

ADA KARLYNE

Emma

New Horizon Collection

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# Emma

**ADA KARLYNE**

Translated from the French by Nik MOANA

New Horizon Collection

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On a path full of pitfalls, there is always someone to guide you, make you grow and  
give you back hope in life.

To all the women who, one day, had the courage to face the wave...

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# Chapter 1

As soon as the door opened, Emma knew she was in for her worst evening after two hellish weeks.

She had misgivings when she crossed the threshold and looked around for her husband.

“What time do you call this? Where were you?” Denis asked, grabbing her arm as soon as the door closed.

“You’re hurting me. Let me go,” Emma said. “I went shopping.”

He snatched the bag she carried and opened it.

“Where is my pack of beers?” Denis growled. “I told you I ran out, damn it!”

“No ... I...”

“What?” He shouted and hurled her against the wall.

Denis’s brutal movement and aggressive bearing deeply shocked her. Tension between them was particularly obvious lately. Denis was always drunk when she came home from work, especially those last few days. His behavior had changed. He was now confrontational and no longer refrained from violence.

Emma tried to move away, but he held her back, grabbing her by the top of her T-shirt. He clung to his wife, blocking her with his whole body.

“When are you going to do what I’m asking, huh?” he snarled at her.

Emma was trapped and could only turn her head away. Obviously, her husband had had a lot to drink. It was still early

evening but already he looked as if he could not control himself anymore. Emma was panic-stricken, her heart was pounding in her chest. He grabbed her chin with an iron grip and forced her to face him. He crushed his mouth on her lips, his tongue seeking hers brutally. Emma held out and gritted her teeth.

“Loosen up. I want you. There, go ahead and kiss me,” he said, rubbing against her body.

Emma felt disgusted as she could see how aroused her husband was. He couldn't control himself anymore. She gathered all her strength and pushed him back enough to pull away. He slapped her in the face with all his might. Her skull hit the wall, and the next blow twisted her head. She slid to the ground, stunned.

Denis caught her by her collar and spit in her face.

“You're mine, do you hear? You're not allowed to push me back.” He tore off her clothing in a sharp movement and threw her down.

“Stop, Denis, please, stop!” Emma said, begging and crying, still shell-shocked.

“Shut up! You disgust me!” he barked and raised his hand again.

Emma instantly shielded her face. She caught her breath when a fierce kick hit her in the stomach. Cowering on the ground, she waited in fear for the next move.

“You don't deserve me, bitch!”

The door slammed, marking the end of her ordeal, one of the most violent Emma had undergone yet. Her heart was pounding in her temples, her lip was swollen, and her mouth now tasted of blood. She collapsed and began to cry her eyes out.

\*\*\*

Several hours later, Emma found herself standing in the driveway leading to her brother's house. She had resolved to take shelter at Nicolas's but had not yet dared to knock on his door.

She started and froze when she heard a voice nearby.

Alex had watched her carefully for a moment before she decided to call out. Despite the season, Emma wore a long cardigan that reached to her knees. Her arms were folded, holding it tightly against her chest.

Alerted by her bearing, Alex approached slowly and faced her.

"Emma? It's Alex. Is everything OK?"

Emma hadn't expected to see her brother's friend so soon, even though she knew crossing paths with her would be unavoidable as her brother and Alex were joined at the hip since childhood. She felt even more unsettled to meet her now, after so many years and under those circumstances. Unable to look up, she didn't move, didn't speak.

"Emma, please, say something." Alex said.

She didn't know how to react. Should she touch her? Could she even touch her? Emma's attitude left no doubt about what must have happened.

Nicolas had told her that his brother-in-law had been fired from his job a few months earlier. According to his parents, he had since fallen into a cold, often angry stance, and used alcohol as a remedy. He had also let his marriage, until then a seemingly happy one, go downhill quite a bit. Nicolas suspected Emma had been assaulted by her husband, a guy whose guts he always hated. He had shared his suspicions with his friend but without proof, it was difficult to act, especially since his sister had constantly refuted his accusations.

When she saw her there, standing before her, Alex understood that her best friend's sister had probably lied. The worst just happened.

Since Emma's wedding, the siblings had become very distant. Their only remaining contact was through their parents, who made sure that they kept up with each other's life. Although Nicolas had tried to maintain a relationship with his sister in the early days of her marriage, Denis's attitude quickly discouraged him. Emma constantly defended her husband when he attempted to talk to her, and over time, they only saw each other at family gatherings. Alex witnessed their increasing estrangement but couldn't do anything to prevent it.

Very slowly, she came closer to Emma, raised a hand and placed it lightly on her arm. Emma flinched at her touch but didn't back away, so Alex's hand continued to move toward her face.

"Emma, you have nothing to fear. Look at me." Alex said. She gently lifted Emma's chin with her fingertips, and noticed in horror the extent of the damage.

Her gaze fell successively on Emma's purplish left eye, her swollen cheek, her split lip where blood had dried.

"You can't go and see your brother like that. I don't think you're in any shape to handle his reaction. I'm taking you home." Alex said. She kept her fingers on Emma's face. "Look at me."

Emma took in the soft words and glanced at her.

"Trust me. No one will know where you are, you'll be safe, and when the time comes, I'll talk to your brother."

Alex lowered her hand and held it out to Emma. "Come with me."

Emma looked down at the outstretched hand. Still unsure, she uncrossed her arms and slowly accepted it. Her tear-filled eyes stared back into Alex's and she nodded her agreement.

Without releasing her, Alex pulled her along and directed her toward the car parked in front of the alley – she supposed it was hers. Alex kept wondering how Emma, who lived three hundred kilometers away, had managed to make the trip alone considering her condition.

“I rode on my motorcycle,” Alex said, picking up her helmet from the ground where she had put it on arrival. “Can you drive a little longer? It’s not far.”

Emma nodded, still speechless. Alex held the door open for her while she got behind the wheel. The keys had been left in the ignition, and Emma started the car.

“OK ... Follow me, right? If there’s a problem, just flash your lights and I’ll pull over.”

Alex took one last worried look at her, then zipped up her leather jacket, adjusted her helmet and gloves, and got on her bike.

Twenty minutes later, Alex pulled up in front of her house, followed by Emma. She parked the car into her garage, so no one could see it. She opened the door for Emma, who had not yet moved, and held out her hand.

“Come with me.”

Alex deliberately maintained physical contact with Emma, as she wanted to build trust with her despite her withdrawal.

She let her in and turned on a low-intensity light.

“It’s not very big, but it’s my house,” Alex said. “Nobody except your brother ever comes here, so you’ll be safe.”

She led Emma to the couch, invited her to sit down and positioned herself in front of her on the coffee table. She gently seized Emma’s hands and took great care not to tower above her.

“Emma, talk to me. Tell me what happened.”

Emma remained silent, her head down, her gaze on Alex’s thumb, which kept brushing her skin in a soft circular motion.

“Did your husband do this?” Alex asked.

“Yes...” Emma answered weakly.

“Right,” Alex said, relieved she finally heard the sound of her voice. “Where are you hurt? Did he hit you elsewhere than your face?”

Emma turned away, feeling ashamed to be seen in that position.

“Tell me,” Alex said gently. She put a little pressure on her skin.

“In the stomach,” Emma answered.

“OK,” Alex kept stroking, “Did he ... abuse you?” She immediately felt Emma withdraw.

“Do you want to press charges?” she asked.

“No, I don’t.” Emma said, fidgeting nervously.

“If you press charges now, they’ll take pictures and do whatever is necessary. He won’t be able to deny the evidence and he won’t be able to get near you.”

“No, I can’t...” Emma’s eyes were now filled with tears. “I can’t put up with this.”

“OK, OK. It’s fine... So... Do you mind if I take a few pictures?” Alex said as calmly as possible. She kept looking at Emma and focused on her every move. “Let’s just do this here between us. We’ll see what we do with them later. Just you and me.”

Emma spent a few moments thinking. “Yes ... If you want, but I won’t go to the police station.”

“OK, no problem. We’ll see that later.”

Alex got up and dragged Emma after her without letting go of her hands. She went to the hall closet and took out a bottle of pills and an ice pack. She entered the kitchen and handed Emma two pills and a glass of water.

“Here, take these, they should help with the pain.”

Emma thanked her and took them. As soon as she finished, Alex grabbed her hand again.

“Come on.”

She led her to the only bedroom in the house, opened the ensuite bathroom door and turned on all the lights. She faced her and stared for a second.

“The next few minutes are going to be quite unpleasant for you. Do you trust me?”

Despite the situation, Emma felt safe and secure with Alex. Her attention, her words, and her gentleness warmed her up a bit. “Yes ... Go ahead.”

Alex took her cell phone out of her jeans pocket and switched on the camera.

“I’ll start by taking pictures of your face,” she said. “If you want to take a break, just tell me, OK? Please look at me.” After taking a few shots, Alex slowly stepped forward. “Now I’m going to take your jacket off and look at your belly, OK?”

Emma nodded. Alex began to undo her buttons, and removed her jacket as lightly as possible. She put it on the sink, and noticed that her T-shirt was torn from the collar down to the chest. A purplish smear marked her neck. Alex thought it was probably due to the fabric roughly rubbing on the skin. She made no comment.

“There’s a mark at the base of your neck. I’ll take a picture,” she said. “Don’t move.”

Alex took the photographs and put down her cell phone. She gently laid her hands on Emma’s arms at elbow level and bent her head to scrutinize her.

“I’ll help you take off your top,” she said quietly. “Can you raise your arms?”

Alex slowly lowered her hands and seized Emma’s arms, helping her pull off her shirt. Then she brought them back against her torso.

“All right, Emma, it’s almost over. Don’t move.”



Alex picked up her cell phone, crouched down, and looked at Emma's belly. It was sporting a large bruise on the left side. Without thinking, she moved her hand forward and touched the mark with her fingertips. Emma gasped at the contact.

"I'm sorry, did I hurt you?"

"A little, but it's OK... Your hands are cold."

Alex smiled at the unexpected remark.

"Sorry," she said, taking two more shots. "Can you turn around, please?"

Emma complied and Alex checked for other marks.

"Great, thanks."

She took off Emma's shoes and stood up.

"Can you slip off your trousers?" she asked. "I'll check that there aren't any more bruises, and then it's over."

Emma briefly faltered and did as she was asked. Much to her embarrassment, she found herself in her underwear. She instinctively crossed her arms over her chest in a protective gesture and looked down.

Alex noticed her movement but made no comment. She glanced down at her legs, saw no other marks, and then went to the shower to turn on the hot water. She came back to Emma and lifted her chin with her fingertips to catch her eye. She tenderly unfolded her arms and smiled.

"You have nothing to fear, Emma," she whispered. "Don't be embarrassed. Come on, it's over."

She led her to the shower stall and checked the water temperature. She took off the flip-flops she had put on in a hurry after leaving her motorcycle gear. She let Emma in and followed her without caring one bit about being dressed.

Emma allowed herself to be led without saying anything. She was still in shock, as if out of her body, without actually realizing what was happening. She closed her eyes, pampered

by the warmth of the water, and raised her head toward the stream. It felt so good.

Alex was watching her carefully.

“Show me your lip.”

She brushed the tip of her thumb over Emma’s open lip to wipe away the trace of blood and ran her hand over her face. Her slow, gentle movements gave Emma a feeling of well-being. She kept her eyes closed and began to release all her stress. Alex felt her shake under her fingers and crossed the few centimeters that still separated them to embrace her.

“It’s over,” Alex whispered in her ear. “It’s done.”

Emma was now quivering violently and crying. Alex was careful not to hurt her, but held her tightly in her arms and softly stroked her neck, her cheek pressed against hers.

After a long time, Emma’s tremors subsided and Alex felt her relax. Emma rested her forehead against her shoulder and slackened against her body.

Alex held her under the warm water and kept stroking her tenderly, well aware of the closeness she had created.

Without a word, she grabbed the shower gel, put a small amount in her hand and continued her slow movements to clean Emma’s skin. The intimacy of the moment made her shiver. She silenced the image that had just formed in her head and decided that it was time to slip away. Alex gently stepped back, leaving Emma under the spray, and placed some product in the palm of her hands.

“Emma, I’ll let you go on. Take your time. I’m going to dry off and change. I’ll wait for you on the terrace, OK?”

Emma looked at her and nodded.

“Did you pack anything when you left?”

“There’s a bag in my car.”

“OK, I’ll get it and put it on the bed. I’ll bring a towel and a clean change of clothes on the sink for you. You have

everything you need in the cupboards, just go through and help yourself... Make yourself at home.”

Emma felt her eyes fill with tears once more, fully aware of the care her brother’s friend had shown her.

“Thank you. I don’t know how...”

Alex put a finger over her mouth to gently silence her and held her for a minute, before breaking away and looking at her.

“It’s OK, Emma. I just did the right thing. I’ll find some way for you to thank me, don’t worry,” she said playfully.

Emma smiled as she was aware her words were meant to lighten the situation.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Alex said. “If you need anything, I’m right next door.”

She placed a tender kiss on Emma’s cheek and stepped out of the shower. Through the fogged glass wall, Emma saw her undress, dry herself off, and finally leave the room, returning a few moments later to drop off her bag. Alex slipped out again and closed the door slightly, signaling that she would not be coming back.



## Chapter 2

Once she was dried and changed, Alex headed to the garage to get Emma's things. She put her purse down in the hallway and went back to the bathroom to drop off the rest of her belongings. The shower was still running. She retreated to the living room and called Nicolas. She claimed she had overslept and didn't feel like going out. She casually arranged to meet him the following day. She went out to the terrace to breathe again and gulped a beer she picked from the refrigerator. Coldness soothed her senses.

Alex's house stood alone at the edge of the ocean. A friend of hers, a real estate agent, had found it specifically for her. It was an old building, and she had needed to restore it completely before she could move in. The main room now consisted of a modern kitchen that opened onto a spacious living room. Its large windows led to a huge terrace offering an unobstructed and magnificent view of the ocean. Vintage surfboards hung on the walls alongside furniture and various wood and metal objects. The whole set-up gave an industrial, contemporary, and warm vibe. Alex was charmed at first sight by the quietness of the place and the proximity of the water. She didn't hesitate for a second to buy it, aware it was an opportunity many others would envy her. A good ten minutes separated her from civilization, via the beach, for those who made the effort to walk. It took twice that time when using the access road in order to arrive on the main road and cover the remaining distance.

Alex enjoyed her peace and quiet, as she was both solitary and fearless. A seasoned sportswoman, trained in combat sports for her own pleasure and defense, she moved within a male environment and despite the slowly changing attitudes she had

to put up with sexist comments and gestures more than once. Her name was well known in the surfing world and sealed her success. She was respected thanks to her personality and her complicity with Nicolas, with whom she'd been sharing the same passion since childhood. Surfing was her drug, her passion. To her greatest pride she could live on it now, and very comfortably. She lit a cigarette and let the sound of the waves sooth her. Alex rarely allowed herself to succumb to this vice, but the contact with Emma had upset her too much. Knowing she was in the shower, so close, had awakened her senses – inappropriately in these circumstances, she knew –, nevertheless her body had reacted and she couldn't help it. Alex had to meet Nicolas the following morning for their daily surf session. How could she hide his sister's presence under her roof?

Emma took her time to clean her skin, soiled by her husband's words and blows. Sluggish at first, her movements became more vigorous as she came out of her daze and she replayed the latest events in her mind. She showed a lot of courage and energy to leave her home and travel all the way, alone. She was slowly realizing what happened. She also appreciated how lucky she was to have met her brother's friend. What would have occurred if she hadn't? How Nico would have reacted? She didn't dare think about it. Alex was quiet and attentive. She had known how to approach her, how to speak to her. Her kind gestures instantly won her trust. When Emma undressed and let her examine her bruised body and take all these photographs, she felt only a slight embarrassment. When they were together under the shower, there was no aversion either. Although she wasn't accustomed to this kind of connection in such a short time, she didn't feel any real discomfort. On the contrary, Alex's presence soothed and reassured her.

An hour later Emma came out on the terrace. Alex sensed her approach and looked at her with a slight smile. She noticed Emma was wearing the clothes she had been given.

“I knew these would fit you.” Alex said.

“Do you know my size?”

“No, but I have an eye for this kind of thing. How do you feel?”

“Much better... Thank you.”

“Good. Don’t move, I’ll be right back.”

Alex went inside to retrieve the ice pack. She filled it and handed it to Emma after she came back on the terrace.

“Put it on your eye for ten minutes, then on your stomach for another ten minutes. And you do it again. I’ll get new ice cubes if there’s not enough left.”

“Yes... Thanks once more, Alex.”

“Do you want a drink? I have beer, or something stronger if you prefer?”

“I’ll have a cigarette,” Emma said, looking at the pack on the table, “and also some herbal tea, if you have it, with something strong in it, if possible.”

Alex smiled at these requests. She took her pack of cigarettes and handed one to Emma, switching her lighter on. She brought her hands around the cigarette Emma had put to her lips and waited patiently. She used their closeness to stare at her and was pleased to see that Emma’s hand was no longer shaking, her face looked more serene, and she had let off some pressure.

“I’ll go get your tea,” Alex said, looking into her eyes.

She came back two minutes later and handed her the cup.

“Here. This should make you feel better.”

Emma grabbed the cup without looking at its content and let it brew for a few more minutes before tasting it.

“Yes, thank you, it’s perfect.”

Silence settled between the two young women. There was nothing heavy about this moment, on the contrary. Alex let Emma relax to the sound of the ocean. It was dark and they both gazed toward the source of the soothing rumble.

When Emma finished her drink, Alex noticed that she had not applied the ice.

“You really need to put this on,” she said, pivoting toward Emma, “if you don’t want to drag it out for too long. Come on.”

Alex sat in a corner of the outdoor couch and turned slightly. She motioned Emma to lie down and use her body for support. Emma did so soundlessly and Alex put her arms around her. She warned her. “Be careful, it’s going to be cold.”

She delicately put the ice pack on Emma’s eye before she resumed. “Try to keep your head up until tomorrow. You need to be cautious or it might get worse.”

Alex let the silence settle again. She moved the ice from Emma’s eye to her stomach, and felt her shiver from the cold. She tightened her grip.

“Stay in my bedroom for as long as you like. I’ll sleep on the couch. You’ll find a set of keys on the hallway cabinet if you need them while I’m gone. I have to see your brother early tomorrow morning, so I probably won’t be here when you wake up. Make yourself at home.”

Alex looked at Emma’s face so close to her.

“Why are you doing all this?” Emma asked. “I wasn’t very nice to you all these past years.”

Alex smiled at her words.

“No, you weren’t, it’s true...” she said, “but I was, wasn’t I. You’re Nico’s sister, and that’s enough for me. In a way, you’re part of my family and I’m willing to do anything for my family.”

“Even hide from my brother that I’m at your place?”

“For a while, if necessary, but I can’t do that for too long... Even for you.”

Emma took in Alex’s words and puzzled over them.



“I haven’t had a real conversation with my brother in a long time,” she said. “Our relationship hasn’t been the same since I married Denis. What’s going on between you two?”

“Between us?” Alex asked, surprised.

“Yes. You’ve known each other since you were ten years old, you do everything together, surfing, going out, work? I don’t know... I watched you grow until I was twenty and then I moved to the city and got married. You’re the same age as my brother, I think, so five years older than me. How is it that at thirty-seven, you don’t wear a ring on your finger?”

Alex raised an eyebrow when she realized that her guest didn’t know much about her brother or herself. Emma looked up at her at the same time.

“OK, fine... Let’s start at the beginning then!” She smiled at her. “I am one year younger than Nico, so I am thirty-six years old. As we went to school together, we shared our common love for surfing and competitions. And we lived in the same environment. Our bond strengthened over time, and thanks to the trust between us, to our notoriety, we managed to transform our passion into a job when our financial situation improved... and when we felt better adjusted too! So, we opened our very first surf shop. It did quite well, then two more followed. We’ve been very lucky to hire reliable staff. They’re running the stores nowadays. That’s how we’re able to indulge in our passion for surf. We also give courses at all levels to pass it on to others. Our business is going very well, especially in the season, as you can imagine. This job is really great!”

“Indeed! Many would like to find themselves in such a situation.”

“We are perfectly aware of it and we remain as discreet as possible to avoid showing off. We haven’t been competing for a few years, new, younger faces arrive every day on the boards... People forget... And it’s just as well! At least for me”

“You haven’t answered all my questions,” Emma said after a brief silence.

“Nico and I are friends, Emma, nothing more. What’s between us, it’s a deep and sincere relationship. It’s been so for many years, but we’re like siblings, so... I’m sorry, but I don’t have any juicy details for you!”

“I reckon it’s a shame, actually,” Emma said. “I didn’t think my bro could have that kind of relationship with a beautiful woman. He’s not usually a paragon of virtue from what I can tell!”

Alex smiled at Emma’s compliment and shuddered again.

“Thank you, but we agreed on that a long time ago. Nico does love women and they love him back! Yet in our world, there’s little room for serious connections, so he has fun from season to season and hopes one day to find the one woman with whom he could contemplate some future, and, why not, a family.”

“What about you?”

“Me? It’s all the same... But enough about me,” she said, snickering. “What about you? Tell me about your life since you went away. I remember a girl who followed us everywhere and was always complaining, who did nasty things to get us in trouble, and who couldn’t stand when we left without her.”

Emma chuckled.

“Yes... You could say I was a real pest. In my defense, it drove me crazy to see you do all those things I was forbidden to do. I think I was deeply jealous of you!”

“Yes indeed! It was very difficult to get close to you.”

“I felt resentful and it got the better of me and of my relationship with both of you. That’s why I turned to people of my own age. I met Denis when I was seventeen. We had a long-distance romance for two years until I went to stay with

him in town. We got married and tried to build a life for ourselves reflecting who we were.”

“What do you do for a living? Do you work?”

“Yes, I am an accountant. Nothing very exciting, I realize. And it’s a lot less sexy than walking around in your swimsuit every day, but hey... It’s my job!”

“Don’t underestimate yourself, Emma. You may be married and an accountant,” Alex said mischievously, “but I quite like picturing an accountant in a suit, wearing glasses, and sitting behind her desk... I can see you like that, and it’s very sexy!”

Emma giggled and looked up.

“Yes, well, thank you for that image... It’s nice that you wish to cheer me up!”

“I mean it...”

“Well, OK, if you say so!”

“Did you tell your boss you were leaving or...”

“Yes, I called him,” Emma said, getting serious again. “It’s a slow time, so I took a few days off.”

“You don’t have children?”

“No... Denis doesn’t want any.”

“Why not?”

“Denis is a very, well, he’s a selfish person in fact! I believe I should never have married so young. For a few years everything was going well. Then he started to work in a company. He was totally invested in his job, he thought of nothing else and completely neglected me. He left early, came home late, and was all about work. He climbed the ladder one step after the other. I didn’t lack anything, materially speaking, but... Our relationship suffered a lot. I talked to him about a baby... He refused outright, because he didn’t want the screaming and crying when he got home from work. He didn’t have time for that and he longed for quiet, not caring for one

second what I wanted! Our intimacy took a hit at that moment.”

Alex listened attentively without speaking as she went on.

“Three years ago, Denis’s company faced serious financial difficulties and experienced a first wave of layoffs. Last year, it was my husband’s turn and he didn’t take it very well. I was working, he was staying at home. He started to drink, more and more every day. I often found him drunk when I came home. He changed, smothered me considerably, would blow me off one moment and want to kiss me later. His attitude became possessive and bordering on violence, but until today, I’d managed to keep him at a distance... I tried to support him, to coax him to get help, but... He’s really macho, so he didn’t want to hear anything, he had no intention of going to see a doctor and even less a shrink!”

“Why didn’t you talk to Nico about it?”

“I told you, my relationship with my brother isn’t the same anymore, and he never liked my husband... I know that.”

“Yes, that’s true, but he’s your brother! He would do anything for you, you must know that anyway.”

“Yes, maybe...”

“No, Emma, I’m absolutely sure of it. You should have come earlier; we would have been there! I would have been here,” Alex said and tightened her grip. She saw Emma close her eyes for a moment.

“I think it’s time for you to go to bed,” Alex went on. “We’ll talk about this tomorrow and you need to get some sleep.”

“Yes, I don’t know what you put in my tea,” Emma said jokingly, “but I think it’s starting to work.”

She slowly got to her feet and held out her hand. Alex was quick to grab it and slip her hand into Emma’s.

“Take it easy,” Alex said teasingly. “I think my whole lower body is numb.”

Emma smiled, her gaze cheerfully looking into Alex's.

Alex was pleased that she had managed to get in touch with Emma and made contact with her. She enjoyed their obvious closeness and the trust between them.

Without letting go of her hand, Alex led Emma to the bedroom. She grabbed a pillow and clean linens to change the sheets on the bed while Emma headed for the bathroom.

“Are you sure you want to sleep on the couch? We can share the bed if you want?”

Alex sent her a hard look. When she heard the invitation, she felt a wave of desire sweeping through her. Emma had put on a pair of shorts and a tank top, without realizing the impact she had on the surfer. Alex looked away to erase the image in her mind.

“No... a big bed for yourself will do you good,” she whispered, “and I have a sofa bed, so don't worry about me.”

Emma squinted, not understanding her host's reaction. Why was Alex responding this way? Her gaze was so intensely focused on her since their meeting in her brother's driveway. Why did it become so troubled and shifty now?

“Did I say or do something wrong?” she finally asked to break the enduring silence.

Alex finished making up the bed before she turned to Emma. She closed the distance between them to take her hand.

“Not at all. Go on, lie down. I'll be right back.” Alex said as she left the room.

She took a deep breath to relax and returned with a jar of honey and a tube of cream. She went to the bathroom to wash her hands and sat next to Emma on the edge of the bed.

“Do you like honey?” she asked.

“Yes,” Emma answered. She had watched her without saying anything.

“OK... I’ll put some on your lip, it will prevent an infection and make you feel better.”

“OK ... yes. Are you a doctor too?”

“No,” Alex said, chuckling, “but between surfing and practicing martial arts, I’m... Let’s say I’m used to this kind of little injury.”

“OK. I was looking for someone to protect me, I think I’ve found them!”

“You have them in front of you in the flesh!” Alex answered in the same tone.

The light banter between them brought Alex some much-needed feeling of relaxation. The care she showered Emma with might look harmless to her guest, but it certainly didn’t look so to herself. She needed to stay focused to avoid making the wrong gesture.

Alex moved closer to Emma’s face and collected a dollop of honey on her finger. Her free hand rested on the base of Emma’s cheek while she moistened her lip with honey. Her gaze was fixed on Emma’s mouth, and she had to rein herself and not kiss her.

Emma stared at her without moving and swallowed hard at this very intimate gesture. Why did she suddenly feel such tension? Alex saw her start and locked her gaze on hers. She couldn’t help but hold it for a few more moments, before looking back at her lips.

“Try not to remove it too quickly,” she said, clearing her throat, “it needs time to penetrate.”

She looked away from her protege and moved to the bathroom. She washed her hands once again, returned to the bedroom, and grabbed the liniment.

“I’ll put some on your belly if you like.”

Emma didn’t say a word and just lifted her tank top in agreement. Alex sat back down and applied the cream. She felt on the edge, she could not ignore how her fingers were

running lightly on Emma's skin. Yet she struggled against this feeling with all her might. Emma saw that Alex was totally absorbed in her care, looking tense, her forehead wrinkling slightly in absolute focus.

"Is everything OK, Alex?"

Alex didn't answer and continued her light and tender gestures, caress-like.

"Alex?"

She finally raised her eyes, her gaze hazy.

"Uh ... Yes, yes, everything is fine! I'm done," she said, heading back to the bathroom.

When she returned, Emma still hadn't moved. Alex sat down beside her.

"Leave your belly out in the open for a while until all is sucked in and remember to stay elevated as much as possible."

"Yes, I will... Thank you," Emma said softly. She smiled and put her hand on Alex's.

"There's only one bathroom here, so don't be surprised if you see me walk through the bedroom."

"Yes, of course! No problem."

Alex brought the back of Emma's hand to her face and kissed it, while staring at her.

"OK then... Good night, Emma."

"Good night, Alex."

Alex didn't move for several seconds, then finally got up and collected her things. She left the room, pushed the door slightly open, and went straight out onto the terrace to have a smoke.

She walked down to the sand and faced the ocean. She wanted to put a little more distance from Emma and enjoy the coolness of the evening. Tonight, she would have trouble sleeping.

Alex was roused from her sleep at three in the morning by noises from the bedroom. Emma was moaning and obviously having a nightmare. She went into the bedroom and turned on the bathroom light. She sat on the edge of the bed and pushed a few strands of hair out of Emma's face.

"Emma... Emma... Wake up!" she called out gently.

Emma jumped at the touch of a hand in her hair and opened her eyes. As soon as she saw Alex, she calmed down.

"I'm sorry," she said at once.

"It's nothing, you had a nightmare. Are you OK?"

"Yes, better now that I am awake."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Alex asked.

"No, thanks... There's not much to tell... I dreamt that my husband was hitting me."

"Yes, that's what I thought. But it's not the case, so you should try to go back to sleep, I'll stay with you for a while."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I woke you up."

"Don't worry about it. Just close your eyes and relax."

Emma did as she was told. She let herself go as she was feeling comforted by her protector's kindness. Alex felt her gradually relax under her fingers. She ran them through her hair, brushed her face, erased the crease on her forehead, followed the curve of her eyebrows, the bridge of her nose, without ever breaking contact. Alex lavished her with gestures intended to put her back to sleep. She kept soothing her, and fifteen minutes later Emma was asleep. Her breathing became regular. Alex stopped and waited a moment longer before withdrawing as gently as possible and turning off the light. She returned to the couch, where she had a hard time falling back asleep. The alarm on her cell phone rang at half past five. Alex got up, totally exhausted and red-eyed. Her daily surfing session and two hours of class were bound to be endless.



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## Chapter 3

Emma woke up at 9:30 a.m., alone, in an unfamiliar house, shrouded in silence. A note sat on the kitchen bar.

*“Hi, Emma, I hope you slept well. I’ll be back around 12:30. Make yourself at home. I left my phone number below, don’t hesitate if you need anything. Kisses. A”*

She took her cell phone, noticed calls and SMS on hold, but decided to postpone going through them. She entered Alex’s number in her contact list and typed a thank-you text message to her as a way to send her own. She made a cup of tea and went out on the terrace. September would end soon, but she had an immediate and comforting feeling of peace in the lingering warmth and the simply magnificent sight. The ocean receded far away before her; the sand stretched as far as the eye could see; the low tide displayed a landscape dear to her heart, yet overlooked in recent years. In a few hours, the water would rise, revealing a new panorama. Emma understood perfectly why Alex fell for this house. She breathed deeply and soaked in the unique location, her eyes wide open. At that very moment, she realized how much she had missed all this, the scenery, the climate, the smells. How could she forget all these sensations, and, most of all, how could she forget herself so much?

She took the time to walk along the water’s edge and to sit on the sand to enjoy the peace and quiet. She returned to the house a good two hours later. Comforted, she felt now ready to consult her mobile phone and unfold the fourteen new notifications waiting for her. She read the SMS sent by her husband and tirelessly listened to all his messages, one after the other. She was once again overwhelmed by anguish when

she heard his tone, full of annoyance, sometimes insulting her, sometimes begging. Her heart was pounding, a dull panic had invaded her. Emma closed her eyes for a moment to regain some sense of calm, then put her phone down and went back to the terrace.

She stood motionless and looked at the horizon, taking a few deep breaths and letting her heart rate drop slowly. Her thoughts turned to Alex, the only person who could calm her down. Alex had done so many things for her since the day before that she wondered why getting to know her had seemed so difficult in the past. Her jealousy had gotten the better of her judgment. Unfortunately blaming herself today would be useless, but she believed she could manage to correct her error. She replayed Alex's words about her brother and could not help but wonder, once again. How was it they weren't together? Her brother was quite good-looking in his own way and Alex was a pretty woman full of charm and sensitivity despite her slight masculine edge. She promised to solve this mystery and, when she got the chance, to have a word or two with the interested party ... if the situation called for it obviously!

Alex came back home and found her on the terrace, comfortably seated on the couch, with the ice pack beside her.

"Hi," said Emma, who had heard her enter.

"Hi. How are you? Did you get some sleep?"

"Yes, thanks to you. I fell asleep quickly and I'm fine, thank you. How about you? You look tired?"

"Um... Well, I slept a little and... I'm exhausted actually!"

"I'm really sorry. It's all my fault."

"Don't worry, it's not that bad. I'll take a nap and it'll be fine."

"I prepared a few things for lunch. Are you hungry?"

"Yes, I'm starving!"

Emma stood up, reached over to kiss her cheek, and pushed her toward the couch.

“Settle down. I won’t be long. Would you like a beer?”

“Yes, thank you,” Alex said, pleasantly surprised. “Did you decide to wait on me as a way of making amends?”

“It’s the least I can do, I think.” Emma smiled at her and replied in the same playful tone before going inside. “Or else my debt will be so huge that I’ll never be able to pay it back.”

After one minute, she returned with two bottles in her hand. Alex grinned and took the one that was meant for her. She noticed that Emma looked good. Five minutes later, a tray filled with snacks sat on the coffee table. As Alex was hungry, she rushed to taste it.

“Mm... looks mouth-watering! Thank you!”

“You’re welcome. Have you seen my brother?”

“Yes, I have. I meet him every morning, you know, but I haven’t told him anything yet, don’t worry.”

“My husband called my cell phone several times last night. I think he’s going to try to get in touch with him to find out where I am if I don’t show up.”

“And, do you intend to?”

“No, I don’t intend to nor want to! But considering the messages, I fear the worst.”

“Can I listen to them?”

Emma stared at Alex for a moment before she answered.

“Well, yes, if you want. I’ll grab my phone.”

When she returned, Alex began to listen to them carefully.

“Mm... Indeed. As long as he’s drinking like that, he’s capable of anything, including barging into your brother’s house without warning. I’m sorry, Emma, we’ll have to talk to him about it. I’ll do it tomorrow morning to pave the way. You should expect him to arrive with me around 12:30. Is that OK?”

“Yes... OK,” said Emma, closing up.

“Don’t worry, I’ll do my best to make sure he reacts appropriately, and until then, keep taking care of yourself. Your black eye will still be noticeable, but your lip is already better and don’t forget that he’s your brother. Despite what you may think, he loves you and will do anything for you.”

They finished their meal in silence.

“Do you want some coffee?” Emma asked.

“No, thank you. I’m going to lie down later and try to sleep,” Alex said. She adjusted the cushions beside her. “I have to visit one of our stores thirty kilometers from here this afternoon. You’re coming with me?”

“I don’t know, Alex. I’m not really fit to be seen in public.”

“We’re only going to one store, you know. You can wear sunglasses if you don’t want people to see your face. Our supervisor, Justine, is considerate and very kind. She will take care of you during my appointment. You really have nothing to worry about and you aren’t disfigured either... Do you want to come?”

“Yes, I’d like to.”

“OK then, please come with me. I promise you won’t regret it.”

“OK, I’m sold! I’m going with you.”

Emma watched Alex as she squirmed and tried vainly to find a comfortable position. She took a pillow, placed it on her thighs, and invited Alex to put her head on it.

“You want to lie down? You’ll be cozier.”

Alex hesitated a short time before settling there, unable to resist.

“My appointment won’t take long. Meanwhile, you can browse through the store,” she said. “Did you bring a swimsuit?”

“No,” Emma answered in a flash, laughing. “I must admit it’s not the first thing I thought of when I left home!”

“Yes, it’s true! Sorry! Why don’t you pick out one and we’ll go swimming tonight?”

“Er ... Yes, OK, we’ll see about that later... Try to sleep,” she said after a while, running her hand through Alex’s hair.

Alex was already closing her eyes, enjoying the contact before she sank deeply in sleep.

Emma’s hand was still on her flank when Alex woke up half an hour later. She opened her eyes slowly, turned onto her back, and grabbed the indecisive hand in her own to keep it on her belly. She looked up at Emma, who was smiling and staring at her.

“So, did you sleep well?”

“Yes, it felt good... Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, I didn’t do anything. Would you like a coffee now?”

“Yes, but give me two minutes to really wake up... Don’t move.”

Ten minutes later, her cell phone, which was sitting on the coffee table, beeped meaningfully. Alex got up.

“Come on! Enough dawdling, let’s move.”

“I’ll make your coffee. Can I get a cigarette?”

“Help yourself, no need to ask. If you run out, there are more packs in the hall cupboard. Make yourself at home.”

“I don’t smoke at home. To tell you the truth, I’ve never felt so ... free.”

“Good, I’m glad you said that. So, enjoy this day without asking yourself too many questions, tomorrow might be different.”

“Yes, I am aware of that... Thank you for taking care of me. It feels good, so good, if you only knew.”

Alex shortened the distance between them and cupped Emma’s cheek in her hand. She pressed a kiss on the other

cheek before drawing back and looking at her.

“You’re welcome. I can’t help it! It is one of my flaws, I am very ... tactile.

“One of your flaws?” Emma wondered aloud. “I can’t wait for you to show me your qualities then. Because it’s a real torture.” She went to the kitchen. “Come on, I’ll make your coffee.”

Alex followed her.

“Do you have a pair of jeans?” she asked before she disappeared through a yet-unseen door.

“Yes, why?”

Alex waited to answer until she came back.

“Then you’ll have to put them on... There, try this on!” she said, handing her a leather jacket, a helmet, and a pair of sturdy boots.

“Are you kidding?” Emma said, squinting. “You want me to ride on your bike?”

“Yes, sure. If you want to enjoy your freedom, you can’t miss it! And who knows, you might get a taste for it. Thanks for coffee.”

Alex sipped her drink and cast an amused glance at Emma who was feverishly putting on the biker gear. The boots were a little big, but with a good pair of socks, they would do. The jacket and helmet were perfect.

“Aren’t you warm in that?”

“Yes,” Alex chuckled, “but the important thing is to be protected and you look... very sexy! Much hotter than behind a desk!”

“Oh yes, right! Here we go again. You’ve never seen me behind a desk!”

“Hmm ... Right. We’ll have to do something about that! Come on, let’s finish getting ready and then we leave or I’ll be late



and I don't like being late for work.”

Alex got ready while Emma smoked her cigarette and they left the house. Alex handed her a backpack and headed for her bike.

“Here, take this on. We might need it.”

Alex lowered the passenger footrests.

“OK. So... some ground rules. Since you never rode a bike, I'm going to ask you to press yourself against me. I need to feel your legs around me. You can hold on with one hand at my waist and one hand on the handle, here, or both hands at my waist, whatever you want, OK? Another thing: shift your head a little to the right or to the left, whichever way, but look at the road. That way, you'll be less surprised by the curves and you'll hit me less with your helmet! And finally, I'm the pilot, so you have to do the same moves as me. If I lean to the right, you have to lean to the right and vice versa, but no more or less than me. Got it?”

“Uh... Yeah, OK, but that doesn't make me feel much better,” Emma said, frowning at the lengthy explanations.

“Don't worry, I'll take it easy at first and make a few turns so you can feel the bike and go with the flow.”

“Go with the flow,” Emma repeated, beaming, “yes... OK!”

Alex smiled too, but immediately said:

“If it doesn't feel right or if you're scared, just tap my thigh twice and I'll stop. If my hand presses on your knees, it means I don't sense you enough and I ask you to tighten your legs. Oh yes... don't move to change your position for example, wait until I stop for that. Have you understood everything?”

“Yes... I think so.”

“You know what they call a pillion rider in the motorcycle world?” Alex said with a laugh.

“No, but I fear the worst.”

“A sandbag.”

“A sandbag! Nice! Really nice!”

Alex laughed warmly and walked over to her passenger to check her equipment.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

She zipped up her jacket, settled into her roadster, and invited Emma to do the same.

She waited for Emma to squeeze her legs together as requested, then left slowly.

Emma was delighted with the ride. At first, she was anxious to do well, but then she was totally focused and held on to Alex, who took the time to reassure her and adjust her riding. When her pillion rider was more relaxed, Alex speeded up and rode a little more sportily. The landscape flashed before Emma, who felt euphoric and light, excited and happy. Despite her inexperience, being at one with Alex and her bike fascinated her.

When they arrived at their destination, Emma got off and was quickly joined by Alex.

“Are you sure you’ve never ridden before?”

“I’m sure! It was exciting and... great!” she exclaimed, not quite finding the right word. “Thank you!”

Alex helped Emma undo her helmet strap and was now staring at her. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks flushed with excitement, her face glowed. Alex found her even more beautiful in that moment. She couldn’t help scrutinizing her, observing, and drawing the image in her memory. Her gaze went down to Emma’s lips, freshly moistened and looking very sensual, even though their owner was certainly not aware of it. Alex’s eyes stayed there for a long time before she turned away swiftly, shattering the moment. Emma had not moved. She squinted at the sudden retreat and then, confused, tried to understand what had gone through Alex’s head during their exchange. When she was invited to follow her inside with a smile, she did not hesitate and came after her wordlessly. She would think about that later.

As soon as they entered the shop, a young woman in her thirties came up to the owner and kissed her.

“Hi, Alex.”

“Hi, Justine. How are you?”

“I’m fine, thanks. Your appointment is here and waiting for you in your office. I took the liberty of putting him there with a cup of coffee until you arrive.”

“OK, thanks, Justine, I’ll take care of it.” Alex said. She turned to Emma. “This is Emma. She’s never been to the store and she’s going to look around while I deal with my visitor.”

The saleswoman held out her hand with a smile.

“Hello, Emma. Nice to meet you.”

The warm welcome comforted Emma, and she felt at ease right away.

“Hello, Justine, nice to meet you too.”

“I’m counting on you to look after her, whatever it takes, OK?”

“Don’t worry, Alex, your friend is in good hands.”

“Please, put everything on my account.” Alex said. She turned to Emma and smiled tenderly. “Have fun. I won’t be long.”

With the owner gone, Emma scrutinized the store. She deemed it hip and cool, just like Alex and her brother. Surfing was omnipresent and occupied a large space. She shifted her attention to the women’s section and was caught up in the new items she found.

She was so engrossed that she didn’t hear Alex coming behind her back a moment later.

“So? Did you find what you were looking for?”

Emma jumped and smiled, but didn’t turn around.

“Maybe! I’ve selected several things!”

“Show me.”

Emma pivoted and showed her the clothes she had put aside.

“Um... This will look great on you, but... there’s no swimsuit.”

Emma laughed at her friend’s stubbornness and then got serious.

“No, there isn’t. Anyway, I don’t think the swimsuits on the rack will be able to hide my marks.”

Alex looked at her from head to toe with a mischievous smile and grabbed her hand to lead her to the swimsuits’ section.

“Your marks will be gone in a few days, whereas you’ll still be here. Tonight, we’ll be alone, so you don’t have to worry about anyone else seeing them but me and... I already saw them, so... I think this one would look great on you. Give me all that stuff so I can take it off your hands. I’m going to the checkout. Try it on or pick another one if you prefer. I’ll wait for you there, take your time, OK?”

“All right, I’ll try it on and then I’ll be right there.”

Alex went to the counter and handed the stuff to Justine who removed the locks. She made sure that everything fit in the backpack and then grabbed a pair of flip-flops, sunglasses, and waited for Emma to come back.

“So?”

“So... I did what you told me,” Emma answered in the same tone.

“That’s great! Justine, please try to find a little room for it in the bag.”

“Very funny!”

Justine looked at each of them in turn and couldn’t help smiling slightly and quietly. She’d been working for eight years in the store, and she was well aware of Alex’s orientation as it was no secret. However, she took care to not make any inappropriate comments.

“Here... Everything’s inside!” she said as she handed the backpack to her boss.

“Thanks, Justine. See you next week. Nico should be by in a couple of days. He’ll call you.”

“Yes, no problem. It was nice meeting you, Emma.”

“Yes, likewise,” Emma shook her hand vigorously. “And thank you, Justine, for your help.”

“It was a pleasure. See you soon.”

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## Chapter 4

An hour and a half later, the two young women got off the motorcycle. Alex had taken her sweet time to go home, riding through circuitous routes for the sole pleasure of her passenger. To see Emma's face glowing when she took off her helmet had suddenly become her only goal. Once again, she was granted her wish.

As the sun was still warm, they decided not to waste any time and went for a swim. Emma had gone to the bathroom, and Alex was waiting patiently in the living room after putting on swim shorts, a bikini top, and a lycra shirt. When Emma came out, Alex couldn't help but look her up and down in her new outfit. Emma was a little shorter, with shoulder-length hair in tawny hues, a few freckles on her soft round face. Her sad and anxious green eyes had given way to a livelier and more brilliant gaze. The bikini wonderfully highlighted her feminine and harmonious curves. Alex noticed that she had slipped on the flip-flops chosen earlier in the store and held the sunglasses in her hand.

"I felt quite sure it would suit you perfectly," Alex said. "Here, put this on if it makes you feel better." She handed her a lycra top.

"Thank you, Alex, for everything. That's really nice of you." Emma smiled. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything, you know. I'll be happy with a mere 'thank you' and a kiss!" Alex said, teasing.

Emma laughed at the words. She walked over, stood on tiptoe, and put her lips on Alex's cheek. Then she slowly stepped back and looked at her intently.

“Thank you so much.”

Alex felt her cheeks heating up. She swallowed. “You’re welcome,” she answered in a low voice, “it’s my pleasure.”

“Are you ready?” Emma asked.

“Yes, let me get a couple of things and we’ll go.”

She grabbed two towels and her backpack, which contained a few beers, her cigarettes, a bottle of water, and some snacks.

“Are you surfing?”

“No, I’ll stay with you, unless you want to surf?”

“No... My tummy still hurts a bit and then it’s been ages since I’ve surfed.”

“Um... We’ll have to do it another time then. You shouldn’t have too much trouble getting back into it and feeling it again. Let’s go!” said Alex, taking her hand.

They went down to the beach and sat on the dry sand at a fair distance from the water. Alex led her to the ocean, and they played in the waves for a while. The two friends returned to their towels, out of breath but exhilarated, and lay side by side on their stomachs, heads facing each other, smiling and not saying a word. Emma closed her eyes for a bit to enjoy this moment of total relaxation. When she opened them again, she was surprised to find her swimming partner still looking at her.

“Well rested?”

“Yes, sorry. How long did I sleep?”

“Don’t apologize, just half an hour. Are you thirsty?”

Emma sat down to overlook the sea and answered:

“Yes, very!”

Alex grabbed two beers and gave her one. She lit a cigarette, pulled on it twice and handed it to Emma.

“Cheers!”



“Cheers!” Emma looked at the horizon. “This place is perfect,” she said, talking in a heavier tone. “I haven’t forgotten why I’m here, of course, but... This day with you has taken a huge weight off my shoulders. You gave me so much comfort, I won’t forget it. I still don’t know what’s in store for me tomorrow, but I wanted you to be aware of that.”

“OK, that’s sweet of you, but you know... I feel really good when I’m with you too. If I could make it last longer without you getting in trouble, I would.”

“Yeah, but you’re right, I can’t hide forever. In order to move forward, I’ll have to make some decisions. I’m going to have to do something about it.”

“Do you have any idea yet?”

“I know what I need to do... And I have known for a while now, but it’s easier said than done. And, quite frankly, I’m really scared.”

“Your brother and I, we’ll be there to help you, don’t worry. We won’t let you on your own, and I can promise you that I’ll do everything I can to make sure he doesn’t... touch a hair on your head again.”

Emma’s eyes were glistening during the course of the discussion. Alex watched her closely and didn’t miss her shivering.

“Are you cold?”

“A little... Yes.”

Alex grabbed the lycra top from the backpack and handed it to her.

“Put it on, the fabric is good for keeping the body heat in.”

She stood up and sit down behind Emma’s back while she was putting on her top. Alex tightened her legs against hers and wrapped her arms around her, her mouth close to her ear.

“You know,” Alex said warmly, “when I need it, I do exactly as I do now! A beer, a smoke and I sit here. I look at the ocean

and I let the waves rock me. I take deep breaths. I listen and observe everything around me, from the fishing boat that's been slowly passing by us since earlier, to the seagull above us that would love to steal a little something to eat, to what must be a sailing boat over there." She pointed a blurred shape on the horizon. "I think about everything and nothing at the same time, about what I want and don't want... It makes me feel good."

She fell silent before resuming. "Are you less cold?"

"Yes... Much less, thank you. Go on... You were saying, 'when you need it'. What do you mean?"

"Like everyone else, I get low sometimes, you know. Surfing is my way of life, my daily job, my means of expression, my way to blow off steam, but, all this..." She drew a wide semicircle in front of them and continued. "All this is necessary for me, vital, it refreshes me, warms me up and so I can go on with life. You should set yourself goals within your reach, go ahead and take them on without thinking too much. You'll see, you'll find it easier than you imagined and you'll feel so much better afterwards."

Emma closed her eyes for a minute at the words whispered in her ear. When Alex tightened her grip, she opened them again to breathe deeply.

"Do you want to go back to the house?" Alex asked.

"No, wait a little longer... I'm trying your thing here," Emma said with a slightly mocking look designed to lighten the mood.

Alex smiled into her neck and let the quiet and the sounds of the outside world surround them.

Emma was enjoying this moment as much as she had enjoyed every moment with Alex. She felt soothed and completely safe. She found herself comfortable with the numerous physical touches initiated by Alex. They felt almost motherly and had become essential for her. She was not used to this kind of relationship with another girl, but oddly enough she tried to

do everything to ensure that these thoughtful gestures would continue. Emma felt serene and didn't see any potential ambiguity in their current position.

Alex, on the other hand, was well aware of their closeness, and she made sure to keep Emma's family relationship with Nicolas in mind. Their friendliness was the result of Emma's current situation, as she needed attention, tenderness and above all to be taken care of after the beatings. Of course, Alex was aware she was playing a risky game, as numerous shivers passed through her. It wouldn't take much for her to let herself go for a minute, to sink her face into Emma's neck, whose delicate skin nearby thrilled her senses, to brush soft kisses all along her earlobe and feel her tingle under the caress of her lips... Her thoughts were becoming terribly dangerous. She turned her face slightly away and closed her eyes to compose herself. When she opened them again, Emma was watching her.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," Alex said hoarsely. "But we're going home now if you don't mind."

"Yes, of course."

Emma frowned, but didn't insist. Alex looked worried and she didn't want to break this moment of bonding. So, she stood up and offered her hand to help her up. Alex grabbed it and leaned on it before finding herself, stunned, back on her buttocks in front of Emma, who chuckled.

"Well, then... Can't you stand?"

"Are you looking for trouble? Just you wait!"

Alex got on her feet quickly and went after Emma, who was giggling like a little girl and running away. Eventually Alex caught up with her and dropped her gently into the sand. Now straddling her friend, Alex tickled her, taking care not to hurt her.

"You'll pay for this! I'll show you!"

Emma was now laughing out loudly under Alex's hands.

"Stop... Stop... I can't take it anymore!"

Grinning, Alex stood up and looked defiantly at Emma. She kept her eyes firmly fixed on her and reached out with her hand.

"Do you think you can still trust me?" Alex asked.

Emma smiled and held her gaze.

"Sure!"

Alex helped her to her feet and they stood close together, still holding hands. Alex needed all her willpower not to kiss her at that moment.

"Come on... Let's go home," said Alex. She went back to pick up their stuff.

The early evening passed quietly. After they showered and ate a bit, Emma prepared two herbal tea cups and brought them on the terrace. Her cell phone in hand, she checked her notifications and messages.

"Did he call again?"

"Yes, several times during the day. I have a message from my brother too. Wait, I'll listen to it."

She put her cell phone down and she turned toward Axel, her face closed.

"Denis called him to ask where I was. He doesn't understand what's going on and he is worried."

"Shit!" Alex cried out. "We have to call him... We don't really have a choice anymore, Emma."

Emma tensed up, her eyes wet. Alex moved closer to the couch and put her hand under her chin, tipping her face toward her.

"Emma, sorry, but this can't wait until tomorrow. I'm going to Nico's now to tell him everything, OK?"

"OK... But I'm coming with you."

“No, not yet, but get your stuff ready. Your brother will probably want you to stay at his house when he finds out. Don’t worry... I’ll be fine,” Alex said reassuringly. She wrapped her arms around her tenderly.

Emma heard the sound of a car about two hours later. She was standing in the living room, waiting patiently, ready to endure the dreaded moment.

Nico came through the door first, his worried eyes fixed on his sister. He slowly walked forward until he faced her, then he raised her chin to scrutinize her eye, still swollen, and her lip, nearly unmarked now. He took a deep breath and smiled tenderly. He embraced her in silence. Alex followed on his heels and observed them. As she expected, the young man reacted very badly when she related the events of the last few days. She remained patient when confronted with his anger, letting him express all his feelings before she talked it through with him and found the right words to convince him to act with his sister exactly as he did at the moment. Reassured, she went out on the terrace to give them some privacy and proceeded toward the ocean to clear her head. She felt uneasy at the thought that Emma would certainly leave her tonight. Despite the situation, the last forty-eight hours had been full of emotions. They had grown very close, and she would miss Emma terribly.

Sitting at the water’s edge, still in her contemplation, Alex heard the young woman settle down beside her. No words were exchanged until Emma spoke up.

“My brother wants me to go to his house... But I don’t feel quite ready. If you’ll let me, I’d like to stay with you a little longer. In the two days I’ve been with you, you’ve almost made me forget what I’ve been through... Your presence is comforting, and I feel at ease with the environment here. That’s what I need right now. May I stay?”

Alex, who had not made a sound, looked at her carefully and smiled.

“As long as you want, I told you. But your brother won’t mind?”

“He understands, don’t worry. I’ll spend time with him as often as I can, but otherwise I’ll be at your place. I feel comfortable and safe, and I know I have nothing to fear from Denis here.”

“It’s OK for me, Emma, with great pleasure... I enjoy your company.”

Emma took her hand and squeezed it without adding anything. After a few minutes, they got up and walked back toward the house where Nicolas was waiting.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” He asked Alex when they arrived near him.

“Not at all. Would you like something to drink?”

Nicolas observed her carefully before answering.

“A beer for me, please.”

Alex held his gaze for a moment before turning to Emma.

“Emma?”

“Your special herbal tea for me, please.”

“OK,” Alex chuckled, “I’ll make one for myself too.”

Nicolas looked at them closely. His partner was very attentive to his sister, and an obvious complicity emanated from them. He noted that Alex sat on a small armchair after she brought their drinks and at good distance from them, which was not her normal behavior. He saw her light a cigarette, draw twice on it and give it to Emma. She did not ask for it but took it as if it were a common occurrence. He drank his beer quietly and noticed that their eyes often met.

Alex was aware she was being scrutinized by Nicolas. He knew her by heart and lying would not be useful.

“Do you want one?” she asked, holding out the pack.

“No thanks, not tonight... And I wasn’t aware you smoked, sis.”

“Sometimes it’s necessary, Nico,” Alex said without giving Emma time to answer. “We’ll be careful that it doesn’t become a habit, won’t we, Emma?”

She turned to her for a moment, then looked back at Nicolas and stared at him. “Everything’s fine, Nico... Emma’s fine, I’m fine. You have nothing to worry about.”

He sent her an intense look before answering.

“If you say so... Just take care of yourself.”

“That’s what I’m doing every day,” Alex said and looked down.

Mindful of this surprising and puzzling exchange, Emma, eyebrows furrowed, gazed at them in turn before calling them out.

“Hey, I’m here! May I know what you’re talking about?”

Nicolas pivoted toward her and asked. “How do you manage for the night?”

Emma took some time to understand the question, as she didn’t really grasp what it had to do with their discussion. Alex remained silent, and Emma answered in an easy way.

“Alex gave me her bedroom. Why?”

“And I sleep on the couch,” Alex uttered, more curtly.

“OK. See...” Nico said without letting anything show, “If you had furnished your guest room, you’d be less bothered.”

“I’m not, so the matter is settled.”

Emma followed their exchanges without really understanding what they meant. She had frowned again at her brother’s behavior toward his friend, which she found unpleasant, but Alex’s tone had been terse and didn’t encourage further discussion. She kept quiet. The silence was broken shortly afterwards when Nicolas rose.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it. I’m tired. See you tomorrow, sis?”

“Yes, I plan to have lunch with Alex and then to join you. We can talk more in the afternoon.”

“OK, perfect.”

Nicolas walked over to his sister, hugged her and kissed her on her cheek.

“See you tomorrow. Good night, Emma.”

“Good night, Nico, see you tomorrow.”

Alex also got up to follow him. “I’ll walk you out.”

Without a word, they reached Nicolas’s car.

“Do you have something to tell me?” Alex finally said before they parted.

“Yes, but I think you already know that. You’re playing a dangerous game, Alex. Married and straight, does that mean anything to you or not at all?”

“Yes, I know... What do you think? I took care of her, she’s getting better and better now that you’re here... That’s what matters, right?”

“How are you?”

“I’m fine, I’m telling you.”

Nico hugged her and kissed her cheek.

“OK. Be careful, see you tomorrow.”

Alex went back inside and joined Emma, who had stayed on the terrace. Emma was staring at her.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Alex... What’s going on? Why was my brother ... unpleasant to you?”

“He’s just worried about me, don’t sweat it.”

“About you? Why?” Emma asked, pushing.



Alex stared at her for a long time. Emma just waited; she could see the anxious crease in her forehead.

“Your brother is worried that I’m getting too close to you,” she murmured at last.

“OK, but what’s the problem? I don’t understand.”

More silence followed before Alex finally resolved to come clean at the risk of scaring her. After all, she’d done nothing wrong and Emma’s decision to stay was entirely her own.

“I’m homosexual, Emma, so your brother is afraid I’ll get too attached to you.”

Emma stared at Alex for a long moment, but Alex remained silent, giving her time to think about her words. Emma replayed their time together in her mind, from the driveway in front of her brother’s house to today. She realized how much she now sought the attention her rescuer had lavished on her. When she was in her arms, she never felt anything other than the comfort she needed. However, the memory of their wet embrace under the shower made her cheeks turn pink. She slowly comprehended that she could now understand some of Alex’s reactions. The two young women had been standing close, very close, but Emma had never felt unsafe or disturbed by their closeness. For a long moment she felt as if she was free-diving. Then she took a deep breath and asked: “And... Is that a problem for you?”

“Not at the moment... No.”

“Could it ... Could it become a problem?”

Alex stared intently into Emma’s emerald eyes before answering. “Yes.”

Emma could not hold her gaze, so expressive suddenly, and her cheeks heated up instantly. Alex had literally confessed her attraction to her, and yet she felt no need to leave.

“Would you rather I leave?” she asked right away.

“No, but if you’d rather go, I’ll understand.”

“No!” Emma answered at once. “I want to stay here with you.”

“OK, let’s not talk about it anymore.”

Alex took a cigarette to try to put a brave face. She really should stop falling back on smoking at all times! A moment later, her thoughts were interrupted when Emma casually admitted:

“I went out with a girl, when I was younger.”

“Did you?” Alex asked, surprised.

“Yes,” Emma scoffed, “at the beginning of my relationship with Denis. I’m not very proud of it, you see.”

“No, I don’t see it.” Alex answered at once. She couldn’t help sounding curt.

“I’m not very proud of the fact that it happened at the same time, Alex, not that I went out with a girl.”

“Ah! I thought...”

“You thought wrong.”

“I’m sorry. Why are you telling me this?”

“I don’t know... Maybe to relax you. You’re gay... All right, I heard you. I just wanted you to know that I have an open mind. That’s all.”

“OK, I get it... So what?”

“What?”

“Your affair with that girl?”

Emma laughed, but took some time to think before answering.

“We only exchanged one or two kisses, if I remember correctly... I would say nice, sweet, and disturbing at the same time. I didn’t dwell on it at the time. I had mapped out my future with Denis and I quickly forgot this youthful mistake.”

The next few minutes were silent and rather painful. Alex felt uneasy and didn’t really know how to behave now. Emma watched her but didn’t say anything.

Alex stood up and turned her back to her, looking out over the ocean.

“I liked the Alex from before,” Emma said suddenly.

“I am the same as before.”

“So why are you so far away from me?”

Alex turned slowly to face Emma, looking laid-back.

Emma patted the cushion to her right. “Come on! You’re making me cold!”

Alex melted at Emma’s reaction, but asked: “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

They were now sitting next to one another. Emma immediately snuggled up to Alex who wrapped her arm around her and held her tightly. The silence felt quieter. Emma lifted her face.

“Did you flirt with me?” she asked, smirking.

Alex smiled at her and joked back. “Like hell I did! But you didn’t notice a thing.”

“Stop it! It’s not true! You’re lying!” Emma exclaimed. “But now I know that you fantasize about bespectacled accountants behind their desks!”

“Like crazy!” replied Alex, “and also about biker women plastered against my back!”

They laughed together for a moment. Emma rested her head on Alex’s shoulder, still holding her. She felt the fast rumble of Alex’s heart and let herself settled in her warmth, closing her eyes.

“Let’s go to sleep now,” Emma said after a while.

Alex loosened her grip and began to get up.

“Yes, a good night’s sleep will do us good.”

Emma followed in her footsteps and took her hand. Alex flinched at the gesture. But she was well aware that the only purpose of all this attention was to reassure her, so she said

nothing and let Emma do as she pleased. Their closeness was so good. She really didn't want to put an end to it so early. She forced herself to remember why she was there and led Emma to her room.

“Do you want me to put some cream on your stomach or do you want to do it yourself?”

“I'd rather you do it, if you don't mind?”

“No, I don't mind at all. Go get ready, I'll wait for you.”

Emma went to the bathroom and returned in her night clothes. Just like the previous day, the warmth, and depth of Alex's blue gaze shrouded her whole body. Now fully aware of what it meant, Emma couldn't help but feel a wave of heat spreading across her cheeks and her body. The simple fact of knowing that the surfer was attracted to women, and even more so to her, had changed the situation. Even if Emma still refused to admit it, she didn't feel immune to it. Shyly, she lay down on the bed and pulled up her tank top. Alex was just as careful to apply the cream on her belly as she had been the day before, and she was totally absorbed in her task. Emma let her do it and took the opportunity to look closely at the brown shoulder-length hair and tanned face enhanced by penetrating blue-gray eyes. Alex's sporty look, a bit masculine, contrasted sharply with her inner femininity and delicate touch, but it suited her perfectly. Emma couldn't stop her heart from racing as she realized how beautiful she was right now.



## Chapter 5

When she got up the next morning, a note was waiting for her on the bar.

*“Hi. When you go around the house, there’s a little path toward the woods. If you follow it, the walk will take you about an hour and I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. See you later. Love to you. A.”*

Emma smiled. She was touched by such thoughtfulness. She was in a cheerful mood as she ate her breakfast and got ready. Before she started following the path, she texted Alex.

*“Hi. I’m heeding your advice and going on an adventure. Wish you were here. Thanks. E.”*

Before she stepped out, her cell phone vibrated.

*“This is my walk, so I’m with you for a bit. Watch and enjoy everything you see. A.”*

When Alex returned home, Emma was waiting for her, the table set.

“Hi. What’s up?”

“Hi there! The walk was really nice. Thank you so much. I’m glad I took some very nice pictures.”

“You’re welcome. I don’t have to work tomorrow. If you want, I can take you to the forest. I know a lovely spot.”

Emma got closer to Alex and kissed her cheek. “I’ll be happy to follow you anywhere. Thank you very much,” she said, as she looked into Alex’s eyes.

Alex blushed and turned away to hide her confusion.

“Are you hungry? Sit down, I’ll serve you.”

Alex nodded and obeyed quietly. They shared their meal quite silently, watching each other. Later they drank their coffee sitting side by side on the terrace. As Emma sensed that Alex had been withdrawing since the day before, she deliberately maintained a physical contact with her, shoulder to shoulder.

“Do you need a ride to your brother’s?”

“I’d like that if you don’t mind.”

“No problem, I’ll take the opportunity to go shopping. Just call me when you wish to leave for home and I’ll pick you up.”

“OK, but you can come and join us afterwards if you want.”

“No, Emma. I think it’s important that you spend some time alone with Nico. I guess you have a lot to talk about and you need to be together. I’ll be a third wheel.”

“Yes, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s OK. I’ll be here when you get back, don’t worry,” Alex added, aware that Emma longed to be comforted. “By the way, I’m seeing some friends tonight. I’m taking you with me.”

“Friends? Where?”

“At a local lesbian bar. Can you handle it?”

Emma was silent for a moment before she answered.

“If you stay with me, yes.”

Alex chuckled at the reply and at Emma’s face.

“You have nothing to worry about. I won’t leave you at any time. And, you know, we don’t bite, not like that! You just have to say no!”

Emma blushed at Alex’s innuendo and smiled widely. “Are you making fun of me?”

“Of course! I couldn’t resist!”

“This isn’t funny!” Emma said, slapping Alex’s thigh.

“Yes, it’s funny, believe me! You should have seen your face!”

They laughed and teased each other for a while before Alex finally decided to drive her to Nicolas’s house. Hand in hand, they separated in that same driveway where they reunited, and exchanged a kiss on the cheek.

Alex used the afternoon to isolate herself. After some shopping, she got on her motorcycle and rode without thinking about anything. The speed, the sensations, the excitement born from the danger of every curve she took, gave her a momentary relief. She stopped a full hour later at the shore of a lake whose beauty and tranquility she appreciated. Sitting alone at the water’s edge, staring into space, she felt good and calm from her outing. She also worried about her feelings for Emma, as they were becoming more and more obvious. She couldn’t help but think about her protege. She itched to bring her there, to show her this much-cherished place and so many others. She wanted again to feel her body when riding her bike and to see her face beaming at every stop. Emma fully opened up to her now. Their connection seemed so natural.

Alex breathed loudly and shook her head.

“Damn it!”

She threw a pebble into the water viciously. It ricocheted twice before sinking.

Emma had spent the afternoon at her brother’s house. She talked and Nicolas listened carefully. He rarely interrupted her to ask questions or to nudge her to go on. She reviewed her whole life with her husband, from the beginning to the present day. She was deeply relieved by her brother’s attitude. He was curious and concerned, but neither vindictive nor bossy as she had expected.

“Thank you,” she said after a moment of silence.

“For what?”



“For listening to me first and not judging me.”

“Alex lectured me.” Nicolas said, smiling widely. “You should thank her.”

Emma grinned back, pleased.

“She’s got quite a pull on you, hasn’t she?”

“Yes, she has. Quite often she helps me understand women!”

“Um ... There was never anything between you?”

He chuckled, then answered very seriously. “Nothing at all, to my dismay.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but it’s water under the bridge, as the saying goes.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Hey, you know, there’s not much to tell. I tried everything I could until I realized that I didn’t have a chance.”

“Go on.”

“She kindly explained that she wasn’t interested, that I shouldn’t take it personally, and she explained why.”

“Did she really?”

“Yes, she did. Look, Emma... Alex’s homosexuality goes back to her birth, she has always known about it and nothing and nobody will change that, not even me.”

“How did you react?”

“Well, I moved on quickly and then, you know... With surfing, I had plenty of girls around me, so... Anyway, since that day, we have a much stronger, more solid bond. Everything is very clear, for her and for me.”

“It’s weird that I never realized it! Yet I could have, as we saw each other regularly, even if I weren’t the most pleasant with her.”

“Yeah. Hard to say otherwise. You were so jealous! We couldn’t stand it anymore, what with so many outbursts, over

and over!”

“Yes, I know. I was obnoxious. Yet I’m surprised I still remember how nice she was to me.”

Nicolas scoffed and made a face.

“What?”

“You’re still a piece of work, you know. You’re probably the only one who hasn’t figured it out yet.”

Emma frowned and stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what you’re thinking right now, what you never wanted to see. Alex has been deeply attracted to you since the beginning of time and no girl has ever been able to change that.”

Emma gaped for a moment, digesting her brother’s words as well as she could.

“Are you ... uh ... sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“But... I didn’t do anything to... No, no, no way! I... I behaved like a real brat with her. I hated her as much as I could. Well, shit!”

“As you say! I don’t know how it happened back then, let alone how it obviously still happens now. I’m just noticing what’s right under my eyes, and it worries me to no end knowing you’re here.”

Emma stared intently at Nicolas before lowering her head.

“Do you think I should leave her house?”

“Look, I don’t want to meddle in her decisions or yours. If she told you that you could stay, she’s certainly thought about it. I just wanted you to know so you’d be careful, that’s all.”

“OK, I’ll try to be careful,” she stammered, confused.

The sound of Alex's motorcycle resounded out in front of the house and cut short the conversation.

Nicolas kissed his sister and hugged her affectionately. They agreed on a time to see each other the next day.

Alex and Emma arrived at the *L* early and were able to choose their table. Emma was curious about this new environment and watched Alex carefully. She was in her natural element. The woman at the entrance gave her a warm hug, and the barmaid went around her counter to do the same. Alex embraced them tenderly before turning back to Emma to introduce her. She quickly felt at ease at the cordial welcome. Alex kept her close, made sure to stay with her at all times, and introduced her right away to her friends and acquaintances. Alex's mates, Nicole, Pauline, and Samantha, arrived together and joined them after sharing long hugs with other patrons. The young women had an aperitif and ordered food. The discussions were lively, sometimes serious, sometimes goofy. Laughter erupted throughout the room, and Emma took part in the jokes. Many times, she felt Alex's gaze on her, and she looked back with a wide smile. Alex's friends accepted her unconditionally and talked to her as if they'd known her for years. Once mealtime was over, the place transformed quickly. The DJ took her spot and played hits tailored for the beginning of the evening. The dance floor filled up; the bar was now packed. Emma seemed fascinated as being in a bar full of women was a wholly unusual experience for her. She looked around quietly without any second thought, observing this unfamiliar world with curiosity. Women were swaying on the dance floor, others were hugging at the bar, standing hand in hand or holding each other by the waist. She crossed some glances intended for her but did not really notice, as she focused on thoroughly scrutinizing the place.

Alex leaned over her and whispered in her ear.

"You should be careful. Most of these girls tonight are in relationships, but some are single, and if you keep staring at

them as you are, you're bound to attract one or more of them."

Emma looked at her and slowly realized what her friend had said. Alex was smiling tenderly at her. Emma suddenly understood that she had openly leered at several people and blushed intensely.

"I..."

Alex was already laughing at her embarrassment.

"Do you want to dance?"

"Dance? With you?"

"With me, with the girls and with all those already on the dance floor, yes... I'm going to dance, so either you wait here, sitting at the table, or you come with me. As you wish!"

"I'll come with you," Emma answered hastily, clearly unwilling to stay alone.

Alex took her hand to lead her along and didn't let her go until they both were on the dance floor. She made her laugh several times to relax her. She pushed into her with her shoulder and caught her just before she hit a dancer who was wiggling not far from her. Full of mischief, Emma made big eyes at Alex. She pretended to be surprised and afraid, as if some closely approaching woman was checking her out. Alex giggled, but was careful to stay in the game as she didn't want her to feel scared. Their easy connection reassured Emma, who found she was having fun, fully enjoying this moment of relaxation and forgetting all her problems for one evening.

When the first slow song came through, Alex reached out and leaned into her ear.

"You wanna dance with me?"

Emma looked around. The dance floor was emptying. Couples were forming and embracing. She looked back at Alex who was waiting patiently. She nodded softly and took her hand. Alex helped her to position herself and hold her delicately by the waist to bring her slightly nearer. Their faces were a little too close, so she shifted a bit, as she didn't want to hinder her

partner. She also wished to make sure to keep a respectable distance between them.

“Do you feel all right? Let me know if you’d like to go back...”

Emma cut her off and whispered in her ear:

“I feel fine, Alex. Don’t worry. I haven’t slow danced in forever. I didn’t know it was still on!”

“Specialty of the house!” Alex said, smiling. “Natacha, the DJ, plays several sessions in the evening. According to her, there’s no better way to bring people together.”

“Hum, I see... Do you come here often?”

“Yes, whenever I can. I feel a bit at home here.”

“Do you have a friend here?”

Alex stepped back to look at Emma, surprised by her question.

“Friends, yes, I have several friends, some closer than others, but no girlfriend, not at the moment. Why?”

“Nothing. I’m just asking. You’re here with me and I thought that if...”

“If I’d wanted to be somewhere else, Emma, I wouldn’t have brought you here, believe me. But right now, I’m craving your company. Can we just dance?”

Emma smiled and nodded. Alex moved closer and pulled her gently toward her as another slow dance began. Their bodies brushed lightly against each other.

“I love this music,” Emma whispered in her partner’s ear. Alex shivered.

Totally relaxed, Emma put her head on Alex’s shoulder, broadening the zone of contact between them. The surfer sighed silently and tightened her embrace, disturbed by their closeness and Emma’s lips on her neck.

The slows passed one after the other, and neither of them wanted to interrupt this moment. Alex couldn’t help slipping

her hand in the small of Emma's back. Her thumb flirted with the skin at the edge of her top and caressed it tenderly. She'd wished so much for this suspended moment that she couldn't think anymore, she was just led by her instinct. Emma was in her arms, pressed intimately against her body. She sensed her curves against her, felt her heat, and enjoyed her smell. Every fiber of her being was awake, and she didn't dare make any other gesture for fear of breaking the occasion.

Emma felt hot, her flesh responding, despite herself, to Alex's caress on her back. Shivers ran through her, and for the first time she felt both comforted and panicked. She didn't dare to move; she didn't want to move. However, when the rhythm of the music changed, she stepped aside and her eyes found her partner's. Alex gazed at her, going through every millimeter of her face and stopping for a long time on her lips. Emma felt deeply disturbed by the desire she saw in Alex's eyes. She smiled shyly and backed away subtly. Alex immediately looked away.

"Come," she said, holding her hand. Her face suddenly closed and she slowly came to her senses.

Alex's friends had not missed a beat, but pretended not to notice anything. Emma was watching her out of the corner of her eye. Alex was avoiding her gaze, worried that she had gotten carried away.

As lightly as possible, Emma took Alex's hand under the table and tried to exert a soothing pressure. She smiled tenderly when Alex finally looked up. She relaxed at once under Emma's comforting gaze and grinned back.

The remainder of the evening was filled with laughter and jokes of all kinds. Emma was feeling good.

They came back from the *L* in silence. Emma was thinking back on the evening. She really enjoyed herself. She had been able to get to know Alex a little better: she was in her element, friendly and smiling with the few people she wasn't familiar

with, mindful and tactile with the others. She wasn't stingy with jokes, without ever making too many; her laughter sounded soft to Emma's ears. She was also serious when necessary, and gave her full attention to whomever was speaking to her. She'd never left her side during the evening. Emma had often spotted the lingering glances some patrons had sent Alex's way, without raising her curiosity. At that very moment, Emma realized that Alex's gaze had been almost permanently on her, at times encouraging, sometimes laughing and conspiratorial, at other times protective. When Emma noticed her watching, she sometimes sensed some prodding, immediately followed by the embarrassment of having been caught in the act. No one had looked at her like that in a long time. Such a gaze deeply disturbed Emma who saw in it much more than desire. She remembered at once her brother's words.

How should she behave now? The warm sensation that had invaded her body during their dance branded in her memory. What did she feel? All these questions jostled in her head. However, she couldn't find the exact answers to them. She didn't want to hurt Alex, but wasn't she already wounding her by her mere presence? Emma lost herself in her own thoughts. To come back to reality after an out-of-time evening such as this one was hard. In a way, she felt bad about it, yet refused to put an end to it.

Alex parked in front of her house and turned toward her protege. She sensed her turmoil.

"You are very quiet. Is there a problem?"

"I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"I ... I've been so unfair to you. I'm really, really sorry," Emma replied, not daring to look at her.

"What are you talking about, Emma?" Alex said, frowning.

"I used to be such an idiot, thinking only of myself. I believed you were taking my brother away from me, I didn't have any

gumption and I couldn't see anything past it. Nico should have told me before. If you had told me before. Maybe..."

Alex understood right away that Emma knew and that Nico had spilled the beans. For the first time since they met again, she answered curtly.

"Maybe what?"

Furious, she got out of the car and left her keys with Emma, as she headed for the beach to cut short a conversation she didn't want to have.

Alex's angry reaction stunned Emma, who remained motionless for a moment. She got out of the car and put her things down before heading to the terrace. The moon was full and shining brightly. The night air was cool. Emma didn't hesitate a second before she followed Alex on the shore, carrying a plaid in one hand, a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of water in the other.

Alex was sitting on dry sand a good distance from the water, her arms wrapped around her legs and her chest hunched.

"Can I join you?" Emma asked when she reached her.

"As you wish."

Spurred by the short answer, Emma put the plaid around Alex's shoulders and tried to incite her to open her legs and welcome her as she'd done the previous day. Alex didn't have the strength to refuse. She wrapped her arms around Emma as soon as she was seated and drew her closer to her body.

They stayed there quietly for a long time. Alex didn't know what to say and Emma respected her silence and this moment of intimacy. Her arms rested under Alex's, and her fingers caressed her skin gently.

"I didn't mean to lose my temper."

"I know... Don't fret. I was clumsy. I'm sorry."

"Nico shouldn't have told you. He had no right."



“My brother is worried about you. Why shouldn’t he have done it?”

“I’m a big girl and I make my own choices. You have nothing to do with it.”

“Forgive me for arguing, but I’m involved too. If I didn’t know before because I was too stupid and blind to see it, now I know and I can’t pretend and close my eyes.”

Alex loosened her grip.

“That’s why I didn’t want you to know.”

Emma stopped her.

“Please, don’t move, Alex. We have to talk about this and you know it.”

“I don’t know what else there is to say. I was in love with you, you didn’t notice it, you left, got married... The end of the story.”

“And now?”

“Now what? Let bygones be bygones.”

Emma didn’t answer, aware that Alex was lying. She let the silence settle once again and lit a cigarette, which she handed to Alex.

When she felt Alex had relaxed a bit behind her, she spoke again.

“I’m leaving Denis. My marriage is over, finished. He’s gone too far, and I want a divorce. Staying with you has allowed me to find myself and to smile once more. It does me so much good if you only knew! I realized today how lucky I was to have crossed paths with you on this driveway. I loved every single thing you did for me. I got to know you, even though we didn’t actually spend much time together in the end. I truly like your presence by my side and I feel sorry for the pain you experienced because of me.”

“This...”

“No, let me finish, Alex, please. You are respectful toward me, funny, caring, tender and I ... like you a lot. But I really can't bear to make you suffer and I know that's what I'm doing right now. I need time to clean up my life. I'd like to be able to bounce back on my own, to head in the direction I've chosen. It's essential for me to be sure of myself, you know?”

“Yes.”

“I really like the image you send me back. It really helps me to move forward, but... I can't go any faster at the moment. I don't want to lose my way and to realize too late that I'm not on the right track. And I don't want to drag you down with me... You don't deserve it.”

Silence enveloped them again. Alex had listened carefully to every word. Emma was asking for time to clean up her life and figure out what she wanted, but most of all Emma hadn't pushed her away.

“All right. I heard you. Thanks. I'm sorry...”

“Don't be, please, don't be. Just be yourself, Alex. You're a beautiful person. If I was stupid enough not to realize it earlier, now I see it.”

Alex tightened her grip on Emma, who did the same. They stayed there for almost an hour without talking before going back to bed. It had been an emotional evening for both of them.

## Chapitre 6

Alex woke early the next day. It had been a short night, but she felt rested. Emma's words the previous evening had given her a new, albeit slight, sense of hope. She was making breakfast when Emma joined her, still half asleep.

"You're up early," Emma grumbled.

Alex smiled and turned to her.

"Good morning to you too! Did you sleep well? I'm sorry if I woke you up, but in my defense, I was going to bring you breakfast in bed."

Emma instantly softened and a wide smile lit up her face. She reached over and kissed her cheek.

"Good morning, Alex. Let's have it together on the terrace to enjoy the view!"

"Your wish is my command, princess!"

"Huh ... Watch out, I could really enjoy it!" Emma said, happy with the early morning playful mood built by Alex.

Alex chose not to answer as she was wary about weighing down this lighter mood considering how the previous evening ended. She handed her a full tray.

“Here, will you help me? I’ll bring the cups.”

They relished the moment, seated side by side silently. The sun had risen, the air was mild and the horizon bright. It would be a beautiful day.

“What do you say, I could call Nico for a surf session, the three of us? The sea is beautiful and the waves are not too powerful at this time of the day.”

“I haven’t surfed in like forever, Alex.”

“What’s the big deal? You’re safe with us.”

“I don’t know. I…”

“Does your stomach still hurt?”

“No, but…”

“Come on, Emma! Just for a short time, and if you think it’s too much for you, you just stop. We’ll surf here, right in front of us,” Alex said and pointed to the spot<sup>[1]</sup>. “There, see?”

“OK, fine… But I don’t want to get in your way.”

“Have a little trust in yourself, Emma! Everything will be fine, don’t worry. And the time when you were a burden seems to be over… Well, I hope so!” Alex winked at her protege.

“Ha, Ha, hilarious!” said Emma with a hint of sarcasm.

They were at the water’s edge when Nicolas joined them. He kissed his sister tenderly, then moved close to Alex and shoved her.

“The last one in the water is the loser!” he exclaimed and started to run, carrying his board under his arm. Alex almost fell in the sand and barely caught herself.

“What a jerk!” she said, laughing. “Wait, I’m coming!”

Just as she was about to run, she stopped dead in her tracks and turned to Emma who was looking at them, smiling. She held out her hand.

“Are you coming?”

Emma took her hand and they joined Nicolas as he dived into the foam.

Alex stayed with Emma at the lineup<sup>[2]</sup> to give her advice and guidance. Emma wavered a few instants before rushing to the water. She surfed some nice waves. Alex watched her duck diving<sup>[3]</sup> back as a wide smile lit up her radiant face. She felt happy that Emma was enjoying herself. After surfing for a full hour, Emma collapsed on the sand, exhausted. Alex and Nicolas were still in the water and she could admire their technique. They looked perfectly in their element, surfing the same wave, having fun, sliding and pushing each other like kids.

Nicolas joined her first. She had laid out two broad towels side by side, and she was settled in the middle. Her brother gently splashed her and lay down on her right.

“Hey sis, how are you?”

“Really great. I managed to surf... It’s been so long!”

“I saw that. You did quite well.”

Alex came in and sprawled out on her stomach in the empty spot.

“OK, girls, I’m leaving.”

“So soon!” her sister replied. “Aren’t you coming with us? We’re planning to go for a walk in the forest afterwards.”

“No, I can’t. I’ve things to do. But you’re coming this afternoon, right?”

“Yes, of course! Alex will drop me off after lunch.”

“OK. See you then, little sister! See you, Alex.”

“See you later, Nico! You can go to my house if you need anything.”

“Don’t worry, I’m fine. Watch out for sunburn,” he added to Emma before walking away.

“Yes, yes! I’ll protect myself.”

She grabbed the sunscreen and spread it on her pale skin.

“Can you put it on my back, please?” she asked Alex.

“Sure, lie down.”

Alex took her time to coat her with the cream. The gentle touches of her hand, sometimes light, sometimes stronger, instantly calmed Emma, who couldn’t help but close her eyes to enjoy every second of what felt like a massage. She opened them again only when Alex lay back down beside her. With their heads turned toward each other, they stared without exchanging a word. Their hands were very close and almost touching. Emma struggled to hold her gaze, but forced herself to do so anyway. Finally, Alex was the first one to look down, as she feared she might let slip to Emma how much the massage she performed had troubled her.

“I enjoyed this morning so far,” Emma said in a small voice.

Alex stared back at her, and she couldn’t help looking down on her body.

“I enjoyed it too...”

Emma blushed and smiled shyly. Her little finger caught Alex’s, who closed her eyes at the touch she had not dared to hope for. She relaxed at once. Emma watched her, feeling delighted and full of emotion. She closed her eyelids and let herself go, relishing the serenity of that moment, shared by both of them, and only them.

Later, they headed to the forest where they walked for a full hour. Emma followed Alex, listening to the sounds, smelling the scents. She could feel her surroundings and felt perfectly fine. Alex soothed her, and she savored every second.

They ate quickly and drank their coffee cheerfully. Alex then offered to drive her to Nico’s.

“What time are you picking me up?” Emma asked as they pulled up to the house.

“Do you miss me already?”

“Yes... I think I do,” Emma whispered as she looked out.

Alex turned her head toward her, surprised at Emma’s tone. She wasn’t gazing at her, but Alex had perfectly heard her “statement”. She smiled and continued more seriously.

“If you wish I’m picking you up around seven, on my way back, as I have some shopping to do.”

“Maybe you could come earlier, and I can go with you?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it.”

“I know you can take care of it, that’s not the point. But I want to share in. You can’t pay for everything...”

“All right, Emma, don’t fret. I’ll be back around six, and we’ll go shopping together. Is that OK with you?”

“Yes, that’s fine. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Shall I come with you?” Alex said. Her car was parked already.

Smiling, Emma got out of the car and started to walk toward the house. Suddenly she stopped and stared right in front of her.

Alex followed her gaze and frowned at once. Denis was standing a few feet away, staring at them.

Emma hadn’t expected this encounter at all. She was stunned and felt a dull fear seizing her whole being. Alex had to step into her field of vision to help her regain her footing. She grabbed her chin with her fingertips.

“Emma? Look at me,” she said softly.

Emma blinked several times but couldn’t come out of her state. Alex snapped her fingers and spoke more firmly.

“Emma? Hey!”

She finally managed to look back into Alex’s eyes and return to reality. Alex sensed her fragility and continued to talk to her.

“It’s OK. I’m here. He won’t hurt you, Emma!”

“It’s all right, I feel better. Thank you, Alex.”

“You’re welcome. What do you want to do now? Shall we go back?”

Before answering Emma shifted to rest her eyes on her husband and watched him for a moment. Denis had not moved and was waiting patiently for them to come toward him. She noticed that his face didn’t show any anger or anything that could put her in danger. He didn’t look drunk; on the contrary, he even seemed embarrassed.

“No, I’ll go talk to him.”

Surprised, Alex also turned toward him and spotted the same facts.

“Are you sure about this?”

Emma shut down straight away and stared intently at Alex.

“Yes, I am. We have to get it over with.”

Alex looked at her for a moment before nodding.

“Very well. I stay beside you, right here. If there’s any sign of trouble, I’m coming.”

Emma turned her attention back to her husband, her gaze hard and her face closed. She walked toward him, stiff but determined.

Denis saw them approaching and lowered his eyes. After several days of excesses in all kinds, he managed to get out of it enough to be ashamed. He stood in front of his wife, head bowed and shoulders bent.

“What do you want?” Emma asked sharply.

“I ... Sorry. I ... want to apologize,” he stammered.

“Apologize? Are you kidding me?”

“Please, let me explain. It’s all my fault, forgive me. I can’t sleep anymore. All I can think about is how I screwed it up. I swear it won’t happen again. It was a mistake and...”



“A mistake!” Emma cut him off angrily. “You hit me, you called me names, and you tried to molest me.”

“I lost control. Don’t get me wrong, I was drunk and I didn’t realize what I was doing.”

“Do you think drinking is an excuse? You kicked me when I was already on the ground!”

“I love you. I need you. You’re the love of my life. I beg you, think about it.”

Emma realized her husband was downcast and she felt terribly uncomfortable to see him in such a state. Alex, who was standing close to her, could feel her weaken.

“Do you realize what you’ve done?”

“Yes, I’m so sorry, if you only knew. If you want, I can prove to you that I’ll change.”

“And tell me, what exactly are you going to do?”

“I’ve... I’ve stopped drinking. I’ll get my act together ... find a job. I want to move on. Let’s forget it.”

Emma remained silent. Alex couldn’t believe her ears. Was Emma planning to go back to him? Alex moved even closer without taking her eyes off Denis, linking their fingers and hoping to be the anchor she needed. She wished Emma could feel her strength and get back on track. Emma flinched slightly at the touch. Alex saw her stiffen again.

Denis had not missed this unexpected gesture and frowned at once. He sent a hard look to Alex.

“I’d like to talk to my wife alone. Who are you?”

Alex was about to answer when she felt a pressure on her hand. She turned to Emma, who hadn’t taken her eyes off her husband and who had obviously recovered. Alex was instantly pleased with the resolve on her face. She pressed her hand back and looked back at Denis.

“This is Alex, my brother’s partner and best friend, and she’s not going anywhere. Look at me,” Emma said in a cold,

incisive tone. “I don’t want to forget. What you did is outrageous and I will never forgive you... Never, you hear me!”

Denis tensed at the determination in her words.

“Don’t say that, I beg you! Give me a chance to make up for it. I’m nothing without you.”

“I’ll say it one more time. There’s nothing more you can do to make up for what you did to me, as you say. Go back home and get yourself together... For you.”

“Yes, I will, I promise. When you get back...”

“I don’t think you understand. I’m not coming back and I’m filing for divorce.”

A stony silence greeted this last reply. Denis squinted, took a step forward, and grabbed his wife’s arm.

“What? But you can’t do that! You’re my wife...”

“That doesn’t give you the right to hit me. Let me go.” Emma cut him off sharply.

“You can’t do this to me. I don’t agree.”

“I don’t care about whether you agree or not, you hear me?” she said, furious. “I stopped being your wife the day you hit me when I was already down.”

“I...”

“Let go of me! There’s nothing you can say to change what you dared to do! You tried to rape me, you molested me, you threw me to the ground and you kept hitting me! Nothing can justify that! And nothing will make me forget that look of loathing on your face that day! Nothing, you hear me!”

“You...”

“Nothing!” she spat at his face before she pushed him back fiercely with both hands on his chest.

Surprised by her furious reaction, Denis let her go and moved back two steps. He looked at his wife with hatred and stepped

toward her once again.

Meanwhile Alex felt the danger and took a step forward to counter any possible attempt on his part. Denis stopped dead in his tracks and glanced at her. They stared at each other.

“Contact your lawyer. We’ll meet again to sign the documents,” Emma said with a steady voice.

Denis looked back at his wife.

“What if I don’t want to sign?”

“I don’t see what you’d gain if I went to the cops to file a complaint.”

Denis snickered, with a nasty look on his face.

“Your word against mine! What will you tell the cops?”

“I’ll tell them what you did and I’ll show them pictures that prove you hit me. I’ll ask Alex and my brother to testify. Who do you think they will listen to? Me or some loser who lost his job, is drinking like a fish and beats his wife?”

“You dirty...”

“I think you’d better leave now,” Emma said, cutting him off with a steady voice.

Behind her, the door of the house opened and Nicolas got out, eyebrows furrowed. He walked quickly toward them. Denis glanced at him before pivoting back to Alex. He was the first to lower his gaze before turning around and leaving hurriedly.

The three of them saw him get into his car and drive off with a screech of tires.

Nicolas took his sister in his arms right away.

“Is everything OK, little sister?”

She relaxed instantly. She’d needed much courage to stand up to her husband. As she suddenly felt the accumulated tension in her withdraw, she started at once to shiver and cry. Nicolas looked at Alex and silently pleaded for her help. She smiled and nodded in understanding.

“Carry her inside and give her some time,” she whispered.  
“She just needs to get it all out.”

“OK.”

He lifted his sister in his arms right away, carried her into the house and laid her gently on the couch.

“Can you give us two minutes, please, Nico?”

“Yes, of course. I’m in the garage if you need me.”

Alex sat down beside Emma, still frozen in her seat.

“How are you feeling?”

“Right, I feel better. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

“Come here,” Alex whispered and opened her arms.

Emma took shelter in Alex’s embrace without a qualm, letting her comfort and hug her as closely as she could.

“I felt very proud of you, you know.”

“Yes, well, I hope I didn’t do anything stupid. There was so much hatred and evil in his eyes.”

“Don’t worry. He’s left. Anyway, we’re standing by you now, we won’t let you go. Try to relax, will you?”

“Yeah, thanks, Alex. I probably wouldn’t have made it without you.”

“Of course, you would. You think you’re weak but I’ve just seen the opposite.”

“Can you stay with me for a moment, please?”

“Yes. I’m not moving right now. You should get some sleep. You’ll see, it’ll be better afterwards. It looks like the worst is over.”

Emma lay down with her head on Alex’s lap. Nicolas came back into the room at that moment and, looking meaningfully at his friend, grabbed a blanket and covered his sister.

“I’ll keep her company for fifteen minutes then I’ll go.”

“No problem. Do you want a coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

“I’ll bring it to you. I’ll make one for myself too.”

When he returned with his tray, Emma was fast asleep.

“I’ve planned an evening with the gang tonight to take her mind off things. Do you think it’s still in the cards?”

Alex pouted and took a moment to think.

“Look, I don’t know. Give her time to get over it and talk to her when she wakes up. Maybe being around people will take her mind off things and make her feel better.”

“OK, I’ll see you later.”

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## Chapter 7

Alex left the siblings after drinking her coffee. Emma was fast asleep and didn't notice her departure. Despite her willingness to help Alex with the groceries, Emma didn't want to offend Nicolas and relented to his insistence that she stay with him. He took her back to her friend's house so she could get ready for the evening and drove her to the restaurant at the club he regularly visited. When Alex returned home, Emma was already gone. During the afternoon, they had exchanged several messages, Emma telling Alex that she was feeling better, apologizing for not being able to be there for the shopping, and thanking her again for her support and help. She told her that she wanted to see her again soon and was happy to have some fun at the impromptu party.

That evening at the Beach Club, the mood was festive and people were already filling the room. It didn't take long for Alex to spot the group of friends who were regulars there. Emma was with them, sitting by her brother, laughing and looking at ease. Next to her, Alex recognized Rémi and frowned at once. Women liked him a lot, and he was very much accustomed to using his charms. Why was Nico leaving this Casanova with his sister? She mentally reprimanded herself. Emma was a big girl. Anyway, she seemed to enjoy the company, which stirred Alex's jealousy.

"Hey, hi!" Emma said happily as she approached.

"Hi," Alex replied laconically.

She hugged everyone before sitting down opposite Emma. Nico followed her with his eyes and immediately saw she was annoyed. He expected it, of course. He knew Rémi well and also knew what Alex thought of him and he couldn't ignore

that she wouldn't like this set-up at all. But Rémi was in the parking lot of the club when they arrived and the young man had joined their group without any qualm. Emma was clearly feeling good about herself and having a great time. Nicolas saw no need to intervene and, deep down, he wanted his partner to cope with the facts of life. He'd been awfully worried about her from the beginning and as time went by, this feeling kept growing. Alex spent all her time with Emma unless she was with him, and he knew Alex was terribly hooked. As for his sister, she was smiling again thanks to his best friend, and her eyes were sparkling again. He could feel that she was slowly regaining a taste for life and that Alex was calming her down. However, a platonic relationship wouldn't be enough for his friend and he feared the day was coming fast when she'd suffer from it. Emma wasn't a lesbian. The emotions shared between the two young women certainly seemed to be strong, but it would be a very hard step to cross. The next hour passed quietly, amidst lively discussions. Initially, the music played softly and it was easy to chat and exchange. After some time, though, the room, until then great for talking, transformed into a nightclub.

Alex really tried to fit into the group's conversation. As she knew the people who were there and she was familiar with the all-pervading surfing, she could rather easily blend into the crowd. However, when the music grew louder and Rémi got closer to Emma to speak in her ear, her blood ran cold. She got up quickly and went to the bar to order a drink. Emma, who felt that Alex has shuttered despite her efforts to talk to her, followed her with her eyes. Nico had introduced her to his friends, everyone knew each other well, but Alex apparently didn't share the good mood. The young man at her side was pleasant and made her laugh. Although she found him a little insistent, he was courteous and knew his place. No need for her to be curt toward him. She looked back to the counter and smiled at Alex, who was glancing at her with a serious expression on her face and didn't smile back. Emma didn't take her eyes off while Rémi put his arm over the back of her chair and leaned to whisper something that she didn't hear.



She saw Alex heading for the exit and she obviously finally hit her. She stood up, apologized to the group, and tried to catch up with her.

She called out in the parking lot, just before Alex reached her car.

“Alex! Wait!” She managed to grab her arm to halt her. “Alex, please.”

“What?” Alex asked loudly and turned around abruptly.

Emma was surprised by her aggressive stance and stopped dead in her tracks. She took a step back. Alex noticed it and calmed down immediately.

“What?” she repeated in a softer tone.

“Are you leaving?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Why are you leaving?”

“You know very well why, Emma. Go back to them and enjoy your evening.”

She walked away but Emma called her out again.

“Are you going to the *L*?”

Alex faced her and ran a hand through her hair.

“Yes,” she answered quietly

“Let me come with you.”

“No.”

“I want to come with you,” Emma insisted.

“Not tonight,” Alex cut in. She turned around to end the discussion. She got into her car and drove away after one last look.

Emma stood there for a while. Nico, who had seen the scene from afar, joined her.

“Are you all right?”

“I’d like to go home, Nico, please.”

“OK, I’ll give you a lift.”

On the way back, Emma didn’t say a word. Nico also kept silent and just drove on, his eyes fixed on the road. His sister had to deal on her own with the situation she allowed to happen. He dropped her off and went back the way he came.

Alex drove to the beach. Sitting alone on the sand, she unrolled the thread of the evening and blamed herself for her pathetic behavior. Jealousy had clearly overtaken reason, and she mentally berated herself. What would happen now? She was trapped by her own feelings; there was no turning back. She felt lost and had no desire to visit the *L*. What might happen there would certainly not help her forget this dismal evening and she might regret it later. She lingered for a long time, listening to the familiar, soothing sounds she knew by heart. When a shiver came over her, she decided to go back.

She stopped dead in her living room when she saw Emma, fully dressed, lying on her sofa bed. She was obviously fast asleep and hadn’t heard her come in. Alex sat down in the armchair across and looked at her. *Should she wake her up? What would she say to her? Would Emma choose to leave?* She stood up and carefully covered her with a blanket. Emma started at once and opened her eyes to see Alex who was walking away.

“Alex?”

Alex didn’t answer and headed for the front door. Emma rose up abruptly to catch her.

“Alex, wait a minute, damn it!” she said as she grabbed her arm, forcing her to stop and turn around again. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t paying attention; I didn’t notice how it affected you. I feel bad now.”

They faced each other silently.

“I’m so sorry. Please, say something,” Emma repeated, stepping closer.

Alex's heart pounded at this unexpected approach. She raised a hand and put it on her cheek, very softly. They couldn't take their eyes off each other. Emma leaned on Alex's hand.

"Nothing happened, Alex," she said. "He made me laugh for a night. Nothing more will come out of it. I know that kind of guy. He just made me laugh, that's all. I care about you and I don't want to lose you. I'm sorry if I hurt you. I didn't mean to. I was stupid not to understand that right away. Please forgive me."

Alex listened carefully to each word. With her thumb she wiped away the tear Emma had shed, and took one more step to stand very close to her. She rested her forehead against Emma's, who didn't back away and looked at Alex. She had just closed her eyes in response to their physical contact.

Alex needed to control herself and stayed a long time like that, caressing Emma's cheek. She felt her breath and the heat of her body. Then, without a word, she stood back, and looked into Emma's eyes. Without averting her eyes, she gently leaned her face and grazed Emma's lips. She caressed them slowly, taking her time. Emma didn't move. Lulled by this unusual gentleness, she lost herself in the moment. Her heart pounded in her chest; she closed her eyes, feeling warm inside and sensing Alex's lips gently pressing on hers. Without any more thoughts, her lips moved and half-opened, letting her partner set the rhythm of their sensual dance.

Ecstatic, Alex was kissing the woman she loved and that woman was responding. She allowed herself to close her eyes and to enjoy this much-awaited moment. Her lips grew bolder and Emma didn't push her away. Her tongue brushed Emma's, tentatively, as if to invite her, and the response was swift. They finally touched and Alex couldn't stifle her moan. She plastered her body against her, slipped her hand in her hair then kissed her with all the love she could muster. Emma was swept away in a whirlwind of sensations. Alex's kisses were shy, firm, feverish, and delicate. The shivers spreading through her body left no doubt on what she felt. When Alex inserted her leg between her thighs, it was as if electricity was

powering her whole body, the first in ages she experienced it. Then she abandoned herself to this tidal wave of sensations, unable to refuse it.

They were breathing heavily. Alex put a last, light kiss on her partner's half-opened and swollen lips. Their foreheads were touching for a long time. They didn't want to reconnect with reality. They waited for their heart beats to slow down. Alex didn't want to move too fast. To reach Emma's lips was already a feat. She'd just kissed her with passion, and Emma had responded without restraint. Alex would have gladly tried to go further, but she needed to stop. She opened her eyes on Emma's angelic face and saw that her eyelids were still closed.

"Are you OK?" Alex whispered hoarsely.

Still unable to make a sound, Emma nodded. When she finally allowed herself to open her eyes, she was overwhelmed by Alex's glance. Emma held back Alex, who was struggling with herself to move from Emma's body.

"Where are you going?" Emma asked, frowning.

"I..."

"I don't want you to go."

"Emma..."

Emma's fingers trailed along Alex's arm until she found her hand. She held it gently, then stepped toward the bedroom and pulled her in.

"Emma..."

"Shut up, come on."

"What are you doing?"

"I thought it would be obvious, but if you really want me to put words to it: I'm leading you into the bedroom."

When she got close to the bed, Emma turned to Alex and smiled at her before taking her other hand. She pulled her closer without averting her eyes until their bodies met. Alex swallowed hard.

“Is there anything else you need to know?”

Alex had stopped breathing; her heart was beating wildly. Her eyes were stuck on the young woman in front of her, who was waiting for her reaction. So, without further delay, Alex slipped her fingers on Emma’s hand and went up along her arm. The back of her fingers caressed her jaw in a gesture of infinite delicacy while she put her other hand in the small of her back to keep her close. Emma shivered. The desire she saw in Alex’s eyes suffused her body with a soft warmth. She held Alex’s gaze with a confidence she was far from feeling. Alex tilted her head and put her lips on Emma’s cheek then went down along her neck. Emma’s pulse quickened and she clutched Alex’s arm. Alex’s tongue traced a wet trail all along her path. She first went to her earlobe, and took it between her teeth. Emma’s skin felt electric; she tightened her fingers without even realizing it and tilted her head slightly to give Alex all the space she needed. *God, she loved the way she felt!*

Alex was moving back up to her lips now, so slowly that Emma thought it was indecent. When she finally reached her lips, she kissed her tenderly and pulled away to look into Emma’s eyes. They stared at each other for a few seconds, before Alex moved to lift Emma’s top over her head. Emma helped her, raising her arms, before their eyes met. She smiled to encourage her. Then Alex looked down at the half-naked body. She put two fingers on the strap of her bra, looked again in her eyes and slipped the piece of fabric along her arm in a light touch. Without breaking contact for a second, her fingers moved up to her neck and slowly down to her collarbone, giving Emma goose bumps. Her skin felt exquisitely responsive to these caresses, and waves of gentle warmth lapped at her as Alex’s fingers continued down to the edge of her lacy underwear and brushed against it. She signaled Emma to turn her back to her and resumed stroking her from her shoulder to her shoulder blade, dropping light kisses here and there. Feeling confident, she unfastened Emma’s bra and released her breasts. Emma stiffened despite herself. Alex

drew her against her with a hand placed on her belly, embraced her tenderly and kissed her neck.

“Just say the word and I’ll stop,” Alex whispered in her ear.

Emma’s skin quivered once more. She nodded. Watching her reactions carefully, Alex held her close and continued to stroke her belly. She moved up to her breast and cupped it before touching the nipple, already hardened with anticipation. Emma let out a slight moan and tipped her head back. Alex stopped dead in her tracks and closed her eyes. The sound was so erotic to her ears that she needed a moment to control herself. When Emma squeezed her forearm, she snapped out of her lethargy. Alex delicately grabbed her jaw, directed it toward her, and dragged her into a passionate kiss. She turned her around without releasing her lips and held her firmly against herself, a hand on her nape. When she freed her and they looked at each other again, there was no doubt about what would be happening. Alex stepped back and looked down at Emma’s body. She was so absorbed that she felt Emma’s self-consciousness only when she noticed she had crossed her arms over her chest. She smiled tenderly at her and hugged her. She pushed a lock of hair out of her eyes and kissed her again. Her hands were busy unbuttoning her trousers which slipped along her legs. They were still exploring Emma’s curves when Alex stopped her kiss.

“Hang on,” she whispered in her ear.

She grabbed Emma’s buttocks with her hands and with one push, Emma wrapped her legs around her, her arms around her neck.

Alex gently laid her down on the bed before sliding on top of her. Leaning on her forearms, she gazed at her for several seconds. She kept enjoying Emma’s intense stare on her, giving her all the consents she could wish. She peered ardently at her partner’s lips, unable to avert her eyes. She moistened her own lips, swallowed, and approached. They were now breathing the same air. In a gesture of infinite tenderness, Alex dropped a light kiss there before taking her lower lip between

her teeth. Emma's skin was burning again, and she gave in to the exquisite sensation. She closed her eyes and moaned. Her stomach contracted and her pelvis rose mechanically as Alex sucked on the bite with her soft, warm tongue. Emma felt the need to touch Alex's body as she continued to kiss her more forcefully. Feverishly, her hands stroked her lover's body, slipped under her top and explored her back, all along her spine. She felt her partner shivering under her caresses, however shy. Her excitement grew and she wanted more. To feel her skin became her first objective. She raised her partner's top to signal her to take it out. She pulled out her underwear shyly. Alex let her do it and inwardly made fun of her tender inexperience. Then she took control of the situation, got up to remove her trousers and offered her partially naked body to Emma's passionate gaze. She came back to her partner. One knee on the bed, she put her fingers on Emma's ankle and slid them up her leg. She lay down on her left side, her hand up in the inside of Emma's thigh until she brushed her crotch. Her gaze followed the movement of her fingers, then stared up at the green eyes facing her. Emma had held her breath for what seemed like an eternity. She was just releasing it when Alex put her mouth on one of her breasts and licked it. Alex sensed her harden even more as she wrapped her tongue around her nipple and teased it with her teeth. Emma's inside flared up at the stronger caress. Alex felt her partner's body quiver with excitement. She moved up to her lips, pressed her body against hers, and kissed her passionately. While she was still kissing her, Alex slipped her hand to Emma's waist and stopped on her hip. She broke away from the kiss to look into her eyes again. Emma was still tense with excitement. She yearned so much for that hand on her hip to keep moving down that she slipped her fingers over it to push it down to the edge of her panties. When she felt Alex's fingers creep under the fabric and slide to gently sink into her wet folds, she arched her back and threw her head backward. An intense heat flooded her; she tightly clutched to her partner. Her pelvis began to sway in search of further contacts. Alex caressed her slowly and firmly. Waves of pleasure shot through Emma as

Alex entered her. She was panting and was on the verge of exploding with each coming and going. Alex gazed lovingly at her lover's pleasure; she had waited so long that she didn't want to miss any of it. She stopped until Emma came back to her, her eyes full of emotion. She then kissed her fiercely again and resumed her movements. Emma's orgasm bloomed and she moaned in her mouth. Alex immediately sprinkled light kisses on her face while she was catching her breath, still firmly clinging to her. When Emma finally opened her eyes, she pulled Alex to her and held her tightly. Alex buried her face in her neck and returned her embrace. They stayed in that position for a long time before she lifted her face. Emma had closed her eyes, and her breathing was calmer.

“Are you sleeping?”

Emma smiled, keeping her eyes closed.

“No, I'm not,” she whispered.

“Do you want to sleep?”

“No, I don't.”

“Do you want me to go away?”

“No, I don't.” After a lengthy silence, Emma said “You aren't asking me what I want?”

“Look at me.”

She opened her eyes to Alex, who was now staring at her.

“What do you want, Emma?”

“I want more.”

Alex smiled broadly and took hold of her lips again, kissing her languidly. When she went down her body and kissed it, sometimes lightly, sometimes more firmly, Emma clung to the sheet, arched her back and breathed heavily again.



## Chapitre 8

The next morning, Emma was the first one to wake up. She hadn't slept much, but she felt perfectly fine. She smiled in the dark room, her eyes on the ceiling, before she turned her gaze to the woman still lying next to her and looked at every inch of her sleeping, relaxed face. The images of the previous night's lovemaking flooded her and she felt her cheeks heat when her body remembered the sensations brought by Alex's tongue. *God, it was so good!* She stared at the ceiling again and blew out several breaths. She gently leaned on her side as she didn't wish to wake Alex up. Emma watched her sleep and pondered on the days she had spent with her. How could she be so peaceful after the hell she had been through? She thought less and less of Denis. She felt as if she was floating, overwhelmed by a sensation of well-being. How could one person make you feel like that in just a few days? Alex listened to her, pampered her and respected her. She was there at every moment, and she had touched her soul. "Magical" was the best word to describe the previous night. Emma remembered every feeling, every action, every remark, and every sigh. She closed her eyes again at the overflow of emotions and slowly opened them to look at the young woman lying in front of her. Then Emma moved steadily toward her

face. Her mouth landed on her partner's for a soft, tender kiss. She felt her smile, opened her lips, and deepened the kiss.

"Hi there," Emma whispered.

"Hi."

Alex's eyes were still closed, but she put an arm around Emma's waist and hugged her tightly. Their legs intertwined as if they had always been together and they strived to be as close as possible. Emma kept her attention on Alex's mouth.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Hmm... What time is it?"

"Still early, don't worry."

Emma moved from her lips to her neck, which she showered with kisses. She traveled up to her cheek, her forehead, and down to the tip of her nose. She was going to put her lips tenderly on her partner's when Alex picked her up for a deeper kiss. She flipped Emma on her back and loomed over her, before she finally opened her eyes.

"How very early?" she asked mischievously, while her hands cupped Emma's face.

Emma smiled and answered with the same look.

"Very early, meaning there's still time!"

They stared at each other for a moment before Alex grabbed Emma's lower lip between her teeth and eased her bite with her tongue. Emma closed her eyes; she couldn't get enough of this exquisite sensation, and her body was already stretching toward her partner's. Alex tightened her grip and moved to slide her firm thigh more intimately between Emma's legs, which spread to accommodate her. Alex had been awakened in the most beautiful manner. To tell the truth, she didn't care about the time. She swayed against Emma's body very slowly, their intimacies slipped on each other in a sensual way. The musky scent of their arousal was already filling the air. Alex kept on kissing her, pressing tightly against her. Her kisses became lighter. Her tongue dotted Emma with delicate and

loving caresses. Emma let herself be carried away again. Alex, her body, her tongue, her hands, her whole being, made love to her again in the most splendid fashion. She let herself go and enjoy this intense moment. She welcomed each tingling, each sensation, each burning, each rise of pleasure, before allowing her body to vibrate and shake.

Still intimately entwined, the two young women basked in the afterglow. Alex stroked Emma's skin tirelessly, as she cuddled against her shoulder. She heaved a sigh of relief before breaking the silence.

"I have to go," she whispered.

"Yes, I know."

"I wish I could have stayed like this all day, you know."

"I wish I could too, Alex."

"I don't want to leave you."

Emma propped herself on her arm to look at her. She put her hand on her cheek, and her thumb brushed her lips. Alex opened her mouth and tried to breathe calmly, her body already responding. Emma smiled and kept touching her, fully aware of the effect she was having on her. She forced herself to look away from her lips and into her eyes.

"I'll be here when you get back."

"Do you promise?"

"I don't want to be anywhere else, Alex."

"Promise me."

Emma chuckled at Alex's almost childish attitude, although her voice sounded perfectly serious.

"I promise," she answered tenderly. "You and I still have a lot to talk about, don't you think?"

"You have no idea, honey."

Their eyes locked intensely when hearing the nickname Alex had dropped. Emma blushed and they smiled at each other as

they contemplated all they had said.

“Don’t make me wait too long then. I’m already looking forward to it.”

“Don’t tell me that or I’ll never get out of this bed,” Alex grumbled and rolled her partner onto her back.

Emma burst out laughing.

“Go to work! Go to work! You’ll be late. I’m not moving, I promise.”

“OK, I’ll go ... But first, give me a kiss.”

Emma lifted her head to meet Alex’s waiting lips. With one hand, she invited her to deepen the kiss, which grew passionate and left them breathless.

Alex pulled herself away from Emma’s arms.

“See you later.”

“See you later.”

A last light kiss on those soft and so welcoming lips and Alex stood up to get ready. A trip to the bathroom and a cup of strong coffee later, she peeked through the bedroom door to find that Emma had fallen back asleep. With a smile, she looked at her for a moment before deciding to leave her home.

The chill stung her, but she didn’t care. She moved mechanically, her head still full of their latest cuddles. Alex had to turn back when she realized she’d forgotten her car keys and smiled stupidly when she remembered their recent conversation. *Well! Girl, you need to step down from your cloud, you have a course to teach!* she said to herself before raising her eyes to the sky. It seemed bluer and more luminous than the other days. She was warm even though the sun had just begun to rise. Alex sighed and sat behind the wheel. God, she felt so good and totally at peace! She drove down the dirt road with a smile. Lost in her feeling of fulfillment, she didn’t notice a gray car, parked on the side of the road. This car shouldn’t have been on her property. Neither did she see a

figure get up after she passed by. Nor did she perceive the fierce gaze fixed on her as she disappeared onto the main road.

Emma woke slowly when she heard the door closing, her body relaxed and her mind filled with a deep sense of well-being. What a joy it was to feel that way! It had been so long since someone had loved her and in such a perfect manner. Her lover's tender and exciting touches had made her desire and her pleasure rise to an incredible intensity. With a smile on her lips, Emma buried her blushing face in the pillow. *What a night!*

She got up shortly afterwards, intent on enjoying her morning. She was hungry. A hearty breakfast, a refreshing swim in the ocean, and a good book, that's what she planned while waiting for Alex to return.

She put the kettle on before heading toward the bay window and opening it wide. She looked out at the landscape and inhaled the fresh air. She went back to the kitchen to pour herself a cup of tea and grabbed a bun from the cupboard. She was about to go back to the terrace when her gaze fell on the front door. She felt confused when she saw it was slightly ajar as she was sure she had heard it close. She looked around, suddenly gripped by a slight fear, which she dismissed with a shrug. *Don't be stupid, she told herself. Alex never locks the door; it must have blown open.* Emma walked to the door and slammed it with her foot before crossing the living room again.

"Can I join you?"

Emma flinched violently, tea spilling out of her cup and onto the floor. Frozen by the sound of the voice behind her, she made no move. An intense cold came over her when Denis pushed himself against her back.

"Alone at last, huh?"

Emma closed her eyes for a moment and breathed carefully, trying to silence the rising panic inside her. She slowly

detached herself from the body pressed against her, overwhelmed by a passionate loathing. She put on the most serene countenance possible as she faced Denis.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m looking for you, darling, and I think I’ve found you. Make me a coffee, will you? I didn’t sleep well in that crappy car and I need caffeine.”

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“But I am. Make me a coffee.”

“Listen, maybe you could go back to your hotel and have a nice shower and breakfast. I’ll get ready and meet you there. We can talk if you still want to.”

Denis walked around her and went to the bay window to contemplate the view.

“It’s lovely here. Cozy little nest, isn’t it? I had a hard time finding your girlfriend’s place. The locals aren’t very chatty.”

“Denis...”

“I had to hide out in this shitty rental car all day and night. I stink and I haven’t eaten in hours.”

“Den...”

“I suggest you make me a coffee right now or I’ll smash everything in this fucking place!”

Emma was startled by his cold, dry tone. *Breathe, it’s OK, she thought. Make his coffee and act natural.*

“All right. I’ll put everything on the table outside and I’ll make a coffee for you.”

Emma’s husband watched her carefully, paying attention to her every move. She opened a cupboard and grabbed a black mug, adorned with “Good morning,” in a pretty white writing. She put it under the coffee machine and inserted a capsule of intense ristretto coffee from the holder next to it.

Once the coffee was poured, Emma pushed the mug toward her husband without saying a word. She took a lump of sugar from the cupboard and a spoon from the cutlery drawer and placed them next to it.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you... I see you’re comfortable here,” he said as he stirred his coffee.

Emma stiffened even more. His voice sounded neutral, but dry and warning of hard-to-contain violence.

“I ... I’ve been here for a few days. I’ve had time to figure out where things are.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“Would you like to sit on the terrace? And eat some bun? You must be hungry, right?”

“No, you’ve spoiled my appetite.”

“I...”

“Shut up!”

As Denis glared at her, Emma lowered her eyes. *Hold on as long as you can, she said to herself, scared to death, and run away at the slightest opportunity.*

“Where did you sleep?”

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Alex arrived slightly late for work. Nicolas was waiting for her and had prepared everything. The students were putting on their suits under their parents’ eyes, creating a terrible mess, as they did every day.

“Hey! Sorry, I’m running late.”

Nicolas watched her put her stuff aside and wolf down a croissant she just grabbed.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, like a baby.”

“And my sister?”

Alex almost choked and took a sip of hot coffee before answering in a neutral voice.

“Yes... I think so.”

“You think or you’re sure?” he insisted, his gaze firmly anchored in hers.

“I’m completely sure, yes.” She held his stare and smiled slightly.

Nicolas scrutinized her for a few seconds.

“Very well!” He smiled wildly. “So, I don’t need to call her to ask if everything’s OK?” he asked teasingly.

“Look... When I left her a little while ago, she was perfectly fine. But if you want to make sure, be my guest! We still have five minutes before we go down to the water.”

“I’m thinking about it! Might be traumatic for her!”

“You idiot!” she said, ironically, before slapping him on the shoulder.

Nicolas burst out laughing and grabbed his telephone.

\*\*\*

“...”

“So? I asked you a question.”

“In the bedroom there, in the back.”

“And your girlfriend, where does she sleep?”

“On the sofa, it can fold out as a bed.”

Denis looked carefully at the living room, devoid of any bedding.



“She didn’t sleep there last night?”

“Yes, she did... But she had to tidy before leaving to get breakfast. As a matter of fact, she should be back here soon...”

“Your girlfriend is at the beach with your brother right now and she’s not coming back anytime soon. Nice try!”

“What? No. No...”

Denis advanced dangerously close to Emma.

“Shut up!” he spat at her. “You’re lying through your teeth! Show me the bedroom!”

“Den...”

He grabbed her hair with his powerful hand, shutting her up instantly.

“I said, shut the hell up! You really want to mess with me? Go ahead and show me the damn bedroom!”

With tears in her eyes, Emma complied, totally helpless against her husband. If he ever figured out what had happened in that bedroom the previous night, she wouldn’t rate her chances of survival highly.

He pushed her roughly through the doorstep, and she almost fell to the ground.

“Sit.”

Emma obeyed and sat down at the end of the bed, distressed about what would happen. Her cell phone suddenly began to ring in the living room. She tensed and looked at her husband. He encompassed the room in a hateful glare. Emma wanted to reach for her phone, but she didn’t dare make a move. Denis was standing right next to her, and it would be very easy for him to catch her. To her dismay, the ringing stopped. Two nightstands surrounded the bed. Denis approached the one on the right-hand side and, snarling, poured its contents on the unmade bed.

“You, on the other hand, it looks like you didn’t make your bed!”

“...”

“So, you’ve got nothing to say?”

“I’d just gotten up when you arrived. I didn’t have time yet.”

Denis walked past her and went to the left side of the bed. He looked at the various objects that adorned the nightstand: a bedside lamp shaped like a surfboard, an alarm clock, and a photo of the ocean shining brightly under the sun. He swept them away with his hand, sending them all over the floor. Emma had followed his progress out of the corner of her eye. She saw him stop dead in his tracks, staring at the ground. He bent down to pick up Alex’s red lace bra and held it up with his fingertips, staring at his wife.

“She forgot to put that away, obviously, didn’t she?”

The ringing of the cell phone echoed through the house once again. Emma seized her chance, dashed to the door, and threw the garment rack across the corridor.

“You fucking slut! You’ll regret this!” Denis cried, mad with rage, and launched himself after her.

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“She’s not answering,” Nicolas said, surprised.

“When I left, she was sleeping. She might still.”

“Well, my sister never used to rise late, or that’s how I remember it, so what did you do to make that happen?”

Alex laughed at the retort, so typically male. If he only knew!

“Nothing she didn’t like, don’t worry! And I won’t say anything else!”

“Oh, come on, she’s my sister, I still have a right to know.”

“Yeah, right! Dream on!”

“Hmph... You’re not funny, seriously.”

“And you have the mental age of an eight-year-old kid! Speaking of which, while we’re on the subject, maybe we should move them a bit.”

“Yes, let me try again.”

He typed on his screen and waited, one ring, two... Finally, she picked up.

“Hey, little sister, awake at last?”

A thud answered, followed by a terrifying scream, then nothing.

Nicolas jumped up from his stool, which fell with a crash to the ground.

“Alex!” he shouted.

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Emma had barely time to pick up her phone and knock over the bar stool to block the path behind her. Denis’s hand grabbed her hair and stopped her in her tracks. She screamed under the sharp pain piercing her and dropped her lifeline.

Denis was pulling so strongly that she had to kneel. He harshly crushed the telephone under his heel, scattering it in a thousand pieces across the room. He turned a murderous gaze on Emma and slapped her to the ground.

“You want to play, bitch! Let’s play!”

Emma was holding her cheek as he grabbed her hair again.

“Get up!”

Emma cried out terrified. But something inside her pushed her to react. He would kill her, she was sure of it. She quickly assessed her meager options before slowly standing up, shaking with sobs.

“Stop blubbering!” Denis shouted, still holding her by her hair.

He forced her to stand in front of him, her head tilted back under the pull of his hand. He was overpowering her.

“Stop right now! You disgust me! When I think of what you’ve done, I want to puke! My wife! My own wife, fucked by another woman, and I haven’t been able to touch her for months!”

Emma watched as rage and hatred poured out of her husband. She forced herself to hold back her sobs. She hurt like hell with her head pulled backward. Yet she stubbornly kept her eyes open and stared at him. She made a decision in a flash.

“What are you going to do now?” she said to him defiantly. “Break everything? Go ahead, break everything!”

Surprised, Denis kept silent and seemed to assimilate his wife’s words. He looked around the room.

“So what?” Emma taunted him. “You wanted to destroy everything, and now you’re wavering? You hit me, but you can’t destroy everything in this damn place!”

“Shut the fuck up! What the fuck are you playing at?”

“What? Don’t you want to? Look around you. I love this place, I feel at home here.”

With a sharp movement, he propelled toward the closed half of the bay window, in the living room. He squashed her cheek on the glass and got closer to her face.

“What are you doing?” He growled threateningly, “You want to make me mad? My God, you’re crazy. You’ll regret this! Don’t you dare move from here!”

Denis turned around, furious, and hurled the living room coffee table, with everything on it flying across the room. He was venting his rage on the television when he realized that Emma had disappeared.

“What? I’ll fucking kill her!”



## Chapter 9

As soon as her husband turned to ransack the living room, Emma burst through the French window and started to run barefoot on the still cold, wet sand. The only alternative she could think of was the ocean. It was her only mean of escape, even though some people considered it a dark and ominous mass. As Denis could hardly swim, he'd never venture there. The question was, could she get there before he caught up with her? She stared at her goal without turning around, the slightest second crucial to her escape. Denis was running faster than her despite her head start. She certainly had an advantage regarding the environment as she was used to running in the sand and she was definitely in better physical shape. But she was well aware that her husband's strength was increased tenfold by the rage thundering inside him. She felt him behind her, close by and chasing her. So, she ran at full speed, breathlessly, toward the ocean, hoping it would save her life.

\*\*\*

Alex reacted immediately to Nicolas's shout. She left everything in a hurry to rush toward her car. She started it with trembling hands; the engine roared and she took off with a screech of tires. *No, no, no... Please, not that, no!* Nicolas couldn't hold her back. As he stayed behind, he hastened to give instructions to one of his friends, who was attending the session, apologized to the children and parents still present and jumped in his car.

Alex arrived in front of her house and stopped in a cloud of dust. She ran to the front door and opened it violently.

“Emma!”

Her frightened gaze fell on her living room, its coffee table overturned, her stuff scattered about, her television screen cracked. She went into the bedroom and saw it was in the same state.

“Emma!” she shouted.

She looked around, quickly checking every nook and cranny, but she could find no evidence of Emma.

She went to the bay window to go to the terrace, always searching for the slightest clue that could give her an answer. Suddenly she saw them: two figures at the water’s edge, one on the ground and the other towering over it.

Alex hurried and ran as fast as she could. The closer she saw them, the more her rage grew. Too busy shouting insults to his wife’s face, Denis noticed her only when she was on him. Alex crashed into him with all her might and threw him to the ground one meter away. Alex felt a violent pain when she hurled herself against him but she disregarded it, lost in her fury. She stood up at once to step between Denis and his wife.

“Do not touch her!”

Denis hadn’t expected this charge. He got up, a bit stunned, before glowering at Alex and advancing toward her, his fist curled.

“And you think you’re gonna stop me?” He spat, full of hate. “Is this a joke?”

“Do you see anyone else here? Come on! Come and show me how strong you are! Oh no, I’m stupid, you only hit your wife, right? Is that it?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll find out soon enough,” He shouted as he raised his right arm and brought it down toward his opponent’s face.

Her feet solidly anchored in the ground, Alex protected herself with her upper limbs and managed to parry his powerful blow. She kicked him on the outside of his knee, and he fell down at once shouting in pain. Decided to finish with him, she took his head between her forearms and struck his face violently with her knee. Denis collapsed backward on the sand.

Alex turned to Emma, who was still lying down, and fell to her knees. The young woman looked up with tears in her eyes. Her puffy, purple face made Alex want to vomit and she didn't dare touch her.

"Honey? Are you OK?"

Emma threw herself into her arms. Alex held her tightly for a moment then stepped aside to examine her.

"I tried to get to the water," Emma replied, still sobbing, "but I didn't have time... I was almost there... He..."

"Shh! Calm down, it's over," Alex said and tightened her hold on her. "Calm down, all right? I'm here."

"Yes... Don't let go of me, please. I was so scared!"

"I've got you, sweetheart... I'm here."

Alex let Emma cry against her then pulled away to look once more at her face. Shattered, she lifted a trembling hand to Emma's cheek and placed her fingertips gently on it.

"Are you in pain?"

"Yes, my cheekbone is throbbing terribly."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. You don't have to feel sorry."

"If... I promised you he wouldn't touch you again. I'm so sorry."

"Don't talk nonsense. Neither you, nor I, nor anyone else can control everything and you know it."

"Does it hurt anywhere else?"



“Yes, horribly... In my head. I feel like my hair has been pulled out... I was so scared. It came out of nowhere, I wasn't expecting it... God, Alex, I was so scared!”

“I know sweetie, I know.”

“He figured out about us. He went into a rage, I thought he'd kill me. I was alone, terrorized, I saw no alternative.”

“I feel terrible if you only knew! I should never have left you. How did you manage to answer the phone?”

“I had one chance, I rushed to it. If you hadn't taken action, I ... He... My God! I was so scared!”

“I'm here now, Emma. It's over, OK? We'll call the police. He's gone too far now, we can't do anything else.”

“Right, I don't want to see him anymore! He makes me sick!”

“Don't worry, we'll take care of it. I'll go with you and we'll do whatever it takes to make sure he never comes near you again. Can you stand up?”

“I think so.”

Alex stood up and held out her hand to Emma, inviting her to do the same.

“My phone is in the car, come on. Nico will be here any minute...”

A sudden, piercing scream echoed in the ears of the two young women. Surprised, Alex turned to the frightening sound that was coming from the house and became fully aware of its meaning. A cold chill ran through her as she felt an iron grip on her.

\*\*\*

Nicolas entered Alex's house quickly. He called his childhood friend several times unsuccessfully and went through each room before realizing that there was no one there. Horrified,

he crossed the messy living room and headed to the terrace to check it as carefully.

“Alex! Fucking answer me!”

But all he heard was silence. Nicolas looked into the distance and stopped dead in his tracks. He could clearly see a figure leaning over another on the ground and... He squinted to better identify the shape. A third one was joining them. Its gait seemed laborious, but soon it would be upon them.

Nicolas opened his eyes wide with fear as he realized.

“Alex! Behind you!” He shouted, hoping against all hope that it would be enough.

Then he ran, looking at the third form that was inexorably getting closer to the other two.

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Alex was brutally pulled back and partly turned around. A violent punch hit her in the stomach and lifted her off the ground. A searing pain crushed her abdomen. Emma screamed terrified. A hard slap threw her back to the ground where she collapsed in tears.

“Go ahead and cry while you can! I’m not done with you. I’ll make you regret what you did to me, don’t worry. But first, I’m gonna take care of your girlfriend. That bitch hurt me like hell!”

Alex doubled over. Denis gripped her at the shoulder with his left hand to straighten her up. He rummaged in his pocket, took out a switchblade and pressed the button to open the blade.

“You wanted to break my joint, didn’t you? That’s for you, bitch... Go play sports after this!”

Alex couldn’t avoid the knife that perforated her belly nor the kick that crushed her knee with a tremendous strength. She felt

a spike of intense pain run through her as she heard her knee crunch loudly. Blackness overcame her immediately afterwards, and she collapsed in the sand.

\*\*\*

Nicolas shouted and threw himself at Denis. The two men rolled on the ground and got up. Denis faced him, with wild eyes and a predatory smile on his lips. They circled for a moment, challenging each other and waiting for the other to make the first move. Nicolas wanted to take advantage of his brother-in-law's obvious difficulty and to jump on him. But Denis, acting surprisingly fast, slightly slashed his arm with his blade. Nicolas seized Denis's wrist and clenched it so forcefully that his knife slipped from his hand. At the same time, he punched his face, and without giving him time to react, kept hitting him in the face and in the stomach until Denis collapsed in the sand. Deaf to all that surrounded him, Nicolas, enraged, straddled the inert body and hit it tirelessly. This guy whom he had hated for so long had just beaten his sister and stabbed his childhood friend in front of his eyes! He felt sick thinking of it. Damn! Nicolas was suddenly aware of his thoughts and stopped abruptly. He looked at the man lying under him, not moving anymore, his face swollen and bleeding. The surrounding noises came crashing on him. The wind... The waves... The sobs? Emma! Nicolas looked around and found her at Alex's side, her bloody hands pressing on her abdominal wound. He quickly got to his feet, retrieved his bag from the ground next to Emma, and took his phone to call emergency services.

“EMS, good morning.”

“Hello. Please, I need help urgently. My friend has been stabbed in the stomach.”

“All right. Give me the address, sir. I'll send an ambulance immediately.”

Nicolas complied and the operator put him through to a doctor who advised on the next steps.

Nicolas went over to his sister and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Emma, please... Raise her head and put it on your lap. I’ll put pressure on her. Hold the phone for me, I have the doctor on the line.”

Nicolas took off his T-shirt, rolled it into a ball, and pressed it on the wound.

“It’s done, Doctor. Yes, very well, we’ll wait for help. Doctor? My sister is also injured, she was beaten by her husband. He is unconscious. I hit him several times.”

Two ambulances arrived very swiftly, followed closely by the police.

A team worked on Alex who was promptly transported to the nearest hospital. According to the paramedics, her condition was alarming, and she required immediate attention. Emma insisted on being with her. The ambulance driver allowed her inside, as she also needed to be treated, and left in a hurry. The other vehicle followed quickly, carrying Denis. Nicolas remained at the scene to answer the police officers’ questions and was asked to go to the station with his sister as soon as possible to give their statements.

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Sitting on the terrace with a hot cup of tea in her hands, Emma was blowing softly on her beverage, her eyes unfocused. Three months had just passed, three long, trying months full of colliding fear, pain, and tears. Denis was taken into custody and incarcerated as soon as he left the hospital. Emma filed a complaint the day after the assault and told the police about the abuse she had been subjected to in the previous months, with photos to back up her complaint. Nicolas accompanied her and supported her through the ordeal. Both spent long and

anxious hours in the hospital lobby, waiting for news about Alex. Heavily injured, the young woman was taken to the operating room immediately. The doctor informed them that her life was at risk and that surgery was necessary. Emma could hardly bear the long wait until the surgeon appeared before them, looking tired and closed. When she saw him, fear gripped her, tears ready to burst.

“Emma?”

The young woman jumped and shook her head to get out of the memory that invaded her nights and most often ended in a nightmare. She got up quickly, crossed the living room, and entered the room.

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Can you help me, please?”

Emma walked over to Alex, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, and held out her hands.

“Yes, of course! Put your arm around me and I’ll walk you over.”

Emma helped her up, and they walked to the crutches. Emma realized that they were too far away for Alex to reach on her own, and blamed herself at once for not thinking of bringing them nearer. Alex grabbed one of them and headed for the terrace.

She’d been discharged from the hospital the previous day although she was still in need of treatment. Miraculously, her vital organs had been spared. Two centimeters closer and the stab wound would have been fatal. Her knee, however, was severely damaged. It took six weeks after the accident for it to deflate and allow the health professional to perform reconstructive surgery on the broken ligament. Alex had a long rehabilitation period ahead of her, and her spirits were low. Nicolas and Emma had done everything they could to get her out of the hospital and back into her environment. Emma committed to taking care of her day and night, driving her to

physical therapy sessions. They argued that Alex would recover much faster at home, and begged the doctor, who finally agreed under strict conditions.

“Do you want a cup of coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

Emma carried out her task and returned with a tray.

“Here, have something to eat. Did you sleep?”

“Yes, I did. I woke a few times, but overall, I slept better than in the hospital.”

“Good. You’ll sleep better and better, you’ll see. I’ll take care of you and soon you’ll be walking normally again.”

Alex glanced toward the horizon, her face closed.

“Alex? Look at me.”

After a moment, Alex turned her head to Emma.

They stared at each other for a long time, then Emma smiled and spoke again.

“You saved my life, Alex. Without you, I wouldn’t be here. Without you, I wouldn’t have gotten my life back so quickly. Without you, I wouldn’t have felt the way I did. I love you, Alex. I love you so much, if you only knew. I can’t imagine my life without you. With a little patience and a lot of hard work, you’ll walk normally again and all the while I’ll be by your side to help you like you helped me. Tell me that’s what you want too.”

“It’s what I want too, Emma,” said Alex, who immediately looked down. “But...”

“But what? Look at me. Do you love me?”

“Yes, I love you, you know that.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t want to be a burden to you. I’ll need months to get my leg back, if I ever get it back. I don’t want you to feel you have to take care of me because I saved your life, as you say.”

“Nonsense! You didn’t listen to a word I said, did you?” Emma said, angry. “You deserve a slap in the face for what you just told me! And if you weren’t already disabled, I’d slap you right now!”

Alex couldn’t help but smile at Emma’s anger.

“That makes you laugh? Really, that’s the dumbest thing I’ve heard in my life!”

Emma stood up toward the railing and turned her back on her companion. She didn’t move to help her when she saw her straighten up.

“I’m sorry,” Alex whispered. “I’m a fool.”

“Yes, you are.”

“What I said is stupid.”

“Totally!”

“Yes, but... Do you love me?”

Emma’s anger faded when she heard Alex’s soft tone and she slowly turned around.

“If you’d listened to me earlier,” she said, her eyes locked on Alex’s, “you wouldn’t be asking me this question.”

“Say it again.”

“I love you as I’ve never loved anyone else before.”

“So, I want you to move in with me permanently in this house.”

“OK,” Emma said quickly.

“I’d like us to remodel it together so that we both feel comfortable.”

“Yes, all right.”

“I want it to be yours too.”

“Yes,” Emma whispered, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I love you, Emma.”

“I love you too, sweetie ... so much.”

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# Epilogue

Alex was on the phone when Emma came home from work. Emma had spent four months caring for Alex. Together, they overcame the trauma. Emma quit her old job, and they moved in together permanently. Nicolas, with Alex's consent, offered his sister a position at their company to help with the day-to-day running of the business. Emma accepted immediately, excited about the opportunity to stay with her brother.

Alex worked very hard on her rehabilitation. She was now walking without assistance. She still had some discomfort and not much stamina, but her efforts were paying off and she relentlessly continued her physical therapy.

Emma kissed her on the forehead just before she hung up.

"We're invited to dinner tonight at H  l  ne and Sylvie's.

"Ah, good. H  l  ne is your childhood friend?"

"Yes, and Sylvie is her partner. Um, then I'd like to introduce you to someone."

"Really? Who?"

"You'll see, it's a surprise."

"All right. What time are we expected?"

"Around seven, not later, and we've got a thirty-minute drive."

"OK. I'll run off to the shower."

"Hold on a second, will you?" Alex asked, and caught her before she turned around. "Come here."

"We'll be late!"

“Not at all, I’ll just be a minute,” said Alex, who eagerly took Emma’s lips. “I’ve been waiting for it my whole afternoon,” she murmured against her lips. “Hi... I missed you.”

Emma smiled and slowly opened her eyes again.

“Hi... Show me again how you missed me, I didn’t quite understand.”

“We’re running out of time, honey.”

“We’ve got one more second... Right?”

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Hélène and Sylvie greeted them warmly. Alex hadn’t met them in a while. Despite frequent phone calls from Hélène to check on her, Alex refused to allow them to visit her at the hospital.

“It’s so good to see you up and about. Are you feeling much better?”

“Yes, I do feel better. Emma took good care of me.”

Hélène walked over to Emma and hugged her.

“I’m so pleased to finally meet you. Thank you for taking care of her.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too.” Emma said, hugging back.

Alex walked over to Sylvie who was cradling a little girl against her. She gave the young woman a kiss and held out her arms.

“Wow, you’re all grown up, now! Come give Auntie Alex a cuddle!”

Alex hugged her tightly and kissed her face and neck as the little girl laughed out loudly.

Emma didn’t miss a moment of this touching scene and smiled broadly when Alex turned to her.

“Emma, this is Lola, my goddaughter.”

Emma leaned over and gave the child a kiss.

“She’s so sweet,” she said, in a voice full of emotion.

The couple invited them to make themselves comfortable and offered them a drink. After a while, when most of the discussion and attention was focused on the little girl, H el ene turned to Alex.

“It’s time to put her to bed. Do you want to do it?”

“Yes, I’d love to. I’ll do it now.”

“Do you want me to carry her?”

“No, thank you, I’ll manage.”

As soon as she left the lounge, H el ene turned to Emma.

“She seems to be in much better spirits.”

“Yes, she’s had a hard time, but her efforts are paying off and soon it will be a thing of the past.”

“I’m so happy to see her like this. Let me tell you, I was really scared. You did a great job.”

“I didn’t do anything special. I was just there with her to support her and love her like she deserved.”

“Do you want kids, Emma?”

Stunned, Emma turned to Sylvie and looked at her for a moment, not knowing how to answer such a direct question.

“Sorry, did I embarrass you?”

“No... No, no need to apologize. No harm done. You surprised me, that’s all. The answer is yes... Yes, I’d like to be able to enjoy such happiness one day.”

Sylvie turned to her wife, a slight smile on her lips.

“You should go and join her.” H el ene said. “Bedtime is Alex’s favorite time. I’m sure she’d love to have you there. It’s the second door on the right in the hallway.”

Emma looked at each of them in turn, not sure she’d fully understood the subliminal message hidden beneath their smiles

and knowing looks. She stood up.

“All right. I’ll go.”

“We’ll wait for you.”

Emma entered the room, which was lit by a nightlight. Alex was leaning over a white wooden bed. She held one of her goddaughter’s small hands and stroked it tenderly with her thumb.

Emma settled herself behind Alex’s back and wrapped her arms around her.

“She has grown so much already, it’s amazing.”

They watched the little girl sleep for a while without saying a word, sharing this out-of-time moment. Emma tightened her grip. Alex put her hand on hers, pressing down on it, and broke the silence.

“I’d like to have a child someday, to see them laugh and cry, to teach them to surf without them disappearing after the session. I’d like to be there for them every moment of their life...”

“Would you want to carry them?”

“To be perfectly honest, I don’t intend to. No.”

A silence greeted this revelation. Emma leaned a little bit more against Alex.

“Nothing in the world would make me happier than to carry our child, sweetheart,” she whispered in her ear.

Alex slowly turned around. With tears in their eyes, they hugged and smiled at each other.

The end

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Finally, to conclude, thank you for reading my work. I hope you enjoyed this story and you will like the next ones...

Ada Karlyne

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# Biography

Drawn to writing at an early age, Ada Karlyne exorcises her sorrows, disappointments, and demons by putting down words on paper. They quickly become small texts that are best described as poetic. Everything that deeply touches her can be found on numerous sheets of paper that are carefully kept out of sight.

She has a scientific background geared toward management and business administration. Reading took a belated but important place in her life. A great reader of romance, bit-lit, post-apocalyptic zombie and fantasy, she turned to LGBT literature and followed its emergence and rise in power over the years, bringing out her literary side very strongly.

One day, her feverish imagination and a deep love for the ocean took her on a journey. The result was “Emma”, her first romance in the “New Horizon” collection, which she chose to self-publish.

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# Bibliography

The “New Horizon” collection evokes love between women and gathers several short novels that can be read independently of each other. Each story has sensitive, sometimes hard topics as a common thread, where the heroines fight in their own way to regain possession of their lives.

“Emma” is my first title. It depicts the harsh subject of domestic violence.

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You enjoyed “Emma”. Tell me in a private message! Or post a comment with stars!

A comment posted on a retail site is comforting and will prompt others to read the novel.

Self-publishing is a complex and difficult undertaking. Help me to promote this story.

To all of you who are here, THANK YOU.

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[1] Specific place with noteworthy waves.

[2] An area in the water, just outside of the breaking waves, where surfers are waiting to get started.

[3] Getting under a breaking wave coming in front.

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