrespect me in front of my own son?” He jabbed an unsteady finger at Alex without looking. “This is what happens when you don’t listen. You need to show me respect, Anna. How the hell’s the boy supposed to learn if you don’t?”

Anna cupped her cheek and nodded through silent tears.

“I’m sorry.”

“Damn right.”

He straightened and turned to the table. His eyes landed on Alex.

“You watchin’, boy?”

Alex’s mouth opened, but nothing came out. His vision blurred as his eyes filled with tears. He blinked desperately, but the hot sting remained. His hands trembled beneath the table, his body shrinking instinctively into the chair.

Frank’s gaze sharpened when he saw the moisture in Alex’s eyes. His lips curled into something that wasn’t quite a smile.

“You crying?”

Alex shook his head quickly, but a traitorous tear slipped down his cheek.

Frank slammed his palm against the table. Alex jumped, the pencil rolling off his notebook.

“You listening, boy? You want to make it in this world, you toughen up. You hear me?”

Alex wiped the tear away with his sleeve and gave a shaky nod.

“Good.” Frank settled back in his chair and exhaled heavily. “That’s how the world works. Softness gets you hurt. You show them you’re weak, they’ll chew you up and spit you out.”

Anna knocked the spoon against the edge of the pot too loudly.

Frank shot to his feet.

“Jesus Christ, can’t you do one goddamn thing right?”

She raised her hands in instinctive defense as he lunged toward her. The pan slipped. Rice exploded across the tile.

There was silence for the space of a breath. Then the first blow came.

The sound of his father’s knuckles against his mother’s face cracked through the kitchen like thunder.

Alex jolted from his chair. “Go to your room, Alex!” Anna screamed through a mouthful of blood.

His legs wouldn’t move.

“Now!”

The force of her voice broke through the paralysis. Alex ran. His socks slid across the tile, sending him crashing into the hallway wall before he righted himself.

Behind him came the awful sound of his mother hitting the floor. Then the dull thud of his father's boots stepping over her.

The hallway stretched forever, the walls seeming to bend and twist, a nightmarishly long tunnel. His bedroom door loomed ahead.

He grabbed the knob, threw himself inside, and locked it. His breath was hot and ragged in the darkness.

He curled beneath the bed, pressing his face into the dust-scented carpet. His heart hammered so hard it hurt.

He clamped his hands over his ears, but the sounds still seeped through, the crash of furniture, his mother's muted cries, his father's voice barking.

Then came the footsteps.

Heavy. Slow. Deliberate.

"You think a lock can stop me?" The voice was different now, colder, quieter.

The silence stretched thin.

Then the crack of wood giving way exploded through the hallway as his father's boot smashed into the door. The first kick carved a long fracture down the frame, blue paint chipping, a sound so sharp it made Alex's whole body flinch. The second sent splinters blasting across the room like flying teeth. The third hit with a force that made the bed shake, tearing the door completely off its hinges and hurling it into the wall before it collapsed in a broken heap on the floor.

*Crack. Crack. Crack.*

His father stood in the doorway, framed by the dim light of the hall. His silhouette was too big, too solid. Alex pressed himself tighter against the floor, willing himself to disappear.

“Come out,” his father said.

Alex didn’t move.

The man’s whisky-laden breath came heavier. He crouched, eyes searching the shadow beneath the bed. Their eyes met.

“Think you can hide from me?” The voice turned mocking. “Like a scared little girl.”

A hand shot out and latched around Alex’s ankle. The boy clawed at the carpet as he was yanked from his hiding spot, his fingernails tearing against the fibers, back scraping against the bedframe.

The first blow came fast. The leather belt whistled through the air and snapped across Alex’s back with a sound like a gunshot. The pain was white hot, stealing his breath away.

“Men don’t cry,” his father hissed, raising the belt again.

The second lash cut across the first, igniting the burning pain into something sharper. Alex’s body convulsed, but he didn’t scream. He knew it would make it worse. Instead, he bit his lower lip until he tasted blood.

“You hear me?” The belt snapped down again. “You want to survive in this world? You fight back when someone disrespects you! That’s how it works. You think life’s fair? It’s not. Weak gets you hurt!”

Alex's cheeks were wet. He squeezed his eyes shut, hating the tears, hating himself.

His father knelt beside him, grabbed his wrist, and twisted it until Alex gasped.

"Say it," the man demanded, voice low and deadly. "Say it or I'll give you more."

Alex's vision blurred from the pain.

"Men don't cry," he whispered.

"Say it louder!"

"Men don't cry!" Alex sobbed.

"Again!" The word snapped like the belt.

"Men don't cry!"

The tears were gone.

The hand released him. The belt dropped to the floor with a dull thud. Alex heard his father's footsteps retreating down the hall.

He lay on the floor, his back on fire, his wrist throbbing. He stared at the shattered doorframe, at the splinters littering the carpet. The ruins of his last safe place.

From the kitchen, his mother's muffled sobs drifted down the hall.

Alex wanted to cry himself to sleep, but the pain held him awake, and tears only brought more. Sleep found him. The tears never did.

The next morning, the door was gone from his room, its broken remains stacked against the wall. The kitchen was clean. His mother served scrambled eggs. His father read the newspaper, sipping coffee as though nothing had happened.

Alex sat at the table, his spine rigid with pain. He didn't touch his food. His father looked up once, eyes meeting his across the table.

"That's how you survive, boy," he said softly, almost like a teacher offering wisdom. "You remember that."

Alex didn't respond. His eyes went to the dent in the wall behind his father's shoulder.

He didn't cry.

He prayed he never would again.

## Chapter 2: Inheritance

The police cruiser jerked to a stop in front of the county jail. The brakes screeched. The engine sputtered to silence.

Alex Mason sat rigid in the back seat, wrists cuffed behind him. Pain throbbed through his ribs. Dried blood cracked on his lower lip each time he breathed, and the cold vinyl seat pressed uncomfortably against his spine.

The officer drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* Each knock sent a vibration up Alex's spine, sharp and splintering. His muscles tensed, wound tight like a drawn wire. The sound bored into his skull, burrowing deep until the car blurred into a soft gray haze.

The officer twisted in his seat, eyes glinting through the wire partition. "County lockup," he said flatly. "Doesn't look like much, but it'll break you. Every time."

Alex barely heard him. The tapping, steady and rhythmic, was filling his ears. His shoulders tightened. His mind drifted to places he didn't want to go.

He was back under the bed. Pounding blows against a splintering door.

*Think you can hide from me?*

The officer sighed and stepped out of the car. The back door opened. The cold slapped Alex in the face as a rough hand clamped around his bicep. He jerked away instinctively, and his temple slammed into the cold metal of the partition.

“Jesus,” the officer muttered. “You havin’ a seizure or something?”

Alex’s heart was hammering. The jail loomed beyond the windshield, a box of cold brick and glass crowned with razor wire. He blinked rapidly, his pulse still skittering.

“I’m fine,” he said, voice unsteady.

“Let’s go, tough guy,” the officer said, hauling him to his feet.

The ground tilted, and his legs threatened to buckle, but the officer held him firm and jerked his arm. “Walk.”

Alex stumbled forward. The steel door dominated the building’s façade, its riveted surface reflecting the overhead lights in sharp, broken angles. The deadbolt beneath the handle was thick, scarred with scratches.

The officer stopped in front of the intercom box. Alex’s chest tightened. The officer raised his fist and knocked once, sharp and jarring.

Alex’s breath caught.

For a split second, the world tilted. The steel door warped at the edges. The rivets blurred into splintered wood, chipped blue paint. The smooth surface darkened.

His stomach clenched. It wasn’t a steel door anymore. It was a kitchen table.

Frank’s fist slammed against it. The plates rattled. A cup wobbled beside Alex’s plate. Nine-year-old Alex froze mid-sentence, math worksheet crumpled in his hand.



Another blow.

Frank's voice was low and cold. "Milk." A pause. "All I asked for was milk with my goddamn dinner."

Anna flinched, her knuckles whitening around her fork. "We're out," she said meekly. "I didn't have time to..."

The empty glass flew across the table, shattering against the tile. Frank turned, eyes burning into Alex. "You saw the goddamn carton was empty. You didn't think to say something?"

Alex's knees knocked together beneath the chair. Say something. Fix it. "I, I didn't know," he whispered.

Frank's fist slammed into the table again.

Intercom crackled. "Yeah?" a voice asked.

The present crashed back in.

"Incoming," the officer said. "Mason, Alexander. Domestic violence. Drunk. Resisted us pretty good."

The intercom hissed. "Copy," the voice replied. The lock clicked with a heavy thunk and the door groaned inward.

"Inside," the officer said, shoving Alex forward.

The hallway was narrow, lined with cinderblock walls painted pale institutional green. The air reeked, filled with the sour tang of unwashed bodies. Overhead lights buzzed, sharp and steady, like a wasp trapped in a jar.

The door clanged shut behind them, driving Alex forward.

The officer shoved him toward a counter where a guard waited, steel-gray hair slicked back, a permanent scowl etched in his face. His name tag read Porter. He tapped a pen against the counter, a rhythmic hollow sound, not loud and not sharp, but something about the sound still itched under Alex's skin.

Like the soft rap of wood on metal.

*Tap.*

A wooden spoon struck the edge of a pot. Six-year-old Alex stood on a chair, hands gripping the counter for balance. Steam curled from the saucepan in front of him.

“Stir it gently,” Anna said, guiding his small hand on the handle. “Like this, see? No need to rush.”

Alex mimicked her motions, tiny fingers wrapping around the wooden spoon, careful but eager.

Behind them, the couch creaked. Alex froze. Frank shifted, the leather groaning beneath him. A cough, deep and gravelly, cut through the air.

Frank's fist struck the doorframe. “You babyin’ him again?” he sneered.

“No,” Anna said quietly.

The clink of a belt buckle.

Frank slung it onto the table, heavy and final. “Weak men don’t survive.”

The kitchen blurred, swayed. Its warmth soon dimmed, swallowed by the weight of his presence. Alex stiffened at the

rustle of fabric and the heavy scrape of boots against the floor. Then there was a thud.

“Clothes off.”

The guard’s voice dragged him back. Jail. Fluorescent lights. The counter.

Alex peeled off his clothes, hesitating at the belt. It had once been Frank’s belt, now worn and smooth at the holes. The cold air gnawed at his skin.

Porter inventoried each item. “Shirt. Belt, Jeans. Socks. Shoes.” He held up the gold wedding band. “Still married, huh?”

Alex swallowed. “Not really,” he mumbled.

Porter chuckled and dropped the ring into a plastic bag. “No woman worth a damn is scared of her husband,” he said, sealing the bag with a sharp click. “But you already know that, don’t ya?”

An orange jumpsuit hit the counter. “Pod three,” Porter said. “Enjoy the company.”

He tapped the counter one last time. *Crack*.

The hallway yawned open, endless and suffocating.

At the pod door, Porter raised his baton. Alex braced himself as the lock clicked.

The pod was windowless, lined with metal bunks, most of them occupied. Inmates stared as he stepped inside.

The door closed. *Thud*.

Alex shuffled to his bunk and gripped the bedframe, cold and hard and familiar. The door blurred. The steel should have been gray, but for a second, just a second, it was blue.

Chipped. Splintered.

But it wasn't his bedroom door. Not this time.

The metal held.

Cold. Unyielding. Locked.

## Chapter 3: Taught to Be Quiet

The kitchen smelled of scorched bacon grease and stale cigarette smoke. The Mason house always carried a scent like that, like something burned and bitter. The clock above the refrigerator ticked with mechanical precision, each click cutting through the silence. Its plastic face was cracked, a scar from the night Frank hurled a beer bottle at the wall. The Mason family sat in their usual places, Anna at the stove, Alex with his cereal, Frank across from him, nursing black coffee from a chipped, oil-stained mug.

It was Sunday morning, and Sunday mornings were for lessons.

Frank's gaze locked on Alex. His eyes were pale blue and cold, like frozen water beneath thin ice. "You know what today is, boy?" he asked.

Alex, eight, froze mid bite. That tone meant a lesson was coming. He set the spoon down carefully, making sure the metal didn't clink against the bowl. "Sunday, sir."

Frank's mouth twitched, though it wasn't a smile. "That's right. And Sundays are for what?"

Alex's throat constricted. He knew the answer, but saying it always made him feel smaller. "To learn to be strong, sir."

Frank tapped the edge of the table with his knuckle. The sound jolted Alex's chest, his pulse jumping. "Go get your shoes on," Frank said.

Alex stood so quickly his chair scraped across the tile with a sharp screech. Anna turned from the stove. Her eyes darted toward Frank, then toward Alex. She opened her mouth, then shut it again. Frank's gaze lingered on her for a second too

long. She turned back to the stove, gripping the spatula hard. Eggs smoked on the pan, untouched. Alex's heart sank. He'd hoped she'd say something, anything. Anna didn't look at him as he passed.

Frank tapped the table again. *Crack*. "Go," he said.

Alex obeyed.

The vacant lot sat half a block from their house, its grass patchy and brittle. Beer cans, cigarette butts, and shards of broken glass littered the ground. A rusted chain link fence stretched across the far end, sagging in places like it was too tired to stand straight.

Frank stood beside him, hands buried deep in his jacket pockets, breath clouding the cold air. "See that fence?" he asked. Alex nodded. "Go hit it."

Alex blinked. "Hit it?"

"You deaf, boy?" Frank's voice hardened. "I said hit it."

Alex hesitated, stomach tight, eyeing the fence. It wasn't the first time his father had told him to hit something, but this was different. The fence didn't deserve it. It was just there. Alex shifted his weight. The fence loomed in front of him, still, silent, waiting. His fingers curled into tight knots as the cold bit into his skin. He didn't want to do this, but he knew better than to say no.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" Frank snapped.

Alex tightened his grip and swung. The impact jarred his arm. The chain link rattled with metallic protest and pain shot through his wrist.

Frank gave a curt nod. "Again."

Alex hit the fence again. The vibration traveled up his forearm.

"Harder."

He hit it. The fence shivered and the links clanged in protest. The diamond pattern cut into his skin. Pain flared across his hand.

"Good." Frank grabbed Alex's wrist and squeezed. The pain intensified. "You feel that?" Frank asked.

Alex nodded silently.

"That's weakness leaving your body. Pain's just fear trying to stay put. You hit hard enough, long enough, and people get scared. And when people are scared of you, they can't hurt you." He squeezed tighter. "Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Frank released his wrist and clapped his shoulder. Alex's knees buckled under the force. "That's how you get strong," Frank said.

The skin on Alex's hands had split where knuckles met wire. Later it would crust, scab, and tear open again the next time he swung too hard at something.

The scars stayed. But the lesson stayed longer. Strength meant making others afraid. Power meant control. Pain wasn't something to endure, it was something to inflict.

Frank had acquired this truth a long time ago. It was a family heirloom, cracked and bloodstained. Frank Mason grew up in

a house without locks. He told Alex the story once when Alex was ten. They sat on overturned crates in the garage, surrounded by the sharp scent of motor oil and the metallic tang of old tools.

“My old man said locks were for cowards,” Frank said, cigarette dangling from his lips. “Told me if you need a lock to feel safe, you’re already dead.”

Alex sat cross legged on the concrete floor, watching his father’s hands. Frank’s fingers were thick, the skin scarred from years of fights and hard work.

“One night,” Frank continued, “I heard glass shatter in the kitchen. Someone busting in. I was about your age. My mom screamed. The old man grabbed his bat and went after the bastard. Broke the guy’s ribs and threw him right through the screen door.” Frank took a drag and exhaled slowly. “Then he turned around and gave my mom a beating for screaming.” His eyes narrowed as if saying something no one else could. “Said her fear invited the bastard in.”

Alex didn’t know what to say.

Frank flicked ash onto the floor. “Fear is like an open door,” he said. “Leave it open and bad things come through. You want to survive? You shut that door. You lock it from the inside.”

He reached out, gripping the back of Alex’s neck, not hard, just firm. The press of his fingers was warm and deliberate.

“You understand?”

Alex nodded stiffly, voice frozen in his throat.



Frank tapped the side of his beer can. Alex swallowed hard. Fear was weakness. Weakness got punished. He learned that young.

By the time he was fifteen, Alex had stopped apologizing. By eighteen, he had stopped hesitating. By twenty, he had stopped flinching.

Years later, when Alex lay on his prison bunk, gripping the cold steel bedframe, he'd remember the way Frank's fingers tightened around his wrist. He'd remember the rule.

Men don't cry. Men take control. Alex exhaled, slow and measured. His scarred knuckles pressed into the mattress, bloodless and stiff.

The lock was his.

And this time, nothing, not fists, not fear, would break through.

## Chapter 4: Taught To Be Quiet

The night air was crisp, biting against her skin. Sarah stood at the front door, one hand on the knob, unmoving. Inside, the house was silent and still. Her fingertips traced the strap of her purse in a quiet, soothing rhythm. Left, right, left. A small anchor in an unsteady world. The porch light buzzed, casting a dull glow over the doorframe.

Beyond it, the house waited, and inside, memories from long ago stirred, pressing against the edges of her mind. Her father, Tom Godwin, loomed over her, broad-shouldered and unyielding. His breath reeked of beer. His knuckles curled at his sides, already pink from whatever had set him off before this.

“Finish setting the table,” Tom said, his voice sharp.

Sarah hesitated, looking toward the front door. “But Mom said—”

“Don’t argue with me!”

“I’m not.”

His jaw clenched. “Then what the hell do you call it.”

“No, I wasn’t—”

The slap came, sharp and sudden, no time to brace herself. For a second, there was no pain, just a burst of white and a ringing in her ears. Something inside her broke loose, and then the heat bloomed. Tom’s face twisted in disgust. “What did I tell you about back talk.”

Sarah's seven-year-old body went rigid, her small shoulders tight with the effort of not recoiling, not showing weakness. She could still taste the word on her tongue, a single word that had set him off. *No*.

At the stove, Mary Godwin stirred the soup. She didn't turn or react. The spoon made soft, rhythmic circles in the pot, the only sound in the room besides the faint humming of the refrigerator. Sarah's fingertips traced the cool, smooth counter in a quiet rhythm. Left, right, left. Mary had taught her that as a little girl, something small to focus on when the walls closed in. A quiet anchor when everything else shifted.

She wanted to scream. To throw something. To make Mary look at her. Do something. But Mary only turned off the burner, her face blank, as if that was all she could do. "Come sit down, Sarah."

Tom sat first, like nothing had happened. Then Mary. Then, finally, Sarah. The silence stretched across the table, thick and suffocating, an unseen presence among them. Sarah's cheek throbbed, but she sat because that was the rule. You don't challenge the man of the house. You keep your voice low. You swallow your pain. And when it is over, you sit down for dinner like nothing happened.

That night, Sarah lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. The ghost of the slap still lingered on her cheek, more memory than pain now. The old mattress was thin, the springs pressing into her spine, but she didn't move, didn't let herself shift too much. Shifting made noise. She traced quiet circles onto her pillowcase with her fingertip. Left, right, left. This time, not for comfort but defiance.

Through the thin walls, Mary's voice drifted, soft and pleading. "She's just a child, Tom."

“She’s a mouthy one,” Tom muttered. “If she don’t learn now, she never will.”

A pause. Then Mary’s voice, even smaller. “Maybe we should—”

A loud clatter followed by a slammed cabinet cut her off. “You questionin’ me now, too?”

Silence followed. Sarah’s stomach clenched tight, the weight of it pressing against her ribs. The wood groaned under shifting weight as Tom’s steps moved, slow and deliberate. Sarah held her breath. He stomped past her door. A minute later, Mary’s door clicked shut. Anna exhaled. Not relief. Just waiting. Her fingertips tapped against the mattress, matching the rhythm of her heartbeat.

The next morning, the house smelled like burned toast. Mary made breakfast like always, standing at the stove like nothing had happened. No one mentioned the slap. Sarah sat at the table, her fork scraping against her plate, the sound too loud in the quiet.

Then, without thinking, she did something she had never done before. She stood.

Tom looked up from his plate, a slow, deliberate movement. The tension snapped tight, invisible threads pulling the air thin. “Where do you think you’re going.”

Sarah swallowed. The inside of her mouth tasted like salt and metal. Mary’s eyes widened in a silent plea to sit. Just sit. Instead, Sarah met Tom’s gaze. Her voice came out steadier than she expected. “I’m full.”

The air in the kitchen thickened. Tom’s fork scraped against his plate. “Sit down.” Sarah’s pulse pounded so loud she swore

she could hear it. She didn't sit, but turned and walked toward the hallway. Her whole body was braced for impact. She expected the hit. The slap. The fingers gripping her wrist and yanking her back. But it never came.

Behind her, Mary's voice broke. "Sarah."

She didn't stop. She walked to her room and closed the door.

The memory peeled away, dissolving into the dim glow of the kitchen as Sarah turned the knob and stepped inside. The scent of burned toast faded, replaced by the familiar warmth of the present: soft overhead lighting, the faint smell of dish soap and garlic, the hum of the refrigerator. Max was asleep upstairs. The house was quiet.

Her house.

No shouting. No footsteps to brace for. No man to manage or fear. Just the kitchen. Just her hands. Just the breath she could finally take without flinching. She stirred the sauce and set the water to boil. Her fingertips brushed the counter. Left, right, left.

The shift hadn't been clean. Like her own childhood home, this kitchen had known raised voices, shattered glass, a slammed door that never reopened. But it had also known Max's laughter, birthday candles, and late-night cocoa after nightmares. Maybe blood didn't change. But choices did.

Alex was gone now, arrested, facing what couldn't be undone. And Sarah stayed. Not because she was stuck and not because she was weak, but because she refused to let the past define her home.

She stirred the sauce, and she stayed.

## Chapter 5: When Soft Gets You Hurt

Alex Mason was twelve when he first broke someone's nose. It was behind the middle school gym, during lunch. Todd Brown had been circling him for weeks, taunting, sneering, calling him "crazy Mason" and "son of a drunk." That day, Todd had shoved too far.

"Hey, Mason." Todd grinned, voice loud enough to draw a crowd. "Your dad teach you how to hit fences? Or just your mom?"

Laughter slapped the air. Alex's pulse spiked. His hands clenched at his sides.

*Respect is the foundation*, his father had said. *If they don't give it, you take it.*

Todd started to turn away, already searching for his next victim. Heat rushed through Alex's veins, and he lunged.

Alex's fist cracked into Todd's jaw. The boy lurched back, but Alex kept going. Cartilage crunched. Something gave. Blood splashed on the pavement. The blow echoed, loud and final, like something that could not be taken back.

Todd staggered, clutching his nose as red streamed through his fingers. Alex stood over him, breathing hard, heart pounding so fast it hurt. The other kids backed away. Their fear was unmistakable. Alex knew exactly what it looked like.

The principal dragged Alex into his office ten minutes later. Anna arrived shortly after, her face pale and pinched. "Why,

Alex,” she whispered after the principal stepped out. “Why did you do this?”

He stared at the blood under his fingernails. “He disrespected me.” Anna flinched. Her lips parted, then pressed shut.

When Frank picked him up later, he said nothing in the car. Once they got home, Frank clapped Alex on the back. “Good job,” Frank said, voice filled with rare pride. “Now they’ll think twice.”

Adolescence arrived with violence and silence. Alex grew taller and stronger, but the lessons from childhood remained unchanged.

Power was protection. Fear was survival. Emotions were liabilities.

He learned that laughter could mask humiliation, that kindness invited exploitation, and that tears were weapons others would use against you. He became a master of emotional camouflage.

His mother tried to reach him in rare silences, but her voice no longer carried the same weight as his father’s. “Don’t be like him, Alex,” she pleaded one afternoon when Frank was at the bar. She sat across from him at the kitchen table, wringing her hands. “You’re not your father.”

Alex stared at her. His knuckles rested on the table’s surface, the faint scars from the fence lessons still visible against his skin. “Then why does it feel like I’m just like him,” Alex asked. Anna looked away.

Frank Mason saw adolescence as an opportunity to mold his son into a man. When Alex was old enough, Frank’s lessons took over their entire weekends.

Knuckles against heavy bags. Lectures about power and control. Stories laced with the bitterness of his own past.

One night, after an argument with Anna, Frank dragged Alex into the garage and slammed the door. “Sit,” Frank ordered, pointing to an old wooden stool. Alex obeyed.

Frank paced, his breath ragged from shouting. “You see your mother?” he asked. “Weak. That’s what softness gets you.” Alex stared at the floor. Frank stopped pacing. “Look at me, boy.” Alex lifted his eyes.

“You want to survive in this world, you learn to control it. You want to control it, you gotta be harder than it. No exceptions.” Frank stepped closer and tapped the side of Alex’s head with two knuckles. It wasn’t a punishment, it was just the only way Frank knew how to communicate.

“Got it.” Alex nodded. “Got it, sir.”

By now, Alex had stopped crying altogether. When his father hit him, he didn’t even blink. When his mother begged him to open up, he stared in silence.

Alex focused on sports instead. Football, wrestling, track. Activities where aggression was an asset and his father’s lessons became strengths rather than liabilities.

During one wrestling match in ninth grade, Alex pinned his opponent in under thirty seconds. His coach cheered. Frank watched from the bleachers, arms crossed. Alex barely heard the applause. He was waiting for his father to nod. But he didn’t.

Later, in the car, Frank said, “You hesitated on that first move.”



“I still won,” Alex said.

Frank’s hand lashed out. Alex’s skull snapped forward, a sharp jolt snapping his teeth. The burn of the slap lingered, pulsing across his scalp.

“You could have been faster,” Frank said. “You win by dominating from the start. No mercy. Remember that.”

Alex stared out the window, willing the tears away with an ease borne of practice. Frank was right. Hesitation was weakness.

Alex started picking fights beyond the mat. He justified it the way his father taught him. “They asked for it.”

At fifteen, he broke a boy’s arm during a schoolyard fight. He hadn’t actually meant to go that far. Hadn’t meant to feel the snap beneath his grip.

The boy screamed, a sound that cut through him. Alex recoiled. The boy’s arm hung at the wrong angle.

The silence that followed was worse. Alex had him pinned, knuckles digging into ribs, heartbeat roaring in his ears. The boy had stopped fighting, gone limp. Beaten.

But Frank’s voice pressed through his mind. *You win by dominating from the start. No mercy.*

Alex’s grip tightened. The boy flinched.

He met his eyes and saw no defiance, no fight. Only fear.

A sick twist knotted in his stomach. This isn’t the same. He’s already down.

A part of him wanted to stop. Walk away.

But the other part, the louder part, felt Frank's words digging into his ribs like a fist. *Control isn't given. It's taken.*

The principal called Anna, who arrived breathless, hair in a rushed ponytail. "What happened," she asked. Alex's knuckles throbbed. The scream still echoed in his head. He swallowed hard and forced his voice steady. "He wouldn't stop running his mouth." Anna turned to the principal. "I'll handle this," she said through gritted teeth.

That night, Anna sat on the edge of Alex's bed, her hands trembling. "You don't have to do this," she said softly.

"Do what."

"Be like him. Hurt people to feel safe."

Alex shrugged. "It works."

Anna shook her head. "For a while, maybe. But someday you'll hurt someone you love. And then what?"

"Then I make it right," Alex said stubbornly.

He wouldn't meet her eyes. Anna reached out, but he shifted away.

The fights got worse. The nights of silence grew longer. Frank grew angrier.

Then one night, Frank came home drunk and slapped Anna. This time, Alex charged. The kitchen blurred as he hit his father with his shoulder, driving him backward into the wall. Frank's head hit the plaster with a dull thud.

Frank recovered quickly. He brought his elbow down on Alex's back, sending him to the floor. Frank yanked his belt free in one violent motion.

The belt sliced through the air with a sharp hiss before snapping across Alex's back. Alex lay motionless, cheek on freezing tile, each breath scraping his ribs as shadows coiled at the edges of his vision. For a moment, he was five again, a smaller body enduring what it couldn't fight.

Then Frank grabbed Anna's wrist and dragged her toward the garage. Alex pushed himself up. He wasn't five anymore. His body screamed in protest, but he followed through the hallway, past the laundry room, into the garage where Frank was shoving Anna against the workbench. She yelped in pain and fear.

Alex's eyes darted across the cluttered bench. His fingers closed around the first thing he found, a wrench.

Alex swung.

The wrench connected. Something crunched. Frank let out a strangled sound, half snarl and half gasp, before crumpling like a felled tree.

Frank collapsed. Anna screamed. Alex stared at the blood pooling beneath his father.

For the first time, he understood that Frank had been wrong.

Fear wasn't control. It was just another kind of cage.

And Alex had spent his whole life trapped inside it, thinking the only way out was to become the warden.

But now, looking at Frank crumpled on the ground, he saw the truth. He hadn't escaped.

He had only built new walls. Around himself.

## Chapter 6: Laughter, Weighted

Alex Mason wasn't watching the girl at the corner table. Not yet. At least, that's what he told himself. The cafeteria buzzed with end-of-lunch chatter, trays clattering, chairs scraping.

There she was alone at the far table, swirling her straw through her chocolate milk, unconcerned that no one had invited her. She was appealingly unkempt. Her blonde ponytail was slightly crooked, her sweatshirt too big, her sneakers untied.

None of that should have caught his attention, yet something about her held him still. Maybe it was the way her lips curled in a private smile or the way her shoulders shook with a quiet, amused chuckle, as if the joke in her head was too good to keep to herself.

Alex had spent years learning that laughter meant mockery. It meant kids pointing at the scars on his knuckles from the fence-punching lesson. It meant his father standing over him, sneering, as his mother cowered by the stove. Laughter was a blade wielded by the cruel.

But Michelle Becker laughed like it wasn't something dangerous, like she had never had to be afraid of it. She should have been. She just hadn't learned any better.

"You're staring," Jason muttered from across the table. Alex forced his attention back to his untouched food. "No, I'm not." Jason tilted his head, amused. "Yeah, you are. Just go talk to her."

Alex scoffed and shoved his math homework aside, as if that was the problem. The last time he'd approached a girl he'd

frozen mid-sentence, stomach knotting as he imagined her realizing who he was.

That he was Frank Mason's son. That his father had been arrested for beating his mother while he watched.

"She's just new," Alex muttered. "Nothing special."

Jason shrugged but didn't argue. Michelle's voice wove through the cafeteria noise, a quiet thread that caught and held his attention.

After school, Alex was heading to his locker when he spotted Michelle struggling with hers, frustration pinching her brows as she twisted the dial in vain. He hesitated, then leaned against the locker next to hers.

"They stick sometimes," he said. Michelle startled, shoulders stiffening before she turned to him. "What?"

"Your lock," Alex said, nodding toward it. "They're old. You have to go left, right, left. Try it."

She did. The lock clicked open.

Her whole face brightened. "You just saved me from committing locker homicide."

Alex allowed himself a small grin. "Happy to help."

Michelle shut her locker and extended her hand. "I'm Michelle."

Alex hesitated, heartbeat in his ears, before shaking it. Her grip was warm, light but sure. "I'm Alex."

Her expression shifted, recognition dawning. “Wait aren’t you the guy who broke Todd Brown’s nose last year?” His stomach twisted. There it was. That was all anyone remembered about him.

“Yeah,” he muttered. But Michelle didn’t pull away. Instead, she grinned. “Good. Todd Brown’s an ass.”

Alex blinked. “Yeah. He is.”

She slung her backpack over one shoulder. “See you around, tough guy.” Alex watched her walk away, pulse hammering. She didn’t know who he really was. Not yet. But she’d seen a little and she hadn’t flinched.

Weeks passed. Michelle’s presence was no longer just a flicker on the edge of his awareness anymore; it was something he sought out. She had this way of shaking the weight off things, making even a flat tire feel like an adventure.

They walked everywhere together now, their conversations stretching between classes, across sidewalks, through the quiet pockets of town where no one cared about last names or rumors.

But sometimes, when another guy made her smile, a quiet pressure settled deep in Alex’s chest. At lunch once, she smirked at something Jason muttered. After school, she tossed her hair back at Drew Wallace’s off-hand comment near the vending machines outside the gym.

It wasn’t jealousy, not exactly. It was just awareness.

He started walking closer, angling himself between her and other guys without thinking. He wasn’t trying to be weird. It was instinct. Just instinct. Protecting what was his.

She never said anything. Not at first. Why should she? He was just looking out for her.

Then one day, she did. “You know, I can walk myself to class,” she joked, nudging him with her elbow. Alex exhaled a soft laugh. “I know.”

Michelle smiled, but it was thinner this time, like she had just now noticed his possession of the space between them. She brushed it off. He was just looking out for her. That was all.

But a few days later, it happened again. Michelle had mentioned heading home, so when Alex saw her at the library instead, hunched over a book with Drew Wallace, something inside him pulled tight.

He stayed quiet, walked up, and set his bag down on the table beside her. Michelle startled. “Oh, hey. I didn’t know you were coming.” Alex shrugged, ignoring Drew as if he weren’t there.

“I was around.” Her smile flickered. Still, she closed her book and started packing up. Drew glanced between them but said nothing. Neither did Michelle.

That night, Alex saw her at the gas station. She hadn’t mentioned going out, but there she was near the coolers at the back of the store, shoulders loose, her laugh easy as she talked to Jason. This time, Alex didn’t think. He marched inside. He headed toward the snacks, pretending to browse, but his eyes stayed locked on them. Jason looked up first, his smile faltering. “Hey, man.”

Michelle turned, her face lighting up too bright, too quick. “Hey. What are you doing here?”

“Needed a snack,” Alex said flatly.



He walked past the aisle toward the coolers, stopping a few feet from them. His eyes flicked to Jason. "Didn't know you two were hanging out."

Michelle hesitated. Too long. Then she shrugged. "We just ran into each other."

Jason scratched the back of his neck. "Yeah, we were just talking."

Alex just stared. A second too long.

Jason's voice trailed off. Michelle tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and glanced toward the door for just a second.

Alex smiled. She didn't. "You ready to go?" he asked. Michelle blinked. "Yeah, but-" Alex had already turned toward the counter. Jason looked at her. She didn't answer. She just followed Alex.

Three months later, they were at the county fair, packed in a rickety wheel carriage that swayed with every gust of wind. Michelle leaned forward. "Oh wow. You can see everything from up here."

Alex's breath caught. Not at the view. At an image in his mind. Her foot slipping, her body tumbling, bones snapping against metal. Danger.

His hand clamped around her wrist. Hard.

"Stop!" Michelle gasped. "Alex, I was just looking." The carriage rocked beneath them. "Alex, you're hurting me."

Alex's fingers didn't release her. Not at first. Then, too late, he let go.

That night, Michelle sat in her room, scrolling through her phone. She started typing a message to Alex, then erased it. She rubbed her wrist slowly, pressing her fingers against the faint bruises. They weren't that bad. It wasn't like he meant to hurt her. He just overreacted. He was just being protective. Right?

Her screen lit up with a message from Cara.

*Hey. You okay? You were quiet today.*

Michelle hesitated, then typed.

*Yeah. Just tired.*

Cara replied almost immediately.

*Is it him again?*

Michelle stared at the screen. Her thumb hovered. A few weeks ago, she had told Cara just a little. How Alex got tense around other guys. How he showed up wherever she went without asking. How it didn't feel like protection anymore. She hadn't said much, just enough to plant a seed.

Michelle typed:

*It's fine.*

There was a long pause. Then Cara sent another message.

*Sending you something. Just read it, okay?*

A link popped up. Michelle didn't click it right away. Her laptop sat open across the room. She copied the link and emailed it to herself, then walked over and opened it there.

The article loaded slowly. She skimmed the beginning, but one section stopped her cold.

He isolates you. He gets jealous over little things. He watches you. He punishes you with silence. He grabs you too hard and you make excuses for it.

Michelle swallowed hard. She typed a new message to Alex.

*I can't do this anymore.*

She sent it. Alex didn't reply. Not that night. Not the next morning. Not ever.

Three days later, she saw he had unfollowed her and blocked her number. It was like she had never existed. She should have felt relief.

Instead, she felt watched.

Alex sat in his car, staring at his hands. Michelle was gone. She wasn't the right one. She didn't listen. She laughed when she shouldn't have. She wasn't careful.

She was never meant for him. He knew that now. But someone else would be.

There, across the parking lot, another girl sat alone. Same quiet confidence. Same distracted little smile.

Alex's breath evened out. It wasn't Michelle. But it didn't have to be. She was just the next one. He simply had to find the way in.

*Crack.*

## Chapter 7: False Start

The rain had stopped, but the ground was still heavy with it, darkened earth, worms curling on the sidewalk like spilled thread. Water clung to the edge of the gym roof and dripped in slow, deliberate taps into a rusted trash can below.

Alex sat on the crumbling steps out back, where the concrete was slick with rainwater and cracked from years of wear, and the sky hung low like it hadn't made up its mind about what to do next.

His knuckles stung under the bandages. The skin had split again during drills. Bear crawls across the gym floor, each stride grinding old scar tissue against old pain. The floor smelled like dust and sweat and industrial cleaner. He hadn't slowed down. He never did.

He didn't look up when footsteps approached.

Most people knew better than to come near him.

But she came anyway. Sarah's shoes whispered against the wet concrete, her soles too clean to belong in a place like this. Her jacket was too thin for the cold air, a pale corduroy thing with frayed cuffs. Her hair was pulled back in a loose knot, curls escaping in soft, stubborn spirals that stuck to her cheek in the damp.

"You're bleeding," she said.

Alex didn't move. Not a flinch. Not a nod. Just a flicker in his jaw.

Not “what happened.” Not “are you okay.” Just a fact. Like she was reporting the weather.

“I’ve seen you fight,” she added after a pause. “You don’t even try to block.”

“I don’t need to,” he muttered, without looking up.

“Still hurts, though.”

There was no edge to her voice. No softness either. Just a quiet recognition, like she’d learned not to speak unless she meant it.

Sarah lowered herself to the step beside him. Not too close. Not touching. But near enough for him to catch the faint scent of soap on her skin, lemon-something, artificial and a little too sharp.

Her knees were scarred, pink-ringed, scabs lining the edges. She didn’t try to hide them. Just picked at one with her thumbnail like it was a habit she’d long stopped thinking about.

“I used to come here, too,” she said. “Before they put up the cameras.”

Alex said nothing. He wasn’t sure where this was going.

The wind lifted a corner of the chain-link fence behind the field. It rattled like bones in a loose pocket.

His pulse thudded in his hands.

“People see what they expect,” she continued. “They don’t always wait for the rest.”

Alex glanced at her, sideways. “And what do they see when they look at me?”

She didn’t look at him. “Someone who hits first. Someone who wants to be alone.”

“Is that what you see?”

Sarah peeled off a flake of dried paint from the step between them and let it fall. “I haven’t decided.”

Something heavy settled in the space between them. Not tension. Not quite.

A bird landed on the railing a few feet away, shaking water off its wings in a quick flutter. It looked at them, decided they were unimportant, and flew off again.

Sarah stood first. “Keep your hands clean,” she said. “Scars are fine. But infection spreads.”

She didn’t wait for an answer. Just walked away, slow, steady steps fading into the gray.

Alex stared at the empty space beside him. Like heat left in a seat after someone gets up.

Three days later, he saw her again, outside the art room, perched on the low retaining wall like she belonged there. Her knees were pulled up, sketchbook propped across them, pen darting in quick strokes as if it was chasing something invisible.

A breeze cut across the courtyard, carrying the sharp smell of wet leaves and sidewalk chalk. Her coat sleeves were pushed to her elbows. Purple ink smudged the inside of her wrist like a shadow.

He almost kept walking. Then he didn't.

"Hey," he said.

She didn't look up. "Guys only say that when they want something."

Her tone wasn't angry. Just flat. Like she was giving him a test.

"I don't want anything," he said.

He shifted, fists buried deep in his hoodie pocket. His palms were still raw, but starting to heal.

"I just..." The rest of the sentence caught in his throat.

Sarah looked up. A curl had fallen loose again, clinging to her cheek. Her eyes were rimmed with exhaustion.

"You just...?" she prompted, after he stood in silence for a moment.

"I thought maybe you didn't want to be alone."

A beat. Then the ghost of a smile, thin, unreadable, passed through her face.

She nudged the sketchbook to the side. Just enough to make space.

Alex sat.

Silence rolled over them like fog. Not empty. Dense.

The gauze on his palms had frayed at the edges, yellowed with old blood and gym sweat.

Sarah looked over, quiet.

“You still haven’t cleaned those properly.”

Alex grunted. “They’ll just scar.”

“They already have,” she said. “But they’re not healing right.”

His silence said enough. He just watched her with surprise as she pulled a small bottle and some gauze squares from her bag.

“Why do you have that stuff?”

“Because sometimes people don’t take care of themselves.”

He blinked. “You don’t have to.”

“I know.”

He peeled the bandages back. The skin underneath was less angry now. Still red, still tight, but the wounds were closing. Finally. Her fingers were steady as she cleaned the edges, wound the fresh wrap, pressed it into place.

Her touch was steady and unflinching. “You’re healing,” she said.

“I guess.”

She didn’t let go right away. “You’re not what people think you are,” she said. “You’re not even what you think you are.”

Alex looked at her, chest tight. “I don’t know what to do with that.”

“You don’t have to yet,” she said. Then she let go.



Sarah went back to her drawing. He watched her fingers move, sharp, sure, clean lines cut into the paper like she knew exactly what she wanted and wasn't afraid to take it.

"Do you always draw?" he asked.

"Only when I'm trying not to feel something."

He nodded. "Is it working?"

She didn't answer. Just kept drawing.

When she shifted the book slightly, he caught a glimpse of the page. A figure, hood pulled up, body hunched, arms folded in on themselves. No face. No details. Just posture and attitude.

Him.

"Why'd you draw that?" he asked.

She didn't stop moving her pen. "Because I know what it's like to disappear," she said. "But still want someone to notice."

Alex swallowed. His throat felt tight. Like breathing had become a choice.

"I'm not good at this," he admitted.

"I noticed."

He exhaled. Not quite a laugh. Not quite a sigh.

"But you're still here," she said, eyes still on her page. "So maybe I'll stay this time."

And with that, he left.

They never planned anything.

They just kept ending up in the same place, mostly behind the storage shed where the vents hummed warm air into the cold and the gravel muted their steps. No one ever came looking there.

She always drew. Sometimes they talked. Most times they didn't.

Alex watched her hands more than her face. There was a steadiness in the way she moved, like each mark had already existed before she touched the page.

She wasn't creating. She was remembering.

Things didn't shift all at once. It moved the way ink spreads in water, slow, unsure, impossible to take back.

A seat saved in the back of biology. A granola bar slid across the table. Her jacket around his shoulders on a cold morning, no words.

They never called it anything. But they didn't leave the space they'd created for one another.

Even on the days when Alex broke things just to feel the noise. Even when Sarah went silent in that way that meant don't ask me why.

They remained.

And somewhere between the silence and the staying, between not-talking and almost-touching, something formed.

Not a rescue. Not a promise. Just a place to rest.

## Chapter 8: Promise And Possession

Fall came early in their second year of college. The leaves in Maple Ridge turned brittle and red, and the days grew colder in the little apartment Alex and Sarah now shared off campus.

Most nights were quiet, filled with shared leftovers, homework at the kitchen table, the hum of Sarah's diffuser filling the silence. But some things hadn't changed.

Especially the way Alex watched her when she smiled at other people.

The first time Alex told Sarah he loved her, she laughed. It wasn't mocking or dismissive, just surprised. They were sitting in his car, parked at the edge of Maple Ridge Bluff.

The cool air seeped through the cracked windows, carrying the scent of damp leaves and woodsmoke. Below them, the town's streetlights glimmered like a constellation scattered across the earth.

Sarah leaned her head against the passenger window, tracing invisible patterns in the fogged glass. Drawing. Alex, gripping the steering wheel with both hands, blurted it out without planning to.

"I love you."

Sarah turned to him, eyes wide. "What?"

"I mean it," Alex said. His chest felt like it was wrapped too tight. "I love you."

Her mouth twitched, and then came the sound, a soft, startled chuckle, quick and unintentional, before she could stop it. Part of him flinched.

“Sorry!” she said quickly, shaking her head. “I’m not laughing at you. I swear. I just, I didn’t expect that.”

It struck him low in the ribs, sharp and cold. The moment stretched, brittle and sharp. His father’s voice rose from memory.

*They laugh when they think they’re in control. Don’t let ‘em.*

He swallowed. Smiled. “It’s okay. It surprised me too.”

Sarah reached across the console and squeezed his hand. “I love you too, Alex. I mean, I think I do.”

The warmth of her hand softened something in him unexpectedly. He held on tightly, even when she tried to pull away.

From the bluff below came the sound of wood cracking as the wind pressed against a sagging fence. That sound followed Alex home that night.

Lying in bed, he tapped his knuckles against the headboard in time with the memory.

*Tap.*

That moment. The uncertainty in her voice.

Love shouldn’t be unsure, he thought. It’s absolute. Unshakable. Permanent.

He didn't tell Sarah how much her laughter had unsettled him, but the feeling stayed with him. In the weeks that followed, he became more attuned to the people around her, especially other men.

One afternoon, he walked into the college campus library and saw Sarah sitting across from John. The sight of them talking sent heat rushing to Alex's face. He ducked behind a bookshelf and watched.

John gestured toward something on Sarah's notebook. She leaned in, listening, her lips curving as she jotted something down.

Alex's hand curled into a fist against the book spines. *She never looks like that when we study.*

Something heavy settled in his ribs. The feeling was all too familiar. A gas station. A soda machine. Jason's easy grin. Michelle shifting her weight, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

She had laughed, too. And she had left.

Not Sarah. Sarah wouldn't leave.

He was still standing there when Sarah packed up her things and left the library. He followed at a distance, watching.

That night, he asked casually, "So...what'd you do today?"

"Library," Sarah said, pulling her sweatshirt over her head. "Studied chemistry for like three hours. I was dying of boredom."

It was partly true. But she hadn't looked bored. The lie settled into his gut like a lead weight. "Anyone there with you?" he asked, keeping his voice light.

"Not really. Just people coming and going," she said, slipping into bed beside him. The lie solidified into something heavier. The air in the room felt thinner.

Alex stared at the ceiling. His father's voice murmured.

*They all lie eventually. You gotta stay ahead of 'em.*

The next morning, Alex found Sarah's phone on the counter while she was in the shower. He hesitated for barely a second before unlocking it.

Her messages with John were harmless, mostly about school. But John had sent a smiley face after one of his texts. And Sarah hadn't mentioned running into him at the library.

His pulse pounded. His fingers hovered over the screen. His vision sharpened on every word. A slow, burning heat spread through his chest.

Then, he exhaled slowly. Smiled. Easy. Controlled.

When Sarah walked into the kitchen, towel wrapped around her hair, Alex set the phone down and smiled. "You want pancakes?" he asked.

Three months later, Alex walked into Jensen's Jewelry Emporium and bought a diamond ring with three small stones. The clerk called it a "past, present, and future" setting.

Alex liked the symbolism. It meant Sarah's past didn't matter. Her present and future belonged to him.

He carried the ring in his jacket pocket for a week, rehearsing what he'd say. On Saturday, he drove Sarah back to Maple Ridge Bluff, the same place where she had first been caught off guard by his "I love you."

The sky was clear that night, the stars sharp and bright. Alex laid out a blanket near the edge of the bluff that overlooked the city. Sarah sat beside him, pulling his jacket tighter around her shoulders.

"This is where you caught me off guard," she said, giving him a small, uncertain smile. "Remember?"

Alex forced a chuckle. "Yeah. I remember."

Now was the time. He shifted onto one knee and took the box from his pocket. The hinge creaked as he opened it.

Sarah's eyes widened. "Alex?"

"Marry me," he said. His voice was low and firm. "You belong to me, Sarah."

Sarah went still. Rigid. Unblinking.

Alex's eyes flickered. Just for a second. He realized what he'd said.

Then, his voice softened. "With me," he corrected himself. "You belong with me."

Sarah's lips parted. The air thinned. Her fingers curled into her palms. Her eyes didn't leave his. There was no smile this time.

Alex's hand didn't move. The wind rattled the fence below.

*Snap.*

“Say yes,” he murmured, not wanting to plead, not able to accept the possibility of a no.

Sarah exhaled, slow and trembling.

“Okay,” she whispered.

The moment the word left her mouth, his grip locked around her hand.

Cold. Final.

She wasn’t sure what she had just agreed to. But even in those first seconds, something in her had already begun to retreat.

As they drove home, Sarah turned the ring on her finger. The metal was cold. Heavy. The weight pressed into her skin, leaving a faint indentation.

She inhaled once, shallow. Her breath wouldn’t come. She looked at Alex. He was smiling.

She smiled back. Barely.



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