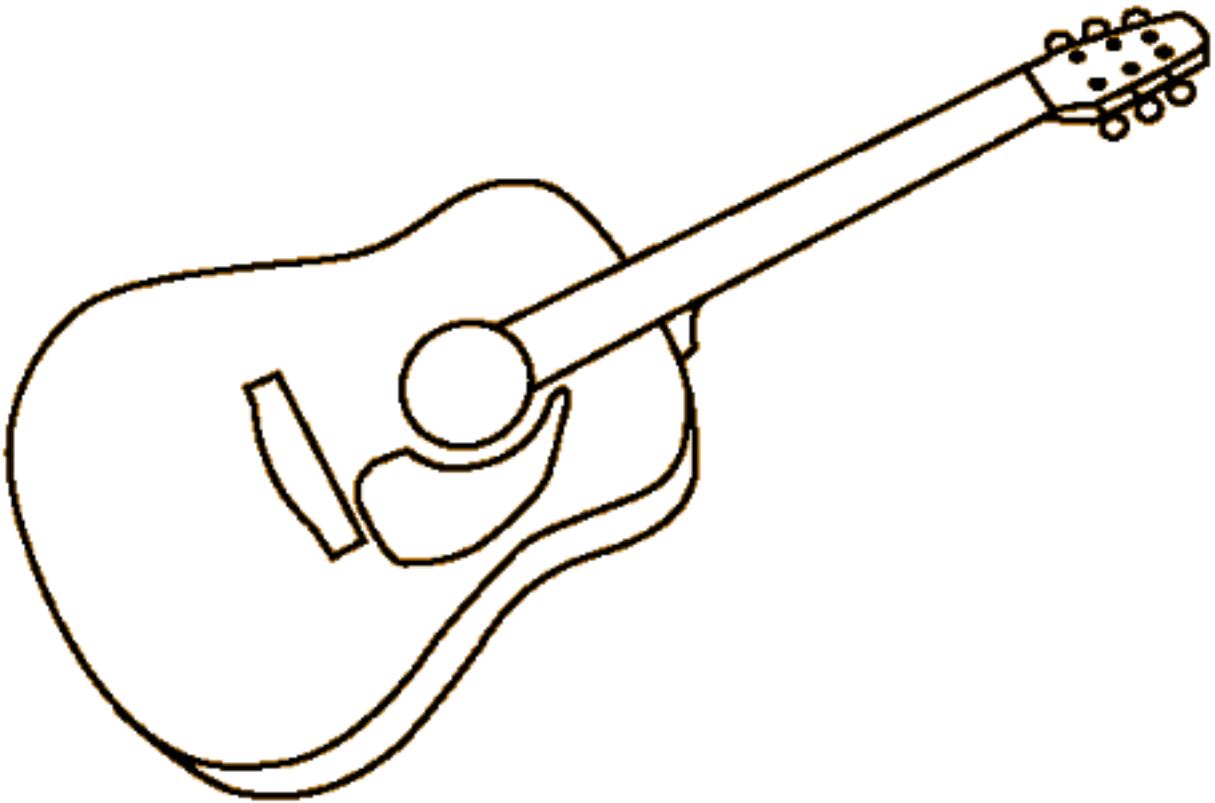


Mendable

By Aniyah Veal



6 years old

The father and daughter sat on the floor in the bedroom. Laid out on the floor around them were many pages of sheet music, each one marked with multiple symbols and scribbles. Alex had her eyes glued to her father as he strummed the strings of his guitar. She loved to sit across from him and watch her father play. Every couple of minutes he would look over at her and she would smile and wave at him. After filling in another staff, he beckoned her over. Quickly, she scooted over and placed herself in his lap.

James squeezed Alex slightly, kissed the top of her head and asked, “Don’t you want to go play outside with your friends?”

“No, Daddy. I like the music.”

“Well then, I think you should help me play,” James said as he took Alex’s smaller hand in his. He took her index finger and plucked one of his strings. Alex smiled proudly as she heard the sound. James high fived Alex and he told her that she did a great job.

They continued on for an hour. James guided Alex through the basics as he enjoyed her gasps and smiles at every new note that she learned how to play. Every call from Camille, the wife and mother of the house, was answered with two voices asking for five more minutes. With matching groans, they put down the guitar and went downstairs when she began fussing about the dinner beginning to become cold. They wanted to avoid another scolding about coming to the dinner table late. If Camille noticed that they rushed through their meals to return back upstairs, she didn’t say anything.

12 years old

Alex sat at the dining room table as she worked on her school poster board. She cut out pictures of clothes items she had printed out from the internet. Alex had picked enough items to make at least 6 unique outfits to put on her poster board. Camille sat across from her, sipping tea as she read over her files from work. James had not arrived home yet.

Five minutes later, James walked through the door as he yelled out a hello. His two ladies greeted him as he walked into the dining room. He kissed Alex's forehead before walking over to his wife to place a kiss on her lips. They exchanged a brief account of their day with each other before James took notice of Alex's work. He watched her mutter to herself as she paired a pink top with some denim shorts. She shook her head and switched the shorts for a pleated black skirt.

"What are you doing, Alex?" he questioned as he shifted his weight from his left foot to his other foot and tilted his head to the right.

"I'm finishing my school project," she said without looking up.

"What is this project about?"

"It's for Career Day, Dad. Our teacher is making us talk about our future careers," Alex answered with a forced casual tone as she placed glue to her picture and pasted it in the spot she had prepared beforehand.

James chuckled and glanced over at Camille. She met his eyes before holding up an open file to cover her face as she remained silent. Alex looked up at her dad when he started laughing. Her stomach started to twist as she saw his confused face. This was the first time she decided to

try and tell him about her career change. She didn't feel that he was getting her point or taking her seriously. She looked back down and continued her work. Alex could hear his work shirt ruffle as he folded his arms.

“How are you going to relate those outfits to music? Where's a picture of a guitar?”

James asked as he scratched his neck. Camille lowered her file to peek over the top edge as they looked at Alex.

“Oh, well... I... my teacher said we can do our projects about any profession even if it's not what we want to do. I thought it would be fun to talk about being a personal stylist,” Alex muttered as she quickly tried to think of an excuse.

The room was quiet for a moment as her father stared at her blankly. Her mother made a small sound from the back of her throat before returning to her reading. Alex shrunk in her seat after hearing the sound. Alex thought about all the times she asked her mom to buy her fashion magazines in the grocery stores. She knew her mom knew the truth. She was thankful that her father didn't seem to notice her mother's sound.

“So you're just doing this because you thought it would be fun?” James's surprise was laced in his voice.

“Yes.”

“Well, then. That's fine. I don't see how it could be fun for anyone, but to each his own.”

James chuckled again. Alex felt the sound of her dad's laugh cut through her, but she gave a soft snort and nodded at him. James started walking towards the stairs as he shook his head in amusement at Alex. When he had a foot on the bottom step and a hand on the railing, he stopped suddenly and turned back to face the dining room.

“Alex, I’ll be in the bedroom. When you’re done with your little project, grab your guitar and come meet me for practice time.”

“Sure thing,” she answered happily and gave her dad a thumbs up.

As she raised her thumbs, she knew it was too much. Luckily, James didn’t notice her exaggerated behavior. He continued up the stairs. Alex held her breath and didn’t exhale until she heard her parents’ room door close. She slumped in her seat and propped her head on her hand.

“Didn’t work out how you wanted it to, did it?”

“No.” Alex let out a groan.

Camille gathered her files and put them back into her briefcase. She pushed back her chair as she stood up. Alex watched her mom as she walked around to her side of the table. Camille pulled her into a hug and rubbed her back before letting go.

“You should tell him. Eventually, he’s going to find out,” her mother recommended as she headed to the kitchen to start dinner. When she was finally sitting alone in the room, Alex put her head down on the table.

“If only it was that easy.”

15 years old

Alex rode in the car with her father as they headed to her high school. They chatted about what they expected their days to be like before quieting to listen to their favorite morning radio

program. They laughed at the jokes cracked by the co hosts as James navigated his way through traffic.

When they arrived at the school, Alex, already used to her father's ways, tried to hurry out of the passenger seat, but he grabbed her arm gently. She sighed before turning around to see his amused smile.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

Alex pretended to think and then replied, "Ah, my guitar. Thanks, Dad." She reached into the back seat and grabbed her guitar case. "Okay, gotta go."

"Alexis, not so fast. Come over here," James said as he held his arms wide open.

Alex was slowly leaning back into the car when James embraced her. She shook her head as her dad pulled her in closer. It had been the same drop off routine since she started kindergarten. Back then, she was the initiator, fearful of being without her parents for an entire day. Now, she was fifteen and not a child. As she pulled out the embrace, she saw her father's profile as he pointed to his cheek. Alex rolled her eyes as she laughed.

"Really?"

"Yes. Come on, amuse your old man."

"That's what you say everyday and you're not old."

"That's what you say everyday," he replied teasingly.

Alex didn't respond as she leaned in and planted a kiss on her dad's cheek. Her mouth hung open and put her hand on her chest, looking overly offended, as she watched her dad wipe his cheek repeatedly with a scrunched up face. When he winked at her, she threw her head back to laugh.

“You’re awful, you know that? Awful,” she said with a smile.

“Yeah, bye kid. Work hard, practice hard at your club.”

“Bye.”

Alex closed the car door and walked into her school building. She moved from side to side to avoid walking too close to others in the crowd. She held her guitar close to her so she wouldn’t hit anyone. No one was ever understanding when she muttered out a “sorry” and quickly shuffled away. She reached her locker and saw her best friend standing there waiting for her. She ignored the disapproving stare she received from Christine and started turning her lock to open her locker.

“Alex, that is ridiculous,” Christine remarked as she pointed at the guitar.

“Don’t call Belle ridiculous. You’ll hurt her feelings,” Alex joked to deflect the conversation she knew was coming. They went through this every Thursday.

“You should have left Belle at home.”

“You know why I can’t do that,” Alex said as she maneuvered Belle into her locker for the day and turned to look at Christine.

“Yes, because your dad thinks you’re in the guitar club instead of the fashion club,” Christine huffed out.

Alex knew her best friend was as tired with the charade as she was, if not more. Christine didn’t understand why she couldn’t tell her father she was in the fashion club. She thought it was crazy for Alex to drag her guitar with her every Thursday as an excuse to stay after school. Alex knew Christine just wanted her to be able to stop faking. The girl had told her this all before repeatedly.

“It’s not his fault that he thinks I’m in the club. I am the liar here,” Alex calmly pointed out. Christine crossed her arms and sucked her teeth.

“You lie because you feel you have to do it. He pressures you.”

“He doesn’t do it on purpose. He swears we’re on the same page. To him, the dream he put on a shelf is my current dream. He won’t know the truth until I tell him so he’s not the villain.” Alex defended.

“Then, you should tell him. He might surprise you and be understanding,” Christine insisted quickly.

“... I can’t. I know everything will change. My dad isn’t like your dad,” Alex said and continued before Christine could argue, “The strongest part of our bond is music. I love it, but he loves it more, he lives for it. How do I look him in the eyes and tell him that the guitar isn’t the be all and end all for me? He’ll be as crushed as he was when he left his band.”

“He can’t live through you forever because the truth is you aren’t going to be a musician. I know you’re scared, but I hope you haven’t forgotten that. The longer you lie, the more he believes it,” Christine said in her best soothing manner. The last time Alex had heard Christine pull out that voice was when her crush got a girlfriend. Alex flashed her a small smile because she knew Christine was trying to be the voice of reason and comfort.

“Well, it won’t be today,” Alex said as she grabbed Christine’s hands to pull her towards their advisory room.

“But—”

“—Christine, it’s sinful for you to pull me into such heavy conversation and it’s not even nine in the morning yet. Please, can we talk about something else? Trust me, you’ll have an

ample amount of time to spread your common sense later,” Alex pleaded with her in a playful tone.

Alex was grateful when Christine continued their walk and started to speak about the boring school play that she was dragged to the day before to see her little sister perform.

18 years old

Alex walked behind her father as he happily led her through the busy streets. They were supposed to be side by side, but James stepped eagerly while Alex dragged herself along. On the inside, she was panicking. Her father had gotten her an interview and audition with a music studio to play the guitar for their recording artists. She should have looked him in the eyes and told him that she wouldn't do it, but she didn't. Instead, she thanked him and let him take her and her mother out for a celebratory dinner. How anyone could be that excited over a simple interview she didn't know.

With every step she took, Christine's and her mother's voices echoed in her head. They had told her to tell him the truth so many times. She knew they had been right all along, but she had no guts. She had let this get out of control. She couldn't believe she let her dad and herself start walking to the building. Alex had no intention of entering the building because she knew if she entered, then she would audition. If she auditioned, she would have to be good. Alex didn't do anything by halves. Not games, not debates and not even unwanted interviews. She would crush the audition and they would hire her. So what was her genius plan for when they reached the building? She didn't have one yet. She thought about the acceptance letter, hidden in her sock

drawer, and knew that she wouldn't be working at the studio. Alex wished she could will a hole to open up in the ground and swallow her whole. Even after years of lying and hiding, Alex had never felt more like a coward.

She felt like her throat was tightening as she thought about speaking out to her dad. She couldn't speak, but she knew she had to leave. Alex felt the overwhelming need to escape. James hadn't even turned around to check on her yet. She suspected that he may have thought that she was walking right beside him all along. As she walked, she noticed she was approaching a subway station. Alex glanced between the station and her dad, walking with purpose and holding Belle for her. Alex felt guilt as she made her decision. Although she didn't need to run, she raced down the subway steps before she could change her mind. She was going to the only place she could think to go, Christine's house.

2 weeks later

"Are you sure you want to go?" Camille questioned Alex as she watched her daughter line her luggage up by the bedroom door and close her boxes.

"Mom, Aunt Gloria is waiting for me outside now. Of course, I'm going."

"She could come back another day," Camille suggested softly. Alex stopped moving to look at her mom. She sighed when she saw the tears in her eyes. Alex walked up to her mom and gave her a hug.

"I'll miss you too, but it's time. The school is closer to Aunt Gloria's house and she is my favorite aunt. I'll be fine and I'll call all the time."

“You just graduated, Alex. School doesn’t start for a couple of months. You’re running,” Camille said without judgement.

“Can you blame me?”

“No.”

“I’m his only child and he hasn’t said a word to me in two weeks. I got to go, Mom. It’ll be easier this way and I’ll be happier,” Alex confessed as she began to pull away from their extended embrace.

Camille nodded before she began to carry her daughter’s things out to her sister’s car. Alex followed with her own arms full. They made three trips before they finished. Camille and Alex stood facing each other, not being able to say everything that needed to be said.

“I guess this is it,” Alex said slowly as she leaned back against the passenger seat of her aunt’s car.

“Yes. I can try to go get your father if you want,” Camille offered weakly.

“No, don’t bother. He stayed in your room for a reason.”

Camille nodded again as she pulled Alex into another hug. She kissed her daughter’s forehead and pulled away. She breathed in and out sharply before taking a step back. She gave a nod to her sister and promised to call them later. Alex got into the car, buckled up and waved as they drove away.

19 years old

Alex sat in a chair, on her parents' back porch, with her hand gripping her suitcase handle. Although she was cold, she stayed seated and thought a little longer. She hadn't gotten the nerve to ring the doorbell yet. It didn't feel right to use her old key that was still on her keychain. Her mother insisted that she come home for Thanksgiving. She was only there for her mom. While Alex knew what to expect on the other side of the door, she had no idea what to expect.

Alex made herself stand and step forward to press the doorbell. While she waited, she reminded herself to keep breathing steadily. The door opened quickly and she heard her mom squeal happily.

"Hi, you made it! I missed you so much," Camille let out her words as if she had been holding them in since Alex left.

"We talk almost everyday," Alex said in amusement.

Camille argued that it was not the same as she brought Alex into the kitchen. Alex scanned the room and noticed that everything was exactly the same. The food smelled heavenly and she missed it. Neither Alex or Gloria were chefs, but Camille came close in Alex's eyes. She stomped her feet on the mat to shake the excess snow off and hung up her coat. She heard the voices from television coming from the living room. She looked at the door, but made no move towards it.

"Football?" Alex asked even though she knew the answer.

"Of course, just like normal. You could go in there and watch like you normally would."

"I could," Alex replied with a tone that said "as if". Camille said nothing as she washed her hands and went back to cutting her potatoes.

“Has he ever asked about me when you get off the phone?”

“I fill him in on how you are. He listens,” Camille said carefully.

“I’m sure you do. But does he ask?”

“...No.”

“I’ll help you with anything in here,” Alex said.

Alex washed her hands and her mother put her to work. They listened to the small kitchen radio as the station played Christmas music. They made small talk lightly over the music as they cooked.

When the meal is finished, the women set the table. Camille coaxed James to turn off the television and sit at the dinner table. Alex kept her head low, looking at the table cloth. James didn’t make a big show out of carving the turkey. They didn’t go around the table and say what they were thankful for. They prayed silently as Camille linked her hands with her husband and daughter. Alex didn’t dare risk her other hand being left reaching out for her father’s so she kept it sitting in her lap. The table lacked the conversation and laughter that it had seen every year in the past. She had hoped he had cooled off although deep down she knew he hadn’t. She had no thought that her mother had tried over and over again for her. Her mother was strong, but she wasn’t a miracle worker. Alex began counting down the hours until she would leave. She decided that she wouldn’t be home for Christmas.

21 years old

Alex didn't go home for two years. Camille and Alex talked every other way all of the time. They called each other, they texted each other and faceted. Camille stayed away from James while they talked, but Alex still heard the guitar strumming faintly at times. She chose to ignore the sound and the weird feeling she got in her stomach and heart. She ignored the thought that her stomach felt fine when she played Belle at work daily for the children. She knew who plucked the cords of the guitar and why it had once been so special.

Alex goes home for Christmas after her mother practically begged. She was prepared to happily go with her boyfriend, Diego, to his family's home. Her mother told her that she had a surprise for her. She couldn't find it in herself to get excited. With each year, it was harder to ignore that her father was ignoring her. She didn't understand how someone stays mad at someone for almost three years without a word to them. Alex wasn't some stranger, she was his child, his blood. She preferred for her dad to yell at her or scold her. She was willing to apologize if need be and confess her guilt. Alex wanted anything except disappointment and silence.

This time when she arrived, she went to the front porch and knocked immediately. She was surprised when her father opened the door with a smile and a warm greeting. She felt bewildered as he hugged her stiffly before letting go. With some difficulty, the two talked about Alex's commute to the house and the weather. They were talking about the weather of all things. Alex was shocked while James looked uneasy. After a minute or two, Alex went into the kitchen to say hello to her mother. She felt like she was in a dream.

It wasn't a dream. They sat down and had a wonderful Christmas day dinner. They didn't have gifts for each other, but it was fine. The family held conversation long after dinner was

finished and they sat on the couch. They watched *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* as they talked. It should have been awkward, but with Camille carrying the greater portion of talk for her husband and daughter, everything was fine.

The rest of the week went by similarly. The complete family spent time together as they tried to feel as normal as possible. The conversation was strained at times and Alex didn't hear a guitar being played once, but it was better than before. Alex wondered why her father had a change of heart. At first, she wanted to be angry. Why did he get to decide when everything was okay? Why was she supposed to act like nothing had happened? She wanted to make him sit down and talk about it. She almost did it too, but she got scared. She didn't want to rock the boat. She didn't want to disrupt whatever he was trying to do so she kept her mouth quiet the entire visit. It was pleasant, but it left her wondering how long it could last.

22 years old

Alex sat in the hard, plastic hospital chair with shaky hands as she dialed her mother's cell phone number for the fifth time. She held the phone up to her ear and counted the rings before the phone went to voicemail again. She hung up without leaving a message. She ran her fingers through her hair and then brought her hand over to wipe her teary eyes. She decided to dial her parents' house phone although they barely used it. It rang twice.

"Hello."

"... Oh hi, Dad," Alex said through the phone softly before she cleared her throat. She gripped her cell phone tighter.

“Alex, I’m surprised you called the house phone.”

“Yeah, Mom didn’t answer her cell phone.”

“Oh, she’s at the supermarket. She must have left her phone in the car again.”

“Oh,” Alex whispered.

They sat on the phone breathing for a few seconds before James spoke again.

“So, um, is everything okay?” James asked awkwardly. Alex let out a sigh.

“I… I just need to speak to Mom, that’s all,” Alex said as her voice shook.

She cleared her throat again and tried to sniffle quietly. She didn’t want her dad to feel obligated to stay on the phone. She wanted to get off desperately. They were silent again.

“Could you please tell Mom to call me when she gets home?” Alex tried to say calmly, but her voice betrayed her.

“Sure I will,” James said hesitantly.

“Okay, thanks. Bye, Dad,” Alex quickly let out while she swallowed down the ‘I love you’ that often almost came out naturally.

“Yeah, bye.” James hung up the phone.

Alex let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. They didn’t do things like this anymore. It didn’t feel right to cry in his ear and she didn’t think he would know what to say. She didn’t expect him to know.

Alex waited for another forty five minutes before she got to talk to her mother. She had managed to drive herself home although she was shaky. When her mother called, she told her that Christine’s little sister was run over in a hit and run accident. She told her about the way she watched her best friend’s family fall apart in the waiting area as the doctor delivered the terrible

news. Alex recounted how the family left the hospital in a daze and how she was too stunned to follow them back home. Immediately, Camille drove to Alex's apartment. Alex crumbled when she was finally in her mother's arms. Alex was relieved that she had come alone.

26 years old

Alex was surrounded by her three best friends. She was sitting in the living room of Christine's apartment for her "bachelorette" party. Bachelorette party actually meant an evening of drinking a minimum amount of wine, throwing pre wedding diets out the window, playing Uno, having karaoke/choreo breaks and talking about the wedding happening the next day. Alex's and Diego's wedding. They had just finished drooling over Alex's wedding gown that she made herself. Alex felt lucky to have her best friends in her bridal party.

Alex wanted to sneak and call Diego one more time without the girls watching her and talking about tradition. She didn't believe in any silly traditions, but she entertained them anyway. They were doing so much for her. She patted the couch for her phone before realizing that she left it in her purse. She got up, said she was going to check for something in her bag and went to the guest bedroom where everyone piled their bags immediately. She sat on the bed as she rummaged through her purse. She stopped moving when she felt an envelope at the bottom of her bag. Pulling it out, she was shocked to see it was from her dad. She stared at the envelope for a moment, wondering what could be inside. She had just seen him earlier in the evening at the wedding rehearsal. Opening the envelope, she found a letter and began reading.

Dear Alexis,

This should have come a long time ago. I know this isn't a good time for this either, but I've been thinking a lot about us and the way we have been. We may act like we are fine, but we both know the truth. I don't want to walk you down the aisle tomorrow and we aren't okay. I can't play a song dedicated to you and Diego if we aren't okay. I don't want to have our father and daughter dance in front of everyone while we fake smiles and try to hide the awkwardness. I would love for it all to be genuine or at least not sickening.

I want to say I'm sorry. I've felt sorry for longer than anyone will know. I know this letter can't make up for the past 8 years, but I was too afraid to tell you in person. I respect your decision if you don't forgive me, but I couldn't handle you telling me so to my face. Guess I understand why you were so afraid in the past. Anyway, if this is too little and too late, you don't have to mention it. If you never bring it up, then I'll get the message. I won't ever bring it up.

Just know I love you, Alexis, and I'm proud of who you are.

After she finished reading the letter, she read it over and over. She couldn't believe what she had read. He had actually apologized. She pressed the letter to her chest and held it tightly as she fell back onto the bed. She stared up at the ceiling as she thought about his words. Alex had given up on hoping things would get easier for them. She had told herself that she was fine with

it. Up until that moment when she read the letter, she had fooled herself into believing it. She felt lighter than a feather. Then, she heard a knock on the door.

“Alex, what’s taking you so long?” Christine whined while her other friends chimed in with complaints as well.

“I’ll be out soon guys,” Alex yelled out with a giggle.

“Hurry up. It’s been your turn for ten minutes now and I’m five seconds away from looking at your hand,” Regina called out in a singsong voice.

“Don’t you dare! I just need a minute.”

“Missy, I hope you’re not talking to Diego,” Natalie teased loudly.

“Oh, get out of here!” Alex laughed as she heard her friends call her rude and over away from the door.

Alex reached back into her purse and pulled out her cell phone. She opened up her phone, opened a new text message and typed in her father’s cell phone number for the first time in a long time. She typed a message and then deleted it. She wanted something short, but meaningful. She repeated this process three more times before she knew what she wanted to say.

I love you too, Dad

Alex sent the message right away. She figured he must have been waiting worriedly for hours. She could have called him, but she wanted to wait to hear his voice and see his face. Alex was an adult and she knew everything wasn’t perfect now. She understood that they may not ever get to perfect, but perfect’s impossible anyway. They still had a lot to talk about and it would be hard, but they are mendable. That was the best start she could ask for.

Alex slipped her phone back into her purse and stood up. She walked out of the bedroom and back into the living room. She saw the ladies filling up their glasses with their second round of wine for the night. She laughed as she noticed that the Uno cards had been scrambled and tossed to the side. She squeezed herself between Regina and Christine and grabbed her wine glass. Her friends stared at her weirdly.

“What?” Alex asked confusedly.

“What’s got you smiling so hard?” Regina said as she pinched her cheek.

“Oh, I didn’t notice. Maybe it was being away from my crazy bridesmaids,” Alex answered sarcastically with a smirk.

“As if! You’ll never find better than us,” Natalie fiercely replied as she snapped her fingers and rolled her neck sillily. They all chuckled together.

“Really, what happened? You were happy before Miss Bride to be, but now you’re glowing,” Christine pointed out with a wide smile of her own.

“I’m really feeling happy, that’s all,” Alex admitted dreamily. Her friends let out an extended ‘aw’ as they pulled her into a group hug.

Alex felt happier than she had felt in a while. Something inside her told her that it would be a lasting feeling. She wasn’t wrong.