

Dependable



A.M. Berg

Dependable

By A. M. Berg

*For Sonja, who encourages, supports, and inspires
me.*

Copyright © 2016 by A.M.Berg.

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any
form without permission in writing from the author.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to people, both fictional and living, is
purely coincidental.

Chapter 1

"I'm home," I called out, shrugging my backpack off and setting it down by the door.

"The prodigal sister returns!" Ben, my brother, crowed from the kitchen.

"Ha,ha, you're so funny," I shot back with a smile as I walked to the counter he was leaning against, hopping up beside him and tugging his shaggy bangs before shoving him out of the way to grab an apple out of the fruit bowl. "You need a haircut."

"I'm growing it out, for your information," he said, his lazy drawl making his sentence longer than it needed to be.

"Well don't," I said, taking a bite of my apple. "You kind of look like a creeper, especially with that mustache."

"Don't be talking about the 'stache like that," Ben said, stroking the facial hair in question.

Rolling my eyes, I moved on from my brother and his offended mustache. "I take it someone thinks I'm spending too much time at Lexi's?" I said, taking another bite.

Ben shrugged as he flipped through the mail. "Not really, I understand that you don't want to be here." He cast a meaningful look down the hall, before turning to me again.

Avoiding his eyes, I shrugged as I continued to munch on my snack. "What's that?" I asked, as Ben had pulled an official looking envelope out of the pile.

"It's addressed to mom. I think it might be the alimony check." With another look down the hall, Ben carefully slid his finger under the flap and tore the letter open. "Yeah... Dad actually sent money this month."

"Well that's nice of him. He usually doesn't choose to acknowledge his first family."

Ben raised his eyebrow at me, but chose not to comment. "It's enough to cover the rest of your dance classes for the year," he said off-handedly.

"I don't need it. Kay and I have an arrangement, remember?"

"Yeah, I know. I just don't like taking charity."

"It's not charity, I'm teaching a few classes after school. It's an honest job."

"That she only gave you because you couldn't afford her classes anymore."

"I'd like to think that it's because of my God-given talent, thank you," I said, adding with a bat of my eyes and letting my accent thicken, "And a good dose of New Orleans's charm. Use the check for Tay's tuition... or yours."

"I don't need it."

"But I thought you had to pay for this quarter before next Friday?"

"Not anymore," he said, refusing to meet my eyes.

"How come?"

"I dropped my classes," he said, shrugging.

"What?" I said, staring at my brother in disbelief. "But you've wanted this since middle school! It's all you ever talk about."

"We couldn't afford it," Ben shrugged. "Plus, since my schedule freed up, I can pick up more hours at the café, and find another job."

"But Ben," I protested, but he cut me off.

"Don't but Ben me Sybil. You and Taylor are still in school, so it's up to me."

"Mom could get a job."

"You and I both know that's not going to happen. Mom hasn't moved from her room since the divorce was finalized. It's fine Sybby," he said softly, cupping my chin and bringing my eyes up to his. "I can learn tons of stuff at Angela's—she's offered me a cooking position, which comes with a raise, so I don't need to go to some fancy culinary school."

He smiled at me, and I offered him a weak smile back. Then, our tender moment was interrupted by the hurricane that was my youngest brother.

"I'm starving," he announced, loosening his tie as he barged between me and Ben on his way to the fridge, pulling out a can of soda and popping it open before tilting his head and chugging most of the contents down in three gulps.

"Tay, you're disgusting," I said as he belched, running his sleeve against his mouth as he started to dig through the pantry. "And just what are you looking for?"

"My doughnuts... I know I had one left. Sybby, did you eat it?"

"Does this body *look* like it eats doughnuts?" I demanded.

Rolling his eyes, Taylor continued his search, emerging triumphantly with a box. "Found it!"

"Don't you want to eat dinner first?" Ben asked, smiling wryly.

Taylor looked at him with a confused look. "This is dinner."

"Like hell it is," Ben said, swiping the box away from Taylor. "Go do your homework, and I'll make you something that contains some more of the food groups before I go to work."

Grumbling, Taylor shuffled out of the kitchen. Ben and I shared amused looks, then I heard a buzzing coming from the counter where I had placed my phone. Swiping at the screen, I found that I had five unread text messages, all from Lexi. With a sigh, I opened them, shaking my head as I began to read.

"What has Lexi done now?" Ben asked with an amused smile.

"I have no idea...she wants me to meet her at the Garage... she's at some battle of the bands thing. Is that okay?" I asked, hopping down from the counter to throw away my apple core.

"You get your homework done?"

"I'll do it tomorrow after my class," I said, grinning hopefully up at him.

"Go," he said, smiling fondly at me while shaking his head. "Save Lexi from whatever dramatic situation she got herself into."

"I'll text you if I'm going to be out too late," I said, giving him a hug before heading to my room, shrugging off my uniform blazer as I went. I hung it up, the plaid skirt that went along with the blazer following suit, and with a grateful sigh, I pulled on a far more comfortable pair of leggings and a tank top, then throwing on my favorite grey cardigan. I slipped into a pair of flats and grabbed my purse, straightening my bedspread before heading towards the hall. Ben was walking down to his room, and I stopped him. "Use it for Tay's tuition okay?" I whispered, brushing his cheek with a kiss.

He shook his head at me, but his smile told me that he would, and I smiled back before heading out the door.

Chapter 2

I wrinkled my nose as I walked through the doors of The Garage, offended as always by the smell of sour beer, sweat, and too much cologne that seemed to permeate the building. Why Lexi liked it here, I would never understand. But she was into all this, the punk music and style—or at least, she had been for the last two years or so. She'd been into a lot of things these past few years.

Pushing my way through the crowd of people already amassed, I made my way to the girl's bathroom, swinging the door open to find my best friend standing in front of a mirror, threading a hoop through her lip.

"*Mon Dieu*, it stinks in here," I exclaimed, waving my hand in front of my nose, hoping to ward off the old urine and I didn't-even-want-to-think-about-what-else stench as I went to stand by Lexi, watching in fascinated revulsion as she carefully picked up a small silver hoop before pushing it through her nose. "I will never understand how you do that, or why."

She shrugged. "I like them," she said, tightening the ring before bending down to rummage through her backpack, emerging with an eyeliner pencil.

"So why were you still at school anyways?" I asked, leaning against the sink.

"Our far-too-friendly guidance counselor Mrs. Murphy cornered me after auditions to make sure I knew that her door was always open if I ever I wanted to talk," Lexi said, pitching her voice three octaves higher as she made air quotations, tilting her head and mimicking the concerned face Mrs. Murphy always pulled around worrisome students before turning back to the mirror and applying thick black eyeliner around her blue eyes. "Fuck her."

"It could help," I said, shrugging.

"I'm fine, I just want people to leave me the fuck alone," Lexi muttered, running her finger under her eyes before capping the pencil and tossing it back into her bag.

"Mmmhhmmm," I muttered under my breath before exclaiming, "*Mon Dieu*, Alexys, what are you doing?"

"Changing," she said, bent over with one leg in a pair of jeans.

"This is a public restroom!" I squawked, running over to block the door.

"It's the girls room, anyone who comes in here has the same bits I do," Lexi said, rolling her eyes as she squirmed into her jeans.

Once she had fastened the skintight pants, she retrieved a baggy band tee I had never seen before from her backpack and tucked it between her legs. Then, she pulled off the white t-

shirt she had worn to school, revealing her belly button, and the silver barbell that was now hanging from it, the skin around it still red and irritated.

“When did that happen?” I asked, pointing to the piece of jewelry.

She shrugged. “Last night I think. I really don’t know, I woke up with it.”

“Oh my Lord, Alexys Marie Ried. You can’t just let random people at parties pierce you!” I scolded. “What am I going to do with you?”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Lexi said, rolling her eyes and pulling the hair-tie out of her ponytail and shaking out her thick, wavy black hair.

Sighing, I rubbed my temples as I watched my best friend fiddle with her hair. “Can I have your hair-tie?” I asked, and she nodded, rolling it off of her wrist and handing it to me. “Thanks.”

Gathering my mass of curls in one hand, I corralled them into a bun on top of my head with an expert twist of my wrist before fastening it. “I don’t think so,” I muttered when a strand of hair sprung loose, tucking it back with the rest. I cast an envious glance at Lexi, who despite all her fiddling, didn’t have to do all that much with her hair.

Just then, a scream of feedback echoed through the building, causing me to jump and clap my hands over my ears.

Cursing, Lexi shoved her uniform into her pack—where it would probably stay until tomorrow morning, and swung it onto her back. “C’mon, I don’t want to miss Kris’s band!”

“Yeah, that would be a shame,” I muttered under my breath, following her out the door.

Even more people had crammed themselves into the building, and Lexi began to push her way through the crowd.

“Lexi, wait up!” I yelled, hoping she heard me over the screaming guitars and pounding bass coming from the four guys on stage as I attempted to follow her through the crowd—something that was easier said than done.

“C’mon Syb!” Lexi said, pausing and rolling her eyes.

“Easy for you to say miss legs-up-to-her-ears,” I retorted, pushing away some mosher that had gotten a little carried away with his head-banging. “What’s the hurry anyways?”

“I want to get to the stage before Kris goes on. I want to make sure he sees that I made it.”

“Is *that* what the whole fight was about?” I asked, referencing the long text I had received earlier.

"In part," she said, glancing at the stage to avoid my eyes. "His bands on next, c'mon!"

She started to move again, and I rubbed my temples before poking out my elbows and following her. *The things I do for this girl*, I thought, ducking under a flailing arm.

And it was true. We'd been friends since elementary school, when a sullen nine-year old me had moved to Seattle from New Orleans because of some things that had happened with my dad. Our dads were in the same precinct, so I think Lexi's mom must have told her about me, because on my first day at Saint Anne's, she came striding up to me and announced that we were going to be friends, taking me by the hand and pulling me after her.

That was a common theme in our friendship. I was cautious and a little too scared to try anything new. Lexi on the other hand was up for anything, and she often dragged me along in her escapades, mainly I think so I could keep her from killing herself. We've been through everything together; braces, bad haircuts, and heavier things—my dad walking out, her mom's affair and divorce... and the other thing. I'd do anything for her; even follow her through a crowd of smelly alt-kids so she could make up with her current boy toy.

I honestly didn't know what she saw in Kris, but she had met him at some party this summer, and for the last two months, all she talked about was how he was an older guy, a junior in college, not like those dumb high school boys, and a musician to boot. I just rolled my eyes whenever she talked about him, because what she doesn't mention is that they're constantly arguing, and were off more often than they were on. Speaking of which...

"What does 'in part' mean?" I asked Lexi once we had reached the right of the stage, amidst cheers as four guys shuffled on. I recognized Kris, so assumed that this was *the band* he was always talking about.

"It was nothing," Lexi yelled, jumping up and down to catch Kris's attention.

"Mmmhmm," I muttered under my breath, waiting until she had stopped bouncing having gotten a head nod and maybe smile from Kris before asking, "Lex, what did you do?" giving her my best scolding look.

Lexi played with the hoop in her lip before sighing and muttering into my ear, "He says I keep flirting with the lead singer, Luke."

I turned to look, and my jaw dropped open. "Alexys Marie Ried, is that who I think it is?" I demanded, turning to her and seeing the tell-tale blush flood my friend's cheeks. "Oh my LORD, Lex. Does Kris know?"

"No, and I'd like to keep it that way," she muttered, and I shook my head.

"The lack of shame you have sometimes is astounding," I said, turning to face the band again.

“He introduced me to Kris!” Lexi exclaimed, throwing up her hands as Luke adjusted the mike and introduced the band.

The following cheers made it impossible for me to answer, but it was all making sense now. Luke had been one of the most popular kids when Lexi and I had started high school, and he and Lexi had dated for a while. He’d dumped her for a boy he’d met in one of his college classes, but he and Lexi had stayed friends, and it was his parties she went to, saying they were safer than most.

Seeing Kris next to Luke was interesting, as I had always thought that it was weird that he and Lexi were together—Lex tended to go for slender, pretty alt boys, and Kris...didn’t really fit that bill. He was slender, I’d give him that, but he was also insanely tall, with long limbs that he didn’t seem to really know how to control. I would admit though, there was something about his intense brown eyes and sharp jawline... *Maybe if he smiled more, he’d be prettier* I thought, watching as his long fingers plucked the strings of his bass.

This was the first time I was hearing Kris’s band, and I had to say, they were good. The song was a good tempo, upbeat enough to get the crowd moving, but not so noisy that I felt like my head was going to explode. There was also no screaming, thank god, and Luke was actually a really good singer—something I had never known about him. Kris still looked like he was getting a root canal, but watching his fingers fly over his bass was really impressive. Then my eyes flickered over to the drum kit, and I couldn’t stop myself from blatantly checking out the drummer. I got onto my tiptoes, trying to get a better look, but it was near impossible to see anything other than well-toned arms flying over the drums and inky dreads bobbing along with the beat. The song finished with one last belted word from Luke, then the band left the stage and stage hands appeared to set up for the next band. I turned to ask Lexi who was going on next, just in time to see her disappear through the crowd.

“Lexi, wait up!” I cried, rushing after her. “Where are you going?”

“Backstage,” she said, ducking through a door marked **STAFF ONLY**.

“Lex, we’re not supposed to be back here,” I hissed, but she waved a hand at me.

“I come back here all the time. I just need to talk to Kris for a minute,” she said, darting off towards the group of boys and pulling Kris aside.

With a sigh, I looked around and found a speaker to perch on, absentmindedly stretching out my leg as I watched Lexi talk to Kris, arms waving. I almost felt bad for the guy, Lex could be a lawyer for how well she could plead her case. I lifted my leg up to my forehead, wincing as I felt my quad stretch, but it was the best kind of pain.

“How the hell are you doing that?” a deep voice asked, and I jumped, my foot falling to the floor with a thump, my gaze snapping up.

Oh mon Dieu was all I could think when I found myself looking into the most brilliant pair of emerald green eyes I had ever seen. After a moment, I realized that he was the drummer from Kris's band, and he was ever better looking up close. He leaned against the speaker next to mine, giving me a nice view of his long body, clad in baggy jeans, motorcycle boots, and a black tank top that showed off the intricate tattoos that decorated one arm. But it was his eyes that kept catching my attention, the way his latte-colored skin contrasted with them, and how his hooded eyelids made him look sleepy, despite the smile on his face. Realizing I was staring, I stretched out my other leg and studied the toe of my shoe while I said, "Years of dance classes."

"That's cool," he said, a grin spreading across his face. "Do you do ballet or the hip-hoppy stuff?"

"I focus on contemporary...but I like the hip-hoppy stuff too," I said, smiling back at him.

"What's contemporary?"

"It's like ballet, but less...this," I said, getting up to demonstrate my best ballet pose, back erect, arm above my head, and a sour look on my face.

He laughed, not a polite, 'this girl is kind of funny laugh', but a full belly one, head tipped back and one hand on his stomach. "That's totally what they look like," he said once he caught his breath. "Although, you could pull off that pissed off look better than any ballerina I've ever seen."

Taken aback, I felt my cheeks flush, and I wrapped my cardigan around my body tightly.

"Oh my god Desmond Park, I leave you alone with Sybil for like five seconds..." Lexi said, coming up to us, dragging Kris behind her. "I'm so sorry about Dezy Syb. He's quite possibly one of the worse flirts ever," she added, poking his side.

"I'm not that bad," he said with an easy grin.

Lexi arched her eyebrow and placed her hands on her hips. "I've been with you at parties. You're shameless."

Desmond shrugged. "I'm friendly. What's wrong with that?"

"Hey guys, Venom's Kiss is almost done, then all the bands need to go onstage. Hey Sybil!" Luke said, dragging the other member of the band behind him as he infiltrated our group.

"Hey Luke," I said as a blast of feedback came from the stage, causing me to wince.

The people responsible for the horrendous noise shuffled backstage, and Desmond grinned widely when he saw a girl with a green pixie cut.

"Great job Dara," he called, waving. She waved the tips of her fingers back, her 'too-cool' attitude marred by the faint pink staining her cheeks.

"See," Lexi said, poking Desmond's side again. "Shameless."

Desmond shrugged, poking Lexi back and saying, "Party at our place after. I'm making my Knock-Out Punch," before turning and following Luke and Layn onto the stage.

"See you later?" Kris asked, bending to kiss Lexi quickly.

"Syb and I will be there!" Lexi said, returning the kiss before taking my hand and pulling me towards the door.

"We are?"

"Well, if you want too," Lex said, shrugging. "It'll be fun though! You already know Luke and Kris, and Layn is super sweet."

"I'll go, I guess," I said, casting a nervous glance at the stage. "Is he always like that?"

"Dezy? Yeah," Lexi said, giggling. "Kris once told me his nickname in high school was the Happy Virus."

"I'd believe that," I said before the cheers and whistles made it impossible to talk. But as I watched Desmond onstage, who waved when he noticed me staring, all I could think was that his nickname was very befitting. Even though we hadn't talked very much, Desmond had this aura around him that was made the atmosphere lighter. I hadn't been that at ease around someone at first probably since I met Lexi, and I found myself not entirely dreading the idea of seeing him again.

Chapter 3

“Alright, let’s go through that one more time! You guys are doing great!” I said, walking over to the stereo to start the song over again.

“If we were doing great, we wouldn’t be doing it again,” Anna, one of my students, said with a wry grin.

“It never hurts to go over it one last time—get that muscle memory working,” I said, winking as I walked to my spot in front of the class. “Okay, positions! And *un, deux, trois, quatre.*”

As I lead my class through the routine, I couldn’t keep the grin from my face. While I loved dancing other people’s routines, I loved creating my own more—getting to experiment with different combinations of moves and styles to create a piece that connected fully with the music was challenging, but fun. Since I’d been teaching classes for Kay, I’d also discovered that making routines and watching other people execute my vision was even better than doing it myself. It may have started as charity, but now, I looked forward to the days that I taught, and I spent every hour I could thinking and practicing new material—something that was helping solidify my feelings that dance was something I wanted to do for the rest of my life. My mind started to wander as I lead my class, thinking about how amazing it would be to earn a living (no matter how small), doing this when the last bar of music started, snapping me back to the present. I called out, “Alright, almost done, you guys are doing great!”

Seven tired grins met mine in the mirror, and they gave it their all, finishing out the last combination before throwing their hands on their knees and panting. I clapped my hands and cheered, “Great job guys!”

My girls gave me exhausted smiles, and I grinned back, walking over to the stereo and stopping the music, wiping my forehead with a towel as I watched them stretch out their muscles, wiping themselves off and chatting away. As they filed out, I started to tidy up the classroom when a voice came from the door.

“That’s quite a creative routine, Sybil,” Kay said, coming into the room.

“I didn’t realize you were watching,” I said, clearing my throat as I tucked a stray curl into my bun.

“I caught the last run-through.”

“What did you think?” I asked, bouncing on the tips of my toes.

"It's...interesting," Kay said, nodding thoughtfully. "It's a sort of fusion of contemporary and hip-hop, right?"

"Yeah!" I said, grinning. "I've been fiddling with it for some time now, I really think the two genre's mesh well together—I mean, lyrical hip-hop is like a cousin to contemporary."

"I'm not sure about that," Kay said wryly. "But there's a certain, charm, to your routine."

"I was thinking of doing something similar for my Ailey audition," I said, biting my lip.

"I really don't think that's a good decision," Kay said immediately, causing my stomach to drop. "For Ailey, you should do the routine you did for the summer showcase—impress them with your talent before you show off your ambition."

"But I want to show them what I'm capable of!"

"Show them when you're in. Now my class is about to begin, and your sullen friend is lurking in my lobby."

With a smile and squeeze on my shoulder, Kay glided away. With a grunt, I spun on my heel and picked up the rest of the towels before pulling on my sweatshirt and grabbing my bag before heading out to the lobby. Lexi was slouched against the wall with the hood of her sweatshirt over her head, which was bobbing up and down to the beat of whatever song was playing through her headphones. I tugged her sleeve on my way out the door, not waiting for her like I usually did.

"Hey, Syb, wait up!" she said, but I kept storming towards the bus stop, needing to move, to get my anger out.

"Woah," Lexi said, hurrying to catch up with me. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," I muttered, shoving my hands into the pouch of my sweatshirt.

"Bullshit," Lexi said, stomping her foot. "Did one of those skinny bitches say something to you? Who is it? I'll kick their ass."

"There's no need for that," I said, flopping onto the seat of the bus shelter. "I talked to Kay about using one of my routines for my audition."

"And she said yes right?"

"No, she told me to save it for when I'm actually in...something about showing them my talent before my ambition."

"That's such fucking bullshit! Your routines are amazing, and would set you apart from all the other pirouetting, leaping bimbos that audition."

"Thanks Lex...I know she's probably right, I just want to show them what I can do," I sighed, extracting my hair-tie from my hair and scrubbing my scalp. "Anyways, are we heading to Kris and Desmond's?" I asked as I redid my hair.

"No, I'm not speaking to Kris at the moment," Lexi said crisply.

I chuckled to myself as I bent to dig for my wallet. "Now what are you guys fighting about?"

"He seems unable to understand that I'm a naturally friendly person."

"And that you get more friendly when that person is male and good-looking?" I arched my eyebrow at Lexi, and she sighed.

"I know, I know, I'm a flirt...why can't he just get over it?"

"I don't know." I shrugged, stretching out my legs, feeling a cramp coming on. "So is this the last straw? No more Kris?"

"Oh no, we're still together," Lexi said quickly, her eyes widening along with mine at her quick response. She blushed, then studied the toes of her shoes and muttered, "He just needs to cool off."

Avoiding my eyes, she took her bus pass out of the slot in her phone case, then fished a strange looking cigarette from behind her ear. It was thinner than the ones she usually smoked, and obviously hand-rolled.

"Alexys Marie, is that a joint?" I hissed, glancing from side to side.

She rolled her eyes at me. "No, god. It's just a homemade cigarette. Luke smokes them and they taste way better than my mom's or Dezy's."

"Luke huh?"

Lexi flushed again, bending down to light her cigarette—which did smell better than the others. Exhaling a cloud of smoke, she said, "Don't raise your eyebrow at me Sybil Clementine. I just needed a place to crash for the night—I didn't feel like going home."

"Did you..."

She shook her head. "He wanted too—him and Layn have an open relationship, so it was okay on his end, but I don't know..." she shrugged and kicked the ground. "It didn't feel right."

"I see," was all I said, and she took another drag of her cigarette. While we sat there, I studied my friend, hearing what she didn't want to say out loud. I'd known she was into Kris more than she would admit because he had lasted more than a month. But he must have really gotten under her skin if she had turned down Luke.

"Don't give me that look," she huffed, snubbing out her cigarette and tucking it back behind her ear. "I didn't feel like having sex okay? Don't go reading anything into it. Bus is here."

"Mmmhmm," I said under my breath as I followed her onto the bus.

I sat down beside her, wrinkling my nose at the earbud she offered me. She giggled before popping the bud back into her ear, and I bent forward to retrieve my iPod out of my bag, almost hitting my head on the seat in front of me as the bus lurched into traffic. After I untangled my headphones, I pulled up the song from earlier today and slid the earbuds in, resting my head on the top of the seat and running through the routine. Something about it had been bugging me. Subconsciously, my body began to move, and Lexi poked my side.

Jumping, I pulled out one of my earbuds. "What?"

"You're doing it again," Lexi said with a smirk.

"It's my creative process," I said, shrugging as I reached across her to pull the stop cord.

I returned my iPod to my bag, but kept running through the routine in my head, trying to figure out where the problem was. I was so distracted that I didn't notice the bus had stopped, and Lexi had to nudge me. I hopped off the bus and began to run through the routine, happy to finally be able to move through it.

"Oh my god," Lexi said, shaking her head fondly as she headed towards my house.

I ignored her, moving past the sequence the girls had just learned today to the next one, and then jumped up and down. "*Ca y est!*" I cried, running to catch up with Lexi, fishing my keys out of my bag.

"Figured it out?"

I nodded. "It wasn't flowing right, but I think I know how to fix it," I said as I opened the door, and we headed into the kitchen. "Are you hungry at all?" I asked, grabbing veggies and hummus out of the fridge.

"Not for rabbit food," she said, wrinkling her nose. "Where's Taylor's stash?"

"Somewhere in the pantry," I said, waving my hand in the general direction my brother always headed.

Lexi started to rummage around while I prepped my snack, but we both froze when we heard a door creak, then footsteps shuffling down the hall.

"*Bonjour chérie's,*" my mother mumbled, pushing a lank piece of hair behind her ear.

"Hello Mrs. Fontaine," Lexi said before popping a chip into her mouth.

"Bonjour mama," I said weakly.

"Lexi, you dyed your hair...I'm sure St. Anne's doesn't approve."

Lexi played with one of the green streaks in her hair. "They're clip-in."

"Ah, I see, how fun," my mother said, then she began to move towards the fridge. "Did Ben go to the store today?"

"I don't know," I shrugged, knowing what she was really asking, and hating that Ben had probably made a trip to the store today, had probably gone just for her.

She sighed in relief as she opened the fridge and found the bottle of Jamison sitting in the door. Grabbing it, she came over to brush a kiss that smelled like stale alcohol on my cheek, and I reciprocated, taking shallow breaths until she had left. Even with that, the air still smelled like unwashed body and alcohol. We were quiet until we heard the door to her bedroom close, then I breathed a sigh of relief, putting away the container of hummus while rubbing at one of my temples. Lexi's phone buzzed then, the screen lighting up. She leaned forward and swiped the screen, chuckling when she saw who it was.

"Apparently our brothers are hanging out today."

"How do you know that?"

"They sent me a snap," she said, holding up her phone and making a face at her camera.

"Oh man, what are the Trouble Twins up too now?"

"Who knows. That one was just a face swap, which honestly didn't look that much different. Now, Taylor is accusing me of eating his food."

"Well it's not like he's wrong."

With a chuckle, Lexi snapped a picture of herself eating a chip before following me and instantly making herself at home, flinging herself onto my bed, throwing pillows onto the floor and rumpling my covers.

I sighed and pointed my finger at her ratty converse. "Shoes off."

Rolling her eyes, she kicked off her shoes and scooted so I could sit down on my bed as well. I placed my displaced pillows back where they belonged before settling down beside her. "So are we still going to Luke's for Halloween?" I asked, dipping my carrot in some hummus.

"Why wouldn't we?"

"Well, we were planning on going with Kris and Desmond..."

"So?"

"So, what if you and Kris aren't speaking by then?"

"Don't worry about that," Lexi said, waving her hand. "We're going as Courtney Love and Kurt Cobain. What are you going as?"

"Honestly I have no clue," I said, sighing. "I was thinking maybe some sort of Black Swan kind of thing? I've got most of the things from old recitals."

"That'd be cool! Oh hey, maybe Des could dress up as a dancer too, it'd be better than Wasabi."

"Huh? Desmond wants to dress up as that green spicy stuff?"

"No, it's some cartoon character from a Disney movie," Lexi said, rolling her eyes. "Dara was going to go as one of the other characters, but she bailed on him, so now no one's going to know who he's supposed to be."

"Why did Dara bail? Weren't they a thing?" I said, getting up to gather up clothes for a shower.

"Kind of? But they're not anything anymore. Des doesn't really do relationships, and I think Dara wanted more."

"Really? He seemed pretty into her."

Lexi shrugged. "He probably was...just not enough to do anything about it."

"That's not normal."

"Normal or not, it's Des," Lexi said, tipping the bag of chips so the crumbs fell into her mouth before crumpling the bag and tossing it half-heartedly in the direction of my garbage can.

"You ARE going to pick that up right?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

With a roll of her eyes, she pushed herself off of the bed and picked the bag and deposited it in the garbage. "Better?" she asked with a smirk as she flopped back on my bed, dragging her backpack with her.

"Much. I'm going to take a shower, okay?"

"Okay...when you get back you can tell me why Chemistry is important, because right now I have zero fucks to give about this class," she sighed, laying her head on her textbook.

"I can try," I said wryly before heading to the bathroom. On my way, I stopped by Ben's room, tapping lightly on the door as I said, "Bathroom check."

When I didn't get an answer, I opened the door a crack, shaking my head and putting down my stuff when I saw my brother passed out on his bed. Creeping in, I carefully untied his

shoes and slid them off, grabbing his phone from his back pocket, clicking it into the charger and setting his alarm before carefully rolling him under his blankets. "Sweet dreams," I whispered, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek before sneaking out.

It was weird, how we had settled into a routine these past two years, one that was sans either parental unit. Really, it was Ben doing all the work, making sure Taylor got all the important food groups, and the bills got paid; I did what I could to keep the house clean and the laundry done, trying to give Taylor as normal of a life as possible. There were times, like tonight, when I passed my mother's door, knowing that she was passed out in there, but not because of exhaustion like Ben, that I got so angry I almost wished she'd just go away and leave us alone.

It wasn't fair that we had to do this; it wasn't fair that I had to feel like I wasn't allowed to be a normal senior in high school, that I spend most of my time in the dance studio, not only because of my love for dance, but because if I didn't get a full ride to Ailey, I wasn't going anywhere. It wasn't fair that my brother had to work double shifts to support his mother and siblings, just because my father decided he no longer wanted us and left. And it wasn't fair that even though I was instantly attracted to Desmond, I'd never let myself be with him. My heart had jumped a little when Lexi had said that he and Dara weren't together, because whenever I spent time with him, I could feel myself relaxing. I didn't feel like I had to impress him or be mature and responsible, I could just be me, and it was addicting, which is exactly why I couldn't ever be more than his friend.

Chapter 4

"You know you don't have to do those..."

"If I didn't do them, no one would," I said, arching my eyebrow at Desmond, elbow deep in a sink of soapy water.

Desmond's cheeks flushed, because he knew I was right. The boys' apartment was the definition of bachelor pad, with beer cans making a pyramid by the recycling bins, pizza boxes and takeout containers spilling out of the trash can, and the sink overflowing with dishes. Walking into here made my temple start to throb, so whenever I came over, I ended up tidying the entire apartment; embarrassing Desmond to no end.

With a sheepish smile, Desmond placed the bowl he had been eating out of beside the sink, and I shook my head at him with a smile, picking up the bowl and scrubbing it. Even though it was a mess, I loved spending time here. What their ramshackle apartment lacked in cleanliness and décor, it made up for it with its comfortable atmosphere.

"So how's the Ailey audition going?" he asked, reaching into the fridge and grabbing a can of beer before leaning against the counter beside me.

I shrugged. "It's okay I guess. Kay wants me to do a more traditional routine. I've been experimenting with my stuff, but it's clumsy. I don't know, maybe she's right."

"I don't think you should," Desmond said, taking a pull from his beer. "I bet your routines are awesome, you just need the right motivation."

"Thanks, but I'm not sure," I sighed, turning off the faucet and draining the sink. "How's school going for you?"

"Oh, I dropped out."

"What? When?"

"Well, it's not official yet," he said, ruffling his dreads. "I just haven't been feeling it, and if I don't have a passion for it, why bother ya know?"

"I guess... is it like the thing with Dara?"

He looked at me, surprised. "What thing with Dara?"

"Weren't you two dating?"

"No... I mean, we hung out a few times, but we're just friends. Why are you asking about my love life?" he asked with a smirk.

"No reason at all," I said, feeling my cheeks get warm.

Just then, the door slammed open, and Lexi stormed in, followed closely by Kris. I could tell by the look on her face that she was upset, and by the low whistle Desy blew, Kris wasn't too happy as well. We sneaked over to the breakfast bar to watch.

"Why can't you just let this be?" she huffed, whirling around to face him.

"Because I'm getting tired of feeling invisible while you flirt with some random guy."

"I've told you I can't help it. I'm not trying to flirt! Why can't you trust me?"

Lexi spun on her heel and stomped toward Kris's room.

"I do trust you," Kris sighed, throwing up his hands and following her.

"I will never understand their relationship," I said, shaking my head as I walked over to the fridge to grab a bottle of water. "Kris just seems so...intense."

"I mean he is... but it's because he's crazy driven," Des said, taking a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and shaking one out. "He's also never really dated, and Lexi is probably the first girl to ever really get to know him. He has a hard time letting people in."

"I understand that," I said softly.

Des lit his cigarette, watching me from under his eyelashes. Clearing my throat, I walked into the living room, sitting on the couch and curling into myself. He followed me, flopping into the easy chair next to the couch and taking a drag from his cigarette.

"She's good for him you know," he said, exhaling a cloud of smoke. "She loosens him up. People like him, need people like Lexi."

"And you," I added, taking a drink of water.

"And me," he said, nodding. "So, there's this really cool movie coming out soon, want to go see it?"

"It's not a zombie one is it?" I asked with an arched eyebrow.

Des laughed. "No, I promise, no zombies."

"So were you thinking a group thing?"

"No...just you and me," he said softly, tapping his ash into an ashtray.

"That sounds like a date."

"Maybe it is."

He tried to seem nonchalant, but the way his foot was jiggling told me that he was nervous.

"I can't," I said, studying my socks. "I really need to focus on my audition."

"Okay," he said softly. "I understand. But just so you know," he added, raising his emerald green eyes to mine, "I'm here, if ever you need me."

I smiled weakly, pulling the sleeves of my cardigan over my hands. "I'm going to put on a movie... you want to watch anything in particular?"

He shook his head, and I sprung up from the couch, ruffling through the boys' extensive DVD collection, eager to change the subject. As much as I liked spending time with Desmond, I had found that I had started to like it a little too much. He faced the world with so much positivity it was blinding, and despite myself, I found that I kept confiding in him, needing to hear the things he'd say, needing to hear him say that everything was going to be alright. He kept demolishing my walls one by one, and I couldn't let that happen, because I'd be damned if I repeated my parent's mistakes.

Chapter 5

"That movie was such a rip-off," I grumbled as we left the theater, pulling on my gloves and tucking my hair into my hood.

"What are you talking about?" Desmond exclaimed as he pulled his beanie over his dreads. "It was amazing!"

"Are you serious?" I shot him a baffled look. "You enjoyed that?"

"Yeah! I mean, I could have done without the couple making out beside me," he said, shooting a smirk at Kris and Lexi.

The former just rolled his eyes, but Lexi flipped him off before tucking herself under Kris's arm.

"It's freezing out here," she said through chattering teeth. "Can we take this film critique someplace warmer?"

"We could go to Aaron's," Kris suggested.

"Don't you get enough of that place when you work?" Des said.

Kris shrugged. "Its good food and I get a discount."

"Aaron's sounds good to me!" Des said, grinning.

We all laughed and then headed down the street, Lexi and Kris up ahead, walking arm in arm, and Desmond and I behind them, me taking five steps for every one of his. The store windows were decorated for Christmas, and I kept getting distracted, seeing things that I wanted to get for my brothers, before finally stopping at the window of a kitchen supply store, spotting a gadget I was sure Ben would like. Desmond leaned against the store window, watching me with an amused smile.

"So did you really think the movie was that bad?"

"I just don't understand the whole zombie thing," I shrugged, pulling out my phone to take a picture of the store window.

"I love them," he confessed. "I've seen every episode of the Walking Dead to date."

"Wow," I said, shaking my head and smiling up at him as I tucked my phone back in my pocket. "I knew the addiction was bad, I just didn't know how bad until now."

He grinned down at me, and I offered him a shy smile. Then, I saw Lexi stop suddenly up ahead, and a muffled 'shit' come from her as she whirled around and started to drag Kris the way we had just come, almost running into us.

"I don't think we should go that way, let's just go the other way okay?" she said, her eyes wide with panic.

"That's ridiculous, Aaron's is just up the street, why would we go the other..."

I trailed off as I saw the reason for Lexi's antics, pushing a stroller while a curvy blonde hung on his arm.

"Papa?" I whispered, a sick feeling in my stomach. I watched as they came closer, the blonde obviously annoyed at us for blocking the entire sidewalk.

"Excuse me," she said, her disdain evident in her tone and the way she looked us all up and down, but I was more interested in the man standing next to her, morbidly curious as to what he would do.

We moved aside to let them pass, and as they did so, his eye's flickered to mine, making brief contact before sliding away and staring straight ahead.

I heard a sharp inhale of breath from Lexi, and quickly turned to stop whatever outburst that was about to spew from her mouth; but I found that Kris had beaten me to it, one hand over her mouth while the other held her trembling body next to him, containing her body and her words, but not her eyes, which were shooting daggers at the couple walking away from us. It all being too much, I ran.

"SYBIL!" I heard Desmond call, but I couldn't turn back now, couldn't deal with the pity I had seen in Kris's eyes, nor the empty feeling in my stomach from being slighted by my own father. And so I ran, and ran, and ran, until I found myself in front of the dance studio.

Kay had given me a key, and I fumbled for it now, my gloves causing me to drop my key ring several times before I finally got the key into the lock and I was able to get in, not bothering to lock up behind me, my emotions pushing me towards the practice room. I shed my coat, hat, scarf, gloves and boots before stepping onto the gleaming hardwood floor, the wave of calm I usually felt once I stepped into the room losing against all the emotions I had coursing through me. I could feel them waging a war inside of me, could feel it in the tightness of my chest and in the way my hands were shaking as I typed in my passcode and found my music, but I swallowed them down and selected the song from the summer showcase, quickly moving to take my opening stance, arms folded and head down; until the music began, and then I swooped my arms above my head, spinning and swiveling my hips to the sultry guitar riffs.

As I danced, I tried to stay focused on my movements and form, tried to lose myself in the routine, but as the lyrics of a father's sin and a mother's pain sunk into my soul, I couldn't stop the images from popping into my head; my father coldly turning his head as he had passed me by five minutes ago, my mother huddled under her blankets, bottle of Jamison sweating on her bedside table, Ben, his face haggard and bags under his eyes as he works too hard and plays both parents to Taylor, and then, Desmond, and his kind green eyes and smile.

At that, I froze, holding my last position—hands in front of my face and right leg extended behind me, for longer than I was supposed to, fighting against the feelings trying to rise, trying to keep everything under control. But as the music began to build, and the singer began to wail out the chorus, I lost my fight, and exploded.

I forgot about form, technique, or genre, and I just danced; spinning, punching, jumping, and tumbling, expelling all my anger and hatred for my father, disappointment for my mother, sorrow for my broken family, and fear of the feelings hiding inside for Desmond, losing myself in the music and the way my body moved, until at last, after one last flip, I felt my strength and control fail, and I crumpled into a ball, sobs wracking my body.

The song faded out, and I heard a soft clapping. Startled, I looked up to find Desmond standing by the door.

“How...how long have you been there?” I whispered, wiping my eyes.

“I got here a few minutes after you started to dance. Long legs you know.”

“How did you find me?”

“Lex said this is where you’d go.”

“Why didn’t she come?”

“She’s too mad. Kris is probably still trying to stop her from tracking your dad down and kicking his ass.”

“So she sent you because you’re not mad? So you could talk down the crazy one?” I scoffed, sniffing.

“You think I’m not mad?” he asked quietly.

“Of course you’re not... you’re never mad,” I said, rolling my eyes as I looked over at him. It was then that I noticed that his ever-present smile was missing, and his hands were shoved deep in his pockets, probably to hide the fact that they were trembling, but I could still tell.

“Is that so?” he said, one side of his mouth quirking up in something that would have been a smile if he was Kris, but he wasn’t. He was Desmond... my Desmond, and for the first time since I’d known him—hell, maybe the first time ever, he was mad.

Incredulous, I said, “You...you’re mad... but why?”

“Why? How the hell can you ask me that? How come you never told me...” he paused, frustration marring his handsome face.

Hating this side of him, I pushed myself off of the floor and walked over to him, taking his hand and pulling him over to the couch that sat against the far wall.

"Sit," I told him, and with a rueful smile, he did so, and I sat down next to him. We sat there for who knows how long before he spoke.

"When did he leave?"

"Almost two years ago."

"Has he ever..."

"Reached out to us? No."

"Bastard."

We were quiet again, the only sound in the room my occasional sniffing, and again, he was the first to break the silence.

"Is he the reason you turned me down when I asked you out?"

I nodded.

"I... I don't understand. It was just a date Syb... it wasn't anything serious."

"It's never serious with you Des," I said softly. "But it was getting serious for me and..."

Unable to look into his eyes, I looked down at my hand, and was surprised to find that at some point, we had entangled our fingers together. It was the first time we had ever touched, and the heat from his hand was comforting, and I wondered why I had never held his hand before. It also gave me the strength to let him know everything.

"When my dad left," I began, voice shaky, "it destroyed my mom. She had become so dependent on him for her happiness that without him, it was like she didn't exist anymore. Now she's just a lump in the bed that smells like whisky. And we had to just move on you know, just put our heads down and do our best to make this work, to not let everything fall to hell. And I swore to myself that I would never let myself be that dependent on someone ever..."

My voice broke, and I stopped to take a ragged breath, and then continued. "And then I met you. You and your dopy smile, and, and your flailing limbs and your kind heart, and the way you can make even my worst days a little bit better...you scared the hell out of me, because in you, I saw someone I could become dependent on, and I just can't let that happen."

Too scared to see the damage my words had done to him, I studied our entwined hands, just waiting for him to decide that my emotional baggage, my walls, were just too much for him to take, too heavy for his light-hearted approach to life and walk out. Even though I was expecting it, my heart fell to my stomach when he released my hand and stood up.

Trying to hold back tears, I curled up into a ball so I wouldn't have to see him leave, but when I didn't hear any footsteps, I raised my head enough to see that he had crouched down in front of me. I had to smile a bit at the comical sight of him folded practically in half all so he could be at eye level with me, but the serious look on his face still had me worried. He reached out a giant hand and cupped my chin, gently lifting my head so that I was looking at him. "My smile is not dopey," he said, smiling softly.

"It can be," I said, and he snorts.

"I don't think so," he says, taking a seat next to me and taking my hand again.

"As for all that other stuff..." he said, studying our reflections in the mirror. "There's a difference between depending someone and being dependent. You... you have too much in your life that you're passionate about for you to ever become fully dependent on another person. You have too many dreams to chase, so many plans and goals... you don't need anybody. But you can want somebody. That doesn't make you weak, or less of a person. It's normal to want someone to share in your happiness, to be there for you when you fall, and for all the things in-between. Everyone should have someone in their lives they can trust, that they know will be there for them no matter what, someone to depend on."

"I guess I never thought of it like that before," I said softly. "I just... I just don't know what to do.... I don't know how to do relationships."

"That's alright," he says, smiling. "I don't either. But being someone to depend on... I'm pretty good at that."

"That's good," I said, smiling up at him. "Because I could use someone like that."

"Then I'm your guy Syb. Now, how about we go join our friends and get something to eat."

"Yeah, that sounds good," I said shyly.

We both stood up, and I gathered my belongings. After I locked up the studio, I turned to Desmond, who stood with his hand out, offering it to me. With a smile, I took it and together, we began to walk to the diner.