

The Secrets They Keep  
Guardians Society: Book One  
By Alison Haines

***Preview***

## *PROLOGUE*

*17 years ago*

"You can't tell me you haven't sensed it," Jack hissed.

Mark gripped his brother's upper arm, pulling him from his crowded dining room and into the adjacent living room. Mark returned his glare to Jack after casting a glance back towards the table; the kids were too distracted to notice their fathers' absence.

"Don't give me that *sense* bullshit. She's just a little girl."

Jack sighed, looking back at their kids eating, laughing without any sense of the danger that lingered in their periphery. "Fine, don't take my word for it. If

you can honestly say you don't see it in her, or any of the others, I'll drop it."

Letting out a breath, Mark bit the inside of his cheek, unable to completely discount his younger brother's assessment, as much as he wanted it to be wrong.

"We're going to have to move. If you're sensing it, even if you're wrong, someone else might as well."

"Mark, are you sure we shouldn't let the kids decide if they want-"

"They are never to know about that world," Mark interrupted, voice booming. His wife Nicole turned, catching his eye from the table with a furrowed brow. Mark waved her off and forced a smile. "Jack, I mean it."

Jack looked into his older brother's eyes, opening his mouth as if to disagree. But as he took in Mark's expression, he thought better of it.

"I'll make the arrangements. Get your family ready." Before rejoining the festivities, Mark turned to his brother once more. "And don't tell Clarissa."

## CHAPTER ONE

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I step out into the setting August sun, air still hot and thick with the smell of fresh-cut grass. Looking down the quiet street for a familiar car, I pop on my sunglasses. Mom is picking me up, but she's running late, as usual. I really didn't need to rush my shower. I spin my damp auburn hair into a messy bun with my ever-present hair elastic—the only accessory I wear.

"Are you the new 103?" An elderly woman asks, exiting the building with a yipping ball of brown fur.

"Hi. Yeah, I'm Alex." I reach down to pet the Yorkie, who promptly nips my fingers.

"Don't touch Winnie! She doesn't like strangers."

"Oh, sorry—"

"I live in 203, and I won't tolerate any tomfoolery. If you have a party, I *will* call the police."

"Right, well you don't have to worry--"

"You smoke?"

"What? No!"

"The last guy smoked." She leans closer, sniffing my tank top. "Winnie doesn't tolerate smoke, either."

"Fair enough."

"Your moving truck. It was too loud. You need to be more considerate."

I barely hold in a snort. "I assure you it won't happen again. Until I move out, anyway."

She glares at me for another minute through thick glasses and lets out a scoff as her eyes run down my jean shorts. "You kids and your refusal to cover your bodies. In my day..." she mutters as she tugs Winnie down the front walkway.

"Lovely to meet you," I call after her with a smile. She continues to mutter, tottering down the tree-lined sidewalk and clutching her sweater over her ankle-length floral dress. It's easily 30°C this afternoon; looking at her makes me sweat. *She's gonna be fun.*

My mom finally arrives, pulling to the curb and beeping her horn. I press my lips to suppress a laugh, my new neighbor jumping and turning to glare at the car.

"Who's that?" Mom asks through a forced smile as she waves at Ms. Grumpy-Pants.

"My delightful new neighbor."

She laughs. "Well, there had to be some downside to this beautiful building."

It's true; I'd been lucky to score this apartment. I start my job with the Toronto District School Board in a week, and I managed to find a place on budget in a quiet neighborhood in Markham.

"I thought Erik was with you."

"He and his mom are meeting us at the restaurant."

"Talia's coming?"

"Mom, we are *not* starting this again. Talia is *nice!*" I insist, checking my phone and channeling my anger at the red light. We're running late.

She huffs. "I *know* women like her. She comes from money and flaunts it. She thinks she's better than me, better than us."

My sunglasses mask my eye roll; Mom's clearly projecting. "You've met her once, and it was for, like, five minutes. I think I might know her a bit better than you. I swear, she's incredibly kind and generous."

"So, can I assume Erik didn't even help with the heavy lifting today?"

I groan, regretting inviting Mom to dinner already.

Erik and his mom are already seated when we arrive, only four minutes late.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry!" I say as I hurry to the table, darting past the hostess who attempts to greet us.

"Don't worry about it, honey. You're right on time." Talia smiles as she stands to pull me into a hug. She's wearing a beautiful blue sundress that makes

her cerulean eyes pop. *Why didn't I wear something nicer?*

I notice with chagrin that this restaurant is fancier than Erik had let on when he invited us. The table is adorned with a cloth tablecloth and napkins, too much silverware, and sparkling glasses of water with extras for wine. This really isn't helping my "Talia's down to earth" case with Mom.

Erik greets my mom before pushing in my chair as I sit. Returning to his seat, he plants a kiss on my cheek. I smile shyly, looking into his gorgeous sparkling blue eyes. He gives me the half smile that melts my heart; *god, that smile.*

"Nicole, great to see you," Talia says. She reaches out to squeeze Mom's hand.

"And you, Talia," Mom responds, giving me a knowing look. "This is a very nice restaurant."

*Please, oh please, let this lunch go smoothly,* I pray, barely containing a grimace. Mom isn't going to make it easy.

"Happy moving day! How are you settling in?" Talia asks as she sips her water, mysteriously not leaving a mark on the glass despite her bold red lipstick.

"It's been a busy day. My brother-in-law helped Whit and I get everything moved in, and my dad installed new curtain rods for me." My eyes dart instinctively to my mom, who stiffens at the mention of Dad. I quickly push on. "It's a total mess right now, but I'm excited to actually *have* it." A shiver runs

through me in the over-air-conditioned restaurant; I'd forgotten my sweater in the car in my haste. Before I can excuse myself to get it, Erik passes me his with a wink.

Smiling gratefully, I slip into his already warm hoodie. *It smells like him.* "How do you like Erik's new place?"

"Oh, it's nice enough. A little small, but nice," Talia muses. I ignore a kick from my mom under the table.

"Mom, I told you, that's what you get in the city. Besides, why would I need a bigger place? It's just more space to keep clean," he replies as Talia raises her dark eyebrows. "Hey, it's your fault for babying me and doing all the cleaning yourself."

"Yeah, thanks for that, by the way," I add sarcastically, causing both moms to laugh.

Erik also landed a job in Toronto, which was an amazing surprise. As excited as I am about having my own place, I didn't relish the thought of moving to a new city alone. We hadn't been dating long enough to even consider moving in together, but it would be nice to have him nearby. He's a true city boy and found an apartment in the heart of downtown. His job as an accountant for a major firm also pays better than my starting salary as a substitute teacher, even in a busy school district. I'm sticking to the suburbs—more my style and price range.

Erik's eyes shoot to his vibrating phone sitting on the edge of the table. The illuminated screen reads



*BLOCKED CALLER*, as usual. He reaches for it, but Talia gets there first.

"Mom, it might be—" Erik starts, but a look from Talia shuts him up.

"It's not as important as dinner with your girlfriend." She eyes Erik intensely for a moment before smiling at my mom and me. "Teaching your son manners is a never-ending pursuit. I apologize."

My mom catches my eye, brows raised, before returning Talia's smile, albeit a little forced.

Erik's fair cheeks burn red as he runs a hand through his short chestnut hair. Quickly regaining his composure, he smiles at me with *that* smile and takes my hand. "Sorry. Tell me more about your move."

After dinner, Erik promises to help me unpack in the morning, apologizing for about the tenth time that he couldn't get off work today.

Talia pulls me into a hug. "Alex, we must reschedule dinner with your father. I feel terribly about Michael canceling last Thursday."

"No worries. Let me know when you guys have a free night, and I'll check his schedule."

My dad had yet to meet Erik's, despite a few failed attempts. Michael is always away on business trips, which suits me fine; he makes me nervous.

"Oh! I nearly forgot. Please give this to your sister. It was so kind of her to invite Erik to the wedding, and he forgot our gift." She casts Erik another vexed glare as she hands me a thick envelope. "The pictures you

shared online are gorgeous. Whitney's dress was stunning, and you made a beautiful maid of honor. I don't often see you that... formally dressed."

I blush. I really should put in more of an effort when I'm going out, but makeup has never really been my thing. Mostly because I suck at it.

Before we leave, I duck into the washroom. As I wash my hands, the sound of Talia's voice drifts through the door from the adjacent corridor.

"I don't care *what* other mission they offered you. This is a priority, and we're not done here."

"I'm ready to submit my report and wrap up. This was clearly a bust," Erik comments, his voice uncharacteristically petulant

I see my brow furrow in the mirror as I listen.

"That is not yet the consensus..." Talia's voice fades away.

I try to unpack what I've just heard. I'm sure it was their voices... but it can't have been. Nothing they said made any sense, unless *mission* was just a poor translation from Talia's native tongue of Greek. Talia doesn't work with Erik though, so what were they talking about?

I dry my hands, half convincing myself it had just been two similar voices in the hallway. I'm certainly not going to tell Mom what I thought I overheard. She would latch onto it as an example of Talia being two-faced. Plus, she isn't crazy about Erik. She thinks he's too charming. Apparently, someone can be too chivalrous for her.

The whole way home, I let Mom vent. She dissects the *true* meaning behind every word Talia said. She's still prattling on when we get to my place. I head straight for the wine: a house warming gift from Whit. I didn't think I'd be cracking it open quite this quickly, but after that dinner, I need a drink. Seemingly out of complaints, mom drops onto the couch and pulls her red curls over her shoulder.

For mother and daughter, we share very little in the way of looks. Where she is full figured, I'm slender and lack curves. We're both fair skinned, but I'm missing her red hair and charming freckles that add so much warmth to her complexion. We do share the same emerald green eyes, stopping me from considering too seriously that I was secretly adopted.

"Oh my gosh," Mom laughs as she pours herself a glass. "I just remembered that place we looked at, the one near the gas station."

I almost spit out my wine. "The one with *two bathrooms*, but one had a sink and a shower, and the other had a toilet and tub?"

We both laugh, trading stories of the worst units we'd seen. It's hard finding an apartment in a city you don't know well. I grew up in St. Thomas, a couple of hours from Toronto, and both my parents still live there. We didn't know the neighborhoods around here, so we'd wasted many summer days going through terrible apartments. It's disheartening what some people try to pass off as a habitable place for humans.

Mom reaches for the wine bottle on the floor, topping up our glasses. I take a drink, Talia and Erik's conversation I overheard at the restaurant pulling at my thoughts. Before I can replay the whole thing, my mom turns to me, eyes serious.

"Alex, this color really is too dark for autumn. I wish you'd let me book you in with my girl, get some highlights," Mom says, twisting a strand of my hair as I pull out my bun. "And you're such a smart girl. I really think you should look into law school again."

I clench my jaw, cheeks burning. "I know you do."

"I'm not trying to get you all worked up. I just want you to know I support you." She huffs, overshadowing my right to be angry with her indignance. "I just have a feeling that there is more for you than substitute teaching, and you know what Grandmother always used to say: *a woman's intuition is not to be ignored.*"

"Thanks, Mom. That means a lot," I say flatly as I bite my cheek, trying not to cry.

She smiles, appeased, as she gets to her feet. "That's enough wine! I'm gonna get ready for bed."

I thank her for staying over with a tight smile; my irritation goes unnoticed or ignored. She leans down to kiss the top of my head, before stumbling to the bathroom. I take some deep breaths, pushing my frustration down. She hit a nerve that's still raw, yet she's like a dog with a bone, bringing up law school every chance she gets. Mom's never respected my decision to become a teacher.

I pop my head into the spare room, tossing a pillow on the air mattress I'd set up this afternoon. Truth be told, I blew it up for my little brother Caleb, but he had soccer practice tonight, so Dad took him home after we'd finished moving. I was starting to doubt my decision to use Mom as a back-up. I love her, but she knows how to get under my skin like no one else. Well, at least I don't have to stay alone.

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Whit yawns loudly, collapsing onto my couch, her impossibly long legs draping over the armrest.

"You're here for your muscles, not to lounge. Up!" I say, flattening another cardboard box and adding it to the teetering pile. Yesterday, Whitney came over to help me unpack with Erik, then I subtly manipulated her into sleeping over. It's one of the perks of being a little sister: your older sibling will instinctively protect you. In the last two weeks, since finding out my apartment application was accepted, I'd been so excited about getting my own place. Somehow, I'd ignored the fact I'd be living *alone*. *I wonder how long I can convince people to spend the night?*

"Hey, don't blame me! I had to share a bed with Kicky Mc. Ice Toes. God, do you even own socks?" Whit teases.

"My toes aren't that cold."

"I thought you died. I seriously thought I was sleeping next to a corpse."

I throw a pillow at her, trying not to laugh. "Whatever, at least I don't snore."

"That's true; Sam's like a freight train."

"I wasn't referring to your husband, Mrs. Freight Train." I drop down on the couch beside her, and a wave of discouragement washes over me as I lean my head on her shoulder. This place is a huge mess. "Plus, you could have slept in the spare room."

"I don't do air mattresses." Whit rests her head on mine. "Where's Erik, anyway?"

"Working. He has zero vacation time. He had to work super late yesterday just for taking the morning off," I explain with a frown. It sucks not having him here. He'd only spent a couple hours here yesterday before hurrying back to the office. To be fair, he did bring the most beautiful print of one of my favorite art pieces. He's always doing sweet things like that: remembering stuff I swear I've only mentioned once and surprising me with really personal gifts.

"Are you excited that you guys will be living so close now?"

"Yeah."

"Wow, with that enthusiasm, you'll be right on my heels down the aisle," Whit says, raising her eyebrows.

"Stop. I *am* excited."

"That's it. We're going to pick out china patterns right now!" Her smile fades. "Anything wrong between you two?"

"No, things are good. He's great. But with his crazy work schedule, we only see each other on

weekends anyway, so it won't really make a huge difference. I'm going to miss seeing you and Caleb all the time."

"I get that, but this will be good for you."

"I worry about Dad. Will you visit?"

"Alex! He's an adult; he can take care of himself. You know I'll visit, but you need to stop coddling him."

I bite my cheek. I'd been living with Dad since the divorce, and I can't help but feel like I'm abandoning him. "Promise me you'll check in on Caleb. He needs homework reminders."

"Mom and Dad raised us; he'll be fine," Whit reminds me in her typical worry-free way.

"But we had each other."

She sighs, smiling at me indulgently. "Fine, fine. I'll keep an eye on Caleb, but only if you promise to let Mom and Dad deal with their issues. I know this sounds extreme, but *try* to start living your own life."

I glare at her as I pry myself off the couch, a familiar intricate knock saving Whit.

"I come bearing gifts," my cousin, Seth says with an elaborate bow, extending a box of delicious-smelling pizza my way as I open the door.

"I smell cheese. Gimme!" Whitney calls from the couch.

"Hi to you too, Whit." Seth shakes his head. "Sometimes I feel like you two only like me for my pizza discount."

"I mean, he's not wrong," Whit whispers loudly as I sit beside her, pizza in hand.

"I was going to share the precious *last slice* with you, but now I'm eating it myself."

"Where's Miles?" Whit manages as best she can with a full mouth.

"He got called into work."

I snort, reaching for a napkin. "Tell your brother I think he's full of crap and I'll remember this next time he needs help."

"Isn't our generation supposed to be full of lazy drifters who spend more time traveling to East Asia than actually working? Erik and Miles are a disgrace." Whit shakes her head, grabbing more pizza.

"Well at least we're here, in the middle of the afternoon on a weekday, eating garbage food and accomplishing nothing," Seth points out.

"Too true," I say, holding up a bottle of pop. "But seriously, I need you guys to help put my dresser together."



## CHAPTER TWO

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I survive my first work week, and the short drive makes the upheaval feel worth it. My first day of week two was made longer by an all-night marking session, leaving me dreaming of my bed. I'm supposed to be in orientation as a high school sub, but my preceptor is basically just using me as a marking assistant. Kelly loaded me down with an overwhelming stack of quizzes yesterday, having totally forgotten about them. She wants them returned to the students tomorrow, so I spent the night getting them done. Also, I may have been sucked into a Netflix binge session that made the whole thing take longer.

Just as I'm snuggling under the covers, my phone rings. I'm surprised to see my mom's picture smiling up at me. It's 8:30 in the morning—not her prime time.

"Mom? Everything okay?"

"Yes. Well, no. I was hoping you could watch Caleb? I forgot it's a PD day and I have a few appointments. You don't work today, right?"

"Oh, I kind of was up all night with work."

"I see." She pauses. "If you can't take him, I'll bring him with me. The waiting areas will have toys, I'm sure."

I picture her going into the doctor's office and leaving Caleb in the waiting room unsupervised. He could easily try to find a park when he gets bored. Who knows what could happen? My worrying mind gets the better of me.

"No, it's fine, of course I'll watch him. Can you bring him here, at least?"

"Can we meet halfway? I don't want to be late."

I shut my eyes, trying not to let frustration seep into my voice. *I'm just tired. I'll be fine.*

On the way to our meeting place, I hit the drive-thru at the nearest coffee shop to get tea and a donut. I have to get through this day somehow, and coffee isn't my thing.

"Seeeeeeth" I whine, calling my cousin from the car.

"Whaaaaaat?" Seth laughs.

"Please tell me you have today off and access to a car."

"I'm heading to work now, but only for a few hours. What d'you need?"

"I was up all night, and I have to go get Caleb and watch him for the day."

"What? You do know he isn't your kid, right? Wait, he isn't, is he? I mean, I was only like thirteen when he was born, maybe I missed you getting super pregnant or something?"

I laugh. "No, he isn't mine. I wasn't a teen mom."

"Well, you kind of were... just sayin'."

"Don't trash my Caleb."

"Hey, Caleb is great, but why are you watching him when you should be sleeping?"

"He doesn't have school today; Mom forgot."

"Does your mom own a calendar? She's always calling you last minute to take care of the things that are her responsibility. You can't keep letting her do this, Alex," Seth says, sincere but stern.

I let out a sigh, knowing he's right, but my hands are tied. "I don't do it for my mom. I can't let Caleb suffer because of her irresponsibility."

Seth chuckles. "You're too good to that kid. I do have the car today. I'll drive to your place after work and bring my charming personality. But you owe me."

"Deal! Thank you, Seth. Seriously!"

When I arrive at our meeting place, a gas station definitely closer to my mom than me, I end up waiting twenty minutes for Mom to show up. Luckily, it's a sunny, warm day and the brightness perks me up. I fill my tank and buy a magazine to kill time, not unfamiliar with my mom's disregard for keeping people waiting. The new issue of Canadian Geographic has a wolf on

the cover, so I get it for Caleb; he loves wolves. He calls them woofs, and I'm not going to correct that level of adorable.

"It's not my fault! Caleb spilled his juice box, and we had to get him changed," my mom says when she finally arrives. Her tone is flustered—it clearly hasn't been a very good morning for either of them. I open the back-seat door, and Caleb jumps out, hugging my waist; his smile chases away any lingering resentment.

"Don't worry about it. I'm just happy to spend the day with my favorite guy."

"Erik is your favorite guy!" Caleb says with a smile, crinkling his little freckled nose.

"No way, man! I have had way longer to build up love points for you." I tickle his tummy, laughing as he giggles uncontrollably.

He reaches up to take my hand. Mom stays in the car, distracted by her phone.

"Okay, we'll see you later, Mom."

"Hmm?" she mutters idly, finally looking up. "Have fun, baby. Did you get his bag?" She waves a hand towards the back seat. Caleb's overstuffed backpack is sitting on the other side of the car; he must have packed it himself.

I resist the urge to ask if she wants to get out and hug us, moving instead to get the backpack, Caleb's little hand in mine.

"Call me later."

She notices me looking in the passenger side window and jumps, her hand pushing a distinct carton back into her purse.

My heart sinks. “Mom, not again. You said you quit.” I try to hide how dejected I feel. Caleb doesn’t need more stress.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I have to run, honey,” she says, avoiding my gaze.

“You’re smoking again.”

“Not with Caleb in the car. Don’t lecture me,” she tsks. “I have to go. Call you later.” She rolls up the window and speeds from the lot. Pulling Caleb away from the car, I hold in a curse with clenched teeth.

“Alex, can we get a snack?” Caleb asks after only a few minutes.

“Didn’t you just have breakfast?” I’m surprised. Caleb isn’t a big eater.

“No, just a juice box. Mom said she was in a hurry and that you would feed me.”

I let out a breath, but smile at him in the rearview mirror.

“All the better, I was hoping to check out one of the new breakfast places near my apartment.”

Caleb’s eyes widen, his smile lighting up his whole face. “Yes!” he squeals, excitedly.

We chat the whole way back to the city, and I pull into the only diner I’ve seen in my short time here.

I let him order chocolate pancakes and chocolate milk, but I also make him eat a fruit cup; *balance*. His mood is contagious, and I find myself glad to have him

with me. As tired as I am, it's exciting to show him my new home.

When we get to my apartment, I open his backpack; it's not full of toys as I'd imagined. His homework folder is tucked along the back, but the main body is filled with a pair of PJs, a change of clothes, and his stuffed turtle. I shake my head at my own ignorance. This is way too well-planned for my mom to have put together last minute. There are even toiletries. She had set this up at least yesterday, clearly intending for him to stay over. I don't mind him spending the night, but the blatant manipulation pisses me off. I should have predicted it; it's her week with Caleb.

When Seth arrives, I direct him to a nearby park. He's over six feet tall, and Caleb looks so small holding his hand as they leave, Caleb skipping in excitement. I wave them off before collapsing into bed, setting my alarm for a couple of hours; left to my own devices, I'd sleep all afternoon.

Before the blaring buzzer sounds, my door slams, startling me awake. I'm disoriented for a minute before Caleb's giggle brings me back.

I furrow my brow, it's only been about 45 minutes.

"Back so soon?" I ask after pulling myself out of bed and stumbling to the living room.

"Seth says the park was a bus."

“Not a bus, a *bust*,” Seth corrects with a smile. He meets my eyes with a serious expression and shakes his head.

I open my mouth to question him but think better of it. “Well, I’m glad. I was bored, anyway. Want to play with the new Lego set I got you?”

“Yes!” Caleb jumps before running to the spare room. “A dragon? Awesome!”

“We’ll be there in a minute,” I call, catching Seth’s arm as he tries to walk past me. He looks at me blankly and I raise an eyebrow.

“It was nothing.” Seth’s eyes dart around the room.

“What happened?”

“I know it sounds crazy... It’s probably nothing.” Seth tugs on his collar. “While we were at the park, some guy took our picture. Well, it looked like he was taking our picture, maybe he was just snapping shots of the park.” His troubled expression tells me he doesn’t think this mystery man was taking a picture of the slide.

“Did you say anything to him?”

“I turned to push Caleb on the swing, and when I looked again, he was gone. I’m sure it was nothing, it was just... weird.”

I bite my cheek, torn between reassuring Seth and wanting to protect Caleb. Dad had a friend on the police force run a record check of this neighborhood, and there wasn’t an issue with predators.

“Like I said, I’m just being overly cautious. Just... be careful if you take Caleb there again.”

“I will. Thanks for the heads up.”

Seth stays the rest of the day. Even if he won’t admit it, I know it’s to keep an eye on us. More than once, I catch him peeking through the curtains. I try to make the best of our day, building forts with every blanket I own and making Rice Krispie squares. By late afternoon, I’ve convinced myself to let the park incident go. It was just a coincidence.

Caleb and I rent a movie and eat popcorn after Seth leaves, snuggling under blankets on my couch. My living room is a total mess of toys and sheets. Hugging Caleb tightly, I sweep his curly brown hair from his forehead. It’s getting a bit long and falls into his eyes. I’ll have to take him for a trim soon. A consequence of uncivil shared custody: my parents don’t negotiate over small stuff like haircuts and new shoes. Those things end up falling to me. Just another reason I can’t stop thinking about my plan, the one so big I haven’t even told Seth. I’d taken the first steps, getting a job and a place of my own, but would a judge take my request seriously?

With Caleb here, it’s so easy to picture this as our life. The spare room would make a perfect bedroom for him. He’d have to switch schools, but he was only in the first grade, so that wouldn’t be the worst thing. I had done the same as a kid; he would make new friends. Maybe this really could work.



“Alex!” Caleb yells, and my eyes fly open. I must have nodded off. “You missed the best part! Now we have to watch it again.”

“Nice try.” I pull him closer, tickling him.

“St-Stop,” he finally manages through fits of laughter. I stop tickling him to check my phone. Seven thirty and no missed calls from my mom.

“Hey, keep watching. I’m gonna get more water.” In the kitchen, I slide the pocket door closed, dialing Mom’s number.

“Honey, having fun with Caleb?”

“Yeah, are you planning to pick him up or what’s the deal?”

“Oh, I had a thought! I wondered if you’d like him to sleep over?”

I roll my eyes. *You had a thought, eh?* “Is that why he had PJs in his bag?” I ask before I can catch myself. I’m tired; my filter’s a bit broken. “You know he can sleep here. Will you be able to pick him up tomorrow? I have to work in the morning.”

“Of course I’ll pick him up tomorrow,” she says indignantly. “I’ll pick him up now if that’s what you want.”

“No, I’m happy for him to stay. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, honey, if that’s what works best for you. Have a good sleep. Kiss Caleb for me. Love you both,” she adds before hanging up.

I let out a long breath to relax my clenched stomach, reminding myself I actually *do* want Caleb to

stay. Getting him ready for bed is a bit of a challenge; he's so excited to be "*camping in his new room.*" I read to him and tuck him in, reminding him I'm right across the hall and promising to leave the nightlight on in the bathroom all night. Caleb is so easy to love, I hate that I can't always be with him. It's weird to have a sibling that I don't spend every day with. Growing up, I'd been so close with Whit; I can't imagine how different our relationship would be if we hadn't had all that time together. I guess it's not the same with Caleb. Whitney and I aren't peers to him; we're so much older. He's basically an only child.

I go to sleep that night imagining this as my life, smiling at the routine I could provide for Caleb if I had custody. As I drift off, I wonder if it's something I should talk to Erik about. No, that's silly. We haven't been dating long enough; no need to talk about that much future stuff. He would probably think it was crazy, anyway.

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When I get home from work the next day, I wander to my kitchen, looking for something easy to cook for dinner. I had barely made it to work on time this morning; Mom was predictably late to pick up Caleb, and I'd been playing catch-up all day.

A staff meeting had dragged my stressful day even longer. Technically, I didn't have to go to the meeting. I'm just on orientation, but I desperately want

a permanent position with guaranteed income. I worried that could only happen if I made a good impression on everyone. The logical side of my brain reminded me I was being silly. If an opening became available in my department, I'd have a good shot at it. The emotional side told the logical side to shut up and think of something smart that will *wow* the principle.

As I close the fridge, a flashing light on my phone catches my attention. I can't use my phone during classes, so I'm in the habit of leaving it at home. If I had it with me, I'd spend my lunch hours in the safety and comfort of an ebook. Not exactly helpful when you're trying to get to know people.

The blinking notification grates on my nerves: voicemail. I hate voicemail. I've repeatedly told my parents to text me or wait until I call them back. Yet still, they persist with the damn voicemails.

"Hey Alex, it's Dad. I was wondering if you've talked to Seth today? Jack says he doesn't know where he is and I thought you might have some ideas. Give him a call if you do. Hope work went well. Love you."

I furrow my brow. My uncle Jack isn't prone to worry, so it's unlikely he'd call my dad on a whim. I dial Seth's number, hoping to clear this up before my anxiety-prone mind is roused.

"Hey, you've reached Seth. Leave it, and I'll hit you back," his voicemail recites.

*Okay, that doesn't mean anything*, I insist.

I call my dad to find out what's going on, but it's a waste of time. He knows almost nothing and doesn't

sound concerned at all. He picks up on the growing panic in my voice and tries to calm me, reminding me that Seth isn't a little kid anymore and he's probably just out with some friends. He's right in theory, but a bad feeling is nesting in the pit of my stomach.

Dialing my uncle's number, I try to ignore the tremble making its way to my hands.

"What's up, cuzo?" Miles, Seth's older brother, asks.

"What's going on with Seth?" I ask, not in the mood for pleasantries.

He pauses for a second. "He just left, I guess?" The distinct sounds of a video game explain his flat tone.

"What do you mean *he just left?*" I close my eyes, trying not to let frustration and panic show in my voice.

"He left a note, well an email I guess. He went to Europe."

"Europe?" My eyes shoot open. I didn't see that one coming.

"He's always wanted to go," Miles says, as if we're having a complete conversation and he isn't just spitting random bits of information at me.

"Wait, he sent you an email saying 'Hi, off to Europe' and your response is 'Okay, that sounds about right?'"

"I'm not his keeper. What d'you want from me? He's a big boy."

"Miles, pause your stupid game and talk to me!"

He sighs, but the rapid-fire machine gun and dubstep go silent. "So you're telling me that Seth went off to Europe out of the blue? That's not like him," I insist. That's not like most people. I mean sure, he's nineteen, but he's more responsible than this. The story isn't adding up. Unfortunately, as I'm now experiencing, Miles isn't the co-detective I need.

"I just saw Seth yesterday, and he didn't mention anything about this. He wouldn't just take off like that without talking to me, or at least someone," I say, in a final attempt to arouse suspicion in Miles. "Read the email to me."

"Lexie, let it go. He went on vacation. Good for him. He has wanted to go to Europe for years. Look, I just forwarded you the email so you can obsess over it some more." Miles chuckles. "You are so stubborn, hon, and too suspicious. I'm sure he's fine. I'll let you know if he emails me again."

I squint my eyes, irritation rising at Miles' use of *hon*. He's only a year older than me. "Put your dad on the phone."

"He's out for a walk with Mom."

I bite the inside of my cheek, wishing I had someone to share in my panic. Miles' condescending sigh on the other end of the phone makes my heart sink.

"You need to chill, have a drink or something. I'm sure he's fine. You aren't his mother."

"Yeah you're probably right," I lie. "Let me know if he emails or calls."

“Will do, cuzo, have a good night. Get that drink.”

I hurry to the living room, turning on my irritatingly slow computer. It’s unlikely I’m going to get any more clues from Seth’s e-mail, but I have to read it for myself anyway. Miles is right about one thing: I’m obsessive. But come on, this situation is weird! On top of the fact that it’s totally out of character for Seth to just take off, I also can’t shake the bad feeling now deeply rooted in my gut. I hate that I already doubt myself, with Dad and Miles taking this so lightly.

It takes five password attempts before I get it right; my hands are shaking. My nerves twitch, like electric shocks are surging through me.

Miles,

I went to Europe for a while. Tell mom and dad.

See ya later.

- Seth

*See ya later?* Seth definitely didn’t write this message. And who writes an email like this anyway? It’s ridiculous. Something else is going on, but what? And how is Miles buying this?

Yelling in frustration, I get to my feet to pace my small living room. I call Seth again out of desperation, annoyed but not surprised when he doesn’t answer. I try to come up with any plan that doesn’t involve wearing a hole in my laminate floors. Turning to my phone, I call the first person who comes to mind.

“Erik, I need your help,” I say frantically when he answers.

"You sound stressed. What's going on, baby?"

I tell him everything I know about my cousin's impromptu Euro-trip. "I just have a bad feeling about this."

He pauses for a little too long; my throat tightens as my small light of hope is extinguished. "You think I'm crazy."

"No, honey, not crazy. You care about your cousin, I get that. I just think..."

"I'm over-reacting?" I finish for him, crumpling onto my couch.

"He's young. He's had that job a while, probably been saving his cash. You said yourself that Seth has always wanted to go to Europe. I know you're worried, but baby, I think you shouldn't stress over this. He left an email, so it wasn't totally irresponsible."

I frown. *Not totally irresponsible?* "Maybe you're right," I lie for the second time tonight. Maybe Erik is right, but unfortunately for him and Miles, my crazy isn't that easily dissuaded.

"I'm sure I am." I hear Erik's smile as he speaks. "Have you talked to Whitney?"

"No, She's out of town for a couple days. Why?"

"I know how close you all are. Just thought she might have heard from Seth. I'm glad you called me, though. You know you can call anytime. Do you want me to come over?"

"No, no, I'm fine. You're right," I say lightly, putting my high school acting classes to use. "I have to work in the morning...oh, and so do you!" I cringe; Erik is super

protective of his work nights since getting his new job. "I'm so sorry. You probably need to get to sleep."

"Don't worry about it, baby. Are you sure you're okay? I'm just returning some emails, but I can finish them later, come to your place right now."

"No, really, I'm just going to take a bath and go to bed."

Erik yawns. "Okay, if you're sure. I'll call you in the morning before work."

"Okay, yeah, okay." My mind is racing. I have a hard time keeping my composure. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

I spend the next several hours lost in a haze, dissecting the email and replaying my conversations with my dad, Miles, and Erik in a loop. The more I do, the crazier I feel. Like Miles, Erik had taken the practical perspective, content to believe the email. Maybe I'm on my own, then? I just need a plan. A plan, and possibly some sleep.

I finally abandon my pacing and go to bed a couple of hours later, still without any rational ideas and having neglected to eat dinner. I try to reason with myself. Dad said Uncle Jack had called him in hysterics. I assume that the "in hysterics" part was an exaggeration, but Uncle Jack was worried. Seth never missed dinner without calling. He had never missed work, even when sick. Am I really being irrational in thinking something is wrong? Isn't the evidence supporting my theory?



I sigh, rolling over for the hundredth time, unable to find a position comfortable enough to soothe my pounding head. If I am right, why doesn't anyone else see it? And, more importantly, where is Seth? I remind myself that he's a smart guy, strong and clever. He can take care of himself. The weight in my stomach doesn't ease as I close my eyes, uselessly trying to shut out my thoughts.

## CHAPTER THREE

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At work the next day, I can't concentrate; I'm thankful, for once, that I'm still in orientation. Not only am I tired, but my emotional distraction seems to show. Kelly actually sends me home early, promising it's our secret.

"Alex, you are working so hard here, marking a ton and organizing everything. Those color-coded files you made me? They're brilliant! But starting a new job is right stressful. Plus, you just moved! That's a lot to be getting on with. Take a duvet day, and you can start fresh Monday," she says in her pleasant English accent.

I return her smile, barely holding in a humorless laugh. Her reasons would have been overwhelming enough, yet they seem like a vacation compared to my

actual stressors. I thank her and hurry to my car, hoping the principal doesn't see me bagging off early, but in this moment, I'm too relieved to care.

I'm dead tired, but have no intention of going home. I use my newfound free time to take a road trip. My cousins live in Burlington, only about 45 minutes from my apartment. I have to check out their place, fully acknowledging I've passed obsessive levels of worry.

My uncle answers the door in a pair of sweatpants and a housecoat. "Lexie? What're you doing here?" he asks, surprise shifting to a smile. My uncle is such a softie. He always wanted a daughter. He treats his sons like kings, but as his only nieces, Whit and I hold a special place in his heart.

"Hey, sorry, did I wake you?" I ask, the answer obvious by the crease marks on his face.

"No, of course not. I was just watching TV," he lies. "Come on in. I'll make us some tea." My dad's side of the family is British; tea is their answer to everything.

I follow my uncle through the foyer and into the kitchen, sitting at the counter as he fills the kettle. His home has always been the most comfortable place, with its soft butter yellow shag carpet and dependably-warm temperature. In the winter, it's made warmer still with the smell of cookies baking and an ever-present pot of soup on the stove. Aunt Cindy would sometimes tease Uncle Jack about the tattered furniture and outdated kitchen, but it seemed more a running joke than true annoyance. If she really wanted

something changed, she'd only have to ask. My uncle would never refuse her anything.

"Aunt Cindy at work?" I ask as Uncle Jack pulls milk from the fridge.

"No, we didn't get much sleep last night; I suggested she take the day off. She's out walking the dogs," he says with a tight smile. "So, what brings you by? Settling in okay in Markham?"

"Yeah, I just... I wanted to see how you were doing, you know, about Seth?" I watch him closely.

"Oh, that. I'm sorry if I scared you with the panicked phone call. I don't check my email, well, you know, very often. I was just calling everyone I could think of to hunt him down. Your dad always helps me think through these situations, so he was top of my list. Though, I guess I didn't actually call you." My uncle looks up, finally meeting my eyes.

"My dad did. He asked if Seth had come by my place."

"Right, he was helping me call people. Anyway, when Miles got home and checked his email, he saw that Seth had left word." Uncle Jack shakes his head. "It's funny how out of control you can get when you assume the worst." Tea spills to the counters as he pours with trembling hands.

My dad has always been very much the older brother, the leader between him and my uncle. Still, I can't believe Uncle Jack is passive enough to swallow this story.

“So, the last time you saw Seth was when he came home from my house yesterday?”

“Yes. Well, I didn’t see him get home, but he probably just got in late.”

“He left my place really early.”

Uncle Jack just lets out a sigh, staring at his tea.

“You really think he just went off to Europe?” I ask, trying to elicit a reaction to get a sense of his true feelings.

He smiles sympathetically, but the smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “I didn’t believe it at first either, but after I thought it through I realized that it really was the most likely explanation. He has wanted to go to Europe for a while, and I guess he had some money saved. I was a bit surprised that you weren’t gone too, though.”

My uncle’s words combined with his intense look send a shiver down my spine. I stare at him, trying to decode the message he seems to be sending. It’s like having a word on the tip of your tongue; I just can’t quite grasp it.

“I mean,” he continues, expression softening as he looks down at his tea, “I thought you two would go together. You had been talking about it this past summer at the cottage. I guess you just couldn’t get the time off work?”

My eyes widen. In all my stress and confusion, I’d forgotten that Seth and I made plans to do Europe together. He would act as my bodyguard, and I would make sure that he didn’t get himself in too much

trouble. We had been joking about it and planning the last couple summers. This solidifies my suspicion; if I'd been seeking more proof, I found it. Seth didn't go to Europe on a whim. He and I are too close. He would never plan a trip to Europe, however short notice, without inviting me. It's against our unwritten code. I knew about his first kiss, he knew about the first boy who broke my heart, I knew about his first time getting drunk, he knew when I learned to forge my mom's signature and started ditching school. I talked him out of a tattoo, he'd talked me out of a bad haircut. It's what we do; our system.

I'm now more certain than ever that Seth is not on his dream vacation. The realization, however momentarily gratifying, leaves me nauseous.

I make a point of leaving before Miles gets home, not wanting to deal with his condescending remarks. Before I leave, I go to my cousin's room, telling Uncle Jack I'm using the washroom. When I open his door, it's the usual organized chaos that drives Aunt Cindy crazy. I don't even know what I'm looking for, but I certainly don't find it.

I flush the toilet for good measure before heading back downstairs; I'm nothing if not thorough in my façade.

When I'm getting ready to leave, I hug my uncle. This is my next clue that something's up. He grips me just a little too tight for a little too long. As I pull away, his glistening eyes search mine for a long moment, looking conflicted.

“Take care of yourself, kid,” he says finally, turning back into the house and leaving me alone on the porch.

This last picture of my uncle clings to my mind as I drive home. He knows something. I’d wager my car he has a better idea than he’s letting on about what’s going on with Seth. And what’s worse, he isn’t going to tell me what he knows. Unless... he was trying to tell me something when he brought up my absence on Seth’s trip to Europe. But why would he be so convoluted and not just come right out and say it? Is he being watched?

I shake my head, an embarrassed laugh escaping as I open my window for some fresh air. I’m letting paranoia run away with me. I had almost convinced myself a random black SUV was following me. Clearly I need sleep, but I still think Uncle Jack is hiding something.

If he isn’t going to talk, can I get Aunt Cindy to spill? It’s tempting. She might have more information, but the thought of getting between my uncle and aunt leaves a bad taste in my mouth. They’ve been nothing but loving towards me, and if Cindy thinks Seth is missing, she’s probably even more of a mess than I am. I might make it worse by involving her. I begrudgingly put the idea of approaching her on the back burner. I trust that if she can fix it, she will. I’ll give it some time, but if I don’t have a plan in a week, I’m doing what I have to do. *Let’s be real, five days tops.*

Three long days pass; I keep my body busy organizing and cleaning my apartment, but my mind is no closer to sorting things out in regards to Seth. I can't accept that he left for Europe on a whim. No one else shares my concern. Whitney's too absorbed in the news that Sam got a fancy new job, and they *finally* get to move out of their "crappy" apartment, the one that makes mine look like a hovel. She's obsessed with real estate, going to a new showing every day, frustrated that she isn't finding her dream home the instant she's ready to buy.

Dad remains no more helpful than Whitney and Miles. He's a firm believer in Occam's razor: the simplest explanation is most likely the correct one. He is convinced that my uncle was destined to raise a kid irresponsible enough to leave for Europe out of the blue.

With Erik, I keep the subject of Seth's disappearance to a minimum, not bringing it up unless he does. I'd complain that he hasn't texted me any pictures, or called to let me know how much fun he's having. I would wonder aloud what sites he's seen, or which countries he's visited. I'm not sure if Erik is buying my act of being unconcerned; I suspect he isn't. He's changed his rule about no work night hang-outs, instead coming to my place every evening. He insists it's because things have calmed down at his work. I worry it's actually because he senses I'm losing it. Erik made it clear he doesn't share my suspicions about Seth, but it's a lot harder to hide my strain with him



around all the time. I don't want him to think I'm a lunatic, although I am beginning to feel like one.

I've become majorly sleep deprived, feeling like a zombie most of the time. When I do sleep, I'm tormented by bad dreams. I wake up covered in sweat and shaking, but I can rarely remember what caused the fear. There's only one dream I remember. In it, I'm in my grandmother's garden. She sits with me on her big wooden swing. My grandmother died when I was twelve, but in my dream, I'm an adult. She reminds me that a woman's intuition is a special gift and it needs to be nurtured and respected. Then she looks into my eyes with intense scrutiny, opening her mouth to say something. Before she can speak, a shadow pours over us. She gasps, face turning pale, wide eyes looking just past my shoulder. I turn around, my body rigid with fear, before waking up. It felt so real, I had tears in my eyes as I sat up in bed. I chalked it up to my mind trying to release the stress I'm feeling about Seth and the frustration of no one believing me.

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"Hey, you okay?" Erik squeezes my hand. He'd brought over dinner from my favorite restaurant, something he used to do all the time before we moved. Maybe things really were just settling at his work. Maybe he really isn't hovering because he thinks

I'm unraveling. Maybe Erik just wants to spend time with me.

We're sitting on my couch watching a movie, although I'm not really paying attention, my mind stuck on Seth.

I turn to him with a smile. "Yeah, fine, just tired. Haven't been sleeping well lately." *Crap!* "I mean, y'know how it is, moving and my new job. Just stressful trying to learn everything in such a short orientation."

I shift my attention to the movie: some romantic comedy that he obviously picked for me. His gaze stays trained on me. Reluctantly I meet his gaze, concern etched on his beautiful face. *Busted.*

"Alex, what's really bothering you?"

"What do you mean?" I bluff, putting on my doe eyes.

"Seriously, you've been off all week. Ever since...wait. Are you still worried about Seth?" he guesses, eyes narrowing in suspicion.

The direct question catches me off guard, and I pause for a second too long. He takes my hands in his and sighs, looking at me with a small smile. "Honey, I thought we talked about this. Seth is fine, I'm sure of it. You can't let yourself get so worked up about these things," he says soothingly.

I want to cry, but I hold back. "I know he's fine." An idea comes to me. "It's... no, it's silly." I shift on the couch, leaning my cheek against Erik's firm chest.

"Your feelings aren't silly," he says, rubbing my back.

"It's just... Seth and I were planning to do Europe together..." I trail off, hoping my true sadness will add sincerity.

His hand pauses for a second while rubbing my back. "Oh." *Nailed it!*

"I know. See, I told you it was silly!"

"Oh baby, no I just thought... well, it doesn't matter. I'm sorry Seth bailed on you for Europe."

*Hook, line, and sinker.* I smile inwardly. I don't like lying, but I've learned to follow my gut when navigating unknown waters. Okay, maybe I like getting away with a lie a little bit.

"Yeah, you're right, just bummed." I pull away from his chest, letting a weak smile play on my lips.

"Hey, I have an idea. Why don't we go to Europe together?"

"What?" is all I can manage. My elation from my minor deceit evaporates as I try to regain my footing.

"It'll be fun. I have family we can visit. We could use the vacation." His tone is casual, though his eyes polar his easy words, scrutinizing me. I try to figure out where this is coming from. It's like I've slipped into an entirely different game with no concept of the rules.

"Since when do you want to go to Europe? I thought you had no vacation time."

"I'll find a way to make it a work trip. We have offices in London and Prague."

"Erik, I don't have the savings for that. I just moved, and I have less than no vacation time."

"You're a substitute teacher." Erik scoffs, head tilting to the side as a small smile forms.

I look at him, my mouth literally hanging open, any attempts to decipher his motivations abandoned.

"Excuse me? What is that supposed to mean?"

He shakes his head. "I didn't mean anything. Just that, come on, you know, you can get time off whenever you want. They aren't exactly going to miss you."

My eyes narrow, but he continues before I can respond.

"That sounded bad; I didn't mean it like that. Just that you have the chance to get away now, before you get busier."

Seething and embarrassed, my cheeks burn, and my eyes sting with oncoming tears. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to hold in the rage that wants to lash out.

"You should go," I finally whisper, turning away from him. His warm hand rests on my shoulder, but I stand up to shake it off.

"I'm sorry if I offended you. Forget about Europe, it's fine," he says quietly.

I shake my head, not turning to face him as I scramble for an excuse to be alone. "No, I just... I have to get up early. Lost track of time."

Silence presses into my ears for a minute before the door creaks open. "Goodnight, Alex. Call me tomorrow."

I close my bedroom door, desperate for space and isolation. As I pull a pillow to my chest, tears pour down my cheeks, the weight of the past week finally squeezing out the fear and confusion I was forced to mask. My throat stings as sobs force their way from my body. How did my boyfriend inviting me to Europe turn into this?

Lying in bed a couple hours later, my face streaked with dried tears and unable to sleep, guilt seeps through me as I replay the fight with Erik. Maybe I'm being ridiculous. Why did I get so upset over him inviting me on a trip I wanted to go on? It was sweet of him to try and cheer me up with such a grand gesture. He knew I was upset and was just trying to fix it. It's not his fault I entered into the conversation full of anxiety.

Something in the back of my mind nags at me, but I brush it off. Erik is great. A trip to Europe is a wonderful idea. I'd been over-sensitive. I should've explained what I'm actually feeling about Seth; maybe his support is just what I need. If I present the evidence to him, he might side with me, maybe even help. I haven't given him a chance since the night Seth went missing, and I've learned more since then.

It's after midnight and Erik has to work in the morning; this probably isn't the best time to call with my conspiracy theory. That won't exactly portray the picture of sanity I'm going for. Instead, I text him:

*Hey Erik, call me when you  
get a minute tomorrow.  
Just want to talk. Sorry*

*about earlier, I was being  
weird <3 Alex*

Guilt appeased, I roll over and shut my eyes. I have my performance review first thing tomorrow with the school principal. Like I need another stressor to keep me awake.

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I'm ripped from sleep, my room still pitch black. *What was that?* I peer at my too bright clock, totally disoriented. 2:36. In the morning?

*BANG!*

I jump as I instinctively turn to my window, a shadow visible just beyond the curtain. Someone is out there.

My heart pounds and I gulp for air; my body trembling from the shock of being torn from sleep so suddenly.

I'm completely paralyzed, trapped as the figure crouches, my window pane shaking as the shadow works to pry it open.