



*Always  
a Love Song*

CHARLEY CLARKE



# Chapter One

## Then

WHEN ALEX LOOKED BACK ON this night in two or five or ten years, she'd remember it as perfect. What else could it be when they were eighteen—or near enough, in her case—freshly graduated, and on top of the world? Not literally, of course. They weren't even on top of the building. They sat on the stage in the empty Wentworth Theater, a six-pack and a battery-operated camping lantern between them. The theater had been closed for a year, but Bridget had snuck out of her house enough times to have learned a thing or two.

Their pocket of light made the rest of the black theater even eerier, but nothing could touch Alex when she was with Bridget. Her best friend. Someone who could be more than a friend. One day. But Alex wasn't going to push it. She was just going to keep on loving Bridget because loving made her feel like a sun spreading warmth to everyone she met. Didn't even matter if Bridget loved her back.

"You're going to be a big star one day," Alex said. "You're going to be up here on this stage, and I'm going to be in the front row clapping the loudest."

Bridget bumped her shoulder. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

With her golden hair, sparkling smile, and glowing personality, maybe it was Bridget who was the sun.

"But we're going to have adventures first," Bridget said. "Lots of them, starting with college."

Alex's smile fell away, and she bit her lip. It wasn't that she wasn't excited for the year to come. It was just that they were going to change. That was what growing up was all about.

"What is it?" Bridget asked in a whisper. "You can tell me."

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“It’s just...” Alex sighed. “What if we grow apart?”

“We won’t,” Bridget said, fidgeting with the corner of the beer carton, an idle smile on her lips as she regarded Alex. “I’m not worried.”

“You’re not? Not even a little bit?”

“Nope.”

Alex found her chest lightening. Because change could be good for a relationship. Change meant growth.

Besides, they were Alex and Bridget. Inseparable.

Bridget pulled one leg up under herself. “I can’t imagine my life without you, and now, I don’t have to.”

And all of a sudden, Alex couldn’t help it. She couldn’t fight the fuzziness that welled up in her chest and threatened to explode. She surged forward and kissed Bridget’s cheek.

Even in the dim lantern light, Bridget’s answering blush was apparent. “Why’d you do that?”

“Because...” Because it felt right. Because they were best friends. Because words sometimes weren’t enough. “You’re my favorite person. Ever.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Bridget grinned. “Well, you’re mine, too. But for a scholarship athlete, your aim’s pitiful.”

“My aim?”

Bridget closed the gap between them again, but this time, lips met lips. It wasn’t Alex’s first kiss, but it was the first one that meant something. This wasn’t fumbling around behind the bleachers or in the corner of a house party. It wasn’t even open-mouthed. It was just soft, warm pressure and the feeling of Bridget’s smile beneath her own.

Yeah. Definitely a perfect night.

\* \* \*

**Now**

“Music’s golden girl Bridget Callahan has broken her silence about her fiancé’s shocking infidelity,” the entertainment anchor on TV said.

Alex finished the chai she was making and handed it off to her customer, then picked up the remote and switched the channel to a women’s golf

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match, but not before catching a glimpse of the screen, which showed a smiling Bridget in a stunning green dress on the red carpet. The Grammys. This past year. Not that Alex kept track of that stuff.

She had a café, a bar, and a brewery to run. Her life didn't have room for celebrity gossip.

"Hey, Alex," Lu said, loudly enough to draw the attention of everyone in the café. Even Benny, Alex's pit bull, looked up from where he was lounging beneath Lu's feet. Jordan and Owen filled out the rest of their unofficially reserved corner table, with their daughter, Keiko, in a stroller that Owen rocked with one foot.

"Refill?" Alex asked.

Lu, dressed in her park ranger uniform, shook her head and gestured to the television. "Who do you think's going to win this tournament?"

"Oh, definitely Culey," Owen said. "She's been on fire all year."

Alex filled a to-go cup with hot water. Even though the reminder of Bridget's success no longer hurt, her friends couldn't seem to get out of the routine. "I wouldn't be so sure," she said. "I'd put my money on Park."

"Boo," Jordan said, waving a dismissive hand. "She's what, thirty-nine? She can't keep up with these eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds. She's three strokes behind Culey right now."

"She's a master. She'll pull through." Alex shrugged. "Besides, the old ones are the sure things. They're solid. They won't choke under pressure."

"And let us not forget," Lu said, "that though she may be a veteran in athletic terms, she's by no means actually old."

Alex dropped a fresh Earl Grey teabag into the cup and took it over to the table. She planted a kiss on her goddaughter's forehead before handing the drink to Lu. "For your shift."

Lu accepted it with a grimace. "If I had known this job would involve weekends, I never would have accepted."

"Yes, you would have," Owen said matter-of-factly. "Because, despite the weekends, you love it and you wouldn't be happy without it."

Lu threw a sugar packet at him. "This is why I need new friends. You guys know me too well."

"Yeah, fifteen years will do that," Jordan said, leaning back with a sage expression.

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“You can advertise for new friends after your shift,” Alex said, waving her towel at Lu. “Don’t be late!”

“Fine. Fine.” Lu grumbled as she adjusted her ball cap. “Put it on my tab, will ya, sweetheart?”

Alex swatted her with the towel. “Get out of here.”

“Stop trying to hurry me.” Lu looked at her watch. “I have at least six more minutes.”

Jordan pushed an empty chair out from the table with her foot. “Sit a spell, friend. Make the most of Lu’s six minutes.”

“I’ve got customers,” Alex said suspiciously. Her friends were a common fixture in both the café and the bar next door, but they usually didn’t interfere with her job. What were they up to?

“You’ve also got very competent employees,” Owen said. “Now sit.”

With an exaggerated sigh, she complied. “What?”

Jordan lifted an accusing eyebrow. “You reached for that remote awfully fast, there.”

Alex rolled her eyes. “I hate gossip. Just because she’s a celebrity doesn’t mean she doesn’t deserve a private life.”

“Okay, but did you listen any before you changed the channel?”

“Why would I?” She had, sort of, but she’d been too distracted to really process any of it.

Owen swiveled his laptop toward her. On the screen was an article with the headline “America’s Sweethearts’ Shocking Break-Up,” accompanied by individual pictures of Bridget and Patrick Norwood, Hollywood’s current hottest commodity, and a third photograph of the two together at his latest movie premiere.

Alex shoved down the eruption of anger. She was past that. Bridget’s romantic entanglements didn’t affect her. Sure, she knew he’d proposed to her on stage three months ago, but only because everyone did. It was impossible to escape Bridget Callahan fever.

Talk about irritating.

She gave a disinterested shrug. “So?”

“So they broke up, like, the day after they got engaged, and *she* wanted to keep it a secret,” Owen said, leaning forward eagerly.

“What’s your point?”

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“Our point,” Jordan said, “is that maybe she doesn’t have as perfect a life as she wants everyone to believe.”

“Perfect comeuppance for a perfect bitch,” Lu said, blowing on her tea.

Owen leaned over the stroller to cover Keiko’s ears even though she’d fallen fast asleep.

“Language, Lu,” Alex said as she got to her feet and straightened her apron.

Lu raised an eyebrow. “What? Bitch?”

“No,” Alex said with a smirk. “Where’d you learn the word ‘comeuppance’?”

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Even surrounded by people, Bridget was alone. Or, at least, it felt that way. This was what her life had become, just a still body in a sea of constantly moving people. Television studio workers scurried around prepping for the show. Her agent, Pippa, chattered on the phone, making decisions on her behalf. And Max, her best friend and songwriting partner, was too caught up in flirting with his makeup artist to even glance her way.

“I want to go home,” Bridget said. The decision came out of nowhere. Or everywhere, maybe, informed by five long years of loneliness and heartache, and exacerbated by this mess of a breakup. It wasn’t loud enough for anyone but Pippa or Kit, her makeup artist, to hear.

Kit gave her a sympathetic pout, but her hand never wavered as she applied lipstick.

Without taking her eyes from her smartphone, Pippa said, “It’s a measly interview. You’ve done a million, and every one is GIF-ably adorable.”

Bridget waited until Kit moved to eyeshadow to say, “It’s the first one I’ve done since...” Since the whole world found out she’d destroyed the perfect relationship with the perfect guy. Perfect was in the eye of the beholder, though, wasn’t it? Not so perfect if she spent the entire time thinking about someone else.

Pippa finally looked at her. “I know,” she said, her tone unusually gentle. “But it’s a breakup, not the end of the world. It happens all the time between celebrities. The truth had to come out eventually, and you’ll get through it with grace, like you always do.”

Bridget did a short breathing exercise. It didn't calm her as much as usual, but it helped. "After this, though, I'm serious about going home."

"You're supposed to be writing new songs," Pippa said, slipping into her stern voice again.

Max, done with his makeup, hopped out of his chair to join them. "What do you think we're playing today?"

Pippa crossed her arms. "One song does not an album make."

"I have been writing. *We* have," Bridget said. "And I'll keep writing when I go home. I just ... I really need a break, Pip."

Max gave Pippa his calculated puppy-dog eyes. She was one of the few people—besides Bridget, of course—proven immune to them, but he tried anyway. "She's the hardest working musician in the industry. She deserves a break, wouldn't you agree?"

Pippa sighed. "And you'll be accompanying her to work on next year's top album?"

"We can write over Skype and stuff," Bridget suggested, not wanting to pressure him into spending time in the middle of nowhere, even if she desperately wanted him there.

All ease and nonchalance, Max grinned the dimpled grin that drove their fans wild. "I've always wanted to visit Pennsylvania."

"You know I'm nowhere near the Liberty Bell, right?" Bridget asked. Outside of Pennsylvania, that was the only thing the state was known for. And Punxsutawney Phil. Everyone loved him. Inside the state, it was pierogi and sports and remnants of steel. Fun and rich in history, but not exactly a thrill a minute.

Max groaned.

She smacked his arm. "If you're good, I'll take you to a Steelers game."

"I thought you didn't like football."

She'd loved it once—in her old life. Sunday afternoons of full living rooms and jerseys in church and eating until you were stuffed. "Everyone there loves football. It's a rule."

"Then it's settled. I'll book the tickets," Pippa said before waltzing off.

A stagehand replaced her. "Five minutes, you two."

Kit ran a lint brush over each of their shoulders, then stepped back to assess them. "All done! Break a leg!"

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“Thanks,” Bridget said. Once Kit walked away, she snaked an arm around Max’s waist and leaned her head on his shoulder. “And thank *you*.”

“What are best friends for?”

“Um...” She put a finger to her chin and pretended to think. “Writing kick-ass songs that win awards and making me delicious baked goods and saving me from making terrible life decisions.” She snorted. If only he’d talked some sense into her five years ago. Then again, they had only been acquaintances back then.

“Co-writing,” he amended. “Now let’s get out there and show the world what real songwriting looks like.”

She straightened. “Right.”

All told, the situation could have been much worse. This appearance on *The Mikayla Miles Show* had been scheduled before the news broke the day before. Bridget was lucky that Mikayla, one of America’s favorite daytime hosts, tended to sympathize with her guests. It was a good place to break big news. Or explain it.

Like why she’d broken up with the nation’s most famous and beloved actor after he’d proposed to her on her first world tour.

They made it three minutes without a mention.

Then: “I have to ask, Bridget,” Mikayla said, looking sincere. “You know I have to ask. You’ve been pretty quiet lately, working on your new album, but a lot has been going on. You and Patrick Norwood got engaged on your tour stop in Paris on stage in front of a screaming crowd. But yesterday, you released a statement saying you’re no longer together. So, what happened to America’s sweethearts?”

“You know, after we got engaged,” Bridget said, “we had a long conversation, and we realized our visions of the future didn’t match up. That’s all.”

“So, there was no cheating involved?”

“None whatsoever. I asked him for some time, and he gave it to me, but I didn’t want to keep him from moving on.”

“And the pictures?”

“Were taken last week, after we’d been broken up for months.”

Mikayla looked at the audience. “You heard it straight from Bridget Callahan herself, people. There is no need to demonize Patrick Norwood.”



She turned back to Bridget. “Now for a harder question, Bridget. Do you still love him?”

Bridget sighed quietly. How terrible it was to break another person’s heart in order to heal your own. She only wished the pain had more to do with him than with her first love. She smiled. Five years had taught her how to do it convincingly even if her heart wasn’t in it. “Of course I do. Just because something doesn’t work out doesn’t mean your feelings dissolve in an instant.”

“Thank you for your honesty,” Mikayla said. “I know this must be difficult to talk about.”

“Unfortunately, I’m a bit desensitized to people overanalyzing my personal life.”

“I’m sure. Who knows? Maybe you can turn it into a song down the road.”

Bridget laughed lightly. “Maybe.”

“And speaking of songs,” Mikayla said, “Bridget’s songwriting partner, the very adorable Max Ocampo is here, and they’re going to play for us. Are you ready, Bridget?”

Bridget smacked her hands down on her armrests. “I’m ready.”

“Well, don’t be too ready. We’ve got a commercial break now.” Mikayla addressed the camera. “Stay tuned for the premiere of a brand-new song from the one and only Bridget Callahan!”

Bridget released her breath, and a bucketload of tension, when the red light winked out.

Mikayla leaned forward to touch her arm. “Hey, was that all right? I hate asking such personal questions.”

“Yeah, it’s good. I’m good,” Bridget said. “I know you have to do it.”

“Try not to be so famous, would you?”

“Well, the plan is to lie low a while, so we’ll see.”

“Good luck with that.” Mikayla tilted her head toward the stage. “You should probably get over there.”

“Sure, sure.” She stood, wiped her palms off on her jeans, and joined Max on stage, where he perched on a stool, holding an acoustic guitar.

“Look at you, coming through unscathed.”

Bridget sat at the piano bench. “Always do.”

“Are you sure you want to sing this one? Not too late to change.”

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Bridget ran through an arpeggio. It couldn't be too late—for closure, at least, if not for a second chance. Her songs had always been personal. This one was no different, really. “No. We're doing this one.”

“Okay.”

“Thirty seconds,” someone called.

Mikayla gave them a thumbs-up from the other side of the set. Max returned it. Bridget merely nodded. She took five deep breaths before the camera light blinked back on. Mikayla introduced them once more, and finally, Max began plucking out the intro.

Bridget lost herself in the music.

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After the show, Bridget pulled out her phone and texted someone she hadn't spoken to in years, hoping her number was still the same.

*I'm about to tell all my followers I'm going back home for a much-needed break. I didn't want you to find out from anyone else.*

Then, as an afterthought: *And this is Bridget. In case you lost my number.*

The reply came a few minutes later: *I know who it is. Thanks for telling me.*

*You're okay with it?* Bridget asked.

This response was quicker. *It's your hometown, too. I'm sorry if you stayed away all this time because of me.*

Bridget let go of the breath she was holding. *You always were a better person than me. Maybe I'll see you around?*

This time, there was no reply.

## Chapter Two

### Then

BRIDGET FLOPPED ONTO ALEX'S TINY twin bed as Alex peeled off her sweatshirt and hung it in her closet. Most of their friends, including Alex's roommate, had gone home for fall break, but they'd elected to stay on campus to spend some time together that didn't include homework or a dozen other people.

"I'm stuffed," Bridget said, hands on her stomach, eyes closed.

"We could've brought home leftovers, you know," Alex said.

"But it looked and tasted so good. No regrets."

Alex's soft laugh put a smile on Bridget's face, too. Even in the tiny freshman dorm room, she sounded too far away. Bridget popped an eye open to see Alex perched on the other bed. Hmm.

Scooting up so she was sitting against the headboard, Bridget patted the spot next to her. It was a squeeze, but they'd spent a lot of time in twin beds together. "Come 'ere."

Alex curled her hands around the edge of the mattress, staring at the floor without answering.

Bridget considered her girlfriend—her beautiful, intelligent, confident girlfriend. Adjusting to college life had been difficult and sometimes weird. Bridget missed home a lot more than she'd thought she would, especially considering they were only an hour away, but Alex's presence lessened the sting. Because Alex *was* home, in a way. Alex made Bridget feel comfortable and cared for.

So, why, all of a sudden, was she acting so distant?

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“I thought we stayed here to spend extra time together without distractions,” Bridget said quietly. “Do you want me to go back to my room?”

“What? No. No, I don’t want you to go.” Alex injected bravado into her voice, but she still couldn’t quite meet Bridget’s eye.

Maybe she was just tired. Or itching to get a jump on all the homework she’d have to do on Sunday. If that was it, though, it wouldn’t be the first time they’d spent the night quietly working on different projects.

No, this was something more. This was something new, which meant something had to have changed, and the only thing that had changed was...

Oh.

“This is the first time we’ll be alone without roommates. Maybe you think I have...expectations?”

Alex didn’t say anything, only took a deep breath.

So that was it. Bridget, who’d always been more comfortable with her body and with physicality, didn’t mind waiting. Not for Alex. While five months may be a long time to other eighteen-year-olds, Bridget wasn’t going to jeopardize something this special.

She moved to the edge of the bed, where she could face Alex. “I know we haven’t really talked about it, so if I’m off base, let me know. But...I don’t think I am.”

Alex shook her head.

“So, let’s talk about it.” Bridget turned her hand palm-up and rested it on her knee within Alex’s reach. She wouldn’t push in any way, but she craved contact. “I’m sorry I made you feel like that.”

“You didn’t,” Alex said quickly.

“Then what did?”

“Only every single book and movie ever made,” Alex replied, chuckling weakly. But she reached out her hand to hold Bridget’s.

Despite the unexpected heaviness of the moment, Bridget smiled. She loved holding Alex’s hand—even when it was slightly clammy.

“I didn’t want you to get bored,” Alex said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I didn’t want to be that girlfriend who made you wait so long that you left.”

Bridget couldn’t help but be upset by that. She should’ve done more to reassure Alex. “Can I sit by you?”

Alex nodded.

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Bridget moved to the other bed, keeping one hand in Alex's and sliding the other to her back. "I'm never going to pressure you into having sex before you're ready, and if I do, I deserve to be kicked to the curb. Got it?"

Alex squeezed her hand.

"Good. I just like spending time with you, baby, no matter what we do. I've watched you do homework and loved it."

That earned her a tiny laugh.

"All I want to do tonight is cuddle and watch a movie. We aren't going to do anything more than that until you want to. Hell, if you never want to, we can figure that out, too."

"No, I want to, I think," Alex said shyly. "Just not tonight."

"Definitely not tonight." Bridget pressed a kiss into Alex's hair. "I've got two promises for you. Are you ready?"

"Mm-hmm."

"We'll never do anything unless we're both comfortable with it."

Alex leaned her head on Bridget's shoulder. "Okay."

"And when the time comes," Bridget said, "I'll take care of you. I'll always take care of you, Lex."

\* \* \*

**Now**

"Mom!" Bridget exclaimed as she and Max exited the rental SUV.

Evelyn Callahan met her in the driveway with a bear hug. "It's been far too long since you've been home."

Bridget rolled her eyes, grateful her mom couldn't see. "And here, I thought we'd make it inside before you chastised me."

"Oh, hush," Evelyn said. "I love you, but you deserve it for staying away so long."

"I've flown you out to visit me multiple times each year!"

Evelyn ignored her in favor of hugging Max. "Max! How are you, dear?"

He grinned. "Doing well. Thank you, Mrs. C."

"Come in. Come in." Evelyn waved them toward the house. "I'm sure you two are hungry from traveling all day."

Bridget and Max grabbed their suitcases from the trunk before following, but Bridget only made it to the foyer before she stopped. Little touches were

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different—a painting here, a lamp there—but the majority of the house was unchanged. A wooden staircase covered in a Persian runner led up to the second floor. The dining room off to the left featured a rectangular table that seated twelve. It was a bit less crowded than it used to be, what with Bridget's dad gone and Bridget herself a coward who never came home. Her brothers were still in the area, though, one thirty minutes away and the other an hour, so the table still got good use.

She regretted not coming home sooner. But it had never been about her family. Even now, though, she was afraid to examine her true motives, afraid to find Alex there, at the heart of it all.

"The house looks great, Mom," she said.

"And it smells like cookies," Max said.

"Fresh from the oven," Evelyn said with a smile, "but you'll have to wait for them to cool."

Bridget wandered into the living room while Max and her mom chatted. The TV was a lot bigger, but the couch was still the same brown one she loved so much. Beneath it, nestled beside the stereo, were two CDs. Her own. She pulled them out. Attached to the front of each was a sticky note in her own hand, both addressed to Alex. Hot tears welled in her eyes.

She strode back into the foyer and held up the CDs. "You never gave them to her?" She hated how small her voice sounded.

Evelyn wrapped an arm around Bridget's shoulders. "I tried, honey."

So she didn't want them. Of course she didn't. Bridget wouldn't take anything from a selfish ex, either.

"This is probably a good time to tell you that in the basement, there are a few boxes of your stuff from the apartment," Evelyn said. "She couldn't take everything, and I didn't quite know what to do with it."

Bridget choked out a half-sob, half-laugh. More shit that she'd run away from all those years ago. This whole trip was going to be an exercise in delayed pain. "Why would now be a good time to tell me that?"

"You have to rip off the Band-Aid all at once, Bridgie."

Bridget bit her bottom lip. "I'd rather just find a stronger Band-Aid."

Evelyn chuckled. "You can't keep running away from the things that hurt you. You've got to face her sometime."

Bridget knew that. She also knew that as soon as she saw Alex again, she'd want to run straight back into her arms. The problem was that Alex wanted nothing to do with her, and Bridget couldn't blame her.

"Well, why don't I show you to the guest room?" Evelyn said to Max.

His room was the first at the top of the stairs. It used to be Marcus and Ian's room before they'd moved out for good. Now, the sports and movie posters had been replaced by plain yellow walls, and the twin beds had been swapped for a single queen-sized one with a dark blue comforter. It was comfortable without being too inviting or interesting.

Max set down his suitcase at the foot of the bed. "Looks great, Mrs. C. Thanks."

"Oh, Max, you're so easy to please," Evelyn said, looking pleased, too.

Bridget dragged her bags to her old bedroom. She stopped in the doorway. It was so...unremarkable. And so much the same, even though the walls boasted a new coat of light gold paint and her mom had swapped out most of the furniture. A queen bed covered by a striped red duvet. A bookshelf. A desk bare of a laptop or papers. An old guitar in a stand in the corner.

This tiny room was imbued with so many memories, mostly good. Middle-school sleepovers. Playing songs for Alex on her very first guitar. Late mornings after high-school parties. The first time they'd had sex. All the other times they'd had sex in this bed. The times they'd cuddled and watched movies instead.

Some memories not so good. The week after her father died. The crushing emptiness of the room when they'd fought and Bridget wanted to call the only person who didn't want to hear from her.

Even with all the trappings changed and Bridget's belongings gone, Alex was in every single atom of this room. Fuck, she couldn't do this. She'd just sleep on the couch.

With a grunt, she hefted her duffel and her suitcase and headed back downstairs.

Evelyn's voice followed her. "Honey, where are you going?"

"Downstairs." Bridget set her suitcase at the foot of the couch. This could do. Maybe a couch wasn't the best choice for an extended stay, but she had the TV, and the kitchen was right there.

"With your bags?" Evelyn asked.

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“Yeah,” Bridget called.

“Oh.” Rapid footsteps down the stairs. Then her mom was in the living room, hands on her hips. “You won’t get very much rest here, you know.”

“Well, I can’t...” Bridget swallowed down the tightness in her throat. “I can’t stay there.”

Evelyn hummed. “I thought I’d changed it enough that it wouldn’t matter. You’ll switch with Max, then.”

A surge of gratitude welled in Bridget. Her refusal to come home had to have been tough on her mom, and yet Evelyn hadn’t pushed, and she wouldn’t push. She wouldn’t because she already knew. She knew Bridget’s heart was a shattered mess clumsily taped together, and she knew it was all Bridget’s own fault. Her greatest mistake and her greatest regret.

She should keep a count of how many times she got a breath away from letting the tears fall this trip.

“Yeah, Mom,” she managed. “I think that’s a good idea.”

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At the opposite end of the bar, Riley jerked her chin in the direction of the door. “Incoming.”

Lu, Jordan, and Owen walked in, Owen pushing a sleeping Keiko in her stroller. Benny barked and padded over to greet them, tail wagging.

“Hey,” Alex called from behind the bar. “The usual starter?”

“Yes, please!” Jordan said.

The group sat at their usual table in the back. Alex poured Life on the Berm draft into three steins and brought them over, leaving Riley and Hunter to man the bar. Benny had already settled beneath the table by Lu’s feet.

“Thanks, Al,” Lu said, sipping the foam from the top of hers.

“So, we heard She Who Must Not Be Named is officially back in town,” Owen said.

Jordan elbowed him in the side, but Alex just smiled. “Have you guys seen her? Fawned all over her yet?”

The three exchanged glances, guilty enough that she threw up her hands. “What? Just say it.”

“Is that allowed?” Jordan asked meekly. “Fawning?”

Alex rolled her eyes. “Aren’t you a little old for that?”



“You’re never too old for a good bop,” Owen said, “and she’s got a few.”

“Yeah, and she’s also got enough people fawning over her.”

“Actually,” Jordan said, “from what I can tell, people are trying to be respectful of her space. She’s on vacation, after all.”

“Still, if you three make a big deal about it, she’ll get an even bigger head.”

“Then she won’t even be able to fit through the door,” Owen said.

Alex snorted. Like that was a concern. “I doubt she’ll be coming in here.”

Lu laughed, earning a glare from Jordan. “What? Saying you won’t run into your ex is, like, the first rule of dealing with exes. It dooms you.”

“Thank you for that brilliant advice, Lu,” Alex said, a little too harshly.

“Don’t be sore. I’m just looking out for you.”

“You don’t have to anymore. I’m a big girl.” When she caught sight of their skeptical faces, Alex took a deep breath. “Look, guys, relax. I’m fine.”

Before any of them could respond, Riley said from the bar, “I’m going on my break, Al.”

Alex nodded. “Sure.”

“Hey, Benny. Want to go for a walk?”

The pit bull lifted his head at the last word. When Riley walked toward the door, he ran after her.

“Thanks, Ri,” Alex called.

“Don’t mention it. See you in half an hour.”

Lu leaned forward. “The whole town’s talking, you know.”

“Oh, yeah?” Alex said nonchalantly. “What about?”

“As far as we can tell,” Owen said, “half of them are thrilled the prodigal daughter has returned.”

“And the other half?”

“Out for the prodigal daughter’s blood,” Jordan said, the corners of her mouth twitching with the beginnings of a grin. “For...you know.”

“Yeah,” Alex said. For breaking her heart. The whole town had watched their romance blossom and later implode. “Well, I’ll be sure to send half the town thank-you cards when she leaves.”

Lu took a long drink. “So, what’ll it be? Should we tar and feather her?”

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God, she didn't need them to come *this* far over to her side. Bridget was still someone Alex had once loved. She rested her forearms on the table. "How would you guys treat her if I weren't in the equation?"

Jordan sighed. "We'd flip out. In a good way."

"Seeing her after five years?" Lu added. "Yeah, she was our friend, too."

"Okay, well," Alex said with a shrug, "maybe you should do that, then."

\* \* \*

Max strummed an A chord. "What are you thinking for this line?"

"Which one?" Bridget asked, consulting the lyrics she'd scrawled into a notebook on the plane.

They sat on adjacent stools in the basement studio Bridget's parents had built when she was fifteen, and they realized she was more than a little serious about music. The glass box wasn't big enough to fit a whole band, just a keyboard, a couple guitars, and a drum kit if they wanted to be ambitious. It was perfect for just her and Max, which was how they had started. Sometimes, she thought that was how they would end, too. The two of them and their guitars. What a quartet they made.

"Her name was Sorrow," Max said. He strummed the chord again and tried out a vocal line.

Bridget shook her head. "No, not quite like that." She tried an A minor and sang a variation. "Her name was Sorrow. She had my face."

"You want harmony on that?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe on the next two lines?"

"Your name was Hope. You taught me grace?"

"Yeah." She scribbled chord notations over the lyrics.

Max plucked out the melody. "Are we ever going to write a happy song again?"

"What are you talking about? We write happy songs all the time."

"Up-tempo' and 'happy' aren't the same thing."

Bridget lifted her gaze to meet his. His brown eyes were full of concern. If she couldn't tell him about the turmoil she was feeling, she couldn't tell anyone.

"I'm trying," she said.

"I know, and I don't mean to push you."

"It's just a lot harder than I thought it'd be. Coming home."

He gave her a lopsided smile. “That’s why I’m here.”

“To help me mine past heartbreak to use for song lyrics?”

“Something like that, yeah.” He tapped the body of his guitar. “I’m just saying. Maybe it’s time to mine *my* heartbreak instead.”

Bridget laughed. Maybe she *was* getting to be a broken record.

When Evelyn knocked on the studio window a moment later, they set down their guitars and came out to the main part of the basement. It wasn’t much to look at—a wooden coffee table, a forest green futon, a flat-screen TV sitting on a chest against the opposite wall, and a pile of boxes in the corner.

“What’s up, Mom?” Bridget asked.

Evelyn put her fists on her hips. “Is this how you’re going to spend your entire vacation? Squirreling yourselves away in the basement?”

Bridget and Max exchanged a look, then, nodding, turned back to her mom.

“Pretty much,” Bridget said. “It’s our job, after all. Do you want my career to crash and burn because my next album flops?”

“No, but it’s your first night here. You should show Max around town.”

“You mean around the bowling alley, the liquor store, and the closed-down theater?” Bridget’s voice caught on the last word. She cleared her throat to cover it up. Another place with inescapable memories.

Evelyn frowned. One day, and Bridget was driving her to that state of motherhood where worry for her adult children caused wrinkles. “All your friends are still here, Bridge,” she said. “Owen and Jordan and Lu. You should get in touch with them on the Facebook.”

“It’s not *the* Facebook, Mom. It’s just Facebook.”

“Whatever it is, it doesn’t mask the fact that you’re twenty-eight years old and spending Friday night at your mother’s house.”

Max leaned a hip against the door frame of the studio. “I’m up for bowling or whatever. Is there a place to get a drink around here?”

Evelyn’s expression lightened. “Now, there’s a boy after my own spontaneous heart. You should be more like Max.”

Bridget’s jaw dropped while Max grinned.

“Anyway,” Evelyn said, like she hadn’t just mortally offended her only daughter, “there’s a place called The Pothole. Good beer and good pizza,

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which is not something you can say for every small-town watering hole. It's on Main, right next to the café. You can't miss it."

\* \* \*

Bridget shook off the evening chill as she followed Max into The Pothole, which, as her mom had warned her, was right next to the café. Just inside the door was a plaque proclaiming that the bar had been established in the memory of Calvin Marlowe, Alex's dad. She didn't even need to see the door leading to the café to extrapolate that Alex owned both.

She wiped shaky, sweaty palms on the thighs of her jeans. This was ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. She could get up on stage in front of sixty thousand people without batting an eye. She could perform on live television broadcasts across the country without an ounce of nerves.

She led Max to a booth against the wall, keeping her head down in case anyone she knew from before was here. If Alex hated her, surely they all did, too. She wasn't ready for that.

She fidgeted with the placemat as Max went to the bar to order two beers, and when he slid back into the booth with that tense expression, she just *knew*. Alex was here. Of course. Because she owned the place, which her mom had conveniently forgotten to mention.

"Isn't—" Max started to ask.

"Yes."

"And isn't—"

"Yes."

"Hmm." He paused. "Wow. Your mom's kind of a jerk."

"I can think of another word for it." Still, Bridget was a masochistic fuck, so after a long swig of admittedly delicious beer, she asked, "She's over there?"

Max nodded. "Yeah, she's over there."

Bridget risked a glance. Wrong move. Alex was in tight black jeans that showed off her amazing ass. Her black-and-blue plaid shirt was unbuttoned partway, revealing a black tank beneath, and the sleeves were rolled up to expose her forearms. Her very sinewy, fit forearms. Bridget groaned audibly. With regret, with want.

In a blink, her beer was all over the table. Bridget quickly righted the glass and grabbed a wad of napkins to sop up the mess.

“Shit, Bridge,” Max said. “Let me grab something to help.”

He disappeared and returned a minute later with a towel. After soaking up the spill, he gathered all the sopping napkins and took them to the bar.

Bridget let her head fall into her hands. Oh, God. Alex was here. She’d seen that. She *knew* Bridget was a mess.

“Hey,” Max said when he returned. “No harm done.”

“Lots of harm done, I think.”

Max pushed a fresh glass toward her. “Were you always this nervous around her, or is it just because you haven’t seen her in so long?”

“I haven’t seen her since I broke her heart, Max. I’m allowed to be nervous. Besides, that shirt is just not fair. No one should be allowed to look that good in plaid.”

He chuckled and sipped his drink. “This beer is really good. Maybe if you get yourself another one, it’ll take your mind off how good she looks.”

“I doubt it.”

“So...is that why you came home? To win her back?”

Bridget locked her fingers together to keep herself from fidgeting. Did she? Was that the reason, buried beneath all the others, she refused to acknowledge? “I don’t know.”

“Well, maybe going to say hello would help you figure it out.”

The blood drained from Bridget’s face. “I can’t.”

“Bridget, you performed in front of the president.”

“Oh, I miss him.”

“You can face an ex-girlfriend.”

“An ex-girlfriend who hates me.”

Okay, so she’d go, and then what? If Alex asked how she was, what would she even say? *My bed is cold without you? My life is a mere semblance of a life without you?* How pathetic was that? She was her own person. She didn’t need Alex to make her whole.

She *wanted* Alex, though.

There. Now she didn’t have to spend the entirety of this trip lying to herself.

“You’ll regret it if you don’t,” Max said, his focus already on the picture of his beer he was posting.

She forced a smile. He was right. He was always right. So, with a great big sigh, Bridget slid out of the booth and walked toward the bar.

## Always A Love Song

\* \* \*

After all this time, Alex felt it like an earthquake. Her world tilted on its axis when Bridget Callahan walked through the door of her bar, walked into her life for the first time in five years. Alex had had four days to brace herself, but four centuries wouldn't have been enough time to prepare. Her shoulders dropped as she dried out a glass with a rag.

Bridget looked good. Really good. Like, fuck, she didn't deserve to look that attractive. Her jeans were form-fitting, but not too tight, and her black sweater and red scarf were pleasantly fashionable without trying too hard. Plus, she had the golden glow of the famous, that carefree bearing that didn't let anything touch them. She walked in with Max Ocampo, whom Alex recognized from television and pictures, and they slid into a booth like they were meant to be here, like this small town was big enough to hold people as recognizable as they were.

Alex turned to a patron, got an order, and poured a drink, all while endeavoring to ignore the blonde in the corner. But Bridget's presence was magnetic, drawing Alex's attention repeatedly.

Ten minutes later, after Max cleaned up a spill at their table, Bridget finally looked up and caught Alex staring.

*Don't come over. Don't come over. Don't come over.*

She came over.

Alex turned away. She slid down to the other end of the bar, busying her hands with wiping down the counter.

A little ways down, Bridget leaned against the bar and cleared her throat.

"What can I do for you?" Hunter asked.

"Um, I don't know. What's your best drink?"

Relatively new, Hunter wasn't the best at recommendations, so of course he said the absolute wrong thing. "Well, we've got a pretty banging one called the Callahan."

"The Callahan?" Bridget asked, voice uncertain. Her gaze flickered to Alex.

Alex stiffened. *Build those walls up. Build them up high and strong.*

"Fun while it lasts, but you regret it in the morning," Alex said, a bite in the words. She and Lu had come up with the drink years ago. It'd been a

lark. It'd been a coping mechanism. She'd never expected Bridget to come back, but now that she had, explaining it to her face sent a thrill through Alex.

"Right." Bridget let out a long breath, tapping her fingertips against the counter. "Okay, could I just get a beer, then?"

"What kind?"

"Whatever kind you give to people who just say 'a beer' and don't specify."

Hunter's forehead crinkled.

"Give her the usual, Hunt," Alex said, biting back a sigh. He could make this easier on all of them if he were a tad brighter.

"Oh. Right." He filled a stein with the house lager.

Alex turned away again.

"We should talk," Bridget said.

Alex's jaw jumped with tension. "I think we're five years past that point, actually," she said, and walked away before Bridget could respond.

Then the front door opened, and Benny trotted through, followed closely by Riley, her cheeks flushed from the evening chill. Benny raced over.

To Bridget.

"Benny!" Bridget held open her arms, and Benny jumped into them. She gave him a vigorous petting. "Oh, I've missed you, boy." As Benny licked her face, she laughed and said, "I know. I know. Hello to you, too."

"Traitor," Alex muttered.

Riley, who had joined her behind the bar, dug a teasing elbow into her side. "Someone's sore."

"She can have everything else," Alex said. "But she can't have Benny."

"Relax," Riley said. "She's not going to take him. He missed her. She missed him. But it's your bed he'll be sleeping in tonight."

"Mm." Alex still couldn't manage to smooth out the crease in her forehead. This was bad. This was very bad. Hardly thinking, she turned to Riley. "Will you pretend to be my girlfriend?"

Riley barked out a laugh.

"What?"

Riley lifted an eyebrow. "You promised you wouldn't turn into a hot mess when you saw her."

Alex crossed her arms. "I'm not a hot mess."

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“Okay, then, you’re a very warm one. And no, I won’t pretend to be your girlfriend because you don’t need to be in a relationship to prove you’ve moved on.” She flitted a hand between Alex and Bridget. “Besides, there’s no way I’m stepping in the middle of that unresolved tension.”

Alex tossed a rag at her. “Shut up.”

\* \* \*

Bridget laughed as Benny tried to sit on her lap in the booth. It was a tight squeeze. “Okay, boy, I’m not sure this is going to work.” She stopped laughing when she caught sight of Jordan Chambers approaching their table. *Oh, shit.*

“Hi,” Jordan said. She stuck her hand out to Max. “I’m Jordan.”

Max smiled and introduced himself.

“Bridget, I thought you and Max might want to join us, catch up a little.”

Oh. Unexpected. Bridget raised her eyebrows at Max in a silent question, and he shrugged. “Okay, that’d be great, actually.”

“Cool. We’re over here.”

Benny hopped down, letting Bridget and Max follow Jordan to a booth where Lu Salazar and Owen Kim were seated. Owen wore a welcoming smile, and with one hand, he gently rocked a baby in a stroller, but Lu had her arms crossed over her chest.

“My mom told me about your wedding, but I have must have missed this development. Congratulations,” Bridget said to Owen and Jordan, indicating the stroller.

“Thanks,” Owen said.

“Her name’s Keiko,” Jordan added.

“Well, she’s adorable,” Max said. “How old?”

“Twenty-one weeks,” Owen said, clearly pleased as punch.

Jordan offered a patient smile. “In adult time, that’s five months.”

“Oh, yeah. Sometimes I forget not everyone speaks the language of childcare.” He unclicked Keiko’s straps. “Want to hold her?”

“Oh, um...sure?” Bridget answered, because this felt like a peace offering of sorts.



She sat in the chair Jordan had pulled over and took the little girl into her arms. Keiko had her dad's dark hair, but beyond that, Bridget couldn't tell which parent she took after more. She was definitely a cutie, though.

"Hello, sweets," she said. "I'm Bridget, and this is Max, and it's very nice to meet you."

For a few seconds, Keiko simply stared at her. Then she touched Bridget's cheek and laughed, a silly baby laugh that made Bridget chuckle, too.

"So, how long are you here?" Owen asked.

"Not sure yet," Bridget said. "It depends on...things." She couldn't help but glance at the bar, where Alex was talking to another bartender, but she quickly reverted her attention to Keiko, who was looking up at her with big brown eyes. Bridget booped her nose.

"Oh, yeah. 'Things,'" Lu said.

Bridget sipped her beer. Alex hadn't even wanted to *look* at her, and Lu, at least, didn't seem to want her here either. "Look, guys," she said, "we don't have to do this if you don't really want to, but...I am sorry that I lost contact with all of you. What happened between me and Alex was about me and Alex, but I never meant for you to have to choose sides."

"Well, you made us," Jordan said gently, "whether you meant to or not."

"Maybe we can start over," Bridget said. "I really have missed you."

"And Bridget's told me so much about you," Max added. "I'd love to get to know you all."

Bridget shot him a grateful smile, but it faded with Lu's next words.

"You can't miss people you've forgotten about," she said.

"Lu," Bridget said, a pleading tone in her voice, "I didn't forget about you. I thought you didn't want to speak to me. It seems I was right."

Jordan frowned. "I think what Lu means is that staying away for all these years made us feel cast aside. It looks like you went off to become this big star and then you forgot all about where you grew up."

Bridget blushed. She'd never meant to do that. Why couldn't everyone see that she hadn't come home because she couldn't face what she'd done, what she'd left behind?

"Yeah," Lu said, nodding. "Like, do you even know what's going on? Do you know that the Weylands' house burned down a couple years ago?"

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Or that the library had to completely tear down and rebuild because they found asbestos? Do you know that the elementary teachers are close to striking because they haven't had a raise in a decade?"

Bridget forced her knee to stop jiggling. "Well, okay, I'm obviously not up-to-date on town happenings. What can I do?"

Lu rolled her eyes. "Typical celebrity. She expects us to do all the work for her so she can throw some money around and be done with it."

"No, Lu, give her a chance. She's trying," Jordan said.

"The school building needs a new roof," Owen said. "We've been raising money for almost a year now, and we're still only halfway to our goal."

"Okay." Bridget tightened her hold on her glass. If she suggested paying for the roof, Lu would laugh at her. But she *could* offer to help with fundraising.

"Actually, if you're serious about wanting to give back to the community," Jordan said, lifting a finger, "I have an idea. Riley runs a nonprofit that builds houses for homeless and low-income families."

"Oh, yeah," Owen said. "Saturday mornings are big volunteer days, and I know she could use some extra hands tomorrow."

"That sounds like fun," Bridget said. "Max?"

He grinned. "Let's build some houses."

# Chapter Three

## Then

ALEX RESTED HER HANDS ON Bridget's waist, the touch settling the tremor in them. Bridget was a bridesmaid in her brother's wedding, and the red sari she wore was modestly gorgeous. The whole day, Alex had been on the sidelines, a close friend of the groom's family but not involved in the ceremony. And the whole day, she'd been longing to touch Bridget, to be close to her, to step into her space, and let the world around them fade into nothing.

Now that she was here, even the feel of fabric-covered hips was enough to set her heart racing. She wanted and wanted and wanted, but forced herself to slow. She pulled Bridget closer, eliminating what little distance separated them. Her heart jumped when Bridget chuckled, breath warm against her neck.

They could have this one day, *would* have this one day. They'd find a venue in the countryside with a sturdy barn and an overgrown field of wildflowers, and they'd invite all the people they cared about, and they'd pledge to love each other for all eternity.

Bridget smelled like pomegranates and spice. Alex was heady with it.

"Are you all right?" Bridget asked, voice soft against the thumping music and the swirling conversations. Alex felt the question, saw it form on Bridget's lips, more than she heard it. "You've been really quiet."

Had she? Her mind had been so loud that she hadn't noticed. In an effort to ground herself, she swiped her thumb along the small of Bridget's back. "Just thinking."

Bridget smiled, tongue poking through her teeth. "Always thinking. You ever think about how your head might want a rest? It *is* a party, after all."

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Smiling, Alex shook her head.

“Then tell me what you’re thinking about.”

In Portuguese, Alex whispered, “*I’m thinking about how much I want to marry you.*” Her lips slipped against Bridget’s earlobe.

“What language was that?” Bridget asked, giggling. “Italian?”

Alex shook her head. “Portuguese.”

“Ah. And what did you say?”

Alex swallowed thickly. Despite the blood rushing through her like it was rocket fuel, a new tranquility settled over her. She’d always kind of imagined love as a great unstoppable force, something that thrilled you and excited you until you were no longer capable of thinking clearly. But it wasn’t that at all. It was a blanket that settled over you as you were tucked in safely and soundly for a good night’s rest. It was standing in the eye of a hurricane. Maybe nothing around you made sense, but the fullness of your heart sure did.

“I’ll tell you when you’re not so tipsy,” she said.

Bridget bopped her forefinger against Alex’s nose. “Not fair.”

“You won’t even remember this in the morning.”

“Oh, Alex,” Bridget sighed, “I remember everything about you.”

Alex’s breath caught. “I love you,” she murmured, feeling her heart fall into rhythm with the confession.

She’d said it so many times. Bridget had always made it a priority—in random texts, whispered as they were falling asleep, in sticky notes left in lunch bags. She said she did it to make sure Alex didn’t forget. Like Alex could ever forget the surge of happiness that accompanied each utterance. Bridget made it a priority, and so had Alex. She’d said it so many times, but this time felt different.

Bridget stopped swaying to the music to look Alex full in the eye. Even in the dim lantern light, Bridget’s eyes were a fantastic blue. Then, deliberately—as if she also knew the words were different this time for some reason that hung in the air and yet remained elusive—Bridget leaned forward. A soft groan escaped Alex’s throat as she sank into the kiss. Not their first, not by a long shot, but *somehow*, it was different.

Bridget tasted like champagne.

She tasted like home.

Charley Clarke

\* \* \*

## Now

Alex cursed under her breath when she pulled up to the building site and saw Bridget and Riley up on the roof. That wasn't going to end well. Bridget had probably never picked up a hammer before, let alone installed a roof. It was dangerous. She could fall. Imagine the bad press for the town if they let America's Pop Princess fall off a fucking roof.

Alex grabbed her tea and Riley's coffee, exited her truck, and skirted around the volunteers on the ground, Max among them.

"Hey, Riley," she called.

Riley looked up. "Where's my coffee?"

Alex held up the to-go cups. "Right here. Now get down here. I want to talk to you."

Riley said something to Bridget, who laughed and nodded, before climbing down the ladder. She took the proffered cup and sipped. "Now, what's got your panties all in a twist?"

Alex frowned.

"I can't see your glare when you're wearing those sunglasses, you know."

Alex pushed them to the top of her head. "Stop being an ass. She shouldn't be up there."

"Why not? She's an adult."

"She's a first-time volunteer. That's a liability issue."

Riley turned toward the roof and shouted, "Hey, Bridget! Alex thinks you're too famous to be on the roof!"

"Come on, Lex," Bridget called down. "All the things we've done on rooftops? I've got good balance."

Riley snickered.

Alex pushed her in the shoulder.

"Okay, Al," Riley said, "I'm going to cut you some slack because you brought me this delicious coffee, but I don't really appreciate your insinuation that I'm not careful. In the five years I've been running this, not one person has so much as bashed their thumb with a hammer."

Alex shifted her weight onto her right foot. "I know."

"Good."

"I'm sorry."

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“I know.” Riley’s expression softened. “You going to chill now?”

“Maybe.”

“Better than nothing, I guess.”

“You know your way around a roof. You could go up and help her out.”

“No, I...” Alex looked around. “I’ll find something else to do.”

“Whatever. You look hot today. I bet she appreciates that.”

Alex tugged self-consciously at her vest. “Shut up. I always look hot.”

“Damn right,” Riley said, laughing. “Now go make yourself useful.”

Alex grumbled as Riley climbed the ladder again. She accidentally met Bridget’s gaze. She froze for a moment because the look on Bridget’s face was thoroughly unexpected—sadness tinged with...affection? That couldn’t be right.

Turning away, Alex forced her mind to go blank. There was work to be done.

\* \* \*

Bridget unwrapped her sandwich, then turned to Max. “Having fun yet?”

Beside her, Max nodded. “Oh, yeah. I might be an artsy boy, but I know my way around power tools.”

Chuckling, she looked around. She and Max sat on the ground in a wide circle of adult volunteers who seemed too nervous to talk to her. A huddle of college kids here for volunteer hours sprawled on the grass nearby, tossing bits of bread at each other. Alex and Riley sat on the front steps of the house. Never had sixty feet felt so much like opposite ends of the world. Bridget let out a long breath, shoulders slumping.

Max stole a chip from her bag.

She jerked out of her daze to slap him on the hand. “Hey.”

“You snooze, you lose, Cal.”

Bridget scoffed.

“You should go talk to her.”

“Like that turned out well last night.”

“‘If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, try again.’ William Edward Hickson.”

“You’re a nerd, Max.”

“Yeah, a nerd who’s helping you get your girl back.” His smile turned mischievous. “Maybe *I* should go over there and talk to her.” He stood up.

She grasped his elbow and dragged him back down to the ground. “Maybe you should sit your ass down and think again.”

He collapsed in a fit of laughter.

“Ugh, this isn’t funny.” She scrubbed her face with her hands, and when she opened her eyes again, she caught Alex staring before quickly averting her gaze. Something clenched in Bridget’s chest, squeezed until she almost couldn’t breathe. Max was right. Obviously Alex wasn’t going to be the one to make a move.

He gave her knee a squeeze. “Is that you changing your mind?”

She tightened her ponytail and brushed stray hair behind her ears. “I just... I’m never going to get closure if I can’t get her to at least speak to me. Right?”

“Mm-hmm. I mean, what could it hurt?”

It could hurt a lot, actually. It could destroy everything. But hadn’t she already done that five years ago?

She stood and walked straight toward Alex and Riley, her heart fluttering more with each step. Alex looked amazing, as usual. Her outfit—boots, jeans, gray Henley, black vest—was almost exactly what she used to wear on the camping trips they used to take. Bridget smiled at the memories. Those were some *good* trips.

“Hey, Bridget,” Riley said. “What’s up? Need some more Gatorade?”

That was when Bridget realized she’d been standing in front of them for a good few seconds, staring without saying a word. “Oh, um...I thought I could talk to Alex for a minute. If that’s okay with Alex, of course.”

Off a small nod from Alex, Riley got up. She touched Bridget’s shoulder as she walked away. As soon as she was out of earshot, the look on Alex’s face told Bridget this might have been a mistake. Still, she steeled herself and took a seat on the steps.

*Breathe, Callahan. Breathe.*

She hadn’t been this close to Alex in years. This proximity used to be so normal. Even before they’d started dating, their friendship was all handholding and chaste touches and a primal desire just to be near the only other person on the planet who *got* them. The years had been good to Alex, matured her features so that her teenage attractiveness had become

straight-up adult beauty. Or perhaps it was the absence that made Bridget appreciate the plump lips, the bottomless brown eyes, the long nose all the more. And, oh, God, her hair. Bridget wanted to bury her fingers in those curls and never look back.

Alex busied herself with retying her boots, clearly not keen to start the conversation. She hadn't moved away, though. That was cause to be hopeful, right?

"Alex..." For a heartbeat, Bridget could pretend nothing had changed. Despite the uncrossable chasm between them, they were tied together by broken promises and broken hearts. That had to count for something.

"I've missed you," were the words that slipped from her lips. Then she closed her eyes because that was the worst thing to say, something she had no right to say anymore.

"Look," Alex said, "I can't object to you coming back here since it's your hometown, too, but that doesn't mean this is eas—" She took a deep breath. "Maybe we should just stay out of each other's way."

She moved to stand, but Bridget put a hand on her knee. Alex glared, the expression foreign and unsettling.

Bridget jerked her hand away. "I'll respect that, Alex. I will. But I think a semblance of closure could do us some good." She swallowed thickly. "One conversation. A few minutes. That's all I'm asking for."

Alex squinted out into the fall sunshine.

Bridget felt suspended from a string, like Alex's next words were the only thing keeping her from plunging to her death.

"Closure," Alex said with a quiet, mirthless chuckle. Then she stood and brushed off her pants, and just like that, Alex was walking away from her.

If there was any proof that karma existed, this was it right here—the worst act Bridget had ever committed now turned against her every time they interacted.

Bridget chased her. Wasn't that her fate now? To right her wrongs, to fix everything she'd broken or to die trying. Alex wasn't like her. She was quiet, all of her emotions roiling unseen beneath the surface. She needed time to process things. Bridget knew this, and yet it still felt like a slap in the face. Still felt like punishment.



“Hey!” Bridget called after her. “Alex!” In her haste, she smacked into a stack of wooden planks, and her foot twisted around. Pain lanced through her toes and ankle, and she fell forward hard onto the grass before a sturdy pair of arms latched around her and gently turned her onto her back. She groaned, not wanting to look and see who it was.

“Are you all right?” Riley asked, voice too far away to be the person holding her.

Bridget opened her eyes.

Alex. Alex was there, on a knee, arms scooped up under Bridget.

Heat crept up Bridget’s neck. Her cheeks were surely splotchy with it. Fantastic. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

She tried to push to her feet, only to have Alex lift her upright. After the barely there conversation they’d just had, gentleness was the last thing Bridget expected, but Alex allowed Bridget to lean on her as she found her footing.

Which wasn’t too easy, given that her ankle gave out as soon as she put weight on it. Once again, Alex was there with an arm beneath her shoulders.

Max came running over. “What’s going on? Bridge, are you all right?”

“Mostly,” she said. “I think I just twisted my ankle. A little rest, a pack of ice, and I’ll be fine.”

“No, you should go get it checked out,” Riley said. “Come on. I’ll take you.”

“No, I’ll do it,” Alex said.

All three heads swiveled toward her.

Alex shrugged. “That way, you don’t have to call off the day for the other volunteers.”

Riley looked nonplussed for a second before asking Bridget, “Is that okay with you?”

Bridget nodded. At least twelve minutes in the car with the woman who kept avoiding her? Yeah, that was more than okay.

“Okay. Alex, call me later,” Riley said, “especially if it’s anything more than a twist.”

“Sure,” Alex said.

“Want me to come along?” Max asked.

“No,” Bridget said. “It’s probably nothing, anyway. I’ll meet you back home.”

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“Okay.”

Alex, one arm under Bridget’s, hand splayed against her back, dipped her knees a few inches to make Bridget more comfortable. After a short trek to the curb, they paused beside a relatively new black truck.

Alex popped the lock and pulled open the passenger door. “It’s a bit of a step. Sorry.”

Alex helped her up into the cab, even pulled out the seatbelt to hand over and closed the door for her. Bridget watched Alex move around the front of the truck and get in.

“So, you got a new truck,” Bridget said.

“Mm-hmm,” Alex agreed as she started the engine and pulled away.

“Cool.”

“Comes in handy.”

Bridget worried her bottom lip. Honestly, why had Alex even volunteered for this if she didn’t want to? And, despite her kindness in helping Bridget into the truck, her short responses and inability to make eye contact showed her cards. She clearly didn’t want to be here. Sore at the thought, Bridget said, “You didn’t have to drive me, you know. Max would have done it.”

Alex’s voice was flat, unreadable when she said, “Max doesn’t know the way.”

It would have been a flimsy excuse even before the age of GPS; Bridget knew this town well enough to give directions. So maybe Alex *did* want to be here, just didn’t want to show it. Bridget fidgeted with the hem of her sweatshirt, and by the time she thought of something suitable to say, they were pulling into the parking lot of the doctor’s office.

\* \* \*

Dr. Jane Kozlow was six years older than the last time Bridget had seen her, but her take-no-shit face hadn’t aged a day. Bridget lowered her shoulders in an attempt to shrink into the exam table.

Jane addressed Alex, who stood uncomfortably in the doorway. “Alex, thank you for bringing her, but I’d like to examine the patient in private.”

“Of course. I’ll be in the waiting room.”

Bridget licked her lips as her gaze followed Alex’s ass, but her fantasizing was disrupted by Jane smacking her in the head. “Ow! What was that for?”

Jane crossed her arms. Who knew a sixty-year-old sitting on a swivel stool could be so intimidating? “Level with me, Bridget.”

The paper rattled as Bridget tightened her grip on the exam table.

“Scale of one to ten. How badly does your ankle *actually* hurt?”

Bridget squished her nose up. “Uh...point-five?”

Jane nodded. “That’s what I thought. Now, would you care to elaborate on why you’re wasting my time by faking an injury when I could be dealing with real emergencies?”

“I’m not faking. It hurt for a bit, but the pain pretty much faded on the ride over. And come on, Doc. The only emergencies in this town are the fights over at the bingo hall.”

“You’d be surprised how vicious people can get over that game. Count yourself lucky if you’ve gotten out of there with only minor scrapes and bruises.” Jane tapped her pen against the clipboard. “And don’t change the subject.”

Bridget let out a breath and, along with it, a fraction of the tension in her body. “I’m sorry I took up your time, but I did it for love, and—”

“Oh, well, if it’s for love...”

“That makes it okay?”

“Of course not!” Jane said. She straightened the lapels of her white coat. “I expect tickets for your next concert in Pittsburgh for my grandchildren.”

Unexpected, but easy enough. “Done.”

Jane gestured. “Continue.”

“Alex won’t speak to me. She’ll barely even look at me. But when I fell, she was right there, like she hasn’t been able to rid herself of that instinct to protect me. And, starved for any sort of attention from her, I got carried away in the moment.” Bridget frowned.

Jane narrowed her eyes. “You’re very dramatic. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Many times. Unfortunately, drama kind of comes with the territory,” Bridget said, unsure if she was referring to being a pop star or the tension with her ex.

“So you came home to get her back?”

‘Getting her back’ would require Alex wanting her, too. Bridget would be content with much less. “It factored into the decision.”

## Always A Love Song

Jane's gaze lost focus for a moment, as if she were lost in memories. She sighed. "Then I suppose I'll go along with this little charade of yours."

"Thank you!"

"If you hurt her again, the only head that will roll will be yours. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"And don't forget those tickets."

Bridget eased onto her feet. "I won't. I promise. Thank you."

Hopping slightly, Bridget followed Jane back to the waiting room, where Alex sat sullenly in a chair, playing with the zipper of her vest.

"Well, she'll live," Jane said.

Alex nodded and stood. "Good."

To Bridget, the doctor added, "But you need to keep weight off your foot for a day or two. And you'll need to ice and elevate it the rest of the day. You'll see her home, Alex?"

Alex's jaw jumped. Bridget did her best to seem in need of aid without being a total damsel in distress, but she was sure, just from her ex-girlfriend's tense posture, that Alex would say no.

After a moment, though, Alex waved toward the door. "Come on, then."

Relief and anticipation were quickly followed by dread. Because the trip to the doctor's office had been an awfully quiet one. The thrill that went through her when Alex slipped an arm under hers, though—that was worth all the dread in the world.

\* \* \*

Alex gripped the steering wheel hard. Catching Bridget had been nothing more than a reaction, but it had cost her. Five years of fighting it, and five hours had reduced her to an emotional puddle whose first instinct, upon seeing Bridget stub her toe, was to catch her like this was some heteronormative rom-com.

She could beat this. Bridget would be gone soon enough. Her life would return to normal. In a few days, she wouldn't have to worry about Bridget's presence stirring up old emotions.

Alex flipped on the radio. Distractions were good. The rock song that was playing came to an end, only to be replaced by Bridget's latest single. Of fucking course. Inescapable.

Charley Clarke

Bridget shut off the music. “Alex, listen, I know you hate me, but I—”  
“I don’t hate you,” Alex said softly.

“What?”

“I said I don’t hate you.” She swallowed her emotions. It was tougher with Bridget in the passenger seat, but she’d had years of practice. “It’d be easier to hate you if you were terrible.”

That got a smile from Bridget. “You want me to be terrible? Okay, what do you call a belt made out of a watch?” She paused expectantly. “A waist of time!”

Alex groaned. If she weren’t driving, she’d cover her eyes with a palm. “That was awful.”

Bridget laughed. “You love it.”

She did, but it was a residual sort of love, the thing she never learned to stop loving because she was so busy forgetting Bridget’s eyes and her voice and her thoughtfulness.

“So,” Bridget began, twisting her fingers together, “I know we should find a better time to talk, but I thought...I thought maybe we could try to be friends?”

Alex tightened her jaw to keep from replying right away. *Absolutely not* was her kneejerk reaction. Because that was what she did. React and hold grudges and squirrel herself away so no one could make her feel anything. When you were alone, the only person who could hurt you was yourself.

She stayed silent for three more blocks, long enough to prompt Bridget into talking again. “Or not. That’s fine, too. That’s...totally fine. But, you know, we should talk. At some point.”

They reached Bridget’s house a block later. Alex pulled the truck into the driveway next to Evelyn’s car. She hopped out, jogged around the truck, and had the passenger door open before Bridget even got her seatbelt off.

Bridget hesitated before letting Alex get an arm under her and help her hobble to the front door. The walk was short, blessedly so, because holding Bridget was...

*Douse those flames. Build those walls.*

Mrs. Callahan opened the door. “Oh, honey, Max called and told me what happened. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, Mom, I’m fine,” Bridget said, as Alex helped her inside and onto the couch.

### Always A Love Song

“Thank you so much for taking care of her, Alex,” Mrs. Callahan said.

“Not a problem, Mrs. C.”

“Would you like to stay? I’m making lasagna for dinner.”

“Thank you, but I can’t today.”

“Mom,” Bridget said, making a little *go away* motion with her head.

“Of course, dear. Alex, thanks again for being such an upstanding young woman.”

Alex smiled. Mrs. Callahan was laying it on thick today.

Bridget perched on the couch, seemingly content to stare at Alex without a word.

Alex stuffed her hands in the pockets of her vest. She cleared her throat. “So, um, friends. You said you wanted us to try to be friends.”

A small, tentative smile appeared on Bridget’s lips. “Yeah, I did. What do you think?”

Five years was a long time to analyze flaws, and Alex knew she had them. Lots. But she’d never get better if she didn’t own up to them. Besides, all she could think about was her dad’s face if he knew how thoroughly she’d shut Bridget out. Bridget had been like a second daughter to him, and he’d always advocated forgiveness.

Too bad she wasn’t that good a person.

“Yeah... I don’t think so.”

TO CONTINUE READING,  
PLEASE PURCHASE

# ALWAYS A LOVE SONG

BY CHARLEY CLARKE

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