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Alaina Joleen

California State University, Monterey Bay

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'Love' - Prologue

Alaina Joleen

The room is filled with aching hearts. One heart not yet fully capable of understanding the truth that lays behind the aching. One heart, completely in two, the reason behind the suffocation in the room.

My mind, that was once soulmates with my heart, has betrayed its life partner. The longing they equally share for one other, is slowly dissolving. As I lay in a hospital bed, with the window at my back, I cannot open the eyes that I've been given to see with; I cannot move the hands that I've been given to write with; and I cannot speak the words that I have been so gratefully given with this life. I am surrounded by the ones that I love the most in this world and I can feel them all. I cannot feel the heart beating inside of me, but I can feel theirs, slowly beating, all around me.

The thoughts in my mind are racing like usual. It's like they're each stubbornly fighting for my attention. One won't let the other finish before another joins the race. They go back and forth, around and around, like an abstract piece of art that only a talented few can deconstruct. I don't fall into this category.

I hear snippets of these thoughts as they each arise in my mind. The decent thing about thoughts, is that they're only obtainable to the individual. Only if that individual decides to keep them resting in the nest of the brain where they were birthed. And because I am unconscious, these thoughts will stay where they are. I don't have to face them.

At least not yet.

It's a wonder how someone can think two truly polar thoughts at once. Like how I'm so incredibly fucking grateful that I am somehow still breathing. But how I am also stubbornly hoping that I don't wake up. Because if I wake up then I have to straighten out this tangled mess that I've made. I would have to somehow convince them all that I'm okay and that I won't end up back in this bed.

My best friend since the age of 5, Jaide, is sitting in a hospital chair to the right of me. Her heart is filled with helplessness. I know that she won't forgive herself if I don't get through this because she believes that she could have done more to make this easier on me or to prevent this. But believing doesn't mean it's the truth, it just means we hope that it is. I'm trying to reach my hand out to her, to give her some hope but the effort isn't enough. Her husband, Niko, is standing somewhere near her, in an attempt to comfort; something I never found to be his strongest suit. His heart breaks more for Jaide, not for me. Because I'm his wife's best friend and he knows that he cannot fill the void of me in her. I'm not sure that anybody could.

Laying on the bed right beside me, lies my sweet sweet baby sister, Rosa. She is wrapped around my left arm. I can feel her tiny body curled up against mine, which is how I know it's her without being able to open my eyes. Although her heart is intact, she is impatiently waiting for me to wake. She doesn't understand how I ended up here, and I hate myself for having a mind that has defeated my heart, forcing my angel of a baby sister to wait for something that may never come. I can hear, in faint words, Rosa ask the same question every few minutes, as most 5-year olds do when they seek something desperately.

"Is she going to wake up soon?" Rosa turns her body over to the left and asks, directing her question to Dean.

Dean is the love of my life, as I am his; I never imagined I could be so certain of anything. He sits in a chair on my left, opposite of Jaide. Each time that Rosa asks him if I will wake up soon, I don't hear a response. I think it's because, each time that Rosa asks him this question, the tear in his heart lengthens until it's almost completely in two pieces. After all, how do you tell a 5-year-old that their 24-year-old sister might not wake up?

What currently occupies my mind is that Dean is going to be the hardest to convince. I can convince Jaide and Rosa, no problem. But Dean knows. He's felt what I'm feeling now because, he too, has been in this bed. He feels what I feel, so he too, is dying inside. But even with my shattered heart and wandering mind, I still love him with every detached piece of myself. If I could just wake up, then he and I would be husband and wife. Together we would live this life, the way a life is intended to be lived.

I thought that being unconscious would stop the racing thoughts, or at least slow the pace. But the shame, the guilt, the regret, only intensify the racing in my mind. The part of me that so desperately doesn't

want to wake, is exceeding the part of me that is grateful to be alive. Even if I could open my eyes or move my body, I don't know if I would. I think I would just lay here so I don't have to answer the questions or even more unbearable, apologize. I can't wake up. I'm no good at apologies, especially if I'm not sure that I genuinely mean it. I think that I would mean it, but that doesn't make it any easier.

What am I going to say? I'll tell them that I'm okay, even though I'm clearly not. Or I'll tell them that I just had a bad day. Fuck. They won't believe me. Or maybe they will.

Fuck, my head hurts.

I can't face them all. Maybe I can convince Jaide and Rosa. But not Dean. Not my mother.

My mother is the furthest away from my bed. She is sleeping in an uncomfortable chair across the room, slightly facing the window that looks out to the cemetery where my father is buried. I think I want to wake up now. I want to open my eyes and walk over to her sleeping body and wake her so that I could tell her, *I'm sorry*. I'm sorry for being the reason behind the exhaustion in her body and the heaviness of her barely beating heart. But maybe it's better if we both sleep; because sometimes the nightmare isn't in the dream, but when you wake. No one knows this better than me. Her heart is the weakest, aside from mine, for being victim not once, but twice, to the absurdness of this life.

Although I cannot see outside of my own mind, I can hear the tears falling in the room. It's achingly painful to not know what is going to happen: or when it's going to happen: or *if* it's going to happen, I think we can all agree. I'm still shifting between wanting to wake and never wanting to. I still don't know what I'll say. I don't know what they want to hear from me to make this all okay.

This waiting is becoming intolerable, because none of us know what we're waiting for. Maybe for someone to come in and say the words that everyone needs to hear to feel slightly whole again. Or that it's too late, and I'm not coming back from this. So, we wait, hopelessly, because it's all we *can* do. All but Rosa. For a child is always the first to see the rainbow after the rain, no matter how long it takes for the rain to stop. To see through the lens of a child is something I often wish didn't part with age.

As the day persists, the state of the room hasn't changed; still suffocating. But I'm feeling more like I might wake up. If I do, then maybe I shouldn't waste my time pretending anymore and just be honest. I'll apologize to them all because even though this happened to me, I did this to myself. *I should have come here myself, but not like this. I'll do it right next time. Fuck, I swear, I will.*

I wonder if this is how Otto Plath felt after he died. I wonder if he feels the same self-inflicted agony that I feel right now for the pain that I've caused on my family. I wonder if he feels at all, wherever he is. *Do we have the ability to feel anywhere other than here?* I wonder if Aurelia Plath blamed herself for not forcing her husband to seek medical care that could have, undoubtedly, saved his life. I wonder if Rosa, Dean, and Jaide will feel about me, the way Sylvia Plath did about her father. Like it was a choice, and we chose to leave, like it could have been prevented. Now, this is the only way I can see this going. *Please, God, don't let me wake. They'll hate me.* The way I hate myself for the way I ended up here. For being a coward. For not thinking of anyone but my own damned shitty self. For giving up when I didn't have to.

The self-sabotage is interrupted when I hear a distinct set of footsteps from what sounds like a mile away.

The sound of each step touching the ground is coming nearer, but the time between the steps is expanding. I know that they are the footsteps of Jaide's father, or S.D., as I've grown to call him. It stands for "Sort-of Dad". I don't think he's figured out the abbreviation yet. Sometimes I'll call him "Mr. Cruz" if I'm trying to be polite. S.D. has recently taken on the role of my doctor. To have his job is one of the hardest in the world because, like most doctors, he wants to save them all. But this job is especially difficult for Mr. Cruz because I know him and because, he knows me. I hate to think that if I would have come to him sooner that I wouldn't be in this bed. Because they say the sooner you treat something the better chances you have at getting through it, and as much as I hate to admit it, it may have been true. But there's no sense in contemplating what I should or shouldn't have done, because it doesn't matter at this point. What's been done has been done, and this, right now, is where it's led to.

Although Mr. Cruz. is, and always will be, happily married to Jaide's mother, he is the closest to a father

figure I've ever had, hence the "S.D.". Everything he did for me wasn't in an effort to take my father's place, but in an effort to give a fatherless child just a glimpse of what it felt like to have one. To relieve me of some of the abandon that I've felt since the day I was born. And I felt it.

I was never looking to replace my father because nobody ever could; from what I hear he was *the* one of a kind out of all the one of a kinds. And although I never met him to know if this was true, I still love him, because he and I are the same; I know this now. He died before I was born so my mother gave me the honor of sharing his name. Skylar Love. Same name, same mind, same heart. Like father, like daughter.

In this case, I wish it wasn't so. Right now, I feel closer to him than ever before. Maybe I'm crossing over.

I hear S.D. approach the room, it sounds like he's stopped just before entering. I don't hear him come any closer, so he is probably standing in front of the door or looking in from the hallway window. Something cues him to walk into the room. I don't have to open my eyes to know that he has walked over to Jaide, grabbed her head and kissed it. This only makes Jaide more emotional. When he is through comforting his daughter, he takes a few steps towards my bed. He grabs my right hand and kneels down so close to me that I can feel his breath on my cheek. I already know what's going to happen. He's going to say something so effortlessly profound like he always does. And it's going to make me not want to wake up, even though his intention is the opposite. I hear him take a deep breath and I know it's coming.

"Skylar... I finally figured out what it stands for, 'S.D.'... You know, even being your 'sort-of dad' means to world to me because, I always thought of *you* as my S.D. My "sort-of daughter". I'm really glad we're on the same page. Speaking of pages, you need to wake up, darling. You need to finish all the books you've started. Nobody, not even the people who know you the best, can finish them for you." He stops for a moment, but I know he's not done.

How did he figure it out? I didn't even tell Jaide. And why did he have to bring up my unfinished books? I didn't even think about my stories last night and how unbearable it would be if I don't get the chance to finish them. I have to write about this. Fuck, I need to wake up soon. I need to write this all down before I forget. If I don't wake up it will all my gone. Everything I've ever written, gone.

Fuck, what have I done?

Mr. Cruz takes another breath, and here comes the rest. He continues whispering so low that I'm sure no one can hear but the two of us.

"I know you're scared, we're all scared, but it's alright. Open your eyes or squeeze my hand, give me a reason to wake up your mother. This can't be the end, not like this." He pleads of me and waits by my side to see if I respond.

I can hear you! I'm listening! The words don't leave my thoughts.

I try to move my hands, because I know it's no use trying to open my eyes. I try and try but nothing happens. His sigh says that he is disappointed, but it's his tear the I feel fall on my right hand that says he is equally hurting. I don't think that he knows that his tear landed on my hand because he doesn't try to wipe it away. I've never seen Mr. Cruz cry before. I caused this, and I feel awful about it. I think he really thought I would be able to respond. I thought so too. He squeezes my hand and kisses my forehead. He stands up and walks away to comfort the rest of the room.

I know what I'm going to say. I'm going to say, "*I'm here. I'm alive. And I'm going to do it right this time.*" Yeah, I'll say that, and they'll believe me because, I'm going to mean it; more than I've ever meant anything.

But what I will say or will not say make no difference, if I don't wake up.

Something causes Rosa to unwrap herself from my arm. She sits on the edge of the bed and faces Dean.

"Dean. I'm cold." she complains. This isn't what I was expecting her to say.

I hear the movement of Dean removing his jacket, the jean one.

"Here, Rosie." With Dean's help, she puts his jacket on that is way too big and heavy for her.

She loves that Dean nicknamed her Rosie. She loves him the way she loves me, the way a younger sibling loves their older.

I hear her tiny footsteps walk over towards our mother.

“Mama,” Rosa gently tugs on our mother’s hand, the same way she does when she is the first to wake up in the morning. “Mama.”

Our mother wakes.

“What is it Rosa, is she up?” She jumps out of her seat too quickly.

“No. But she’s going to wake up soon. I saw her fingers move.”

She felt it. I didn’t know if I got through.

“What?” My mother seems doubtful, I can tell by her tone. “Did any of you see it?” she exhorts, hoping someone will say yes.

But everyone in the room stays silent.

“Rosa. You need to be careful what you say, this isn’t the time to play games.”

“But Mom! I saw!” She tries to defend herself. She shouldn’t have to. I should be there to do it for her.

“Rosa! Enough.”

“But!” Rosa doesn’t give up that easy.

My mother doesn’t verbally respond but I know the look that she gave Rosa and I know it was enough for Rosa to back down. She comes back over to my bed and wraps herself around my arm again.

I’m here baby sister. I’m here.

For the first time today, I feel something that I haven’t in the hours that I have spent trapped in this bed and in my head.

I feel it coming.

The blood in my veins seem to be flowing normally. My heart is beating at a steady pace. The thoughts in my mind slow just enough for me to remain sane for a moment. I feel Dean hold my hand and for the first time, I *know* that I’m holding his back.

“Skylar!?” Dean jumps out of his chair as soon as he feels the movement in my fingers. I hear everyone else do the same.

“Is she waking up?!?” I hear Jaide shout. “What happened?”

“She held my hand! I felt her move! I swear she did!”

He felt me. I think I’m waking up. God, please, let me wake up.

S.D. walks back over to me. “Skylar? Skylar? Can you hear me? Move your fingers, or your toes, anything if you can hear me, sweetheart.” He grabs the hand that isn’t holding Dean’s to see if there is any movement.

I suddenly get the strangest feeling. It’s like I’ve opened my eyes, even though I know that I haven’t. My eyes are closed but I can see everything in the room. I look around and the image before me freezes in my head. I see them all, as if I’m looking at a photograph filled with beautiful and aching people. But they don’t know that I see them.

I’m here. I’m alive. I’m going to open my eyes. I’m going to do it right this time; life.

I inhale a deep breath. I hold it in for what feels like three expanded seconds.

And with the release of my breath and all that’s been trapped inside, I open my eyes.